

Summer Stars

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Summer Stars

by [PitViperOfDoom](#)

Summary

It's been judged safe to send the students of UA home to their families for the first three weeks of summer, much to the relief of everyone whose name isn't Todoroki Shouto. Luckily, Midoriya has a solution for him, and Midoriya Inko has a lot of love to give.

Chapter 1

In the end, it was Iida who raised his hand and asked the question on everyone's minds.

"Aizawa-sensei," he said politely. "Is there anything planned for summer break?"

No one had been speaking before that, but somehow the room seemed to drop in both volume and temperature. Mouths were tight. Uneasy glances were exchanged.

Everyone was thinking about it, even if no one could quite summon the nerve to say it out loud. Exams were behind them, summer break was nearly upon them, and the knowledge brought with it a healthy portion of apprehension.

One year. In just a few weeks, one year would have passed since the training camp that ended in a villain invasion and a kidnapping. One year since Kamino Ward, All For One, and All-Might's forced retirement.

Bakugou had been sullenly quiet all morning. Midoriya was staring contemplatively out the window. Now, Bakugou's scowl only deepened, and Midoriya seemed to shrink in on himself, refusing to look anyone in the eye.

Aizawa sighed. "I was going to announce this at the end of class," he said. "There will be training taking place during the break, but it will be taking place on campus. Furthermore..." He raised his eyes, casting a glance around the room as his students watched him intently. "For the first three weeks, we will be releasing you to spend the first half your holiday at home with your families."

The mood lightened then, at least in most of the room. A smile spread across Iida's face as he put his hand down. Uraraka, Ashido, and Hagakure cheered out loud, along with Kaminari and Kirishima. Toward the back of the room, Midoriya perked up instantly, from tense, pensive silence to bright enthusiasm like the flip of a switch. Bakugou shifted in his seat and didn't quite smile, but looked a lot less like he was sitting at a funeral.

"The school board's judged it safe," Aizawa went on. "Villain attacks have died down, and pro heroes will be on alert for as long as your break lasts. The school will be using this time to run maintenance and cleaning crews through the dorms, so. Win-win."

From there, he moved on with the day's lesson, and class continued without the heavy pall that had been hanging over it since the start. There were smiles on more than one face, eagerness and excitement and no small amount of relief.

Toward the back of the room, Todoroki faced front, as smooth and blank as glass. No one noticed the tremor in his right hand, nor the way that ice spread along the surface of his desk from his fingertips.

"Hey, um, Todoroki?"

Shouto started.

It was not quite a flinch, nor was it enough to disturb the lunch tray in his hands, but he knew the moment he jerked around at the light tap to his arm that it was noticeable.

"Sorry!" Midoriya said, pulling his hand back. "Sorry about that. Didn't mean to..." His voice

trailed off before he could finish with *scare you*.

“It’s fine,” Shouto replied, forcing his face blank. Embarrassment twisted in the pit of his stomach. Midoriya was frighteningly observant already; he could see that Shouto was jumpy, and he was the only one in the whole class who would know why. “Did you need something?”

“I just wanted to talk to you real quick,” Midoriya replied. “Privately? You probably don’t want anybody overhearing.”

Oh. It wasn’t that Shouto hadn’t known this was coming. On the contrary, he’d been expecting it ever since Aizawa’s announcement that morning. But there was a difference between expecting it and facing it, and not for the first time, Shouto wondered at his own decision to call the single nosiest person in the entire class his friend.

“All right, just let me put my things down first,” he said at length.

Luckily, Iida and Uraraka were already sitting together at an otherwise empty table. Shouto slid his tray in next to Iida’s.

“Could you watch this for me for a minute?” he asked. “I’ll be right back.”

The moment they agreed, he stepped away again, rejoined Midoriya, and walked back out into the hallway. The dull roar of conversation faded away, and after a minute of walking in companionable silence, they found a quieter spot to talk without being overheard.

“What did you want to talk about?” Shouto asked once he was certain they were alone. If Midoriya was going to bring up what Shouto thought he was, then the last thing he wanted was anyone walking in on them.

“Well, it was about what Aizawa-sensei said this morning,” Midoriya said, and Shouto felt his heart sink at the reminder.

Right. Home for the holidays. Dorms being cleaned and checked, so there was little chance he could duck out. That.

“What about it,” he said flatly.

“You know what.” Midoriya met his eyes, and his voice nearly dropped to a whisper. “I just wanted to know if you were okay with it.”

“I’m...” He most certainly was not. This was the furthest he had been from okay in a while. “It is what it is, Midoriya.” Shouto’s throat tightened, and he forced himself to swallow. “It’s only three weeks.”

“I know, but—”

“But nothing.” The tightness that gripped him from stomach to throat made his tone shorter than he meant it to be. “There’s nothing to talk about, Midoriya. I just—got used to this, that’s all.” Shouto averted his eyes. “Being here. Living at school. This is just back to normal for me. And it’s only three weeks. Two, actually, since he’s out of town at the moment.” He had been repeating that to himself since the second Aizawa announced it. Just two weeks. Fourteen days. He had dealt with it since he was five; fourteen days was nothing. It was absolutely nothing to worry about.

Maybe, if he repeated that in his head enough times before summer break started, he might even start to believe it.

“Todoroki...” At the sound of Midoriya’s voice, Shouto shut his eyes and let out the air in his lungs in a quiet sigh. Fool himself, maybe. Fool Midoriya... impossible.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “It’s not like I have a choice anyway.”

Midoriya went quiet, frowning with his eyes lowered the way he usually did when he was thinking about something. For the life of him, Shouto had no idea what it could possibly be. As far as he was concerned, there was nothing *to* think about. They were going home for the first half of summer break, and that was all there was to it. Shouto could handle it. He might not want to, but he could handle three weeks at home, especially if Endeavor wouldn’t even be there for the first.

“What if you did?”

Wrapped up in his thoughts, Shouto lost track of context. “What?”

“Have a choice,” Midoriya clarified. “I mean...”

“I’m pretty sure I don’t,” Shouto said flatly.

“Well, you’re welcome to spend the break at my house, if you want.”

“I...” For a moment, Shouto was truly tongue-tied. “Really?”

“I’d have to ask my mom first, but I’m pretty sure she’d say yes,” Midoriya went on, shrugging like it was no big deal. “Look, I know your house isn’t really... *home* to you. And you looked really upset when Aizawa-sensei made that announcement, so I just thought I’d offer.”

“Oh.” Shouto blinked at him, not sure how to handle this. No one had ever offered something like this before—no one had ever known to offer it. And while he wasn’t sure how he felt about Midoriya casually throwing out an invitation before he’d even confirmed it with his mother, it was... nice. It was nice to be invited.

But...

Aizawa walked to the teacher’s lounge like he was on his way to assassinate someone. Of course, if he didn’t walk quickly enough, then that could very well end up happening. His lunch was in the fridge, and if he didn’t get to it as soon as possible, then Yamada was liable to swipe it again, and Aizawa would not be responsible for his actions.

His path took him close to the cafeteria, enough for the hum of students’ conversations to reach him. Aizawa moved noiselessly, whether he meant to or not; years of being an underground hero with an ambush specialty had drilled stealth into his every move. Colleagues hated him for it at times, which was too bad for them because he certainly wasn’t going to train himself out of it.

And so it was by pure chance that he happened upon a conversation that he most likely was not meant to hear.

“I think I still don’t have a choice.”

That was Todoroki’s voice, Aizawa noted absently as he kept walking. He would have kept going under any other circumstances, but Midoriya’s voice reached Aizawa’s ears next, and for reasons that he could not quite put into words, Aizawa’s pace slowed.

“How come—oh.”

“Do you really think for one second that Endeavor would allow it?” At Todoroki’s bitter tone, Aizawa came to a halt. He felt unreasonably meddlesome, listening in on two of his students in the midst of a private conversation, but something kept him from moving on.

In his line of work, you learned fast to mind your instincts.

“Right.” Midoriya sighed. “There’s... really no way around that, is there?”

“Considering everything that’s happened over the past year, I doubt any of our teachers would let us set foot anywhere without a signed and notarized permission slip,” Todoroki grouched.

“*Urggh.*” Midoriya made a disgusted gurgling noise.

“...Thanks.” Todoroki’s voice dropped in volume. “For the offer. But you don’t have to worry about me. I’ve lived with that man as my father for my entire life. I can... I can handle two or three weeks.”

“You shouldn’t have to,” Midoriya said softly.

“I’ll survive somehow.”

“Well, the offer’s still out, okay?” Midoriya went on. “If you do find a way around it... you’re welcome to stay the summer at my house. I mean, it’s a break and it’s supposed to be fun. You shouldn’t have to deal with...” His voice trailed off.

“Thanks, Midoriya.”

By the silence that followed, Aizawa could reasonably judge that the conversation was over and both boys had left.

Well. That was... a thing.

Aizawa heaved a sigh, and jogged the rest of the way to the teacher’s lounge. Yamada was opening the fridge when he walked in, reaching his thieving fingers for the bag that Aizawa had left. One end of his scarf snapped around his colleague’s wrist and yanked it away, eliciting a squawk from Yamada that might have blown out his eardrums if Aizawa hadn’t glared his quirk away.

“Bring your own lunch next time.” On any other day he might have snapped at him, but unexpected circumstances had given him a mission.

Yamada pouted as Aizawa pushed past and grabbed his food. “I wasn’t going to-”

“Of course you weren’t.” Aizawa turned on his heel and headed back to his desk.

Seated in front of his computer, Aizawa exhaled slowly and considered what he knew. It wasn’t much; poking into the personal business of his students wasn’t in his job description. If it was, then it was a bullet point that he did his best to ignore. He was here to teach these kids how to be heroes, not coddle them through their personal problems.

And yet...

He was a teacher, and a pro hero. Both of his jobs required some level of butting in on problems that didn’t concern him, and those tiny little feelings in the back of his mind were telling him that it was time. There were certain things that he could not quite ignore.

Little things. Endeavor's behavior at the Sports Festival the previous year. The fact that Todoroki had reacted to the announcement of a three-week vacation as if Aizawa had flunked him in front of the class. The discussion that he had just heard. The incident after the provisional license exam, when Endeavor had shown up. The look on Todoroki's face when he spoke with Endeavor. How Midoriya—*Midoriya*, whose last words would probably be "Oh don't worry about me, everything's fine,"—had practically begged Aizawa to make him go away.

All these things came together to form some kind of picture. Aizawa didn't know what it was yet, but he did know that he didn't like it. Therefore, further observation was necessary. If he wanted more information, then he would have to wait, and watch, and gently prod the situation as he saw fit.

In this case...

Everyone and their grandmother knew that Endeavor's responsibilities as number-one pro hero had dragged him out of town numerous times over the past year. With his son attending UA, his situation had necessitated certain extra measures. Formalities, mostly. At the moment, they were useful formalities.

Aizawa glanced around to see if anyone was paying attention to him. No one was; Yamada had his noise-canceling headphones on, Cementoss was in the corner making coffee, Kayama was on the phone, and All-Might was nowhere to be seen.

No use making a fuss before he knew what he was dealing with.

Aizawa dialed one of the numbers in Todoroki Shouto's student file.

Shouto put off packing for summer break until the very last minute. Preparing meant acknowledging it, acknowledging it meant thinking about it, and thinking about it meant accepting it as reality. And while he could put on an unaffected face for anyone who cared to ask him about it (for Midoriya, because who else would think to ask him about it?) his stomach still twisted and churned at the thought of going...

back.

Not home.

He was not going home for summer break, he was *leaving* home for summer break, and so his bags sat limp and empty in one corner of the room until it came down to a choice between having or not having fresh changes of clothes over the next three weeks.

It was already bound to be hell, so why make it any more unpleasant than it was already going to be?

Shouto's movements were purely mechanical as he set about packing. He had seen the likes of Kaminari and Kirishima in the midst of throwing shirts and shorts into suitcases, shoving them in stacked and folded, but still in piles. For Shouto's part, he sorted his clothes into full sets, bundling each of them into compact rolls that fit easily into the limited space of his bags. There was a simple, step-by-step process to putting it all together. The repetition let his mind wander away from what he was doing and why, and he sank into a more comfortable haze of monotony.

For ten minutes, at least, he let himself not think about going back. He let himself not think about his father's house and his father's face and his father's voice. He did not think about his room in that house, or the training hall in that house, or what would most assuredly be taking place in that

training hall once Endeavor returned. He allowed his mind to skip all of that—mentally he skimmed over the next three weeks, and settled more comfortably in thoughts about returning.

He could see his classmates again then. He could eat what he liked, when he was hungry, instead of sticking to Endeavor's strict schedules and diet plans. He could do his homework on one of the couches in the common area, and doze off if he happened to be tired without worrying about being shouted at for laziness.

He could leave the unpleasantness where it belonged. And if it happened to follow him home, then he could hide it in front of the others and maybe—just maybe—let it leak out, just a little, if no one was there. Or if it was just Midoriya—that would be all right, too.

Three weeks, and he would have home and safety to look forward to. He could do this.

For a split second his half-packed bags blurred before him. He blinked, and the wet haze was gone.

He could *do* this.

The low buzz of his phone jolted him out of his thoughts, and he looked around half in a daze before finally remembering where he had put it down. Shaking himself, he clambered to his feet and crossed to his desk to retrieve it. Still with one foot in his mental fog, he answered it without checking the caller ID first.

"Hello?"

"*Shouto?*"

He blinked, voice catching in his throat. "Nee-san?"

"*Oh, good! I'm glad I caught you!*"

"I was just packing," Shouto told her. "I'm almost done. I'll see you tomorrow, right?"

"*Oh, er, about that...*" Fuyumi's voice trailed off into hesitant silence.

Shouto tried to push back the sudden creeping worry. "Is... something wrong?"

"*Oh, no, nothing. I was just—your teacher called me, and he was wondering—well, I guess now it's both of us wondering, since he put the idea in my head, but...*" He heard her take a deep breath. "*Did you want to spend the break with one of your friends? Instead of... here?*"

For a moment Shouto simply held the phone to his ear, speechless.

"*Shouto? Are you still there?*"

"Uh, y-yeah, I..." Shouto caught his breath. "Wait, which teacher?"

"*Aizawa-sensei,*" she replied, and Shouto's heart lurched in something halfway between surprise and alarm. "*He said something about one of your classmates inviting you, and I was wondering if you... wanted to do that.*"

"Well, yes," Shouto admitted. "But what I want doesn't really—you know Dad wouldn't agree to it."

"*Oh of course he wouldn't,*" Fuyumi agreed, with a short little laugh that he might have described as *bitter* if he didn't know his sister better than that. "*But, the thing is, he won't be here for a while,*

and... well, back when he became the top hero in Japan, he realized that, you know, work would call him away more often than not, so... you might need a, um. Custodial stand-in. In case something came up while he was absent. Which ended up being... me."

Shouto stared off into space as he listened to her, at a complete loss for words.

"So, I guess what I'm trying to say is, you don't really... need Dad's permission." Her voice wavered for a moment. *"If you want to do this. Because, if I give them the okay, there's no reason you should have to..."* Her voice trailed off again, but she didn't need to finish her sentence for Shouto to understand her perfectly well.

"I—nee-san, you..." His mouth wouldn't work right. *"Won't you get in trouble with him when he finds out?"*

"Shouto, what's he going to do to me?" she sighed. *"I have a job and a life outside of home. I'm not... I'm not Mom, and I'm not you. He never bothered keeping me under his thumb. But this isn't about me. This is about you, Shouto. What do you want to do?"*

He should tell her no. He should spend these next three weeks at his parents' house, so that Fuyumi wouldn't have to bear any of their father's wrath, even if she said he wouldn't do anything to her. *"I..."*

I want to be selfish.

I want to spend my time anywhere that isn't there.

I don't want to go back.

"Okay," Fuyumi said, before Shouto managed to voice an answer out loud. Even over the phone, her voice was warm enough that Shouto could imagine her smiling. *"I got it, Shouto. You have fun, okay?"* She hung up before Shouto could protest.

"Nee-san—!" Shouto stood in his room, dumbstruck, still holding his phone to his ear. His mouth hung half-open, protests crowded at the tip of his tongue, and he finally lowered the phone to his side. With his free hand he pushed his hair out of his face, took a deep breath, and let it out again.

If he were a better and more selfless person, he would call her back, thank her, tell her it wasn't necessary, and spend his break in his father's house like he had planned.

Just three weeks. He could do three weeks. Everything would proceed as normal, Fuyumi wouldn't be in trouble, and Shouto...

He would...

This is about you, Shouto, Fuyumi had said. *What do you want to do?*

He knew what he *didn't* want.

Shouto did not end up calling back, but he did send her a text.

Thanks, nee-san.

Five minutes later, Shouto stood three floors down and knocked on the second door from the right. A scramble of footsteps followed, before the door opened and Midoriya peered out, eyes widening at the sight of him.

“Todoroki, what’s up?”

Shouto met his eyes briefly, fingers curling and uncurling in his pockets. “...Is that offer still open?” he asked.

Midoriya *beamed*.

Chapter 2

They took the train together.

It was crowded enough to force them to stand, not that Izuku minded. If Todoroki was bothered by it, he didn't mention it. He didn't say much of anything, honestly, and Izuku found himself filling the silence between them. The silence was not an uncomfortable one by any means, but still the words welled up in Izuku until they came bubbling out.

He talked about... well, anything that popped into his head, really. School work. Training exercises. Combat techniques they had learned earlier in the week. Something weird that Iida said at lunch on Wednesday. It came out in a steady stream of one-sided conversation, as Izuku held onto one of the plastic handles suspended from the ceiling of the train car, and kept his small rolling suitcase from drifting away with his free hand. It wasn't soft or incoherent enough to count as his usual mumbling, but beyond the small bubble that he and Todoroki made up, his words and voice were lost to the general hum that pervaded the crowded train car.

Through it all, Todoroki made no reply besides the odd noise and monosyllabic response that indicated that he was still listening. Mostly he stared out the windows as if lost in thought, sparing the odd brief glance at Izuku. He had two bags with him; one of them was slung over his shoulder, and the other hung from the hand not gripping the hanging strap.

As Izuku mused aloud over an interesting blog post he had read the other day, he kept an ear out for the automated stop announcements. They were almost there.

His hand was getting sweaty from gripping the suspended handle. Izuku let go briefly, just so he could wipe his palm dry before holding it again. At that moment the train jerked to a stop, sending Izuku staggering into Todoroki's side with a quiet yelp of alarm.

It was only a momentary crisis. Todoroki dropped the bag in his hand to steady him, and Izuku regained his balance and his grip on the handle.

"Whoops." He grinned sheepishly, pulling his suitcase even closer than it had been before. "Sorry about that."

"It's no trouble." That was the longest sentence Todoroki had spoken since boarding the train.

A wave of self-consciousness rushed Izuku before he could contain it, jarring him off his train of thought. He looked away on the pretense of glancing out the windows again, hoping his embarrassment wasn't making him blush too dark. "Well, anyway..." His mind drew a blank. "Um. What was I talking about, again?"

"You were speculating on the future of widespread independent hero agencies, considering the new emphasis on teamwork and collaboration among incoming heroes," Todoroki replied, without missing a beat. He paused. "Also about how helpful Detective Naomasa is whenever he shows up."

"Oh, right." Izuku tried not to shuffle awkwardly. "Uh." He offered a quiet, sheepish laugh. "Heh. I, um, talk a lot, huh."

"Yes." Todoroki's blunt reply landed like a brick to the head. "But it's nice."

Izuku looked at him, startled, because he must have heard wrong. "...Nice?"

Briefly, Todoroki met his eyes. “I like hearing your thoughts.”

Izuku’s mind went blank a second time, and for a few moments all he could do was stare and blink at Todoroki. “...Oh,” was all he managed to say, and nearly missed the announcement of their stop. “O-oh! That’s us. The next stop is ours.”

“Okay,” Todoroki replied, and the rest of the ride passed with silence between them.

For years, Midoriya Inko had despaired of playing hostess to her son’s friends.

It wasn’t always like this. When he was very small, sometimes little Katsuki would come over to play, and Inko was happy to set out snacks for them and supervise their games from afar. But then their fourth and fifth birthdays came and went, and things took a turn for the worst. Katsuki stopped coming over, and eventually, Izuku stopped going out. He entered elementary school friendless, with Inko always hovering and hoping in the background, waiting desperately for her son to find at least one.

His elementary school graduation passed. Middle school began and ended, and nothing changed.

And then, at long last, his quirk manifested—a miracle all on its own. He got into the high school of his dreams—another miracle.

And the third miracle, the most precious in Inko’s eyes—he found friends.

She’d met a few of them already, but only briefly. Inko could recall their faces because she’d etched them into her memory. Names escaped her sometimes, but that didn’t matter. They were her son’s friends. They made him smile. They watched over him when she couldn’t—which was most of the time, these days—and Inko had cried her relief more than once over how much her son’s life had changed for the better.

And so, when Izuku had called her before his summer break with a hesitant request, she had all but fallen over herself to grant it for him.

“Hi, Mom!” he’d greeted her over the phone.

“Izuku! Oh, I can’t wait to have you home again! Have you been packing?”

“Oh, yeah, of course! I was just...” His voice had trailed off. “Um... I just had sort of a question.”

“Oh?” Her automatic reaction had been worry, of course. After how his high school years had been going so far, she could hardly be blamed. “What is it? Is something wrong?”

“No, no! Everything’s fine!” He’d laughed sheepishly. “Really, nothing’s wrong this time. It’s just a little short notice, I guess, so... anyway. I was wondering if, over the break, it was okay if one of my friends stayed over?”

“Of course it is!” she had replied, heart leaping with excitement. “Why wouldn’t it be? Just let me know when and how long, and—”

“Y-yeah, I meant... the whole break,” Izuku had interrupted. “All three weeks. Is... is that okay?”

Inko had blinked in surprise, caught off guard. “The whole break?”

“Please, Mom? I sort of... I mean I didn’t exactly promise, but I sort of implied it was a promise and I don’t want to let him down. I’m really sorry I’m asking this so late, but—”

“No no, it’s all right!” she’d sputtered. “It’s all right with me, of course it’s all right. I’m just a little surprised, that’s all.”

“Yeah...” Izuku’s voice had trailed a little. “It’s just—his dad’s really busy and isn’t going to be home, and I don’t want him to be lonely, so I thought...”

Her heart had melted a little, and still did when she thought of it now. Her son might be big and strong now, but he was still as soft and kind as he ever had been. Of course he’d offer his own home to make sure a friend didn’t have to be alone over three weeks of summer break. So she had given her enthusiastic permission, and realized rather belatedly that she had forgotten to ask which friend he was referring to.

...Not quite her fault, considering that this was all a little new to her. Her son, having friends over. She was out of practice.

...So maybe it was her fault, a little.

She had neatened up their home, dusted and vacuumed and cleared away the clutter, both to make everything presentable and to distract herself from nerves. The refrigerator and pantry were stocked, Izuku’s room was made up, and the apartment was spotless.

Inko had just finished laying out a spare futon in Izuku’s room when she heard the door open and shut, and her son’s voice rang out.

“I’m home! Mom?”

She nearly tripped over her own feet hurrying back out. “Izuku!” Once within reach, she pulled him into a hug. “Welcome home, sweetheart!”

“Hi, Mom.” Her son’s voice was quiet, and once she let him pull back, she saw that his cheeks were pink with embarrassment. “Uh. You remember Todoroki, right?”

“Of course!” He had been with the little group that Izuku invited over, just months before. He hadn’t made much of an impression then, greeting her politely and saying little else besides. Now he stood a few paces behind Izuku, eyes flickering to her face briefly when she turned to him. “Welcome, Todoroki. It’s very nice to see you again.”

In response, he bowed politely. “Thank you very much for having me.”

“It’s no trouble at all,” she assured him. “It’s wonderful to have you here.”

“The pleasure is all mine.” Todoroki blinked at her, perfectly polite and entirely unreadable.

“Well then!” Inko turned back to her son. “I made up your room and laid out the spare futon, Izuku. Why don’t you two get settled in while I get lunch started?”

“Thanks, Mom!”

“Thank you, Mrs. Midoriya.”

As Izuku led his friend to his bedroom, Inko made her way into the kitchen. There, she set about preparing some lunch for them, running on autopilot as she lost herself in thoughts.

Truthfully, she had not expected to be playing hostess to Todoroki Shouto over the school break. Even when her Izuku had started making friends, she never would have expected the Flame Hero

Endeavor's youngest son to be one of them. Heavens, the boy was practically a celebrity—but just a boy, she reminded herself. Family ties aside, he was only a boy. And why shouldn't Izuku befriend him closely enough to invite him to their home?

Thinking on it now, it wasn't so surprising at all that he was the one Izuku had told her about. Ever since that business in Kamino Ward, Endeavor had become the Number One Hero. A title like that probably took him all over Japan and beyond; no wonder he was missing his son's three weeks home from the UA dormitories. That must have been a lonely thought for his son. She had to wonder about his mother, too—Izuku hadn't mentioned her.

A touch of pride welled within her. There was no need for loneliness here. At times like these, more than any other, Inko enjoyed a certainty that she had raised her son right.

It was during lunch that Shouto finally realized that he had no idea what he was doing.

In general, where there were people, there were rules. For as long as he could remember, Shouto had grown up with rules. Harsh rules, but consistent ones. His father might be an asshole, but there was a method and logic to the ugliness in how he ran his household. There was structure to it—rigid, unforgiving structure—and on the one hand it made rebellion difficult and painful, but on the other it made his father's expectations clear-cut and easily navigated.

School was even easier; the framework was still present, still straightforward and logical, but more pliant. The structure felt less like a cage and more like ladder or a school jungle gym. It was firm enough for Todoroki to understand what was expected of him, yet loose enough to yield him a measure of freedom that he had never enjoyed in his father's house. The rules came neatly printed in student handbooks, outlined in class by their teachers, and in his class's case, emphasized repeatedly by their devoted representative. Shouto had absorbed it quickly without having to ask about it, and when his living situation had switched to on-campus dormitories, those rules extended to all parts of his life instead of just a fraction of his day.

Now, however, he found himself in an unfamiliar house, with no idea what the rules here were. And at this point he certainly wasn't going to make a fool of himself by asking.

Better just to learn by observation. Play it safe, be polite. The last thing he wanted to do was get Midoriya in trouble or anything.

And so, he found himself sitting quietly at the table, listening attentively to Midoriya's mother as she chattered away.

"But again, it's wonderful to have you here," she was saying. "I'd expected a quiet few weeks, but I think this is even better. It's always nice to have company, especially Izuku's friends. He talks about you quite a lot, Todoroki."

Shouto blinked, glancing briefly at Midoriya, who suddenly seemed to take a deep interest in his napkin. It wasn't so much of a surprise to hear, he supposed. He'd spent many a visit to his mother's hospital room talking about Midoriya.

"I must admit, I haven't had much practice entertaining guests lately," Mrs. Midoriya went on, ducking her head modestly. "I've been out of practice for a while, so I do hope you feel comfortable while you're here."

Would it be good to interject here? Assure her that he would be fine regardless? Wait, no, she wasn't done speaking yet.

“But I’m happy to get to know you in person, especially since Izuku absolutely sings your praises,” Mrs. Midoriya went on blithely. “Just last month he was telling me over the phone about that landslide simulation, and you should have heard him—”

“*Mo-om.*” Midoriya startled Shouto by interrupting her mid-sentence in a tone that was almost whining. Shouto shot a quick glance at his friend, bewildered.

Mrs. Midoriya beamed at him. “Only teasing, dear. You know I don’t get the chance very often.”

“To what, embarrass me in front of my friends?” Midoriya sent his mother an injured look.

“Absolutely. I have to make up for lost time.” To Shouto, she smiled again. “He never had friends over when he was younger.”

“New experience for both of us,” Midoriya remarked quietly, drawing Shouto’s attention again.

“Oh, definitely.” Mrs. Midoriya laughed. “I’ve never been able to host a sleepover before.” Midoriya gave a good-natured groan.

It felt less like a household and a bit more like a tennis game, Shouto thought vaguely. Conversation went back and forth like a ball across a court, and sometimes one side was aiming for him, and other times, alarmingly, both sides were. It certainly wasn’t strange at school, surrounded by his peers in the classroom or the common area at the dorms. But in Midoriya’s home, with his parent present, Shouto found it more disorienting than anything else.

At his own parent’s house, if his father was talking, then everyone else was listening until he was finished, and that was that. And while any difference between here and that place could only count as a good thing, that didn’t make it any less confusing.

Midoriya came to his rescue then, though whether he realized it or not was anyone’s guess. “Aizawa-sensei says there’ll be training waiting for us when we get back,” he said, looking at Shouto rather than his mother. “I’m kind of excited. He says it’ll be on-campus, but if it’s over break there must be something special planned.”

Shouto could barely contain a sigh of relief. He had no idea how to talk to Midoriya’s mother, but talking to Midoriya came as easy as breathing. “I haven’t heard anything about it,” he said with a shrug. “Could be they have a new facility waiting.”

“Or at least one we haven’t seen yet,” Midoriya mused. “Depends how long they’ve been planning this. I mean, how long does it take to build these places?”

“They had the dorms ready for us pretty quickly,” Shouto pointed out. He shrugged. “That, or it’ll just be more regular training.”

“I guess it depends whether they want something exciting and fresh, or something... I dunno, quieter, considering what happened last year.” Midoriya grimaced.

“Thank goodness it’ll be on campus,” Mrs. Midoriya interjected, jarring Shouto into looking at her again. “There’s no telling what villains might do on an anniversary like that.”

“Well, security’s up,” Midoriya went on, and Shouto switched back to listening to him. It was getting a little hard to keep up, between switching his attention and reacting enough to be a polite listener. “I heard some of the support faculty’s been touching up campus security measures.”

“True,” Shouto remarked. “And if it’s safe enough to send us home, then...”

“It can’t be that dangerous,” Midoriya finished for him.

“Ohh, don’t say that.” Mrs. Midoriya winced a little. “You might as well ask ‘what’s the worse that can happen?’”

“Well what *is* the worst that can happen?” Midoriya asked with an impish grin.

His mother glared at him, but after a moment of brief alarm Shouto recognized it as only a mock-sowl. “Izuku,” she said, her tone playfully scolding.

“I mean, how bad can it be?”

“Izuku, you know I don’t like it when you tempt fate.”

“I’m sure everything will turn out *just fine*.”

“Young man, you are teasing me,” Mrs. Midoriya tutted.

“Me?” Midoriya’s face was the picture of innocence. “I would never. Would I?” He looked to Shouto as if for support, but for the moment Shouto was too bewildered to offer anything but a blank stare.

“Your dessert is getting smaller, dear.”

Midoriya’s eyes widened, and he mimed zipping his mouth shut. The corners were still turned up in a smile.

In the lull in conversation, Shouto hid his confusion—and no small amount of embarrassment—by turning his full attention to the plate in front of him.

It was several orders of magnitude better than any amount of time spent in his father’s presence, but Shouto was still at sea, and no closer to grasping the rules, or his place in them.

This was going to take some getting used to.

At some point, Todoroki politely asked to be excused, and followed Izuku’s pointing finger and brief directions to the bathroom.

“He’s a little quiet, isn’t he?” Mom remarked once Todoroki was out of earshot.

“Yeah, he’s sort of always like that.” His plate was empty, as was Todoroki’s, so Izuku gathered up both to carry them to the sink.

She smiled softly. “Shy, is he?”

“Heh, not like I’m in any place to judge.”

“He’s a lot different from your other friends,” she said thoughtfully. “I remember—Uraraka, wasn’t it? She was lively.”

“Yeah. Kirishima too—he was the redhead, remember?”

“Oh yes, he definitely made an impression.” She frowned, pursing her lips. “He *was* there too, right? Todoroki, I mean?”

“Yup.” Izuku finished bussing the table and came back for Mom’s dishes, too.

“Oh, thank you, Izuku.” Mom rose from her seat to start the washing up. “Well, he must have been quiet then, too. He’s very polite, though.”

“Yeah, well... his dad’s pretty strict.” Izuku decided it would be best to leave it at that; Todoroki certainly wouldn’t thank him for blabbing about the details of his home life to someone who was a stranger to him.

Mom hummed quietly and joined him at the kitchen sink. “I can hardly imagine what it must be like, having the number one hero for a father.”

Just the thought of talking about Endeavor left a bad taste in Izuku’s mouth, so he shrugged. “His father doesn’t really enter into it. He’s one of my best friends.” He paused, and the volume of his voice dropped so that the running sink nearly drowned it out. “We’ve been through a lot together.”

Her arm went around his shoulders for a gentle squeeze, and she leaned in to press a kiss to his temple. “I’m glad, sweetheart. I worry about you so much, you know that, but... it makes me feel better, knowing you have people you can trust.”

The rest of the day passed fairly quietly and uneventfully. Izuku and Todoroki retreated to his room and passed the time in conversation or companionable silence, texting other friends and classmates or checking villain reports as the day wore on into evening. Izuku was on his bed, sprawled on his stomach but propped up by his elbows. Todoroki sat on the floor with his back resting comfortably against the side of the bed, right next to where Izuku was leaning over the edge.

“It’s still been quiet,” Izuku remarked, scrolling through news clips and links to articles. “Some robberies in different parts of the city, but nothing major. Things really have been quieting down.”

“Strangely enough, I don’t find that comforting,” Todoroki said dryly. “Especially since the old bastard’s been out of town.”

“Makes you think they might be planning something, huh,” Izuku said softly.

“Absolutely.” Todoroki’s brow furrowed. “Much as I’d love to think they’ve been beaten back, nothing has happened recently to make me believe that.”

“It can’t be too bad,” Izuku reasoned. “The pros working the streets, our teachers, *Principal Nedzu*—they weren’t born yesterday. They probably know it’s a little ominous. But I don’t think they’d have sent everyone home for summer vacation if they really thought it was dangerous.” He shifted his weight on his elbows. “I mean, considering how tense everything is *now*, I don’t think they’d send us, the future heroes, into the lions den.” He paused. “At least not without telling us first.”

“You... make a good point,” Todoroki conceded.

“Yeah, I—” Izuku’s phone chimed, and he checked his latest text message. “Oh hey, that’s Kirishima.”

Todoroki looked up. “Anything interesting?” His own phone lit up with a notification, and he glanced down at the screen. “Oh, I’ve got it too.”

“It’s an invite,” Izuku said. “Looks like he sent it to the whole class—he wants to hang out. Some outdoor mall thing is happening in a few days.”

“I’ve never really been one for shopping,” Todoroki said.

“Me neither. Want to go anyway?”

Todoroki looked up at him. “Do you?”

“Kind of. I mean, it’s something to do.” Izuku fidgeted again. “My, uh. My mom was right, before. I never had friends over when I was younger, and this is sort of my first... um.” He pressed his lips together, feeling his face heat with embarrassment. “Sleepover.”

“That makes two of us,” Todoroki told him. “This is new to me, too.” He hesitated, still looking at his phone screen. “You’re... sort of the first friend I ever made.”

“...Oh.” That really should have been obvious, considering what Izuku knew about his upbringing. And maybe he had realized that, on some level. But understanding something subconsciously, and hearing it spelled out for him by one of his closest friends, were two very different things. “Well, then I sure hope I’m doing this right, haha.” The nervous little laugh slipped out before he could stop it. Where on earth had that come from?

“Don’t worry about it,” Todoroki said. “It’s not like you have to work hard or anything.” Another pause. “I just like hanging out with you.”

“Oh,” Izuku said again. He couldn’t deny the warm little glow that lit up within him, nor the smile that it brought to his face. “You too.”

Chapter 3

“This is a travesty,” Izuku said. “This is absolutely—no. This is unacceptable.”

Todoroki, for his part, looked quietly embarrassed. “Is it really such a big deal?” he asked.

“That you haven’t seen Star Wars? Or *any* Disney movies? Kind of. A little bit.”

“I’ve never had much exposure to American media,” Todoroki admitted with a roll of his eyes.

Izuku stared at him. “It’s *Disney*.”

“And my old man’s an asshole,” Todoroki pointed out.

At this, Izuku winced visibly. “Oh. Right.” Damn, he was probably being insensitive. “Sorry. I, uh, well I didn’t forget, I just...”

“It’s fine,” Todoroki said with a shrug. “There’s a lot I don’t know. Is it really that important?”

“I guess it’s not vitally important,” Izuku admitted. “I mean, they *are* just movies, and I guess they aren’t for everyone?” He shrugged. “Still, though, it’s a pop culture thing, and stuff like that kind of gets ingrained in, well, everything. People make references and stuff.” He paused, trying to think of an example. “Oh, remember how weird Kaminari got last May? On the fourth?”

“Vaguely.” Todoroki squinted a little as he thought. “Was that when he kept trying to goad Bakugou into a sword fight with an umbrella?”

“With laser noises, yeah.” Izuku nodded. “That was a Star Wars thing.”

“Ah.” Todoroki blinked. “Well. That’s... that certainly answers a question I never really had in the first place.”

“Really, you didn’t?”

“I mean.” Todoroki shrugged again. “It’s *Kaminari*.”

“Heh, good point.” Izuku grinned. “So, uh... you really don’t know anything about Star Wars?”

“I don’t think so.” Todoroki shook his head. “If I do, it’s not something I can recognize. Is that a bad thing?”

“Honestly? Now I’m kind of excited,” Izuku admitted. “Like I said, it’s ingrained. Everybody knows what Star Wars is. Even a lot of people who don’t know what Star Wars is still kind of know what Star Wars is.”

Todoroki eyed him reproachfully. “Midoriya, are you making fun of me?”

“O-of course not!” Alarmed Izuku backpedaled immediately. “Th-that’s not what I meant! Sorry if it sounded like—I mean, I wasn’t. I’d never—” He paused a moment to get his words in order, grinning sheepishly. “I just meant that it’s exciting because now I get to show you how cool it is, and it’ll be completely new, you know? So, with that in mind, how do you feel about a marathon? My mom and I have the original trilogy. It’s a classic.” He smiled hopefully; it wasn’t every day that he got to show someone something new for the first time.

Todoroki blinked at him, looking surprised, and a moment later his eyes softened. “Sure.”

It was hardly the first time Izuku had watched movies with a friend; every now and then, someone in the dorms (usually Ashido or Kaminari) would yell “Movie night!” and at least two thirds of the class would wake up the next morning sprawled out in the common area with stiff necks and popcorn crumbs in their clothes. How had they gone so long without Star Wars or Disney?

His phone chimed then with a new text message from Uraraka.

>>Hey, Deku! Are you doing anything today? Iida, Tsuyu and I are free, so I was thinking maybe we could hang out!

Izuku frowned, considering the message for a moment, before turning and showing it to Todoroki. “What do you think?” he asked, his face lighting up in another eager smile. “Should we make this a party?”

“Do you want to?”

“Well, kind of, but...”

The look on Todoroki’s face was not what most people would call a grin, but it was close enough to count. “Then why not?”

Inko was in high spirits.

For almost a year now, her home had become such a quiet place. With her husband working abroad and her son living at school, she had been left in an empty apartment with far too much room to herself and no one left to share it with. She could have the occasional lunch with friends, or phone call or visit from her son, but none of those did anything to make her home feel as warm as it once had.

It really wasn’t fair; empty nest syndrome wasn’t supposed to come until Izuku was in college, not high school. His childhood had slipped by so quickly as it was, and now there were villains and lurking dangers set to steal the rest of his precious years from her as well.

But now, her son was home, and he had brought a friend—and today, on just the second day of his vacation, he had brought even more. Inko found herself being introduced and re-introduced to the trio when they arrived later in the afternoon. Uraraka Ochako was a bright, bouncing bundle of energy—her son’s very first friend, or so Izuku had told her. Close to her side was Asui Tsuyu, shy and quietly sweet and bearing enough sweets for everyone to enjoy, Inko included. And Iida Tenya—another minor celebrity, the youngest son in the family of Ingenium—was at once similar to Todoroki and vastly different. Impeccably courteous to her on the one hand, but loud and boisterous and enthusiastic on the other.

“What is it?” Izuku asked her as he poured microwaved popcorn into a large bowl.

“Hm?” Inko looked up from the counter she was wiping down to find her son grinning at her.

“You haven’t stopped smiling since Iida, Uraraka, and Tsuyu got here,” Izuku remarked. “Your face isn’t getting tired, is it?”

“Hmph.” She pretended to look down her nose at him primly. “If it is, then it’s because I’m out of practice after all the fretting I do over you.”

He laughed sheepishly. “Alright, alright, I deserved that.”

“Your friends are wonderful, that’s all,” she said. “You chose them so well. I used to worry, years ago, that the next friend you made would be, well... Bakugou Katsuki all over again.” She winced inwardly. Perhaps she shouldn’t have brought that up.

Her son’s smile faded. “Yeah, well... even with him, it’s not so bad anymore. I don’t know if we’ll ever really be *friends*, not like how I am with Iida or Uraraka or Todoroki, but... it’s better than it was. We’re better than we were. Things are less... lopsided. And we might not like each other very much, but I trust him.” He seemed to shake himself. “But, you know, there’s a difference between trusting someone, and wanting to watch space opera flicks for six hours with them.”

“Hey Deku!” Uraraka called from the living room. “We’ve got the first movie set up!”

“I’ll be out in a minute!” Izuku called back.

“Deku...” Inko echoed, half to herself.

“That’s also better than it used to be,” Izuku told her with a smile. “You want to watch with us, Mom?”

She almost brushed him off and told him to go be with his friends. But then she remembered—he lived with his friends almost every day now. This was her time to catch up with him. “I think I will. Go ahead and start, though. I just want to finish up here.”

He took the popcorn out to them, but returned a moment later, sleeves rolled up to his elbows, and helped clean the rest of the counter.

By the time she walked out, she had more snacks, some cookies, a plate full of apple slices, a pitcher of punch, and a small stack of little plates to minimize the mess. She found everyone huddled in front of the TV, and was met with a chorus of enthusiastic thank-yous. Iida stood up to take some food off her hands, with Todoroki quickly following suit.

“You’re very welcome!” She beamed at her small group of guests. “You’re all welcome to stay for dinner as well—you’ll probably have to, if you have your hearts set on seeing all three of these. Just leave your plates and cups by the sink when you’re done, and I’ll take care of them.”

“We would be happy too, Mrs. Midoriya!”

“Sure thing!”

“No problem—*ribbit*.”

“Thank you.”

She didn’t feel too selfish sitting next to her son. After everything that had happened, she had the right to hog him a little.

In the end, most of them spent more time watching Todoroki than they did the actual movies.

“Did... they just annihilate an entire planet?”

“Yep!”

“Out of *spite*?”

“It’s the Empire, it’s kind of their thing—*ribbit*.”

“Wait, where did his body go?”

“It disappeared.”

“*How?*”

“Magic.”

“I thought this was science fiction.”

“Yeah, but he just—he became one with the Force.”

“What does that even mean?”

“Well that’s awfully convenient.”

“Oh, *here* we go.”

“No, no, I’m with Todoroki. What are the odds that an otherwise impenetrable battle station was designed with a hole in it that leads directly from the core to the outside? *And* that the core is so unstable in the first place that one blast from that distance would ignite it? It’s a glaring design flaw that I highly doubt an organized force like the Empire would—”

“Maybe it’s on purpose—*ribbit*.”

“How do you mean?”

“Maybe one of the engineers who designed it was a traitor or something—*ribbit*. And he secretly hated the Empire, like they took him from his family or something, so he cozied up to them and made them trust him and then sabotaged it on purpose.”

“I dunno, Tsuyu, that sounds kinda far-fetched.”

“Wait, I don’t understand—why are all of you cringing at that kiss? It wasn’t that bad, was it?”

“Um.”

“Well...”

“Nobody tell him.”

“Midoriya?”

“Yeah, Todoroki?”

“Is something wrong? You seem unsettled.”

“Oh, I’m fine, it’s just... I dunno. I used to like Yoda a lot, but now he just... makes me nervous.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, I can’t put my finger on it.”

The room was silent. Todoroki’s eyes were glued to the screen. Everyone else’s eyes were glued to Todoroki.

“ *Obi-Wan never told you what happened to your father.* ”

“*He told me enough. He told me you killed him!*”

Uraraka had her phone out, surreptitiously filming Todoroki’s face.

“*No. I am your father.* ”

Todoroki froze with a small handful of popcorn halfway to his mouth. On the screen, Mark Hamill screamed in anguish. Around him, all his friends waited on bated breath.

He took a deep breath, and whispered a heartfelt “*What the fuck.*”

“...She was his sister the whole time.”

“Uh... yeah...”

“His *sister*.”

“...Midoriya, are you crying?”

“Don’t judge me.”

“Deku, how many times have you seen this movie?”

“Look, he redeemed Vader, he brought his father back from the Dark Side, *don’t judge me!*”

“Iida-chan, are you crying too? *Ribbit.*”

“It’s—it’s a beautiful ending... and the *funeral scene* with the fire always just...”

“*Wish I could do that to my father sometimes.*”

“What’d you say, Todoroki? You’re kinda mumbling there.”

“Nothing.”

“*Wouldn’t work anyway, Todoroki, he’s already on fire.*”

“Midoriya-chan, now you’re mumbling too—*ribbit.*”

Inko hummed as she got started on the dishes. Not long after the credits rolled on *Return of the Jedi*, Uraraka, Iida, and Asui had left. After six straight hours of movie watching, there was little wonder about that; Inko herself had gotten restless, hence why she was neatening up the kitchen again. Izuku and Todoroki were all that was left of the little party, and her son was diving back into their collection of DVDs again.

Truthfully, there was another reason why she had stepped away. She had little evidence to back it

up, no more than vague feelings, but she could swear up and down that she was making Todoroki a little nervous.

Today had given her false hope; surrounded by three other classmates, friends if their lighthearted teasing was anything to go by, Todoroki had relaxed enough to enjoy himself. He had even made jokes. Dry, deadpan jokes, but jokes all the same. And then their three friends had said their goodbyes and left, and it was like a switch had been flipped. Inko almost missed it, it happened so quickly. One moment her son's friend was relaxed and comfortable, very nearly smiling, and the next he was straight-backed as if his spine had been replaced with an iron rod. He looked more like he was sitting on a chair outside the principal's office than on a couch in her house, as a guest. His face was neutral, almost carefully so, and he went quiet.

Inko highly doubted that it was Izuku causing this. No, despite her best efforts, she was doing something to make the poor dear uneasy.

How strange.

She very nearly jumped out of her skin when Todoroki appeared in the kitchen beside her, as if he had materialized from thin air. Now, admittedly, the sink was running, so that made it a bit difficult to hear, but still. The boy must move like a cat.

"Sorry," he said, dashing her hopes that he hadn't noticed her startle like that.

"It's quite all right," she assured him. "Wasn't paying attention, that's all."

"I see." He stepped forward, bearing a dirty dinner plate and an empty drinking glass.

"Ah!" She took both out of his hands and deposited them carefully in the sink. "Thank you very much, Todoroki!"

He looked at her blankly. "...For what?"

"For... bringing the dishes to me," she replied, confused.

"Oh." Todoroki blinked at her, still looking faintly baffled. "But... you told us to?"

"I did," she said. "And thank you for doing so."

"Right, sorry. You're welcome." With that, he left the kitchen again.

Inko wasted water for a few more seconds just staring after him, thoroughly perplexed. Well... that was certainly an odd exchange. She pondered it as she finished with the dishes, mulling the short conversation over and over until she had examined it forwards and backwards. By the time the last plate was in the drainboard, she was no closer to understanding it than she had been before.

She peeked into the living room and found them sitting together on the couch. They'd put in another movie while she was busy—true to Izuku's earlier vow, he seemed to be showing his friend some of their Disney DVDs. Not that Todoroki seemed to mind. They were shoulder to shoulder, Izuku crosslegged while Todoroki's unerring politeness apparently kept him from putting his feet on the couch. The soft almost-smile was back on Todoroki's face. At one point, as Inko watched, Izuku turned his head and murmured something to him without taking his eyes off the screen, and Todoroki leaned closer to hear him and reply.

Well.

Inko stepped back around the corner before either of them could spot her. As much as she would love to wander in and enjoy a few more movies, catch up on a little gentle teasing, and indulge in her mother's prerogative to embarrass her son in front of his friends... they were having fun. Her shy houseguest was comfortable and enjoying himself. No point in barging in and ruining that.

So, she checked on them from time to time, but decided to give them their space for the rest of the evening.

The last time she peeked out, it was past midnight and she was prepared to tell the boys to turn in for the night. Her mouth opened to call out to them, and then shut when she saw them. Silently, she tiptoed out into the living room.

The TV was still on, and the credits for *Zootopia* were rolling. On the couch, nestled into the cushions, both boys were draped against one another, still sitting upright only because they were propped against each other. Izuku was using his friend's shoulder as a pillow. Todoroki's head rested on Izuku's, his face half-hidden in her son's hair. Both of them were fast asleep.

Would it be churlish of her to run for her camera?

Shaking her head fondly, she turned and hunkered down to stop the movie, turn off the TV, and put away the DVD. Every noise she made, no matter how soft, made her wince. She need not have worried, though. The boys slept soundly through it all.

Perhaps she ought to have woken them up so that they could go to bed properly, but Inko hadn't the heart to disturb them. They looked so comfortable that way. Besides, getting caught just shy of cuddling like this might embarrass them, and not in a good way.

In the end, she left a folded blanket within their reach, and turned off all the lights except the one in the kitchen. She debated dragging out the camera once more, before dismissing the idea and going off to bed herself.

Shouto woke slowly. The moment he was remotely aware of things, he didn't want to move.

There were times, every now and then, when he happened to wake up from a deep sleep, and find himself in a position in which he was certain, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that he had an excruciatingly stiff neck to look forward to. Sleep did not always agree with him, and on bad nights he was more likely to move around a lot and wake up in strange positions. He was, as Fuyumi sometimes put it, a "violent sleeper".

This took the cake, though. Was he sitting up? How was he already sitting up? Where was he?

He breathed in, and almost sneezed when hair went up his nose. His first thought was that it was his own, but that couldn't be right because it was the wrong angle and his hair wasn't quite that long yet. His second thought was that there was hair on his pillow.

Except, the side of his face was pressed to something that was most certainly not a pillow.

Gingerly, Shouto lifted and turned his head, ever so slightly, and opened his eyes. The faint smell of shampoo filled his nose.

For a moment, Shouto squinted through heavy eyelids at the mess of green curls without comprehending what he was not quite seeing. Then he registered the couch beneath him, the weight on his shoulder, and the solid warmth pressed against his side, and suddenly he had an entirely different reason to not want to move.

He was sleeping against Midoriya. Midoriya was sleeping on him. He had Midoriya's head tucked against the crook of his neck, and he had been *sleeping* that way. Presumably for most of the night.

Oh.

This was the sort of thing people panicked about, wasn't it?

Carefully, without moving, Shouto inhaled and exhaled slowly. Breathe. This... was not a big deal. This was hardly the first time something like this had happened. Movie nights and late-night group study sessions at the dorms tended to end like this, with Shouto waking up uncomfortably close to one of his classmates, in spite of his subconscious self's best efforts to keep his distance. While those moments were less than ideal, they were nothing to be anxious about. This was no different.

Except it was.

Not only because this was far closer than Todoroki had ever ended up in the morning after a study session, but also because... it wasn't uncomfortable.

He'd woken up once with Kaminari's hand resting on his arm—nothing suggestive, purely by accident. Shouto still remembered how his stomach had turned with unease. Not that he disliked Kaminari; he just disliked being touched by Kaminari without a practical reason for it. It was a stupid thing to be upset about, but at least it was something he could bear quietly and hide.

Right now, his stomach was... not turning, that was for sure. Fluttering a bit, maybe. But beyond that, everything was fine. Comfortable. Cozy, even. He could have closed his eyes and gone right back to sleep to the sound of Midoriya's soft, even breathing.

He did shut his eyes, but instead of drifting off again, he let out a short, quiet sigh.

He wasn't stupid. He wasn't helpless. He knew already—he *knew*. Since spring, at least. The city-wide villain attack. His brief stay in the hospital. Waking up groggy and disoriented to Midoriya's face. He'd known at least since then, maybe even farther back than that.

He knew what this was.

And no matter how hard he tried to fool himself, to shut his eyes and plug his ears and tell himself *it's friendship, he's my friend, the best friend I've ever had and nothing more than that*, there were simply some things that not even Todoroki Shouto could remain oblivious to. It was just bad luck that his own crush on his closest friend had to be one of them.

Feeling helpless, he settled back down and shut his eyes again. It was too early for this. If he moved then he would wake Midoriya up and this whole situation would turn from comfortable if somewhat awkward to uncomfortable and incredibly awkward. But Midoriya was far better than he was when it came to dealing with these things. Better to let him handle it and go back to pretending it hadn't happened.

Feigning sleep, he rested his head back against the couch instead of on Midoriya's to make it easier for Midoriya to disentangle himself.

Izuku's eyes snapped open.

He was not in bed.

This was not a pillow.

This was a shoulder.

Specifically, it was Todoroki's shoulder. And he was sleeping on it as if it was a pillow.

In a quite frankly astonishing display of self-control, Izuku managed not to shriek like a soprano and flail. Instead he went perfectly still, not even shaking, barely breathing, as he took stock of his current position.

He was sleeping on Todoroki. His *head* was on Todoroki's *shoulder*, his body was pressed up against Todoroki's side—the left side, the warm side, *wow no wonder I fell asleep like this, this is really comfortable*—

Focus.

This wasn't a big deal. It shouldn't be a big deal. The last time the class had a movie night in the dorms, he'd woken up on Iida's shoulder, with Mineta sprawled in his lap. That hadn't been awkward at all. They'd laughed it off. (Except Mineta—he'd shot off the moment he woke up, screaming that he liked girls.)

But this wasn't Iida (or Mineta). This was Todoroki, and Todoroki was hesitant about being touched. And the last thing he wanted to do was make Todoroki uncomfortable.

So if he could just... move away. Gently. Without waking him up. He was already naturally warm on that side, so it wouldn't make too much of a difference, would it?

With the utmost care, Izuku gingerly lifted his head off of Todoroki's shoulder—and thank goodness Todoroki had his head back against the couch instead of on Izuku's, or else this would have been impossible—and shifted away. An odd feeling bloomed inside him, somewhere in the vicinity of his stomach, and he froze for a moment and tried to identify it. It wasn't nervousness, or even embarrassment.

It was... disappointment?

Izuku shook his head. What did he have to be disappointed about? All he'd done was move away. And if he was disappointed about that, then—

Nope, some tiny part of his brain said. *Nope. Absolutely not. We're not going down that road.*

But maybe—

Izuku shook his head again to clear it, with a whispered "*Oh my god.*"

Todoroki didn't stir, thank goodness. But just to be safe, Izuku reached for a couch pillow. Even better—Mom must have left a blanket for them at some point (he cringed on the inside, wondering if she'd seen them sleeping like that). Izuku grabbed the folded blanket and set it gently in the spot where he had been, then slid off the couch and crept off to his room for a change of clothes.

Shouto's face felt like it was burning. *Don't set the blanket on fire. Don't set the blanket on fire.*

He wondered, with no small amount of chagrin, if there was a polite way to to ask a friend to stop being so cute.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Some lovely art! [biteitwhenitssoft](#) on Tumblr drew a couple of [snoozy babies](#), go look it's beautiful.

It was four days into their break that the Takodana shopping complex had its grand opening, the one that Kirishima had mentioned in his eager mass-text earlier in the week. That morning saw Izuku hopping on a train with Todoroki to meet their classmates there, shortly after Mom had whisked away the breakfast dishes and shooed them out the door.

Silence stretched between them as they sat side by side and waited for their stop. For once, Izuku didn't feel the need to fill it with words. Instead he listened for the mechanical voice that announced the name of each stop, and watched Todoroki out of the corner of his eye.

He looked pensive, staring off into the middle distance. His usual impassive expression had softened, as if he was too deep in thought to keep holding it. The slight furrow in his brow was not enough to be considered a frown. His eyes were directed toward the opposite window, but Izuku could tell from the faraway look that Todoroki wasn't watching the scenery go by.

Somewhere down the line Izuku left off watching him out of the corner of his eye in favor of looking directly at him. He didn't realize he had turned his head until Todoroki's eyes cleared and flickered toward him, noticing him.

"What is it?" Todoroki asked.

Izuku blinked, startled and then alarmed. He was staring, and staring was—it might be rude. Or at least weird. "Oh, uh, nothing. I just..." His mind went momentarily blank, and he closed his mouth before he could do something embarrassing, like stumble over his words. "You looked really thoughtful just now," he said at length. Honesty was probably the best policy here. "Something on your mind?"

"It's nothing to worry about," Todoroki said. Then, after a moment, "I was only thinking... I was planning to visit my mother sometime soon. If we're spending the day at the grand opening for a shopping complex, then I might as well get her something."

"Oh! That's nice. What were you thinking of getting her?"

"I'm trying to think of something," Todoroki said with a shrug. His eyes flickered toward Izuku's. "What do you think?"

"M-me? Oh, well I—" There he was again, stammering. He shouldn't have been stammering this bad around Todoroki. The best cure was usually talking more, in his experience. "I don't really know much about your mom, but when I try to find stuff for *my* mom, there're usually two or three possible types of gifts I can get her. I either try to find something she really needs, or something she really wants or might like. Mom really likes useful gifts, you know? Stuff that she can use around the house, or something, like—one time I got her these scrub brushes shaped like vegetables, and she really liked those. Or if she mentions losing something, or breaking something, then I can get

her a new one. Oh—also, she likes birds, so. Sometimes I look for stuff that has birds on it? Like sweaters or pictures or hand towels or, or stuff like that. Bird books, that kind of thing.” He paused for breath. “And the third type isn’t really a type by itself, it’s just, sometimes I’ll be out and I’ll just see something that jumps out at me that just screams ‘Mom’ and I can go for that because it’s something that made me think of her and that’s sort of meaningful, I guess? Because it means a lot to people when you think about them even if they aren’t there, and it’s good to trust your instincts even with little stuff like that. I don’t really know if this is helpful because I don’t really know your mom or, uh, really what her situation is, so you’d know better than me—of course, obviously, she’s your mom and everything. I guess that third thing isn’t really helpful if you’re looking for something because that’s not really something you can look for, it’s more like you just wander around until inspiration hits you, so you don’t really have... control over that...” Todoroki was still watching him, face impassive, barely even blinking. “And... um...” A wave of self-consciousness washed over Izuku, and his voice trailed off for a moment. He pursed his lips and felt his face warm with embarrassment. “I’m uh. Doing it again, huh. With the mumbling.”

“Well, yes.” Todoroki raised an eyebrow.

Izuku had to look away then, hoping the volume of his curls might hide his darkening blush. “Right, uh, haha.”

“Midoriya,” Todoroki said. “How long have we been friends again?”

Surprise at the question overtook his crawling embarrassment, at least for the moment, and Izuku could look up again without wanting to sink into the floor. “Huh? Um... I guess since a little after the Sports Festival, our first year. So... a little over a year now. Why?”

“Because it means I talk to you more than anyone else in our class,” Todoroki replied. “And I’ve been doing so for that long.” He paused, seeming to gather his thoughts. “Therefore, I’m pretty sure I know what I’m getting into when I ask you a question. If anything, I welcome it.”

“...Oh. Er.” Izuku felt his face heat up again, but this time it didn’t feel like embarrassment.

“I guess what I’m trying to say is, if I didn’t want to hear your opinion—and I mean all of it—then I wouldn’t have asked.” Todoroki leaned back in his seat. “So... thanks.”

“Y-you’re welcome,” Izuku managed to say. “Even though I kind of, uh, unloaded a bunch of different ideas on you.”

Todoroki glanced at him, eyebrow raised. “You say that like it’s a bad thing. The reason why I asked you is because I didn’t have *any* ideas.”

In spite of himself, Izuku had a chuckle at that. “Guess you have a point. I’m, uh, happy to be helpful.”

“You are.” Outwardly, Todoroki’s tone didn’t seem to change. But for some reason, at least to Izuku’s ears, it sounded like a reassurance. “You always are.”

Izuku shifted in his seat to a more comfortable position, finding his head even more cluttered with thoughts than it usually was.

The shopping complex was a short walk from the train station. After a brief pause to get their bearings, the two of them made their way to the intended meeting place. Izuku found himself lagging a little, still distracted by the tangled confusion taking place in his head. If Todoroki took notice, he gave no sign of it. And he had to take notice, considering how many times he had to

pause to let Izuku catch up. It was difficult to concentrate on keeping in step with his friend when there were so many thoughts and feelings to sort through, especially when a good portion of his focus went to making sure none of his thoughts were muttered out loud.

That... that did not bear thinking about.

Before long, they found themselves on a wide pedestrian-only street. There were no cars except for on the intersecting roads; Takodana was for foot traffic only. Finding it, and catching sight of Kirishima soon after, were a welcome distraction. It wasn't hard; even in the crowded strip, Kirishima's spiky, bright red hair stood out like a beacon. Izuku met his eyes from a distance, and Kirishima grinned and waved them over.

"You guys made it!" Kirishima pitched his voice above the general hum. He wasn't alone; Uraraka was with him, as were Ojiro and Hagakure, arm in arm. "Lots of no-shows, turns out. Looks like everybody's got stuff going over the break."

"Us too, sort of," Ojiro said sheepishly. "Tooru and I are probably gonna do our own thing, mostly."

"But we wanted to say hey to everybody before we did!" Hagakure added. "This place looks like so much fun!"

"Speaking of fun." Kirishima's wide, smiling eyes flickered between Izuku and Todoroki's faces. "Uraraka says Todoroki's staying at your place, Midoriya. How's that going for you guys?"

Izuku glanced to Todoroki. That he was having fun went without saying; Todoroki's opinion sort of held more weight, in this case.

"I've been enjoying myself," Todoroki replied, and Izuku let out the breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

"So, then." Kirishima squared his shoulders, arms akimbo. "Where should we go first? I was thinking of shopping around for more gear."

"That's a good idea," Izuku agreed. "Oh! I forgot, the mouth guard on my costume has a crack in it. Hatsume said she had some ideas for a better design, but I need a new one while she works on it."

"We were just going to window-shop," Hagakure said, tugging on Ojiro's arm.

"I was thinking of visiting my mom sometime over the break," Todoroki said. "It'd be nice if I could bring her a present."

"Oh hey, me too!" Uraraka piped up. "I mean, I want to get something for my parents, 'cause their birthdays are coming up pretty soon."

"Well that's good," Izuku told them. "Maybe you can help each other look?"

"How about this," Kirishima spoke up. "Let's go out and do our own things for like, an hour, and then meet up. Maybe we can grab lunch later, or—hey, there's a cinema somewhere around here. We can see if there's anything good on."

"Sounds good to me." Ojiro nodded. "Meet back up in an hour?"

"Oh, uh..." Izuku hesitated and looked to Todoroki. If he was going to go gift-shopping, and he

had been asking Izuku for help with it...

Todoroki glanced back, blinking, and the look in his eyes changed to one of comprehension. "It's fine," he assured Izuku. "I'll keep what you said in mind."

"See you guys in an hour, then!" Uraraka waved. "C'mon, Todoroki, I saw some great stores over this way." Todoroki did a double take after her, before hurrying to follow. Ojiro let Hagakure steer him off in a different direction.

With that, Izuku was left with Kirishima, wandering through the crowds past storefronts and shops. There were even kiosks scattered through the street. The nearest one sold decorative phone cases; farther ahead, another was draped in a display of colorful scarves.

"Man, they've got a lot of stuff around here, huh?" Kirishima remarked. His smile stretched nearly from ear to ear, showing both rows of sharp teeth.

"Definitely." Izuku stared around, both hands shoved in his pockets as he took in the sights and sounds around them. Would it have been better to go with Todoroki? He had needed help with his shopping, after all. Well... if Uraraka was with him, then she could help him.

"Something on your mind, Midoriya?" He barely felt the nudge, but Kirishima's voice startled him out of his reverie. "Is there something you're looking for? Besides the mouth guard, I mean."

"No," Izuku answered. "Well, I guess there sort of is. In a manner of speaking."

That was the point of no return. "Oh?" After an answer like that, his friend's curiosity was piqued, and Kirishima's full attention was on him. There was no brushing him off now. "What's going on, Midoriya?" Kirishima pressed, his smile bright and eager.

Izuku didn't answer immediately. He pursed his lips, staring forward without really looking at what his eyes were aiming at. "Hey, Kirishima," he said length. "You, uh..." Biting his lip, he wondered if there existed a tactful way to bring this up.

"What about me?" Kirishima prompted gently.

May as well take the plunge. "You have that crush on Kacchan, right?" he said.

Kirishima paused mid-step, nearly stumbling. "I do," he replied. "That was a rhetorical question, right? Because, like—I know *you* of all people know that. But... what about it?"

"True." Izuku nodded. "And, well, I'm not really asking about *that*, per se. I was just wondering... how exactly do you know?"

"Huh?" Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Kirishima cock his head.

"That you have a crush," Izuku clarified. He met Kirishima's eyes briefly, but quickly turned his head to face forward again. "I-I mean... how can you tell?"

"Well, it's sort of like..." Kirishima hemmed and hawed for a moment. "Like... man, this question should not be this difficult." He knocked lightly on his own skull, as if the answer was caught between brain cells and he was trying to jar it loose. "It's like they're your favorite person, and being around them or just the thought of being around them makes you happy, I guess."

"Yeah, but, friends are like that too, aren't they?" Izuku pointed out, touching on the crux of his problem. "How do you tell the difference between wanting to be around someone because they're

your friend, and wanting to be around them for a... another reason?"

The thoughtful look faded from Kirishima's face, and he turned his head to look at Izuku through squinting eyes. A slow smile spread across his face, one that filled Izuku with dread and a healthy dose of regret. "Midoriya..."

"You know what," Izuku said faintly. "It's not important. Forget I said anything—"

"Oh-hooo, no you don't." Kirishima's hand descended firmly on Midoriya's shoulder. "You're not pulling that on me, Midoriya. Not after I've already poured my heart out to you about *my* crush—"

"It's not like I asked you to!" Midoriya protested.

"True. But come on, man!" Kirishima slung an arm around Midoriya's shoulders with a lopsided grin. "Clearly you're having some issues, so—"

"They aren't *issues*."

"You wouldn't be asking me a question like that if you weren't having a little trouble figuring stuff out," Kirishima pointed out. "Hey, seriously. No judgments, I promise. Lay it on me, lemme see if I can help you out. Please?"

Izuku's mouth twisted with indecision. "Well..."

"Or I can just guess," Kirishima went on blithely. "Do you have a crush on Uraraka?"

"I—no." Izuku reddened.

"Is that a blush? You're not lying to me, are you? That's kinda not fair, Midoriya."

"I'm *not*," Izuku groused, glaring at him. "I mean I did, but very briefly, when I first met her, and only because she was literally the first girl who ever talked to me. It went away when we became friends."

"Okay, fair enough." Kirishima nodded. "Tsuyu?"

"No," Izuku sighed.

"Oh, good."

"Good?" Izuku echoed, raising an eyebrow at him.

"It'd be super awkward if you had a crush on either of them because they've been circling each other like graceful ballerinas for like, a while now," Kirishima replied. "And as nice as it would be to get them out of that stage, I don't think interrupting their delicate waltz with a sledgehammer to the knee is the way to do it, you know?"

"Oh, I see—wait, really?" Izuku turned to gape at him. "Uraraka and Tsuyu?"

"Yup! But we're getting off track." Kirishima slid his arm off of Izuku's shoulders and shoved his hands in his pockets. "Seriously, who's this person you have a crush on?"

"Maybe nobody!" Izuku's voice cracked on the way out. "That's why I was asking you that question—I seriously don't know! But..." He wrung his hands at his sides. "It's *possible* that I *might* have feelings that *maybe* aren't completely platonic, and it's *also* possible that those feelings are... for..." His voice trailed to a mumble. "Todoroki." He half hoped that his voice was too

indistinct to hear.

His hopes were in vain. “Dude!” Kirishima jostled him by the shoulder. “And—wait, don’t you have him staying over at your place? *Very* clever.”

Without warning, Izuku felt his temper flare. “It’s not like that!” he snapped, glaring at his grinning classmate. “I invited him over because I didn’t want him to have to—” *spend the break anywhere near his father*, he thought. “I didn’t want him to be lonely over the break, okay? Do you really think I’d do that just for a chance to—to hit on him or something?”

“Whoa, whoa, no way, man.” Kirishima held up both hands in surrender. “I was just joking—sorry. I guess that was in poor taste. I know you’re not like that, Midoriya, I didn’t mean to step on your toes or anything.”

Sighing, Izuku let his shoulders slump. “Besides,” he went on, in a more subdued tone. “Like I said, I don’t even know if I have a crush at all. That’s my whole problem.”

“I dunno, Midoriya,” Kirishima said. “You got really bent out of shape just now, and you invited him to your place for—what, the entire break?—just so he wouldn’t be lonely. Seems pretty likely to me.”

“Not really,” Izuku said. “I mean, I’d have invited *you* if you didn’t have anywhere to go.”

Kirishima placed his hand over his heart and made a quiet choking noise. “*Bro*.”

Izuku elbowed him lightly and tried not to laugh. “You’re not being very helpful so far.”

“Okay, okay-okay-okay. So.” Kirishima tapped his chin. “Let’s try from a different angle. So, you think it might not be a crush because you’re not sure you aren’t just feeling the friendship for him real hard. Right?”

“Pretty much.”

“So then, why do you think you *do* have a maybe-crush on him? I mean, besides the obvious.”

Izuku gave him a dubious look. “What obvious?”

“He’s *pretty*. Now answer the question.”

“Because...” Izuku’s breath caught in his throat. “I dunno, lately I’ve been... sort of weird and stuttery around him? Like he’ll say something nice and I don’t even know how to respond because it’s like we’re having a moment and I don’t want to ruin it. And I’m just—are these just friendship moments or something else? Would I react the same way for my other friends?”

“Well, I’ve always thought your hair is really fluffy and your freckles are cute, but like in a manly way,” Kirishima told him.

“I—what?” Izuku blinked up at him. “Thanks, I guess? What does that have to do with anything?”

“Well, you sure looked like you knew how to respond then,” Kirishima said. “Did we have a moment just now?”

“What are you—oh.” Izuku resisted the urge to roll his eyes. “It’s not the same if you just spring a compliment out of the blue, there’s like a build-up to it and—”

“Uraraka calls you cool like, every other time she talks about you when you’re not around,”

Kirishima added. “And I know she does it to your face too, ‘cause that girl has no chill when it comes to encouraging her friends. Here’s a question—do you ever over-analyze any of your other friend moments that don’t happen with Todoroki?”

“I... sort of do?” Izuku made a so-so motion with his hand. “I’ve been trying to compare them to see if there’s a difference.”

“Let me rephrase that. Have you ever over-analyzed them for any reason that *doesn’t* have to do with Todoroki?”

Izuku opened his mouth to reply. Then he closed it. His brow furrowed as he wracked his brain for a good answer, and came up empty. “I... guess not.”

“Well then.” Kirishima spread his hands wide. “I guess it’s not a hard and fast answer to your question, but it’s something to get those juices flowing, you know? I mean—brain juices. Not... not any other kind of—”

“I *know*, Kirishima.”

“Right.” Kirishima nodded once. “So like, I can’t explain your brain for you, mainly because your brain’s so twisty that sometimes it’s like you do all your thinking sideways, but... if you’re feeling different about Todoroki than how you feel about everybody else, then... well, I guess that sort of answers your question, don’t you think?”

“Maybe...” Izuku pursed his lips. Far from quieting his questions and thoughts, this line of conversation had only kicked them up like dust.

Kirishima patted him none too gently on the shoulder. “I know, dude. Feels Limbo is a weird place to be. You’ll figure it out, though.”

“I sure hope so.” This conversation was making him feel restless. Izuku’s hands moved on their own, going through familiar repetitive patterns until his phone was out and he was scrolling through news feeds. “It’d be bad enough having a crush, but I don’t know what to do with just, not knowing.”

“Well, maybe talking helps?” Kirishima said with a shrug.

“It usually does—uh-oh.” His thumb went still on the screen.

Kirishima leaned closer. “What is it? Villain trouble?”

“Maybe.” Izuku frowned down at the article that had caught his attention. “Couple of attacks, looks like. By someone claiming to be the same guy both times.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Kirishima’s eyes narrowed in confusion. “Why would someone have to claim to be the same person as... themselves? That doesn’t even make sense.”

“It does if they look different the second time,” Izuku pointed out. His stomach turned as he read the rest. “Police think it might be a shapeshifter or something.”

“Ugh.” His classmate pulled a face. “I swear, if this cuts our break short, I’m gonna find that guy and punch him in the face myself.”

“It’s just one villain,” Izuku assured him. “One shapeshifting, attention-craving villain. And from the looks of it, the police have it in hand.”

“True. And even if they don’t, isn’t Endeavor supposed to be back in town pretty soon?”

Another wrench to his stomach rendered Izuku mute for a moment more. “That too,” he finally managed to say.

“Well, no point in worrying about it either way,” Kirishima reasoned. “C’mon, there’s this new store I want to check out. You might find that mouth guard, too.”

“Sooo,” Uraraka said sweetly, as they passed storefronts and kiosks. “How’re things going at Deku’s place?”

“How do you mean.” Shouto slowed as the window display of a jewelry store caught his eye, but kept walking. It was outside his price range, to say nothing of the fact that his mother wasn’t much of a jewelry person.

“You know very well how I mean, Todoroki.”

Shouto shot her a quick glance and returned to absorbing the scenery. “I don’t, actually.”

Uraraka let out a noisy sigh. “*Fine*. Are you having fun, at least?”

“You were just there with us the other day,” Shouto pointed out. Jewelry was out. Maybe a nice scarf? She didn’t get the chance to go out very much, living in the hospital as she did, but it might raise her spirits anyway.

“Guess so. And speaking of which, I was wondering—”

Todoroki suppressed the urge to sigh. Uraraka was almost as much of a chatterbox as Midoriya, but talking to her could not have been more different. When Midoriya talked, he didn’t stop. Words, sentences, and ideas flowed out of him in a continuous stream, provided that no one interrupted him. Shouto was never one for interrupting, so he could simply listen and let Midoriya do enough talking for both of them. Uraraka, on the other hand, paused when she talked. She asked questions and prompted responses. With Uraraka, there was no such thing as a one-sided conversation; the only option was participation.

“Todoroki?” Uraraka tilted her head, leaning so that she was within Shouto’s line of vision.

“What?” He blinked at her expectant face. Had she asked him something?

“I just wanted to know why you decided to stay with Deku,” Uraraka said. “If that’s okay. It’s just, neither of you ever said anything about it before the break started, so...”

“We decided pretty late,” Shouto said. “I didn’t feel like going back to my parents’ place. My sister’s one of my family contacts at school, and she gave permission.”

“How come—ohhh, your dad’s out of town, isn’t he?” It was easy enough to let her come to her own conclusion. “That was pretty nice of Deku, doing that so last minute.”

Shouto felt his stomach turn. It wasn’t like he needed to be reminded that he might be inconveniencing the Midoriyas. “He was the one who offered,” he muttered.

“Uh-huh. Like I said, pretty nice of him.”

Her tone sounded a little too sly for Shouto’s liking. “Well,” he said. “I don’t know if you noticed, but in general, Midoriya is a nice person.” His teeth ground together a little after the words were

out.

“True,” Uraraka said blithely. “How long are you staying with him again?”

“The... whole break,” he admitted.

“Yeah, I thought that was it.” Uraraka paused when a kiosk caught her eye, but kept walking. “I mean, three weeks. On *such* short notice.”

“Pretty sure he’d do it for anyone in class,” Shouto said stiffly.

“But he’s not doing it for just anyone,” she said, her tone lifting as if prompting him. “He’s doing it for you. Don’t you have anything to say to that?”

“Well I’ve said ‘thank you’ quite a number of times,” Shouto answered. “He’s probably tired of hearing it by now.”

Uraraka made a rough groaning noise. “That’s not what I mean, Todoroki, and you know it.”

“Actually, I don’t.” Shouto halted, stepped to the side of the street and out of the way of foot traffic, and turned to her. “I really don’t know what you mean. If you’re trying to throw me hints, it isn’t working, so I’d really appreciate it if you just said what you want and saved both of us a lot of time and frustration.”

His classmate blinked in surprised, and then disbelief. Skipping out of the path of other passersby, she faced him with her hands on her hips. “Wait... you mean you don’t know?”

“Don’t know what?”

Uraraka rolled her eyes. “Todoroki, more than half of our class and a few people *outside* of our class know that Deku is very, *very* fond of you.”

Her words struck like a gut punch. “I—well—we’re friends aren’t we?” he managed to choke out. “So that’s no surprise.”

To his relief, Uraraka lowered her voice when she spoke next. “Yeah, well, *fewer* people know that you’re kinda completely gone for him, too.”

Shouto gaped at her.

“Unless—oh my God, did you not know that either?” Her eyes widened. “Because you just—have you not figured that out yet, or—?”

“No,” Shouto blurted. “I mean, yes, I figured that out, but—how did *you*?”

Amusement flickered in Uraraka’s eyes. “Gosh, what a tough question,” she said dryly. “How would I, Uraraka Ochako, know what a crush on Deku looks like?”

“I...” The words would not come. “Oh.”

She smiled. “But don’t worry, that’s in the past. I don’t think he really saw me as anything but a really good friend, and that’s fine. But you? You’re a different story.”

“I’m... really not,” Shouto said. How had he let himself become this transparent? If Uraraka could figure it out, then it wouldn’t be long before Midoriya did, too. Or worse, he realized with a jolt—his father. His father missed *nothing*. Mentally, Shouto gave himself a shake. “It’s like I said.

We're friends. Nothing more."

"Maybe," Uraraka said. "Are you fine with that?"

He blinked. "What do you mean?"

"I was fine with us just being friends," Uraraka explained. "I thought it'd get in the way of my goals if I tried being anything else with him. But you're not me, obviously, so maybe you aren't."

"It... it doesn't really matter what I—why are we discussing this?" Shouto asked.

"Because Deku's my best friend," Uraraka told him, and Shouto felt an uncomfortable jealous twinge at that. "He's one of my favorite people in the whole world and that means sometimes I try and tip things in his favor."

"In other words, you're meddling," Shouto said.

"Absolutely."

He blinked. "And if you're wrong?"

"Wrong how?" Uraraka cocked her head.

"I'll grant it makes sense, that you'd recognize... me," he said, wishing he could bite off his own tongue as the words left his mouth. "But give me one good reason why you think Midoriya feels the same way." Uraraka opened her mouth to reply, but Shouto cut her off before she could. "And even if he did, you said so yourself—you had goals, and you decided it would get in your way if you tried to pursue it. Have you ever met anyone as driven as Midoriya?"

"Everybody in our class is driven," Uraraka reminded him. "You think Ojiro and Hagakure aren't driven?" She shook her head. "Besides, if you want a reason, then there's the fact that he sort of fell apart when you took a hit protecting him last spring." Her brow furrowed, as if she was seeing an unpleasant memory before her eyes. "He was okay by the time you woke up, but you didn't see the worst of it."

Shouto winced. He tried not to let it show, but his fingers curled into fists and he shut his eyes against the sudden wave of painful *something* that washed over him. Steeling himself, he opened them again. "Do you honestly think he wouldn't have taken it just as badly if it'd been you? Or Iida?"

"I don't know." For a moment Uraraka sounded small. "All I know is that he cares about you. Enough to practically fall all over himself if he thinks you might need help."

"All the more reason that I don't want to be a burden to him." Shouto turned and started walking again.

"You're *not*—" Uraraka trotted to catch up.

"But I could become one," he said. "And I have goals too, you know."

"Course you do," she said. "I just want to know if those goals absolutely don't include Deku."

"Uraraka," Shouto sighed.

"Is it really so hard for you to believe he might feel that way about you?" she pressed gently. "You're basing at least half your argument on a choice I made almost a year ago. You're not me,

and neither is Deku. Are you really gonna stamp out your chances before you even know you have ‘em?”

“I’m used to not having nice things,” Shouto said flatly.

He could feel her eyes on him, but this time he didn’t turn to look at her. To his relief, he heard her sigh her resignation toward the ground at their feet. “Well,” she said. “I see a craft store up ahead. Maybe there’s something nice in there.”

Relieved, Shouto allowed himself—or forced himself, rather—to turn his mind back to the task at hand. What was it again? Right. A present. That was what he was here for.

Mother did say she had too much time on her hands, after all. And that his visits were the highlight of her week, or month, or... whatever period of time it took for him to show up. Being cooped up in that facility all the time must not be fun, especially considering how many years she had spent there. How she avoided going stir-crazy, Shouto would never know.

So maybe she would like having something to do with her hands.

Shouto browsed with a renewed certainty, satisfied with his plan. There were a number of kits available, step by step crafts like latch hook rugs and sew-and-stuff animals and embroidered throw pillows. But that was no good; kits like that only lasted so long, and then they were done. What could he get her that would last?

A book on crocheting caught his eye; a flick through the pages proved it to be simple enough for a beginner. After a brief exchange with an available store clerk, he went on to find a crochet hook (metallic pink) and two rolls of yarn (one sapphire blue, one violet). Satisfied, he made his way to the front to stand in line. Uraraka had wandered off to do her own shopping; whether she was still browsing or waiting outside already, Shouto wasn’t sure.

The important thing was, he wasn’t stuck in line with her so that she could take the chance to pick up their earlier conversation where they’d left off.

Eager for a distraction from the traitorous thoughts creeping back into his head, Shouto idly scanned the impulse-buy shelves around him. A variety of odds and ends lined the shelves, from simple kids’ crafts and cheap art supplies, to decorative mugs and packaged snacks.

His eyes fell upon a stack of small books toward the end of the shelf, and he blinked when he caught sight of the cover.

Barely stepping out of line, he snagged the one at the top of the stack and examined it with a mixture of perplexity and amusement.

It was one of those kitschy little photo books, the kind that people kept on their coffee tables. On the cover, in full color glory, was a photograph of an enormous fawn-colored rabbit, ears sticking up in a perfect V shape. The rabbit was dressed in what looked suspiciously like a miniaturized version of All-Might’s hero costume.

Pro Hoppers: Rabbits Dressed as Heroes, the title read. Shouto flipped through the first few pages, and—yes. That was exactly what this book was. And to be perfectly frank, Shouto had never seen anything that screamed *Midoriya* this much.

it means a lot to people when you think about them even if they aren’t there

Less than an hour later, he plunked the book into Midoriya’s hands with a “Saw this and thought of

you,” and was rewarded almost immediately when his friend took one look at the cover and laughed until he choked on his own spit.

Chapter 5

Izuku wasn't altogether sure what roused him in the middle of the night. He came awake, blinking drowsily in the dark with no memory of what he had been dreaming about. Maybe nothing; dreamless nights were increasingly rare lately, but welcome when they did come. It was his own bad luck that this one had to be interrupted. But by what?

The sound of blankets rustling reached his ears, and Izuku felt his mind worm its way further into wakefulness. Was Todoroki awake too?

For a while Izuku lay motionless, struggling against the feeling of his senses wading through molasses. He almost slipped back into sleep, before he startled again when something moved before his eyes, right above his face, just barely visible in the faint light through his window. A *cloud*? he thought groggily. *Steam*?

Close, he realized. His nose was cold. He could see his breath.

Bleary-eyed, Izuku struggled to sit up, failed, and settled for rolling over on his mattress so that he could see over the edge. The blankets slipped from his shoulders, and he shivered in the shock of chilly air and squinted down at Todoroki. He blinked, and in an instant he was wide awake.

It was hard to see, with his eyes still sleep-crusted and adjusting to the dark. But even then, it was hard to miss the fact that Todoroki had all but kicked the blanket off. He lay curled up on his left side, and what little light there was glinted oddly on his shoulder and arm, his face, and his side. With a jolt, Izuku recognized it as a pale sheen of ice. Wisps of thin, smoke-like fog hovered around Todoroki, and the temperature in the room had dropped.

It was either the cold, or Todoroki's voice that had woken him. He was murmuring in his sleep, too soft and indistinct to be words, and interspersed with sharp, ragged breaths. With the blanket in disarray and his quirk activating subconsciously, Todoroki was subtly shivering.

"Todoroki?" Izuku whispered. The only reply from his friend was a soft noise, suspiciously close to a sob. Izuku inched closer to the edge, and saw wet tracks shining on his friend's tense face. For a moment Izuku's eyes stung, and he could barely breathe through the twisting in his chest. It was equal parts pity, sympathy, and a healthy dose of fear.

As noiselessly as he could, Izuku slipped out from under the covers and crept down to the floor. His first instinct was to wake him up; whatever he was dreaming about, it wasn't pleasant, and if he waited a moment more while Todoroki was crying just a few feet away, it might just break him. But as he crouched over his sleeping friend, hand outstretched to gently shake him, he hesitated.

Todoroki was his friend, one of his closest friends. He was strong, and he had been through so much, but he was *proud*. Izuku had seen Todoroki shaking and uncertain, lashing out, desperate, enraged, in pain, injured and bleeding and unconscious, but never before had Izuku seen him like this. It didn't take half a brain to know that Todoroki wouldn't want to be seen like this. If Izuku woke him up now...

He wasted more seconds caught in indecision. Todoroki shuddered, the ice spreading along his arm toward his hands. Another noise escaped him, somewhere between a whine and a sigh.

Izuku shifted into a more comfortable sitting position and reached out again.

"Don't."

He froze with a quiet gasp of shock, before he realized that Todoroki was neither awake nor talking to him.

“I don’t want to—” Todoroki’s voice hitched, and Izuku never found out what he didn’t want, because his hand was in his friend’s hair before he could even register what he was doing.

When Todoroki showed no signs of waking up, Izuku dared to speak. “It’s okay.” He forced out a shaky whisper. “You don’t have to.”

He was cold. He was cold, and trapped, stuck in the dark with no way out. There was no coherence to this dream; sometimes there just wasn’t. Images flashed in the dark, vague impressions of things, interspersed with the fear, and the cold.

(Cold was better than fire.)

The threat of fire made him choke on his own fear, even though it shouldn’t—he knew it shouldn’t. Someone had told him it shouldn’t, and it was important, very important, that he remembered that. And he was *cold*. If the cold kept up, even that would hurt him, but he didn’t want fire, he didn’t want flames, he *didn’t want to*—

It’s okay.

A hand in his hair, light and trembling and gentle.

You don’t have to.

Oh. Oh, good.

He almost came awake then. He almost struggled his way out of the dark and back into the world, but the hand in his hair was soft, and the voice was soft, and he found himself drifting.

It’s okay. It’s going to be okay.

Should he believe that? It wasn’t like he had much of a choice.

It’ll be okay, I promise.

Yes. He could believe that.

I’m sorry.

What for?

I’m sorry I can’t do more.

What an odd thing to say, Shouto thought as he sank down into a more comforting, dreamless warmth. This was enough. In his recent memory, this was more than anyone else had ever done.

Shouto woke slowly, and then very, very quickly.

For about two seconds he was peaceful, heavy eyelids lifting, buried in a blanket with his face half-hidden from the sunlight streaming through the window. Then came the instinctive panic, which snapped him wide-awake with an abruptness that gave him mental whiplash.

And then actual whiplash, when he sat up quickly and discovered the painful crick in his neck.

There was no practical reason for his own brain to slap him awake screaming *How long have I been asleep* but at this point he was more or less used to it. It was a useless and irritating habit, and one of his many, many crosses to bear.

What time is it?

“Morning, Todoroki.” Shouto turned his head, blinking leftover sleep out of his eyes, to see Midoriya walking in, already dressed. A quick glance told him that Midoriya’s bed was made, the sun was bright, and that was definitely the sound of Midoriya’s mother puttering in the kitchen.

“How late is it?” Shouto asked. His voice came out as a raspy croak, and his throat ached almost as much as his neck.

“It’s not ten yet,” Midoriya replied, like that was supposed to be reassuring.

Shouto bit back a groan of embarrassment. “Sorry about that. You should’ve woke me up.”

“Oh, well, you know.” Midoriya stepped past him to tug at the covers on his bed, a little pointlessly since it was already neatly made. “We’re on vacation, right? If we can’t sleep in now, when can we?”

Leftover grogginess loosened Shouto’s tongue. “Well, I didn’t expect to do much sleeping in over break, but then you invited me.” Something rose up in the back of his mind, a vaguely unpleasant memory struggling to surface. It curdled his already empty stomach, so he blinked hard and forced the feeling back down.

The pieces fell into place. Tired enough to sleep late, even though they’d gone to bed at a reasonable hour (late-night whispering aside). Stiff neck. Sore throat. Nebulous bad feelings and memories just beyond his reach.

Nightmares again, he realized with a short sigh. He should probably be thankful that he couldn’t seem to remember any of them. How humiliating—hopefully it wouldn’t happen again, especially with the risk of Midoriya seeing or hearing something. Shouto cleared his throat, wincing a little at the ache. He didn’t yell in his nightmares anymore, but sometimes his throat still hurt from the strain of keeping quiet in his sleep.

“You... okay?” There was a halting note in Midoriya’s voice.

“Fine,” Shouto replied automatically. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Midoriya took long enough to answer that Shouto assumed he’d taken the question to be rhetorical. Eventually, his friend shrugged and sat down on his bed. “No reason,” he said. “My mom and I are thinking of checking out the beach today—what do you think?”

Shouto blinked. “Er... fine, but I didn’t bring anything for...”

“Don’t worry about it,” Midoriya assured him again. “We’re going to the Dagobah Beach Park, and Mom’s been wanting to check it out but she doesn’t really... trust it very much.”

Dagobah... the name was familiar, somehow. “Why not?”

“Well...” Something flitted across Midoriya’s face, an emotion too quick for Shouto to catch.

“Apparently it used to be a big dumping ground for people’s trash. But then, uh. Someone cleaned

it up. Cleared the whole horizon. It's a pretty popular spot now, but Mom's pretty convinced going barefoot in the water's just asking for a hypodermic needle in the foot or something. Still, though, it'd probably be fun to hang out. Lots of shops, and the shoreline's supposed to be pretty nice."

"Sounds good." Shouto nodded. "Just let me get dressed."

"Sure thing! There's breakfast in the kitchen, too." With that, Midoriya darted out again.

Once he was gone, Shouto let out the breath he'd been holding. It wasn't that he didn't like talking to Midoriya, or that he didn't trust him; far from it. But heaven help him, Midoriya was *nosy*. Worse than being nosy, he was perceptive to an almost unsettling degree, which was like being nosy without even trying. And between school, training, and whatever he had going on with All-Might, Midoriya had quite enough on his plate without getting dragged into Shouto's problems again.

True to Midoriya's word, there was food ready for him when he finally ventured out. Mrs. Midoriya beamed at him from the kitchen with a cheery "Good morning, Todoroki!"

"Good morning," he replied. "Thanks. Sorry to keep you waiting."

"It's no trouble at all, don't worry. Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Did Izuku tell you the plan for today?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied. "Sounds fun."

Right when she was starting to remind him of Uraraka, she stepped back and stopped pressing him for conversation. Todoroki tried not to breathe an obvious sigh of relief; the only thing worse than inadvertently dragging Midoriya into his problems would be doing the same to his mother.

Inko suppressed a sigh. He seemed awfully cagey this morning—and there he went again with the apologizing.

Oh, well. Patience would get her there in the end. Wherever "there" was.

The Dagobah Municipal Beach Park was quite lovely, in Shouto's opinion. Midoriya had said it was once little better than a garbage dump, but Shouto would never have realized that just by looking at it. The beach was clear and pristine, not a speck of trash in sight. The sand was white, the water nearly as blue as the sky above it. Shops and food stalls lined the streets leading up to the park, children shrieked and played in the waves, and one or two couples lounged on towels in the sand. It wasn't quite crowded, but the warm day had attracted quite a few visitors.

"It's still a mystery, you know," Mrs. Midoriya said blithely. "Just a couple of years ago you couldn't even see the horizon, and now look at it. What do you think, Todoroki-kun? Have you ever been here before?"

Shouto hesitated a moment before replying. "I haven't. But whoever cleaned it up did good work."

Midoriya made an odd throat-clearing noise. "I'm surprised all these shops popped up so fast," he said, gesturing vaguely toward the street nearest the shoreline. "This place was pretty dead back then."

"It's practically bustling now," Mrs. Midoriya said.

It was easier to keep track than it had been before. Midoriya and his mother speaking interchangeably had made his head spin a little the first day, but a shift in mindset made following along simpler. The structure and rules here were still a bit blurry, but thankfully there seemed to be much more room for error than there was in a household where Endeavor was in charge.

That didn't mean certain things didn't catch him off guard from time to time. Shouto still balked on instinct whenever Mrs. Midoriya addressed him directly.

"Either of you need to use the restroom?" she asked, drawing him out of his musings again.

"No thank you," he said.

"I'm good for now," Midoriya added.

"Well in that case, give me two minutes," she said, and nodded toward the public toilets. She took two steps and paused. "Actually, you two want ice cream?"

"I'm fi—" Shouto started to say.

"Sure!" Midoriya interrupted, most likely on purpose.

"Great!" His mother beamed at them. "I saw an ice cream place over down that way." She pointed down the line of beachside shops. "I'll meet you two there!" They parted ways. Once she was out of earshot, Shouto took a deep breath and let it out again.

"Are you nervous around her?" Midoriya asked, and Shouto would have choked on air if he hadn't already taken a successful breath.

"What?" he said.

"My mom," Midoriya clarified. "Are you nervous around her?"

"What makes you say that?" Shouto asked, which was not an answer to Midoriya's question.

Midoriya shrugged. "Just wondering. You kind of sighed just now when she left, like you were relieved. That's not the only reason, though. It's just what made me ask."

"She's been very welcoming," Shouto told him, which still technically wasn't an answer. "Don't worry about me. I've had a good time."

"Oh. That's good." Midoriya pushed his hands into his pockets. "You don't have to talk in past tense yet—we're not even one week in."

"One week may be all I can have," Shouto said, before he could think better of it.

Midoriya jerked his head around to frown at him. "What do you mean?"

"I've just been thinking about it a little," Shouto said with a shrug. That wasn't a lie; he'd been thinking about it as little as possible, but the notion refused to go away altogether. He looked at Midoriya's face and had to look away again. Something about his friend's anxious eyes made Shouto feel transparent. "The old man's due back in town after the first week, remember? It might be a good idea if I went home then." The words tasted sour in his mouth.

His friend was quiet for a moment, watching him as Shouto watched the horizon. "No offense,

Todoroki,” Midoriya said. “But that kind of sounds like the opposite of a good idea.”

“I’m not saying it’d be fun,” Shouto told him. “But... he’s gonna wonder where I am, once he gets back. If I’m already there, or if I go straight home without a fuss, that’ll probably be the end of it.” The end of what, though? He’d still be at home for another two weeks.

“Didn’t your sister give her permission, though?” Midoriya pointed out.

The twisting sensation in his stomach almost showed on his face. “That’s the whole problem. She said she’d be okay, but I don’t want the old bastard getting angry at *her* when I’m not there.” He shrugged, forcing down the sick feeling. “If I go home, then no harm, no foul.”

“But are you okay with that?”

Shouto blinked at him, momentarily lost for an answer. Was he okay with it? He was “okay” with Fuyumi not getting in trouble, no matter how confident she was that the old man wouldn’t give her grief. He was “okay” with his father not coming back to find out that Shouto was spending the break with All-Might’s favorite student. And besides, what he was okay with didn’t really enter into it. Even if he was having fun, there were more important things to worry about. Even if he wanted to spend the whole break watching movies shoulder-to-shoulder with Midoriya, or visiting outdoor shopping malls with friends, or sleeping on a futon on Midoriya’s bedroom floor after staying up late talking softly about anything that came to their heads, it didn’t have to matter. Even if he didn’t want to go home.

“I’ll be fine,” he said out loud. *I don’t want to go home*, his mind said, like a mismatched echo. “It’s just two weeks.” *I don’t want to go home*.

He forced himself to look up at Midoriya’s face then, and his heart sank because one glance was all it took to tell him that Midoriya didn’t believe him. He kept silent, bracing himself for Midoriya to press him with more questions.

At last, Midoriya took a breath and spoke again. “Well... did you mean it when you said you didn’t want ice cream? Or were you just saying that to be polite?”

Shouto hesitated. Without him noticing, they had arrived at the shop Mrs. Midoriya had indicated. “I’m... I guess I could go for some,” he said sheepishly.

He shot another glance at Midoriya, just in time to see his friend’s worried frown break into a warmer smile. “Let’s get something while we wait for my mom, okay?”

Shouto felt his chest loosen. “Sounds good.”

They each paid for themselves. The girl behind the counter was round-eyed as she handed him his cone, and his heart sank, just a little. He recognized that look, and met it with a flat, slow-blinking stare. Her face reddened, and she lowered her eyes as he stepped away.

He joined Midoriya, who was looking at some of the other sweets on display, further away from the register. As he did, he heard the cashier whispering frantically to her coworker.

“*Oh my God, do you see who that is?*”

“*Should I know him? He’s got cool hair, I guess. Too bad about his face, he’d be cuter without—*”

“*Shhh, he’ll hear you! Do you even know who that is? That’s THE Endeavor’s son!*” He shut his eyes briefly. Just when he was starting to enjoy himself.

Midoriya's head turned so swiftly it was a wonder he didn't pull something in his neck. "Todoroki?" he murmured.

"It's fine."

"If you want, we could go somewhere else—"

Shouto pretended to be utterly fascinated by mint chocolate. "It's fine."

They lapsed into silence after that, enjoying their ice cream, or at least attempting to while the cashier's excited whispered ranting ran its course. Shouto let it fade into background noise. The shop door jingled as another customer wandered in, but he barely looked up.

Midoriya's hand brushed his. He didn't startle, thank God, but he did glance over to see Midoriya shift away.

"Sorry," Midoriya murmured, half to himself. His eyes met Shouto's, and he opened his mouth to say something else. Before he could, his face went still, and his eyes flickered to something over Shouto's shoulder.

A chill went up the back of Shouto's neck. He knew that look.

As he turned to see what was so interesting behind him, the sound of scraping reached his ears. The customer who had entered now stood at the register and dragged five metallic claws over the surface of the counter on one hand, leaving deep ragged grooves in the granite. With the other, he slammed an empty bag in front of the wide-eyed girl.

"Empty the register," the man growled. He lifted his hand from the counter, rasping his claws together. Each of them was half again as long as a steak knife.

"W-wait a minute," the girl stammered, and cut off with a short scream when the man grabbed her collar and pressed three of his claws to her throat. Her shocked coworker, halfway to the phone, froze where she was.

"Fine then," he snapped to the coworker. "*You* do it. Money, bag. Or I slice your friend's face like a birthday cake." The girl whimpered audibly.

"Seriously?" Shouto heard himself say. "It's not even noon yet. How much do you think they have in there?"

The man's head whipped around, eyes glinting dangerously. "You got something to say?"

He was college age at the oldest, Shouto noted as he shifted subtly closer and took stock of the situation. Two civilians behind the counter, one more hovering and gaping by the door, and one criminal menacing the two workers. The shop was small, far too small for any big attacks. Midoriya had his back. "You haven't been doing this for very long, have you?"

"What's it to you, asshole?"

"If you had more experience, you'd pay more attention," Shouto said calmly.

"To what?" The would-be robber sneered. "Your pretty face?"

"Ito, watch your goddamn feet!" someone yelled, just as the trail of ice spreading across the shop floor encased the criminal up to his shins.

The robber—Ito—swore loudly, accidentally releasing his hostage. She stumbled back out of his reach, and her coworker lunged for the phone again. With a loud crack, Ito wrenched one foot free and pivoted to lunge at Shouto and swipe with his finger blades. Shouto let his cone drop, ducked under the claws, and grabbed his wrist with his right hand. Ice spread along the criminal's arm and beyond it, trapping him from the neck down.

There was a yell from the shop's door, and the third civilian—not a civilian after all, but an accomplice—charged in with clearly quirk-enhanced speed.

Midoriya slipped in between them, caught the accomplice's half-thrown punch, and slammed his knee into the larger man's midriff. There was an awful retching noise, followed by a wet splatter.

"Son of a *bitch*," the criminal snarled, braced for another attack. As Shouto watched, Midoriya simply loosened his grip and let his opponent step in his own vomit. The man's foot shot out from under him like a cartoon character stepping on a banana peel, and he ended up flat on his back with Midoriya's foot planted firmly but gently on his throat. He could breathe—just. Shouto could see from the way his eyes flickered about that he was searching madly for an escape.

Ito was encased in ice from the neck down; he wasn't going anywhere. Shouto stepped closer, flames rippling from his fingertips to his elbow, right below where his sleeve ended. More fire lit up on the right side of his face, on his neck, in his hair. Ice spread along the other side, down his arm, and on the floor by his right foot. Neither fire nor ice touched anyone but him, but the threat was clear enough. Between that, and the way Midoriya's quirk crackled dangerously along his skin, the downed villain went still.

Midoriya looked to the two girls behind the counter. "Are you two all right?"

The cashier nodded vigorously, eyes as round as saucers. Her friend still had the phone in her hand.

"I, uh, called the police," she said awkwardly.

"Thanks for that," Midoriya went on. "And... sorry about the floor. He was moving faster than I expected, so I kind of... kicked him a little too hard."

"No, no." She eyed the criminal currently wheezing under his foot. "I'd say you hit him the right amount." Her eyes turned to Shouto, glinting with amusement. "I'll, uh. Replace your ice cream. On the house."

"Thank you," Shouto replied.

At that moment, the door jingled again as it opened. "Sorry to keep you two waiting, I had to go back to the car to grab my *oh dear goodness*."

"Hi, Mom!" The smile on Midoriya's face was bright, if a little strained. Mrs. Midoriya stood in the doorway, gaping in shock.

"Sorry about this," Shouto said. "But would you be all right with waiting outside for a minute or so?"

"Police should be here soon," Midoriya added.

Mrs. Midoriya heaved a sigh. "This is going to be a regular thing with you," she said to her son in a long-suffering voice. "Isn't it?"

Behind them, still encased in ice, Ito swore loudly.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

More art from Tumblr user [biteitwhenitssoft](#) - Izuku and Kirishima's beautiful little [bro moment](#), in comic form!

The police only kept them long enough to take brief statements and double-check their provisional licenses.

At least, they checked Izuku's provisional license. The officer took one look at Todoroki and went from grim-faced and stern to cordially polite. At some point during the exchange, Todoroki sent Izuku an uncomfortable look, which he met with a helpless shrug.

"That was annoying," Todoroki muttered when they finally left the scene. Both criminals were thawed and handcuffed, and their part in the whole business was done. "I can't believe he didn't ask to see my card."

"It's not your fault, or his," Izuku said, bumping his shoulder lightly. "Everybody and their goldfish knows what you look like, and that you have your provisional license." He shrugged. "I'm a lot harder to spot on the street."

"Still, it's disrespectful."

Izuku snorted. "Won't be like that for long." He stretched his arms behind him until the joints in his shoulders gave a satisfying pop. "I just need to make myself known. Do something big enough that I start getting recognized by random bystanders, too."

"Be careful what you wish for," Todoroki said dryly. "And don't come complaining to me."

Izuku laughed softly as his mother rejoined them. "All set?" she said. If she was fretting over their scuffle, she didn't show it.

"We're good to go," he told her. "It's okay, Mom. Nothing we couldn't handle."

"Just be careful." She squeezed his shoulder briefly. "I've been hearing things on the news—someone's been stirring up trouble in the city. They think it might be a shapeshifter." She shuddered a little. "You really can't know for sure that it's safe, especially with someone like that."

"No shapeshifters there." Izuku glanced over his shoulder just in time to see the officers buffalo the two would-be robbers into a squad car. "Just a couple guys trying to make quick cash."

"They didn't even bother masking themselves," Todoroki muttered. Izuku saw him shoot a look at Mom before falling silent again.

"Well, I'm glad you two could handle it so well," Mom sighed. "I, for one, could go for a nice peaceful walk along the beach."

"Great idea." Izuku cracked a grin. "Actually, if I can grab my sandals from the car, there're some great tide pools further down I could show you."

Todoroki glanced at him. “You’ve been here before?”

“Uh, y-yeah.” He kept the grin in place, hoping it didn’t look too strained. “I’ve checked it out a couple of times. For fun. It’s a great place to go for a run, too. Running on sand tires me out faster. Good exercise. Anyway, tide pools! Want to see them? We’d have to wade a little, though.”

Todoroki shrugged. “I don’t mind.”

“I’ll pass,” Mom said. “If you two want to go, then make sure you watch where you step. If you need, I could watch your shoes for you.”

“I can just carry mine with me,” Todoroki said.

Izuku perked up excitedly. “Great! Just let me get my sandals.”

Not five minutes later, he was leading the way through the shallow waves further down the beach. Todoroki was close behind, carrying his shoes and stepping carefully after him. Further up the beach, Mom was on the wooden boardwalk, admiring the scenery from a much drier vantage point.

“They’re pretty cool,” Izuku was saying, pointing to the cluster of dark rocks up ahead. Each wave sent seawater cascading into the spaces between them. “There’s always a bunch of stuff living in them, and sometimes you can see little fish. Ever explored tide pools before?”

“Can’t say I have,” Todoroki admitted.

“Okay, well, just be careful. The rocks are pretty rough.”

Reaching them, Izuku climbed onto the nearest surface of stone poking up from beneath the waves. Almost absentmindedly he reached back to give Todoroki a hand up, and was mildly surprised when his friend took it. Warmth spread from his palm to the rest of his arm; Todoroki had reached back with his fire side. Clinging to his hand, Todoroki stepped up to stand beside him, then gave his hand one more squeeze and let go.

A bewildered Izuku forgot for a moment to let his hand drop back to his side.

He shook himself, remembering the tumult of questions that Kirishima had not quite been able to help him answer. “A-Alright, let’s see.” Izuku squatted by the pool and squinted, eager for a distraction. Beneath the shallow, ebbing water, the pool was a mass of color. Moss clung to the rough stones that formed the pool’s crooked walls, as did small clusters of barnacles and shellfish. The water gave all of it a blue-green tinge, but dark orange starfish and one pale sea anemone still shone through.

“Are those sea urchins?” Izuku almost jumped when he felt Todoroki suddenly crouching beside him, their shoulders brushing lightly. He followed Todoroki’s pointing finger to the spiky purple clumps in one corner of the pool.

“Oh, yeah!” Izuku leaned in for a closer look. “I don’t think those were there, last time I was here.”

“They kind of remind me of Kirishima’s head.”

“Oh my God.” A jolt of laughter took Izuku by surprise, and he brought his hand to his mouth in a halfhearted attempt to muffle it. “Oh my God, you’re absolutely right.” Now there was a nickname that Kacchan had yet to capitalize on.

A warm hand pressed his shoulder, keeping him from leaning too far in. “Careful,” his friend

warned, and Izuku made the mistake of looking at him. Todoroki had one of his infuriating almost-not-quite smiles again. “If you’re going to laugh, don’t lean so far. You might step on something if you fall in.”

“R-right.” *Friendship moment or something else?* That question seemed to crop up at the most inopportune moments. “It’s usually not too bad to touch stuff in these pools, though. Long as you’re careful, and don’t do it too much. And as long as you don’t, y’know, try to pull anything out.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” Todoroki lowered himself to one knee, which must have been uncomfortable on the uneven rock. Izuku shifted away, partly to give Todoroki room, and partly in the hopes that his nerves would stop feeling so fluttery if he did.

He would never know what possessed him to do it. Izuku perched on the rock, watching as Todoroki gently brushed a sea sponge with his fingertip. The wind stirred at his friend’s hair and mussed up the line between red and white as Todoroki pulled his hand back, rubbing his thumb and forefinger together. His brow furrowed thoughtfully as if committing the sensation to memory, and Izuku reached down, dipped his hand into the salty water, and launched a handful straight into Todoroki’s face.

Todoroki reared back, spluttering in shock. Wide eyes locked on Izuku’s face, blinking furiously to keep the water out of them, and his bangs flopped wetly against his forehead. He opened his mouth to say something, but all that came out was a sneeze.

Maybe it was a little mean, but Izuku couldn’t help it. He laughed. Gripping the rock at his feet to keep from overbalancing into the tide pool, Izuku ducked his head and laughed and tried not to mentally associate Todoroki sneezing with words like “cute.”

When he looked up again, Todoroki was pushing his wet hair out of his face and glaring at him, or at least trying his best. It was an expression that Izuku had never seen on Todoroki’s face before; his eyebrows were knitted together, and his eyes narrowed, but his nose was wrinkling and his mouth was trembling as the corners did their best to turn upward without Todoroki’s permission.

To Izuku’s eternal mortification, his laughter started to turn into giggling.

Todoroki pursed his lips. “What was that for?” His voice shook oddly.

“N-nothing.” Izuku struggled to compose himself. “It’s just—sorry, I don’t know why I did that, just—you were making a weird face and—” Todoroki stared at him, bewildered, and Izuku had to sit down so he could laugh without toppling into the shallows.

With a short sigh, Todoroki rolled his eyes. “It wasn’t *that* funny,” he said, and sneezed again.

“You sneeze like a kitten.” It slipped out before he could stop it. Embarrassed, Izuku clamped his hand over his traitor mouth, but the damage was already done. All traces of annoyance, feigned or otherwise, vanished from his friend’s face. Todoroki stared blankly at him, and Izuku’s mirth curdled into chagrin. “Er, I-I mean...”

With a huff, Todoroki got to his feet, picked his way nimbly over the rocks, and splashed back into the shallows behind where Izuku sat, face burning.

You sneeze like a kitten. Where the hell had *that* come from? Izuku could have kicked himself. His stupid, loose mouth was going to be the death of him one day. All that mumbling *did* have consequences. How was he supposed to explain his way out of this one? No, really, how? Izuku

still wasn't sure either way if he *did* have an explanation for how much of an idiot he was being. What was he supposed to do? Apologize?

Before Izuku could answer any of his own questions, he felt Todoroki yank back the neck line of his T-shirt. He yelped, flailing in surprise, right before Todoroki stuffed a handful of ice down the back of his shirt.

Izuku *shrieked*.

Somehow he ended up flat on his back in the shallows—and that was no good, because not only was his head below the water, but the ice was sandwiched between his bare back and the sand beneath the waves. Scrambling up, Izuku managed to stagger back to his feet and grab the back of his shirt so that he could shake out the ice. He stood there, drenched from head to toe, and winced as the last of it slid down his back and fell into the shallows at his feet.

“*Ackph*,” was the first noise out of his mouth as he snorted seawater out of his nose. He shook his head, the water in his ears cleared, and something else took its place.

Laughter.

Izuku turned his head, and any words, complaints, or jokes on the tip of his tongue vanished. Todoroki stood a few feet away, still damp from taking Izuku's palmful of water to the face, and *laughed*.

It wasn't that Izuku had never seen Todoroki smile before. There were moments, rare ones that were less rare than they had been months before, when the corners of his friend's mouth crept upward. These days, Todoroki's smiles had gained a habit of reaching his eyes, creasing the corners and shining in dark brown or pale, icy blue. But Izuku, to his memory, could not remember seeing a smile that crinkled Todoroki's eyes this way, or took up his whole face so that every inch of it was part of the smile and the beginnings of dimples formed.

And he had never seen or heard Todoroki laugh.

But Todoroki was doing it now, too restrained to be a belly laugh, but still clear and bright. Izuku watched, unable to look away.

The sun was blinding-bright behind Todoroki, hitting the white and red in his hair where the two colors mingled in the middle. Izuku caught his breath. He caught his breath at least twice as he realized, deep down in that place in his chest that ached when he felt things too strongly, that he had never seen Todoroki smile like this before, and that there wasn't a lot that he wouldn't do to see it again.

His heart skipped enough beats that he stopped keeping track of whether or not he still had a pulse at all. All his stupid, frantic questions really only had one answer between them, and that answer was right in front of him.

By the time Shouto got a hold of himself again, his ribs ached from using muscles in a way they weren't used to being used. His eyes were wet, but at this point the difference between tears and sea water was unclear. Saltwater was saltwater, after all.

He looked up to find Midoriya staring at him, squinting a little against the sun in his eyes, and his voice trailed off as self-consciousness took hold. Mentally he kicked himself. He must look like an awful fool, shin-deep in the ocean and cackling himself breathless. He coughed, clearing his throat, and shifted his weight in the sand. Midoriya wasn't just staring at him; he was slackjawed. He

looked at Shouto, soaked curls flat and extra dark against his head, blinking in the sun as if he couldn't look away.

“W-what is it?” Shouto asked, trying to keep the nervousness out of his voice. “Was that—?”

“I’ve just... never seen you do that before,” Midoriya said, eyes narrowed against the glare.

“What, drop ice down someone’s shirt?” Shouto said. “I should hope not.”

“No.” Midoriya shook his head. “Laugh.” He said it softly, almost too softly to be heard over the water.

“I... oh.” Shouto looked away, throat tightening. “Right. That.”

They stood in awkward silence for a moment more, before Midoriya seemed to shake himself. “Well, I’m soaked. Let’s head back.”

Shouto was relieved at the suggestion, relieved to not have to make a decision of any kind, because his brain was a chaotic mess and he wasn’t sure he could have managed the fortitude to take charge like that. He was relieved enough, in fact, that when he splashed after Midoriya toward dry sand, he didn’t quite watch where he was stepping.

They left the beach shortly after that, pausing only when Todoroki ducked into a restroom. Izuku, for his part, was relieved. Sitting quietly in the car gave him the chance to gather himself together and fumble out his phone.

In the safety of the car, Izuku had to admire his own outward composure, because he must have had better control over himself than he’d thought. He had to, for his face to stay this straight while he was having his particular conversation via text message while sitting with less than two feet between him and Todoroki.

>>KIRISHIMA

KIRISHIMA I NEED YOUR HELP

In a frankly admirable display of self-restraint, Izuku did not let out the strangled yell building in his throat before Kirishima replied.

>>what’s good my man

>>I HAVE FEELINGS

>>well I sure hope so

wait

WAIT YOU MEAN

DUDE THAT’S GREAT :D

>>NO IT’S NOT GREAT I DON’T KNOW WHAT TO DO

>>omg ur really panicking

>>DO YOU BLAME ME???

>>u have feels for the prettiest boy in class

u have fallen and u can't get up

>>STOP LAUGHING AT ME

>>no i dont blame u at all

>>I CAN'T

>>bro calm down

>>DO THIS

i'm sorry i just

>>lol it's cool. srsly tho what happened??

what changed?

>>nothing??? i just

oh god i'm so pathetic

>>no ur not u are a wonderful human being now spill

>>a;slfidfjae

>>MIDORIYA IZUKU YOU WILL GIVE ME DEETS RIGHT THIS INSTANT

*I HAVE WAXED POETIC ABOUT MY ETERNAL AFFECTIONS FOR BAKUGOU AND SO
HELP ME*

YOU

WILL

RECIPROCATE

>>i saw him laugh okay???

for real laugh! at something funny!

>>shut the front door

>>he smiled and he laughed and there was sunlight behind him and i am so screwed

>>only if u play ur cards right ;D wink wonk

Izuku choked.

“Are you okay?” Todoroki asked.

“Fine.” Was his voice higher than usual? He couldn't tell.

>>CAN YOU NOT

>>lmao no i will never not

now you know what it's like

to suffer

>>aaaaaAAAAAAA

>>ahhh the song of our people

Izuku heaved a sigh, shut his eyes, and let his forehead thump lightly against his phone.

“Are you sure?” Todoroki said.

“Yup. Just... Weird conversation. With Kirishima. He's being weird again.” He'd said weird twice. That wasn't suspicious, was it?

Apparently not, judging by the understanding look on Todoroki's face.

>>i'm serious kirishima you're freaking me out a little and he's sitting right next to me

>>????seriously?? u should kiss him

Izuku ground his teeth to keep back the strangled yell, and sent one last text message before turning his phone off.

>>BLOCKED

With that, he pocketed his phone, leaned his forehead against the seat in front of him, and let himself breathe.

It was purely by coincidence, with his head bowed and his eyes pointing down, that his vision fell in line with Todoroki's foot. He almost missed it; it was minuscule and almost impossible to catch.

“What's that on your sock?” he asked. “Did you step in something?”

Todoroki stiffened and shifted his foot away. “It's nothing.”

Izuku squinted and leaned over for a better look. It definitely wasn't nothing; there was a dark stain on Todoroki's sock, only just visible above the top of his shoe. “It kind of looks like it's spreading—oh my God it's red. Todoroki, is that *blood*?”

“What?” Mom took her eyes off the road briefly to look back, concern written across her face. “Are you all right? If it happened back when you stopped those people robbing the shop, then you should have said something.”

His friend shifted away, moving his foot to hide it from view. “N-no, it hasn't been that long. And it's just a scratch. I was going to fix it when we got back.”

“You are literally bleeding right now!” Izuku spluttered. He was sure he wasn't imagining that the stain was bigger than it had been a few seconds ago. “Is that why you stopped by the bathroom before we left?”

“Yes.” Todoroki grimaced. “Sorry, don't worry about it. I wrapped it pretty well, so it won't get on the floor or anything.”

Izuku gaped at him.

Todoroki stared back. "...What?"

"We're almost home," Mom interrupted, before Izuku could outline everything wrong with the current situation. "There's medical supplies in the bathroom, so we can get you patched up, okay, Todoroki-kun?"

Todoroki looked faintly caught off guard. "Um. Yes. Sure."

"Are you sure you're okay?" Izuku asked, more quietly. Guilt gnawed at him. How had he missed that Todoroki was hurt for so long? "If it's bad—"

"It isn't," Todoroki assured him. "It's nothing to worry about, really." One corner of his mouth quirked upward, but for once it didn't look much like a smile to Izuku's eyes. "I've had worse."

"I guess so..." With a quiet huff, Izuku sat back in his seat and waited impatiently for home.

Inko kept her lips pressed together in a thin, tight line. Todoroki was limping now, and when Izuku sidled closer with a silent offer to help, he gently shrugged her son off. There was a look of resignation on Izuku's face, but he didn't protest or try again.

Her mouth tightened further as she opened the door for both of them. Enough was enough.

"There's bandages and disinfectant in the bathroom," she said, patting Todoroki's shoulder gently. "I'll show you. Izuku, sweetheart, I forgot to empty the dishwasher this morning. Could you get started for me?"

Her son blinked at her. "But Mom--"

She met his eyes solemnly, and whatever protests he might have had petered out to silence. For a moment the stubborn light in his eyes flared, but she met it with her own silent, patient insistence.

Trust me? she asked with her eyes. After a moment of indecision, Izuku's shoulders slumped a little, and he nodded.

"Sure, Mom," he said, and darted off to the kitchen.

She led Todoroki limping into the bathroom, and put the toilet cover down. "Have a seat. Let's have a look at that."

His eyes widened slightly, her only clue that he was surprised. "You don't have to--"

"Maybe not, but I'm going to anyway," she said gently. "Come on now. Shoe off."

Todoroki gave her a brief helpless look, but complied. His face tightened when he pulled the shoe off, and Inko bit back a hiss of sympathy. He'd bled all over his sock too; Inko could see the boy wince as he peeled it off to reveal soaked gauze. Considering he'd crept off to a public restroom to take care of it, that was much preferable to soaked paper towels.

"I, er, carry first aid things with me all the time," Todoroki muttered, as if reading her thoughts.

"Thank goodness for that." Inko opened the medicine cabinet, then nudged the trash bin closer with her foot so that Todoroki could throw out the soiled gauze. "Turn this way? We may as well do this over the tub."

Todoroki hesitated, eyeing his injured foot.

“It’s easier to clean up that way, Todoroki-kun,” Inko assured him. He faltered a moment more, but shifted around and lifted his foot gingerly to rest it over the bathtub. “There we are—oh dear.”

The cut was a nasty one that ran from the bottom of his inner arch and nearly to his ankle, though it looked like the bleeding had slowed, thank goodness. It still looked painful, especially to think he’d been walking on it without favoring it.

Inko tutted softly to herself, and ran warm water from the shower faucet. “Nothing a little soap and water can’t fix,” she assured him. A clean washcloth hanging nearby floated down from its rack and into her hand; a dollop of antibacterial soap, and she handed it to her guest as he let the water run over the cut. “Use that to clean off the grit. Beaches are awful places to get cut. Lots of germs, and sand gets absolutely *everywhere*.” She stepped over to the sink and washed her hands carefully. “You weren’t in the restroom very long—did you have the chance to check?”

“I just—I wrapped it to slow the bleeding.” Todoroki addressed the floor, or the wall, or anything but Inko. “I was going to check better myself, when we got here.” He finished rinsing his foot, and shut off the water.

“Well, two eyes are better than one,” Inko said briskly. She stepped around him and seated herself on the edge of the tub. “Let me see? It wouldn’t do to leave anything embedded—it might get infected.”

“I’ll be fine,” Todoroki said quietly. “I-I can do this myself, you know, you don’t have to trouble yourself—”

“Todoroki-kun.” He still wouldn’t look her in the eye, so Inko rested her hand on his shoulder until he did. After years of raising a rambunctious boy who could cry at the drop of a hat, Inko was an expert at mixing patience with insistence. “I’m going to repeat myself as many times as I need before it gets through to you. It’s no trouble.”

He stared at her, and his eyes were so very hard to read.

“If you really want me to leave you alone and let you do this yourself, then I will,” she went on. “But don’t worry about *me*. I promise you, it isn’t any trouble.”

Todoroki met her eyes, almost too briefly to catch. Inko wondered if the poor boy didn’t believe her. Finally, though, he sat back and quietly shifted his injured foot toward her, without raising his eyes again.

Gently, Inko prodded at the cut. Todoroki didn’t flinch, but considering that he’d successfully hidden an injury like this while walking on it, that didn’t necessarily mean she wasn’t hurting him. She felt her heart do a painful little flip in his chest—what had this boy gone through, to make him act like showing pain was shameful? “You haven’t been any trouble, you know,” she said. “You aren’t a bother, and you aren’t an inconvenience. Far from it. If anything, you’ve been an absolutely model guest, did you know that?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “Not to mention you’re one of Izuku’s closest friends. You’re welcome here on that alone.” A small smile played about her lips. “You would be even if my son *didn’t* sing your praises the way he does.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw his head turn.

“Confession time,” she went on. “That’s why I sent him into the kitchen. If he knew I was telling you this, he’d fuss. Mother’s prerogative.” An effort of will brought a pair of tweezers and a bottle

of rubbing alcohol floating toward her, and she plucked them out of the air and disinfected the tweezers. “There’s some sand and gravel in the cut. I can get them out, but would you rather do it yourself?”

“Yes,” he said, and she handed him the tweezers. With practiced ease, he bent over his foot and carefully removed the grit. He was used to doing this by himself, she noted. Not that that hadn’t already been obvious.

“So it’s all right to be nervous,” she went on. “And I know at the end of the day, telling you that there’s nothing to be nervous about won’t make you any less so. But the last thing I want to do is make you feel unwelcome.”

He looked up at that, setting the tweezers aside. “You haven’t done anything to make me feel unwelcome,” he said.

“Good. Hold still, this might sting a bit.” Her quirk brought cotton balls, another clean pair of tweezers, and a bottle of disinfectant within her reach, and she set about carefully doctoring the cut. She glanced up at Todoroki, and found him wordlessly watching the floating objects. “Ah, you’ve never seen me use my quirk, have you?”

He shook his head.

“It’s nothing flashy or impressive, but it’s useful,” she said. “I was out of practice for a while, but... well.” She paused, pursing her lips. “Izuku was a late bloomer, you know. He’s looked up to heroes like All-Might since he was small, and he had his heart set on being one. But his fifth birthday came and went, and for... for quite a while, we thought his quirk just wasn’t going to come in.” She sighed. “And oh, he was so upset. And I’m afraid I didn’t handle it very well. I should have been more supportive of him, but instead I was... resigned. And I think I encouraged him to be resigned, too. There was a time—about a few years—that I stopped using my own quirk. I got this silly idea into my head that it would upset him, and I... well, I coddled him a little. Treated him with kid gloves, like he was something fragile. And that wasn’t what he wanted, or needed.”

“He’s a lot of things,” Todoroki said softly, nearly startling her. “Fragile isn’t one of them.”

“Certainly not.” The bleeding had stopped, more or less, and the cut was clean, so she called over some fresh gauze to wrap it; it was a bit too large for band-aids. “I can’t afford to blame myself, though. I didn’t have any help raising him.”

“You did—um.” Todoroki hesitated, averting his eyes again, but this time it looked more like embarrassment than uncertainty. “You did a good job.”

Inko didn’t need to put on a warm smile at that; it came to her unbidden. “Thank you, Todoroki-kun,” she said. She secured the gauze in place with a piece of medical tape, then turned and stepped away to wash her hands again. “But that does mean something important. I raised him, by myself, through some tough times. And that means that, everything else aside, we built trust between us. I trust my son to do the right thing, to ask for my help when he needs it, and to let me know when he’s in over his head. And... I know that, him learning to be a hero and all, there are things he’s keeping from me. To spare my feelings, or keep me from worrying—no chance of that, I’m afraid. But I like to think he trusts me, too, at the end of the day. And I know that even if I can’t be there, he isn’t alone. Especially if he has friends like you.”

Todoroki shot her another split-second glance, and Inko stepped closer and bent to his eye level. Her hand went to his shoulder again.

“You seem surprised,” she said. “I did say he talks about you. Did you think he never let slip that you’ve run into danger to help him, more than once?” His eyes were downcast, but she could see him redden with embarrassment. “Don’t worry, I won’t make too much of a fuss. I just want you to know, Todoroki-kun—I trust you, too. You’re welcome here. And if there’s anything you need, that I can help with, just ask.”

She pressed his shoulder gently, then let go. This time, when he looked up at her, his eyes didn’t waver from her face. He stared at her, silent and astonished, as if he’d scarcely seen anything like her before. His eyes were different now, she noted—softer, and not so cold and stony. With eyes like that, he looked more his age, instead of like an old soul in a teenager’s body. “How’s that foot feel?” she asked, as she put away the medical supplies left on the counter.

“Better,” he said. “Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome.” Inko closed the medicine cabinet. “Take it easy, and don’t be shy about limping, okay? I’ll get the hydrogen peroxide—that should loosen the bloodstains on that sock.”

The dishwasher was mostly empty when she walked into the kitchen. Izuku glanced up from where he was sorting and drying silverware. There were questions in his eyes.

Well, she had a few of her own. “Izuku,” she said quietly as she reached under the sink for the hydrogen peroxide. “What *really* made you want to invite him for the break?”

In the corner of her vision, she saw him avert his eyes. He was silent for long enough that she thought he might not answer her at all.

“It was better than his alternative,” he said at last.

“Hm,” she said, setting the bottle on the counter. For a moment she stood staring off into space, and then—on an impulse—she turned and wrapped her son in a hug.

“Mom?”

“You’re good, you hear?” she said. “You’re *good*. And I’m proud of you.”

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Hi, Mom.”

She sat crosslegged on her bed with a book in her lap, chin tucked in as she read. Her hair was as snow-white as ever, combed to a shine and tucked neatly behind her ear. At the sound of Shouto’s voice, she looked up, and her face lit up with delight. “Shouto!” She didn’t get up, but slid forward on the bed until her feet could drop to the floor.

There was already a chair waiting for him, and he dragged it over so that when he sat down, their knees were nearly touching. “How’ve you been?”

“Not bad.” She reached out, with some hesitation but far less than she once had, and touched the side of his face gently. Her smile was warm. “You’re a lifesaver, you know. This place never gets any new books. I’d read everything at least a dozen times over before you started bringing me more.”

“I brought even more today,” he said, indicating the bag he’d set down by his feet. “And something new—I thought you might like something to do with your hands, so. If you’ve ever wanted to learn how to crochet...”

The corners of her eyes crinkled in amusement. “Shouto, are you trying to coax free sweaters out of your mother now?” He blinked, eyes widening at the gentle teasing note in her voice, and found his face mirroring her smile all on its own.

“Just trying to keep you comfortable,” he said. “I never know what entertainment is like here.”

“Mostly TV, books, and the occasional craft day,” she said lightly. “Nothing like crochet, though. Thank you—it certainly sounds interesting.” After a moment her smile faded, and she reached out again to tuck a lock of white hair behind Shouto’s ear. “I couldn’t help but notice you limping a little when you walked in. Any trouble lately?” Her eyes lingered on his for a moment, bright with worry.

“No.” He remembered the store hold-up at the beach. “Well, one thing. Nothing major, just a small fight. That wasn’t even where I hurt my foot—I just stepped on something sharp, that’s all.” He shrugged, managing a lopsided grin. “That’s what I get for walking barefoot in the ocean.”

She smiled again, her relief obvious. “You went to the beach recently?”

“Yes. We have three weeks off from school for half of summer break, so...”

“Oh.” Her face fell at that, confusing him for a moment. “So... you’re at home again?”

“I—oh! No, I’m not.” He shook his head. Of course she would be worried by that. “Father’s out of town, so I took a chance. I’ve been staying with one of my—with Midoriya.” His mother’s eyes lit up, and Shouto felt the left side of his face warm. “I’ve, um. Told you about him.”

“Quite a bit.” Her amusement was back. Shouto tried not to fidget. “Are you having fun?”

“It’s been... yes.” Shouto fidgeted again, remembering how painfully awkward he’d been acting.

“It took—it’s taken some time to get used to. I’ve never really done this before.” He smiled. “But it’s been fun. Midoriya and his mother are... they’re very welcoming. They make me feel at home. And they kind of fussed when I hurt my foot. It was embarrassing, but they were both nice about it.” The gentle weight of Midoriya Inko’s hand on his shoulder had stuck with him, stilling his embarrassment whenever it came back to him.

When he looked at his mother’s face again, the smile at her mouth was a small one, but it shone far more intensely through her eyes. “That’s wonderful, Shouto,” she said softly. “I’m happy you found somewhere... safe to be.”

Shouto shrugged. “Wasn’t my idea. It’s not like home is unsafe, it’s just unpleasant. I was ready to bear it for three weeks, but then Midoriya invited me. I turned him down at first, but then Fuyumi found out and encouraged me to take him up on it.”

Her eyes crinkled again. “Good. I’m glad you kids are looking out for each other. And I’m glad your friends are looking out for you, too.” She paused, hands curling gently in her lap. “Your friend Midoriya... does he know? About... about your father? And about...” Her voice trailed off, but he could tell from the way her eyes flickered up, tinged with sadness, that she was looking at his scar again.

“He knows,” Shouto told her. “I told him, before the sports festival last year. That’s how he knew to invite me in the first place. One more time he’s helped me without being asked.” He shook his head. “Midoriya never asks. He just does it. One moment everything’s falling apart, and the next he’s just *there* and suddenly I know how to fix things. If he doesn’t fix them himself.”

“I think I might like to meet him sometime,” she said, laughing softly. Shouto blinked at her, surprised. “It’d be rude of me not to thank him in person.”

Shouto took this in silently for a moment, hands open in his lap. “Well, then, maybe...” He cleared his throat. “Maybe, next time I get the chance to visit you, I’ll ask him if he wants to come along.”

“Well, you do have three weeks to yourself,” she pointed out. “You know where to find me.”

“Maybe not,” Shouto murmured.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean Father’s set to come home in a few days,” Shouto replied, burying his distaste deep enough that not even a twist of the mouth showed on the surface. “Might go home then. Just so Fuyumi doesn’t get in any trouble for letting me go. He, um... he doesn’t like Midoriya very much.”

For a split second, a dark look flitted across his mother’s face. “Just like him,” she muttered. She shook her head, composing herself again. “Well... try to think hard about that choice, whether you go or not. I... know I said to look out for each other, but make sure you look out for yourself, as well.” She met his eyes solemnly. “You always were his... his *favorite*.” The word came out as if it tasted terrible in her mouth. “I’m just afraid for you, Shouto.”

“I know. But even if I do go home, it’s just two weeks. It’s not a big deal.” Everyone was making this out to be something serious—first Midoriya, then Fuyumi, and now Mom. It really wasn’t. Just two weeks, and what was that next to the fifteen years he’d survived before that?

“I know it doesn’t seem like it,” she told him with a fretful sigh. “But... you’ve been so *happy*, Shouto. When you first started visiting me, and then when you moved out of his house to live at

school. You've been happy. I just don't want him to take that away from you."

Shouto leaned forward, and his mother met him halfway in a warm hug. "He won't," Shouto murmured into her shoulder. "He can't. It's like you said—I'm not alone, remember?"

Her thin, pale arms were tight around him, but he felt her nod.

Most hardware and sporting goods stores carried hero supplies these days. Padding, protective eyewear, and various accessories were in high demand among pro heroes, sidekicks, and students alike. Most licensed pros relied on their agencies' support departments for equipment, but for trainees, students, and the much rarer freelance heroes who operated independently of any organization, there were places to find good gear if one knew where to look. Off-the-shelf goods weren't as high-quality as, say, online or specialty orders, but they could do in a pinch.

Izuku was mostly here for inspiration, anyway. Anything he might need, Hatsume would be only too happy to build, but it was good to have a look around for the sake of ideas.

His belt, for example. Could he carry more while minimizing weight and volume? Was there a sturdier material? A better design? One For All meant that speed was one of his best strengths, but that didn't mean he couldn't cut down on bulk and wind resistance in his costume. This was more Hatsume's area of expertise, but if he came to her with ideas, then she could build from there with less of a chance of getting any... *outlandish* ideas of her own.

It wasn't until he happened to look up and see another customer looking at him funny that he realized he was muttering to himself again. Embarrassed, he ducked his head and pressed his mouth shut.

This store was part of a larger shopping center, several blocks away from the hospital where Todoroki was visiting his mother. That was Todoroki's business, and Izuku would have been happy to let him go without tagging along, but Mom had put her foot down. Between Todoroki's still-healing foot and the worrying news reports she'd been hearing, Mom had insisted that they stick to the buddy system. And so, as a compromise, Izuku was browsing around the shopping center while Todoroki was spending time with his mother.

In just a few days, Endeavor was due to be returning. Whether or not Todoroki would stay past that was still up in the air. It was hard to think about that, if only because just considering it made him feel like choking on... something. It didn't feel quite like rage, nor did it feel like the distracting emotions that he could now identify as attraction.

Whatever it was, it was strong, and it was protective.

The last thing he wanted was to see his friend get hurt.

There must have been a weird look on his face, because Izuku looked up and found the customer from before looking back at him with an oddly interested expression. Izuku blinked back and turned away again, sheepish. Luckily, the man didn't comment on it as Izuku carefully stepped past him and moved on.

In the midst of his thoughts, Izuku failed to notice someone stepping into his path until he'd smacked straight into them. Jarred back into the present, he jumped back with a startled yelp.

"Ah! I'm sorry!" A voice boomed above him, and Izuku found himself abruptly presented with the back of someone's head as the person he'd collided with bowed low. "Forgive my clumsiness! I should've been paying better attention!"

“N-no, it’s okay, really!” Izuku spluttered. “To be honest, I wasn’t paying attention much either.”

“Well then, looks like we’re both at fault.” He straightened up, and Izuku tilted his head back to look at his face. Recognition kicked in a moment later; the boy before him was not one that you forgot easily.

“Oh! Um. Hello!” Izuku fidgeted where he stood. He couldn’t help it; Yoarashi Inasa had quite the presence. “It’s Yoarashi-kun, isn’t it? From Shiketsu High?”

Yoarashi blinked. Surprise clouded his eyes for a moment before recognition lit up, clear as day. “Ah, yeah! I remember you from the provisional exams last fall! I don’t think we’ve been formally introduced.” He held out his hand.

“Oh, right! I’m Midoriya.” Izuku’s hand was dwarfed in Yoarashi’s when he shook it. “I’m, uh, from UA.”

“I remember. Havin’ a nice summer, I hope.”

“Pretty good.” Izuku pushed his hands into his pockets. “Oh, and, I guess I’m pretty late, but congratulations. On your provisional license. I heard, from Todoroki—” Yoarashi’s face went cold, and Izuku’s voice trailed off. The change to the other boy’s demeanor was immediate and visible—obvious, even. Izuku could have kicked himself for forgetting; Todoroki and Yoarashi hadn’t parted on the best of terms back in the fall; the make-up exams must not have improved things very much.

At least they’d apparently kept it civil enough for them both to pass.

A moment later Yoarashi seemed to compose himself, and smiled again. “Thanks. That’s kind of you to say.”

“Er. No problem.” Eager for a subject change, Izuku latched onto the first idea that came to his head. “So, uh, what brings you here?”

“Shiketsu High is really kicking off with its training,” Yoarashi replied, with an eager smile that showed all his teeth. “Some of my gear’s with Support for repairs, so. Meantime, I need spares.”

“Same here, sort of,” Izuku replied. “UA’s given us three weeks of break, but once we’re back, we’ll probably be hitting the ground running, like always.” His memory took him back to the attempted robbery at the beach, and he couldn’t help smiling wryly. “I’m still finding time to train, though. Well—it finds me, anyway.”

Yoarashi laughed. “I see! It’s pretty refreshing to have a license, even if it’s only a provisional one—no more standing back when a crime happens in front of you, yeah?”

“Well, for the most part. It’s nice to be helpful, and it’s good practice, so.” Izuku shrugged, grinning sheepishly. “Win-win.”

“Indeed! Even the top heroes have to start somewhere.” Yoarashi sobered for a moment. “Though I suppose it’s not as much of a race now as it used to be. What with the focus on collaboration, and all.”

“Yeah... I’m kind of glad,” Izuku admitted. “Honestly? I’m happier helping my friends get stronger with me, than trying to compete with them.” He thought of Monoma in B-class, and couldn’t help wincing. “Though, some people have a problem getting out of that mindset.”

“Hmph. I can only imagine how much trouble someone like *Endeavor* must have with it.” A look of distaste crossed Yoarashi’s face, and Izuku found himself matching it.

“Yeah, well...” Izuku let his hands curl into fists in his pockets. “He’s just gonna have to deal with it. And if he can’t... well, he’s not gonna be number one forever.”

“Hah.” It sounded a bit similar to a laugh, but it wasn’t one. “Hopefully his son learns better.”

Izuku felt a prickle up his spine at Yoarashi’s tone. “What do you mean by that?” he asked, fighting to keep his tone steady.

“You’re his classmate, aren’t you?” Yoarashi replied. “The similarities are pretty obvious—surely you’ve noticed.”

Hidden in his pockets, Izuku’s fists tightened until his nails dug into his palms. “Not particularly.”

“It’s in his eyes, y’see,” Yoarashi went on. “They’re a lot like Endeavor’s. Just as cold. I don’t think heroes should have eyes like that, y’know?”

Izuku thought of the way Todoroki’s eyes had lit up over a year ago, standing across from him at the Sports Festival as he let his fire loose for the first time. He thought of his half-almost-smiles that sometimes, very rarely, turned into real smiles. He thought of Todoroki watching movies late into the night, eyes wide and glued to the screen or crinkling with amusement at some casual crack that Izuku or Tsuyu made. He thought of Todoroki laughing.

“I think he just doesn’t know you very well,” he said at length. “And you don’t really know him either.”

“I’ve gotten a pretty good idea from what I’ve seen of him,” Yoarashi said with a shrug. “He’s pretty wrapped up in himself, y’know? Doesn’t pay much attention to people beyond him. Acts like everybody else is in his way. Pretty bad quality for somebody who says he wants to be a hero —”

“Yoarashi.” His own voice felt harsh and rough in his throat, but Izuku was too cold and numb to care about how he must sound to Yoarashi. The prickling along his spine had stopped, replaced by a chill that seemed to pervade every nerve in his body. Yoarashi looked at him, and blinked when Izuku met his eyes. He spoke, voice quiet and trembling. “If you keep talking about my friend like that, then we’re going to have a problem.”

Yoarashi blinked again, eyes widening slightly. “O-oh.” He cleared his throat noisily. “M sorry, I didn’t realize—uh. That was out of line.”

“Just a little.” Izuku shut his eyes briefly, struggling to leash his temper.

“Sorry,” Yoarashi repeated. To his credit, he did sound contrite. “Didn’t know you two were friends.”

Izuku let out a noisy sigh, and with it went the rest of his temper. “It’s fine if you don’t like him,” he said. “Can’t force everyone to get along, I know. And it’s definitely fine if you don’t like his dad because I don’t like him either. *Todoroki* doesn’t like him either, did you know that?”

“It—it’s not just that.” Yoarashi frowned—not an angry frown, but a thoughtful one. “Have you met Endeavor?”

By some miracle, Izuku kept his face steady. “Once or twice.”

“And you don’t see the similarities?”

“It just doesn’t matter to me,” Izuku said shortly. “Just because he’s similar doesn’t mean he wants to be.” He paused, grinding his teeth until his jaw ached. “Look—what do you even have against Endeavor? Not that I’m saying you’re wrong, just... what’d he do to you, to make you hate him so much?”

“He—” Yoarashi averted his eyes, frowning. “You’ll think I’m petty.”

“No, I think Endeavor’s petty,” Izuku said flatly. “Look, you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to, just—”

“It was a small thing,” Yoarashi went on. “Now that I think of it. It was such a small thing, but it meant a lot. I looked up to him, you know. For years, I thought he was—well.” He grimaced. “Then one day, when I was pretty young, I had the chance to meet him. Just wanted an autograph, y’know? Too starstruck to string half a sentence together.” He paused. “He brushed past me hard enough to knock me over, told me to stay out of his way.” He forced out a humorless bark of laughter. “Kind of a slap in the face.”

It was a drop in the bucket of his dislike for Endeavor, but Izuku could still feel the level rise, if only a little. “I know the feeling,” he said. “Believe me, I know. I was like that too, sort of.” He shook his head. “I mean, All-Might’s always been my favorite—” Yoarashi’s wry smile softened to something more genuine. “But I used to think Endeavor was cool, too. Finding out he wasn’t what I thought he was...” *Todoroki’s face like stone, one hand clutching at his scar. “In my memories, my mother is always crying.”* He shook himself. “Well, it wasn’t fun. But... still, that was what? Two minutes of interaction with him?” Izuku shrugged. “Hardly more for me.”

Yoarashi’s eyebrows came together, his brow furrowing deeply. “What does that have to do with it?”

“If Endeavor can hurt you that much in two minutes,” Izuku said. “Then imagine what it must be like living with him.”

If Yoarashi did have an answer for that, he didn’t offer it. Izuku kept his eyes on the other boy, willing him to understand.

“Honestly? I don’t think I’d need to have met him to dislike him.” His jaw tightened. “Because Todoroki’s my friend. He’s saved my life more than once, and I don’t like *anyone* who hurts my friends.” He looked away, shrugging again. “Honestly I’m surprised you two aren’t friends already. If you hate Endeavor that much, then you already have something in common.”

He heard a short huff of breath from Yoarashi.

“Like I said,” Izuku went on, before Yoarashi could answer him. “You don’t have to like him. But if you’re going to dislike him, then dislike *him*. Dislike him because you don’t agree with him, or because your personalities just clash. Don’t hate him just because you think he’s Endeavor Part Two.” The other boy towered over him, but Izuku glared up at him anyway. “That’s not who he is, and you have no idea how hard he tries to make sure it’s not what he becomes.”

Yoarashi’s eyes were wide with surprise. “I... I see.” He paused, jaw working slightly as if he was physically chewing it over. “I apologize, if—if I offended you. I didn’t know you felt so strongly about this.”

“I do. Of course I do.” Seeing Yoarashi back down, Izuku found himself off-balance and

embarrassed. With an awkward cough, he let his squared shoulders slump again and forced his tense spine to loosen. “It’s just—it’s not about me.” But it was, sort of. Because for all that Todoroki had ever been through, for all his past suffering, it barely ever showed on his face. He bore it all stoically, especially now more than he had before. Izuku remembered yelling at Todoroki and Yoarashi for getting sidetracked by their argument, and here he was squaring up with his hackles up like a dog, after nothing but a few careless comments. What was wrong with him?

Feelings like this, at least from what Izuku had heard, were supposed to be butterflies and stammering. All Izuku found himself with was more worries and a shorter temper.

“He’s my friend,” he said at last. It felt like a lame excuse.

“Hnh.” Yoarashi paused. The corner of his mouth twitched. “Guess that makes him lucky, then. To have a friend like you.”

Izuku shrugged. “Luck doesn’t have anything to do with it,” he replied. “We’re friends because we’ve been through a lot together.”

The half-smile deepened. “Huh. You’re kinda prickly about him, aren’t you?”

Thankfully, Izuku’s mind went blank at that, so he simply stared at Yoarashi instead of spluttering or saying something embarrassing.

“Well, anyway.” Yoarashi stepped past him. “I won’t keep you any longer. Good talking to you, Midoriya.”

“Uh, thanks,” was all that Izuku could think to say. Face blank, he watched Yoarashi walk away and wrestled with the off-balance feeling he was left with after the whole encounter. It felt a little like he had overextended himself, and now the other boy was leaving him stretched too far forward with no way to catch himself.

Shaking his head to clear it, Izuku paced through the store for another fifteen minutes before employees started recognizing him and giving him funny looks. His temper had finally calmed, and he made his way back outside for a breath of fresh air.

If he had been slightly less distracted, he might have noted that his exit did not go unnoticed. But Izuku, at the moment, was very distracted, too caught up in his own thoughts to notice that he was briefly followed on the way out.

Out in the parking lot, he kept his feet moving as he tried to untangle his own mind. Vaguely he remembered talking to Kirishima, just a few days before. He’d snapped then, too, at the implication that he’d had ulterior motives for inviting Todoroki into his home. Kirishima had called it getting “bent out of shape,” and that felt like an apt description.

I want to protect him, he thought. It wasn’t much of a surprise, or even a realization. Protecting Todoroki had been on his list of priorities since the day they’d become friends. It seemed absurd when he really thought about it. Todoroki was one of the strongest people he knew; he was sharp, he was fast, he had a powerful quirk that he’d been making full use of for over a year, and he was probably better-trained than anyone else in their class—though that thought made his stomach turn.

Izuku realized he was pacing across the parking lot and stopped when he reached the street outside of the shopping center. The inside of his head felt like a hopeless mess.

He had thought of Todoroki when running into a villain-infested forest with two broken, useless arms. At the provisional exams, he’d almost kicked Gang Orca in the head, and then spent the rest

of the day worrying about Todoroki's failure. He'd dragged Aizawa into helping him chase off Endeavor. He'd almost lost his damn mind when Todoroki was in the hospital, and he'd challenged Endeavor like an idiot then turned around and eaten crow to fix the mess that it could have made.

Izuku pressed his palms into his forehead and quietly groaned. Really, how had it taken him this long to understand his own feelings? In hindsight it was painfully obvious. Even *Yoarashi* seemed to be picking up on it.

Resigned, he checked his phone. No messages from Todoroki yet, but he may as well start making his way back. Mom had insisted they stick together while they were out, and she would be worried sick if she knew they were separated for this long. He could always wait in the lobby.

Mind made up, Izuku walked another block further. He was less than halfway there, just crossing a side street, when he froze in his tracks and barely—just barely—turned his head.

Repeat villain attacks had made him more alert, or one might say jumpier. His senses were sharpened by bitter experience, and Izuku wasn't sure he knew how to turn them off anymore. And so, when he stepped across the side street, he heard the muffled cry of alarm perfectly well.

Izuku turned and stepped into the side street before his mind had caught up to his instincts. Once it did, he forced himself to stop where he was before rushing in. He had no backup, no plan, and no idea what he might be dealing with. No one knew where he was going.

He had no intention of ignoring a call for help, but he would help no one by being stupid about it. Better text Todoroki, at least.

His phone was out, his thumb poised over the screen, when the cry reached him again, louder this time.

"*Midoriya—*" It cut off as if choked. All thoughts of caution vanished, and Izuku launched himself into the side street at breakneck speed. It was quiet—silent, even, far enough from the shopping center that any semblance of crowds wouldn't quite reach. The street stretched before him empty, but Izuku turned his head this way and that as he ran, scanning for intersecting streets or alleyways.

"Todoroki?" he called. His voice was thin, his heartbeat high in his throat. His phone was still in his hand. He could call—

"*Midori—*" This time, the cry was cut short before Todoroki could even finish his name.

Izuku's eyes fell upon an alley up ahead. With a burst of quirk-fueled speed, he reached the entrance and skidded to a halt ready for a fight. "I'm here! What's wrong—"

The words died.

Before him, the alley extended a short distance before ending with a high concrete wall that blocked the rest of the way. In one corner, right where the wall met the side of one of the buildings that enclosed the alley, Todoroki slumped over, huddled and still. On the wall behind him, a dark red smear showed where he'd struck the wall and slid down.

The sight hit him like a knife to the heart.

A harsh cry of horror wrenched its way from Izuku's throat, and he hurled himself forward. He made it two steps before sense got in the way of howling panic, and he stumbled to a halt to look around, listen, and take stock of where he was. His ears roared, but the alley was silent. As best he

could tell there was no one around.

The walls around him went hazy, and the buzz of One For All had left him. Tears blurred his vision, and he all but staggered forward and dropped to his knees in front of his friend. The tears spilled over, clearing his eyes so that he could see the blood soaking through Todoroki's shirt and pooling on the ground beneath him. "No," he rasped. "No, no, no, no—" His friend's face was dead-pale and streaked with red, and there was no rise and fall to his chest.

It was hard to see when the tears *would not stop*.

"Todoroki," Izuku sobbed, and reached out desperately to feel for a pulse.

His hand was maybe halfway there when sense made itself known again. Heart-stopping terror and panic almost drowned it out, but still it persisted, drilling through to the back of Izuku's mind.

No ice, no burn marks. If Todoroki had time to call for help, he would have had time to fight back.

He was halfway through the thought when the world turned sideways, and the body before him moved. Or it didn't move; Izuku's eyes didn't catch what happened. One moment he was kneeling in blood and horror, and the next he was spun around and slammed hard enough against the wall that the back of his head hit concrete and his vision went dark. When it cleared, he found himself looking into a face that looked like Todoroki's but was not him. All the parts that made the whole were there—mismatched eyes and scar and red-and-white hair—but Izuku knew more than he'd ever known anything before that this was not Todoroki.

No ice, no burn marks.

No signs of a fight.

Too much blood pooling on the ground.

News reports said 'shapeshifter'.

In the end, it was the smile that gave it away. Todoroki's smiles were rare and precious, and this face smiled the way a child did when holding a magnifying glass over an anthill.

"So, you're a crier," they said in a voice that sounded like Todoroki's but was not. The hand pinning Izuku to the wall was hard and strong enough to bruise. "That's nice. Criers are more fun." The scarred face stretched wider in a grin, blood trickling between the teeth. "So, kiddo, tell me something. What else scares you?"

Chapter End Notes

Honeymoon's over, kids.

(It's not Himiko.)

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

One For All roared back to life, and Izuku brought his knee slamming into his attacker's stomach.

Or at least, he tried to.

It missed. Somehow, absurdly, though the thing that was not Todoroki barely moved, it missed. Izuku felt it connect awkwardly, more a glancing blow than a proper strike; he knew from experience how much damage a knee to the gut could do.

But the thing that was not Todoroki shrugged the blow away, smiling even as blood ran from his mouth and his nose and the spot on his chest—dark and wet as if something had torn a hole in him. Izuku swallowed the bile in his throat and lunged again.

This time his foot connected, but the pained, wet cough in Todoroki's voice curdled his triumph to horror. Izuku landed with a stumble, fists clenched, just in time to see Todoroki (not Todoroki, it wasn't Todoroki) stagger and clutch at him. Blood splattered the ground, and the breath rattled in (not Todoroki, *it's not Todoroki*) his chest.

“*Midoriya.*” Todoroki's voice came out as a choked sob. Izuku faltered.

His head cracked to one side, and he staggered under what felt like a punch to the jaw.

“It's a simple question.” Todoroki's voice slid out again. “You're making it easy, y'know. I can tell I'm only scratching the surface.” The hard, strong hand gripped Izuku and yanked him up to his toes, forcing him to look at Todoroki's blood-splattered face again. “What else is there?”

What else? So much. Ever since the USJ, there had been so much to fear. Izuku's teeth clenched against the wave of terror that overtook him, fighting back the memories that came with it.

The world tilted, and suddenly the painful grip was gone, Todoroki was gone, and Tsuyu crouched a few feet away, pale with shock and horror. Izuku stared back, and before his eyes he saw his friend's face begin to crack.

Shigaraki touched her, the thought came to him on its own. *He touched her face with all five fingers*

Izuku could not tear his eyes away from Tsuyu's frozen, terrified face as the cracks spread, angry red lines through her skin that peeled and flaked off like old paint. Tsuyu's mouth opened, lips peeling and crumbling to chips of flesh, and she *screamed*.

Bile rose in Izuku's throat as Tsuyu screamed and wept before him, face disintegrating and falling apart. Another blow came, this time to his stomach, and he doubled over and retched it out. The shapeshifter grabbed the back of his neck and forced him down to his knees. Only by planting his hands on the ground did Izuku keep his attacker from shoving his face into his own sick. He forced his head up, and found himself face to face with Tsuyu. Half her face was simply gone—one cheek had crumbled away entirely, exposing teeth and gums to the very back of her jaw. Red muscle and white bone were open to the air, and still cracking and falling away.

Izuku shifted his weight on his hands, turned his body, and kicked out with all his might.

He aimed for her legs, and could have sworn that it landed with his full weight behind it, but it felt like another glancing strike.

For a moment, Tsuyu's face seemed to flicker, and Izuku took his chance to disengage. He found himself with his back to the wall, chest and stomach heaving.

How did they know?

How did they know what to turn into?

How did they know what nearly happened to Tsuyu?

What else did they know about what could hurt him? About his friends?

"Midoriya," Tsuyu's voice rattled in her throat, wet and hoarse.

Izuku clenched his teeth, launched himself forward, and kicked out again. *It's not her. It's not Tsuyu.* It was a sloppy attack, and Izuku might have been ashamed of himself if he hadn't been reeling with nausea and fear.

His foot connected, and the pained cry that reached his ears was not Tsuyu's.

He looked again, and Uraraka slumped to the ground at his feet, eyes wide, blood bubbling from a slashed throat. He blinked, and there was Iida instead, lying in the alley just like he had when Izuku found him in Hosu, only this time he was limp and motionless, his eyes wide and blank in a pale, slack face, staring up at Izuku without seeing him.

Why didn't you save me? the dead face seemed to ask.

His throat burned, but he couldn't tell if it was from puking, or he'd screamed without noticing. He tore his eyes from the sight, blinking against the hot sting in his eyes. Even without looking, he felt someone move right in front of him, reaching for him. He lashed out on instinct, blind to whether or not he had One For All behind it. The kick landed awkwardly, and the voice of the answering grunt of pain chilled the blood in his veins. It was deeper, rougher, but still familiar.

Izuku looked again, and All-Might stood before him clutching at his side. Tall and gaunt and sagging, breath crackling in his chest, his mentor slumped forward to one knee. Blood soaked through his shirt, right at the spot where the scar was.

The way the shirt clung looked... odd. It dipped inward, as if there wasn't just a scar there, but a gaping hole of a wound.

It's not him. It's not real.

But it looked real. And when All-Might's voice choked out "*Izuku?*" with a mouthful of blood and vomit, it sounded real.

A noise crawled out of Izuku's throat, somewhere between a sob and a whimper. His vision blurred with tears again, blocking out the horrible sight at least for the moment.

Relief did not last. A hand clutched at his shirt, and another broken voice reached his ears.

"Izuku."

No.

“Izuku, sweetheart, *please*.”

The tears fell, clearing his sight, and Izuku looked into her mother’s eyes and watched her choke on blood and tears.

“*Help me*.”

Izuku drowned in his own horror.

His vision went white for a few seconds, and he simply stopped breathing. He stood frozen, upright by a miracle and a prayer, half-blind with tears and nearly deafened by his pulse pounding in his ears. He tucked his chin in, staring not at her face but at her blood-soaked hands as they clutched at his shirt, seeping through.

Izuku blinked.

Her hands were bloody. Dripping with it. Enough to dampen his shirt.

But it was dry, wasn’t it? He could feel the hands grasping at his shirt, but his shirt felt dry.

Stray threads of thought drifted free of the inner screaming panic. *No ice, no burn marks. The hand feels too big to be hers. My shirt is dry. My aim is good but I can’t land a hit.*

He shut his eyes and grasped the wrist of the hand clutching at him. This was a move that he had run through countless times in training. Repetition built muscle memory, and Izuku could go through these motions in his sleep, much less with his eyes closed.

One For All coursed through his body, and he twisted out of the grip and around his attacker, The arm that he wrenched behind their back did not feel like his mother’s arm. Reaching up with one hand he found the back of a head, and he shoved it forward and knocked it forcefully against the wall. When he opened his eyes, he was looking at his mother’s back, but his hand—still gripping the hair on the back of his attacker’s head—hovered at least a foot above hers.

The sight flickered, like old rotted film, and Izuku’s grip tightened on the man that appeared in his mother’s place. Izuku shot a split-second glance over his shoulder, inspecting the ground in the alleyway. Not a drop of blood was in sight. The only puddle of puke was his own.

“You little shit,” the man twisted, but Izuku’s quirk-enhanced strength kept him in place. He was tall, almost as tall as Endeavor, but hunched over and sluggish from his head’s collision with the concrete. His head turned, and the face was vaguely familiar—it was a moment before Izuku recognized him as the man who had been staring at him back in the store, before he’d talked to Yoarashi. He must have been followed.

“You’re not a shapeshifter,” Izuku gritted out through clenched teeth. “It’s all illusions. You’re messing with what I see, and what I hear. But you can’t change what I can touch, can you? That’s why you didn’t fake any quirks—you knew I’d see through it when I didn’t feel it.”

“Smart little shit.” The villain sneered, blood running down his forehead where it had struck the wall. “Do you feel *this*?”

Still shaking off sickness and horror, Izuku saw the man’s hand move in his sleeve too late. The villain struck back at him—light flashed on metal—

Pain lanced through his right shoulder. Izuku cried out as a four-inch knife blade sank in, breaking his hold on his quirk. The villain slipped free of his grip, wrenching the blade from his shoulder in

a way that sliced through more of it. Before Izuku could gather himself again, the man whipped around and punched him in the bleeding wound.

His vision went gray, and when it cleared again he was flat on his back, surrounded by corpses. Every one of them had a face he knew. There was Iida again, dead the way he might have been if Stain had had his way. Uraraka's corpse looked pale and bled out. Todoroki's skin was patchy with dark bruises and red-black burns. Bakugou's head looked caved in, his body unnaturally still. Tsuyu and Aizawa-sensei lay nearby, half-disintegrated. Beyond them was All-Might with his shirt as bloody as if his old wound had been ripped open all over again. Mom was closest, her eyes staring sightlessly at the sky.

There were more besides that. Friends, acquaintances, classmates, teachers. He could put a name to each of their faces.

He shut his eyes again and rolled onto his side, curling up as if overcome with pain and fear. There was no way of knowing for sure that he was hiding it properly, but his phone was in his hand. Blood smeared the screen as he typed out the street location with a hand that shook.

The villain's hand gripped his hair, yanking him to his knees until his scalp burned. He barely felt it; most of his capacity to feel pain was taken up by the fiery agony lighting up his right shoulder. Blood was flowing freely; his shirt was already warm and wet. His eyes opened, and he caught sight of little Kouta Izumi curled up at the foot of a bloody smear on the wall. His breath hitched at the sight, and tears coursed their way down his face. He'd lost his grip on his phone, he was alone, and there was a hole in his shoulder and a villain with a knife ready to make a new one.

Breathing shallowly, Izuku took stock of what he did have.

It wasn't much. He couldn't trust his eyes or his ears. But there was a hand gripping his hair, and he could trust that. He had seen, at least for a few moments, what the man looked like—how tall, how broad. From there...

Izuku caught hold of the man's wrist, firmly enough to keep hold but not so tight as to make him let go. If his hand was there, and his arm was positioned like that, then maybe...

He kicked out at empty air, and connected solidly with what felt like a stomach. The illusion around him flickered.

Retaliation was swift; he couldn't see the man, but he could feel hard fingers digging into the stab wound in his shoulder. He staggered with a gasp of pain. In the back of his mind he thought of diagrams in anatomy textbooks, veins and arteries and other major blood vessels. He was bleeding already. Too much and he'd pass out.

Gritting his teeth against the haze of agony, Izuku clung to the wrist like a lifeline and aimed for where he hoped the lower stomach would be. The kick landed, and he was rewarded with the sound of breath whooshing from lungs. That was a minor miracle by Izuku's judgment; his shoulder was useless, he was half blind with pain and tears, and blood loss was going to make him dizzy before long. He was probably telegraphing his movements like crazy.

"Kind of a one-trick pony, aren't you?" The villain's voice came from thin air, tight with pain from Izuku's kick to his stomach. "Most people have a little, you know, variety? But look at you." The grip on his hair forced his head up to look at the corpse-strewn alleyway. "Dead loved ones, dead loved ones, and more dead loved ones. It's kind of a downer, you know? At least the last guy danced when I made him think his pants were full of spiders."

“You’re *disgusting*,” Izuku hissed, and broke off to yell with pain when nails dug into his wound again.

“I’m *bored*. You’re boring me. You’re making corpses boring. I didn’t even know that was *possible*, shit.” Fingers curled in the hole in his shoulder, and Izuku’s vision went black for a moment. “—all of you hero types like this? Nothing but corpses and dramatic deaths? That might...” His voice trailed off.

Izuku waited, breathing through the pain. His head already felt light, and he could feel blood still oozing out of his shoulder and trickling down as far as his waist. *Don’t pass out. Don’t pass out.*

The villain’s voice came again. “Huh. Maybe you are after all.” A hard flick stung his ear, and a moment later the voice spoke again close by it. Izuku knew it was real this time; he could feel breath against his ear. “You sneaky little bastard, you called for backup, didn’t you? Want to guess what fears are in *his* head?”

Instead of answering, Izuku bent his head forward, then slammed it back in the direction of the voice. Something crunched against the back of his skull, and the villain swore at him. The hand in his hair moved to grip his throat instead, and Izuku managed a strangled cry before he was slammed into the wall at the back of the alley. He barely managed to brace his head before he hit, so when it struck the concrete he managed to stay conscious. Ears ringing, he slid down with his back to the wall, breathing heavily. A kick to his shoulder kept him down, and when his vision cleared again, he found the alley empty of bodies.

Mostly empty, at least. There was still one left, splayed out with one arm outstretched and the other curled around the gash that reached from chest to stomach. The only difference was that this one looked to be still alive; the chest was moving, the breath short and raspy in rapidly filling lungs, and the blood-spattered face was creased with pain.

It was another face that Izuku recognized: his own.

Confusion clouded his mind further, until movement at the entrance to the alley drew his eyes. Even with his blurry vision, he could see bright red and white hair.

Only a moment after Todoroki appeared at the mouth of the alley, the illusory Midoriya reached toward him feebly, shuddered, and fell still.

The alley wasn’t that deep. Even from the very back, Izuku could hear the strangled sob that tore from Todoroki’s throat. He could see the way Todoroki’s right foot left patches of ice with each step as he ran into the alley.

“Wait!” he called out. “St-stop! Todoroki, I’m right there—” Another kick to the shoulder left him retching with pain. Todoroki’s eyes were fixed on the illusion; he didn’t even turn his head.

He can’t see me, Izuku realized as his head swam. *He can’t hear me, either.*

He kept calling out anyway.

Todoroki reached the body and dropped down next to it as if his legs had given out. “*No*.” His voice cracked, and Izuku nearly sobbed out loud at the look on his friend’s face. “No, no, Midoriya, *no*.” He reached forward, deaf to Izuku’s cries.

Izuku watched, helpless, as Todoroki was yanked away by an unseen force, and thrown back against the side of the alley. Shock registered in Todoroki’s eyes, before they hardened and his face froze in a mask of mingled fury and pain. Pressed against the brick, he choked and clutched at

the space by his throat, fingers clawing with ice and fire. A moment later he staggered as if released, gasping for air. Frost spread along his right arm, flames licked his left, and his lip curled back to bare his teeth.

Then his head whipped to one side, and when he straightened again there was blood running from his mouth. Barely a heartbeat later he was slammed back into the brick with a grunt of pain.

With his back to the wall, Izuku forced himself to his feet. His head swam as he leaned against the concrete and then brick and inched along it, closer and closer. Todoroki's cold side flared again, and Izuku's heart leaped—if he could freeze the villain, maybe that would throw off his quirk. But a moment later Todoroki went still, teeth clenched and bared as his breath hissed in and out between them.

“Feel that?” Izuku could just barely hear the villain's voice. “Yeah, that's a knife at your throat. Now, you can try and freeze me, or burn me, if you think you can do it before this knife hits your jugular. I'd be careful. If you're not then you'll end up just like your friend over there.”

“*Go to hell.*” Todoroki's voice shook.

“You're not like him, you know. His fears were pretty boring. All the same, right? I mean he cried a little, and that was fun for a while but it got old faster than it should have. But you—you've got loads more. I can tell. So what are they?”

One For All crackled to life, and with a yell of fury Izuku launched himself forward with as much force as he dared. He aimed for the air right in front of Todoroki and struck a solid body instead. As Izuku bore the attacker to the ground, pain exploded in his injured shoulder again, too intense to be a simple jarring of the wound. With a cry of pain, Izuku rolled off of him with the impact. When he came to a halt, he found the villain on the ground not far, fully visible and winded with a broken, bleeding nose. In one hand he clutched the knife, and its blade was wet with fresh blood.

“It's not real!” Izuku yelled, and this time Todoroki whipped around to look at him, eyes wide with shock. “He makes illusions, it's not real! I'm okay!”

Todoroki blinked, and—

Izuku would never agree with what Yoarashi had said. Todoroki was not Endeavor, would *never* be Endeavor, but in that moment—just for that moment—Izuku could sort of see what the Shiketsu boy meant about his eyes. When Todoroki turned back to the villain on the ground, they were cold—the coldest eyes that Izuku ever hoped to see.

“Shit,” the villain said, and threw himself out of the way of the blast of ice that erupted from Todoroki's right side. In a heartbeat he was up and running, barely outstripping Todoroki's ice as he dashed to the mouth of the alleyway and out of sight.

Todoroki began to give chase, then stopped and rushed back to Izuku's side. His eyes flickered over Izuku's shoulder; following his gaze, Izuku saw empty ground where his dead body had lain only moments before.

“Midoriya.” A shaking hand touched his uninjured shoulder; Izuku had his hand pressed to the other in the hopes of stemming the bleeding. “Are you okay?”

Izuku tried to reply, but his head was still swimming with leftover adrenaline—and blood loss, probably. His hand wasn't cutting it.

The touch became a firm grasp, grounding him back in reality. “*Are you okay?*” Todoroki

repeated, his tone hard.

“Y-yeah.” Izuku nodded. “Um. Dropped my phone. Didn’t have the chance to, uh. Call in. Could you—?”

“Yes.” Todoroki didn’t let go of his shoulder. “You’re injured?”

Izuku nodded and leaned back against the side of the building. Dimly he could hear Todoroki talking, but he was too shaky and exhausted to pay much attention. The call didn’t last long, and Todoroki’s voice roused him again.

“Midoriya. It’s your shoulder, right? How bad is it?”

Izuku blinked groggily at him, then glanced down at himself and realized the problem. He had bled all over his shirt, but the fabric was too dark for it to stand out, and the location of the wound meant that the blood ran down his side instead of down his arm where the short sleeve didn’t cover. It was visible on the hand pressing the wound, but it wasn’t enough to show how severe it really was.

“I’ve... had worse?” he said.

“That’s not saying much. Let me see.”

Izuku hesitated.

Todoroki gave him a look. “Don’t fight me on this, Midoriya.”

“I really don’t want to—”

“Midoriya.” It was hard to look away, with Todoroki’s eyes boring into him like that. “Let me see.”

Reluctantly, Izuku let his hand drop from his shoulder. Before he had the chance to look at it himself, he heard Todoroki hiss softly through his teeth, right before his friend pressed his own hand to the wound in its place.

Fading adrenaline made the pain stand out sharper, but Izuku countered it with a shaky smile. “Thought you wanted me to take my hand away.”

“How long has it been bleeding?” Todoroki asked.

“Um. A few minutes?” Izuku winced. Todoroki’s hand had stopped shaking, but it didn’t make this any less painful. “He stabbed me again when I took him down. Feel kind of dizzy.”

“It’s bleeding fast.” Todoroki’s hand was rock-steady, but his voice shook. “Judging by the placement of the wound, it’s likely that it hit an artery. Midoriya—”

“Good thing you called for help, then.” He tried to be encouraging, but it was hard to do that when the world kept tilting.

“If it’s been like this for that long, then they might not—” Todoroki broke off. His face was smooth and emotionless, but his eyes burned with raw fear when they met Izuku’s. “There’s something I can do. To stop the bleeding. But...”

His right hand was the one pressing against Izuku’s shoulder. The left one curled with tension, nails digging into his pant leg. For a moment Izuku’s brain limped to catch up, before his friend’s

meaning hit him. He turned his head to an awkward angle, trying to see his shoulder. It still bled freely, leaking through the gaps in Todoroki's fingers. He couldn't be certain how long it would take for help to arrive.

Stomach curdling with dread, he steeled himself and looked Todoroki in the eye again. "Do it."

Todoroki blinked. "You don't even know what I—"

"Your quirk. Your left side. You can cauterize it. That's what you were thinking, right?"

"Well, yeah, but—"

"But nothing." Izuku held his gaze. "I've been bleeding for a few minutes now—it wasn't as bad before, but like you said—if it's hit a major artery, then I'll bleed out before an ambulance gets here. So I need you to help me stop it."

There was no more hesitation after that. "Okay. Just—" Luckily his shirt was a button-up, so it was easy to loosen it and shift it out of the way. Izuku winced as he peeled it away from his stab wound, and tried not to look at it. Todoroki's eyes turned to him, and Izuku focused on them instead. "Ready?"

"Not really," Izuku said bluntly. "I have a high pain tolerance but—I'm gonna scream. It's gonna hurt, I know it's gonna hurt, just. Don't stop 'til you're done. I trust you." He shifted again until he was sitting on his hands. "Just hurry."

With one hand, Todoroki helped him brace his shoulders against the wall. The other, his left, lit up like a blowtorch. "It'll—it'll help if you don't look."

Izuku turned his head away. "Got it."

By the time it was over and done with, Izuku was muffling his screams into Todoroki's shoulder.

Chapter End Notes

Me @ these boys: *Marceline voice* I'm hurting you because I love you.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Shouto's throat burned as he stepped out of the restroom, made his way out to the hospital waiting room, and sank into the nearest chair. The urge to curl in on himself and hide from the world was strong, but he forced it down and continued to sit upright and keep watch.

He was mostly alone, which was a mixed blessing. Midoriya was still getting his shoulder patched up, and Shouto found himself politely but firmly shooed away whenever he got up to try to check on him, which did nothing for his nerves. On the other hand, the waiting room was quiet with only a few people present, so at the very least he didn't feel so exposed.

Left to his own devices, he kept himself just within the bounds of sanity by pacing restlessly and burying himself deep in his own head. He kept his eyes open for as long as they could bear, and blinked only when necessary. If he closed his eyes for too long, then he'd see it again.

It wasn't real. He's fine. He's safe. You're safe. It wasn't real. It wasn't real.

But the sight of Midoriya's dead body may as well have been branded to the backs of his eyelids, for all the good that did. And while that vision may have been fake, his friend's agonized screaming had been very, very real.

A shudder ran through him, and he shut his eyes on instinct. Midoriya's dead face flashed in the darkness, and he forced them open again. His aching throat seized.

It wasn't real. He's fine.

"Todoroki?"

The voice jolted through his protective haze, and he looked up to see who was addressing him. His heart sank at the sight of Midoriya Inko standing over him, concern clear on her face. An apology nudged its way to the tip of his tongue, but he remembered their earlier conversation and bit it back. "Hello," he said, and nearly winced at how lame it sounded.

"Are you all right?" she asked. He nodded mutely. "I just spoke at the front desk, and I spotted you before I went in to see Izuku. Would you like to come with me?"

And yes, yes, Shouto did want to, so very badly. He could chant silently to himself all he wanted, but the illusion lingered like a bad dream, haunting him while his friend wasn't there to prove it otherwise. And yet...

He was looking into Mrs. Midoriya's worried green eyes, but all he could see was blood and tears and his father's stupid flames. The memories wouldn't leave him be, real or imagined. Midoriya dying in front of him, just beyond his reach in a dirty alley. Midoriya yelling at him hoarsely, breaking through his shocked stupor with cold, hard reality. Midoriya bleeding out under his hands. Midoriya screaming into his damp shoulder as Shouto pressed his hand to the hole in his shoulder and burned it shut.

I almost let your son die. It went so far that I couldn't save him without hurting him.

Vaguely he realized that Midoriya's mother was still waiting for an answer. He had been silent for

longer than appropriate, but his tongue had locked itself firmly behind his teeth.

In a few more seconds he might have tried to force words out, or look for an escape, or something even more embarrassing, but relief came unasked for only a moment later. Across the room, the doors slid open, and Shouto sat up straight at the sight of two familiar figures. Detective Naomasa Tsukauchi stepped into the waiting area first, face set with a professional sort of blankness. At his side, towering over him too high to be hidden behind him, was All-Might.

Mrs. Midoriya must have seen the look on his face; a moment later she turned and followed his gaze, and Shouto heard her breathe in sharply with surprise. All-Might scanned the room briefly and spotted them, and Shouto felt the knot in his chest loosen when he met his teacher's eyes.

On instinct he shot a glance at Mrs. Midoriya and was shocked by the grim look on her face. She was far from impolite or hostile the way Endeavor was, but it was odd to see anyone, especially anyone related to Midoriya, greet All-Might with anything less than a bright smile.

"Mrs. Midoriya, good afternoon." All-Might's voice was calm and polite, if strained. Shouto could swear his teacher's worry lines had deepened since the last time he saw him. "And young Todoroki—are you all right, my boy?"

Shouto nodded, not quite trusting himself to speak.

All-Might's shadowed eyes turned to Midoriya's mother. "And young Izuku?"

"They told me he'll be fine," Mrs. Midoriya replied, sighing a little. "His shoulder is injured, but they have enough medical quirks on staff to make sure it heals quickly. I was just about to go in and see him."

All-Might seemed to sag with relief, and a note of tension in his face relaxed. "Naomasa came and fetched me the moment he heard," he said with a nod toward the detective. For the moment, Naomasa was standing politely to the side while pleasantries were exchanged. At All-Might's acknowledgment, he stepped forward.

"I hear you two ran into someone we've been looking for recently," he said. "I was hoping to ask you a few questions—and Midoriya Izuku as well, if that's all right." He nodded respectfully to Mrs. Midoriya.

"If he's up for it when they're done with him," Mrs. Midoriya said. "He probably will be, knowing Izuku." She paused, chewing worriedly at her lip. "Well, I'm going back to check on him. Todoroki, are you sure you wouldn't like to come?"

"I-I'm fine out here," slipped out before Todoroki could think better of it.

"Okay, if you're sure." She turned her head. "All-Might?"

He blinked at her. "Hm?"

"Would you like to come with me?" she asked. "He'll be glad to see you, if I know my son."

Surprise flitted across All-Might's face, but was quickly overtaken with relief. "I-I suppose. Yes, of course. Thank you very much."

Shouto watched them go, bemused. At any other moment he might have laughed, remembering the absurd conclusion he had first come to over a year ago. Even now it wasn't too far-fetched, considering how All-Might and Midoriya acted around each other. But knowing his friend's

mother personally, it was hard to think about that without wanting to cringe and laugh at the same time.

Mostly cringe, at the moment. Shouto didn't feel much like laughing.

Beside him, Naomasa settled into a chair to wait, but Shouto needed a distraction. "I didn't get to him until late," he said. "But I can tell you what I know until Midoriya gets here."

For a heartbeat the detective looked him in the eye, gently searching, before his face softened with understanding. "That would be helpful," he said. "And don't worry about how late you were. Just start from the beginning."

When the others joined them, Midoriya's right arm was in a sling, and he was craning his neck to say something to All-Might. Shouto stopped midsentence and opened his mouth to call out, only to shut it at the last minute when his friend glanced down and met his eyes.

Midoriya broke away from his mother and All-Might, crossed the waiting room at a jog, and, using his good arm to vault over the back, slid into the empty seat beside Shouto.

"Hey," he said. "You all right?"

Shouto found himself reaching for him without thinking, only stopping short when he remembered that Midoriya's injured side was closed to him. He pulled his hand back. "Um."

"Oh, hello, Detective Naomasa." Midoriya waved his left hand in greeting. "All-Might said you'd want to ask some questions."

The corners of Naomasa's mouth were twitching as All-Might and Mrs. Midoriya caught up. "Izuku, you're still healing!" Mrs. Midoriya put her hand to his uninjured shoulder, as if in a belated attempt to keep him still. "And yes I know you didn't use your bad arm, but still."

"I know my limits, Mom," Midoriya assured her.

"You should really be more careful, my boy," All-Might scolded him gently. "You've had a rather devil-may-care attitude about injury and it worries me."

Midoriya wilted under the combined concern of his mother and his teacher. "Sorry," he murmured.

With a sigh, All-Might stooped a little so that Midoriya wouldn't have to bend his neck to keep looking at him. "Keep in mind, young Midoriya," he went on. "When I say 'I'm worried,' I don't mean 'Don't let me catch you.' I mean 'Stop doing it.'" Is that clear?"

"Yes, All-Might. Sorry, Mom."

Throughout this exchange, Shouto shifted in his seat until he was sitting on his hands. He was being ridiculous. Midoriya was next to him, inches away, alive and well and breathing. He could see him, hear him, perfectly clear.

You could see and hear those illusions, too, so what good does that really do you?

Shouto shut his eyes and buried those thoughts deep.

At Naomasa's prompting, Midoriya gave his own account of things. "It was sort of my own fault," he said, flashing an apologetic look at his mother. "I shouldn't have gone off alone without telling anyone. But, anyway, I was on the main road and passing the side street that led to that alley when

I heard... someone calling for help.”

“An illusion?” Naomasa asked. “Todoroki said this individual’s quirk was to make you see and hear things that weren’t there.”

“S-sort of.” Midoriya fidgeted. “I think it might be more than that. Or... less than that? I mean I think there’s a limit, or a... a specialization.”

Naomasa’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “How do you mean?”

“I don’t know for sure, but I think his quirk has more to do with fear than it does with illusions,” Midoriya went on. “He wasn’t just making me see things, he was making me see things I’m afraid of.” His voice trailed off.

“How sure are you?” Naomasa asked.

“P-pretty sure. He was saying stuff about it, too. He talked about making someone see spiders, and he just... kept talking about fear. I mean he wouldn’t shut up about it.” He forced a laugh. “Said my fears were boring, even. I don’t know if that’s a good thing or a bad thing.” His mother drew in a sharp breath. Her knuckles were nearly white.

All-Might’s hand descended on Shouto’s right shoulder, startling him. He glanced up at his teacher, then at his right side, and found ice spreading along his arm. All-Might squeezed gently, and Shouto tried to drag himself together.

“Did he ask you what you were afraid of, or simply create the illusions unprompted?” Naomasa asked.

“Sort of both,” Midoriya replied. “I mean he asked, but I didn’t answer, and he made me see stuff anyway. I wasn’t sure how he was doing it at the time, but I’ve been thinking about it and he may have been reading my mind? And maybe he was just asking so he could get me to think about the answers even if I didn’t say them out loud.” He reached up and took his mother’s hand, squeezing back. “The first—image—he showed me, it had to do with someone I was thinking about before I even knew he was there.” He looked to Shouto, eyes wide. “And later on, he knew you were coming before you even got to the alley.”

Standing over them, All-Might spat out what sounded like a quiet curse in English. Naomasa groaned softly and massaged his forehead with his palm.

“What?” Midoriya asked. “What is it?”

Naomasa slipped his phone from his pocket. For a minute or so he thumbed the screen, scrolling through files until he found what he was looking for. He held it out, displaying a mugshot of a familiar face. “This him?”

“Yeah.” Midoriya nodded vigorously. “His hair was different, but that’s definitely him.” Shouto nodded.

“Deimos,” Naomasa muttered, pocketing his phone again. “I might have known, but everyone was yelling about shapeshifters—”

“Easy mistake to make,” All-Might said darkly. “Even back then, he preferred using his quirk to make *himself* look frightening.”

“Deimos?” Mrs. Midoriya echoed. “I don’t know that I know that name.”

“I do.” Midoriya sat up straighter. “Um, I think?” He looked at All-Might. “It was one of your minor fights, wasn’t it? Four years ago?”

“‘Minor’ is right,” All-Might said. “He gave some of the lower-ranked heroes some trouble before Naomasa and I brought him in. His illusions were nasty but he wasn’t much in a real fight.”

Naomasa nodded to Midoriya. “From what I recall, his quirk’s called Night Terror, and it boils down to what you said, more or less. He can read your thoughts, but only those pertaining to what you’re scared of, and then turn those thoughts into illusions.” He shook his head. “He got out early on good behavior a little over a year ago and he’s kept his nose clean, but it looks like he’s fallen back into old habits.”

“Good thing Endeavor’s due back soon,” All-Might mused. Shouto tried not to flinch. “The sooner Deimos gets picked up again, the better. He’s not much on his own, but if the Alliance gets their hands on him, there’s no telling what they’ll dream up.”

“Thank you,” Naomasa said emphatically, and got to his feet again. “Both of you. A devil we know is preferable to some anonymous shapeshifter. You’ve both been a great help. We won’t keep you any longer. If I think of anything else, I’ll be in touch.” He nodded politely to Mrs. Midoriya, and turned to take his leave. All-Might gave both Shouto and Midoriya’s shoulders a final pat, and straightened up to follow him.

Mrs. Midoriya cleared her throat and stepped after him. “All-Might?”

He stopped and turned back. “Yes, Mrs. Midoriya?”

She looked tiny standing before him, but to Shouto’s eyes it didn’t seem to make much difference to her. “I was hoping to have a word with you,” she said. “Not now—I should get them home for now. But soon? Tomorrow, if possible.”

“I—yes, of course.” All-Might looked equal parts bewildered and nervous. “Tomorrow afternoon, then?”

“Yes, thank you. There were a few things I was hoping to discuss with you.” She brushed a lock of hair behind her ear. “My son has your number, so I’ll contact you later once everything’s calmed down.”

All-Might nodded. “Of course. I’ll talk to you then.”

With that, she turned on her heel and walked back to where Shouto and Midoriya were sitting, leaving him staring after her in worried bafflement.

As she made her way back to them, Midoriya stood up with a curious frown on his face. “Mom, what was—?”

“Nothing to worry about,” she said lightly, forestalling any questions from either of them. “I think it’s high time I had a parent-teacher talk with him, that’s all.”

Midoriya didn’t look any less worried.

She sighed lightly and put her arm around him gingerly, careful not to bump his bad shoulder. “Don’t worry, sweetheart, he’s not in trouble.” Midoriya managed a wheezy little laugh at that, and let her usher him along to the door.

Shouto reached for him again, without thinking. His hand moved as if on its own, before he

checked himself and crossed his arms to keep them from straying again. His fingers curled and uncurled, and any words he might have had on the tip of his tongue stayed locked in his mouth.

It was strange, how quickly Shouto had come to associate Midoriya's house and Midoriya's room with safety. It was no more secure than any other apartment in the city, it certainly had none of the expensive measures that his father's house did, and even if it was in a nice part of town, that didn't necessarily mean much in these troubled times. And yet, when Shouto stepped inside at Midoriya's heels, he noticed the knot of tension in his shoulders only when it began to ease.

"Well, I'll get dinner started," Mrs. Midoriya said, shaking herself a little. "Izuku, do you need anything? An ice pack?"

"I'm okay," Midoriya assured her. "I just want to put my stuff down in my room."

Shouto followed him, because he was at a loss for what else to do, but now that being in a separate room from a living, breathing Midoriya was no longer necessary, he saw no reason why he had to put up with it. If Midoriya thought he was being weird or clingy, he said nothing, and Shouto was careful to keep his hands to himself.

It wasn't as easy as it should have been. As Shouto caught up on Midoriya's left side, their hands nearly brushed. It probably felt like nothing to Midoriya, but to Shouto it was like passing his hand over a flame that wasn't his. Self-consciously he pulled his hand further away to keep from bumping Midoriya again. The silence between them did not feel like a comfortable one, and for once Midoriya wasn't filling it with chatter.

Once they were in his room, with Midoriya gingerly shrugging out of the jacket draped across his shoulders, the thick quiet finally became too much.

"M-Midoriya." His voice caught in his throat and cracked. "Listen, um."

His friend looked at him, and Shouto noted absently that eye contact with Midoriya didn't normally steal away his ability to string words together. He switched his eyes to the floor somewhere to his left, swallowing against a dry mouth.

"I wanted to talk to you about... about when I showed up, back then. In the alley." Shouto wrung his hands at his sides. It wasn't really that he wanted to talk about it. What he wanted was to pretend it had never happened. But if he didn't do something, then he might go crazy. "That illusion that—that Deimos made me see. I-I know you probably saw it too, and I just—" His voice stopped working again, and Shouto forced his way past it. "I got your text message, and it reminded me of that time with Stain, and that was a close call but we made it through and we're stronger now. But—but that didn't stop me from being... I mean, from thinking that you might—" He couldn't finish that sentence. "I must have looked like an idiot."

Midoriya hugged him.

Looking away as he was, Shouto never saw him coming. One moment Midoriya was standing silently a few feet away, and the next, he was pressed against him, his good arm encircling Shouto's shoulders while the one in the sling wrapped gingerly around his back. Shouto found himself with his chin on Midoriya's good shoulder, barely daring to breathe.

"Sorry," Midoriya blurted close to his ear. "Sorry, I just—this was my fault, because I wasn't being careful, but he—um." His voice broke. "L-look, Todoroki, if that—seeing me dead, and getting scared—if that makes you an idiot, then I'm an idiot too, okay? Because the reason I was in

that alley in the first place was—he did it to me, too.”

Shouto’s heart dropped. “He... did...?”

“He made me see you. Like that.” A shudder ran through Midoriya, and Shouto felt it. “Plus a lot of other people. But it started with you. And...” Midoriya tucked his chin in and pressed his forehead to Shouto’s shoulder. “I’m glad it wasn’t real. I’m really, really glad it wasn’t real.”

It was awkward, with Shouto taking extra care not to jostle Midoriya’s wounded shoulder, but he hugged back. “Sorry I took so long to come get you.” His voice was hoarse.

“I’m still alive,” Midoriya reminded him. “You came to get me just in time.”

“Sorry I burned your shoulder.”

“I told you to.”

“I know, Midoriya, I just—”

“Izuku.”

Shouto’s breath stuttered. “What?”

With his left hand, Midoriya pushed back and disentangled himself from the hug. His eyes still looked wet, and his face was red enough that his freckles were nearly invisible against the blush. “Look, we’ve been friends for over a year, and today you emergency-cauterized my shoulder and let me cry on you twice without giving me any grief, so. I think it’s cool if you call me Izuku.”

“...Oh.” Not for the first time, Shouto momentarily forgot what words were for. “Um. Same to you. I mean—call me Shouto. It’s fine with me.”

Midoriya grinned, and that was a lethal combination—a blush, a scattering of freckles, and a smile like the sun coming out. It was impossible to look away.

“Are you going to be okay tonight?”

Izuku wasn’t sure what possessed him to ask. The room was dark and silent, Mom had already gone to bed, and it was just the two of them, safe in bed after a frankly insane day. Maybe the head rush of surviving something harrowing was still making his mouth loose. Maybe he was still riding the high of hugging Todoroki—*Shouto*, he was Shouto to him now—and being hugged back.

Or maybe, after having his nose shoved like a disobedient dog’s into the sight of Shouto’s corpse, he wasn’t in the mood to keep his mouth shut about things anymore.

“I’ll be fine,” Shouto answered from closer to the floor. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You had a nightmare the other day,” Izuku said quietly, before he could think better of it.

“Seemed pretty bad. And today we went up against someone with a fear-based quirk. Would that cause them?”

For a moment, Shouto didn’t answer. “M-maybe,” he said at last. “They... they happen, once in a while.” And then, softer, “You never said.”

“I didn’t know how to bring it up,” Izuku told him. “Wasn’t any of my business. I, uh, guess it still sort of isn’t. Sorry.”

“It’s fine. I trust you.”

Izuku’s breath caught, and he coughed lightly to hide the noise.

“And I think I’ll be...” Shouto’s voice trailed off for a moment. “Well, I’m no worse off. In fact, I think I’ve come to a decision.”

“About what?”

“To hell with my father,” Shouto said flatly. “Someone has to look after you for the next couple of weeks and it might as well be me.”

A burst of giggles escaped Izuku before he managed to muffle them.

“I’m still worried about my sister, but... she had a point. She has her own life away from *him*, and he hasn’t bothered much with her before, so she should be okay.” Shouto took a deep breath. “If he comes back to town and wants me home, then he can damn well come find me and drag me if it makes him happy.” When he spoke next, his voice was quieter. “Maybe it won’t matter in the end and he’ll force me back anyway, but I might as well make him work for it.”

“Maybe Mom will kill him with kindness before he gets through the door,” Izuku mused. “She’s pretty good at that. I’ve been told it’s pretty infuriating.”

“Maybe... I just don’t want to think about it right now. After everything that happened today, I don’t want to think about him.”

Izuku couldn’t see his face, and didn’t quite feel like rolling over to look at him. It was easier to be frank this way, when he was talking to the ceiling instead of Shouto’s face. “Are you sure you’re okay?” he asked. “You looked really... I dunno, shaken. Especially right after the fact.”

“So did you,” Shouto pointed out.

“Of *course* I did.” Izuku felt his chest hitch. “And I know *I’m* not okay.”

Silence met his quiet confession, then rustling. From the sound of it Shouto was sitting up on the futon. Izuku considered turning to face him, but he couldn’t force himself to move.

“Do you... want to talk about it?” Shouto asked.

Izuku didn’t reply. At first he simply couldn’t decide on his answer, and then the silence stretched long enough that Izuku wondered how his friend would respond. Would he lie back down and give up?

The answer, as it turned out, was no.

More rustling reached Izuku’s ears, first the futon and then the carpet. His bed creaked and shifted, only slightly—from the sound of it, Shouto was sitting on the floor, leaning up against the side.

His friend’s voice came again, quiet but clear. “I’m... not very good at this,” he said. “Not like you are.”

“Good at what?”

“At... *this*.” Though he couldn’t see him, Izuku could imagine Shouto gesturing vaguely. “This thing you do. I... I can fight. I’m good at it. I like to think that... that maybe I’m even good at saving people, that way. But only that way. I can’t do what you do. I never learned that.”

Was it his tired brain, or was Shouto really just talking in circles? “Sorry, what exactly do I do, again?”

“You save people just by talking to them.” Shouto’s voice was hushed. “You help people without thinking, and I understand that, but it’s how you do it that just... I can’t do that. I don’t think I could do, for you... what you did for me. I just don’t know what to say or how to say it, the way you do.”

Izuku’s eyes stung, and the darkness of his bedroom ceiling blurred. He stayed where he was, breathing lightly until the hot, wet pressure in his chest subsided enough that he could trust his voice again. “It’s not like that, for me,” he said. “It’s not that I know what to say. I just tell the truth.”

Shouto was quiet for a few seconds, and when he spoke again, Izuku could hear a smile in his voice. “You’re doing it again, Izuku.”

Izuku huffed out a laugh through the threat of tears. “R-really? I didn’t notice. I don’t really know what I’m doing.”

“But anyway,” Shouto went on. “Even if I can’t do that... I meant it, when I said I trust you. And you can trust me, too, if you want. If you don’t want to talk about it then that’s fine, but—”

“He made me see you,” Izuku blurted. “Well. I heard you, first. You were calling for me, and when I ran to find you, you were just... there. Not moving.” His eyes stung again, spilling over at the corners. “And he didn’t stop there. I saw *everyone*. Uraraka. Kacchan. Iida—I saw him dead in an alley, and it was just like what happened with Stain, except I didn’t get there in time. I saw our classmates. I-I saw—remember the USJ, way back when? Did I ever tell you that Shigaraki touched Tsuyu? Aizawa-sensei erased his quirk, but—it was so *close*. And I saw her, both of them, just falling apart, like it was from his quirk. I saw everybody I know. People in our class. Our teachers. Kouta—remember him? I saw All-Might like that. And—and my mom.” His voice broke then. “Th-that was around when I figured out his quirk, and I started fighting back, but it was still there. And then you showed up.”

“Izuku...” Shouto said softly.

“He said my fears were boring.” Izuku managed a watery chuckle. “They were all the same. Just lots of dead people. He was probably right. That’s all I’m afraid of, you know. I had no friends before and now I’m drowning in them and I don’t want to let any of you go. So I’m not scared of spiders or ghosts or heights, I’m not scared of pain and sometimes I wonder if I’m even scared of dying anymore, but I’m so scared of losing people. I’m scared of losing *you*. And I know I shouldn’t play favorites, but I can’t help it, because you’re just... *you*.”

“...Me?”

“Shouto.” The name still sounded strange to him. Strange, but right. “Do you even—” His throat closed, as if his own body wanted to gag him. “I just—I *like* you.” And then it was out, and there was no taking it back so Izuku forged ahead. “I couldn’t tell you how long, and I probably shouldn’t be telling you at all because now it’s gonna be weird but it’s the truth and it’s part of what scares me. Because I know it’s going to hurt that much worse if—if—” Sanity returned without warning, and he shut his eyes as his stomach crawled with nerves and deep, twisting regret. “*Shit*,” he hissed in English, a short, harsh syllable he had probably picked up from All-Might at some point. “Sorry. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. That was really stupid and I—”

Shouto’s hand found his in the dark—a warm hand, his left—and cut off his flood. “It’s fine,” he

said, once he could get a word in between Izuku's. "Really. It's fine. I don't mind. I was the one who asked. Remember what I told you before? I don't ask unless I want to hear your answer."

Izuku drew in a slow, shuddering breath, and let it out again in a stream of words. "*I've been having a really bad day.*"

"Yeah."

"I had all my worst fears shoved in my face and it's made me think about things," he went on. Like how we're stuck in this world, there's danger everywhere, and I'm so scared I'll wake up one day and find out that someone I—I care about just wasn't fast enough."

"We all signed up for this," Shouto reminded him gently. "And we've seen ourselves through danger more times than I care to count already."

"And we can keep doing that," Izuku whispered harshly. "We can be fast enough, and strong enough, and clever enough, hundreds of times, but we only have to mess up *once*."

Shouto didn't let go—and somehow through the haze of tears and embarrassment and churning fear, it got through to him that Shouto was *holding his hand*—but it took a moment for him to reply. "I think—I see your point. But at the same time, there's a lot of us." The warm hand holding Izuku's shook as it gave him a light squeeze. "There's us, and our classmates and our teachers. And all the other heroes. All the other students who're just as strong. Everybody. There's a lot. So even if someone does mess up, someone else is bound to pick up the slack. That's the whole point of heroics now, remember? No more pillars. We look out for each other."

"I know," Izuku rasped. "Doesn't make me any less scared."

"Guess not." Shouto's hand loosened, but he still didn't let go. "I'm scared, too. I don't want to lose you either." He paused. "I guess that's pretty obvious, after today."

"Sorry for unloading all that," Izuku whispered. "That went a lot farther than I meant, I'm really sorry."

"You don't have to apologize."

"Are you sure? I feel like I just made things weird, with that—that one thing I just said. Because that didn't have all that much to do with what you asked, so I could've left it out. It doesn't have to mean anything. I-I mean, I meant it, it was the truth, but. It's fine. I'm really happy being friends with you, I know you have your own stuff going on and you probably don't feel the same way. It's just a thing, and I can deal with it—"

"Who says I don't?"

It was quiet, but it cut through Izuku's rambling stream sharply enough to trip him up.

"W-what?"

"I never said that," Shouto said. The hand around Izuku's was still. "And I know I didn't."

Izuku lay motionless, listening for his friend's voice, unable to gather enough sense together for words.

"Because you've never given me a reason to lie to you."

I am asleep right now, Izuku thought vaguely. I am fast asleep and having very vivid wishful-thinking dreams.

“You’re right, though,” Shouto went on. “It doesn’t have to mean anything. I like being friends with you. My life’s better than it was before I met you. *I’m* better. You’re... important.”

“So’re you,” Izuku managed to mumble.

With one last gentle squeeze, Shouto finally let go of his hand. “We should sleep.”

“Um.” Izuku’s voice shook, and for the first time he turned his head, ready to roll over and face him. “Shouto—”

“It’s after midnight. We’re exhausted, you’re panicking, and I’m kind of panicking but it’s mostly on the inside like always.” Izuku could hear him moving back to the futon.

“Are you sure we shouldn’t—” Izuku broke off, face heating. “I don’t know, talk about this?”

“If you want. But maybe later. When we’re not half-asleep. And panicking.”

“Heh.” Izuku managed an awkward little laugh. “I guess you have a point.”

“Was that helpful?”

“Hm?”

Shouto’s tone was one of hesitance. “That. What I just—talking like that. Was that helpful?”

Izuku smiled up at the ceiling. “Yeah. Felt—well, maybe not good, but, less awful? Just getting it out. It’s like puking. It’s awful and messy but you feel better after.”

“Charming.”

“You know it.” It was so easy, slipping back into normal, lighthearted banter. It was as natural as breathing in and out. “Good night, Shouto.”

“Good night, Izuku.”

Shouto was right; he was exhausted, enough to sleep through the night without dreams.

Chapter End Notes

Biteitwhenitssoft on Tumblr strikes again with more [more amazing art!](#)

Chapter 10

“So.”

“...Yeah.”

Breakfast had been quiet. If Mrs. Midoriya had taken notice of it, she hadn't said anything. Maybe she reasoned that they were still shaken from the previous day, and she wouldn't be entirely wrong. A dying and dead Izuku was something that was going to stick with Shouto for a very, very long time. All the same, he had seen plenty of action and danger already, even if it wasn't quite on par with most pros. Yesterday was just one more experience to file away with all the others.

At this point, Mrs. Midoriya was occupied. After gathering their breakfast dishes, she had nudged her son for All-Might's cell number. As far as Shouto knew, she was hashing things out with their teacher to meet with him later.

He and Izuku had retreated back to the bedroom, because while no promises had technically been made, his friend had been giving him a Look periodically over the table. Izuku, it seemed, still wanted to talk.

Shouto ought to have felt nervous. That was how people were supposed to feel when laying bare their feelings for their crushes, wasn't it? Except, he was a bit past the point of confessing; that had all happened the previous night. And now that he thought about it, he hadn't felt very nervous then, either. There had been no stuttering, and minimal butterflies, heart palpitations, and uncomfortable flushing, though that last one was at least partly because he could regulate his own body temperature.

It had simply come out, once Izuku had said it first. Like it was the most natural thing in the world. It still was, now that they were (somewhat) rested and past the previous day's post-battle jitters. Shouto hadn't been nervous then, and he still wasn't nervous now.

At the moment, there was only quiet between them. They were both on Izuku's bed; Izuku was sprawled out on his stomach with his feet on his pillow and his chin resting on his crossed arms, and Shouto sat crosslegged with his back to the wall, waiting. Izuku was the one who wanted to talk, and while Shouto wasn't against it by any means, he was happy to let him have the first word.

“You know,” Izuku said at last, his voice muffled in his arms. “You kind of... didn't really say it.”

“Hm?”

“I mean, you implied it,” Izuku went on. “And I got the message, loud and clear, but you didn't really say it outright.” He paused. “I guess I sort of beat around the bush too, a little. So, I'll come out and say it straight. I have feelings for you, and they are not platonic. At all.”

Shouto wasn't sure what he looked like on the outside. He was sure his face was an open book, but he'd been told in the past by very reliable people that he was hard to read. He certainly wasn't free of butterflies and heart tremors anymore.

He ought to reciprocate. He ought to spell out his own feelings plainly.

What came out instead was, “Nothing about what you just said was straight.”

There was a beat of silence.

Before Shouto had the chance to mentally kick himself, a snort of laughter from Izuku put him at ease, and his friend knocked his knee lightly with one of his own. “Don’t be a jerk,” Izuku snickered, and Shouto offered a brief grin to the back of his head.

“Why?”

“Because I’m trying to be honest and serious about emotions and stuff and you’re making fun of me—”

“I wasn’t making fun of you,” Shouto told him. “And when I asked why, I meant, why do you have feelings for me?” It sounded a little more pathetic out loud than it had in his head. “I’m just curious.”

He half-expected Izuku to make some snide comment about Shouto fishing for compliments, but instead Izuku hummed softly to himself. “A lot of reasons,” he said. “A lot of little things that come together, and the whole ends up greater than the sum of its parts. If that makes sense.”

“I... I think so?”

“I mean, part of it is stuff like how I like hanging out with you and we have a lot in common, just friend stuff like that,” Izuku went on. “And then there’s bigger stuff, like how you’re probably the strongest person I know, and I’m not just talking about your quirk, or how well you fight. And I like seeing you happy.”

There was more to it, he felt. There was more that Izuku either wasn’t saying or didn’t know how to say. “I’m in love with you,” he said, and Izuku went quiet. “I can’t pinpoint a specific moment, but it’s been that way for a while.”

“Why?”

Shouto stared at him. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“Hey, don’t cheat, I answered you when you asked.”

The wall was smooth and cool against his back, and he pressed his full weight to it. His jaw moved up and down, as if he could chew his words over before he said them. “You, um... saved me. When I met you, I wasn’t in a very good place, and you helped me. You didn’t have to, and I didn’t give you a reason to, but you did it anyway. And I’m not exactly—” He shut his eyes briefly. “I don’t know if I like where I am, yet. But if I look at it, and I look at where—at what I used to be, and compare... I think this is a better self than what I had before. And there’s a correlation, I think, between you being you and me being... a better version of myself.” He stopped talking, wondering if that had made any sense whatsoever.

“I see,” Izuku said quietly.

“I think I said before that my life is better and so am I. Because of you.” Shouto swallowed, but the lump in his throat remained. “I meant that. I mean... I’m *here* right now. Instead of...” His voice trailed off.

Izuku rolled onto his back gingerly—the combination of quirks and modern medicine made for fast healing, but he was still careful with his tender shoulder—and looked up at the ceiling. “What about that other thing you said, about this not having to mean anything? Did you mean that too?”

“Well... yes.” The lump was making itself known. “It doesn’t. Maybe it’s better that we both know, and we’re on the same page, but it doesn’t have to mean anything if we don’t want it to. We

can just... continue as we were before.”

“Mm.” Izuku blinked up at the ceiling, as if the conversation’s script was written in the drywall. “What if we do?”

Shouto opened his mouth to reply, but nothing came forth.

For the first time, Izuku raised his head and met Shouto’s eyes. “Do you want it to mean something?”

“I...” Shouto stared at him, at a loss. Truth be told, he hadn’t thought about what he wanted, because he had simply assumed it would continue to mean nothing, with him ignoring it and Izuku unaware. In the end, he managed to say as much.

“Was it really that hard to believe that I might like you back?” That was another thing to admire about Izuku. He rarely wavered when he really wanted to know something. He just asked, right out. No stammering, no hesitating.

“I’m used to not having nice things,” he said, trying to keep his tone matter-of-fact. “At this point I just sort of assume that if I want something, I’m probably not going to get it.”

“So you do want it.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Then you don’t?”

“I didn’t say that, either.”

With a grunt, Midoriya propped one elbow under himself and sat up. “Normally I’d find an answer like that kind of frustrating, but... I know exactly how you feel.” A rueful smile twitched at the corner of his mouth. “I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t sort of curious.”

Shouto hadn’t the nerve to try to put a name to the feeling that welled up within him. It felt like spiderwebs in his lungs, thin and wispy enough to breathe through but still sticking to the sides and tangling. “Midori—um. Izuku. Are you asking me out?”

Izuku’s eyes widened, and his face colored almost immediately. “N-no. I-I-I mean, not really? I don’t know, I just... Part of me thinks we shouldn’t. It feels like it’d be dangerous. But... it’s what people do, isn’t?” His hands kneaded the blanket beneath him. “I like you and you like me, so...”

“Is that a good reason?” Shouto asked, addressing his lap instead of Izuku’s face. “Just because everyone else does it?”

“Well... do you not want to?”

Shouto couldn’t answer that.

“Okay.” Izuku’s voice was a little firmer now. “How about this—what are the reasons we shouldn’t?”

This was an easy question. “It’d be a distraction,” he said, wincing. The words tasted sour on his tongue, and why wouldn’t they? Those were more or less the same ones Endeavor used when taking something away from him.

“Only if we let it be,” Izuku said. “Besides, hiding it and suppressing it seems like it’d be pretty

distracting anyway. And Ojiro and Hagakure have been doing fine, haven't they?"

"Well, true, but... Izuku, it feels like we'd be inviting disaster, at least in the long run. A lot of heroes avoid things like this because it turns people into targets."

"Except we're already targets," Izuku pointed out. "In case you hadn't noticed, we've been targets since we started high school." He looked away. "Besides, distancing yourself to protect people... I don't think it works. Especially since... it's *us*. We're both strong. We already signed up for this. We aren't risking anyone but ourselves, and we were already doing that."

"We could be used against each other," Shouto reminded him. "You do realize that, don't you?"

"That's already happened." Izuku's fingers curled in the blanket. "I know I was kind of a mess last night, but I meant what I said. I'm already scared of seeing you die. It'd hurt me to lose you. So this... wouldn't really change much."

The memory of Izuku's dead face rose up in his mind in the same way bile crawls up a throat, until Shouto forced it back down. "I guess it wouldn't."

He was running out of reasons. He'd spent enough time quietly longing and pining behind a blank face that it never occurred to him that this might be a possibility, that there was any point in being in love when he was used to not having nice things, or at least having nice things and seeing them taken away.

"My father would raise hell, of course," he said bitterly.

Izuku surprised him by snorting with laughter. When Shouto looked up at him, there was a full-on smirk on his face. "Shouto," he said. "When was the last time you made a decision based on what your dad would approve of?" When Shouto blinked at him, the smirk softened into a smile. "Besides. I won't tell if you won't."

"You were the one who asked me for all the reasons we shouldn't do this." Shouto broke off, shaking his head. "Are you just going to come up with a counter-argument to everything I say?"

"Maybe," Izuku said innocently. "So far you haven't said anything that I can't argue with."

"I've never had anything like this before," was the last card Shouto could think to play.

Izuku tilted his head to one side. "You think I have? At least we'd be on the same page."

"You're doing it again."

"Well, maybe I've made up my mind." Izuku leaned forward, rested his arms in his lap, and looked Shouto straight in the eye. "If you're okay with it, I want to give it a try."

Oh.

He was used to not having nice things. But here it was, offered plainly by a face he trusted more than any other. He was used to not keeping nice things. Did that mean he would lose this? Did that mean Izuku would lose him?

He must have been staring for longer than he meant to, because Izuku pulled back. "It's fine if you don't want to. I understand."

"I do want to." Shouto's mouth was at least a half a mile ahead of him, and the words were out

before the rest of him had admitted it was true. He'd wanted things this badly before—he'd wanted a different father. He'd wanted his mother free and happy. He'd wanted, nearly a year ago, to look up at the results of the provisional license exams and see his name listed with the rest of his class. He wanted this, right now, and the difference was that maybe it was something he could actually have.

And yet...

"I do want to," He repeated. "I'm just..."

"Scared?"

His breath hitched in his chest. "Not sure we should."

The quiet stretched between them again. It was not an awkward or uncomfortable quiet—merely a thoughtful one. Izuku scooted over on his bed until he was sitting next to Shouto.

"I'm just torn," Shouto said quietly.

"What are you most afraid of?" Izuku asked. "Are you afraid of either of us being targets—more than we already are—or are you afraid this will mess with our chances of being the best heroes we can be?"

"I don't want to hurt you."

Silence again.

"Shouto?"

He was staring into his lap, hands folded loosely. "You know me. Maybe you know me better than anyone else. I have—*problems*. Just to start." His interlaced fingers tightened. "I've noticed a pattern. I said it before, didn't I? About people's hands. It's just, people get hurt around me. And it's usually people I like, people I care about. It already happened, with you, just yesterday. You said that villain used my face to lure you in, and that's how he—"

Izuku's scarred hand passed into his line of vision and clasped one of his. "That wasn't your fault."

"It still happened, and it could happen again—"

"Shouto." Something in Izuku's tone made him look up. "That's always going to happen, no matter what. He picked you first because you were on my mind. If he'd picked my mom, or All-Might, or Uraraka or Iida or anyone else, it would have hurt me. It was *not* your fault." Izuku shifted and leaned forward until their foreheads were touching. "You might as well say it's too dangerous for us to be friends at all, and there is *nothing* you or anyone can say that will make me stop being your friend."

Shouto leaned in the rest of the way, and the silence that followed was for an entirely different reason.

When Inko poked her head into her son's bedroom, she found both boys sitting on the bed. Todoroki had Izuku's PS Vita in his hands, and Izuku was leaning over his shoulder to watch the screen, point, and murmur advice to him. Todoroki noticed her first and sat up straighter, which drew Izuku's attention away from his game.

"I'm gonna head out," she said. "I should be back in a couple hours. Izuku, I just texted you the address for where I'm going, but keep your phone on so I can call you if I'm going to be late." She paused, pursing her lips. "I'll ask you two to maybe consider staying in today, but if you do go out, *call me*. Don't text, my phone is on and I will pick up." She held Izuku's gaze until he nodded vigorously.

"Got it, Mom."

"All right, I'll see you two later." She turned to go.

"Be nice to All-Might!" Izuku called after him. "He's very sensitive!"

"He's doing his best," Todoroki added.

Inko did *not* cackle in amusement on her way out. Anyone who told you different would be lying.

She met her son's teacher at a quiet coffee shop on a quiet street. The man himself had suggested it, and who better to know how to escape attention than the former number-one hero? The service paid little mind to her dining companion, even though most everyone in Japan knew what he looked like. Inko got the feeling that he frequented this place.

After he sat down across from her, she regarded him for a moment without speaking. She didn't often see him in person, but he was looking better—much better than he had the first time she saw him in this form. His clothes fit him, there was a healthy amount of color to his face, and he carried himself less like a broken, worn-down man, and more like a busy one. She supposed he must be, even if he wasn't out fighting villains anymore. She'd only had to raise one child, after all, and here he was raising twenty.

She must have taken too long to speak. "If this is about yesterday, with that villain Deimos—" he began.

"It isn't," she assured him. "Well, it sort of is, but I'm not..." *upset about it*, her mind finished for her, though her mouth didn't follow suit. That wasn't quite accurate; her son had been injured, so of course she was upset. "I'm not as terrified as I might have been, a year ago," she finished. "I'm not *happy* about it, but... honestly, I don't know whether I'm more comfortable with my son's ability to defend himself, or I'm just getting used to him being in danger." She cleared her throat and tested the side of her cup to see if her tea had cooled—not yet. "I hope it's the former. The latter doesn't bear thinking about." Shaking herself, she cleared her throat. "And anyway, even if I was more upset, it's not something I would scold *you* about. It wasn't your fault." She shook her head. "Honestly, I was thinking of having this conversation long before now. So tell me, how is my son doing in school?"

Inko had never seen a man perk up from nervous worry to eagerness so quickly. This, it seemed, was a question that he was happy to answer. "Well in terms of grades, he's consistently ranked in the top five since last year..." He went on in that vein, addressing academics first. None of the superficial authoritative blather that she had endured from Izuku's middle school teachers, either. In spite of herself, Inko found herself leaning forward to listen, asking him questions and bringing up previous concerns, feeling keenly interested instead of brushed off.

Here was a teacher who loved what he was doing. This—her son, his growth—was something he wanted to talk about. This was something that was worth the world to him. Inko could see it in his face, in the absence of the professional vague disinterest that she was used to when talking to her son's teachers. It wasn't that Inko was surprised that he had so much to say; it had been barely a year since All-Might prostrated himself before her and promised to devote himself to Izuku's

development and well-being. But the man before him was not talking about a duty or an obligation; he was talking about a joy, and Inko had never seen or heard a teacher speak of her son like he was something unspeakably precious.

And then he said something that no one had ever told her before. “I’ll admit we haven’t pulled many punches, but he takes to training no matter what we throw at him,” All-Might said, and his face didn’t look nearly so worn when it had that smile. “He’s terribly clever. It’s probably because he was—er, a late bloomer. He lacked a quirk to rely on for so long that he’s used to relying on his brain.” The smile widened. “And now that he has both, he’s that much stronger for it.”

Pleased, Inko couldn’t help but back. “You know, I think that’s the first time anyone’s said something honestly good about that part of his life.” She paused, wrestling with her own regret. “... Myself included. Thank you. You should tell him that, if you haven’t already.”

“It... it isn’t shameful.” All-Might’s brow furrowed, and in that thoughtful look there was something awfully close to sorrow. “Being without powers, I mean. And anyway, it’s not just his own ability that makes him so... so special. Though he has plenty of it, and he works hard to make sure of that. But he has this—this charisma about him. He inspires his classmates to push themselves the same way he pushes himself.” The frown relaxed to a thoughtful sort of contentment. “I’ve seen it—he drives them closer toward their potential. And you know he won’t rest until he’s left them better than he found them.” He sipped at his own tea, as casual and matter-of-fact as if he were remarking on the weather, instead of heaping glowing praise on her son. “It gives him this kind of pull, like gravity. I’m sure he’d tell you that I was the one who drew him in, but I consider myself lucky to have fallen into his orbit. He teaches me as much as I teach him.”

By the time he was finished, Inko was openly gaping at him. She must have looked like an utter fool. It took a moment before the dumbstruck fog passed and she found herself grappling with the power of speech again. “I—you—” She cleared her throat and quickly composed herself. “I don’t think you quite understand what it means to me, to hear you say that. You especially. You must know he’s looked up to you for so long.”

“I got that impression, yes.” All-Might chuckled. “He does have much to learn, still. He has yet to fully master his quirk. As clever as he is, he has trouble thinking before he acts. Not that I’m in any place to judge—my biggest worry has been making sure he doesn’t learn my bad habits.”

“Well, I’m glad he’s doing well,” Inko told him. “Of all the teachers he could have had, I’m glad it could be you.” She sighed. “Heaven help me, I’ll worry about him no matter what, but... this makes me worry less.”

“Happy to help,” All-Might told her. “Was there anything else specific you wanted to know about young Izuku’s studies?”

“Actually, that wasn’t all I wanted to talk to you about,” Inko said. “There was—one more thing, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” All-Might said with a curious glance at her. “Is there something else going on with young Izuku?”

“It’s not about Izuku,” she said, and gave a cursory glance around. The cafe was mostly empty save for one man nursing a cup of coffee in the corner, and one service worker behind the counter. Neither of them looked to be in earshot. “It was actually—well. I don’t want to be impertinent, but I was hoping to ask you about Todoroki-kun. Todoroki Shouto, I mean.”

Curiosity gave way to surprise. “I see. What about young Todoroki?”

“You know that Izuku invited him to stay with us over the break?” she said. At his nod, she went on. “Well, he’s been with us about a week now, and I’ve gotten to know him a little and I was wondering if...” Her voice trailed off as she pondered how she could possibly phrase her question in a way that didn’t sound meddlesome. For a split second she questioned herself, wondered if her vague little feelings were enough to warrant this, before her resolve hardened and she forged ahead, politeness be damned. “What do you know about his home life?”

If he had looked faintly surprised before, he now seemed utterly taken aback. “I... I’m not sure how much I could tell you, to be perfectly honest. I haven’t heard him speak of it before, beyond—he mentions visiting his mother once in a while, when he has a free day, though I get the feeling she doesn’t live at home. I’m afraid I don’t know details—young Todoroki rarely offers them up, and I don’t want to press.” All-Might sighed a little, shaking his head. “He’s a reserved one, as you’ve probably gathered. I’ve seen a change over him over the past year, since the students moved into the dorms, and I’m never sure I won’t chase him back into his shell by accident.”

“I understand,” Inko said. “I know the feeling. Are you sure you couldn’t tell me more?” She decided to take a risk. “His father is your former colleague, isn’t he?”

Something flitted across his face, too small for Inko to catch. The closest she could come to identifying it was “regret”. “Well, yes, but... I’m afraid Todoroki Enji and I aren’t exactly on the best of terms.”

“May I ask why?”

All-Might met her eyes with a look that was almost helpless. “I don’t know. Honestly, I haven’t a clue.” His spidery hands worked at the cup in front of him. “I’m not sure if Endeavor can be said to get along with *anyone*, but... well, before Kamino Ward, my work occupied most of my attention, but ever since I retired permanently, I’ve taken the opportunity to focus on things that had fallen to the wayside. Teaching, for one. My, er, my health. Old acquaintances I’d lost touch with. And I’ve come to realize that Endeavor seems to have something against me, and I *wish* I knew what it was.” He grimaced slightly. “Gaining young Shouto’s trust is a job and a half, and one that I’m not sure I’ve completed yet. But his father? It’s like drawing blood from a stone.”

“I see.” Inko deflated a little.

All-Might seemed to shake himself. “But that has little to do with your original question. And I believe I can trust in your discretion, so.” One of his long fingers tapped rhythmically on the table top. “What little I know is this: I believe that, at least for a time, young Todoroki’s relationship with his father was strained. The only hint I ever got was during the Sports Festival, their first year. There was some kind of tension between them, and young Todoroki was refusing to use his flames as part of their argument.”

“But—” Inko interrupted. “I was watching it, and I saw him use his flames, during his match with Izuku.”

“You did,” All-Might said with a nod. “I don’t know what the quarrel was about, only that it was resolved during that match. Frankly, Mrs. Midoriya, young Izuku could have and *would* have won that match, if he had only let things be.” His bony shoulders rolled in a shrug. “I don’t know what he said, but whatever it was, it snapped young Shouto out of whatever was holding him back.”

“Hm.” The warm weight of satisfaction rested on Inko’s heart, and she tried to hide a smile. “That boy. He gets so caught up in helping others.”

“Says the woman asking after the well-being of a boy she’s known a week.”

Inko looked up sharply to find All-Might grinning at her across the table. She felt her face flush with embarrassment. “Oh—you,” was all she could manage to say.

“You’ve raised a fine young hero, Mrs. Midoriya,” he told her, still grinning like a schoolboy. “Kind and selfless and as stubborn as a mule, with no sense of what is and isn’t his business.”

Inko hid her relief and pleasure behind a thoughtful hum, and busied herself checking her phone, just in case she had missed a message or call from her son. Looking at the screen, she blinked in surprise, then moved her phone this way and that. “That’s strange.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Service must be down.” She lifted her phone higher, but when no bars appeared, she lowered it again.

“Hm.” It was a quiet noise, but Inko heard the worried rumble in his tone all the same. She glanced at him, and found him frowning worriedly at her. “That... might mean nothing, but...”

“Trouble?” Instinctively Inko reached for her purse.

“I don’t want to alarm you,” he began.

“By all means, alarm me. I know better than to ignore the hairs on the back of my neck.”

“Signal jamming is a popular quirk with villain groups,” All-Might said, lowering his voice. “It slows down backup and emergency services.” He slid his chair back. “Old paranoid habit of mine—if I’m ever in an area that should have service but doesn’t, then I assume the worse. We’d better leave.” He glanced up toward the counter, opened his mouth, and shut it. His fingers gripped the edge of the table, knuckles white. Inko followed his line of vision—the counter was empty of service staff. The entire cafe was empty.

Nearly, anyhow.

There was an audible click as the front door locked, and the man who had previously been sitting quietly in the corner looked over at them and smiled. All-Might was on his feet, facing the stranger, and Inko could see the tension in his bony shoulders as he moved, as if unconsciously, to stand directly between her and the man.

“Damn.” The stranger’s voice sent shudders through her, though she didn’t know why. “Y’know, when Handsy told me I’d get a shot at getting back at you, I didn’t think it’d be this *neat*. All wrapped up with a tidy little bow.” Smiling dark eyes turned to Inko’s face, and she met them wordlessly. “Sorry, lady. Rotten luck—hey, you know something? You kinda look like this crying punk kid I stabbed yesterday.” The smile stretched wider. “Small world, huh?”

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

This chapter is the entire reason why I started writing this fic in the first place.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“I can’t get through to her!”

“Try again.” *Fwoom.*

“...It’s not working! I can’t even get her voicemail, and she *never* has her phone off!”

“Just keep trying, whenever you have a moment—*behind you, Izuku.*”

Thwack. “*You piece of—!*”

“Thanks, Shouto! Urgh, I can’t get All-Might, either!”

“Don’t panic just yet. We just need to—oh, *hell.*”

“There’s too many of them here, we need to get through! What if they’re in trouble—?”

“The address she gave us is nowhere near this mess, and All-Might’s with her. Even if he can’t fight, he’ll know what to do.”

“The signal’s jammed on *her* end, Shouto. If they’re safe, then why would that be?”

“Let’s just *hurry—*”

Crash.

Foom.

“Shouto, if we don’t move fast, they’ll surround us.”

“I know, and I’m trying to clear a path—hey, what are you doing?”

“Go on ahead, I’ll catch up!”

“Izuku get back here—!”

“I’ll be fine! I’ll just slow them up so you can shake them! I’ll meet you there—make sure All-Might and my mom are okay!”

“Damn it, Izuku!”

Yagi Toshinori was a frail shadow of what he once was. There was hardly an ounce of spare muscle between skin and bones, his hands were plagued with irregular tremors, and he could hardly manage a light jog for long without tasting blood. If he were feeling particularly

adventurous and stupid, he might manage an echo of his former self. But only for a moment. Not even enough time to throw a proper punch and make the inevitable bloody regurgitation worth it.

But his sacrifice of strength had left his senses untouched. And though his hands shook and his legs fought to keep him steady, his ears worked just fine. He could hear Midoriya Inko breathing behind him, quiet but short, fearful breaths. Other than that, silence had fallen in the cafe. Had he been paying attention, he might have noticed earlier that there were no sounds coming from behind the counter, or the kitchen beyond that.

By now, Deimos had stepped to the middle of the room, and Toshinori met his eyes evenly. “The people who worked here,” he said. “What have you done with them?”

Deimos rolled his eyes. “Oh, *gag* me, they’re fine. All they had to do was keep quiet and not warn you about the scary man sitting in the corner, and they walked out of here alive before anything got ugly.”

“Don’t be a fool, Deimos,” Toshinori said flatly. “Whatever your game is, you have to know it’s going to take more than scaring a few baristas to let you get away with it. Be smart about this.”

“That’s the great thing, though.” Deimos grinned wide, showing teeth and gums. “I *am*. This all got set up for me. See, it’s been pretty hard to get by ever since I got out, but it’s all good now. Found a little club where I can fit right in, and this?” He gestured vaguely at the empty cafe. “No one’s gonna notice this. No one’s gonna come by a nice, quiet little cafe when there’s a full-blown riot not seven blocks away.”

Toshinori’s blood ran cold. Seven blocks—close enough to keep civilians away, and far enough that any possible backup would be occupied and ignoring the places where it was quiet. And with the signals jammed, he couldn’t call for help. “So what is this? An assassination?”

Deimos wrinkled his nose with amusement. “Nah. You were right the first time.”

Toshinori blinked.

“It’s a game, buddy. You know when you can’t join the club unless you steal a stop sign, or shoot hot sauce, or run bare-assed down main street? That’s this.” Deimos snickered. “Oh how the mighty have fallen, am I right? The big bad All-Might’s a *hazing ritual*.”

“Kitchen,” Toshinori said quietly.

“What was that?”

He ignored him, and turned his head just enough that Mrs. Midoriya was within the corner of his vision. “Go to the kitchen. Hide. If you can, find the back way out.”

He heard her sharp intake of breath. “But you—”

Toshinori turned his head further and tried to convince her with a look. It must have worked, because her voice trailed off and her eyes flickered toward the shelter of the counter. Then they flashed back to him and widened.

“Look out!”

He had already begun throwing himself to the side the moment her face had changed. He caught Deimos by the wrist in the midst of his attack and threw his entire body into diverting the villain’s path. He might not have been strong, but he was seven feet tall and there was still weight to his

bones yet. In the corner of his vision he saw Mrs. Midoriya dive out of the way and make a break for the counter.

There was some relief at that. Whatever happened, this wasn't a fight he could win—but he didn't need to win. All he needed to do was buy time, and stay alive. Long enough for Mrs. Midoriya to get clear, and then long enough for her to find help.

Stay alive. He'd made a promise.

Toshinori focused on Deimos once more, but Deimos was gone.

In his place stood a man in a crisp black suit, tall and strong in spite of the heavy black mask that covered his head. The metal gleamed dully, and Toshinori found that he couldn't tear his eyes away from the blank iron face. The harsh rasp of mechanized breathing pervaded the still air, and All For One seemed to draw in light and hope like the center of a black hole.

Fear is a funny thing. Toshinori knew and had no reason whatsoever to not know that the man before him was not All For One. All For One was locked away, in a cage where he belonged, and the man before him was Deimos. He knew it was Deimos and he knew it was an illusion, because he knew he was frightened of All For One and that was how Deimos's power worked, wasn't it?

But fear cares little for logic and reason. It didn't matter to Toshinori's fear that he knew that All For One was in jail. It didn't matter to his fear that he knew Deimos was the one standing in front of him—still a dangerous man, but not the nameless terror that haunted his sleep. It didn't matter to his fear that he had his student's mother to protect. The sight of his old foe, dark and menacing like he'd stepped out of a nightmare, was so closely tied with dread and terror that his mind didn't know how else to react. In that moment, the fear came upon him, and it would not be tricked away by a smile.

It hit him fast and unforgiving, a brutal, visceral reaction that he felt as sharply as a knife to the heart. It overloaded his senses, and he froze in place for a single horrible moment. Perhaps he might have recovered in the next instant, if only Deimos had given him one.

The apparition of All For One kicked out, but the image skipped like a glitched video and Toshinori took the impact a split second early.

Deimos fought dirty; he aimed right for Toshinori's left side.

His vision went gray, and the world tilted on its axis. Pain drove bile and worse things up his throat, and his body forgot how to use what was left of his lungs. When the blank darkness cleared to mere tunnel vision, Toshinori found himself on his knees, choking on the taste of salt and copper. He could barely see or hear his enemy through the haze of sick agony, but he could feel Deimos standing over him.

Another kick to the side dragged a choked noise of pain from his wasted lungs, and Deimos's voice rolled out mockingly above him. "Wonder if they'll let me keep a finger. That's what people do, right? Keep stuff? I've never tried it before."

Inko was going to do what All-Might asked. She really was. In a burst of desperate speed, she took shelter behind the counter, but the moment she came to the decision that running away was probably the best course of action, she heard the noise that All-Might made when Deimos kicked him.

Don't slow down, get help, said common sense, but Inko was already peeking back around the

counter. She had to clamp her hand over her mouth to keep from crying out. All-Might was on the ground, curled up in pain with that horrible figure standing over him. She remembered it from that news broadcast, nearly a year ago—the man who had very nearly killed All-Might once.

So that's who All-Might fears.

The smart thing would be to run, and get help. But Inko knew her own limits, and she could see the patch of dark red spreading on All-Might's side. If she left him now, then he was going to die, regardless of what he had promised.

She gritted her teeth until her head hurt. *Oh, no you don't*, she thought, as her wide eyes took in the scene before her. *My son isn't finished with you yet.*

But what could she *do*?

“People try to hide what they're scared of all the time,” Deimos was saying, aiming another rough kick at All-Might's ribs. This time, the former hero caught the blow before it could reach anything vital. “But eventually it comes out. Just takes the right push.” All-Might shoved himself up to his hands and knees, but Deimos planted one foot on his shoulders and kept him from rising further.

When the villain leaned over to put all his weight on All-Might's back, Inko saw it. There on the wall across from her, just a few feet away from the door, was a breakable glass case. A fire extinguisher sat inside it.

Her heart quickened, and she leaned further out of hiding and narrowed her eyes at it. Was it small enough? Could she reach?

She had to try. Inko crept to the side, until the fire extinguisher and the villain were lined up, as well as she could tell—you could never tell with illusions. Bracing herself, she tried to call the object toward her, but nothing happen. From this distance she couldn't even tell if it was wobbling in its case. It must not be small enough, or close enough, and Inko was no hero. She'd never needed to strengthen her quirk before. Teeth clenched, she pulled and pulled, to no avail, with no way of knowing if she was making any difference.

“I thought you might be interesting.” Deimos's voice cut through her concentration. “It's not every day I get to make myself look like the devil himself. But you know?” He leaned down, seeming to grind his foot into All-Might's shoulder lades. “This is the second time I've had to see this goddamn kid's corpse in somebody's head. You know, the one I stabbed. Little to the right and I might've made that one come true.”

The corners of Inko's vision turned red, and she focused on the fire extinguisher and *yanked*.

A stabbing headache blinded her, but she could hear the crash of broken glass, followed closely by a meaty thud. At the last minute she remembered to duck, and the fire extinguisher slammed into wall behind her hard enough to dent the drywall. When the stars in her vision cleared, she found the illusion gone and Deimos glaring at her from across the room with a flattened, bloodied nose.

“You *bitch*.”

Through the fear, a hint of satisfaction poked through. He must have turned to see what the noise was, and taken the improvised missile straight to the face.

In the distraction, All-Might had dragged himself to his feet and was putting distance between himself and Deimos, while yelling toward her. “Run!”

“Oh no you *don’t*,” Deimos snarled, and lunged toward him.

Before Inko could think to do anything else, more glass broke—this time, the cafe’s glass front was punched inward by what looked to be a narrow, translucent wave. Deimos stopped short as it spread like a wall between him and All-Might, and he nearly slammed into it with his own momentum. Shocked, he sprang back and stared around wildly for the source, and Inko watched—equal parts relieved and worried—as Todoroki Shouto stepped through the hole in the glass with icy mist still rising from the right side of his body.

He wasn’t dressed for heroics, as far as Inko could tell. In fact, he was wearing the same T-shirt and button-down he’d been wearing when she last saw him and Izuku that morning. He must have left in a hurry.

The boy glanced back to where a bleeding All-Might leaned against the side of a booth, then caught Inko’s eye from across the room.

“Hi, Mrs. Midoriya,” he said calmly. “Izuku got worried when you didn’t answer your phone.” Flames burst to life at his left hand, spreading from his fingertips to his forearm—and it was a good thing his sleeves were rolled up to the elbow, or he would have destroyed them.

Without another word, he flew at Deimos with fire in one hand and ice in the other.

Inko shook herself out of her daze, gave caution a loose leash, and rushed out of hiding to where All-Might was struggling to stay upright. Dodging around the erupting fight, she reached his side, caught him by the arm, and hurriedly helped him back to the relative safety of the counter.

“You didn’t run,” he muttered to her.

“I gave it some thought,” she said as she half-dragged him behind the counter. “But you had about as much of a chance of surviving that as I did, so I decided I wasn’t going to leave you. Also?” She hit him with a quick glare. “*He threatened my son.*”

“...Right.” For a moment he looked almost afraid of her. “He told me about your quirk. Did you know you could call something that large to you, from that distance, that quickly?”

“Well, I didn’t know that I *couldn’t*.” She placed herself at the edge of the counter, where she could see her son’s friend struggle. Deimos was quick; his quirk might have been illusions, but he was fast on his own, dodging fire and ice as Todoroki came at him. “Is there anything we can do to help him?”

“Not much.” She could tell it pained him to say that. He gripped the edge of the counter, knuckles white, and looked her in the eye. “But I can’t just... He’s my student too.” In that moment, she knew that nothing she said to him would convince him to run and save himself.

There was a grunt of pain, and Todoroki came skidding back across the floor, still on his feet but clutching at his stomach. He came to a halt not ten feet away, and barely gave himself a moment’s pause before sending out a blast of fire to keep Deimos at bay. By accident, she caught his eye, and he turned his head to see her watching him from the counter with All-Might still at her side.

The man who lunged out through the flames could not have been anyone but Deimos, but once more, he no longer looked like Deimos. Todoroki’s eyes were still on her, but she could tell by the way his face froze that he knew exactly who was standing before him now.

Shouto didn’t need to look. He knew what Deimos would make him see—he’d known from the

moment he heard what the villain's quirk was. He'd known even before then, when the bastard gave him a taste of his power just the day before.

But this was not an empty alley, with no one but Izuku to see. He was looking Mrs. Midoriya in the eye, and he could see from the way her eyes flickered and widened in horror that Deimos had already made his move.

He took a deep breath that shuddered on the way in. *Not here. Not in front of them.* Deimos was the type who liked to play with his food. And with Mrs. Midoriya watching—with *All-Might* watching—Shouto couldn't afford to give him that satisfaction.

"That's not going to work." His voice was steady in a way the rest of him didn't feel. He averted his eyes from Mrs. Midoriya's face, but he didn't look at what Deimos was trying to make him see. If he looked, he might give himself away. "You can't do what the real one can. And I already know you're not him."

"That's funny," and Shouto's throat clenched tight at that voice, because it was *his* voice; Shouto knew that voice better than he ever wanted to, and the copy was perfect. "If you know that, then why are you afraid?"

"I am *not* afraid—" Shouto's head snapped forward, and there he was—not even in costume, but just in regular clothes he wore around the house, with flames flickering around his face, his hands, his shoulders—and Shouto fought to keep his breathing steady, because *they can see it too, All-Might can see it too.* "I'm not afraid of you. Or him. Sorry, but you've got it wrong."

He saw his father lunge, he saw one hand clenched and burning brightly as it pitched toward him, and it didn't matter that he knew that it was not Endeavor. All that his fear cared about was what he could see.

In battle, he had learned to block and counter. In his father's presence, he had learned to flinch first.

It wasn't as hard as he was used to, and there was no real fire behind it, but it still sent him stumbling back into the nearest table. Pain brought his wits back, and he shook his head to clear it before bringing fire and ice back to bear.

Stupid. All he has are cheap tricks, and here you are letting him win.

"I knew you were interesting," his father's voice sailed out, and his first wave of ice passed through nothing. "From the second I looked in your head. Well. Once I got past the obligatory corpses."

He can make you see and hear whatever he wants, idiot, let him come to you first!

Shouto paused, bracing himself, waiting for a blow or a breath of disturbed air or the tremor of footsteps in the floor.

"I mean, a kid whose worst fear is his own hero dad? That's the kind of fear I live for. That's the kind of fear that has a *story behind it.*"

"Shut up," Shouto gritted out. He could feel ice spreading from his arm to his shoulder, dampening his shirt when his flames melted it.

"Why?" Endeavor's voice mocked him. "Is there something you don't want those other two to see?"

Shut him up! Take him down before it's too late!

The floor creaked under his feet, and Shouto threw ice in the direction it had come from. He felt it impact something, but it wasn't enough, because Endeavor still loomed over him, grinning through the fire around his face. Shouto saw him shift his weight to throw a kick, and felt it connect when he blocked it with his right arm. A layer of ice absorbed some of the shock, but he still felt the familiar rattle of impact in his teeth.

"I can see it," his father's voice said. "You know, most people freeze up if you try and kill them wearing a face they know. A face they love. They scream, cry, beg, ask why. But you?" Shouto didn't see the next punch coming until it had already crashed into his mouth. "This is nothing new to you, is it?"

Shouto spat blood and let the fire burn higher. "*Shut up.*"

Jeering laughter hit him like a physical blow. "If I beat your ass til you puked, would that just be business as usual?"

"I said *shut up!*" Ice burst forth in a massive wave, cannoning through the image of his father in as wide an arc as Shouto could manage, but still Deimos evaded it and Endeavor's voice rang out mockingly.

"You don't have to answer that. I can see it just fine." Another blow came at the back of his head. Shouto ducked but it still hit him, hard enough to rattle him but not enough to knock him down. He pivoted, sending flames in the direction it had come.

Get it together, stupid, he's making a fool of you!

Deimos laughed at him, and the sound wasn't out of place in Endeavor's voice. "Well, you know what they say. Don't worry about it—it's all in your head!"

The flames dissipated again, and Shouto found himself facing the illusion with his breath hissing in and out between clenched teeth. His eyes burned.

"It really is, you know." Endeavor's voice lowered, smug and shaking with held-back laughter. "It's all in your head. And I can *see* it." A kick came at Shouto's right hip, and he twisted to lessen the impact. It sent him a few steps back into a table, rather than tumbling to the ground. "And I must say, you're taking a beating from Dad pretty well, aren't you? What's the matter, is that not the worst he could do to you?"

Shouto answered with a blast of fire and a furious yell. "*Shut your mouth and fight me!*"

"You're not scared of him hurting you, are you, kiddo?" The word sounded sickeningly wrong in his father's voice, and Shouto gritted his teeth until his head ached. "Then who? Who else is he gonna hurt?"

Don't think it. Don't think it. Don't—

More laughter, and Shouto hurled himself toward the center of the room to keep from getting backed into a corner. His left arm sent fire arcing through the place where he thought Deimos might be, and his throat seized when an errant flame licked too close at the counter.

Stupid! They're still there, you might—

"I don't see why you don't get along," Deimos taunted him. "Look at you, throwing fire around

like it's a tantrum. You're practically his second coming—"

For a split second he saw red, and it might have been fire or it might have been rage. The image of his father evaporated when Shouto sent a jagged ice spike rushing toward it, only to reappear just a few feet in front of him. Shouto felt the kick coming at him and sprang back, narrowly dodging it.

"Touched a nerve, didn't I? So that's your fear? Scared of being like your dad?" And then he was inches away, teeth bared in a vicious smile. "Well get in line, kid, 'cause everyone's got that one." And then he vanished again, out of reach as Shouto fought to keep his breathing steady.

Don't listen to him, it's such an obvious trap and you're walking right in—

"Not that I blame you, from what's in your head. Tell me, what was it like, knowing *you* were the reason your mom couldn't fight back?"

Ice spread across the floor in a flash, bristling with upward-pointing spikes. A cracking sound and then a curse rang out, and Shouto whipped around to see one spike snapped off and trickling with blood. Fire roared from his fingertips, and he could only hope that some of it made contact.

His father's voice kept talking. "Was it nice, knowing that you'd be the one getting knocked around if she opened her mouth?" A hard hand landed on the back of his neck, his feet were knocked out from under him. Heat from his left side melted the spikes he had made before Deimos could slam him down onto them. "And now you're scared the tables have turned, aren't you? You think Mr. Number One might take it out on her if you act up?"

Shouto focused his power toward the back of his neck, freezing on one side and burning on the other until Deimos let go. He shoved himself back up again, and took the next kick to his side with a muted grunt of pain.

Endeavor's form was blurry when he looked up. His eyes stung. *Stop. Don't let them see you cry. Don't be this pathetic when there are lives on the line.*

"How about that scar?" Deimos-as-Endeavor grabbed his chin almost hard enough to bruise, only letting go when a spurt of flame drove him back. "Dad lose his temper at you?"

"Shut up." His voice broke. *Don't cry. Don't you dare cry now.*

And then Endeavor's eyes widened, and surprise showed on his father's face before it morphed back into a grin. He laughed until Shouto's ears hurt, and the image flickered and the voice changed, and suddenly it wasn't Endeavor standing before him anymore.

"Seriously?" Mother laughed and her eyes glittered, over-bright with the same madness he had seen years before, walking into the kitchen to the sound of boiling water. "*Her?* Your sweet little mother? *She* did that? I knew it! Haha, I knew it!" Her voice shrieked with laughter, and Shouto realized vaguely that he hadn't moved to attack or defend in what felt like an eternity now. "I hoped there was a story behind it, and god have you delivered. This is the best day of my life." She smiled sweetly, and her white hair swayed as she tilted her head. "I bet it was the worst day of yours, though, wasn't it?"

Shouto stared at her—*it's not her, you waste of space, it's Deimos—*

"How long, do you think?" she asked. "How long did it take him to turn me into that? How long do *you* have?"

"Todoroki, *behind you!*"

And it wasn't Deimos who made him hear that. It couldn't have been, because the voice belonged to All-Might. And whatever else happened, whatever anyone might say, All-Might would never have a place in Shouto's fears.

He turned, but too late. There was no room for ice, and fire would not come in time, and he could only glimpse his father's smirk before Deimos grabbed the back of his neck and slammed him face-first to the floor.

Fight back, freeze him, burn him, don't just lie there like a useless pile of dead weight.

"No wonder you're so scared." Endeavor's voice shook with held-back laughter. "That's your future, and you can't stop it."

Shouto planted his hands on the ground and pushed desperately, trying to force himself up, but Deimos kept him pinned. "You're *wrong*."

"Am I? Look at you, setting fires at the slightest little push. I wonder who you'll burn first. Maybe those two behind the counter—would anybody blame you if they got caught in the crossfire?"

He could taste blood again, and he spat on instinct, eyes shut in case his traitor tears spilled over. He twisted his head to the right, just to give himself space to breathe and spit out words. "That won't happen."

"Except you don't even know that for sure, do you?" Deimos leaned harder on the back of his neck. "You've been asking yourself, all your life."

"Shut up."

"If he could turn your pretty, lovely mother into a monster," Deimos snarled inches from his ear. "Then how long do you think you have before he does the same to you?"

"Stop it."

"It's only a matter of time before you follow your lessons like a good little son, isn't it?" Deimos hissed. "Won't that be a surprise for all the people who think you're worth something. Who's gonna get hurt first, huh? Your mom? Your little friend I stabbed?"

"That won't happen," Shouto rasped.

"You think it won't?" The voice changed again, and Shouto heard a gasp from behind the counter. A hand slammed down on the floor inches away from his face, and Shouto opened his eyes to a blur. He blinked, clearing the liquid from his vision, and all he could see was a darkened, rough hand, warped and scarred from a fight that he would remember for the rest of his life.

"It already has!" Izuku's voice rang out above him, hard and accusing. "You talk like it's impossible, but you've already started!" Shouto shut his eyes, and nails dug into the back of his neck. "Look at this! Look at what you've already done, and tell me it'll never happen! *You did this!*"

And something deep in Shouto's mind clicked.

Because this was Izuku's voice, words digging into him like barbed wire, harsh and scathing at the same time as it mocked him. It was so out of place, so terribly, utterly wrong, that his fear was knocked out of its spiral.

His left hand is holding me. He's on the right. He's on my right.

There was a choked cry—not Izuku's voice, or his mother's, or Endeavor's—as his right side erupted with cold so sharp that it burned his skin. Ice burst upward from his back, the weight on top of him vanished, and his body moved without any command from his brain. He blinked, and he was looking at Deimos through his own tangled hair and a thick layer of blue-white ice. Deimos stared back at him, quite literally frozen. The only part of him that wasn't encased in ice was the top half of his face, from nose to forehead. He could breathe—just about—but not much else.

“He would never say that,” Shouto rasped, though Deimos was beyond hearing him. “He would *never say that to me.*” His right hand was still outstretched, still shaking in midair.

There, was that so hard? You could have ended that in seconds if you hadn't wasted time getting caught by his stupid mind games.

Slowly, he lowered his hand to his side and stepped back to take stock of everything. The cafe was a mess—tables and chairs overturned, scorch marks everywhere, the floor still wet with melted ice. His left sleeve was scorched, and he could still taste blood, which probably meant—

“Todoroki?”

He started.

Mrs. Midoriya had risen from behind the counter and stepped forward. Behind her, All-Might still sat injured on the floor and stared at him with a mixture of shock, horror, and confusion.

He stepped away from them, and by some miracle he found a table within reach where he could lean, because his legs were too shaky to trust. “A-are—” His voice scraped out of his throat. “Are you two all right?”

Mrs. Midoriya took another step toward him, eyes wide and worried. “We're fine, but...”

They'd seen.

They'd seen *everything*.

All-Might saw, All-Might knows—

His ears roared. All at once the room seemed simultaneously too large and too small. He breathed in, but it wasn't enough. His lungs took in the air, but beyond that they refused to do their job. The edges of his vision darkened.

Stop. Stop this. Not here. Not now. Later, when no one can see. You can't afford to do this now. Not in front of them.

Broken glass clinked on the floor, and Shouto whipped around to see someone darting in through the broken hole he'd made in the storefront.

“Is everyone—” Izuku stopped short, slipping a little on the wet floor as he stared at the scene before him. “Oh. Wow. Okay, I got here a little late then.” His eyes flickered from Deimos's frozen form to Shouto, and then to his mother. He rushed forward, sending water droplets up with each step. “Mom! All-Might!” He skidded to a halt in front of them, catching himself on the counter. “Is everyone okay?”

Mrs. Midoriya hugged him. “Yes, we're okay, but...” Her voice trailed off; her eyes were still

fixed on Shouto.

Izuku followed her gaze. Instinctively Shouto tried to push himself to stand up straight and pull it together. But he couldn't do both and suppress a panic attack at the same time, so he stayed where he was and tried to keep breathing until his body remembered what it was supposed to do with oxygen.

"Shouto?" When had Izuku gotten to him that fast? He'd just blinked and there he was. Izuku's hand hovered toward Shouto's shoulder, but didn't touch him yet. "Shouto, what happened?" Izuku glanced back toward the frozen statue of Deimos, and a hard edge entered his voice. "What did he do to you?"

"He, uh." His own voice sounded so far away. "His quirk. It made him look like Endeavor." Izuku's head whipped back to face him so fast it must have given him whiplash. "I-it's nothing," Shouto stammered out, hating the way his chest spasmed and made his voice tremble and crack. "He just... he said a lot of things, and it..."

"*Oh*," and that was pity in Izuku's voice. That wasn't right—he didn't *want* pity, he just wanted everyone to stop looking at him so he could leave this place and pretend this hadn't happened. He wanted school to start again so he wouldn't have to worry about Endeavor coming back and finding him hiding at a friend's house instead of facing him at home. He wanted—

He wanted—

"Shouto," Izuku's hand settled lightly on his shoulder, and he tensed like a coiled spring. "Shouto, it's okay—"

Pathetic.

His own hand moved before he could think, knocking Izuku's arm away in a burst of sudden temper. "No it's not!"

Izuku jumped, eyes widening with shock. "Shouto—"

He couldn't hear over the pulse in his ears and the screaming thoughts in his head, all overflowing. "What do I have to do?" he snapped. "What do I have to do to make this *stop*?"

Truth be told, he wasn't looking for an answer, which was a good thing because Izuku was too busy staring speechlessly at him to offer one.

"Every time," he went on, forcing words through a throat that seemed determined to squeeze shut and strangle him. "Every time I think it's better, every time I think I'm finally past it, it comes back." The threat of tears stung behind his eyes, and he fought them back savagely. "What am I doing wrong?" he demanded. "What do I have to do to stop feeling like this?"

Izuku didn't reach for him again, but his hands wrung at his sides like he wanted to. "Shouto, it's *okay*—"

"It's *not* okay!" Shouto snapped again. "Don't you get it? It has *never* been okay!"

Izuku's raised voice cut him off before he could shout any further. "But it's okay to *think* about it!"

He flinched.

"You keep asking what you did wrong," Izuku went on, and his voice rang fiercely against the

storm swirling in Shouto's head. "Like you think what he did was your fault, and it's not!" Green eyes glared fiercely into his. "You want to know what you're doing wrong, Shouto? Nothing! You are doing *nothing* wrong, and anyone who tells you otherwise is mistaken or lying to you!"

Wide-eyed, Shouto could only stare at him dumbly.

"You didn't do anything to deserve what he did, and it's not your fault," Izuku told him sternly. "Do you understand me? It. Is *not*. Your. Fault."

He blinked, and then he blinked again, fighting against the feeling of tears creeping out. A mass of pain had formed in his throat, and he could only manage a broken whisper through it. "I just want it to stop."

Izuku's eyes softened. "I know," he said. This time when his hand found Shouto's shoulder, he didn't push him away. "And I'm sorry, Shouto. I'm sorry it's hard, and I'm sorry it won't go away ____"

He didn't make Izuku let go, but he lifted his hands to his face, feeling the roughness of the years-old burn scar as his fingers slid up to tangle in his hair. "It *hurts*." The words slipped out of his traitor mouth before he could stop them, but really, what more harm could they do at this point?

The hand—Izuku's right hand, the scarred one, the one he'd helped injure—squeezed lightly, grounding him in reality. "I know," he said softly. "And that's okay, too."

He could feel the tears coming again, and he scowled, disgusted with his tears and frustrated with himself for not keeping them in. "I hate it," he rasped out. "I hate feeling like this. I don't want to feel like this—" His nails dug into the scar, and the slight sting distracted himself from his own shame.

"You have to." Izuku's hand left his shoulder and closed around his wrist, gently tugging it away from his face. Shouto tried to take his hand back, but Izuku held firm. "No, look at me—you *have to*." Shouto looked, and that wasn't pity in Izuku's eyes. It was sadness, and understanding, and sympathy, but it wasn't pity. "If all you do is look away and ignore it, it's just going to keep coming back and hurting you." He squeezed Shouto's wrist gently. "You have to let it hurt, Shouto. You have to be honest about how bad it feels, or it's never going to get any better." Izuku's mouth tightened, and he blinked something back. "At least, that's how it is with me. Okay?"

He let go of Shouto's wrist, and Shouto lowered his hands to his sides again. His eyes stung. His throat ached. His chest hurt. Everything hurt, and he was tired of it hurting. He was tired of swallowing it down and burying it deep and pretending it was something he could ignore.

He was *tired*.

Izuku's arms settled gently around his shoulders and pulled him into a hug. "You have to be honest," he repeated. "And you have to ask for help."

There was no stopping it now, and Shouto had long been tired of trying.

It was only when Toshinori forced himself to his feet that he heard it.

It was a quiet, ragged, broken sound—and a sound like that had no place coming out of any of his students, but here it was, drifting to his ears in Todoroki's voice. The boy's back was to him, but he could see and hear perfectly well when a shudder ran through his student's body and a strangled sob forced itself free. His heart broke silently at the sound, and before him Todoroki broke down

crying into Izuku's shoulder.

"It's okay," Izuku murmured, and the steadiness in his voice belied the tears that ran down his own face.

After what he had just witnessed, Toshinori could find nothing to say. He looked to Midoriya Inko, and found her gripping the edge of the counter with the most indecipherable look on her face.

At a loss, he stepped forward toward his students, but Izuku caught his eye over Todoroki's shoulder and shook his head. *Later*, he mouthed silently.

He could think of few times over the past year that he had seen his successor look so coldly, unspeakably angry.

Chapter End Notes

Remember when they were watching Star Wars and hanging out at the mall? Haha good times.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

I got more art! And all of it is beautiful!

First, Biteitwhenitssoft is back with [Shouto vs. Not-Endeavor](#) and some [nice hugs](#) to salve the pain.

And then last chapter's [cathartic tearful hug](#) by [Nappotuna](#).

Thanks, guys!

When the doctors finally released him, Toshinori walked out into the hospital waiting room to find Midoriya Inko waiting for him, and no one else that he knew. He stopped and glanced around, confused, but sure enough both of his students were nowhere to be seen.

“Aizawa-sensei came a little while after you called him,” Mrs. Midoriya explained. “He said that the best place for a discussion like this would be the school, and we decided it would be best if the boys went on ahead with him.” She glanced around at the waiting room, which was nearly full. “Too crowded to be comfortable here. I volunteered to stay and wait for you.”

“Thank you.” Toshinori moved to follow her to the door, glad to be out of here soon. He had little love for hospitals these days.

“They’re both... unhurt,” she continued, once they were outside. “But Todoroki-kun...” Her voice trailed off. Toshinori nodded, and didn’t press her to finish.

The tears had stopped by the time heroes and police arrived to collect Deimos, but Todoroki hadn’t said a word after that. He’d stayed close to Izuku’s side, avoided eye contact with anyone, and kept his mouth shut.

Toshinori already hated feeling helpless. Helpless and guilty were a combination that made him sick to his stomach.

The passenger seat of Mrs. Midoriya’s car was cramped, but he wasn’t about to hold that against her because he was over seven feet tall and every passenger seat was cramped to him. As she pulled out of the hospital parking lot, he stayed silent.

“There’s going to be a conversation,” she told him. “About... what happened today. Izuku seems keen on including Aizawa-sensei, and Todoroki-kun... well, he didn’t protest, so.” Her hands tightened on the wheel. “... Are you all right?”

For a while, he didn’t answer her. The quickest and most truthful would have been *no*. “You knew,” he said at last.

“Hm?”

“You knew there was something wrong,” he went on. “That’s why you were asking after Todoroki earlier. Wasn’t it?” His breath caught in his throat. “You asked about his home life.”

“Yes,” she said quietly.

“How?” he asked. “How did you find out?”

“I... I wouldn’t say I found anything out,” she told him. “But I suspected. And as for why, well, it wasn’t any one thing, more like... well, you were a hero. Don’t you ever have instincts like that? Little feelings, little... alarm bells, and at the time you don’t know what set them off, but when you look back on it later you think, ‘oh, of course.’” She paused. “It was like that. Little, meaningless things, except now I know they meant... everything.”

“Like what?” he asked cautiously.

“He apologized too much,” she answered. “He was quiet, and at first I thought it was just shyness, but then I noticed how much he apologized. Nothing dramatic, it was just... he used ‘sorry’ like a comma sometimes, you know?”

And Toshinori thought back to every conversation that he could recall sharing with Todoroki, but... no, he couldn’t remember noticing anything like that. “I... don’t know that he ever did that with me.” Had he simply forgotten, or missed it?

“I think I made him nervous,” she went on. “Izuku had other friends over, and *then*, then I saw him relax. He had fun, he told jokes, he smiled. But with me, it was like he wasn’t sure how he was supposed to act, so he was... over-cautious.” She sighed. “And then, a couple of days ago, he hurt himself by accident. Stepped on something sharp, you know? And he didn’t say anything about it. Didn’t ask for help. When Izuku noticed, he acted like getting blood on the carpet was a bigger concern. And that was when I thought, what kind of life does a child lead, that makes him hide injuries like that?” Pausing, she shook her head. “I didn’t like the answer I came up with. And Izuku... I could tell he knew. By then, I could tell there was something more to why he’d invited his friend into our home for an entire three-week break.” She glanced at him briefly. “So that’s why I asked you about his home life. I wondered if you might know something... maybe I could think of some way to help him.”

Toshinori took a deep breath, and let it out. “I see.” And he hadn’t. He hadn’t known a damned thing.

He could feel Mrs. Midoriya’s eyes on him, only for a moment before she turned back to the road. “You mustn’t blame yourself.”

With a short sigh, Toshinori covered his eyes with one hand. “Mustn’t I?”

“Who would accuse someone like Endeavor of something like that?” she asked. “Even I hesitated. I questioned myself, even when the hints were right in front of me.”

“But you saw the hints,” he said. “Even if you questioned yourself, you *noticed*. You noticed that something was wrong, after one week with him. He’s been my student for over a year, and I didn’t even—I knew he had problems with his father, and I never even—”

“I’ve been a parent for sixteen years now, All-Might,” she said wearily. “You’ve been a teacher less than two. It all comes down to experience.”

Mrs. Midoriya lapsed into silence then, and it continued for a stretch afterward. It wasn’t until the next time she stopped at a red light that she sighed and turned back to him.

“Also,” she said. “I think... I might know why you didn’t notice.”

He raised his eyes and looked at her.

“Something you need to know is that my son was—” Her mouth tightened. “He was bullied, All-Might. Very badly. Did you know that?”

Toshinori blinked at her. “He mentioned it. But he’s never gone into detail.”

“All through elementary school, and middle school after that,” she said. “When he was younger, there were really only two places he could go—school, and home. And I...” Her mouth twisted with regret. “I didn’t—I knew he was having trouble, because he didn’t have a quirk, but I didn’t know how bad it really was. I didn’t realize until—God, until he was in *high school*, when I looked back and saw how much things changed for him. He wasn’t happy at school. He put on a brave face and kept his grades up, but he wasn’t happy there, and I didn’t know that because I only ever saw him at home. And I *always* made sure that home was somewhere he could be safe and feel wanted and loved.” The light turned green, and she drove on. “People—children especially—*need* places like that. They need their safe spaces. Izuku wasn’t happy at school, so his was home. So I think, for a child who doesn’t have a happy home, the reverse must be true, don’t you think?”

Toshinori stared at her, at a loss for words.

“So maybe the reason why you never noticed, was that you only ever saw him in a place where he felt truly comfortable. And even if you say that’s no excuse, even if you say you should have done better... just remember that. That the place where you always see him, and he always sees you? That’s his safe space, All-Might. You helped build that for him. And you can keep helping him now that you do know.”

He looked away, blinking back tears.

“Thank you,” he said, once he had composed himself. “For saying that. I still say—there are things I’m remembering now, hints like you said, and I still say I should have caught them, but... thank you.” He managed to smile at her. “That helps a great deal.”

They reached the school in due time. Much of the rest of the drive passed in silence. It wasn’t uncomfortable, but both of them had much on their minds.

As they approached the building, Mrs. Midoriya paused. “Is it all right that I come in?” she asked, looking uncertain. “Or does this not have anything to do with me?”

“That’ll be up to young Todoroki, I think,” Toshinori replied. “But you’re just as involved in this as anyone else, and... I think you could offer some good insight to this.”

“All right.” She nodded firmly. “I’ll do my best.”

The common area was immediately inside, and it was occupied. Both boys sat side by side on one of the couches, looking to be deep in hushed conversation. Beyond them, in the student kitchen, Aizawa was making tea.

Izuku looked up as they came in, though he didn’t get up. His eyes narrowed slightly in Toshinori’s direction, and then his face relaxed, as if he was simply confirming that his teacher was still in one piece. With a steaming mug in hand, Aizawa came over to join them.

“So,” he said. “Want to tell me what this is about? And why *we’re* talking about it instead of police or higher-ups?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Toshinori saw Todoroki stiffen. Izuku put a comforting hand to his

shoulder.

“Because it’s sensitive, especially in these troubled times,” Toshinori replied carefully. “Enough that it’s best to decide on a clear course of action before we do anything... messy.”

Aizawa raised an eyebrow.

Toshinori looked to Todoroki.

The boy’s eyes were fixed on his lap. His fingers dug into the couch cushion on either side. Izuku sat up straight next to him, with a posture that was borderline protective.

“Any more tea in the kitchen, Aizawa?” Toshinori asked, as Mrs. Midoriya made her way over to sit with the boys. “I could do with a cup.”

“Thought you might,” Aizawa replied, taking the hint. “Come on, there’s plenty.”

The kitchen was just out of earshot of the sofas, but Aizawa still kept his voice low as he planked a mug into Toshinori’s hands. “So I’m guessing there’s a reason why Midoriya’s spent the better part of an hour looking ready to skin someone alive.”

“You heard that young Todoroki defeated Deimos,” Toshinori said.

“Seeing as I’m not deaf, yes.”

Toshinori filled his mug from the kettle. “And you were briefed on the nature of the villain’s quirk.”

“Are you going to answer my question, or just keep telling me things I already know?”

“A telepathic illusionist with a fear-based quirk took one look at young Todoroki and made himself look like Endeavor,” Toshinori said bluntly. “He then proceeded to say quite a few things that were *alarming*, to say the least, and the long and the short of it is that I’ve overlooked something that I *should not have*.”

Aizawa blinked at him. He raised his own cup to his lips, took a sip, and then lowered it again. He took a deep breath.

“Fuck,” he said, and with a jerk of his head started walking back to the others.

Toshinori felt his heart sink as he followed. “You don’t seem surprised.”

“I think Midoriya tried to throw me a hint once.” There was something in Aizawa’s tone that made the hairs on the back of Toshinori’s neck prickle. “Let’s see what this is about.”

Moments later, all five of them were gathered at the couches. Toshinori sat across from the boys, Aizawa stayed standing, and Mrs. Midoriya sat among them with a look of concern on her face. Todoroki was still avoiding anyone’s eyes. Aizawa considered him for a moment more, then sat down as well.

“No one’s forcing you to talk,” he said simply. “And no one’s here to judge you or call you a liar.” His bloodshot eyes flickered around at the rest of the group. “Pretty sure everyone in this room respects you too much for that. What’s more, nothing leaves this room unless you say it does. Sound fair?”

Slowly, Todoroki nodded. He raised his eyes briefly. “You called my sister,” he said. “Do you

already know?”

“I don’t,” Aizawa replied. “I *suspect*, but I don’t know anything solid.” He paused, considering Todoroki. “Would it be easier to start from the beginning?”

The boy hesitated again. Beside him, Izuku quietly reached over and took his hand. Todoroki shifted at the sudden touch, then seemed to rally himself. Finally, he raised his head and looked at the rest of them.

“You all know what quirk marriages are, right?”

When Todoroki finished speaking, the room was quiet. Izuku was scowling, and still hadn’t let go of his hand.

The first to move was All-Might, and Inko watched in faint alarm as he got up from his seat and walked back to the kitchen. Everything about him was wound tight. Inko caught sight of Todoroki watching him go.

Aizawa was leaning forward as he listened, fingers steepled before him. His eyebrows were knitted together, though Inko couldn’t tell if he was quietly livid or merely thoughtful.

“This has been going on since your quirk manifested?” he said at length.

“It’s been going on since before I was born,” Todoroki said flatly.

“Mm.” Red eyes flickered toward her son. “You knew, I take it.”

“He told me during the Sports Festival, last year,” Izuku said. “Right before our match.”

Aizawa blinked. “Hm. That answers that question.” He sat up straighter. “Why keep it to yourself, then? You, I get,” he said, with a brief glance to Todoroki. “Why didn’t you say anything, Midoriya?”

“It wasn’t his fault,” Todoroki spoke up. “I asked him not to tell anyone.” He paused, and his fingers gripped the sofa cushion tighter. “I didn’t want him to find out.”

“Give us *some* credit,” Aizawa told him. “We wouldn’t have brought Endeavor into it—”

“No, I mean—” Todoroki shot a look toward All-Might, who was walking back to them. “I didn’t want you to know.”

Inko couldn’t help but send a worried look of her own toward All-Might as the former hero sat back down. He still had yet to stop looking like the world was crashing down around his ears, and she could hardly blame him.

“And why not?” he asked finally.

“Because I knew you’d blame yourself.” Todoroki seemed to search his face. “You’re doing that right now, aren’t you?”

All-Might shut his eyes. “My boy...”

“I’ve never blamed you,” Todoroki went on. “Ever. The only one I ever blamed for any of this—” he gestured vaguely at his face “—is that bastard.”

“Todoroki,” All-Might said wearily. “Your father hurt you and your family, and he was motivated by hatred for me—hatred that I have been blind to for years.” He opened his eyes again, and Inko’s heart went out to him. “I’m going to blame myself. And that also means I’m going to do everything in my power to help you.”

Todoroki looked away and nodded.

“Oh, and Midoriya?” All-Might turned to Izuku.

“Yes?”

The former hero seemed to consider him for a moment, his face thoughtful. “I seem to recall you had some harsh words to say to Endeavor, some months back. To his face, no less.” Inko looked at her son, shocked. “I scolded you for it at the time. I would like to retract that scolding.”

Izuku shrugged. “You don’t have to. It was stupid and I shouldn’t have done it.”

Aizawa stood up smoothly from his seat, eyes on Izuku. “Midoriya,” he said, and Inko couldn’t decipher his tone. “A word.” He jerked his head to the side, back toward the student kitchen where their conversation might not be heard.

Izuku hesitated at first, exchanging a quick look with Todoroki. Up to now, he was still holding his friend’s hand, and Inko could see her son’s reluctance when he let go and got up to follow his teacher. On an impulse Inko rose from the sofa as well, and risked a gentle touch to Todoroki’s shoulder as she passed him.

As she caught up to Izuku and his teacher, she noticed the latter’s eyes on her and met his stare evenly, silently daring him to send her off. He blinked back, as unhurried as a cat.

“Quick request,” he told her. “Let me finish? Before you leap to take sides.” Inko glared at him, but he was already looking away to focus on her son.

Izuku met his eyes, briefly, but in the end he had to look away.

“You knew.” Aizawa’s tone was icier than Inko would have thought possible. “For over a year, you knew about this. And you said *nothing*.”

Her son shut his eyes. “Aizawa-sensei—”

“This isn’t just about keeping silent while a dangerous man was put in power,” his teacher went on, face dark with anger. “You’re still only a student and that isn’t your responsibility, though *believe me*, I am not ignoring that in the slightest. But this is also about helping to hide the fact that one of your classmates was in an unhealthy and potentially dangerous situation, which—as your teacher—I *do not appreciate*.” Izuku winced. “I’m disappointed in you, Midoriya. From the beginning you’ve shown a near-refusal to *open your mouth* when you know something is wrong.” His bloodshot eyes narrowed. “I would have expected better from you when one of your friends was on the line.”

“I *wanted* to.” Izuku’s hands curled into fists at his sides. “It was on my mind and I wanted to, I *swear*. But I promised him I wouldn’t and I didn’t want to break his trust.”

Unable to contain herself any longer, Inko shook her head and sighed, lamenting her son and his honesty. “Izuku, for something like this—if your friend is being hurt then you *need* to—”

For the first time, her son’s head snapped upward to look at them. “You think I didn’t *know that*?”

he blurted, clearly struggling to keep his voice from rising out of control. “I did, but it’s *Endeavor*. People don’t like him, but most of them respect him—they did even when he was just number two. I didn’t know if telling would do anything or just make everything worse.” His face tensed, and his eyes glistened with tears. “And then Kamino Ward happened, and suddenly he’s *Number One* and he’s the biggest thing keeping villains back from destroying *everything*.”

“That’s all the more reason that you should have opened your mouth sooner.” Aizawa’s tone was quiet and hard as stone.

“I didn’t know if that would do anything.” Izuku faced him, and Inko could see his hands shaking. “It felt like if I said *anything*, then no one would believe me.”

“You think I wouldn’t have believed you?” Aizawa asked him.

“No, of course you would!” Izuku shook his head vigorously. “But Endeavor’s not *stupid*. People like him never are. They always know how to get away with it, or get people to back up *their* side of the story instead of anybody else. Or spin it so they don’t look as bad, and it looks like other people are complaining about nothing.”

Inko winced. “He isn’t wrong,” she admitted, seeing the way Aizawa narrowed his eyes. “Especially with all the trouble these villains are causing—if nothing else, he could probably appeal to priorities.” With a fretful sigh, she turned back to her son. “Still, Izuku, that doesn’t change the fact that you should never keep quiet about these things. Especially if you know Aizawa-sensei would have believed you. How do you know others wouldn’t have, too?”

“And what then?” A haunted look flashed through his eyes. “Think, Mom, what would happen if I told the world our main defense against villains was almost as bad?”

Inko shook her head. “But that just isn’t *right*—”

“Of *course* it wasn’t right!” Izuku’s voice cracked. “But it felt like every other choice would lead to something even worse if it led anywhere at all.” He reached up with his free hand and wiped his eyes.

“Be that as it may,” Aizawa said. “It would’ve been better if you told one of us. More than a vague hint, anyway.” He gave Izuku a considering look. “You’re right about the risks of public outcry when security these days is so fragile. But that doesn’t mean that we, your *teachers*, can’t still help.”

“I know.” Izuku’s voice was shaking again, and he was losing a battle against his tears. “I-I knew it would all go wrong if I kept quiet. But I knew it’d probably go wrong if I didn’t, and nothing felt like the right answer.”

Inko felt her heart twisting and tearing in her chest as she watched him struggle to dry his eyes and get himself under control again. It only took him a few moments to gather himself up and face them again, eyes red but dry. “I’m sorry, Izuku,” she said quietly. “I’m sorry you were in that position.”

“I’m fine,” he murmured.

“All-Might implied you confronted Endeavor once,” Aizawa went on. “Was that true?”

A dark look crossed Izuku’s face, only to waver into shame. “Yes. It was months ago, when Shouto was in the hospital. Endeavor said something and I just... lost my temper and snapped at him.” He shook his head vigorously. “And I know, it was stupid and I shouldn’t have done it and that’s why

I went back and apologized.”

Inko’s mouth dropped open. “To Endeavor?” She knew, vaguely, what he was talking about—he’d told her that one of his friends had been injured in a widespread villain crisis—but he’d never told her any of this.

“I got scared.” For a moment, Izuku’s voice sounded small. “I thought he might take it out on Shouto if I told him off to his face.”

The words sent a chill through Inko, and she sneaked a glance at Aizawa just in time to see cold fury vanishing from his face. When she looked to her son again, he had pulled together once more. That look on his face was one that she recognized—a bullheaded, unflinching frown that was far less angry than defiant, and yet thoughtful at the same time. It was the look he’d given her when she’d very nearly pulled him out of UA. “What was going on in your head, Izuku?” she asked him. “I know that look, young man—you had *something* up your sleeve. If you weren’t asking for help then you had ideas of your own. It’s not like you to sit around and do nothing.”

“I wasn’t planning to,” Izuku replied. “But I didn’t know how we could fix it right away, so I decided I’d play the long game instead.”

Aizawa cocked an eyebrow. “What was the long game?”

“Get stronger,” Izuku replied. “Help everybody else get stronger—our classmates, all the kids training to be heroes. We couldn’t do anything against Endeavor now because maybe no one would believe us over him, and he’s the strongest so he’s the main thing stopping villains from destroying everything.” The frown on his face turned fierce. “But it won’t be like that forever. The stronger we get, the less the world will need him, and then it won’t matter if everyone knows what kind of person he really is.”

“Replace him and drag his name through the mud?” Aizawa said. “That was your plan?”

Izuku shrugged. “I didn’t say I liked it. But if Shouto can be patient about this then so can I. Besides, I was already planning on being the best, so it’s not like this changed much.” He locked eyes with his teacher, looking tired but determined. “I’m sorry I didn’t say anything sooner. I should have.”

“Hm.” Some of the hardness in Aizawa’s face seemed to give. “Well. That’s enough beating *that* dead horse. You didn’t, and I expect better judgment from you next time. Understand?”

“Yes, sensei.”

Toshinori watched the other three move off, and continued to resist the relentless waves of guilt. Now was not the time to wallow in should-haves and almosts.

Much as he might want to. And probably would, once this was all over. He’d have to get it out of his system at some point. But for now, he sat beside young Todoroki and tried to summon up the words to express even a fraction of what he was feeling. Was there anything useful he could possibly say that wasn’t just a meaningless platitude? Or worse, an apology?

“Sorry” felt like such a useless word. Which was probably fitting, because Toshinori felt like such a useless man.

“Is Izuku going to be in trouble for this?”

Todoroki's voice startled him out of his own musings, and not only because the boy had spoken up so abruptly. Since when had his two students reached first-name terms?

"I think Aizawa is upset that Midoriya kept this from everyone," he answered, perhaps a little too slowly to be reassuring.

"But I asked him to."

"I understand. But you know Midoriya has... a bit of a history of keeping quiet when he shouldn't."

"I know that," Todoroki said, eyes locked on Toshinori's face. "But I asked him to."

"Sometimes," Toshinori said with a heavy heart, "we have to choose between our word, and what we know to be right. And in this case, Aizawa and I—and Mrs. Midoriya as well, probably—don't agree with the choice that young Midoriya made."

"I'm glad he did." The boy's mismatched eyes wavered for a moment, but held firm. "I needed that. At the time, I—I needed someone I could trust, and he was there."

It was Toshinori who turned away first. "Well," he said quietly. "I'm glad someone was."

"You're doing it again." He could hear Todoroki shifting to face him fully. "I told you, I don't blame you—"

"This isn't about whether or not you blame me," Toshinori told him wearily. "This is about whether *I* blame me." His fingers tightened into fists. "And I do, my boy. No matter what you or anyone else tells me, I do."

"Well, you shouldn't. You weren't involved—"

"Of course I was." Toshinori kept a tight leash on his tone. "I've been involved from the start, I just didn't know about it." He shook his head. "I'm under no illusions, my boy, I *know* I can't save everyone—I knew that even in my prime. But this—this was someone who hurt you because of me. And I could have helped—I could have stopped it, if I'd known, but I didn't. You needed help and I couldn't give that to you, and that—" He turned to his student once more, and found the boy's eyes shining wetly, but not spilling over. "It's not a fraction of what I know you must have felt—what you must still feel—but that hurts me. It hurts that I didn't help you. That no one helped you. And even when it was blowing up right in front of me, between you and my s—and my other student, I didn't see it for what it was." He took a deep, shaking breath. "And I'm glad that you don't blame me. I'm grateful. But... please, my boy." After a moment, he managed a sorrowful smile. "Let me take responsibility for my part in this, won't you?"

Todoroki held his gaze, blinking rapidly, and finally nodded. He looked away, still blinking, and turned his head away from Toshinori as he reached up to wipe quickly at his eyes.

With a sigh, Toshinori shifted closer on the couch, leaned over, and pulled the boy into a hug.

He felt Todoroki stiffen for a moment, and thought the boy might pull away, or at best sit still and endure it. But instead, his student relaxed, and a moment later he felt the hug returned.

"I want you to know." Todoroki's voice was muffled. "I wasn't waiting for you. Ever. I never wondered why you didn't come save me. So you didn't let me down." The boy's arms tightened, but he was careful not to touch Toshinori's injury. "People have let me down before, but you haven't. Not once."

All of Toshinori wanted to disbelieve him, because of course he did. Of course he let his student down. Of course he let *everyone* down. But that wasn't up to him to decide, was it? So perhaps, just this once, he could let himself believe it. "And I swear to you, Shouto," he whispered, as tears welled up and fell with no one to see them. "I *never* will."

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Last chapter, but here's more art!

A [collection of scenes](#) drawn by Tumblr user Lunacias

Thanks to everyone for all kudos, sweet comments, and awesome art. Every one of you is lovely.

“This is going to cause a lot of trouble, isn’t it.”

It wasn’t a question, and Shouto clearly didn’t mean it as one. He said it like it was a foregone conclusion, like he had no hope of being anything but a burden, and Izuku could feel his every instinct crying out in protest. He sounded so tired, so resigned.

“Of course it is,” Aizawa said bluntly. Izuku saw his mother open her mouth to rebuke him, but he continued before she had the chance. “It’s an awful mess, but regardless, it’s one that must be dealt with. That *will* be dealt with.” His eyes flashed red, briefly. “The problem is that your concerns about the public are valid.”

“I hope that doesn’t mean you’re planning on compromising on this for the sake of *politics*.” Mom sounded reproachful. Izuku shifted in his seat, uncomfortably reminded of how she’d read the riot act to All-Might after the Kamino incident.

Aizawa’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t compromise when it comes to the safety of my students.”

“What Aizawa is trying to say,” All-Might spoke up, “is that as polarizing a figure as Endeavor is, he still holds a significant amount of political sway.” He pulled a face. “So politics are involved in this whether we like it or not, if only because he can and *will* use it to his advantage.”

“Nothing new,” Shouto muttered. “It doesn’t matter either way—my main problem’s solved once I graduate anyway.”

“What this means is not that we’re going to sit on our hands while this continues,” All-Might went on, with a sharp look at Shouto. “It simply means we have to prioritize, and pick our battles.”

“And be sneaky about it?” Izuku added.

“That would probably be best.” All-Might’s mouth twisted wryly. “I’m not very good at sneaky, unfortunately.”

“You’ll pick it up,” Aizawa told him. “For now—Todoroki. Knowing what I know now, I’m not comfortable sending you home to him anymore. Any objections to that?”

“Not really,” Shouto said, after a moment’s hesitation. “The dorms—I mean, living at school has been better. A lot better. And I think...” He steeled himself. His hand, held loosely in Izuku’s,

curled into a fist. “It’d be best if I didn’t go back, because that’d give my sister a reason to leave, too.”

Izuku saw Aizawa’s eyes go a shade colder.

Shouto must have noticed too, because he was quick to continue. “She doesn’t have it as bad as me. Mostly he just ignores her, and she stays out of his way and makes sure—well. If I can leave for good, then she won’t have any reason to stay there.”

“We’ll do everything we can,” All-Might said. There was steel in his voice. Izuku felt a thrill in his heart, hearing that tone. These days, it was rare to hear All-Might sound like the man that bore the weight of the world on his shoulders.

“There’s no quick solution, unfortunately,” Aizawa said. “It’s going to be an ongoing effort—mostly a matter of stonewalling and diverting him whenever he comes looking for you.” His brow furrowed. “With his position, I doubt we can keep him away from you entirely, but at the very least we can make sure someone else is in the room who’s on your side.”

“That’s fine,” Shouto said. “I don’t need to get away from him entirely, just...”

“You don’t like him having all that power over you,” Mom said quietly.

Todoroki nodded, lip curling scornfully. “He has his uses. Parenting isn’t one of them.”

“Hm.” Mom pursed her lips thoughtfully. Izuku recognized that frown—she looked like that when there was something nagging at her, something she couldn’t quite let go. “Todoroki, I did have one concern.” His mismatched eyes flickered back to her. “It was something that man said—Deimos, I mean. About... about your mother.”

Izuku felt Shouto stiffen. “It wasn’t her fault,” he said forcefully. “She knew it was wrong, she *knew*—I heard her talking on the phone, and she knew she wasn’t well—she wanted to leave because she was afraid she was going to hurt me, but she couldn’t—”

“I understand.” Mom cut through his protests with a gentle hand on his arm. “I understand, I’m not accusing her of anything, I *promise*.” Beneath her hand, he relaxed a little. “But... Deimos said something about—about Endeavor using her? To control you? Was that true?”

“I...” Shouto blinked, staring into her eyes with a lost expression. “I don’t know. He never said it outright, and neither has she, but I know—” His face tightened with disgust and creeping guilt. “I know I was the main reason she didn’t cross him, when she still lived with us, and I’ve always wondered if he’d do the same with me.” He scowled again. “He’s paying her hospital bills, after all.”

For a few cathartic seconds, Izuku basked in the look on his mother’s face, the plain exhilarating desire to skin the current Number One hero alive. He could see that want reflected on Aizawa’s face. All-Might’s was half-hidden by his hair, but he could practically feel the dark thoughts radiating from him.

For his part, Izuku felt... not quite so angry as he had before. There was still lingering protective anger, of course, but it was loosened by relief. The weight was spreading, being distributed over multiple sets of shoulders rather than just his and Shouto’s.

“If money is the object, then I can take care of that, at least,” All-Might said at length. At Shouto’s uncertain look, he shrugged. “The bulk of my income went to charity anyway. If Endeavor tries to pull any mischief regarding your mother’s wellbeing, I can certainly counter it.” *It’s the least I can*

do, he didn't say.

Shouto looked at All-Might the way a drowning man looks at a rope.

"The only immediate difficulty is that Endeavor's due back tomorrow," Aizawa said. "And—no offense to you, Mrs. Midoriya, but if he were to come knocking on your door demanding his son back, I don't know if there's much you could do to turn him away."

"Give him a heartfelt kick in the pants, at least," Inko said. Shouto coughed oddly. Izuku, with far less decorum, snorted with laughter. "But I see your point." She shot an apologetic glance toward Shouto.

"It was fun while it lasted," Shouto said quietly.

"Your first option is to simply spend the rest of the break on campus," Aizawa went on. "We can spin some tale about protecting you from possible backlash after you defeated Deimos, and that should be enough to make Endeavor look the other way."

"Just the first option?" Izuku broke in, more curious than anything else. "There's more than one?" He almost missed the look that passed between Aizawa and All-Might. Or rather, he did miss it from Aizawa, but he caught it on All-Might. If Izuku didn't know him better, he would have thought his mentor looked almost vindictive. And while Aizawa's face gave nothing away, as always, it didn't exactly disagree.

It wasn't a common sight, to see both his teachers on exactly the same page. But damn if it wasn't a reassuring one.

"It depends on if you're comfortable with us bringing one more person in on this," Aizawa said to Shouto. "As we've said, this is going to take more strategy than anything else. Intellect. Wits. Whatever." He waved vaguely toward All-Might. "Everything he doesn't have."

"Who?" Shouto asked.

Aizawa told them.

Izuku's eyes widened. "That'll do it." He looked to Shouto. It was up to him, in the end; Izuku suspected that if Shouto outright refused, Aizawa would have put up a fight but ultimately caved and found another way.

There was a smile playing about the corners of Shouto's mouth. It wasn't a friendly one.

"The old bastard's clever," Shouto said. "But not *that* clever." He nodded. "Okay. I'm fine with letting him know, too."

Aizawa got to his feet. "He'll still be on campus about now. Knowing him, he'll probably thank you for the excuse to plot."

On the other side of campus, Principal Nedzu paused in his office, one ear flicking of its own accord.

His nose twitched, and he sneezed.

Inko hung back when Aizawa took the boys to the main campus admin building. She couldn't

follow, not just yet. Today had been harrowing, to say the least, and she'd scarcely had time to stop and breathe and feel things like a human being again. All-Might, ever helpful (and benignly meddlesome), stayed back with her.

Scarcely had the others left when Inko finally let herself stop fighting it. It had been building and building for too long—since her and All-Might's narrow escape she'd been keeping it back, keeping herself in check. There was nothing quite like parenting for teaching one to hold off their weaknesses until the appropriate time, and Inko had sixteen years of practice.

Once the boys were out of sight, she let herself sag, and the aching pressure in her chest rose to her throat and choked her next breath. Her face crumpled, and she let her forehead fall into her hands as the crying fit overtook her.

She felt the cushion beneath her sag as All-Might moved closer, and his hand settled gently on her back. Hot tears poured down her face—sad tears, angry tears, and tears from all over the spectrum.

"His own family," was all she could say. "He did that to his own family. His *child*. Who does that to a child?"

If All-Might had an answer for her, he didn't offer it up. He simply heaved a sigh, and sat with her until the wave of crying finally ebbed. It took a minute or four; Inko had been holding back all day.

"O-oh dear," she said, sniffing, when she could finally trust herself to speak again. She accepted the clean handkerchief he offered and did her best to dry her face. "I apologize, I just—couldn't do that in front of them, had to be strong..."

"It's all right," All-Might told her. There was a hint of sad humor in his voice. "At least now I know where young Izuku gets it."

A watery chuckle bubbled up from her chest. "Oh, *you*," she said, swatting him lightly with the handkerchief. After a moment, she sat up straight again and took a deep breath to steady herself. "I have to admit, I feel—a little useless, here. I'm not sure how much I can help."

"We'll keep you in the loop," All-Might assured her. She glanced at him, and found a small smile on his gaunt face. "You're trustworthy. More to the point, you're someone young Todoroki can trust, and that's enough on its own. Besides—something tells me you'll keep us honest."

She managed to smile back. "Not too honest, I hope. I'd hate for that—that *man* to find out what you're planning."

All-Might's smile faded. "Can't have that," he said simply. "It'll be good to have Nedzu on board. Subtlety... isn't my strong suit. If I'd found this out a year ago, I would have confronted him. I *could* have confronted him. I think it might've made a difference, then. But now..."

"You're doing it again," Inko sighed, patting her damp face dry.

"Hm?"

"Gathering up all the troubles of the world and piling them on your shoulders." Inko shook her head. "I understand why you blame yourself. But I don't believe you're at fault." He turned his head away, and she frowned. "No, look at me—look at me." When he didn't, she reached out and firmly turned his chin so that he was facing her again. She stared at him fiercely, daring him to try looking away again. "That man broke an unspoken trust. That is *his* crime, not yours. And the fact that you expected better of him only goes to show that he couldn't meet the bare minimum of decency."

All-Might blinked, astonished. “Thank you,” he said quietly. He didn’t try to look away again. “But all the same... I’ve been involved in this from the start, even if I didn’t know it. *Especially* if I didn’t know it. I failed to see the consequences of my own actions. So I will always, *always* hold myself responsible for this. But... by now, the self-blame only accounts for about half of me.”

That was about as good as she was going to get. “And the other half?”

His eyes, dark and sunken in his weathered face, glinted with a fierce light. “Wants Endeavor’s head on a stick.”

It was strange—while it was all happening, it had seemed to drag with agonizing sluggishness as Shouto told and re-told what he knew. And yet, when it was finished and both his words and his throat had gone dry, it seemed to him that it was over as abruptly as it all had started.

Either way, he returned to the dorms feeling wrung out and numb, as if every drop of emotion had been squeezed from him like water from a sponge.

Izuku was quiet. He hadn’t said much during their meeting with the principal, but stayed practically glued to Shouto’s side, and he was grateful on both counts. Izuku’s presence was comforting, but at times like this, Shouto didn’t feel up for even a one-sided conversation.

To be perfectly honest, at this point he didn’t feel up for anything but finding a quiet corner where he could curl up and hide from the world.

The best he could do, for now, was stare at the opposite wall and either wait to be addressed, or wait until he could find the ideal corner.

All-Might and Mrs. Midoriya looked up as they returned. The former’s face was carefully blank, but Mrs. Midoriya’s looked red and blotchy from crying. Quickly, Shouto returned his attention to the wall.

“Well?” All-Might said.

“He’s on board,” Aizawa replied. “He’ll want to talk to both of us later, but for now...” Briefly, Shouto felt his teacher’s eyes on him. “That’s all we need from you.”

He heard All-Might sigh with relief. “Right. Deimos is in custody, and the danger is past. It’s safe for you to go home.”

“Thank goodness,” Mrs. Midoriya said softly.

“If I were to make a suggestion,” Aizawa spoke up again. “Pay your own home a visit on the way, Todoroki.” Shouto looked up, trying not to tense visibly. “You’ll want to talk to your sister, I think. And pick up anything there that you want to keep with you, because if we have our way, then you won’t be going back for quite some time.”

The knot in Shouto’s chest began to loosen ever so slightly, and he nodded.

“All right,” Mrs. Midoriya said, her tone cool. “Well, thank you. Both of you. Keep me posted?”

“We’ll be in touch,” All-Might replied.

At some point from the dorms to the car, Izuku slipped his hand into Shouto’s and laced their fingers together lightly. Shouto could feel rough scars against his palm, and finally raised his eyes

as they were crossing the parking lot.

“How’re you holding up?” Izuku’s voice brushed against his ear.

“I don’t know yet,” he admitted. “I’m sort of…” His voice trailed off. *Tired. Numb. Slightly terrified.* “Not used to this.”

“What?”

“Um.” Shouto pursed his lips. “Having… something done? I’ve been fine, so far, just… waiting it out. And now something’s being done about it, and it’s… different.”

Izuku squeezed his hand gently. “Good different or bad different?”

“I don’t know yet,” he repeated. Pursing his lips turned to biting them. “This could backfire, badly.”

“Aizawa-sensei knows what he’s doing,” Izuku said simply. “And even if he doesn’t, Principal Nedzu will.”

“He’ll be angry if he finds out too soon,” Shouto went on as they approached the car. His mind wasn’t letting him feel the fear of it; instead, it held his emotions at arm’s length. He could identify them, even feel them reaching past his mental barriers to take hold, but they weren’t quite touching him yet. That was probably something he should worry about, but he couldn’t bring himself to feel anything at all yet. This was ridiculous; he’d agreed to all of this already, so why was he suddenly spouting off his misgivings?

“He’s always angry, from what I’ve seen,” Izuku replied.

“But not at you. And if he finds out how much you’re doing…” The fear was creeping closer, clawing past the fog. It wasn’t just fear and anxiety, either; he could feel the old shame, as well—the guilt of causing trouble for someone else, of being a *burden*—

Midoriya Inko turned to face him, and her green eyes blazed with a warm fierceness he hadn’t seen in her before.

“Now, you listen to me, Todoroki Shouto.” Her face was calm, her voice gentle. “I want you to memorize what I tell you, Okay? No matter what happens, remember it—

“You are *always* welcome in my home.”

Shouto blinked at her, caught off guard. He’d heard something similar from her before, but not like this.

“And I want you to remember that.” She had to reach upward to take hold of his shoulders. “And I want you to think of that whenever you need to. If ever you feel unsafe, or unloved, you remember that. My door is always open to you, if ever you need it. You deserve to feel safe, and you deserve to feel loved, and *you are always welcome.*”

By the time his reaching feelings finally forced their way through the barrier of numbness, they didn’t feel like fear and guilt anymore. They didn’t feel like anything he could identify, even as they wrung tears from his eyes before he could think to prevent them.

Izuku’s mother didn’t give him the chance to wipe them away before she pulled the two of them into a hug. “Now,” she went on after pulling back. “Let’s get going, shall we? I think we can all use

a quiet day.”

Not trusting himself to speak, Shouto nodded as he hurriedly dried his eyes.

Izuku didn't let go of his hand.

“Hello, All-Might,” Nedzu greeted cheerfully from across the room. The school principal was at the counter, standing on a specially-designed stepladder as he carefully made a pot of tea. “Oh! Goodness, is my two-thirty appointment here already? The time nearly escaped me.” The smile on his scarred face didn't quite reach his eyes.

“He's here,” Toshinori replied with a single stiff nod. Endeavor had returned the day after Deimos's capture and made a beeline for UA once he realized his son was strangely absent, and Toshinori hadn't caught a glimpse of him yet. If he were perfectly honest, he was avoiding it, but he'd heard enough before hurrying to alert the principal. “And he isn't happy about it. He showed up early, and from the sound of it, he has a lot of questions. Aizawa has been batting him around like a verbal pinball for about five minutes now while I came to let you know.” He paused. “You probably don't need the headstart in the long run, but I'd like to stack the deck anyway.”

“Indeed. Thank you, All-Might.” Nedzu descended the stepladder with a steaming cup in his paws. “And if I may ask out of curiosity, do you know where Todoroki and Midoriya are now?”

“Young Midoriya mentioned something or other about going out for ramen, but that was about an hour ago, so it's anyone's guess.” Toshinori gave a careless shrug. “It's their break. Their business.”

“Good, good.” Nedzu blew lightly on his tea and sipped. He seemed to savor the taste for a moment, one ear twitching as if bothered by a nonexistent fly. “This won't be over quickly, you know.”

“Hm?”

“It will be an arduous tightrope walk for everyone involved,” Nedzu went on. “And it certainly won't be solved overnight. I am *very* good, All-Might, and you and Aizawa were right to bring me in. But I'm hardly a miracle-worker.” He tilted his head to the side, looking thoughtful. “In fact, this meeting today will mostly be a matter of pacifying and redirecting him until he agrees to leave well enough alone. Not lying to him about his son's whereabouts, of course—that would technically be illegal. But I'm going to be... *convincing* him, to submit to our judgment over his desires. Which will be an interesting challenge by itself, I hope.”

“Is that truly all you can do for now?” Try as he might, Toshinori couldn't keep the pain out of his voice.

Nedzu gave him a stern look over the rim of his cup, which was quite a feat for such a diminutive figure. “I understand your impatience, All-Might. But I will *not* confront Todoroki Enji directly over his misdeeds until I can confirm with *absolute certainty* that we can protect his family from any and all possible backlash.” His hackles were up, the fur fluffing around his neck until he appeared marginally bigger than normal. “His hands are virtually tied if he wants to attack any one of us. But that isn't the case with his wife or children.”

Toshinori ground his teeth.

Slowly, the principal's fur began to lie flat again. “You are angry.” His tone was absolutely tranquil, and the smile was back on his face. He looked up again, and his beady dark eyes seemed

to glitter for a moment. “Good. So am I.”

A moment later, heavy footsteps thumped into hearing range, somewhere in the hallway beyond the closed door. Toshinori felt his gut clench at the mere sound of familiar footfalls, and looked to Nedzu for a hint as to whether it showed on his face.

He was reminded, just for a moment, that no one was ever really sure what sort of creature the principal of UA was. He looked quite a bit like an oversized mouse, and given his name, that was what most people assumed he was.

But no rodent had teeth like that. Maybe that was why Nedzu didn’t show them very often, not even to smile the way he was doing now.

“If I may ask a favor, All-Might?” Nedzu said. “Do send him in, on your way out.”

And All-Might couldn’t help but think, as he walked to comply, that a smile didn’t have to be a happy one to be reassuring.

“You aren’t nervous, are you?” Shouto asked.

“Me? Nervous?” Izuku put on his brightest smile. “What makes you think I’m nervous?”

“You’re sort of trailing behind me, so I just assumed...”

“I’m not trailing behind you,” Izuku informed him. “I’m following you, because obviously you’ve been here loads of times before, so you know the way better than I do.”

Shouto paused, and when Izuku halted a pace behind him, he raised a single white eyebrow.

Hiding his embarrassment, Izuku huffed a quiet breath. “I’m not nervous,” he insisted. “I just want to make a good impression, that’s all.”

“Don’t overthink it,” Shouto told him. “You’re the last person I’d worry about making a good first impression.”

“Oh, the stories I could tell you,” Izuku muttered. “This one time, when I first met Nighteye—”

“Izuku?” Shouto’s voice was fond.

“Yes?”

Shouto held out his hand.

Izuku very quickly lost the battle with the smile stealing over his face. He took Shouto’s hand—the cool one on the right—and stepped forward to walk beside him.

“So, uh, did you get the chance to tell her that we’re...?”

“No,” Shouto said as they approached the door. “But I’m about to.”

“W-wait, Shouto—”

With a light tug, Shouto led him into the room. “Hi, Mom—oh, you’ve been busy.”

Izuku blinked. The room around him bore a passing resemblance to a hospital room, but only just;

he never imagined one would look so lived-in. There was color all over—in the quilt on the bed, the framed photos and books on the table across from it, one laminated newspaper clipping on the wall, and what looked like uneven first attempts at crochet draped over the foot of the bed frame. And in the midst of it all sat a woman with snow-white hair, with an open book in her lap and a crochet hook in her hand, working with a roll of blue yarn. She raised her head at the sound of Shouto's voice, and her face lit up.

"Hello, Shouto! And..." Her eyes turned to Izuku.

"This is Midoriya Izuku," Shouto said. "I've, um. Told you about him."

"It's nice to meet you," Izuku said, a bit bashfully.

Her eyes softened. "Oh, believe me," she said. "The pleasure is all mine. My son has told me so much about you..." Her voice trailed off, and Izuku could tell from the way her eyes flickered downward that she noticed their joined hands.

Beside him, Shouto followed her gaze. "Yeah, we sort of, um..." He hesitated. "It was just this past week, so I didn't get the chance to tell you earlier."

His mother laughed softly. "It's only been a week, and we already have some catching up to do. Have a seat, both of you. I want to hear all about it."

The knot of nervousness in Izuku's chest loosened to nothing as he sat down next to Shouto. The resemblance was easy to see when he looked from Shouto to his mother—from the hair to the shape of their chins, and the way they both smiled as if they were still re-learning how.

"A lot's happened," Shouto went on. "Some things are going to change."

"For the better?" his mother asked.

Shouto stole a glance at Izuku, and his smile was weary but it reached his eyes. "Yes," he said, and his hand was cold but holding it made Izuku feel nothing less than warm.

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