

know what i've made by the marks on my hands

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/11356197) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/11356197>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	Gen
Fandom:	僕のヒーローアカデミア Boku no Hero Academia My Hero Academia
Relationship:	Kirishima Eijirou & Midoriya Izuku
Characters:	Midoriya Izuku , Kirishima Eijirou , Aizawa Shouta Eraserhead , Eri (My Hero Academia)
Additional Tags:	au where people have guardian spirits , peoples' quirks are manifestations of their guardian spirits' power , izuku is still quirkless but he can see spirits , izuku is unrestrained by mortal concepts like 'cooperating with the police' and 'pain' , affectionately nicknamed the "my spirit academia" au , crossposted from tumblr
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2017-06-30 Updated: 2017-11-21 Words: 46,561 Chapters: 5/?

know what i've made by the marks on my hands

by [simkjrs](#)

Summary

Midoriya Izuku just wants to lead a quiet, peaceful life. This is foiled by the fact that a) he can see spirits, b) his good nature demands that he help anyone he sees in trouble, and c) he, by all rights, should not exist.

Helping the heroes who have fallen victim to the new quirk-breaking drug is a terrible idea for many reasons, the first and most important being that he hates attention and avoids it like the plague. But he's the only one who can help, so he does.

This is, Izuku decides as he breaks in, more trouble than it's worth.

Notes

things you need to know about this au: people's quirks are actually the powers of their guardian spirits that their bodies have adapted to channel. izuku is still quirkless, but he can see spirits.

*** OFFICIALLY EVEN MORE NON-CANON AS OF 4/20/2K17, the AU where the quirk-breaking drug made by the 8 precepts of death actually permanently takes away your quirk unless you get an antidote from them

(crossposted from tumblr)

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

- Translation into Español available: [Know what I've made by the marks on my hands \[Español\]](#) by [PlayerSh1n](#)

Chapter 1

Izuku bends over the ward plastered to the outside of the shop, lips pressed together as he tries to untangle a spirit from its clutches. Wards aren't so common these days — not many people are still superstitious enough to believe in what they can't see — but occasionally, he'll still run across a spirit that has carelessly run into their clutches. This one, a curiously indistinct lizard-like thing, hisses and squirms in his grasp as he tries to delicately unhook it from the ward's barbed energy.

"Hold still, will you," Izuku mutters under his breath. He winces as he cuts himself on the ward, but only pauses a moment to lick away the welling blood before returning to his self-assigned task. "This will go much faster if you just let me work."

The spirit reluctantly stills. It pins him with its seven glowing, accusatory eyes as he carefully untangles the last of the wards from its many legs, and then — as soon as it is free — it sinks its teeth into Izuku's hands. Izuku jumps back with a cry, and the spirit leaps away onto the sidewalk with a rattling sort of snarl.

"Abomination," the spirit spits. "Mutant. Freak."

It scuttles away, sticky fingers hauling it up the brick wall of the nearest building, before disappearing out of sight with a flick of its lizardly tail.

"Glad I could help," Izuku calls after it halfheartedly with a sigh. He ignores the passing pedestrians staring at him and makes to rub at his eyes, but the sting on his hands reminds him that he's still bleeding. He lowers his hands and stares dully at the crimson-dark drops. God, he's so tired. He turns and starts making his dreary way back home.

He doesn't linger on the spirit's last parting words. It's nothing he hasn't heard before, and it hardly bothers him anymore, either. He can't be bothered by something that's true, after all.

Midoriya Izuku is well aware that he should not exist.

--

Izuku is dragged awake by the bell-like ringing of his wards going off.

He rolls out of bed, grabbing his brush and amulet off the nightstand and landing in a crouch. Sleep blurs his vision; he squints at the shape at the window that's clawing at the spinning red panes of his wards. Or -- no, it's not sleep blurring his vision. Izuku rubs at his eyes and straightens up, then looks back at the shape at the window, but on the third plane.

The shape resolves itself then. A spirit he's never seen before: draped in dark blue, a multitude of eyes peering out from the darkness of its hood, and shimmering bird-of-paradise feathers sprouting from its back, beating gently as it hovers in the air. It sees him looking and scratches insistently at his wards again, ignoring the firework-gold sparks that leap angrily at its cloak.

Izuku hesitates. The smart thing to do right now would be to close the curtains and go back to sleep. The spirits have made themselves abundantly clear over the years that they want very little to do with him, or if they do, that it's a bad thing. Anything this one wants can't be any good. It would be better for him to hit his head down, and forget he ever saw this spirit here.

But then the spirit sings something soft and flute-like and sad, layered in on itself in harmonies and echoes, and Izuku feels the full force of its *desperation grief fury* and its mantra *protect protect protect*.

His hand is on the anchor glyph of his wards before he even makes the conscious decision. With a fizzle and a pop, the wards evaporate, and the spirit swoops into the room and comes to a stop before Izuku.

It's large. Izuku shrinks back and clutches his amulet. "What do you want?" he croaks out.

The spirit whistles a flute song. Images unfold in Izuku's head, swirling with blue and cosmos and impossible dust. *Help. Connect. Help. Help.*

“Connect?” The spirit sings affirmation. “With who?”

Another whistled song, and Izuku’s vision is overlaid with the picture of a young man with wispy black hair and a nervous expression. He wears a familiar uniform, one that Izuku has seen before...

The name clicks. *Suneater*. He’s the hero-in-training who helped stop an incident earlier today, but was shot -- and lost his ability to use his Quirk.

Connect us connect us connect can’t feel small-sun-eater can’t feel can’t touch can’t protect protect protect protect

Izuku lets out a small noise of pain at the deluge of feelings and memories that pours into his head. The stream of consciousness ceases, and the spirit floats back a few inches, almost apologetically. *Connect us*, it whispers again, and the thread of *urgency grief fear* wraps itself gently around Izuku’s heart.

“I can’t,” Izuku mumbles. “I don’t have that ability.”

You are: bridge connection world-walker flesh blood bone spirit, you are: bridge, you are: you are: you are:

“I -- yeah, I know. But I’ve never... I don’t interfere with other spirits’ connections to their humans. I don’t know how to fix this. I can’t help you.”

You: know

Izuku shakes his head and bites his lip.

you : know bridge connection thread you : are channel conduit lightning-in-flesh you : know you ARE you KNOW

“I don’t--”

The spirit lurches forward, its many eyes blazing bright as the sun. *YOU KNOW*

Knowledge wrenches its way into his head, like a red hot poker, like the burning cold. Izuku gasps; his nerveless fingers drop his talisman and paint, but he only registers it from afar; the world swims far beyond the great wall of shimmering pain and the images that fly through his mind. *you : energy push flow push push block clear block clear channel clear burn away open door open gate open open open open open open open open* and a single black eye that flies open and the ancient earth itself gazes at him and sees right through him, flays him open and lays him bare and consumes him alive and it *knows*, it *knows* him --

Burning cold talons sink into his core and drag him back from the deep cracks of the earth. Izuku opens his eyes with a gasp, rolls himself over on the floor, and retches. Nothing comes up. He skipped his meals all day yesterday; it would make sense. He coughs through the bitter taste of bile that rises up in his throat and lies panting on the floor.

A flute whistle carries a thread of apology into his mind. Izuku closes his eyes again and breathes.

Then he pushes himself up, wipes his mouth, and gets off the floor. “Okay. Give me a second.”

He changes quickly, picks a warm jacket and a large scarf, pockets his keys, quietly leaves out the front door. The spirit floats after him, watching anxiously the whole time, until Izuku turns to it and says, “I’m ready. Lead the way.” And then, it’s off like a shot.

Izuku runs after it, barely able to keep up. The night wind bites his cheek and claws at his scarf, knifing its way under his coat. He pulls the scarf up and shivers as his hands go numb. *I should have brought gloves*. The spirit hurtles around the corner and Izuku pushes himself forward into an extra burst of speed.

He's red-faced and panting by the time the spirit comes to a stop, and he drops his hands to his knees and gasps for breath. The spirit whistles *here here go go go* and *urgency grief fear go go go* but his lungs burn and his limbs are iron. "Give me a sec," he wheezes. "I need recovery time, you know."

The spirit doesn't seem to understand, or maybe it just doesn't care. It flits around Izuku's head anxiously as he slowly regains his breath, nudging him forward towards the apartment building it's led him to.

"Okay, let's do this," Izuku says finally, once he's recovered. "Which apartment?"

The spirit whistles and flies up towards a fourth-floor window.

Great.

"Which door do I walk to?" Izuku calls up. "I can't fly up to the window."

The spirit doesn't answer. It circles near the window and peers down at Izuku anxiously, as if to ask why he hasn't come up yet.

Izuku grimaces. Looks like he'll have to do this the hard way. Digging his fingers into the cracks in the wall, he starts hauling himself up. He's infinitely grateful that this apartment is made of bricks -- there are plenty of handholds he can use, even if they're terribly small.

The spirit swoops about him quizzically, singing question after question at him. *fly? fly? fly?* Izuku wants to tell the spirit that he's as chained down by gravity as any flesh-and-blood human, but he can't afford to let his concentration slip. He ignores the spirit and focuses on the window he has to make it to.

He hauls himself onto the tiny ledge outside the window with relief. He can't see inside; the blinds are pulled shut. But the spirit chitters excitedly by him, so it must be the right place.

Izuku inspects the window; he doesn't have a knife, he can't lock-pick it. He'll have to find another way in.

Izuku knocks on the window.

A minute passes. Izuku knocks on the window again, louder and more insistent this time. He's getting a little anxious, clinging to the side of the apartment building like a limpet. He doesn't want to fall.

Someone peers through the blinds with a single dark eye. Izuku starts and almost falls; then he tries to smile, but it probably comes out more like a grimace. The watcher inside disappears, and nothing happens for another minute. Izuku is starting to think that he came here for nothing when Suneater finally pulls open the blinds and opens the window. He stares at Izuku quizzically, but also with an anxious expression that is... well, kind of funny on someone who is supposed to be on the level of a pro hero.

"Hi, sorry for disturbing you," Izuku begins.

"Who are you? What do you want?" Suneater says, and he raises a baseball bat that Izuku didn't notice before. Oh no.

"I'm -- er." He should have thought this out. It's a bad idea to give out his identity to the hero, who knows what kind of trouble he could get into. "It's not that important, I'm just a nobody. Um. But I heard, um, that your Quirk stopped working today."

He isn't sure where to go from there, so he stops talking. Suneater frowns. "What of it?" he demands in a thin, thready voice -- a brittleness that Izuku recognizes at once.

"I guess I'm... here to fix it," Izuku says, haltingly. He bites his lip. "Can I come in...? Perching on this windowsill is unbelievably bad for my anxiety."

Suneater stares at him, then slowly nods and backs up a few steps. He still keeps a grip on the baseball bat, though. Izuku eases himself in until he's standing on stable ground and breathes a sigh of relief.

"You said you could... fix my Quirk," Suneater says. "What did you mean?"

Izuku glances at him, glances at the spirit that has taken to hovering right behind Suneater's shoulder. "I can fix it," he repeats, and shrugs. "I'm sorry I can't really, um... explain it any better than that. But. Yeah."

"How?" Suneater looks suspicious. "Is this some kind of trick? How do I know you're telling the truth?"

"--I guess you don't? I don't have any way of proving it to you until I do it. Um. But you're training to be a pro hero, right...? I mean... I don't think I could hurt you if I tried."

Suneater looks at him a moment longer, and then he lowers the baseball bat slightly. His aura prickles with fear, but desire overpowers it -- a desire for safety, or maybe for his Quirk back. Izuku can't tell. "What are you going to do?"

"Well..." Izuku digs into his coat pocket and pulls out his favorite marker pen. "I just need you to sit somewhere and maybe let me draw on you a little bit. If that's okay."

Suneater nods slowly. He sits down on the chair by his desk. His eyes track Izuku as he treads gingerly across the room.

"I'm going to draw on your forehead," Izuku says, and reaches out with his hands tentatively, trying to broadcast his movements. Suneater is still. His hair is soft as Izuku brushes it out of the way, and Izuku draws a very simple eye in the middle of his forehead. He caps the marker and puts it back in his pocket, then turns back to Suneater.

“I’m going to, um...” Better just to do it than try and fumble an explanation. He puts his hands to Suneater’s temples, then leans forward and presses his forehead against the eye he drew on Suneater’s skin. Suneater’s breath puffs hot and quick on his skin. “This might feel a little weird,” Izuku warns, and closes his eyes.

In his mind’s gaze, he looks through the gateway drawn on Suneater’s skin and steps through. Suneater has a spirit of blue and dark sea that roils and twists in eddies and waves. Izuku takes a moment to admire it, but it’s not what he came here for. He searches for a moment more, and then he spots it: a channel in the back, but stoppered. Suneater’s energy swirls at the gateway but cannot push through the blockade. On the other side of the dam, the swirling cosmic energy of the spirit spins anxiously in anticipation.

Flesh and spirit divided. Of course. That’s why Izuku has to be the one to connect them again. Izuku grabs hold of his own energy -- soft and glowing white, easily malleable and prone to drifting -- and pushes it through the channel. The dam absorbs his energy, glows with the force of it -- and then dissolves, crumbling into wisps of rapidly evaporating energy. The spirit’s energy floods with joy and surges forward, flooding the channels that distribute its power to Suneater’s spirit.

Satisfied, Izuku pulls back out. He closes the gateway as he goes, and then opens his eyes in the real world, pulling away from Suneater. The crudely drawn eye is dissolving and flaking off Suneater’s skin even as he watches. Suneater himself is flexing his fingers. Izuku feels the spirit’s aura flare, and then Suneater manifests claws for hands, and feathers sprout along his skin.

“It’s back,” Suneater whispers. “It’s really back.”

Izuku quirks the corner of his lips up into a smile, glancing at the spirit behind Suneater. It sings its flute-like song, and this one is a song of thanks, one that wraps Izuku up in warmth and joy and safety. “You’re welcome,” he whispers to the spirit, and it trills back at him in satisfaction.

Suneater looks up at him, eyes alight. “Thank you,” he says. “Will you tell me your name? So I can find you later?”

No way. “Are you going to arrest me?” Izuku says uneasily, shifting towards the window.

Suneater shakes his head. “There aren’t any charges I could try and press.”

In other words, there’s nothing Suneater can do to try and detain him for questioning. Relief floods Izuku’s stomach. “Okay. I’ll be going, then. Just... be careful, I don’t want to have to do this again.”

“Why did you?”

“Huh?”

“Why did you come and help me restore my Quirk?” Suneater clarifies. His mouth turns down in -- dissatisfaction? Unease?

Izuku looks at the spirit again. It’s cooing gently at Suneater, and its aura glows round with joy.

“Someone who cares a lot for you asked me to help,” he says finally. “I couldn’t say no.”

“Someone who... Who was it?”

“You wouldn’t know them,” Izuku says. “It’s fine, though. They know your thanks. I should be going now. Um... take care.”

He hops onto the windowsill and surveys a way down.

“Wait!”

Izuku glances back.

“You don’t have to climb out the window,” Suneater says, embarrassed. “The front door is fine.”

“Oh! Thanks,” Izuku says in surprise, and follows Suneater awkwardly out the room to the door.

He pauses on Suneater’s doorstep, and then he turns back. “I know you’re a hero,” he says. “And this is, well... kind of important, I guess? But if you can, please don’t tell anyone about me.”

Before Suneater can respond, Izuku slips down the hall and away from Suneater’s apartment building. Even as he goes, he knows it is too tall an order to ask.

--

It’s on the news the next day. *Unknown visits Suneater in the night, restores quirk.* The media is abuzz. What are the implications of this -- that someone had gotten ahold of drugs that could disable someone’s ability to use their quirk, but that someone, out there, has the ability to reverse it?

No description of him is put out. But there are law enforcement officials beseeching him to come forward and work with them. *You are in danger, we can protect you, we could use your help.*

It’s a trap that Izuku will not allow himself to be caught in. He closes his eyes and hits the off button on the remote. He has homework to do.

--

The thing is, it doesn't stop.

Izuku only ever meant to help the one guardian spirit. Suneater's. But it's as if the floodgates have opened: two nights later, there are two spirits knocking at his wards, and still more the next night. Izuku tries to ignore them, initially, but his resolve quickly crumples under the waves of fury and desperation and intense emotion rolling off the gathering spirits. He picks up his marker pen and house keys — a pocketknife and a couple items handy for lockpicking, too — and sets out.

It seems like it never ends. Izuku loses sleep running around at night, and never can quite seem to find the time to make up for it during the day; between schoolwork, chores, and his terrible executive dysfunction, he just can't carve out time to rest. He goes to sleep late, wakes up with the next coterie of spirits, and crawls exhausted back into bed around five in the morning. Sometimes the spirits approach him during the day, too, but Izuku draws the line at cutting school.

He's running ragged. He's lost count of how many times he's drifted off in class, only to jolt awake when someone drops their pencil or bumps his chair or says something a little too loud. His mom has started commenting on how tired he looks, and multiple times tried to cajole him to sleep. Izuku tries, but it never seems to stick. He's exhausted.

Then one night, a very familiar spirit drifts in through his window. Izuku's stomach drops to the floor.

"Eraserhead lost his Quirk?" he breathes.

Eraserhead's spirit dips its head. It's a fox spirit, and its nine waving tails gleam white under the moonlight spilling through the window. Its mouth tugs down into a frown, and its red eyes seem to glow with the force of its displeasure. It is grim, and Izuku suspects that he is a measure of last resort.

He swallows and grabs his marker pen off his desk.

I apologize for imposing upon your generosity. Eraserhead's guardian spirit speaks to him curtly. *However, it seems I will be in need of your services.*

A hero lost his Quirk. A *hero*. Whoever it is, stoppering up everyone's access to their Quirks — they're good enough to get a pro hero. Izuku knew that this... whatever it is, this going around and restoring people's Quirks, was dangerous — but it never really hit home until now. Izuku only has his marker pen and the curse of straddling the boundary between human and spirit; if they come after him...

But a hero lost his Quirk, and Izuku is the only one who can restore it. He swallows. "Yeah. Okay. Where to?"

But Eraserhead's guardian doesn't answer that; it only sweeps restlessly through his room. Its aura presses heavy and displeased on him, and Izuku manages to get a taste of reluctance in it, too. The spirit doesn't want to ask him. Probably because Izuku, by all rights, should not exist, or possibly because it doesn't want to lower itself to asking *him* of all things for help. Izuku tries to brush aside the sting of hurt, but. It does hurt, that the spirits demand his aid so freely after years of reviling his existence.

"If you're worried about giving away his secrets or locations, I can make a binding promise not to reveal that information to anyone easily enough," is all Izuku says aloud.

The fox spirit shakes its head, irritated. *No. That is not necessary.* For a moment, it almost seems as if it's about to speak, but then it raises its lips in a grimace and turns away.

Izuku waits a moment longer before he asks, "What's wrong?"

It paces about his room some more. Its tails trail behind it and cast strange shadows on the walls. *I do not like dragging you into this.*

"It's fine. I've been doing this for everyone else."

Before, you had a measure of safety.

A measure of safety...?

“Do... do people know who I am?” Izuku asks, afraid of the answer.

The fox gives another irritated shake of its head. *No. But before, they did not know you were coming, and they did not prepare.*

Izuku stares at the spirit uncomprehending for a moment longer, before it clicks into place. “This is a trap, isn’t it.”

The spirit says nothing, which is an answer in and of itself.

Izuku bites down on the nervous laugh trying to force itself out, and he settles for running his hands through his hair instead. “Why?”

They are trying to close in on the villains who produced the cursed drug. You are one of their most important leads. I have searched for alternative means to reopen the connection between myself and my charge, but I have not been able to.

Izuku rubs his eyes. "You're asking me to walk into a trap."

I can help you evade, the spirit says. That's a yes, and they both know exactly what it is the spirit is asking him to do.

It is almost too much to ask, so the spirit only hovers silently and waits as Izuku struggles with himself.

"He won't get his quirk back unless I go," Izuku mumbles. "He took a big risk, doing that. Why?"

They want answers, the spirit answers simply, and my charge has chosen to risk himself as bait.

—

In the end, though, this doesn't change anything, because Izuku's character demands no less than that he go.

Thank you, the spirit says, dipping its head. You did not have to do this.

Izuku just shakes his head. He grips his marker pen where it lies in his pocket. "We should get going. Where to?"

You are already doing enough. There is no need for you to walk, too.

With that, the spirit scoops him up and deposits him on its back in one graceful sweep of motion. Izuku reflexively grabs onto the spirit's fur in an effort to prevent himself from falling. The spirit coils in on itself, tension humming under Izuku's hands, and then it bursts into motion. The world blurs away as it goes.

Izuku focuses on the cold sting of wind and the streaks of starlight moving through the sky. His grip tightens around the spirit. "Thanks. I don't think I have energy to run across the city, anyways."

You may thank me when you have escaped from this venture unscathed, the spirit returns tightly.

The rest of their journey passes in tense silence. Soon the spirit slows. A seemingly nondescript apartment building stands before them. Izuku slips off its back and drops lightly to the ground, surveying the street and picking out two — three — five cameras all trained on the building.

Now comes the hard part, the spirit says grimly.

Izuku nods, and then he steeples his fingers together, closes his eyes, and starts putting together a plan.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Izuku pulls off a heist.

Chapter Notes

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

The plan, otherwise known as Operation Restore Eraserhead's Quirk Without Him Knowing It, is a little bit disastrous from the very beginning, simply due to the sheer disadvantage Izuku has. Eraserhead's guardian spirit, at his request, takes a thorough look through the building and gathers information on all the measures put into place to catch Izuku. The prognosis starts no good and moves to worse. In addition to the cameras, there are also a few heroes keeping watch on the perimeter, and apparently they have *actual traps* set up in case he slips by them, too. Izuku, on the other hand, has his clothes, a pocketknife, and a pen.

But Izuku is nothing if not resourceful, and there is absolutely nothing saying he has to carry out the plan *tonight*. He and Eraserhead's spirit spend the entire night casing the building and its surroundings, and then Izuku goes back home and sleeps.

The solution, in the end, is deceptively simple.

Izuku has been restoring people's Quirks by creating a gateway between himself and their spirit, allowing him to find and destroy the barrier that's blocking their access to their guardian spirit's power. He's done this by drawing an abbreviated gateway glyph over the node of spiritual energy in the forehead. It's the easiest way to create a gateway — a shortcut, really. The only downside is that it requires sustained and willing physical contact to work.

It is, however, far from the only way to create a gateway, which is why Izuku is standing here at 2 a.m. with a can of red spray paint in his hand.

Clever; the spirit says, sounding grudgingly impressed. *You are remarkably adept at Script.*

Izuku shakes the can and finishes spraying the last glyph onto the ground. “Comes with practice,” he says glibly. He takes a step back and surveys his work, then looks back up at the spirit. “How does it look?”

Remarkable. It is... simple, elegant, though your handwriting leaves much to be desired. I have no doubt it will work.

Izuku smiles a little at that. If Eraserhead’s spirit is as old and powerful as he thinks it is, then it’s quite the compliment he’s just received. “Thanks. I guess the only thing left now is the hard part.”

The Script he’s just written encircles the building that Eraserhead is waiting in. It gives the subject — Izuku, in this case, marked by a simple trigram over his heart — access to the spirit of the object of the sentence. As long as Izuku stands somewhere within the Script, it will work. The only problem is that the object of the sentence, Eraserhead, needs to be marked, too.

Izuku has designed the Script to be as smooth as possible so that no matter how messily he marks Eraserhead, it should work. To that end, Izuku has brought two weapons: an ink stamp with its own ink refill, one he designed himself long ago, and a sharpie. As long as he gets the glyph onto Eraserhead’s skin, he wins.

First, though, he has to bypass the security. Izuku shifts his sight to the second plane and surveys the pretend apartment the heroes have set up. Eraserhead’s aura is in a room on the second floor; he can see a few other auras moving slowly about. There’s someone on the roof as well. The cameras, as they’ve been installed, capture almost every entrance within their fields of vision — and Eraserhead’s spirit has helpfully informed him that there are cameras at every single stairwell, too. Unsurprisingly, the elevators are turned off.

This would be a tricky situation to get in and out of unnoticed. But the thing is, Izuku doesn’t need to go unnoticed — he only needs to go unrecognized, and be quick about his work. Subtlety is not really a problem here.

Which is why he doesn't worry too much about avoiding notice as he walks up to the building. Oh, he has his hood tugged over his face and his disposable face mask, and he avoids the most obvious cameras — but he pretends he doesn't notice the others, circling to the back of the building and lockpicking one of the basement windows to get into the below-ground rooms.

“Where did you say it was?” he whispers to Eraserhead's spirit, pulling his disposable face mask more firmly up around his face.

Follow me, the spirit answers, sweeping out the door. Izuku slips out after him into a hall and follows him to another locked door. It only takes a few minutes to pick this lock, and when he slips in, his eyes land on a gray box attached to the wall. *Perfect*. Izuku picks the lock on the box, too, and when he finally gets it open, he flips the circuit breaker. Anything running on the electricity in this building will go out.

He switches his sight to the second plane and gauges everyone's auras. Most of them are flaring with surprise, but a few have already taken action, moving through the floors and probably towards the stairs. Izuku needs to get to his goal before someone arrives and flips the circuit breaker back. He unlatches the window in the room and turns to the spirit. “Okay, time for part two. How close can you get me to Eraserhead?”

The spirit just tosses its head as if to say *who do you think I am*, and then it grabs Izuku's jacket in its mouth and tosses him onto its back. Izuku winds his hands in its fur as the spirit leaps out the window and into the air. The night wind rushes around him and tangles playful hands through his hair, and the spirit beneath him almost seems to dissolve into movement, its fur and aura billowing into mist. It bounds through the air, circling around the building and towards the room where Izuku can see Eraserhead's tense aura fluctuating with little spikes of frustration. A moment later, Eraserhead's aura moves away, further into the building, as if he was called away.

Izuku seizes the chance. “To his room,” he whispers to the spirit urgently. It soars swiftly to the window, hovering as Izuku leans over with his lockpicking tools. To his surprise, the window doesn't have any higher security than any of the other locks in this place — it takes a mere thirty seconds to shimmy the lock, and then it's child's play for the spirit to fly him in. It's almost as if they... oh, right. They *want* him to show up and restore Eraserhead's Quirk.

Izuku quickly closes and locks the window behind him so Eraserhead won't realize anything is off about his room, and he gives a quick cursory scan of his surroundings. A desk with a few screens on them, bundles wires running amok, a couple chairs, a mattress, a closet. Perfect. Izuku ducks into the closet and cramps himself into the corner, behind the few behemoths of shadowy machines crammed in there. He's just gotten the door closed when the lights in the room suddenly flicker on. Someone's fixed the circuit breaker, then. Izuku looks through the building on the second plane and spots Eraserhead's aura coming up the stairs, and the other heroes scattering around the building — probably to try and find him.

Eraserhead's spirit glides in through the closet door. *This plan of yours is rather risky*, it observes. *And what will you do, if he chooses to search through the room?*

“All I can really do is hope for the best,” Izuku admits. He should probably feel more worried about it, but the whole night feels rather surreal to him, almost as if he's watching some outside event transpire through a window. “Besides, you're going to do your best to minimize that risk, right?”

The spirit's nine tails wave pensively behind it as it watches him, something inscrutable passing through its eyes. Then it dips its head and glides back out through the closet door.

When Eraserhead walks back into the room, the spirit *blankets* the room with its aura. Izuku shivers as it passes over him, a quicksilver mercury that sends little sparks from his nerves shaking down his spine. It emanates confidence, security, and a strange and sleepy warmth that tries to seep into Izuku's bones. Only the sheer wrongness of it — how unfamiliar the energy, how invasive it is — keeps his eyes from falling shut.

Eraserhead won't notice. His guardian spirit's energy has been flowing through him his whole life; a nudge to his mood won't ring any bells. If all goes well, Eraserhead will feel just a little more relaxed — a little more tired — and hopefully, safe enough to let his guard down. That's when Izuku will strike.

He hears the chair at the desk squeak as Eraserhead sits down and rolls up to the screen, letting out a sigh. A quick check on the second plane shows Eraserhead's aura fading, jumping back into vibrancy, and fading again, gently pulsing with the edge of sleep. Already, it is fluttering on the edge of third plane, towards dreams and visions and glimpses of what goes unseen by day. Izuku may not have to wait for long.

Eraserhead speaks quietly to the other heroes with some telecommunications device. From the little snatches Izuku can hear, they're still searching within the perimeter for him. One of them has discovered the spray-painted Script, and is in the process of copying it down on paper. "It's — there's something weird about it," says the voice. It sounds warm and familiar somehow, as if Izuku has heard him before. "I'm looking at it from less than four feet away, but it's still blurry. I can't — I can't quite make it out. It's like it changes every time I look back."

Eraserhead just tells the person on the other end to do his best, but to stay on alert. Then he checks in with the other people on his team. He asks one of them if there's any coffee in the vicinity, but judging from the way he sighs, the answer is no. "I'll make do without," Eraserhead tells the person on the other end of the line. "As long as we check in periodically, there should be no problem."

Izuku waits in the long dark, training his every sense on tracking Eraserhead's movement through the room; strains them so far that he barely notices the cold-metal touch of the spirit's aura fluttering at the edge of him. He is nothing but sense: the rustle of cloth as Eraserhead crosses the floor; the quiet hum of the computer fans and swift fingers tapping on the keyboard; the drowsy, hypnotic pulse of Eraserhead's aura as he moves ever closer to sleep. He waits so long and still he forgets he has ever been anything but waiting, until Eraserhead's aura smooths into the third plane and passes into dream.

And then Izuku remembers that he needs to breathe. He sucks in a deep lungful of air, breathes out, rubs his eyes and feels how his legs have cramped up from staying so long and still in the dark. A minute later, when he's worked the pins and needles out of them, he carefully opens the closet and lets himself out

Eraserhead has nodded off in his seat, in front of the monitors displaying footage from the cameras. His guardian spirit hovers next to him, watching with a plaintive sort of look to its face, and its fur casts a ghostly white glow on the room that Izuku knows no one else would see.

Hurry, the spirit says, so soft it barely carries.

Izuku nods and gingerly approaches, pulling his stamp from his pocket. One of Eraserhead's hands rests limply on the armrest, and gently, lightly, Izuku presses the stamp to skin. It only takes a touch of his energy to burn the Script to life. The glyph lights up across all three of the planes Izuku can access at a glance, unfolding into impossible shapes and a promise yet to be made, pulsing with anticipation of what is to come.

Eraserhead shifts and mutters. Izuku freezes. But the spirit only leans forward calmly, and its heavy aura presses down on them both and sings with *safety comfort home*.

Rest easy, the spirit murmurs. Its words ring with a power or truth that was not there before. ***There is nothing that will harm you here.***

And Eraserhead's aura, previously fluttering its way awake, slips away from the boundary of the second plane and smooths back down to calm.

Izuku lets out a breath he didn't know he was holding and mouths a *thank you* to the spirit. It merely inclines its head. *You should depart as soon as possible*, it informs him. *Shall we go?*

He holds up a finger to say, *one minute*. Pulling his marker pen from his pocket, he writes directly on the desk, heedless of property damage. It'll wash off easily, anyhow. *Don't touch the stamp*, he writes. *It'll come off as soon as your Quirk comes back. Until then, stay here and let it do its job*. After a moment of consideration, he adds, *Toodles*, and a small smiley face.

That should take care of things, in case Eraserhead wakes up before Izuku can finish restoring his Quirk. Tucking the marker away, he carefully climbs onto the desk and unlatches the window. Without prompting, the spirit sweeps him onto its back and carries him out the window. A quick scan of the second plane reveals their path is mostly clear, and Izuku leans forward on the spirit as it flies away.

They alight a few blocks away, where Izuku spray-painted the first sigils of the Script. Izuku slips to the ground and lands lightly on his feet, and when he looks back up at the spirit, it nods curtly at him. *I will keep watch as you do your work*, it announces, and with a flick of its tail, it disappears.

Izuku lets out a slow breath. “Right,” he says. “Time to fix his Quirk.”

He bends down and presses his hands to the marks on the pavement, closing his eyes and sending a tendril of his energy down its length, and in his mind’s eye, the Script lights up. Good; it is still complete. Izuku takes a deep breath and, gathering his energy, channels it into the Script.

It blooms to life, unfolding through the planes in a burst of white light. Blazing brightest of all in his mind’s eye is Eraserhead, marked by the stamp on his hand. Izuku takes hold and flows into the gateway that opens into his mind. Eraserhead’s spirit scorches like plague and cold, but there is vitality to it like the tundra in spring. Far to the edges, the channels are stoppered up, and just like before, Izuku lets his energy surge through the channels and break down the dam.

The cold touch of Eraserhead’s guardian spirit bursts back in, whirling like the north wind and singing with triumphant joy. But there is something oddly narrow about the channels, places where the grooves are uneven and cannot quite carry the energy right. Izuku hesitates, but he can’t resist: he carves the channels smooth, molds them just a bit until everything flows, and only then does he let himself be carried out the gateway. A moment to gently close it behind him, and he returns to himself with a dizzying falling sensation, satisfied.

Then he realizes that he *is* falling, and only barely catches himself before he can faceplant on the ground. His entire body seems to burn faintly, as if his muscles have all gone a minute without air. Exhaustion hits him like a truck. *Oh well*, he reflects. *At least I didn’t knock myself unconscious this time.*

Eraserhead’s spirit appears again with a pleased gleam to its eyes. *Well done*, it says. *Let us return you to your home.*

Izuku nods and climbs to his feet, feeling oddly heavy and light all at once. The paint used to write the Script has lost its color, and already, it is flaking away and blowing down the street. Soon, there will be no trace of it at all.

“Let’s go,” he agrees, and reaches to climb onto the spirit’s back.

Its eyes crease into a smile. But before either of them can move, someone shouts, “Wait!” and a blurry gray-stone spirit tackles the fox spirit away.

Izuku whirls around, pulling his face mask up further along his nose. There — a boy his age, with spiky red hair and diamond-sharp teeth, hurtling towards him at full speed. — It's Red Riot, the hero-in-training who debuted the day Suneater lost his Quirk. He glances to the side, but — Eraserhead's spirit is snapping and snarling, grappling with the hulking stone creature that must be Red Riot's guardian spirit. He will find no help there. Izuku turns and bolts.

“Hey, hang on—!” Red Riot shouts. Footsteps pound on the pavement behind him. He's too afraid to look back, as if the act of it might bring the hero closer to his heels. Instead, he turns a sharp corner into an alleyway and vaults himself over the fence. He lands with a somersault, and then he's on his feet and running again. Red Riot lets out an exclamation of surprise; the fence rattles even as Izuku pelts away.

But he's mostly running on adrenaline. He expended more energy than he should have, fixing Eraserhead's Quirk, and he hasn't had a good night's sleep in weeks. Izuku weaves wildly through the streets, pulling on every trick and acrobatic feat he's ever taught himself to be as fast and tricky as possible, but he's slowing down. As soon as he can no longer hear Red Riot on his heels, he takes a couple turns into a narrow street and nearly collapses. He manages to catch himself on one knee, leaning against the wall with one hand, and he just stays there for a while, panting harshly and waiting for his fearfully beating heart to bring itself back down.

“Gotcha!”

Izuku spins around, just in time to be tackled to the ground by Red Riot. His hood gets dragged off his head by the impact, and his face mask gets torn off, too. He shouts and twists, and when that doesn't work, tries to headbutt Red Riot's face. But the hero-in-training's aura flares, and a stone-hard armor of spiritual energy grows over him on the second plane. The impact hurts Izuku much more than it hurts the red-haired boy, and when he recoils, he accidentally hits his head on the pavement too. His head rings. He thinks he can taste blood. — No, that's definitely blood, dripping down from his nose, apparently. He must have overdone it with the Script tonight.

Red Riot's grip loosens; he even has the audacity to look *concerned*. “Hey, are you okay?”

“Just *peachy*, ” Izuku snaps out, flaring what little energy he has left to feel out the armor Red Riot has grown.

“Er, yeah,” says Red Riot, looking a bit awkward now. “Sorry about all this, but—”

Izuku channels his spiritual energy to his mouth and *bites*. The armor parts before his energy like butter, and his teeth sink into the flesh of Red Riot’s arm.

The red-haired boy yelps and yanks his arm away. It’s opening enough for Izuku to push him off, scramble to his feet, and take off. He only gets a few steps before Red Riot tackles him again, though, and moments later he’s pinned face-down to the ground. *Damn it*. Izuku tries to wriggle out of his grasp, but Red Riot twists his arm and pushes it up his back and the pain is enough to make him gasp and finally be still.

“Hey, calm down,” Red Riot says, sounding as though *Izuku* is the one making this difficult, where does he even get off doing that? “I’m not gonna hurt you! I just want to talk.”

“Oh, sure, you just want to *talk*, ” Izuku says, wild with disbelief. “That’d be more believable if you *didn’t* set a trap for me.”

“Wha — you *knew*? ”

“Right, because it’s *so hard* to notice all the patrols and *traps* and *cameras* —”

“Are you kidding me? We tried so hard to make sure no one would notice!”

“Well, try harder next time!”

“What kind of logic is *that*? — and if you knew it was a trap, why did you come?”

“Because I *love* waking up at two in the morning to go traipsing across the city and help some ungrateful pro hero who decided it was a good idea to risk losing his Quirk — obviously it’s the fucking delight of my *life* —”

“We’re not ungrateful! We just wanted to get into contact with you! We’re trying to—”

“No thanks,” says Izuku.

“Aw, come on! You didn’t even hear me out!”

“Sure, I’ll hear you out when you aren’t — fucking — pinning me to the ground,” Izuku bites out. “Let’s have a rational conversation when you’re grinding my face into the gravel — I sure do love a five star meal of coercion with a side dish of *pain* —”

“I’m not trying to *coerce* you,” Red Riot says, sounding almost shocked.

“Then get off me.”

“Promise not to run again?”

“It’s my free rights as a citizen,” Izuku says. “And if I’m not being detained or arrested then I have every right to run — and if I *am* being detained, why *wouldn’t* I run—”

“Please,” says Red Riot. “We just need some information.”

“Why are you even putting up a pretense of negotiation,” Izuku says. “We all know who has the upper hand here.”

“Pretense of,” Red Riot repeats, and then he’s quiet for a moment. Izuku does his best to beam *let go let go let go* straight into his head. Unsurprisingly, it doesn’t work. “Let’s just — go to the heroes,” Red Riot says, sounding a bit uncertain now. “They’ll know how to explain it better.”

“No,” Izuku says, so immediately and violently he almost takes himself aback with the force of it. He somehow finds the energy to briefly throw Red Riot off his back, and they scuffle anew — but once again, Red Riot knocks him down and holds him there, this time face-to-face. This is getting real old.

“Look,” Izuku says, and licks his dry lips. “If you let me go right now, I’ll answer three of your questions truthfully. If you arrest me, I swear to every spirit I know I’ll fill your audio transcripts with every single bit of bullshittery I can pull.” Which is admittedly not a lot, but Red Riot doesn’t have to know that.

Red Riot’s brows furrow, and he tilts his head and does this little pouty thing while considering Izuku’s proposal. “*And* you have to listen to our request.”

“For one minute, and once that time is up, you won’t try and stop me from leaving again,” Izuku counters.

“Five minutes.”

“Three, and within that time you ask your questions.”

Red Riot screws up his face in thought. “You promise?”

“Seriously?” Izuku says. But Red Riot doesn’t budge, just trains his weirdly honest and intensely earnest gaze on Izuku, and he just knows that he won’t get anywhere if he doesn’t give his word. He closes his eyes, resigned. “I promise to uphold the terms of this deal if you do,” he says, and even as he says it, he can feel the promise binding him, sinking its hooks deep into his blood and marrow.

Red Riot studies him for a moment more, and then he nods once. “Okay.” He releases Izuku, and Izuku immediately scrambles to his feet and puts some distance between them. Red Riot is still watching him, a little bit tense, still looking as though he’s ready to chase after Izuku at a moment’s notice. Hah, as if Izuku can do that now.

“Well?” he says, wiping the blood away from his nose as best as he can before replacing his hood over his head and pulling on the drawstrings. “What do you want to know?”

“You’ll really answer?”

Izuku sighs. “I promised, didn’t I? Hurry up. Clock’s ticking.”

“Okay, got it. Wow, you really don’t mess around.” Red Riot scratches his head. “This is a lot of pressure to put on someone on the spot, you know? Uh... Me and the hero agencies I’m workin’ with — we’re trying to hunt down the Eight Precepts of Death, since they’re responsible for the Quirk-breaking drugs and all. There’s a girl we need to save to do that, but we can’t find any information on where she is. We need that info, and we were hoping you could provide that.” He looks up at Izuku through his lashes hopefully, and the golden-dusk light of the street lamps catches on his irises, lighting them up from within.

“You are picking the worst possible person to help you, ever,” says Izuku.

“Not true! You’re pretty fast, dude, and whatever you’re doing to fix people’s Quirks is *really* useful,” Red Riot protests.

“You would think that,” Izuku says flatly. “Where do you even get the idea that I know anything about this? I’m not the right person to ask.”

“You somehow managed to find where we set up the trap,” Red Riot says. “You’re getting your information somehow. *And* you decided to help, even knowing that this was a trap.”

“Sure, under duress,” Izuku snorts. Specifically, the duress of feeling horrifically guilty if Eraserhead never got his Quirk back just because Izuku decided not to come.

Red Riot frowns. “Are you being *forced* to do this?” he asks, and, “We can help you! We’re heroes; it’s our job to protect people.”

Izuku just looks at him for a moment. “Thanks,” he says finally, “but even if I did need help you wouldn’t be able to help me. I also can’t help you, despite what you think. Ask your questions.”

Red Riot looks like he’s about to protest for a moment, but then he bites his lip, probably just as aware of the minutes ticking by as Izuku is. “What’s your real name?”

Izuku stares, surprised. And then he can’t help but let out a startled laugh — because that’s such a clever question, a wealth of information, and it would have forced Izuku to give up almost every advantage he had... if he had been any other person. “I don’t have one,” Izuku says. “Next.”

“What do you mean, you...” Red Riot shakes his head. “Okay, nevermind. Since you don’t have a real name, what name do other people use for you?”

He is really going for Izuku’s identity. “Some people call me Deku,” he says. Technically, it’s true. At this point, more people call him Deku than by his legal name.

Red Riot runs a hand through his hair. “Do you know, or could you find out, where the Eight Precepts’ headquarters are located, currently?”

“No,” Izuku says, “and possibly yes, but...” How should he put this. “...I’d rather take my chances deep diving in the Pacific without any gear.”

“You feel that strongly?”

“I said I’d answer truthfully,” Izuku says. He promised, anyways, and he’s bound to his word.

At that moment, he feels a flare of energy, and something blankets itself over him, heavy and cold and stifling. Izuku shudders. For a moment he can’t breathe, can’t move, but then the feeling recedes and he looks behind him.

“Is something wrong?” Red Riot asks, shifting on his feet to a fight-ready stance.

Izuku sweeps the second plane. It’s mostly quiet — but there are a few auras in the distance, moving, closing in, and there’s one signature across the street in particular that Izuku recognizes instantly. Of course Eraserhead is here and back on his feet already. He sighs. “It’s fine. But remember your side of the deal. Okay?”

He can feel the exact moment that the binding of his promise releases him. And then he’s running past Red Riot and swinging himself up onto the fire escape of one of the alleyway buildings, eyes trained on the roof. He can hear people bursting into motion after him, voices crackling on their communications devices. One last burst of speed and Izuku has vaulted himself onto the roof, wincing — he offers a mental apology to anyone he’s accidentally woken with the noise — and runs across the rooftop and jumps across the alleyway to the next building. It’s a moment’s work to scramble back down to the street, and then he runs for it.

Eraserhead’s aura pulses behind him, blankets his spirit and freezes it with the same mercury-cold touch as his guardian spirit’s power. All of Izuku’s muscles seize; he trips and falls to the ground, skin scraping open on the hard asphalt. He can’t breathe. He can’t move. He tries to flare his own energy and burn out the freezing cold of Eraserhead’s aura, but his energy is slow and frozen and refuses to budge. He feels like sleep paralysis has set over him, only now he’s perfectly lucid and aware for the burn of his lungs and the footsteps rapidly approaching and there’s not a single thing he can do.

“—just fell over—”

“—shouldn’t have that kind of effect on—”

And then Eraserhead's aura retracts, and Izuku gasps for air. He hauls himself to his feet and runs. There's no time to look back, but — too late.

White bandages wrap around his legs and pull his feet from under him. Izuku nearly eats the dirt again, but he manages to catch himself on his elbow and roll over, one arm raised to — to what? Fight an officer of public law? And then Eraserhead is there, and he grabs Izuku's wrists, and something cold latches onto them with a *snap*.

Izuku lowers his hands and stares at the new pair of handcuffs gleaming mirthfully at him in the lamplight.

“You,” Eraserhead announces, “are under arrest.”

Chapter End Notes

check out [this lovely gift art](#) that tumblr user @hyolks made, as well as more wonderful works in my [fic art tag](#)!

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Three heroes and an intrepid intern try to unravel the many, many questions surrounding this mysterious, and freshly arrested, boy.

Chapter Notes

for all you anime-only fans, this chapter contains references to the big events of the summer camp arc. spoilers! read at your own risk.

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

Kirishima Eijirou catches up with everyone else just in time to see Deku look up from his handcuffed hands and say, to Aizawa-sensei's face, "I just fixed your entire Quirk, you *cabbage*."

Eijirou chokes and nearly trips mid-stride. What kind of *balls* does it take to say that to the face of the guy who just arrested you? Holy shit. He's almost afraid to see what his teacher's thinking. But no, Aizawa-sensei just raises his eyebrow. It's the I-am-waiting-for-you-to-dig-your-own-grave eyebrow, not the You-are-an-idiot-and-I'm-about-to-destroy-you eyebrow (he has learned to discern this kind of vital, life-saving information from his many days in Aizawa-sensei's classroom), so Deku will *probably* be okay.

Except Deku takes one look at Aizawa-sensei's face and elaborates, "Okay, maybe that was a little -- I'm sorry -- you are a professional hero who risks his actual life doing hero stuff and deserves respect especially because you always do stunts that terrify me, like -- losing your Quirk and making a *trap* out of it -- which was really stupid by the way, because what would you have done if I didn't *come*, it was a *bad gamble* no matter how you look at it it was just really bad and what kind of person just *does* that--"

Aizawa-sensei's eyebrow climbs higher on his forehead, deeper into what is either Amused or Judgmental territory. Eijirou winces. Deku puts his face in his hands and doesn't get up from the ground.

A moment later, Deku pulls his hands away and makes a face at his palms. It takes a moment for Eijirou to spot the dark smear of blood trickling down from Deku's nose. "Wha -- hey, you're still bleeding! Are you alright?" Eijirou calls, jogging over and crouching down next to him. He almost forgot, with how quickly Deku took off once he'd answered all three questions, but Deku looks -- well. He looks awful, bleeding from his temple and his nose, and there's already splotchy-yellow bruises forming on his cheek. Eijirou has no idea what to do. He looks up to ask, but Aizawa-sensei is already digging through one of the packs on his side. Okay, sensei knows what's up, that's reassuring. Everything is going to be fine. "Sen-- er, Eraserhead'll patch you up real quick, so--"

"It's fine," Deku says.

"You got a *head injury*," Eijirou says. Those can be real bad. And it's a head injury from trying to escape from Eijirou, too, and even though it was accidental on both their parts he still feels terrible about it. The dude just fixed up sensei's Quirk and he looks totally beat up for it.

Deku is unfazed. "Blood is equally helpful outside the body as it is inside of it. I'm just leaking a bit," he informs Eijirou, which is the weirdest thing Eijirou has ever heard someone say about blood. "I can use this, though," Deku says. He sways, and Eijirou, worried, puts a hand on his shoulder to brace him.

"Hey, I'm sure you could," Eijirou says, "but, uh--"

"Blood has all sorts of uses," Deku says blandly, and then he mops up some blood onto his fingers, and starts painting onto the skin beneath his collarbone.

Aizawa-sensei snatches his hand before he can get more than a few strokes down. "And what do you think you're doing?" he says warningly.

"It's for *healing*," Deku says. Then, accusingly, "I'm pretty sure you stopped my heart for a few seconds. You owe me."

And then Deku actually stares Aizawa-sensei down. *Aizawa-sensei loses*. Eijirou unabashedly lets his jaw drop open when Aizawa-sensei slowly lets go of Deku's hand. This is the first time Eijirou's seen his teacher concede to anyone, what the hell, Deku is so frickin' *much*. The guy broke into a heavily patrolled area and Eijirou's pretty sure the only reason they caught him was 'cause he stuck around to make sure Sensei's Quirk got fixed up. At least, that's what he thinks it was -- he saw Deku put on that light show with that weird graffiti of his, and he also saw him almost pass out afterwards. At that thought, Eijirou winces, 'cause man, he really put Deku through the wringer, didn't he?

Deku is unbothered by all of this. He just resumes painting his own blood on his skin cool as anything, like it isn't even a big deal he just won a staring match against the pro hero who arrested him, and like it ain't a big deal to be painting with his own blood either. With quick, sure strokes, he writes -- well, he writes *something*, a symbol or a word that slides right out of focus no matter how hard Eijirou squints.

"There," Deku announces. He wipes his hand off on his pants.

Eijirou waits a beat, but Deku remains as beat-up looking as before. "Uh... you're still bleeding, dude," he feels the need to point out. There's a trickle of blood slowly making its way down the side of Deku's face. He doesn't look too hot. "Wasn't that supposed to heal you?"

"It was for preventative healing."

What the heck does that mean? Like a defense sort of thing? But why does he feel like he'd need--? "We're not gonna do anything to you," Eijirou says, feeling a bit stung.

"Maybe not on purpose," Deku says.

He doesn't even sound bothered by it. *That* -- the matter-of-fact way he says it, and accepts it as if this is just a fact of life -- is what gets to Eijirou the most. He only hesitates a moment before grabbing Deku's hand. Deku turns startled green eyes on him. "Deku," Eijirou says urgently, "I dunno who you've been hangin' around before, but we ain't like that. We're not gonna just *hurt* you. Promise."

Deku's eyes flicker, and he glances to the side at something Eijirou can't see. He looks back at Eijirou a moment later, blankly, as if Eijirou's words haven't even processed.

It's then that Aizawa-sensei shoos Eijirou away and starts fixing up Deku's injuries, for real this time.

There's not much to do after that. Eijirou chats with Hadou-senpai while someone else drives a cruiser over so they can all head home and get some sleep. Deku actually falls asleep while Aizawa-sensei is treating him --slumps right over and doesn't wake up -- and at first Eijirou thinks that Aizawa-sensei is gonna wake the poor guy and make him get into the cruiser himself, but Aizawa-sensei just sighs. He actually picks him up and carries him to the cruiser. Through it all, Deku doesn't stir or make a sound.

Eijirou recalls the bags he'd seen under Deku's eyes while they were scuffling. He looks like he hasn't slept in days. Maybe arresting him is at this point is a good thing; at least it'll force him to get some Z's.

They drop off Deku at Nighteye's office. Aizawa-sensei has to carry him in, too, 'cause he's so deeply out of it he doesn't even wake up when Eijirou shakes him.

Eijirou's a little surprised that Aizawa-sensei's being so nice, but when he thinks about it, it sorta makes sense. Aizawa-sensei's usually real hard on villains and criminal types, but Deku doesn't really seem like a criminal; and to top it all off, the guy knew this whole thing was a trap, and he still came. It's so manly, Eijirou can't help but admire him. And Aizawa-sensei -- well, if nothing else, he doesn't seem like the kind of person to forget what others have done for him.

Doesn't stop Aizawa-sensei from investigating Deku to hell and back though. He makes Eijirou sit down and recount his entire encounter with Deku on a voice recorder "while the incident is still fresh in your head." Everyone heard the conversation over the commlinks -- offered suggestions about what questions to ask, even, which had been super distracting -- but it's not like the commlinks record everything too, which is why Eijirou has to get it all down.

There's so much weirdness that it takes them almost thirty minutes to unpack all the weird things Deku implied. How did Deku know about their cameras and patrols? How did he

know that Aizawa-sensei took the Quirk-breaking drug on purpose? What did he mean when he said he was helping ‘under duress’ -- all signs pointed to Deku helping out ‘cause of a sense of moral responsibility, but is there actually some mastermind behind it all and Deku’s just the pawn? What the hell did he mean when he said he didn’t have a real name? And more than that -- Bubble Girl, who’d been managing communications said that Deku stayed three minutes to the *dot*. How did he know time was up?

But the weirdest part is probably trying to figure out what Deku’s Quirk *does*. He bit Eijirou like his hardening Quirk wasn’t activated at all, which would point towards Quirk cancelling. He’s been fixing Quirks up, too, but he has to do some kind of weird writing to do it, so what’s up with that? And the biggest mystery of all: why, when Aizawa-sensei erased his Quirk, did Deku collapse?

It’s almost like whatever Quirk Deku has, it’s integral to keeping his body functioning and alive. What was it he said earlier? *I’m pretty sure you stopped my heart?*

Eijirou hopes he’ll be okay.

--

He doesn’t get back to the dorms until almost 3:30 a.m., and getting up the next morning on only four hours of sleep is hellish. Dorm life continues as normal, though, almost surreally so. Eijirou tells Uraraka and Tsuyu what happened over breakfast, and they’re stumped by Deku’s weirdness too. They end up talking about it all the way ‘til class. Later, Mirio-senpai gives him a clap on the back as congratulations for last night’s deeds, and Amajiki-senpai, even if he doesn’t totally manage it, stutters out half a compliment before losing his will to speak. That’s it, though. The only change to Yuuei is this new experience that now resides in him and troubles his thoughts all day.

After school, Uraraka and Tsuyu wave him goodbye and take the train together to some other part of the city; apparently, Ryukyu wants to do some patrolling today, take an easy day after all that intense setup and those stakeout shifts trying to catch Deku. That leaves Eijirou and Aizawa-sensei to go to Nighteye’s office together. Aizawa-sensei spends most of the train ride napping, and Eijirou occupies himself with texting Bakugou and Kaminari. When they get to Nighteye’s office though, it’s sort of... in disarray.

“What happened?” Aizawa-sensei asks as, raising an eyebrow as he looks around.

Nighteye sighs, looking rather harried as he paces around behind the desk. “Deku just woke up and broke out,” he says, and Eijirou’s stomach drops. What? “We managed to catch him again, but this should not have happened at all.”

He gives them a brief rundown on all the weirdness that has happened since last night. Apparently it was like this: Deku slept for twelve hours. The security cameras couldn’t render his features clearly; they were strangely full of static, not enough to make the footage unusable, but enough that Deku’s face was a blur. When Deku woke up, he took stock of his surroundings quickly, investigating the bare room -- nothing but a bed and a table with a few chairs -- and the adjacent bathroom. He stood by the table for a moment, apparently lost in thought; and then he raised his head towards the camera, and that’s when the footage dissolved into static entirely.

Nighteye ran to the room, only to find it empty and the door swinging open. He called for everyone to scour the building, and they found Deku climbing out the fourth-story window. Deku jumped out the window and made it two blocks before Bubble Girl managed to catch him. Not with the bubbles, though. Deku somehow figured out a way to avoid them, and Bubble Girl still doesn’t know how. She had to catch him with pure fighting skill alone.

It’s a -- a relief that they caught Deku, because it would’ve been horrible if all that work was for nothing, but at the same time, Eijirou feels kind of bad. Most of all, though, Eijirou thinks he’s just impressed. He’s not sure he’d have the courage to break out of hero jail first thing after waking up. Deku’s real brave, or just kind of a madman, but either way -- he can’t help but admire his spirit.

At that point, Bubble Girl runs up to Nighteye’s desk and says urgently, “Sir, the fingerprint scans aren’t working either. For some reason, none of the computers or cameras can pick it up, they just go full of static like they do when we try and take a picture of him.”

Nighteye looks a lot like he’s about to curse, if he was the type of person to curse in the first place, but he just turns away with a sharp “tch,” and the cogs in the great machine that is his mind begin to tick at a faster pace. “There is nothing for it, then,” Nighteye says, finally. “We will simply have to conduct this investigation blind.”

With a sharp gesture of his head, he indicates for everyone to follow him out of his office, and then strides away with long steps that eat the distance of the hall. Eijirou exchanges glances with Aizawa-sensei, and they hurry after him.

The interrogation room is actually *guarded* now -- and by Fatgum, too. Holy hell. Through the one-way window, Eijirou can see Deku freshly handcuffed to the table, and he does *not* look happy about it.

“I am going to speak with him,” Nighteye tells them. “As participants in last night’s events, I would like you to observe his conduct and responses. Fatgum, you are here to provide a fresh pair of eyes.”

“You mentioned that cameras don’t work right on him,” Aizawa-sensei says. “Will the sound transmitters work?”

“It will be warped, and a... peculiar quality,” Nighteye replies. “You will be able to understand what’s being said, however. Any other questions?”

They discuss it a moment more, and then Nighteye goes into the interrogation room and Eijirou and everyone else settle outside the window to watch it happen.

It starts fine, with Nighteye giving Deku the usual, legally required introduction, and concluding by asking if Deku understands.

That's when Nighteye loses control of the flow of conversation, because Deku says, “Actually, I have a question. Your Quirk is some kind of foresight, right?”

Nighteye goes still, his head turning bird-like towards the boy.

“Right,” says Deku. “Well, if you can see into the future, could you, hypothetically, use your foresight to foresee the conversation we’re about to have, then evaluate all the answers I give you in the hypothetical future, and then ask me different questions based on what you learned

in that conversation? In that case, you would no longer be peering into the future, but an alternate future, right? So I can't figure out if your Quirk is evidence of predeterminism or not. I guess the only thing people are fated to do are the things they would choose to do anyways, but since you know what they'll choose you can change your own choices and that'll change the choices they make as well. So I don't really get it."

He pauses, and then he adds, "Plus, you could look ahead at this conversation we're having now and know that I don't have anything useful to tell you, so you might as well let me go and save us all the time."

Eijirou lets his jaw drop open. That's one *hell* of an opening move. Next to him, Fatgum says, "Huh! He's got spirit," and Aizawa-sensei lets out a huff that almost sounds -- dare he say it? -- amused.

Nighteye studies Deku for a moment more; then he turns away and starts pacing around the table, looming over Deku's small form. "Allow us to worry about whether your information is... 'useful' or not. If you answer our questions truthfully, things will go smoothly and you will have nothing to fear. If not--"

"Well, I guess I can save you some time," says Deku, talking right over Nighteye. The sheer audacity of it boggles Eijirou's mind. "I bet you'll ask questions like, do I know anything about the Eight Precepts of Death, do I know where they are located, do I know how they are blocking everyone's Quirks, and how did I get this information, and is there anyone working with me -- and the answers to those questions are" -- Deku starts sarcastically ticking off his fingers -- "no, no, no, no, and... I lost track of the questions. But the point is I actually have no idea what's going on aside from what Red Riot told me last night."

"So you say." Nighteye comes to a stop across the table from Deku, gaze piercing, glasses gleaming in the light. "But if it were so, then how is it that you learned of Eraserhead's lost Quirk, his location, and the security measures that were in place? How did you find out?"

"A very large fox told me. Room-sized. It can fly."

Eijirou chokes. What?

Nighteye just gives Deku an unimpressed look. “You take this so lightly?” he says, taking on a warning tone.

Deku just sits back and rolls his eyes. “What do you want, the truth or something? Fine. It was an anonymous benefactor who cares about Eraserhead very, very much and was willing to go to many lengths to help him.”

Nighteye pauses to digest this information. “A benefactor, you say? Then your incentive for fixing others’ Quirks is simply for profit?”

“Oh yeah, I get loads,” Deku says. “You should check out the shiny pair of bracelets I got last night.”

Eijirou has to bite back a laugh. “This is *unreal*,” he whispers to Fatgum, who just chuckles quietly at his comment. It’s *true*, though. The amount of sass packed into that small frame is unbelievable.

Nighteye simply disregards the sarcastic answer. “How did this... ‘anonymous benefactor’ know to contact you?”

“I think contact is way too strong of a word to use here,” says Deku, and when he doesn’t continue, Nighteye tilts his head in a slow, imposing manner, remaining silent and expectant. Deku huffs. “What if I told you that they just barge into my room at two in the morning without any rhyme or reason and drag me out of bed to run halfway across the city with no warning at all? What would you even say?”

“Then I would ask: why you?”

“My personal theory,” says Deku, “is that I was born under an unlucky star, so no matter how much I desperately wish for a quiet, peaceful, and uneventful life, I’m permanently destined to be thrown under the bus.”

Nighteye stares down impassively at him. Deku sardonically waggles his fingers in greeting, causing the handcuffs on his wrist to clink. The silence stretches, tense and poised like a hunting thing, until it snaps and Nighteye glides into a predator stride around the table.

“Do you understand the position you’re in?” Nighteye says softly as he circles. His tone has shifted, become something different like the velvet soft edge of the dark night.

“Arrested,” says Deku. He does not shift or blink. The implied danger of Nighteye’s tone washes over him, drips right off like water from wax.

“Arrested,” Nighteye agrees, with a smile that is too sharp under the harsh shadows and the knife blade of his glasses gleaming in the light. “That means, Deku, that you are under our power. Our control. It would be in your best interests to cooperate with us. It won’t be hard at all; only a little honesty, and you will be free and on your way.

“But if you aren’t willing to cooperate... then that will make things more difficult, won’t it? We try and deal like gentlemen, here; let us keep to civil discussion, and nothing more.” He comes to a stop across the table from Deku, hands clasped behind him, gaze lifted to some unseeable point. “But do not make the mistake of thinking we will not go *further*. Now that you are here, you are far from untouchable -- and you cannot escape the consequences of your actions. Choose wisely.”

Eijirou can barely breathe through the tension in the interrogation room, the darkness that seems to clog the air. Deku, though, he just smiles. It’s not a mean smile, but it’s not nice, either. The smile of someone who knows a secret that you are not privy to. “With all due respect,” Deku says, “you cannot keep me here.”

That doesn’t sound good. Eijirou bites his lip. But Nighteye scoffs, unfazed. “If this is about your earlier escapade, don’t let it go to your head. You didn’t succeed; we won’t be so relaxed again. Nor will we be so lenient. It would be in your best interests to cooperate with our questioning; if all goes well, you may even leave within a couple hours. None of us desire to be your enemy; in fact, we’d prefer the opposite. However, if you continue to be uncooperative, you’ll find yourself on your own.”

Deku bursts into startled laughter. He quickly composes himself again, but the strange reaction has Nighteye raising his eyebrows anyways.

“That’s hardly anything new, Nighteye,” Deku says, smiling in a bemused sort of way. “You’ll need a better threat than that.”

The honesty with which he says it makes Eijirou’s breath catch. *Hardly anything new*. There’s a horribly quizzical amusement in Deku’s eyes as he looks at Nighteye, like the suggestion that he’s ever been anything but alone is the funniest joke he’s ever heard. *Hardly anything new*. It hits an uncomfortable chord in him, as those words tumble around in his mind, rattling like a hollow wooden box full of bones.

Maybe it’s just some mind game that Eijirou’s not picking up on, but it sounds like Deku saying, *I’ve always been on my own*, or maybe something closer to, *I don’t have anyone but myself*. It makes Eijirou want to throw open the door and shout at Deku that he’s *not* by himself, that he’s *not* alone, that he must have *someone* who will fight for him -- and if he doesn’t, then at the very least, the heroes will. But Eijirou looks again at the handcuffs gleaming shiny and clean on Deku’s bony wrists, and everything he wants to say comes crashing down inside.

“And more importantly,” Deku continues, not missing a beat, like the unhappy implications he left mean nothing at all, “you’re right about one thing: we should have a bit of honest conversation. How about this? While we’re in this room, you can lie to and threaten me as much as you want, but the moment you lay a hand on me, the law’s on my side, not yours.”

Nighteye’s face doesn’t budge. “According to Public Law 155-32, Subsection IV, Clause 2B-
_”

“Clause 2B was thrown out six years ago,” says Deku. “It got replaced with Public Law 187-14, which hasn’t been modified since. And beyond that, I’m still a minor, so you have to abide by the additional restrictions in subsection 4. I know my rights, and judging by your expression you know them too. Actually, you would have been a very bad hero if you didn’t know all this -- I really shouldn’t give you any props.”

Then Deku proceeds to lay out, in excruciating detail, exactly what laws govern the hero offices, what procedures they have to follow, and what the limits to their interrogation methods are, and exactly what they can’t do to him.

Then he says, “I don’t know who asks me to fix people’s Quirks. I don’t know their names. I definitely cannot describe them to you; they always come at night when it’s dark. So I really have no leads for you. You can’t prove that I do, either. You’ll question me like this for two more days, but after thirty six hours you’ll have to file your charges against me and turn me over to the Police Force, and I get to talk to a lawyer.

“You’ll probably charge me with vandalism, breaking and entering, non-consensual Quirk use on another person, and obstruction of justice. What vandalism? The paint is all gone, and in any case, that’s no serious charge. Breaking and entering? Okay, but what did I damage? What harm did I do? Instead I use the opportunity to restore Eraserhead’s Quirk, and isn’t that a helpful intent? So what if I broke in -- I’m just a teenage boy, I was scared of getting publicly involved, so of course I would try and do things quietly, to the point of stupidity. Youth is like that. Non-consensual Quirk use? You set an entire trap for me. You wanted me to come, and there’s not a person in this world who’s gonna believe it if Eraserhead says he didn’t want me to fix his Quirk. The most I’m going to get is a slap on the wrist. And obstruction of justice? I *fixed Eraserhead’s Quirk*. I tried so hard to help a hero when no one else could, and I got arrested and interrogated for it, and now I’m being charged just because I don’t have the answers you want to get.

“Does any of that look fair? Who’s going to win the court case? I’m young, and scared, and even if I did some things wrong I still restored Eraserhead’s Quirk. The judges will be kind to me; I’ll leave with a minor sentence of community service, you’ll get a reprimand for wasting your time on such minor infractions as mine, and you’ll have wasted two weeks on me instead of investigating your other leads.

“I can afford to wait it out, but you can’t,” Deku concludes. “I’m guessing that whatever your case is, time is of the essence. You can’t afford to wait that long, or spend that much time on me. So as you can see, the best option for everyone here is just to let me walk out of the station and forget about it all.”

Eijirou can’t even begin to think of a rebuttal to that. There’s utter silence -- both within the interrogation room and without -- and Aizawa-sensei leans back slightly, his mouth splitting open into an almost manic grin.

“You’re happy about this?” Fatgum murmurs from the side, sounding more amused than anything.

“Impressed,” Aizawa-sensei corrects. Eijirou has no idea what to make of that.

In the room, Nighteye bows his head, and the harsh lighting from above casts his face into shadow. He turns away from the window, from Deku, and his shoulders tremble -- faintly, at first, but then more obviously as he begins to chuckle aloud. “I see,” he says. “It seems, this round, I have been bested. I will consider your words.”

And Nighteye leaves the room, and Deku slumps back in his chair, and -- and just like that it's over. Eijirou can barely believe it. Deku, just by knowing their limits, has somehow defanged all of Nighteye's weapons -- and all that's left is to retreat, rethink, and regroup.

--

Aizawa-sensei is the second one to try.

Deku doesn't say anything to him when he sits down across from him, but he does stop fidgeting with the chains on his handcuffs. He sits up straighter, drawing into himself like a winch wound tight, watching Aizawa-sensei with dark and uneasy eyes. Aizawa-sensei waits for a few seconds, almost like he's waiting for Deku to start the conversation, but when he doesn't, he takes the lead himself.

“Yesterday, when you restored my Quirk, you changed something about it,” he says. Hang on a minute. Deku *what*? Hey, isn't that bad? Eijirou looks at Aizawa-sensei, who's waiting expectant for Deku to say something.

Deku hesitates and licks dry lips, then parts his mouth to say, “That'll be 500 yen.”

Eijirou's mind stutters briefly. Next to him, Nighteye lets out a surprised *Ha!* Even Deku blinks rapidly after he says that, like he's just as surprised as everyone else at what he said.

Aizawa-sensei stares at Deku for a moment, then says, “If you are willing—”

“It’s twenty percent simple interest every 12 hours, actually, so 600 yen now,” Deku says, and immediately looks mortified. Eijirou has to bite back a laugh.

“If you are willing,” Aizawa-sensei repeats after a pause, “I’d like to hear the specifics.”

Deku shifts and slides a suddenly blank gaze towards Aizawa-sensei.

“Why?” he says. “You must have noticed all the changes by now.”

“Some,” Aizawa-sensei confirms. “But possibly not all. I do rely on this Quirk for my profession; I’d like to hear all changes straight from the sources, rather than chance upon them in the midst of a crisis.”

“If you rely upon it so much, why did you deliberately risk losing it?” Deku asks. His tone isn’t accusing or angry, just tired, and almost rote, like he’s reading off a script he’s tired of acting.

Aizawa-sensei answers him anyways. “It was a logical decision. All signs indicated that you had a strong moral compass; I was willing to stake my Quirk on that information. A simple enough ruse, albeit with high consequences.”

Deku lets out a breath. “Yeah, that’s what I thought,” he says, sounding the tiniest bit bitter now. “Sure. I’ll tell you what I did to your Quirk.”

Aizawa-sensei raises an eyebrow. “Really?”

“No.”

Eijirou sucks in a breath, and Aizawa-sensei is leaning forward, brows furrowed and mouth open to make a retort, but Deku keeps going with, “I can’t tell you something I don’t know, anyways.”

“Something you don’t know?” Aizawa-sensei stares. “Do you mean to say that you modified my Quirk without any real idea what you were *doing*?”

“Yeah.” At Aizawa-sensei’s sharp look, Deku smiles sardonically and says, “Don’t look so upset. It was a logical decision.”

“In *what* conceivable way?” Aizawa-sensei demands. He almost looks... frazzled. It would be funny, except if Eijirou got his Quirk modified by a guy who had no idea what he was doing, he’d probably be the same way. He can’t laugh at Aizawa-sensei for that.

Deku shrugs, unfazed, and his gaze drifts from Aizawa-sensei to the empty space next to his head. He goes quiet, something wire-tense in his pose like a deer poised to take flight, and he mutters something to himself that causes Aizawa-sensei to frown in confusion and the speaker to fill up with static.

“What did you say?” Aizawa-sensei says sharply. He sounds almost confused. Deku, though, he doesn’t reply; he moves his gaze across the bare room, and then for a moment, he looks directly into Eijirou’s eyes.

Eijirou startles back. Deku shouldn’t be able to see him through the one-way glass, it should be impossible — but Deku looks away a moment later. That must have been a fluke, right? There’s no way he could’ve seen Eijirou there.

“Well, it *is* your Quirk,” Deku allows finally. “You have a right to know. I can’t give you anything concrete, but I can give you my best guess at what changed. If you want to hear the opinions of an amateur.”

“An amateur?” Nighteye mutters, frowning. “As opposed to what?”

Aizawa-sensei narrows his eyes at the wording, too. “Amateur?”

Deku gives him a measured look. He allows, “The first time I restored someone’s Quirk was with Suneater, and you’re the first person whose Quirk I’ve modified.”

“The *first*?” The slightly horrified expression Aizawa-sensei makes is almost comical. “Why mine?”

Deku shrugs. “It just didn’t feel right, so I just sort of... smoothed it out a little bit? Tweaked it? I think it should be improved now, at least. Should I give you my best guess?”

“...Yes. I think that would be for the best.”

Deku nods. “You’re okay with everyone hearing this?”

A pause. “Yes.”

“Okay. Well...” Deku splays his hands. “It’s like this. Um... Quirks have this sort of, energy powering them? I don’t know the official term.”

“Quirk Factor?”

“Yeah, sure. Well — your Quirk works by, um, ‘freezing’ someone else’s Quirk Factor. Or paralyzing it. Although it’s still there, it can’t be channeled or used. This gives the illusion of ‘erasing’ someone’s Quirk. But in order to freeze someone’s Quirk Factor, you have to... um...” Deku frowns and looks down at his hands. “...I’m not sure how to describe it. You sort of — invade their system with your own energy. Does that sound about right so far?”

Aizawa-sensei nods, slowly. “And this is what you gleaned last night?”

“And from when you used your Quirk on me,” says Deku wryly. “Hard not to figure out how it works when it’s used on you firsthand.” Eijirou’s unimpressed by this statement. *He’s* never figured out how Aizawa-sensei’s Quirk works, even after three months with him as a teacher, and here’s Deku figuring it out after six seconds. “Anyways, for you, you need to — um — plant your energy in your target’s system *somehow*. Physical contact, eye contact, that sort of thing, but from the goggles around your neck I would guess you only need to have a visual on your target in order to activate your Quirk.”

“What do you mean by saying, ‘for you’?”

“Oh, that was — uh. For your kind of Quirk. It’s just how, um, Quirks like yours tend to...”

“Emitter-type Quirks?”

“Um, no. Not necessarily. They’re... I mean, they all have a certain feel to them I guess. Sorry. I don’t know how to explain it.”

Aizawa-sensei accepts this with a nod and indicates for Deku to continue.

“Okay. Um... I’d guess that your Quirk, previously, had some kind of limitation to the amount of energy you could put out at a time. Say — a time limit? Or maybe if you lost a visual on your target, or blinked... I’m not really sure. But it shouldn’t be a problem anymore. I think you should be able to output however much energy you want for a sustained period of time, at least, until your stamina runs out. I mean, your Quirk Factor stamina, I guess? That kind of thing. That’s the extent of what I can guess... if you want more, you’d have to tell me more about your Quirk.”

“The energy I have to use on others — is it a fixed amount, or does it vary depending on the person?”

“I — well, I’d imagine it varies.”

“By your estimation, how long would I be able to hold the effects of my Quirk?”

“Er—” Deku flounders and looks to the side. A moment later he says, “Maybe — five minutes continuously, on average? You’d have to exercise your Quirk more to get it longer than that.”

“And how long to replenish my reserves?”

“I...don’t know. It changes from person to person.” He sighs and sits back. “Any other questions while we’re at it?” He takes a look at Aizawa-sensei and adds, “Don’t answer that.”

“What breach in our security allowed you to find our location, as well as our traps and shifts?” Aizawa-sensei says thoughtfully. Eijirou sucks in a breath. Why’d he ask that? Deku has given almost complete nonsense answers to every question so far, and the rest are functionally useless -- there’s no way he’ll just give out answers so easy.

“Oh,” says Deku, like a realization. “You think--” He stares at Aizawa-sensei and shakes his head. “It’s not... I mean. There’s no one else in the world who could exploit the same weakness, I can promise you that.”

Aizawa-sensei takes a moment to digest that info. “It’s related to your Quirk,” he says carefully.

Deku twists his lips into something mockingly sardonic and doesn’t answer.

“What is your Quirk, exactly?” Aizawa-sensei continues, still careful, like he’s approaching a cornered feral cat that might attack any moment.

“Isn’t that the question to end all questions?” Deku smiles thinly. It’s a quick, fake thing plastered onto his face, and it doesn’t quite fit right all of a sudden, doesn’t touch the shining gray light in his eyes or the shadows that draw long and deep at the side. “Why don’t you give it your best shot?”

The strange humor that's filled the air buzzes, like the static of a T.V. when something's gone wrong beyond the wires and you don't know where. Eijirou can feel his muscles tense, even though there's nothing he can do from outside the room if the conversation goes wrong. And he *is* scared it's gonna go wrong. He can't explain it, this feeling, but he really hopes Aizawa-sensei doesn't make a wrong step somewhere because he thinks if they do, they'll be going in blind.

"The cameras and electrical equipment don't work right around you," Aizawa-sensei says, with an odd and deliberate weight to his words. "You can sense the 'energy' that powers a Quirk, and modify it. When I erased your Quirk, you collapsed."

Deku tilts his chair back on two legs, irreverently lighthearted despite the heavy atmosphere.

"Your Quirk -- you are composed of a form of energy that allows you to sense others' energy, as well as disrupt electrical processes," Aizawa-sensei guesses.

"That's a pretty good guess," Deku says lightly. Eijirou doesn't know why, but Deku's airy demeanor fills him with deep unease. "I think you could even say it's true."

A pause. "Is it?" Aizawa-sensei says, cautiously. He must've sensed it too, Eijirou thinks, that great lurking unknown looming so close and full of shadow behind Deku's words, drawn in by this game of words and by Deku's empty smile.

Deku hums and raises his eyes to an empty spot in the air again, looking at something that they can't see. Whatever he sees there makes him pull his lips back into a grin that's all teeth.

"It's a secret," he says. "A secret that no one knows, that one will suffer, and one-half loathes. Who knows if it's true or not? The only thing we can confidently say is that it's one thing that should not be."

"Is that what you've been told?"

Aizawa-sensei's words strike quick as a snake. Deku stutters to a halt. "What--"

"Or, to be more accurate," says Aizawa-sensei, "is that what you've been led to believe?"

The front legs of Deku's chair come back to rest on the ground. He's looking at Aizawa-sensei now, all the previous amusement and mirth stripped away to reveal a pale bareness underneath.

"It is what it is," Deku says quietly.

"It is what you believe."

Deku doesn't reply; he just looks at him with this sort of blankness to it, not like an unmarred sheet of paper, but like digging through the dirt by the riverside and finding nothing but smooth, muddy clay.

"Anonymous benefactors who are aware of your skill, who you dislike, and who you likely would have avoided if not for your sense of personal responsibility," Aizawa-sensei says into the weight of Deku's silence. "Your comment last night that you were doing this 'under duress.' Your belief that you are on your own. -- Whoever these people are, they are taking advantage of you."

Deku's gaze is riveted to Aizawa-sensei, now. His eyes have gone dark. "I know."

"You displayed reckless behavior and disregard for your own health and well-being. They have taught you to devalue yourself."

Silence. Something dark shifts behind Deku's eyes, dispassionate and wary and calculating all at once, like the possum that once got trapped in Eijirou's room and refused to leave

because Eijirou was in the way; instead, it had crouched in the corner and watched Eijirou for hours with its cold animal eyes.

“You’ve been forced into doing this,” Aizawa-sensei says, a question disguised as a statement -- or maybe not a question at all -- and this, somehow, of all the things he’s said so far, feels the heaviest of them all.

Deku licks his lips. His previous stillness slides away from him; he pulls motion and life back into his form and puts it on like a drapery, or a costume that doesn’t fit right, dragging at the corners where the movement should be smooth. “You,” he begins, and stops, and turns his eyes up in an eyeroll that feels a bit too tired and a bit too performative all at once. “They’re not -- I’m not being forced to do this.”

Aizawa-sensei considers him, almost indifferently, from beneath his messy black hair. “Have they hurt you in the past?” he says finally, and his words are pointed, but at the same time, oddly flat, like he already knows the answer but still needs the answer to be said anyways.

In the hollow quiet that follows, Deku does not turn his head to meet Aizawa-sensei’s meaning-heavy gaze. The fluorescent lights in the room flicker, leaving imprints of strange and twisting shapes on the walls. It is uneasy. It is uneasy, and a lukewarm sort of chill drips down Eijirou’s spine.

Finally Deku looks back at Aizawa-sensei. The light has not dimmed, but all of a sudden, the shadows seem darker. Shifting. Crowding in until they suffocate the withering brightness in the room. The light is gone from his eyes, and something inhuman and infinitely dark looks indifferently back out at them from within.

“Don’t ask for answers you won’t understand,” he says lowly, melodious into the suspended calm.

Eijirou sucks in a breath of air he didn’t know he’d forgotten to take. Deku turns away from Aizawa-sensei, away from the window, and the strange perception of darkness that had settled across the room is brushed away like cobwebs by the light. Aizawa-sensei shifts from where he was sitting riveted in his chair and starts speaking again, asking Deku what he means by that, and what was that just now?

As the silence between questions stretches he moves on to ask different things -- direct, cajoling, or belligerent, trying all sorts of things. But no matter what he says, Deku doesn't speak to him again.

--

It's Aizawa-sensei's idea to send Eijirou in. Eijirou thinks it's a horrible idea, 'cause he's super lost in all the weirdness that has happened today, and a little intimidated too, and he doesn't know what he's supposed to be going for. But Fatgum tells him that Deku might be more willing to talk to Eijirou 'cause he was the one who Deku negotiated a deal with yesterday, plus Eijirou's his age and probably seems like less of a threat to him. And besides, Fatgum adds, it's good practice for when he's a hero and has to help conduct these investigations himself.

Everyone walks him through some suggestions on what topics to bring up, and which ones not to, but he still feels nervous as he walks up to the door. He takes a deep breath. Okay, he can do this. He can totally do this. He pushes the door open and walks in.

Deku lifts his eyes up at the sound. "Oh, it's you," he says.

Eijirou can't quite tell what emotion is behind that sentence. "Um, I come in peace?" he offers, holding up the bowl of freshly-made cup ramen in his hand.

"Oh," says Deku again. Then, "Thanks, but if I eat anything right now I'm gonna throw up. I wouldn't say no to some water though."

"Throw up? Are you sick?"

"No," says Deku, and proceeds to explain exactly nothing.

“Uh, okay.” Eijirou decides not to ask any further and hands Deku a bottle of water.

Deku snatches it up with a “thanks!” and he promptly chugs down half the bottle. He really must be parched. Eijirou feels a little guilty; they probably should’ve given Deku something to eat or drink as soon as he woke up.

He’s interrupted from his thoughts when Deku sets the bottle on the table and turns his attention towards him. “So, Red Riot,” he says, and it’s jarring to hear his hero name coming out of Deku’s mouth, “what can I do for you today?”

Deku values honesty, Aizawa-sensei told him. Eijirou flounders for an answer for a second, and what falls out of his mouth is, “I’m supposed to try and negotiate a deal with you.”

Aw, fuck, he probably shouldn’t have been that direct.

“A deal?” says Deku, looking surprised. He blinks, glances to the side, glances back. “And they sent you because they thought I’d be more willing to talk to you...?”

Eijirou winces. Was he that transparent?

“Isn’t that too much stress to put on someone?” Deku says, more to himself than to Eijirou.

“I think breaking into a hero office is more stressful than that,” Eijirou can’t help but point out. Honestly, he can barely even imagine himself doing half the shit that Deku has in the past 48 hours.

Deku snorts. “Fair enough. So what’s this proposed deal you’ve got?”

Eijirou can’t hide his surprise. “You’re willing to negotiate?”

“I do want to get out of here as much as the next person.”

“Yeah, I bet,” says Eijirou. “But I meant -- I mean, yesterday you and I made a deal, and you got arrested anyways. You’re still--?”

“It’s not like you broke your promise,” says Deku. “You promised not to try and stop me from escaping in the future, and you didn’t. You just didn’t help me, either. Me getting arrested is more on me being a dumbass than you being an oath-breaker or something.”

Oath-breaker? That’s a weirdly archaic term to use, and there’s a solemnity to the term when Deku names it, too. Eijirou has no idea what to make of that. “Man, I kinda thought you’d be more mad at me,” he says instead, scratching the back of his neck. “I’m glad you’re not, but I still feel kinda bad about the whole thing.”

Deku shrugs. “I kept my end of the promise; you just need to keep yours. Don’t worry about the rest.”

Eijirou blinks. But according to what Deku just said, he’s already kept his half of the promise, hasn’t he? What else is left? He opens his mouth to ask, but Deku continues with, “If I’m mad at anyone, it’s at Eraserhead.”

“Eraserhead’s just doing his job,” Eijirou protests, because he has an obligation to defend his teacher.

“He *arrested* me,” says Deku irritably. “I know I’m providing my services for free, but this isn’t an unlimited service, you know? There’s a limit to what I’ll take. Next time he can fix his Quirk on his *own*. ”

There’s so many things Eijirou could ask about, but what he ends up asking is, “Limited based on what...?”

“My *patience*, ” Deku says emphatically.

Eijirou can't help laughing at that. Deku's really mad about this. He can't really blame the guy, though. He thinks he'd be even more mad or disheartened than Deku, if he was in his situation, but he's not really sure what to say in response. It's not like he can apologize for arresting Deku or something. Before the pause can drag out for too long, though, Deku closes his eyes, lets out a breath, and when he opens his eyes again he looks calmer. Forcibly so. "So, what's the deal they sent you in with?"

Eijirou's brain blanks out. "Uh..."

Deku huffs in amusement. "Really?"

Now would probably be a good time to sit down and pretend like he actually planned this ahead, so he does that. "I didn't think it would be this easy, I guess. I mean, you talked down freakin' *Nighteye*, and he's scary smart, I thought I didn't have a chance."

"It's just talking," Deku says with a shrug. "Talking is just about the only thing I'm good at."

"That is *so* not true," Eijirou says indignantly, because *what*? "You broke into the building where the trap was set up, *and* you broke out of here first thing when you woke up!"

"Yeah, but I got caught both times, didn't I?" says Deku pessimistically, and before Eijirou can say anything to *that*, he continues with, "So what do you want out of this deal?"

Eijirou wants to keep fighting Deku on this point, because Deku has done a *lot* of crazy bullshit in the incredibly short time period that Eijirou's known about him, and that's not useless at all. But he has a job to do, so he grimaces and lets the topic drop. "Well -- I guess first off, what information are you okay with telling us?"

"You know, I think that's the first time anyone has asked me what I'm okay with," says Deku thoughtfully. "I'm going to need a moment to savor this feeling."

“The -- the *first*?”

“Kidding,” says Deku. It didn’t *sound* like a joke. “I honestly can’t think of any information I’d have that would be useful to you, so what do you want to know?”

“Er... the descriptions of the people who asked you to help fix their friends’ Quirks?”

“Any description I give you isn’t going to help you find them, I promise you that.”

“Why not?”

“Please just trust me when I say it’ll be a waste of time and resources for both of us.”

Eijirou doesn’t want to get drawn into an argument, so he drops the subject. “How about the names, descriptions, and locations of the people whose Quirks you fixed?”

“Oh, that’s actually a good one,” Deku says with surprise. Then, “I never actually asked for any of their names, but I can do my best for the other two. What else?”

“Er... a way to get in contact with you?”

“No way,” says Deku immediately. Yeah, that’s what Eijirou thought.

Eijirou wracks his brain for something else to ask for. He doesn’t want to bring up Deku’s “anonymous benefactors” again, ‘cause they seem like a real sensitive subject. But they’re also how Deku allegedly got all his information, and, well, they *really need* that information. He hesitates. He should buy some time with another question while he’s trying to think of a way to ask about the “anonymous benefactors” thing tactfully. “This one isn’t, uh, strictly necessary, but I was -- kinda wondering. You knew that the whole thing was a trap, right? So why’d you come, really?”

Deku considers him for a long moment before he lets out a sigh. "Someone had to do it."

His tone -- matter of fact, resigned -- strikes a familiar chord, and Eijirou finds himself jolting to attention, like previously he was experiencing the world in 740p and it suddenly switched to HD. He's heard this voice before, heard these words before. "So I did what needed to be done. That's all," Deku continues, and that only makes the sensation worse.

I'm doing what needs to be done. He remembers clear as day that quiet voice over the telephone, so tired and so determined nonetheless. Eijirou blinks; the realization hits him in the chest, and he looks at Deku with new and startled eyes. Is he--?

Deku shifts and sits back warily, eyeing Eijirou with trepidation. "What is it?" he says.

"Nothing," says Eijirou quickly. "It's fine. I just thought -- that's real admirable of you to say. 'Cause you really *didn't* have to come if you didn't want to, y'know? I don't think anyone woulda blamed you."

Deku closes his eyes. He looks -- small, and tired, sitting all alone in that chair against the blank expanse of the bare wall. "There's no one else who can," he says, "so I have to do it."

Eijirou knows those words. He has replayed them over and over to himself at night when the night terrors are too close and sleep is far from coming, replayed them so often they're burned into his memory. Once was coincidence enough, but with this, he *knows*. "It *is* you!"

The words come out of him in one big exhale, all at once. The magnitude of it -- it's an answer he's wanted for how long, now, and here it is, right in front of him and yet the mysteries surrounding it are too murky to understand.

"It's...me?" says Deku. He looks at Eijirou with the quiet alarm of a cat who's been disturbed, and it doesn't know why.

“It’s *you!*” Eijirou says, and the truth of that statement finally hits home. “You’re the one who told me about Kamino Ward!”

Chapter End Notes

for anyone who doesn't remember, kamino ward is the location where bakugou was taken after being kidnapped by the villain alliance.

izuku talks more in this chapter than he normally would, but, yknow, extenuating circumstances.

many thanks to [salvainterra](#) for beta reading the chapter!

a truth stranger than my own worst dreams

Chapter Summary

It seems, no matter what he does, Izuku can't escape the consequences of what happened at Kamino Ward.

Chapter Notes

i've introduced an unbelievable amount of fuckery into this au in one chapter and i'm having the time of my life. brace yourselves

chapter warnings: non-consensual situation (not sexual; see end notes for more details)

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

You're the one who told me about Kamino ward!

Izuku's body seizes up without his consent, flinching backwards as if he's just been doused by a bucket of ice water. His heart rate picks up in an instant, andante to allegretto, and the words *How did you know* almost fall out of his mouth in his shock. He clamps down on it. He can't admit to anything in here. "Kamino ward?" he forces himself to say, and it comes out in a remarkably level voice, so distant and alien it might as well belong to someone else entirely. "You mean the thing with All Might's fall?"

"You called me," says Red Riot, looking at Izuku with an intense dawning amazement in his eyes, like -- like Izuku is some kind of... hero, or something. Someone to admire. Izuku wishes he'd stop. "Well, I mean -- you called Bakugou's phone, and I picked up, but you told me where to find him!" He leans across the table, seizing Izuku's hands in his. "I--"

"I think I'm getting the picture here," Izuku says, calmly. He's definitely calm, so calm that he can feel his heart racing in his chest so fast it just about might burst. "But I'm not the one who did that."

“It was you,” Red Riot insists. “I recognized the words you used, you said the same thing to me over the phone. ‘There’s no one else who can, so I have to do it.’ That’s what you said! But you’re not alone anymore, Deku, we can help you too!”

“You’re basing your belief that I’m the one who told you about Kamino Ward off of -- a single phrase?” Izuku says in disbelief.

“Two phrases,” Red Riot corrects. “And both of them, you said exactly the same.”

Izuku thinks his hands might have started shaking. He tries to pull back, but Red Riot clings, and Izuku doesn’t have the steadiness to pull away right now. “Just coincidence, I’m sure,” he chokes out. Red Riot starts looking a little bit alarmed. Hah. If anyone in this room has the right to be alarmed, it’s *him*. “This happened -- at least a month ago, your memory can’t be *that* good--”

“Yeah, I, uh,” Red Riot swallows. “When you asked me to get a pen and paper, I put Bakugou’s phone on speaker and recorded the conversation with my phone.”

“You,” Izuku starts, and then he stops, and then he suddenly becomes intensely aware of the fact that he’s sliding out of alignment with the body he’s inhabiting; the outline doesn’t fit anymore. He feels like he’s looking down at his body from far away, nothing more than a spectator in a strange and surreal movie, and the only audience members are himself and the ever-growing fear inside him. Huh. His hands are definitely shaking now.

“It wasn’t me,” he forces out, and his stomach is churning, he feels like he’s going to throw up. Red Riot *knows*. He has indisputable evidence of his interference, and they’ll know that he -- he --

Eraserhead’s spirit moves forward, eyes flashing. *Calm down, boy*, it orders. *You will not be able to lie convincingly otherwise.*

“But it makes sense,” Red Riot says earnestly. “You were able to get information no one else could -- both back then, and again with the Eight Precepts! Plus both times you were all like

‘sorry, gotta run, I’m being totally anonymous’ and you didn’t really want to get involved but you still did ‘cause you thought it was the right thing to do!”

“Stop it,” Izuku says, a little too loudly. He’s starting to feel uncomfortably hot, like he’s caught a fever, and the room is starting to look worryingly fuzzy. “You’re just -- making assumptions. It’s got nothing to do with me.”

“It’s not like it’s a bad thing!” Red Riot protests. “Hell, if anything, it’s freakin’ awesome! And like, I just wanna say -- if you’re the person who interfered at Kamino Ward’s fight, too, then we all owe you a huge thanks.”

They owe him their *thanks*? Izuku laughs. And then he laughs, and he laughs, and he can’t make himself stop. Red Riot is starting to stand up from his seat, eyes wide, but honestly, who cares? Kamino Ward was -- it was --

Calm down! Eraserhead’s spirit barks. *You’ll do no one any good like this!* It lurches forward at him aggressively, like its attack could make things any better than they are now, and the flash of brilliant light reflecting off its fur--

-- there’s sharp golden light pulsing around his skin, his hand is outstretched to wrap its fist around the core of the crushing dark, and in him and around him everything is burning terrible and holy, and in the distance someone screams with the pain of being known and unmade, screams and screams and screams its agony out long and loud for the heavens to hear, but he can barely care; he can barely hear it over the pounding of his heart in his ears, and the singing promise of--

“--ku? C’mon, man, you’re gonna be okay, just take a deep breath in and out, alright?”

Someone is shaking him lightly by the shoulders. The air around him is cold. He feels lightheaded and short of breath, and his lungs ache faintly like he’s just run an entire marathon. Izuku forces himself to take a deep breath, and another, and another, and then he peels his eyes open to see Red Riot kneeling by his side.

“You’re hyperventilating,” Red Riot says quietly.

“*Am I*,” Izuku says. His heart is racing at a dangerously high speed. The back of the chair is pressed uncomfortably against his spine, where he must have slumped against it. Izuku tries to prop himself up, but he’s still shaking, the world tilts around him, and he ends up clutching Red Riot’s hero uniform in an effort to keep himself from falling. Red Riot steadies him, and Izuku feels both humiliated and grateful.

“Do you need anything?” Red Riot asks quietly, hovering worriedly by his side.

“Let me out of here,” Izuku says, and normally he wouldn’t be so straightforward or desperate, but he *is* desperate. He can’t stay here. “Haven’t I -- I -- I’ve already given you enough.”

“I, uh.” Red Riot looks wide-eyed and distraught. “I can’t do that.”

Izuku closes his eyes, tired. He doesn’t know why he asked; Red Riot isn’t on his side. No one is. “I’m done with this,” he says instead, looking at Eraserhead’s spirit in the eyes. “No more deals. And if that’s too much to ask, then just -- just leave me alone. Just for a little while.”

The fox spirit watches him uneasily from the other side of the table, and its nine tails wave slowly behind it. The cold halo of its aura has taken a heavy lead-weight to it, something that leaves an unpleasant phantom taste on Izuku’s tongue. *I will not apologize*, it says.

Izuku just looks at it, for a long moment. He didn’t ask for an apology.

The fox spirit meets his gaze, but in the end, it looks away. It rises to its feet and glides away, stepping through the wall and disappearing with a flick of its ghostly tails. In the corner, Red Riot’s spirit watches on. Izuku turns and raises his gaze to meet Red Riot’s eyes.

Red Riot’s aura flutters with a sour, guilty hesitation, and he’s looking at Izuku with -- not pity, exactly. Izuku knows pity. This, though, this is closer to helplessness, and Izuku doesn’t understand that at all.

“I’m sorry,” Red Riot says.

Izuku stares for a second, because -- an apology? To *him*? When’s the last time -- and what is he supposed to *say* to that -- he has to suppress an incredulous laugh, because what the fuck? Why is he *apologizing*? “What are you sorry for?” he says, a little wild, a little accusing. “This is just your internship.”

Red Riot just looks more upset at that, which is the first clue that Izuku probably forgot the proper social response to an apology. Izuku gives up. He doesn’t know what he’s looking for. When Red Riot searches his eyes, he has nothing to show but the dark shadows in his mind.

Red Riot can’t hold his gaze. He finally turns away and quietly leaves through the door, and his aura is tinged with the dark red-purple of shame as he goes.

Izuku feels uncomfortably like he’s once again missed his line in the script of some great play. It’s not an unfamiliar feeling, but it’s never a pleasant one. He watches Red Riot’s aura recede into the distant corners of the building, lets his gaze drift to the three heroes’ auras still hovering beyond the window, and deliberately turns his face away from them. He wishes -- he wants to be out of here. He hates being trapped. They've taken his pens, his stamp, they've emptied his pockets and taken his keys, and of the one hidden set of lockpicks he still has on him, he can't reach it without showing his hand. If only Izuku hadn't been a colossal dumbass and gone the extra mile, fixing up Eraserhead’s Quirk. He would have finished faster, he would have had enough energy to run away, he would have been *gone* by the time Red Riot came along. Teaches *him* to go out on a limb and try and do good -- but he never fucking learns, and this is what he gets out of it.

Izuku would hate everyone for it, but it's his own damn fault for caring too much.

He splays his hands on the table and can feel them still trembling slightly, like a runner’s legs after running too long a race. *Calm down*, he orders himself. Get over it. The threat is gone, Red Riot and the heroes aren’t in the room anymore.

It doesn’t do anything for him, because he knows the heroes are there, and more than that, Red Riot’s guardian spirit is still crouching in the corner and watching Izuku as if he is

simultaneously the funniest and most irritating chess game it's ever seen.

Fucking hell. He's so tired.

Screeeeetch.

He flinches violently and can't catch himself in time to stop himself from looking over. Red Riot's spirit slowly scrapes its stony claws together, setting Izuku's teeth on edge, and when it catches him looking, it smiles at him and uncoils from the shadowy corner in which it's been resting. It's a great four-legged beast, ambiguously canine or feline, as if it couldn't decide between a lion or a bulldog; its fur is an iridescent red-gold, and standing at its full height, its curling green-blue mane nearly reaches the ceiling. It reminds Izuku of the liondog guardian statues he's seen before, but far larger, and it sports an intricately carved stone armor that covers most of its body.

Boy, it addresses him, in a thundering echo of a voice. *Negotiate with my charge.*

Izuku's been passive-aggressively ignoring it this whole time, but hey, as long as it wants to talk. He crosses his arms and glares up, unimpressed. "Are you happy now that you've gone and ruined everything?"

The spirit pulls its lips back into what might be a threatening snarl or a very aggressive, self-satisfied smile. Either way, it has a lot of very sharp teeth. *I've done my duty well.*

Izuku glares harder. A glance at the window reveals that there's still one hero outside the cell, and he doesn't want them eavesdropping. He switches to the second intonation. *I don't owe it to you to help you carry out your duty*, he says, a bit more snidely than he needs to, but he's still mad, so he doesn't care about being polite anymore. *Negotiate with him yourself.*

It just keeps grinning at him, if it's grinning at all. *You know I cannot speak with him.*

That's not my problem.

It lowers its head until its face is right in front of Izuku's. One snap of its teeth, and Izuku's head would come clean off. Hah. That would be, well, it would be kind of funny. What would the heroes make of that? *I can make it your problem*, the spirit offers, in the kind of voice that suggests it would be equally amused whichever way Izuku chooses.

Izuku smiles insincerely. *Just try it, then.*

It takes every ounce of willpower he has to hold himself still as the spirit leans forward and closes its jaws around his upper body, plunging him into darkness.

For a moment he thinks he's miscalculated, and he really will die here, in the most pathetic way possible -- bisected by an invisible monster in the middle of a jail cell -- and then the protective ward he wrote on his collarbone last night flares to life. He grits his teeth as it burns itself into his skin, and the spirit's massive pearly teeth skid off of him in a flurry of angry red sparks, tearing his hoodie as it goes.

Izuku takes a couple of deep breaths as it sits back and roars with laughter, aura flaring with mirth and rage. The rune is still burning on his collarbone. *Of course!* the spirit chuckles. *You, of all things, would not be destroyed so easily.*

Has word spread so far among the spirits, then? Izuku snaps out, projecting as much boredom and bite into the words as he can.

After what you did to the unmaker of names... The spirit rolls its eerie, multi-ringed eyes to meet Izuku's gaze. *We all remember what you did.*

If you try and kill me again, he says acidly, *I could do it to you, too.*

But you won't, says the spirit confidently, tilting its head. Izuku wishes it would drop the grin; it's unnervingly fixed in place, like a doll's. The only thing shifting about the spirit's expression is the direction of its gaze. *If you had the will to do it, you would have spoken accordingly.*

Izuku scowls. This is why he hates the second intonation -- it makes it impossible to lie, otherwise he could have told the spirit, *if you try to kill me again, I'll do it to you too*. Without the resolve to follow through, he can't say the words. *It's hardly the only thing up my sleeve*, he says sharply in an attempt to recover. *What do you want?*

I already told you. It sits back with a close-lipped smile, but the fangs still peek out from the gums. *Negotiate with my ward. You cannot give away the secrets of our world, but there is still information you may give*.

The locations and descriptions of the previous victims of the Quirk-breaking drug, huh? *I have nothing to gain from it*, says Izuku. *And I already said: I don't need to help you in your self-assigned duty*. He pauses, and then he says, deliberately, *What will you offer me in return?*

He lifts his chin in a challenge. Izuku doesn't often go about the proper ways, but when he does, it's usually to drive the spirits off. There aren't many who are willing to pay a price to him.

The spirit considers him. *Name your price*, it says.

Izuku narrows his eyes. So that's how it wants to play, huh? *I want you to help me escape in such a way that it's impossible for the heroes to find me again*.

It rumbles with what might be laughter or a growl. *You name an exorbitant price, boy*, it says. *Lucky for you I am so interested. Very well. In exchange for revealing what information you can to my charge, I will help you escape*.

Izuku stares. Then, quickly, *I won't give him the information before you help me*, he warns.

And how will you contact him after you've made your escape? it queries.

I have my ways, Izuku says flatly, and refuses to elaborate after that.

The spirit draws its lips back into a grin, teeth glinting in the light. *Then we have a deal. Upon name and soul I swear to you.*

A deal upon name and soul I swear to you, Izuku agrees, and he feels it settle in his bones -- a promise, and a warning. This is how things are properly done: one way or another, a price will be paid.

The spirit lowers its head to look him almost face-to-face. *I know your title*, it says with mirth, *but you do not know mine. I am the stone-shaker, the earth-lion, the shrine-fang. You may call me any of these.*

Whatever you say, temple dog, Izuku says.

It laughs at him. *Impudent, aren't you?* it says, uncomfortably close to a jeer. *It's a wonder no one has killed you by now.*

Oh, they've tried. Izuku bares his teeth in a smile. *I'd say it's more impudent for you to make demands of me.*

It rumbles, a growl or a chuckle. It considers him for a moment, and then it says, *Well, boy, how adept are you at channeling another's energy?*

Absolutely not, says Izuku.

Its expression doesn't change, but its aura almost seems to sharpen, scraping where it meets Izuku's energy. *But you did quite well against the unmaker not three fortnights ago. Did you not?*

No.

Something rumbles deep in its chest -- a growl, or the shifting plates of the earth itself, harsh as the sharp edges of obsidian rock. *If you can channel my energy, it is your best method of escape.*

No, Izuku repeats.

No? Its aura presses down on him, crushes his lungs between two iron jaws until he's gasping for breath. *This is your way out, boy. You would be a fool to refuse.*

You mean I'd be a fucking idiot to accept, Izuku snarls out between short, ragged pants. He's being incredibly offensive, he knows; offering one's energy to another is *never* done lightly. It is a huge gesture expectation, and to refuse without good reason is one of the greatest insults he can give. But he doesn't care, because --

Red Riot's spirit bares its teeth and *snarls*, and the baritone vibration rips its way through the breath in his chest. *We have made a deal, boy.* Its mane starts flaring out, shifting with the invisible wind of its anger. *I can smell the stink of your fear. I will not leave my word unfulfilled for the sake of your petty human cowardice.*

Izuku laughs hysterically. Human? Him? *You don't know a fucking thing*, he says. He can't -- he can't fucking do this. Especially not after everything that happened at Kamino Ward. He can feel himself smiling, but he doesn't know why, and what the fuck does this look like to anyone watching right now? Him talking himself to hysteria? Haha. Ha ha ha ha ha. God, this is the funniest fucking thing that has happened to him all day. *You don't know a fucking thing*, he repeats, and he can't stop laughing. He buries his face in his hands to stifle the sound, but his shoulders keep shaking. His shoulders keep fucking shaking.

Do not make a mockery of me! Red Riot's spirit growls. *You cannot be so offensively ignorant as to misunderstand the magnitude of what I am offering you. You will not refuse!*

You can't make me do anything, Izuku says. Which is not something he should be saying to the invisible monster that's demonstrably totally okay with killing him, but hey, the last 24 hours have been nothing but a series of bad decisions after bad decisions! Why not add another to the pile! *You can take your offer back and shove it up your ass.*

The spirit thrusts its blunt muzzle into Izuku's face, black lips pulled back in a snarl that frames its marble-stone teeth in perfect, unearthly symmetry. Its aura pulses with power, howls over him like the screaming wind, and with raised voice and words that tear into the essence of who he is, it roars, ***I will not be denied!***

The full force of its will slams into him. Izuku gasps. His back hits the chair with a lightning-spark pain that spiderwebs up his spine, disrupting his focus. His resolve falters, just for a second, but just a second too much. The compulsion smashes through his defenses, that thin dividing line between himself and the vast rippling energies that swell up from the ancient hills to meet him, and the compulsion burns black through him until there's nothing but the teal-blue tide of the temple dog's energy, flooding in, overwhelming him, painting his vision in reds and golds and grays -- it washes at his banks; it pulls him in and muddies the waters until he can't tell who -- who--

-- who indeed? it doesn't matter, such a small thing. it doesn't matter. only listen to the slow growing song of the earth that reverberates until it dominates everything within. only feel the living stone under your feet, only feel the great song woven into the fabric of all things, only open yourself to it and slip in through the stones --

-- no, cries a small thing, head barely above the tides, *don't do this to me, this isn't, it's not -- no, no, no, no, NO--*

--Izuku opens his eyes in a dizzying, bright wash of colors that make nothing coherent at all. "Get out of my fucking head," he says, but his tongue is dry and stuck to the roof of his mouth, his jaw is locked, he's slipping back into the singing earth, he's going to lose himself - again -- not AGAIN, he can't -- it swamps him. the stones sing a choral harmony, eons old, of wheels of burning fire and tongues of flame roaring their mighty warsong to the seas, given structure and form and strength in stone, and the humming of footsteps and the dust of living things sinking into the depths, lost to the great song. it sings so loud within him he can barely remember his own voice. it tells him to listen. it tells him, taste the mud between your teeth, the scrape of granite in the bending of your knucklebones, the earth the stone the iron in your heart and blood, if you would only hear if you would only open your dumb mouth to sing. if you would only sing -- the song is in your bones already, if you would only sing -- no, he doesn't want that! He can't lose sight of himself! *Get out*, he tries to tell the spirit, *get out, get out, get OUT--*

But it doesn't listen, because no one ever listens. Izuku's voice is lost to the chorus. The spirit impatiently sweeps him aside. It wouldn't have to if he would just stop for a moment and *listen*, if he could just see that the easiest way to do what needs to be done is to accept this gift. If he wasn't so mortal and slow.

The thing is, connections open both ways.

Izuku's resistance snaps. The floodgates roar wide open, and the spirit rears triumphant to enter through the gates -- but Izuku strikes first.

The spirit recoils. For a moment, their shared being and memory is alive with nothing but a deep, primal fear, a soul gazing into a swelling tide of darkness and finding no light nor foothold nor even itself as the dark rises to meet--

He doesn't care. He reaches out. He takes.

--

Izuku has willingly opened himself up to a connection only three times before. The first time was betrayal; the second and third, desperation. But it is the first of these things that stayed with him most. The world taught him many lessons as he grew older, and the most important he learned was to never trust himself to others so freely ever again.

--

When the white finally fades from his vision, the lights in his room are shattered and sparking. The door slamming open to reveal the pro hero Fatgum. The light from the hallway spilling over his hood and uniform, and his long shadow stretching to swallow the darkness of the room. But though Izuku knows the shadows should be dark -- they sing, more silver and beautiful and terrible than the song of the earth, vast as void and the tapestry of infinite dark suspended between the planets and the burning stars and better suns than here.

The temple-dog's energy has been burned out of him, but it has opened doors greater than it could ever have imagined; he can hear the voices of the endless universe singing under his feet.

What just happened? someone says, distant and irrelevant, so small it is lost to the hearts of stars singing deep beneath the soil. Lost to the blooming nebulas staining the dark sky with color, miles upon miles of light and rivers of fire and the promise of something new. Izuku can almost hear the words and language they speak; something so close, so distant, something he has never known -- but they ring with such magnificent, terrible truth that he thinks, maybe he has always known them. Maybe they have always lived inside him, alongside the bones. These melodies, these words, that burn with such ferocious clarity that if he just spoke them aloud then the far would become near and he could reach out and pluck the stars from the sky and cradle them in his hands.

Deku?

Izuku reaches out, eyes transfixed on the distant hearts of stars. One whisper is all it needs. He could do it. He can. If he could just shape the cold clay of his lips --

Deku! the voice calls to him. The not-name ripples through him, a still pond disturbed by the shadow of a leaf, and curious he turns his gaze to seek the one who would try to name him. But no aura stands before him in this ocean of star and void. Well, no matter. There are far more interesting things to listen to anyway. He reaches out to listen, but--

Deku, someone says forcefully, *Deku, can you hear me--*

--and something touches his body, and Izuku comes back to himself with a start, and all the visions of the universe start sliding away as though it was them that were the illusion and not the poor, false construction of a room around him all along.

“Deku,” Fatgum repeats from somewhere far away, and his hand is warm and heavy on Izuku's shoulder.

It takes an eon, but mere seconds too, for Izuku to remember how he is supposed to fit into the small confines of his body. He holds up his hand, turns it this way and that. Is this his? How has he ever considered himself something so... so small, so simple and well-defined?

“Deku,” Fatgum says. Izuku blinks, startled. He’d completely forgotten he was there. “What happened?”

“What happened,” Izuku repeats, and his tongue feels so thick and clumsy compared to the singing notes of the universe sliding along strings of starlight. How does he live like this? How has he ever? “What do you mean?”

“You were...” Fatgum frowns. “I’d say catatonic but you seemed to have woken up just fine. And then there’s the fine mess you’ve made of this room.”

The hero’s eyes look at him tense and alert, scanning the fathomless dark that has spilled through the corners and the red and gold sparks falling through the air. His eyes hold questions. And of course they do. But they are as meaningless as the crooked, knotted bark of a tree.

Izuku feels sorry for it, all of a sudden, this dull and sorry creature of so much blood and dust. Why has it come here, what brought it running when it does not belong? Not with its gray, translucent mortal body, a shambling clay thing stumbling around in the dark with no sight nor inkling of the shining rivers that weave the world along. It tries to speak to him, but its poor voice -- so small, like the tapping of an ant’s feet against the earth. Who would ever hear it? Who would ever care?

Him?

... He should care. Right?

...

Izuku looks back at the room. It really is a mess, somehow, even though it is still so bare and empty a skeleton that it could barely be called a part of the earth. Glass shards from the shattered lightbulbs have fallen over the table and on the floor like a strange and razor-sharp snow, glinting in the faint orange light spilling from the hallway. In the second and third planes, he can see the twisting, warped echoes of the struggle between himself and the temple-dog. Can human eyes see anything of it? Can humans see anything of importance at all?

Fatgum doesn't say anything; he just hovers over Izuku's shoulder, still waiting for an explanation. What does Fatgum want him to say, though? He doesn't know. "Oops?" he tries.

Fatgum gives him a strange look. "What did you do?"

The question sparks up something resentful in him. "*I* didn't do anything," Izuku says, but -- "Well, maybe a little bit at the end." He *was* the one who-- ...

He doesn't want to think about it. Instead, he considers the room again. "Could have been worse," he offers.

Fatgum looks a little amused at that. "And what were you tryin' to achieve, exactly?"

Izuku wonders, if he told Fatgum the truth, what he would be able to hear. "It's not *my* fault," he reiterates. This is a really important point to make, even though he can't quite remember why. "You can't reasonably force me to..." To what? What can he say in the human tongue? "To force me to listen to the music of an entirely new level of existence and expect me not to retaliate."

Judging by the look on the hero's face, this means just about nothing to him. It really can't understand anything, can it? Izuku looks at it with pity. "It wasn't very good music," Izuku offers it anyways, as a sort of condolence prize for trying to understand things anyways.

He's lying. It had been wondrous and magnificent and vast, awesome in the very original definition of the word, so beautiful he'd almost...

A cold feeling washes over him. The world comes into sharp focus, driven by the thud of his heartbeat in his ears. He'd almost lost himself in it, hadn't he? He almost lost himself in it. But he wants it. He wants to hear it, now that he knows. He wants it the way a drowning man wants air. And he can't help but listen for it again.

The song is fading, now, quieting to mere whispers of the vast earth-chorus it was before. He can no longer hear the core of molten earth, nor the starmetal that shone in distant lights. But in the quiet are the small voices: the stone foundation of this building, the dirt under the street... the discordant not-quite-hum of the metal in his handcuffs, like the susurrus of rough sea pebbles washing against the shore.

"--worried me for a moment there!" Fatgum is saying in the distance. "Your skin was cold and clammy and you didn't seem like you knew what was happening around you" -- but Izuku is caught on the faint strains of music so close and so near; it hums in him, so sure and cold and silver in the dark. He listens to it. Feels it beat in time with his heart. He knows it in his very bones. And in that stillness between beats, it is the easiest thing to just -- slip the handcuffs off his wrists.

Fatgum tenses. Izuku only sits there, taking in the sight: the handcuffs, still locked, still whole, still functioning perfectly except for the fact that they are not where they should be.

"Don't worry, this is new," Izuku assures Fatgum. Fatgum does not look reassured.

Izuku should try and smooth things over with the hero, he knows, but why should he care, when the song is even now fading, even now gone, leaving nothing but a ringing silence behind?

Without it, the handcuffs have no life of their own; they are nothing but the shining steel that made it, deaf to the worlds and words of humankind. Izuku picks them up and weighs them in his hands, as if that could give them voice again, but they sit as dull and dead as rotted wood.

He might never hear them sing again.

Fatgum's expression morphs into one of concern. He gently nudges Izuku into facing him, and Izuku looks up at him blankly. "Are you alright?" the hero asks.

"Why wouldn't I be?" says Izuku.

"You're crying," he says.

Izuku touches his hand to his cheek. His fingers come away wet. He notices now the hot tears dripping down his face. It's the loss, he thinks. How strange this must look to Fatgum right now, to walk into a prison and find the lights shattered, the prisoner absent, and then the prisoner returned in mourning.

"Oh," he says quietly.

"Was this an escape attempt?" Fatgum asks, gently again, like he's speaking to a wild animal that might scare if he's too loud.

"It was..." Izuku doesn't know. "I'm too small," he says, in lieu of trying to explain anything. A fresh wave of tears comes, and he wishes it wouldn't. "I wish I could stop being me."

Fatgum looks at him, melancholy and sad, as if he has perceived even a fraction of what Izuku is trying to say. Then he should be grieving.

Instead, he is kind. He is kind when he tries to comfort Izuku, kind when he asks him questions, and kind when he shoos Izuku to a different interrogation room so the one with the lights destroyed can be repaired.

--

It takes almost half an hour for the aftereffects of his encounter with the temple-dog to fade. Izuku spends the entirety of that time lying stock-still on the small bed in the interrogation room, staring blankly at the ceiling and contemplating the mistakes he's made.

He has made an uncountable number of mistakes in the last twenty-four hours, honestly. The first and foremost was helping Eraserhead. The second-most important, though, was accepting help from someone else.

How stupid can he be? He's learned this lesson so many times before. The self-hatred in him curdles, a sour and rotten black thing that sinks down into his chest. He's so tired of this all.

Needless to say, he's not in a very good mood when Eraserhead's spirit creeps into the room through the wall.

It approaches him but stops a few feet away, tails wagging in trepidation, unsure of whether or not to approach. Well, good. It should be unsure. This whole thing is its fault, anyways, except for the part where Izuku agreed to help.

"What do you want?" he snaps, tilting his head over on the mattress, but only the bare minimum to glare into its eyes.

I bring a message from the earth-lion, the fox says, lifting up its chin and setting its jaw.

The small movement lingers in his mind's eye: the subtle fear, resolve, defiance. It remembered what he's capable of, then. Or, no, it didn't remember; it was reminded. Something in his chest tightens, and he's not sure if it's because of the fox's fear or because it didn't find him worth fearing before.

The fox shifts uneasily under his gaze; its aura goes metallic and frost sharp, but Izuku doesn't acknowledge its sharp edge lashing at his skin. "I don't want to hear it," he says finally turning away. His voice is low. "I don't want to see it, either. Tell the temple-dog to leave me alone."

Its tails lash, ghostly and shining under the fluorescent brightness of the room. *And what of your deal?*

Izuku looks at it sharply. It jerks back before it can catch itself, but then it meets his gaze with its own defiant eyes, mouth drawn up into a barely-suppressed hint of a snarl. Izuku feels cold and dark, looking back at it with something almost close to the cruelty of indifference. But not quite.

“Not that it’s any of your business,” Izuku drawls, “but I’m breaking it.”

The fox hisses, almost involuntarily, Izuku thinks. Its snarl is no longer repressed. *You do not want the consequences of that.*

Don’t pretend like you actually care about my well-being, Izuku says, low and sharp.

The fox flinches back. Its aura fluctuates with frissons of nervousness. Izuku doesn’t care.

“Besides,” Izuku adds casually, and watches through half-lidded eyes as it presses its ears back in hostility. “I could break the temple-dog’s binding oath quite easily, right now.” He smiles. He can feel how it only moves his lips, how it doesn’t touch his eyes. “But you already suspected that, didn’t you?”

You took its name, it snarls.

“It should’ve known better,” Izuku says. “And you, too.” He looks at it, and he feels rather tired of this, all of a sudden, tired and bored of this story. “It sent you to negotiate, didn’t it? Too afraid to show its face to me right now, because of what I could do.”

The lack of answer he gets is confirmation enough.

“I’m not going to do anything,” Izuku says with a sigh, closing his eyes. He doesn’t want to look at the fox. It probably won’t believe him, anyways. “I can’t blame it for what it tried to do.” A connection as the temple-dog wanted to form would have been harmless, beneficial even, to anyone other than him. The mistake it made was trying to treat him like another spirit.

It’s funny, really, if Izuku feels particularly ironic today.

The fox is silent, but it doesn’t get up to leave. Izuku waits for it to do something, but when nothing is forthcoming, he looks at it again. Its head is turned towards the window, and its eyes are narrowed, fixed on something far beyond.

“What are you looking at?” Izuku says suspiciously, and does a sweep on the second plane. Nothing too unusual there. But on the third--

--a very familiar aura is bearing down on his location with frankly alarming speed.

“Oh, no,” Izuku says, just in time for a blur of peach, gray, and white to hurl itself angrily at his chest and knock him back onto the bed.

“Idiot! Stupid idiot!” it yowls. “I’ve been looking for you *everywhere!*”

Izuku covers his face with his hands. This is so mortifying. “Senshajou please go away.”

“I *told* you not to call me by that stupid name!” Senshajou demands, perched on his chest, claws digging into his jacket. Izuku grumbles and tries to push them away, but they cling so angrily that he just gives it up for a lost cause.

...*Your name is ‘carwash’?* the fox says.

“It sure is,” Izuku says.

“No, it’s *not!*” Senshajou says.

“Jou-chan.”

Senshajou yowls again. “You’re so annoying!”

You named one of the secret-seekers... ‘carwash’? the fox says incredulously.

“To remind them the folly of giving me any kind of naming power, ever,” says Izuku, deadpan.

The fox goes quiet at that, and, well. Whoops. Sensitive topic there.

Senshajou sniffs. “It’s a mockery of the powerful grace encapsured by my *real* name,” they tell the fox. “He’s always so annoying! You do so many favors for him over the years, and then he just up and disappears and specifically wards against you sending messages just ‘cause he doesn’t want anything to do with your kind anymore, and you don’t know what’s going on with him for weeks! You’re worried sick! And when you *do* hear any news from him it’s because the dummy got himself landed in human jail!”

“I’m right here, you know,” Izuku points out.

“*Now* you want me to talk to you!” Senshajou cries indignantly, tail whipping from side to side. “After months of radio silence! *Now* he wants interaction!”

Should I be calling you... ‘carwash’? the fox asks.

“Is that *all* you’re capable of thinking about right now?” Senshajou demands.

“Yes, you absolutely should,” says Izuku.

Senshajou meows angrily. “Take me seriously, Izuku-tan!”

“I really don’t want to,” says Izuku. “You’re going to call me a dummy for...” Uh, for trying to cut himself out entirely from Senshajou’s existence. “...getting myself arrested, like some kind of dumbass.”

“You’d *deserve* it,” Senshajou says haughtily. “But it’s not *entirely* on you. If no one provoked you into doing things you’d just shut yourself in your human room all day.”

“Hey,” Izuku protests.

They look at him archly, and Izuku has a flashback to every single time they climbed into his room to just find him days deep in a depressive episode. Izuku shuts his mouth.

“If it’s anyone’s fault,” Senshajou continues pointedly, “it’s *yours*, foxface.”

Izuku stares up at the cat spirit. They don’t pay attention to him; their eyes are narrowed at Eraserhead’s spirit instead.

The fox bristles. *It was his choice*, it snaps. *The consequences are his to bear*.

Red-hot rage flashes through him. “I got *arrested* for you, you asshole,” Izuku snarls.

“He completed your task without complaint, and he’s being punished for it, but he hasn’t asked you for anything in return,” Senshajou says at the same time, drawing themself up. “You owe him a *debt*.”

Izuku tenses. “Why--? No, it’s fine. No one owes me anything.”

“See?” Senshajou says triumphantly.

He himself has absolved me, the fox replies icily.

“And if you had any integrity you’d know that you owe him a debt, anyways.”

Izuku really... feels kind of uncomfortable, having someone else defend him. It’s weird and he doesn’t like it. Maybe that’s why he never knows how to act around Senshajou. “It’s fine, Jou-chan.”

“No, it’s not! If you keep doing whatever others ask you to and never say no then they’ll just take advantage of you.”

“It’s fine.”

You’re a lying liar who lies, Senshajou tells him.

No I’m not, Izuku wants to reply, but he wouldn’t be able to say it in the second intonation, and saying it in the first would be as good as an admission. So instead he says, “Don’t you have anything better to be doing?”

The look Senshajou gives him is searing and so full of pity all at once, it makes Izuku want to scratch that look off their face, makes him want to throw them out of the room.

I did what was necessary to protect my charge, the fox says stiffly, rising to its feet. *I will not owe anyone for it.*

“You’re ungrateful, that’s what you are,” Senshajou declares. “Ungrateful. A coward.” The fox glares at them, but it turns to walk out of the room. “Yeah, that’s what I thought, foxface! Just turn and run, just pretend that this isn’t your fault.”

The fox ignores him as it slips from the room, and then it’s just Izuku lying on the cot with a cat spirit making itself at home on top of his chest.

Senshajou looks at him for a long moment. Izuku resists the urge to swallow, or lick his lips, or apologize for trying to leave them behind. It wasn’t fair of him, he knows, but he...

“I’d tell you to apologize,” Senshajou says, “but I know you wouldn’t, because you’re so allergic to that! And I’d be mad at you longer, except I know that this is just you trying to protect yourself and preserve your freedom above all else. So I’ll forgive you! Just this once! And just this once, I’ll also tell you a super top-secret secret for free!”

“For free?” Izuku says skeptically.

“Pet me,” Senshajou demands.

Izuku obligingly starts petting their head. The fur is soft under his hands, and when Senshajou starts purring, the vibrations manage to calm something tense and knotted in him that he didn’t know was there. That’s all they do for another five or so minutes, lounging on the bed until Izuku feels almost centered in himself again.

“Hey, Jou-chan?” he asks eventually.

“Mmm?” Senshajou lifts up their head sleepily, eyes heavy with sleep.

“What was the thing you wanted to tell me?”

“Mmm.” Senshajou puts their head back down on their paws and closes their eyes. “There’s a detective coming here to ask you about Kamino Ward.”

Izuku has exactly one moment to process that and let the full horror of that realization sink into him before someone knocks politely on the door.

--

When Tsukauchi Naomasa enters the room, Deku is lying on the bed and regarding him with a betrayed look. What’s more weird is that Deku, inexplicably, has a cat sleeping on his chest.

Naomasa *really* wants to ask, but he just summons a warm smile and says, “Hello, Deku-kun. My name is Tsukauchi Naomasa” -- he flashes his badge -- “and I’d like to talk to you about Kamino Ward.”

Deku doesn’t answer. He only looks at Naomasa suspiciously, and then he gives the cat the most searing look Naomasa has ever seen and says, “You’re useless.”

That’s... not really the reaction he was expecting. “What did the cat do to you?” Naomasa asks, projecting an air of harmless curiosity.

“Their warnings are useless, that’s what,” Deku says irritably. If Naomasa didn’t know better, he’d say the cat looked smug. “And for that, you can shove off,” Deku tells the cat, and unceremoniously drops it on the floor.

The cat yowls and springs to its feet. Deku ignores its offended hiss and sits up, looking at Naomasa irritably. “What do you want?”

“To speak with you about Kamino Ward,” Naomasa repeats patiently. He gestures at the table with the hand of his that isn’t holding his briefcase. “Would you like to sit?”

“No.”

Naomasa nods politely and pulls up one of the chairs from the table so he can sit by the bed. Just as he's about to sit, though, Deku says, “Don't do that,” and gets up from the bed, brushes past his chair, and sits at the table instead.

This conversation is not off to a great start, but Deku hasn't started off by spitting insults or attacking Naomasa's code of ethics and is only being an uncooperative teenager, so it's probably workable. Naomasa is sure that he'll get something out of this, if only he's patient. He picks up the chair and sits at the table across from Deku without commenting and pulls out some of his papers and a notebook.

Deku slouches belligerently in his chair and pins Naomasa with a piercing, unwavering stare. Naomasa isn't sure if he's trying some bizarre form of psychological warfare or not, so he decides to just go ahead and give him the legally required introduction and information before beginning the questioning. Nighteye informed him that Deku already had a frighteningly thorough understanding of the law, but that's no reason to skip procedure.

Deku's expression doesn't change through the entire thing, nor does his focus waver. He doesn't do anything when Naomasa finishes, either, just draws his eyebrows into a deep furrow and frowns very seriously at him. Naomasa waits for a good ten seconds for him to say something but he doesn't. “Are you following me so far?” Naomasa eventually feels the need to prompt.

“Yeah, I got all the legal jargon,” says Deku. “I'm just trying to figure out if it's a typical fashion choice of yours to wear a snake around your neck.”

Naomasa looks at Deku. Deku looks back at him, not seeming to even comprehend the level of weird that just came out of his mouth. “...I'm not wearing a snake,” Naomasa says.

“Maybe not on purpose,” Deku allows. “I was thinking that was a little bit too flamboyant for a professional like you.”

Naomasa doesn't even know how to respond to that, much less figure out why the hell his Quirk hasn't detected a single lie from Deku thus far.

"Would you care to explain... *why* you think I have a snake?"

"No," says Deku.

He should have expected that. He's starting to get an inkling of what conversations with Deku are going to be like. "Okay," Naomasa nods. "Then let's move on."

"Were you involved with the incident at Kamino Ward?"

"Nope," says Deku, inspecting his fingernails with boredom. Naomasa's Quirk pings -- *so he was there, Kirishima-kun was correct* -- when Deku looks sharply up at him.

"What was that?" Deku asks suspiciously.

"This is just a simple question-and-answer, right now," Naomasa says with his best friendly smile. "Would you like me to repeat any of the information I gave you at the beginning?"

"No, I know this is a Q-and-A, I wanted to know what that... ringing noise was."

Ringing noise? Naomasa listens, but doesn't hear anything. "The air conditioning, perhaps?"

"Doubt it. This place is pretty state of the art, it'd be pretty weird if their A/C was bad enough that it rang like a bell..."

Naomasa writes *possibly enhanced hearing?* on his notepad. "I'm sure it's nothing. Have you ever had any contact with the Villain Alliance, in any capacity?"

“No,” Deku says flatly. A lie. “What is that ringing noise? It happened again?”

“I didn’t hear anything,” Naomasa offers.

“Yeah, of course you didn’t,” says Deku. “Just like everything else in my... actually, hm. That’s an idea.” He looks at the area of Naomasa’s neck. “So... guess what. My favorite color is yellow.”

Lie. Naomasa blinks at the non-sequitur. “I see.”

“Just kidding. It’s green.” Not a lie, this time. “Alright, I think I got it.” Deku looks at him, and then he asks Naomasa something.

But Naomasa can’t tell what. It’s like -- like trying to hear the sunlight, or taste the wind, or like someone has finally found a way to speak silence. It eludes his mind’s grasp. What is this...? Some of his confusion must slip into his expression, because Deku just nods -- looking relieved, but also oddly resigned -- and sits back. “Nevermind,” he says, still resigned. “Ask your questions, I guess.”

“...Just now,” Naomasa says slowly, “were you testing my...?” Did Deku guess the nature of his Quirk?

“What do you think?” Deku says with such polite honesty that he must be mocking Naomasa. Deku gives him a small, sardonic smile a moment later. He’s definitely mocking him. Naomasa represses a sigh and writes, *figured out Quirk within minutes. How?*

“Did you call Red Riot and tell him where Bakugou-kun had been kidnapped to?”

“Nope,” says Deku glibly, even though Kirishima-kun has evidence to the contrary. It doesn’t register as a lie, though, so--

“Let me rephrase,” Naomasa says. “Were you the one who imparted that information to Red Riot?”

“He certainly thinks I am.”

“And you?”

“I think there’s nothing meaningful I can tell you.”

That’s a lie if Naomasa has ever heard one, but Deku must believe it if it doesn’t register as a lie. It’s honestly baffling, why he thinks his information has no use. Perhaps it can be attributed to the frankly alarming amounts of aggressive cynicism he seems to display.

“You still have information on the appearances, locations, and Quirks of those whose Quirks you’ve restored,” Naomasa points out. “You were willing to disclose that earlier, weren’t you?”

Deku shrugs. “That was when I thought it’d make you all leave me alone faster. Now, there’s no point.”

The indifference with which he says it makes Naomasa narrow his eyes. “It’s still potentially important information. It may save lives.”

Deku considers him for a long moment. Then, “I’ll tell you if you let me walk out of here right after, and none of you ever come looking for me again.”

It’s... a step in the right direction. Naomasa is a little surprised that Deku capitulated so easily once he brought morality into the fold. *Adheres strictly to personal moral code?* he writes. “That can be done, if you also tell me how you got your information.”

Deku snorts. “Knowing that won’t help you, I promise you that.”

Not a lie. It’s such a ridiculous claim to make, though; how could Deku possibly believe it to be truth? “Still, I’d like to know.”

“Correction: knowing that will make things worse and even more confusing than before,” Deku says. “It’s a topic best dropped.”

Naomasa sighs. “Consider sharing the information anyways, Deku. We may be able to do more with that information than you, and it will make things easier on you as well.”

Deku looks at him and says flatly, “I’ve never made anything easier for anyone in my life.”

The blank hyperbole makes Naomasa stare. “Not even for yourself?”

“At this point, my life is an exercise in how badly I can get fucked over. I’d say yesterday night ranks pretty high on the list, but I’m gunning for a new record.”

Naomasa tries another tactic. “If you disclose your sources, we can deal with them directly. You won’t have to get involved again.”

Deku laughs, and laughs some more, and puts his face into his hands. “There’s -- there’s absolutely no point,” he says, and laughs again. The light flickers, and it feels like such a thin veneer all of a sudden, a fragile veil that with a touch would rip and reveal the dark and hungry shadows beyond. “God, I wish you knew what an absolute fucking circus this is from my point of view, I really do. This is so stupid. I should’ve just stayed home.”

He looks so young, then, sitting small and alone in that chair; he can’t be older than sixteen years, but a terrible weight presses down on his back, invisible but so present that it is suddenly palpable in the exhausted lines of his shoulders, so vast that Naomasa can barely breathe past the phantom weight of it crushing his lungs.

Naomasa coughs and tries to make words come out, but his throat is dry. Some unnamed fear casts ugly shadows within the hollow of him. He doesn't know what it is. He doesn't know why. "Deku," he tries to say, but nothing comes out. *Deku, what is this? Deku, what is happening?* He wants to speak. He can't.

Deku takes his hands away from his face and rests them with a terribly gentle precision on the table. He lifts his eyes to meet Naomasa's, and he's smiling, but there's something wrong with his expression. At first glance it is human, but the longer Naomasa sits with that unnamed fear gripping him from within and his eyes riveted to Deku's face, the more subtly wrong it looks, a puzzle put together that still can't hide the inhuman thing within. "Tsukauchi-san," the thing behind the face says, the name drawled with mockery. "I think it is so funny, how you come here thinking you will find any answers from me at all."

The light stops flickering.

Naomasa inhales sharply, suddenly able to breathe, and the fear slides away from him with all the surreal haze of a dream. Why was he so afraid? What did he see in the face of a fifteen-year-old boy? He wants to ask, but he doesn't know what to say. Was it all in his mind? Or was it--

"What is your Quirk, exactly, Deku?" Naomasa asks. "You never did mention."

Deku looks him dead in the eye and says, "I don't have one."

It's not a lie. "*What?*" There is no way. "That's impossible. Look at everything you've done so far."

"Getting arrested?" the boy says, deadpan.

"Restoring everyone's Quirks! Everything about Kamino Ward! That's not possible to achieve without a Quirk of *some* sort--"

“Oh, so *you* want to complain about it? I’m the one who has to deal with this bullshit on a daily basis, jackass.”

Why is it that nothing Deku says is ever helpful in any way? “If it’s not a Quirk, then *how?*” Deku must have deluded himself into believing his ability isn’t a Quirk but some other power. That’s the only plausible explanation.

“Hypothetically speaking, it’s possible that when a child is born, something will go terribly wrong. Like, absolutely horrifyingly wrong in a way that’s beyond human understanding. Hypothetically, if that were to happen, this child may also have the ability to fuck up in ways that other people have no explanation for.”

“That’s not an explanation,” Naomasa half-yells.

“Yeah, that’s kind of the entire point,” Deku says, in a tone of voice that suggests he thinks Naomasa is a complete dumbass.

Naomasa puts his hands to his head. Deku makes no sense. At least with the other subjects Naomasa has questioned before, they had some kind of internal logic, or at least it made sense what they were lying about. *This*, though -- what the hell is this?

“Just for the record,” says Deku, crossing his arms, “all of my answers regarding my ‘information sources’ are going to be exactly like this.”

Naomasa decides that now would be a great time to move on to a different line of questioning.

“Since you were involved with the events of Kamino Ward, and have had contact with the Villain Alliance,” he says, pulling out a thin sheaf of papers and sliding them across the table. “We have reason to believe that the Villain Alliance may be collaborating with the Eight Precepts. Do you recognize any of these people?”

“Nope,” Deku says flatly, immediately.

“You didn’t even look at th--”

“Didn’t recognize ‘em.”

“Just--” Naomasa pinches the bridge of his nose to stave off an oncoming headache. “At least look at it, please. At least *pretend* to look at it.”

Deku stares belligerently him and slaps one hand onto the offending sheaf of papers, and proceeds to give Naomasa the stink-eye as he drags it closer to him.

Naomasa gestures at the papers with a chin. Deku scowls but acquiesces, glancing down at the pages. They’re profiles of all the known members of the Eight Precepts of Death; if Deku could just--

“Nope, no idea who that is,” Deku says, and starts flipping through the rest of the papers with a bored expression on his face. “Nope, no, no, no... Yeah, I don’t recognize any of--”

He stops mid-gesture.

“You recognize someone?” Naomasa asks, hope slowly blooming in him as the pause drags on.

“Yeah, absolutely fucking not,” Deku says.

It seems more like a denial than an actual answer to his question, so Naomasa presses on. “Which one of them did you recognize?”

Deku glares. “None of them.”

It’s not a lie, but he saw something. Even now, his eyes are drawn back to the papers, narrowed and unhappy with something that they see. “What is it, then?”

“None of your business.”

“Deku, this is important,” Naomasa presses. And, a gamble, “It could save lives.”

It doesn’t work. “I *said*, it’s none of your business,” the boy hisses. Something *other* slips into his expression, in the too-sharp angles of his face, in the terrible gleam of his teeth, in the way his hair and his eyes are such violent dark they seem to absorb all light. “You wouldn’t understand it. You wouldn’t even be able to see it, with your eyes, you don’t even have a clue. Leave it alone and go away.”

The light in the room is too dim, the shadows are creeping in. “Deku--”

“Go *away*,” Deku snarls, and that nameless fear rears its head again and grips him all over again.

He should stay. He still has more questions to ask, so much to find out. But looking at Deku, at that wild and dangerous thing across the table from him, he knows he won’t get another answer. With carefully steady hands, he gathers his papers and goes.

Deku stands up violently, chair clattering behind him, and for a moment Naomasa thinks he’s about to attack. But Deku just sweeps past him, bumping angrily into his shoulder as he goes, and sits down on the bed facing the wall. He does not look at Naomasa.

Naomasa leaves. He shuts the door behind him, feeling strangely shaken for no reason he can explain. He feels like he’s forgetting something. Wasn’t there something else in the room...?

What happened to that cat?

He looks back into the room through the one-way window. The cat is nowhere to be seen.

--

Izuku waits for the door to close before allowing himself to relax a little. He sighs and rubs at his face. God, that conversation went disastrously. Just an absolute gamut of being too emotional and making really bad decisions. Why did he show off so much of his hand? Why did he react so honestly? And more importantly -- Izuku pulls a pad of sticky notes, a pen, and a wallet out of his jacket pocket and stares at them -- why did he *pickpocket a detective in the middle of an interrogation?*

Senshajou's whiskers twitch in amusement. *Did you steal again, Izuku-tan?*

Don't say it like I do this on a regular basis, Izuku says defensively.

Senshajou just licks their paw smugly. Izuku gives Senshajou a dirty look and rifles through Tsukauchi's wallet. Some cash, a few credit cards, the guy's government ID... he's feeling increasingly bad about stealing this, actually. But they're the ones who arrested him and put him into the position to be pickpocketing in the first place, so there.

Why did Tsukauchi have to come, anyways, riding in on his high horse like he's even got a clue what Izuku's world is like, and showing him that stupid set of photos--

He didn't recognize any of them, he told the truth on that. But in three of the photos, hovering behind the subjects, had been a spirit: a kirin with pale fur and accents in red and orange and gold, teal-blue scales glittering on its clawed feet, and a single jagged horn growing from its head.

Izuku has seen that spirit in the area near his apartment before, striding purposefully down the streets, its aura pulsing like the bloody skies of anger and grief. Izuku has never spoken to

it before, has always avoided it, in fact; he has never been able to withstand the force of its terrible sorrow, nor the burning of its resolve. But if it's with the Eight Precepts -- Izuku can't ignore it anymore.

God damn it, he *could*, he could just go home and forget any of this ever happened, pretend he has no capability or responsibility -- but he *does*, and he can't sit by. Why did Tsukauchi have to show him the photos?

He snaps the wallet shut and puts everything back into his pockets. *I need to get out of here*, he says aloud.

Senshajou's tail twitches. *Obviously. You should've gotten out of here ages ago! What're you still doing here?*

Well, I'm sorry, Izuku snaps. *I was in a bit of trouble, okay?*

If you're in trouble then the solution is pretty obvious, isn't it? Senshajou says prissily. *Hurry it up!*

Izuku looks at them sideways. He doesn't have an obvious solution, just a pen and some sticky notes and a set of lockpicks and himself; what is he supposed to do with that? There's no easy way out of here. *Jou-chan, why are you here, anyways?*

For some reason, that makes Senshajou bristle. *Why am I here?*

Well, I mean... yeah, says Izuku. *Don't you have secrets to be uncovering? I'm not going to be able to help you for a while, there's no point in sticking around.*

They yowl furiously and launch themselves at Izuku's jacket. Izuku tries to catch them, but they cling to his arm and start swiping angrily at his face. *Stupid idiot!* they caterwaul. *Stupid! Dumb! Stupid!*

Ow -- stop that! Izuku snaps, trying to fend off their claws. *That hurts, stupid cat! What do you want?*

You're an idiot! Senshajou cries. *What do I want, indeed! Idiot! I came here to help you ! If you can't get out of here on your own then ask me for help, you stupid temple-child!*

Izuku stares. Then, dumbly, *You came here for -- for me?* And his voice is so -- so small, why--

Of course I did! Senshajou stops clawing at his arm and pulls back to look into his eyes, searching for -- what are they looking for, why did they come for him, why do they -- *You didn't think I would care to help*, Senshajou says with all the dawning of a horrible realization, *You didn't even stop to think--*

No one ever comes to help me, Izuku says blankly, before he can stop himself, and Senshajou looks so devastated and Izuku doesn't know what to do. *No, I mean -- Senshajou -- it's not that I'm ungrateful, I -- I just--*

--you just think there's no one you can depend on, Senshajou finishes.

Izuku's words desert him. All he can do is look at Senshajou mutely and wonder why it is they care so much.

The cat spirit gives him no answers. They only put a paw on his arm and say, *Izuku-tan, let's leave. Let's go through the in-between place again.*

Izuku draws back. *I... I don't really want to*, he says, bracing himself for a bad reaction.

It doesn't come. *We don't have to do it like last time*, they say to him. *I can teach you to bring yourself there on your own.*

Izuku digs his fingernails into his palms, chewing the inside of his lips. *What if I -- I lose myself?*

I won't let you, says Senshajou. *I'll bring you back.*

Izuku takes a deep breath, lets it out, and nods. He doesn't have any better ideas. *Okay. How do I...?*

You can hear the star-song now, can't you? Senshajou asks.

Izuku hesitates. *I did,* he says. *Not anymore. I'm...* He's afraid of hearing it again, too.

It's similar to the starsong, Senshajou says, *but not exactly the same, because you aren't hearing the universe, but feeling for the narrow place beyond it. Listen, and try to see.*

Senshajou opens their mouth and starts to sing an odd tune, at first one silvery note that glides up and down through starlight, but as he listens, he hears layers upon layers of sound unfold into places he never thought he could go. The universe is laid before him, that great void and the shining hearts of stars spread all across the galaxy. Izuku wants to listen to them again, but Senshajou's song takes on a new shape, then. It changes. The stars swim out of focus and instead Izuku finds himself drawn to the darkness. He can hear the mysterious voices in the night; he can see the darkness is all alive; and if he could just lean forward a little more--

izuku-tan

he opens his eyes. his ears ring with whispers he can almost hear. his vision swims, but it has never been so clear before. the shadows in the room writhe alive and waiting, the shadows are full of light, and their secrets beckoning him to come forward, away from the thin veneer of reality contained in the planes and into the endless night.

the shadow of a creature steps forward its eyes are glittering its shape has never known light. **we are going beyond** it says **we are leaving this place behind.** izuku gets up he follows it as it steps back and the veil of reality parts to let them through into the narrow place beyond it. the room the people the city just beyond the curtain but here is backstage.

we go away says the shadow it glides away down the path and around the corner and the rooms of the physical plane slide away as izuku moves to follow. miles are swallowed under his steps. but a few meters only. he puts his hands out to the translucent gray walls. his eyes stray from the shadow creature and towards the thin boundary lying between him an endless dark sea something unnameable something unknown something deeply familiar and calling something waiting something you belong. he stops. puts the hand to the boundary. the sea rises to meet him it meets to push it rises like a greeting and a warm embrace and izuku

izuku-tan

is yanked away and pulled back through the curtains. He drops to the floor with a gasp. The fluorescent lights of the hallway are too bright -- he wants to go *back* -- something is tugging on his shirt and refusing him though, something is saying--

Izuku's vision swims, but he manages to focus back on the planes.

Senshajou looks up at him. "I think that's enough for today," they say.

"Where are we?" Izuku asks muzzily.

"First floor, near the exit," Senshajou says. "Someone's coming. Quick--"

They butt Izuku's side and herd him towards a darkened conference room. Izuku slips inside, Senshajou tangling around his feet, and peeks onto the second plane. There are auras moving with frustration and urgency -- his escape has been discovered, then -- and, here on this floor-

-

Izuku opens the door. “What are you *doing?*” Senshajou cries, just in time for Izuku to drag Red Riot into the room with him and close the door behind them.

“I don’t know,” Izuku says to Senshajou, and looks at Red Riot.

The other boy has his hands half-raised into a fighting stance, but he doesn’t move to attack or subdue Izuku. He just looks quizzically at him and lowers his hands. “Hi?”

Izuku takes a deep breath. Then he holds out the pen and pad of sticky notes to Red Riot and says, “Give me your number.”

Red Riot blinks. “--er, for what?”

“In case I need to contact you,” says Izuku. “Tell me everything you know about the Eight Precepts case.”

Red Riot accepts the pen and sticky notes and looks at them for a moment as if he can’t decide what to do. For a moment, Izuku thinks, *This is it. This is the moment where I really fucked up this time*, but then Red Riot says, “R...right,” and finally starts talking.

He gives Izuku a summary of everything that has led Nighteye’s hero office to investigate the Eight Precepts, as well as everything he knows about the structure and members of the criminal organization. Izuku listens attentively, eyes watching the movements of the other heroes on the second plane, and ignores Senshajou staring at him accusingly through the entire conversation.

Izuku takes the pen and sticky notes back from Red Riot and stuffs them back into his pocket. “I didn’t know the Villain Alliance was teaming up with them,” he mutters. “Every time I think this can’t get worse...”

He trails off. Red Riot clears his throat, but Izuku doesn’t turn to look at him. Red Riot says, “If you don’t mind me asking... you *were* the one at Kamino Ward too, right? So how come

you're not... doing the same thing, here?"

"What, gathering information?" Izuku snaps out, deliberately obtuse.

"No, I mean the thing with the... the light? And the flying? You defeated frickin' All for One, so I don't... really get it. Why you didn't just break out immediately, if you really don't want to be here. I don't think any of us could stop you if you really put a mind to it."

Izuku carefully keeps his breathing even, keeps himself from looking at Red Riot. "That wasn't me."

"Are you sure? I mean--"

A communications device clipped to Red Riot's belt crackles to life. "Red Riot, anything on your end?"

Red Riot jumps. "Oh! Yeah! I'm talking to Deku right n--"

"Shut *up*," Izuku hisses, lunging for the commlink. Red Riot skips back, eyes round with surprise, but Izuku manages to snag it, and he throws it against the wall with all his strength. It cracks, and whoever was on the other end is cut off. "Don't tell them I'm here! Fucking hell -- Senshajou, let's go--"

Red Riot grabs his arm and pulls him back before he can make it to the door. Izuku snarls and tries to twist him off, but to no avail. "Calm down, it's fine!" says Red Riot. "You're cooperatin' with us now, right? We can work together! There's no need to worry about--"

"I'm not cooperating!" Izuku snaps. "I'm *leaving*!"

Red Riot looks alarmed, and a little bit betrayed, too, though Izuku doesn't have a clue why - he never owed him anything in the first place -- "Then I'm going to have to stop you," Red

Riot says, determined, and Izuku tries to yank himself away but Red Riot's grip is too strong-

-

"Let *go* of me!" Izuku snaps. "We had a *deal*!"

"We both did what we said we would," Red Riot says, jaw set.

"You *said* you'd never try and stop me from leaving again!"

Red Riot falters.

"That was the wording," Izuku snarls. "I answer three questions and hear you out, and you don't try and stop me from leaving again. I'm *leaving*. I know you're not bound to your word and you could -- you can break it as easy as any other human out there -- but we had a *deal*, damn it, don't go back on your word *now* --"

"I'm -- I'm supposed to," Red Riot mumbles. "I mean--"

"*Please*," says Izuku. Red Riot looks at him, eyes wide, and for a second Izuku thinks he's broken through--

The door bursts open. "Oh -- good job, Red Riot," says the intern girl, "just hold him there a moment so I can knock him out." Game over. Izuku grits his teeth. He's a dumbass. He is such a fucking dumbass, he never should have tried to reach out to Red Riot, he should have just left when he had the chance--

Red Riot lets go of him and steps back.

"Red Riot!" the intern shouts.

“S-sorry,” says Red Riot. “I’m going to have to just leave this one to you.”

“Go!” Senshajou shouts at him. “I’ll distract her, just *go!*” They leap at the intern girl and she steps back with a shout, and Izuku doesn’t wait another second. He sprints out the door and skids around the corner.

There! -- the main room is down the hall, and he can glimpse the exit -- he runs for it. Twenty feet, ten feet, five--

A brown-haired girl hurtles out of nowhere and slaps him on the shoulder, and a transparent bubble forms around him. Gravity loses its grip on him; his feet leave the floor. “Got you!” the girl says triumphantly. Izuku’s heart thunders. He puts his hands on the bubble, slams against it with a spike of his energy, but it only bends; it doesn’t give. The intern is running down the hall towards them, she’s going to catch up--

Izuku slams against the bubble furiously, and again, and again. The brown-haired girl’s eyes widen when Izuku drops down towards the floor a few feet, but it’s not enough, he’s still trapped, it’s not enough -- “Izuku-tan!” Senshajou shouts, sprinting towards him down the hall, fear in their eyes--

The brown-haired girl’s guardian spirit drifts behind her, a nebulous, galaxy-like cloud that shifts and folds in impossible shapes and colors. Izuku slams his hands against the bubble again and glares at the cloud; it stills under his gaze as he gathers up his energy, pushes it towards his throat--

RELEASE, he shouts. The command burns his throat as it comes out, like fire and molten rock, and the bubble shatters. Izuku falls, coughing. He can’t breathe, his throat hurts, it was too much to attempt--

“What? How did he--?” the girl says, starting forward, and the intern is summoning some of her strange-smelling bubbles again -- “Move already!” Senshajou is yowling, “Move!” --

Izuku stumbles to his feet, still coughing, and runs out the door into the street. “Wait!” someone shouts behind him, but Izuku doesn’t look back, he just hurtles into traffic without

care -- cars honk as they screech to a halt, and Izuku throws himself into the crowd of pedestrians and runs down the first alley he can find. Even then he doesn't stop; he climbs over fences, into backyards, over rooftops until he's gasping for breath and he doesn't know where he is.

"They're gone," Senshajou says from beside him, looking at him with concern. "We lost them."

Izuku nods, still panting. The sun is low in the sky; it's approaching nighttime, he's missed an entire day of school, and he needs to be there in class tomorrow. He also doesn't know where he is.

"I'm really tired, Jou-chan," he says. He hates how his voice sounds.

"I know," Senshajou says. They nudge Izuku's face and lick it once, as if to say, *sorry*. Izuku doesn't know what they have to be apologizing for.

They wait there in that alleyway for a few minutes, until Izuku finally catches his breath, and then Izuku sets about the business of finding his way home.

--

It's nearly eight o'clock before he finally stumbles into his apartment. Everything in his pockets was confiscated by the heroes, save his spare lockpicking set; he has to break in through his own front door to get inside. Exhausted, he heads to the kitchen. There's nothing worth having in the refrigerator, he knows, but he still checks anyways. A carton of milk that's on the brink of going bad, a half-eaten box of takeout... Izuku doesn't have energy to make a call tonight, so he dumps the contents of the box into a bowl and throws it into the microwave.

While he waits, he checks his phone. It's almost out of battery, and he has three missed calls from Mom. He winces. He missed their usual phone call today. Izuku dials back, and she answers within two rings.

“Izuku-kun! How are you? Where have you been?”

“Hi, Mom,” Izuku says. “I’m -- I’m pretty good. Sorry for missing your calls earlier, I went to the library to study and got back late. I’m eating dinner now.”

Mom clucks her tongue. “You’re always forgetting your phone,” she says fondly. “Be careful going out, Izuku, I always worry for you since I’m not there with you.”

“Sorry,” says Izuku. “My school is -- it’s kind of far from home. I should’ve chosen something closer...”

“No, no, don’t worry about that!” Mom says. “I’m happy you’re going to a school you love! From everything you’ve told me, it sounds so good for you. I only worry because it’s in the nature of parenthood to worry. Do you have enough food?”

“Yeah,” Izuku lies through his teeth. “Dishes are piling up, though.”

“You never were good at doing those,” Mom laughs. “Remember to put aside some time every day to do a few dishes, honey. You don’t need to do them all at once.”

“Okay, I will,” Izuku lies again. “I’m trying my best, Mom. I’m just a little tired right now.”

“You need to get more rest,” Mom tells him sternly. “Last time we video called, you looked simply awful. Taking care of yourself is just as important as doing well in school! It’s okay if you don’t get top scores, Izuku-kun, so long as you’re happy and healthy.”

“Yeah. Happy and healthy,” Izuku echoes. “I’m getting there.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” she says honestly, and it makes him feel a little guilty before he quashes it. It’s better this way, if she doesn’t know anything, if she thinks her son is normal and starting to get better from his depression.

“How are you though, Mom?” Izuku asks. “You haven’t talked about your end of things for a while.”

They chat for a little longer before bidding goodbye, and Izuku promises to pick up the phone at the regular time tomorrow. She tells him that she loves him, and he says he loves her too, and when they finally hang up Izuku looks at the blinking *Call Ended* on his screen and suddenly feels exhausted.

Mom is the best thing that has ever happened to him, and that’s why he can’t tell her any of his burdens -- otherwise he’s just going to drag her down.

--

It takes a few days to catch up on his schoolwork and his sleep. The spirits have stopped bothering him since he got arrested for Eraserhead’s spirit; word must have gotten around, what he did. Izuku is relieved for some peace and quiet, but it still makes him feel an uncomfortable sort of -- resentment? hurt? anger? -- to see his classmates’ spirits start avoiding him, giving him a wide berth.

Senshajou finally manages to track down his house and sits in the alleyway and meows at him until he lets them in and keys them into the wards. They don’t do much to disrupt his day; they just sit on the counter and comment about how sparse his apartment looks, or asks what kind of homework he’s doing, anyways.

“I’m practicing my calligraphy,” says Izuku.

Senshajou peers at his paper. “It’s so... flat,” they say, wrinkling their nose.

“You would think that, after becoming so familiar with Script,” Izuku snorts. He presses his brush to paper and carefully sweeps it in an elegant arc. “I like it, though. It’s beautiful in its simplicity, and with calligraphy, what you see is what you get. It just is. That’s all.”

Senshajou’s tail flicks, but they must hear something in his voice, because they don’t comment again.

It’s almost a week later that Izuku thinks about all this Quirk-erasing business again. He’s walking down the street to the corner store to stock up on food, when he sees the kirin spirit sweeping around the corner. Its aura, as it brushes over him, makes him grit his teeth with the force of its anger.

Izuku is about to brush off the encounter and continue down to the grocery store, like every other time before, but -- something stops him. The memory of the detective's words beseeching, *this is important, this could save lives*, and Red Riot. Red Riot, with his earnestness and honesty, who kept his promise and let him go, who looked up at him that night and said *there's a girl we need to save*. And Izuku knows, then, that he can't turn away.

No, he *could* do that, damn it, he could turn around and pretend he never saw the kirin and never knew anything about it at all. But he knows it's involved with the Eight Precepts in some way, now; he knows the heroes are so desperate for a lead on the Eight Precepts they left a *trap* for him, so desperate they'd turn to a fifteen year old boy for answers, and he just -- he just up and *left* them, and now they have no leads at all.

He doesn't regret it; he won't let himself be trapped like that, won't let anyone have that kind of power over him again, if there's anything he can do about it. But if he was the only lead they had, then -- then if they don't find a way to take down the Eight Precepts, it's his fault, isn't it, because he left them without answers when he had a way to find them. It's his responsibility.

He's the only one who can see the kirin, who could follow it and find out what it's doing. Once again, there's no one else who can do it. It's just him.

Izuku glances around, glances back, and turns to follow the spirit. He checks everything he has on hand: a sharpie and sticky notes in his pocket, a few lockpicks hidden in the stitching of his hoodie, and a protective medallion around his neck. It'll have to be enough, because

the kirin has never shown up consistently in this area in the past, and he doesn't know when he'll have the opportunity to follow it again. It'll be fine, Izuku tells himself. He'll just follow the kirin and see what it's up to; and if he has the opportunity to talk to it one-on-one, he will. But nothing more than that.

He has to scramble to keep up with the spirit, and even has to take a few shortcuts through the alleys so he doesn't fall behind. A few times, he thinks the spirit might have noticed him, and he has to duck out of its direct line of sight -- but it never amounts to anything. The spirit turns its head away and march on.

Izuku manages to tail it into a quieter neighborhood that feels run-down, but refined at the same time. The kirin disappears into the wall of a traditionally-styled compound. Izuku scans the second plane; there's a few human auras inside the compound, but more interesting is the fact that there are some auras congregated *underneath the ground*.

There really is something going on here. Izuku swallows. Following on a whim was a *really* bad idea; he should leave. He'll come back and find the kirin another time.

Izuku pats his pocket for his phone, but it's not there. He must've forgotten it at home again; he'll just have to remember the location. Izuku takes a moment to memorize the scene in front of him so he can find it again, and turns to go.

He's met face-to-face with a man in a top hat, a hooded man in a plague doctor mask, and what looks like a strange, bird-like doll, as large as a small child.

"It's him," the top hat man says.

"Wha--?" Izuku starts to say.

The bird-like doll blurs forward and swings a limb at his head. Izuku ducks and stumbles back, turning to run--

Something hits the back of his head. His vision bursts with stars, and he falls. The last thing he feels before blacking out is a pair of hands catching him and lifting him off the ground.

--

Izuku comes to consciousness with a start. He flinches back. Standing above him is a man in a plague doctor's mask, his hand outstretched to Izuku's forehead, his eyes clear and cold as the first snow-melt streams of spring.

The man withdraws his hand. "Good, you're awake," he comments idly, stepping back and around a coffee table to sit on a sparse, but obviously high-quality, sofa across from Izuku. His jacket has an unreasonably feathered collar, too, it's so big it almost engulfs his head -- no, focus! He needs to figure out what's going on.

Izuku glances quickly around the room. He's been seated on a sofa across from the guy with the ridiculous feathers. The bird doll and the two masked men from before are here, too, along with a few other people and a coterie of spirits. Izuku shifts uncomfortably under their silent gazes, and when he does, he feels a pressure around his arms. A quick tug confirms they've bound his hands behind his back. Great. And to make things even better, on the coffee table between them, they've placed all the contents of his pockets. Including his lockpicks. Fuck.

"You're certain this is him, Mr. Compress?" the feather guy says, sitting forward and steepling his fingers together.

"Yes," confirms the top hat man from behind his mask, standing beside the sofa. Everyone here is wearing a mask, it's starting to feel suspiciously cult-like. "He did not appear to recognize me in costume."

"What?" says Izuku.

"Interesting," the feather guy says. He regards Izuku with a clinical look that sends shivers down his spine. "Did he ever tell you his name?"

“No,” Mr. Compress replies. What kind of name is that, anyways? “He only stated his objective, but said nothing about himself.”

There’s an expectant pause. Izuku takes the opportunity to look at the spirits more closely; there’s a floating doll-like thing with a wooden mask, a black and serpentine spirit coiled in the corner, and behind the feathers guy -- the kirin, watching him with pained eyes--

Someone hits Izuku’s head, hard enough to be painful but not enough to actually incapacitate him. “Ow!” Izuku protests, flinching away, but whoever it is grabs a handful of his hair and wrenches his head back up. It’s the bird doll. Their aura looks so strange...

“Our boss wants to know your name!” they snap at him. “Learn to read the situation, dummy!”

“What?” He did?

“What’s your name?” asks one of the men in the bird masks. This one is wearing a bowler hat though.

“Oh,” says Izuku. “It’s Deku.” Wait, why did he tell them that. He looks back at the feather guy, who seems to be, for whatever reason, the leader here? Is Izuku supposed to take him seriously with that feathered fringe of his? It’s so oversized, like, probably the weight of a small dog. Izuku can’t even imagine how top-heavy it is to put on, seriously. Why?

“Deku,” the feathers guy repeats thoughtfully. “Do you have any idea who we are?”

Izuku switches his sight to the second plane and looks up. There’s a lot of auras moving up there. “The kind of people to have a shady underground basement beneath their compound for kidnapping minors?”

The bird-doll guy hits him again. This time Izuku doesn't complain. "Show some respect," they demand. "Answer Boss's questions seriously!"

"My serious answer is that you look like a cult."

The feathers guy raises a hand to stop the bird-doll from hitting Izuku again. "No need," he drawls. "I am not so easily riled by playground taunts." He considers Izuku again, eyes glittering in a way that leaves him filled with deep unease. "Tell me, Deku, what do you know of the Eight Precepts?"

This is really not looking too good. "They're yakuza that I really don't want to get involved with, and who I'm really hoping you aren't right now."

The feathers guy only seems to find this interesting. "So you followed Chronostasis without knowing what organization he was part of?"

"Who?" Izuku asks blankly.

There's a pause.

"How *did* you find this location, then?" the feathers guy queries.

"You kidnapped me here," Izuku feels the need to point out.

"To the compound," he clarifies.

"Unwillingly," Izuku suggests.

The feathers guy narrows his eyes at the answer, clearly unsatisfied. Like he has any right to be. Izuku is the one being kidnapped by him right now. “Shin,” feathers guy calls, and one of the masked men steps forward.

“Are you the one who has been restoring lost Quirks?” he asks.

“Not *this* again,” Izuku can’t help but saying. “It was, but I wish everyone would just leave me *alone* about it. It’s no one’s business but my own.”

He stops. He said too much. Why did he tell them it was him? What are they going to do to him, especially if they’re -- they’re really--

He glances up. Feathers guy looks incredibly satisfied, but in a way that makes Izuku feel like he’s a particularly enthralling specimen on the dissecting table. His stomach falls. There’s no way they’ll let him go now, is there? Why is he so *stupid*--

“Let’s cut to the chase,” feathers guy decides, leaning forward and weaving his fingers together. “You must have guessed by now that we are the Eight Precepts of Death. I am Overhaul. You have caused me quite a bit of trouble, fixing the Quirks that my drugs were designed to remove. Normally I would simply have had you eliminated, but your skillset interests me.

“I am willing to spare your life if you enter my service and use your gifts to my advantage... and as long as you disclose who your leader is, and how you have acquired so much information on who was shot with the Quirk-breaking drug.” Overhaul spreads his hands. “Betray them and live, or die under the misery of torture, having betrayed them anyways. What will you choose?”

He wants to kidnap Izuku... for the exact same reason the heroes *just* arrested him for?

“You have got to be fucking kidding me,” says Izuku.

Chapter End Notes

chapter warnings: nonconsensual, mind-altering, mind-invasion type encounter that alters izuku's thinking patterns for a while and leaves him feeling rather shaken

thank you everyone for the wonderful feedback! i've been a little surprised by the reception of this story since i just expected this to be a weird, niche story that was basically only interesting to me, but i'm really glad to see so many people enjoy it! i rarely reply to comments but i read and cherish them all.

other than that... i'll probably post a few sketches / storyboards on my blog, from when i was thinking about writing this story. check em out whenever they happen to occur

special thanks to [sonicman66](#) on tumblr for sending the ask that prompted the entire snake exchange with tsukauchi

boy in the dark with blood on your hands (you can't keep crying if you want to keep going)

Chapter Summary

Things that were not on Izuku's to-do list when he got out of bed this morning:

- being recruited by the beginnings of a criminal empire
- talking about himself, like, at all
- kidnapping a child
- acquiring a follower in the form of a notorious underground street fighter

Things that Izuku has done today--

Chapter Notes

get ready for some FUCKERY motherfuckers we are BUSTING ERI OUT OF THIS JOINT

special thanks to overhaul for making this by far the darkest chapter i've written thus far

helpful but not necessary to enjoying the chapter is [knowing what tokusatsu is](#)

CHAPTER WARNINGS (PLEASE HEED): canon-typical amounts of horrific medical experimentation a la Overhaul, canon-typical amounts of violence and exploitation towards children also a la Overhaul, accidental torture, not-so-accidental torture (non explicit), mild body horror, typical spiritual indifference and disregard for the needs and wellbeing of others and human morality, brief mention of needles/syringes and vomiting

i realize this is an extremely worrying list of warnings and REALLY does not bode well but yknow what just hang in there

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

Upon further reflection, "You have got to be kidding me" is not the greatest opening sentence he could have started with.

Overhaul narrows his eyes. The masked man in the bowler hat asks calmly, “And what do you mean by that?”

“I just got finished being arrested for all this bullshit and I really don't want to go through it again,” Izuku says.

“Arrested?”

“Yeah.”

“What happened while you were arrested?”

“Heroes locked me up and tried to offer me essentially the same deal as you, except with less murder, and way more legal jargon?”

Overhaul raises an eyebrow. “And what did you do?”

“I told them I didn't have any useful information for them, and when they didn't believe me, I just broke out.” Izuku intends to stop there, but his mouth keeps moving. “Which is my tentative working plan for right now also, because I honestly can't help you with whatever you're trying to do.”

No one really seems to believe him. “Our information got leaked to you somehow, Deku,” Overhaul says simply. “I want to know how.”

“Uh, a mix of bad luck and misfortune that is specific to me being what I am,” says Izuku.

“Your Quirk?”

“Haha, that's hilarious. Something like that.”

One of the masked men -- what had Overhaul called him earlier? Shin? -- focuses his attention oddly on Izuku, for whatever reason. “What is your Quirk?”

“Hell if I know.”

Overhaul looks slightly annoyed by the non-answer. “Mr. Compress,” he calls. “Describe Deku’s use of his Quirk to me again, if you will.”

The guy in the top hat nods sharply. “He drew on my forehead and pressed his head to mine. The necessity of the symbol, as well as physical contact, is why I hypothesized his Quirk must work through some combination of writing and physical contact, hence why I suggested his hands be bound... He didn't seem to do anything, but the strangest sensation came over me. A rush, a shiver, the sliding sensation when you are drifting off and something drags you back awake... Something inside of me sparked. I am a show man, Overhaul, I make it my business to describe and astound. And yet I have no words for what I felt--”

“Wait, hang on a minute,” says Izuku, and stares at Mr. Compress accusingly. “I fixed your Quirk?”

Mr. Compress nods. “Yes.”

“Your *entire* Quirk?”

“Y...es.”

“I fixed your *entire Quirk* and this is how you repay me?” Izuku says furiously. Who the fuck is Mr. Compress? Izuku is going to wring his guardian spirit’s neck and then he is going to extract a terrible revenge upon this man.

Mr. Compress clears his throat. “Understand my position, Deku--”

“No,” says Izuku.

Before Mr. Compress can say anything else, Izuku spots his spirit entering the room -- a hovering creature with dark marble-sized spheres orbiting around it as it moves. *Izuku remembers this spirit.* “Wait, I know you. You’re the guy with the fucking -- trophy case of tokusatsu figurines in your kitchen area? The guy who looked like a complete fucking shut in? That guy? Did you even pause for a moment to consider that maybe a trophy case goes better in your bedroom or living room instead of your fucking kitchen?”

Mr. Compress’s mask hides his expression, but his aura immediately flares with embarrassment. Overhaul raises a single eyebrow. The bird doll, lounging on the sofa next to Izuku, snickers. “Which franchise?”

“That’s not important--” Mr. Compress starts to say.

“I’m going to break out of here,” Izuku tells him aggressively, “And *then* I’m going to break into your house and throw *all* of your dishes on the floor.” Mr. Compress stares at him from behind the mask. The bird doll laughs. Izuku glares. “I could do it, you know! I remember where you live!”

“Oh?” says Overhaul with casual interest. “Where is it, then?”

“I have no idea.” He only remembers where it is because he had to climb through the sewers to avoid some spirit’s territory. An address, though? Hah.

Overhaul looks at him unblinkingly. “You just said--”

“I *know* what I said. Everything I say is complete horseshit. I don’t even remember what his face looks like.”

Mr. Compress's aura tinges blue with relief. Izuku tries to murder him with the force of his gaze alone.

"You... don't remember what his face looks like," Overhaul repeats. "Despite the fact that, in order to repair his Quirk, you had to be face-to-face."

"I don't remember unimportant details like that." Izuku glares at Mr. Compress's spirit. "I do remember the important things, though, which is that he's a dumbass who got his Quirk erased and he never would have gotten it back without me. He *owes* me."

He stares accusingly at the spirit, unblinking, until it contritely flares its aura. Its mind nudges his, whispering, *name your price, within my power it will be done*.

Izuku wouldn't normally ask anything -- it's not like the spirits care to listen to him, most of the time, why bother? -- but being kidnapped by the yakuza is a pretty good reason to break that rule. *Then your power, when channelled by him, cannot be used against me*, he says. *That will pay the price*.

Overhaul narrows his eyes. "What did you just say?"

It will be done, the spirit whispers.

"Nothing much," says Izuku. "Just laid a non-serious non-curse tangentially on Mr. Compress for being an ungrateful jerk."

"What do you mean?" Shin asks sharply.

"What do you mean, 'what do I mean'? I fixed his Quirk and he helped me get kidnapped. That's the most ungrateful thing anyone could do. He *deserves* it."

Mr. Compress's aura flares with nervous energy. Yeah, that's right, asshole. Squirm.

"What curse did you lay on him?" Shin tries.

Has he been listening at all? It wasn't a curse. "I didn't."

"Then what did you just do to him?"

"I didn't do anything to *him*."

"That contradicts what you said earlier," Shin says, sounding increasingly frustrated.

"I get that a lot," Izuku says.

Overhaul lets out a short sigh. His minions immediately straighten up, attention shifting to him. "This is all unnecessary," he says. "Deku. How did you know who had been attacked with the Quirk-breaking drug?"

"Their guardians told me," Izuku's mouth says entirely without his permission. Wait a second, what -- why--

"Who are their guardians?"

"The sp--"

Izuku stops cold. The urge to keep speaking presses against the back of his teeth. What the hell -- his deepest and longest-kept secret, and he almost spilled it to a complete *stranger*, just like *that*?

That's when he feels it, finally: an insidious and black compulsion saturating the room in its shadowy aura, so subtle and pervasive he hadn't noticed it until he'd almost blurted out the truth. It presses against him, and Izuku, furious, flares his energy and burns it away. In the corner, the black and serpentine creature raises its head and turns to look at him with cold, toxic yellow eyes.

"What were you saying?" Shin prompts.

"Go fuck yourself," says Izuku.

The answer takes him aback. "Who gave you this information?" he tries, and the compulsion presses in on Izuku again. Izuku bares his teeth as he burns it away again.

Shin bows his head. "I'm sorry, Overhaul. It seems my Quirk could not be of help after all."

Overhaul waves a hand dismissively. "No matter. We suspected this might be the case." He leans forwards and rests his elbows on his knees, hands clasped together. "You never did say what your Quirk is, Deku."

"That's funny," says Izuku. "No one asked."

"What is your Quirk?" Shin tries.

Izuku gives him a dirty look. "I've gone fifteen years without breathing a word of it to anyone, and I'm not about to break my streak for some guy wearing *sneakers* with his *plague doctor mask*."

Bowler hat guy bristles, but Overhaul just looks thoughtful. "Chronostasis, is the dart gun with you?"

“No, but I have some of the cartridges.” The plague doctor guy who’d initially confronted him outside the compound pulls a few syringes of dark liquid from his coat. Izuku does not have a good feeling about this. “Shall I?”

Overhaul nods, eyes meandering back to Izuku. “The temporary form will do.”

Chronostasis approaches him from the side and reaches out to take his arm. His gloved hands handle the syringe delicately, but his intention is clear.

Fuck that.

Izuku doesn’t struggle or try and move away, and emboldened, Chronostasis moves nearer to put the syringe to Izuku’s neck -- and near enough for Izuku to draw his foot up and nail him in the balls.

Chronostasis double over. Izuku gets his feet under him on the cushion and rolls over the back of the couch, away from everyone else, and lands in a crouch; he makes a break for the only exit in the room. Someone grabs his ankle and yanks him back, and without his hands free to catch him, Izuku crashes against the floor. He rolls over, and the bird-doll guy appears, landing on his stomach and driving all the breath out of him. Izuku curls in, wheezing, and the bird-doll grabs the front of his hoodie, barking, “Stop making trouble for our boss!”

“Piss off,” Izuku coughs out, narrowing his eyes as he takes in the aura of the doll. A possession -- this person isn’t even here physically, are they? “Not gonna... be talked down to... by the guy lecturing me... through a fucking *puppet*. ”

The bird-doll stills in shock. “How--?”

Izuku headbutts the bird-doll as hard as he can, sending a burst of his own energy through the point of contact. The bird-doll falls limply over as some large blond-haired man comes tumbling out, eyes wide with surprise. Izuku curses -- he thought it was a nonlocal possession, not a direct one -- but there’s no time to account for that miscalculation. He’ll just have to accept that this player is still on the stage. Izuku rolls back to his feet and runs for it.

The blond-haired man recovers and manages to grab him by the wrists. Izuku shouts and kicks out, but the man is bigger and stronger than him, and Izuku doesn't have use of his hands anyways. The man pins him face-down on the ground.

"Fucking brat," Chronostasis wheezes, somewhere above him. "Boss, should I use my Quirk on him?"

A pair of footsteps approaching. Izuku tries to turn his head to look, but the blond-haired man grabs him by the hair to prevent him from moving. All he can see is a small patch of bare linoleum floor. "No need," Overhaul says dismissively, and Izuku hears clothes rustling as someone crouches down near his legs. "Hand me the drug. Hold him in place, Mimic."

Izuku can feel his heart rate steadily rising, beating jackhammer fast in his chest. His breathing is coming more ragged. He can't see what's going on, he's trapped -- he can hardly move -- Izuku jerks when he feels a pair of gloved hands grab him by the ankle and roll up the cuff of his jeans to expose bare skin. He tries to yank his leg away. He fails. A moment later, he has to grit his teeth as a needle is jabbed sharply into his leg.

At first, Izuku doesn't feel anything, but then a strange tingling sensation starts washing through his body; some foreign glass-cold energy surging through his blood, slipping all the way through him. It feels awful and thick and slimy, and he involuntarily shudders through his whole body. He flares his own energy in an attempt to burn it away, but it's like -- it's like trying to hold water, all of it slipping away from his reach.

And then the foreign energy turns. Rolls over, transforming from a tingle to a molten-hot burn, a fire tearing, a wind howling, screaming through the smallness of his body. It seizes him by flesh and by spirit, digs in its hooks, and *pulls*. Izuku hears himself make a choked-off scream. It's tearing him apart. His vision goes double, his mind and body pulling two different ways and his body is *shaking*, the nerves sparking and sparking like live wires gone mad and the energy is *still tearing him apart*. "S—st," he hisses out between clenched teeth, but he can't unclench his jaw -- his muscles are completely seizing up -- the floor falls out from under him and it's just him and the merciless glass-cold energy ripping him apart from the very bone--

His vision whites out. It's all he can do to cling on, hold himself together when he feels like he's being completely undone. But it's still tearing at him; it's everywhere; it's not going away--

Izuku flares his energy as high as it can go, and he burns.

When he comes back to himself, there's no one holding him down; he's curling in on himself, panting and clammy with sweat. The taste of blood is on his teeth. Experimentally — and because he doesn't have any dignity left to lose — he spits, and drops of red splatter on the floor in front of Overhaul's shoes. "Fuck," Izuku hisses out in a ragged breath. Well, there's no taking back whatever it was Overhaul and company just saw. "What *was* that?"

"The short-term form of our Quirk-breaking drug," Overhaul replies. His expression is clear of any guilt or stain on his consciousness; his eyes are bright. He doesn't care.

"Fucking figures," Izuku mutters, eyes falling back shut. "Nothing ever works right on me." He hopes they don't spend the next two hours slowly torturing him with that fucking drug.

"What do you mean by that?" Overhaul queries.

"I just fuck things up," Izuku feels himself mumble. Ah. The compulsion from earlier has settled on him again, but he's so tired. He can't find it in himself to fight. "It's just because of who I am. Nothing ever goes right around me."

He drifts off for a bit, then. He's completely depleted; his energy reserves have never been this low. He barely rouses when someone drags him across the floor and dumps his body on the couch. He only realizes he's listing over when someone catches him and holds him up. Izuku drags his eyes open, and, oh, it's the bird-doll again. Seems like the blond man is back to his weird possession shenanigans.

Overhaul crouches in front of him. That one guy, Shin, is by his side. "Let's try this again, Deku," Overhaul says. "Who told you about us?"

“The heroes, mostly,” Izuku feels himself say. “I didn’t really have a clue who you guys were before they arrested me.”

“Then how did you know who had lost their Quirk?”

“The,” Izuku starts, and stops, trying to hold it in -- the compulsion presses down on him. He has to speak. But he doesn’t have to do it in a way they’ll understand, does he? He switches to the second intonation. *Their guardian spirits told me, and led me to them so I could fix their Quirks for them and reconnect them with their charges.*

Overhaul’s eyes narrow. “What did you just say?”

Izuku repeats himself, still in the second intonation. The serpentine spirit uncoils itself from the corner and slithers over to him at a leisurely pace. He’s fairly sure this spirit is the one responsible for the compulsion; this doesn’t look great for him.

Overhaul seems impatient. “I’d suggest you give me some answers soon,” he says, and puts a single gloved hand on Izuku’s leg. “Or I may start removing limbs.”

Izuku watches the black serpent slowly climb its way up said leg. It looks at him with amusement in its poisonous, heavy gaze, and Izuku can’t help but laugh, a bit wild, a bit unhinged. “There’s no point in telling you anything. It wouldn’t help you,” he says. “I guess this is as good a way to go as any. Dismembered in a yakuza stronghold ‘cause I don’t have anything worth listening to. Beats being bitten in half by an invisible monster in a jail cell.”

“It wouldn’t help us,” Shin repeats slowly. “But would it harm you?”

Oh, fuck him for catching that. “In all probability, yeah.”

“How so?”

You'd want to kill me, at best, and experiment on me to hell and back at worst? Izuku says drily. *I'm pretty sure that's what you're thinking about doing anyways, though, so...* He trails off. The serpent spirit has wound itself around his torso. Izuku looks down at it uneasily; it gives him a sly look, and then he feels it: another compulsion settling over him. *So, you know*, Izuku says, but the compulsion squeezes him, and the rest of his words come spilling out in the first intonation. "What's the point? There's no reason to talk to you at all."

"What do you mean by that?" Shin queries.

"--B-because it doesn't matter what I say--" Izuku clenches his jaw, but the words keep pouring out anyways with no conscious input from him, as if they've bypassed him entirely and are coming straight from his thoughts. "If I tell the truth, you won't believe me -- if I don't, then I'm a liar -- and even if you *do* believe me, I still lose. The end result is the same."

"And what end result is that?" Shin prompts.

"Oh, you know, the usual criminal pastimes -- torture, murder, or." The last answer presses against the back of his teeth. He struggles for a moment not to speak, but -- "Or you'll try and use me like all the rest."

"The rest?"

"Yeah," says Izuku.

Shin seems dissatisfied. "What do 'they' try and use you for?"

No. He doesn't want to answer this. Izuku grits his teeth, but the compulsion squeezes him tight, and more words come spilling out. "They're always making me do things I don't want to do -- like--" He doesn't want to answer this question! He doesn't want to let them know! Izuku flares his bare reserve of energy, squeezing his eyes shut and gritting his teeth--

"Like what?"

Fucking hell. “Gh--” The compulsion constricts around him. “Like with the temple... and fixing Quirks -- and -- *ngh* --” No! Out of all the shit he reveals tonight, *this* is the one -- the one he absolutely *cannot*--

“And?” Overhaul queries.

Izuku lets out a ragged breath and uses the last of his energy to try and cut the compulsion away. The snake spirit coils around him tighter, flaring out its own energy until it seeps into his veins, smothering his energy like black ashes burying the last of a flame. “And All for One,” Izuku finds himself saying. Fear settles lead heavy in his stomach; he feels tears prick his eyes. “All for One and his *stupid* fucking Quirk.”

Fuck. Fucking hell fucking fuck.

Overhaul’s gaze sharpens, and he leans forward. “What do you have to do with All for One?”

He feels sick. He wants to throw up. The words keep tumbling out. “If he hadn’t kidnapped Bakugou and if he’d just -- if he’d just left it well enough *alone*, then no one would have come to me for help and I never would have known and I never would have been *involved* but he *did* -- he should’ve just *quit*! ‘Cause if he did then I never would’ve had to -- to--”

“To what?”

Izuku bites his tongue, so hard he tastes blood. The snake spirit tightens its hold on him again, and it lays its fangs on the bare nape of his neck. The compulsion is so strong now, it grips him all the way from within, to his very blood, to his very bones. It won’t let him go. And all those angry words and thoughts he’s been keeping inside -- “I wouldn’t have had to kill his spirit!” Izuku bursts out, suddenly furious. “I wouldn’t have had to destroy his Quirk! If he’d just stopped and minded his own fucking business, if he hadn’t gone and done *any* of that then I never would’ve gotten involved and everything would’ve been *better*! But now he’s Quirkless and good as dead and I have to carry that on my shoulders now, and I don’t have his Quirk, but I might as well have it, because I know how to do it too! I don’t want to know, I never did, but I’m always being backed into a corner, I always end up having to do all this -- this garbage, this fucking *shit*--”

Overhaul's eyes are wide. "You are... the third party at Kamino Ward?"

"I didn't want to be," Izuku says. "I didn't mean to interfere. But then he was -- he was going to take Bakugou away again, he was going to kill All Might, someone was going to *die* right in front of me -- of course I had to do something." Of fucking course he did.

"Why aren't you using the same abilities now as you displayed at Kamino Ward?"

"Can't," he says, feeling tired. "The circumstances were one of a kind. I'd only ever do it in a life-or-death situation, and there's no one to do it with right now, anyways."

"What did you do, and who with?"

He's already revealed the second greatest secret he has. There's no point in fighting the compulsion now. "All Might's Quirk spirit," he says dully. "I fused with it."

Overhaul looks at him sharply, and his expression melts into something full of calculation. He tilts his head, and the fluorescent lights catching on the sides of his face illuminate his ice-chip eyes into something clear and utterly devoid of conscience. This man does not care what he does to Izuku.

It would be more frightening, if Izuku hadn't been on the receiving end of that kind of look from almost every spirit he's ever met in his life.

"What exactly," says Overhaul, leaning forward, "is the full extent of your abilities, Deku?"

"I don't know," says Izuku. He looks directly at the serpent spirit. "And if you had any mercy at all, you'd knock me out before he can ask me any more, or all your secrets will be spilled too. And there's no one here who that would help."

“Who are you talking to?” Shin says.

“A snake.”

There’s a pause. The serpent shifts, considering, and a moment later, the compulsion to speak in the first intonation lifts. But the kirin spirit also steps forward, eyes full of fury and mourning.

Dark-scales, it says. *That’s enough.*

The serpent flickers out its tongue. *He is the name-eater*, it says. *What do you care about him.*

He is just a boy.

Please, Izuku says. *I’ve already told them enough. Nothing else I have to say will help them.* That’s all he intends to say, but then the truth compulsion nudges him, and before his brain can catch up to his mouth -- *I’m tired. I just want to stop.*

Something shifts in the serpent’s bright eyes. *Dark-scales, if you do not do it, I will*, says the kirin.

“Can you replicate All for One’s abilities?” Overhaul asks.

Yes, Izuku replies. He feels so exhausted; this interrogation has taken every last thing he’s had to give. *I wish I didn’t know how.*

The serpent spirit looks between Izuku and the kirin, hesitating for a long, long moment.

And it squeezes Izuku one last time. A compulsion settles heavy over him, and his consciousness starts to fade out, pressed down into a welcome dark.

Sleep, the serpent tells him. Everything blurs, and then Izuku is lost to the peace and dark of complete oblivion.

--

When Izuku wakes up, he's strapped down to a cold table in what looks like a dark medical lab. He can barely move. The straps dig into his skin, and no matter how much he twists or struggles, he can't reach any of the buckles.

It's all he can do not to panic. He takes deep breaths, one after another, as his heart race picks up -- races -- takes long minutes to slow back down, and then he does an inventory of himself.

The last traces of the sleep compulsion are dissipating from him; there are also traces of a different spirit's energy in him. Someone was using their Quirk on him while he was unconscious? He can't feel any adverse effects. Checking his energy reserves, he notes that his energy is somewhat replenished; he uses a bit to burn out the last bits of that foreign energy.

He's still clothed -- thank god -- and most important, he can feel his protective amulet still resting smooth and warm against his chest. Izuku sighs in relief.

Then he turns his gaze to the hulking, seething beast hunched over by the wall, so tall it nearly reaches the ceiling. It has glowing neon eyes and a shadowy muzzle full of white teeth, but beyond that, it's difficult to say; the skins, faces, and pelts of all manner of peculiar beings are stitched together over it like the most grotesque of cloaks. There's a black ichor still dripping from the seams, like some horrific impersonation of blood.

Whose spirit are you? Izuku asks.

Skin-beast is my title, and Overhaul my charge, it says in a long rattling hiss of a breath. The smell of something rank and fetid washes over him. It peels its lips back into a curious smile. *And you are the little name-eater who has stirred up so much fear.*

Izuku grimaces at the title. *How long have I been out?*

Nearly three hours, now, it says. It shifts to peer at him more closely. *You have gotten yourself into quite a situation. How did you find this place?*

Followed the kirin. Worst decision I've made this week.

The skin-beast laughs, a gravelly and screechy noise that makes him wince. It seems to be in a good mood, so Izuku tentatively asks, *What happened while I was unconscious?*

My charge has taken quite the interest in your abilities, the skin-beast says. It sounds amused. *He took you apart and put you together a few times, and took some of your blood as well, but he was interrupted by some business.* Satisfied, it adds, *I expect he will be back soon.*

He... took me apart? Izuku says, feeling a cold chill on his skin.

His ability, inherited from me, it confirms. *He may disassemble and reassemble anything he touches.*

Overhaul wants to experiment on him.

Fuck.

His heart rate is rising again, and there's a tingling sensation starting in his fingers and legs. He's having a hard time controlling his breathing. *Why are you here?* he forces out, between shaking breaths. *Couldn't have just wanted to watch me sleep.*

The skin-beast laughs again. Izuku's skin crawls. *You are the most interesting thing to happen in here in months*, it tells him with a wide, toothy grin. *Of course I would be here.*

And no one else is here to spectate? Izuku says flatly, lifting his head as far as he can to glance around the room. A lot of medical equipment he doesn't like the look of, a couple of worrying machines... but no other spirits.

I scared them away, the skin-beast confirms smugly. *They are afraid to be in the same place as me.*

And here Izuku is, alone in its presence. He swallows and reminds himself that he has his protective medallion on still. *Why?*

If I like them enough, it says, *I skin and eat them.*

It stretches out a little, preening, as if to show off the collection of skins in the patchwork collection it's wearing. Izuku turns his head away, squeezing his eyes shut. *You said I'm the most interesting thing here, right now*, he forces himself to say, past the nauseous, uneasy feeling in his stomach. *What do you want from me, exactly?*

Your skin, it says bluntly, whimsical and unconcerned. Izuku's stomach drops as it smiles at him, its teeth white and gleaming in the faint light slipping through beneath the door. *That medallion of yours is protecting you, for now, but I can wait.*

You'd kill me while Overhaul still wants to get something out of me? Izuku asks, feeling sick.

Ah, says the skin-beast. *Aaahhhh*, it says again. *Now that is the question, isn't it? I quite like the idea of having you for my collection. But then again...* It tilts its head to the side. *I'd quite like it if you told Overhaul about us spirits as well.*

Izuku feels like someone has just doused him with ice water. *What? Why?!*

He has done some astoundingly entertaining research using my abilities, the skin-beast says, sounding proud. *Enough to isolate the effects of another's Quirk from their blood. If he knew of us...* It rolls its shining eyes to meet his, bright and amused and utterly devoid of empathy. *Imagine what he could do.*

Izuku doesn't want to. *I don't want to*, he says.

The skin-beast ignores him; it merely sighs dreamily, turning its gaze to some faraway dream. *Once again*, it murmurs reverently, *once again, perhaps, I could walk the first plane under the sun.*

Ah, right. That, Izuku can understand... but he really doesn't want the skin-beast on the first plane, terrorizing humans and killing whoever catches its eye, and more than that, he really doesn't want Overhaul to know anything about the spirit world at all. If Izuku had to tell anyone, Overhaul is quite possibly the last person on Earth he'd choose.

The skin-beast has to know that, though, at least. It wouldn't have told him any of this if it wasn't trying to open some kind of negotiation. What is it playing at? *Why should I tell him anything?*

If you tell him, the skin-beast offers, *I won't eat you at all.*

In its own, weirdly naive way, it seems to think this is a fair deal. Izuku twists his lips sardonically. *If I don't tell him, you'll try to eat me. If I do tell him, he'll never let me go until the day I die.* He shakes his head. *I think I'd rather be eaten, if it's all the same to you.*

Pity, says the skin-beast. *But to have the name-eater in my collection would be a fine tradeoff.*

It looks rather pleased at this, and Izuku wishes, not for the first time, that he never did what he did at Kamino Ward. Not the part where he and All Might's guardian spirit stopped All for One -- he could never regret keeping someone from being killed. But afterwards, with the the unmaker--

Izuku lets out a long, tired breath and closes his eyes. The amulet is reassuringly warm around his neck.

If there's nothing else, he says, I think I'll go back to sleep.

There's nothing he can do now but wait.

--

He wakes up who-knows-how-long later to the sound of Overhaul snapping on a new pair of gloves. He squints against the fluorescent lights; above him, Overhaul and his dumb mask and dumber feather-lined hood come into view. He's holding an empty syringe.

Overhaul doesn't say anything to him as he jabs the syringe into the crook of Izuku's arm, and Izuku doesn't say anything either. He just watches silently as Overhaul collects his blood. The man then disappears for an indeterminate amount of time, probably to look at Izuku's blood; when he returns, there's a thoughtful look in his eyes.

He walks over to Izuku, still strapped to the table, and puts his hand on Izuku's arm. Izuku draws in a sharp breath when he feels foreign energy flooding his system -- with barely a thought, he uses his own energy to burn it away. There's no way he's letting that stay in him long enough to find out what it does, *especially* if Overhaul's ability is what the skin-beast claimed.

Overhaul looks down at him, puzzled, brows furrowing. Energy pours into Izuku's system again, and again he burns it out.

If this is all that they're going to do today, Izuku is probably going to lose. It takes more energy for him to purge something out of a system than for it to invade; in a war of attrition, there's no way Izuku can last. He has to find another alternative.

Overhaul's expression morphs into something clinical, cold, and thoughtful; the insertion of his energy into Izuku's system is slower this time, and it gives Izuku a moment to observe how exactly his Quirk works. It seems that the five fingers, five points of contact, acts a shortcut gateway through which Overhaul's energy comes. Izuku grabs the gate and slams it shut. Yes, that's much more efficient.

Overhaul withdraws his hand. "Tell me, Deku," he says, "what does my Quirk feel like to you?"

"Why the hell would I tell you?" Izuku says. There's the barest tremble in his voice.

Overhaul nods, a bit absently, and retreats from Izuku's field of vision. Somewhere past the direction of his feet, a drawer opens. Something metallic clinks. When Overhaul reappears, he's holding disinfectant and a scalpel in his hands.

Izuku feels himself go completely, utterly cold. His eyes are riveted to the scalpel. He knew that Overhaul was going to try to -- that he -- that he was an awful excuse of a human being -- but somehow, it didn't sink in until now, with the harsh white light gleaming off the indifferent and terrible edge of a metal blade.

"If you do not cooperate, or at minimum, cease disrupting my Quirk," Overhaul says, with all the dispassionate annoyance of navigating a business contract, "then I will have to do this the old-fashioned way, and there is no anesthesia in stock."

He feels sick. Bile is rising in the back of his throat. He thinks he might have started to shake. "I hope you choke and die."

Overhaul doesn't even blink. "Even if I did have some on hand, I would not be able to use it. The application of anesthesia is a precise and exacting field, where a small error can easily

result in the subject still conscious through surgery, or the subject entering a coma or dying. And I do not have any particular training in this field.”

He pauses, looking down at Izuku; the light above them casts shadows over his face. “Do you still care to test me?”

Izuku grits his teeth. He hates Overhaul, with everything he has in him; hates Overhaul more than almost anyone he’s ever hated before. He wishes Overhaul would drop down dead right where he stands.

When Overhaul uses his Quirk again, though, Izuku doesn’t try to stop him.

--

Nearly three hours later, Izuku is tossed into an empty room with a tiny, adjacent bathroom and locked inside. Knowing that they have pre-prepared cells like this makes his stomach churn. And in conjunction with everything else that’s just happened--

Izuku stumbles into the bathroom and throws up into the toilet.

He’s learned more about his own body than he ever wanted to know: his ability to tolerate others’ energy in his system for long periods of time, for one, how much blood he has for another. But worst of all was when Overhaul removed Izuku’s arm and grafted it to something else for study, and Izuku could still feel everything that was being done to it. Could still *control* it, even, because his energy was still in it--

Overhaul had been particularly interested in that. Izuku shudders and puts a hand to his mouth, trying not to throw up again.

If he doesn’t find a way out of here, he’d rather kill himself and be done with it than endure this. He’ll take off the fucking medallion and let the skin-beast eat him, if he has to. He doesn’t fucking care.

Izuku breaks down in the bathroom for a few minutes. He cries embarrassingly and even punches the wall. It's stupid; none of it is going to help the situation. He forcefully shoves all of those emotions away and gets himself back together so he can think of a way to escape.

If he could try going through the in-between place... he doesn't know if he can get there by himself, though, and he's scared to try. Senshajou said that he should ask them for help if he needed it, though. Maybe...?

Izuku bites his index finger. With his blood, he quickly draws a hexagonal Script on the floor, then scrawls a *please help* and one half of a locating rune on it. The other half, he draws on himself. He channels his energy into the Scripts, and the hexagonal Script burns to life; a copy made of his white energy peels away into the second plane and whisks away through the wall. Hopefully Senshajou will get it soon; hopefully they'll come--

Only minutes later, the skin-beast shoves its head through the wall, its eyes glowing eerily and casting strange lights in the room. *I cannot touch you while you are wearing that medallion*, it says, *but I will not allow you to leave, either.*

It opens its mouth to show him the half-chewed remnants of his message, and then it finishes chewing it up and swallows it entirely. Izuku stares, fists clenched and trembling, as it grins at him and disappears from the room.

He's on his own.

His legs give out from under him, and he sits down hard. His finger is still bleeding. What can he do? He isn't a fighter, there's no way he can win in a physical fight against *any* of the Eight Precepts on his own. His Scripts only work against other spirits. What the hell can he do?

Find a way back to the in-between place on his own, without losing his mind. He'll have to make a new Script for it. He doesn't even know where to start.

Izuku's eyes burn, and he has to fight not to start crying again.

Okay, just get yourself together, Izuku. You're bleeding and you only have so much blood. Izuku wipes his eyes and goes to the bathroom sink. Plugging the drain, he fills it with water and sticks his hand in. The water slowly starts turning pink. When he's satisfied with its color, he uses his teeth to rip a thin strip of cloth off the bottom of his shirt, then binds his finger as best as he can.

Okay. That should work for ink. The next question, then, is what the *hell* he's supposed to write.

There are four planes: the first, or the physical; the second, for minds and auras and particularly determined spirits; the third, where most guardian spirits reside, and which is for dreams and transitions; and the fourth, where the most powerful spirits reside, and where -- Izuku suspects -- the soul of someone in a deep sleep or a coma might walk.

Fourth-plane spirits are so vast and so intrinsically connected to the universe that they're almost too great to perceive. It's the plane of planetary spirits, spirits of stars and nebulae and entire galaxies -- the plane in which things like the star-song are sung. Beyond it, there is only the Other Place -- where all beings go when they pass on, and from which no soul nor spirit has ever returned.

The in-between place is none of these things. If the planes are what make up the universe, then the in-between place is the thin structure underneath; the place where things go when they slip between the cracks. If the universe is a stage, then the in-between is backstage. It is the thin boundary between the universe and the vast, dark nothingness beyond. A single misstep there and Izuku would disappear from existence entirely.

So, yeah, the in-between is kind of a tricky place to get to, and a tricky place to be. To make it worse, Izuku isn't sure it even has a proper name to write down in a Script, or if a Script will even work in the in-between. And what case should he be writing in, too...? For every plane, there's a corresponding intonation and written case, but what does the in-between have?

Izuku squeezes his eyes shut. Just *think*. He's been to the in-between place before, he's *heard* the way Senshajou talks in there, the way those words are shaped -- not as syllables or

sounds, but transmitted like sudden and inexplicable knowledge obtained in a dream. If he can just feel out the shape of it and put it down, if he could just remember--

He takes his time, thinking it over. The gray quality of the in-between, the surreal and dreamlike quality. How the universe had slid away into some translucent, glittering thing beyond the veil. The dim light and shadow that slanted through the space, overlaying each other at sharp and impossible angles, and Senshajou's speech, how it wasn't so much spoken as it came into being as if it always was...

Izuku feels for the kernel of knowledge hidden in those memories, and something shifts, deep in his mind, as if awakening, as if a slow movement in the mist. He opens his eyes and dips his finger into the bloody water of the sink, and begins writing on the walls.

--

Three failed Scripts. His energy is running low, and there's not much water left in the sink, but he's gotten closer with every try. This is the one that will get him home. He's *sure* of it. If he just adds a couple more clauses around the edge, to make sure he doesn't lose himself when he enters...

Izuku is just finishing up with the last glyphs when he hears the cell door open. He startles, fumbles to write down the very last of the glyphs -- the door shuts with a click -- he braces himself and draws up his energy to activate the Script -- the bathroom door swings open, and Izuku freezes.

Standing at the door is a girl, no older than ten, frozen in spot. She's a *child*.

"What are you doing in here?" he asks, horrified. He quickly shifts his focus to the second plane; there's an aura frantically moving around on this floor. "Are you running from someone?"

The girl doesn't move for a second longer, and then she nods, casting a fearful look back to the main, empty room of the cell.

Izuku looks over his Script one more time. He only wrote it to get one person through the in-between space, and he doesn't know if it can handle two--

He looks at the girl. It's not even a choice, really.

"I can hide you," he says. "Do you want me to?"

She jerks her gaze back to him, surprised, and for a moment Izuku thinks she's just going to run back out there, but then they both hear it -- footsteps rapidly approaching down the hall. She nods.

Izuku holds out his hand, and she takes it with a fearful expression. Her hand is so *small*. "I need you to close your eyes," he says, and she does, squeezing them tightly shut. "Take as deep a breath you can, and hold it. Whatever you hear or feel, don't look, don't move, and most importantly, *don't let go of my hand.*"

He pushes his energy into the subject clause written on his arm; it glows, and with a mental command, he sends it winding down to his skin and climbing onto the girl's hand instead. He slams the other hand against the fully written Script on the wall, burning it to life. Clear as day, reality around him splinters and refracts until he can clearly see the four planes overlaying each other, and more than that, the thin curtain separating them from the in-between place.

Izuku pulls the curtain over the girl just in time for the cell door slamming open.

A man with shaggy, light-colored hair appears in the bathroom doorway. His eyes flicker to the bloodstained sink, to the slight scorching on the walls from Izuku's failed Scripts, to Izuku crouching down by a messy, water- and blood-stained wall.

"Geez, what the hell have you been up to in here?" the man mutters, casting one last look around. His eyes skitter right over the space where the girl was standing. "Haven't seen a girl run in here, by any chance?"

Izuku can feel the Script starting to destabilize; the energy doesn't want to hold together. It wasn't made to hold a human. "I heard someone rattling the doorknob," he tells the man tersely, straining to keep the Script from falling apart.

The man nods and closes the bathroom door, and a moment later, Izuku hears the cell door slam shut with an audible *click*.

Izuku pulls the girl out of the in-between space and wraps her in his arms, covering her with his body as the Script destabilizes. The energy bursts like a firecracker. White light flashes over the walls. There's a faint hiss as the bloody water that made up the Script evaporates to nothing. Izuku sets down the girl and glances at the wall, where the only trace of the Script is a red-brown powder crumbling to the floor and faint black marks singed into the plaster.

"Are you okay?" he asks, turning back to the girl. He takes in her appearance: long white hair, a single horn, red eyes -- she's tearing up, but she isn't making a sound. Izuku frowns, but then he remembers -- he transferred the subject clause of the Script to her, and the Script just imploded. He curses mentally and gently takes her arm. "I'm sorry that hurt. Let me just check--"

He rolls up her jacket sleeves and stops, frozen. Her arm is completely wrapped in bandages.

If she's running around terrified down here, then -- what's Overhaul doing to her? What the fuck?

"Hey," he says, in as gentle a voice he can manage. "I don't think we've been properly introduced. I'm Deku, what's your name?"

She bites her lip before answering in a voice so quiet he can barely catch it, "Eri."

"Eri-chan, I want to check that I didn't hurt you too bad just now. But I'm afraid that taking off your bandages will hurt you more. On a scale of one to ten, how much pain do you feel?"

Eri fiddles with the hem of her jacket, looking down at the floor. Finally, she holds up three fingers.

“Do you think it would hurt more if I take your bandages off?”

Eri gives a tiny shrug, still not looking up, but she squeezes Izuku’s hand a bit tighter. Best not try it right now, then. He can feel her trembling through their grip.

“Eri-chan,” he says, “why are you in this place?”

She mumbles something he can’t hear.

“Can you repeat that?”

“Researching my Quirk,” she mumbles.

“Does it hurt?”

She nods, and Izuku feels a deep, burning anger spring to life. It’s one thing if Overhaul pulls this kind of shit on him. But this is -- she’s just a *kid*.

Izuku has to get her out of here.

He runs through the calculations in his head. His Script destabilized, but that’s because it wasn’t meant to carry a human through the in-between. He’ll have to make accommodations. -- Izuku mentally rearranges the Script in his head and nods to himself. This could work; he’ll just have to work out the kinks as he goes.

“Eri-chan,” he says, “do you want to leave this place?”

Eri jerks her head up sharply to look at him. There’s a flash of fear in her eyes before she looks away again. “Can’t,” she whispers.

“Nevermind that,” he says soothingly. “Don’t think about whether or not it’s possible. Just tell me: if you could leave, would you?”

There’s a long, agonizing moment, and then Eri nods, just once. Her aura is tinged through with fear.

“Thank you for putting your trust in me earlier,” Izuku says to her. “You were really brave. I’m going to tell you a secret now, okay?” Eri’s eyes flick up to his. “I’m about to leave. Do you want me to take you with me?”

“I-if you...” she swallows, and persists in a small voice. “He’ll hurt you.”

Izuku’s heart clenches. “Overhaul?” She nods, tightening her grip and looking down at the floor again. Izuku didn’t think it was possible for him to hate Overhaul even more than he already did, but he does. “You don’t need to worry about me; I can take care of myself. Earlier, I told you I could hide you, didn’t I? If you want to leave, then I promise that I’ll get you out of here too.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

And that’s when the kirin spirit sweeps in through the walls, aura pressing down with fear and fury both. It turns its head to pin Izuku with its terrible red glare -- and then it pauses.
The name-eater boy?

Eri throws herself at Izuku, burying her face in his hoodie. Surprised, he wraps his arms around her in a hug. “I want to leave.”

“Then we’ll leave,” Izuku says, not looking away from the kirin. “I promise, Eri-chan, I’ll get you out of here.”

The kirin takes a step forward. *You will?* it says, sounding disbelieving and hopeful all at once. *You could not even save yourself.*

It seems to be Eri’s guardian spirit. And if it is, and if Eri really has been experimented on like Izuku thinks -- then no wonder it is so tragically angry all the time. *I’ve been working on a way to leave through the in-between place, Izuku tells it, and I was able to use my last Script to hide Eri-chan from the man she was running from. I’ll need to tweak it to let me take two people at once, but--*

The kirin’s aura flares at that. *You will not*, it commands. *A human is not meant to go through the in-between. She will not last.*

Izuku frowns. He’d suspected it wouldn’t be pleasant, which is why he told Eri to close her eyes, but... He makes to pull away from Eri, but she hugs him tighter. He gives her a baffled pat on the shoulder. “Eri-chan, what did it feel like when I hid you?”

A pause. “Scary,” she says, finally. “Everything was cold. I couldn’t breathe. I felt like I was floating. I could hear you talking... but it was really far...”

You see? the kirin says. *You cannot take her through there.*

Izuku sits and absorbs this information. Unfortunately, it makes sense. The in-between place is... the bare wire framework of the universe, hardly a place for a first-plane creature. But if he doesn’t take her through there -- what else can he do?

Let me lend you my strength, the kirin says suddenly. *How did you fuse with the chimera? I am willing to do it with you.*

Izuku takes a shaky breath, mind racing. If there's *any* other way to do this, any other way at all...

He can't think of one. And he already decided that he's going to get Eri out of here; if he has to sacrifice himself, then that's how it is. But still--

Before I tell you, he says, *you have to promise not to use this information against me, and to never give this knowledge to anyone else.*

The kirin frowns. *Will this knowledge harm anyone?*

Me, says Izuku. *Which is why you have to promise.* He shifts so he can hug Eri better; she doesn't show any signs of letting go.

It studies him for a long moment, before finally saying, *I promise I will not use the information you are about to reveal to me against you, nor will I give this knowledge to anyone else, so long as you speak the truth and these conditions will bring no harm to me and my charge.*

It'll work. *I let the chimera possess me,* Izuku says in a rush, and looks away. His heart is beating fast.

Possess you? The kirin sounds startled.

Yeah, says Izuku. *You can see how the planes don't work right around me, right? If you possess me, you and your powers can interact with every single plane at once.*

He glances at the kirin carefully to monitor its reaction. There's a puzzled crease to its eyes, and its aura pulses contemplatively. *I... will be able to use my power on the walls keeping her captive?*

Izuku swallows. There are so many tempting reasons for a spirit to want to possess him. But the kirin made a promise, he reminds himself. It can't use the knowledge against him. *Yes. I'll only invite you in if you promise to leave after we've removed Eri from immediate danger.*

The kirin looks at him with hungry eyes, and Izuku is afraid for a moment that it won't make that promise; that the temptation of having Izuku as a vessel is too much -- but the kirin only says, *I promise I will abide by your terms, so long as we are united in the common purpose of removing my charge from Overhaul's care.*

Izuku lets out a breath. "Okay," he says out loud. He swallows again and wipes his sweaty palms on his pants. His heart is pounding, and he's fairly certain he's about to lose his nerve. To lose control like that again... But what else can he do? Eri has to go free, no matter the cost to him. "Eri-chan, are you ready to go?"

Eri nods into his jacket. *But*, the kirin adds, *I would prefer to do a partial possession, not a full one. I am not fond of overwriting one's mind.*

Izuku nearly cries in relief.

He takes a deep breath, and another. For this to work... He takes off his medallion and puts it around Eri's neck. If it can't protect him, then maybe it can offer some measure of protection to her instead. "Eri-chan, this might look a little weird to you, but don't be scared. Okay?"

And then, turning to the kirin, *Under the terms we have agreed to, I--* He swallows one more time, throat dry. He has to force the last words out. *I invite you in.*

The kirin glows, and then Izuku's world is consumed by a rush of pale golden fire streaked through with red -- and a moment later, when they open his eyes, the kirin is gone, and everything has been tinted gold as if they're viewing the world through the thinnest shell of a rose pearl. They flex his hands experimentally; his nails have turned into black, wicked

claws, and its teal scales are covering his hands and running up his arms. They open his mouth and exhale a plume of black smoke.

Eri pulls back and looks up at them curiously. “Deku?” They peer down at her. She’s so small! She’s so near! “You look different. You...” She reaches up, and they bend down obligingly. Her hand touches something attached to the skull above the eyes -- *my horn*, the kirin whispers. “You have a horn like me,” she says, full of wonder, and touches it again.

“That’s because I’m borrowing your power for a bit,” they say -- the boy in them says.

She withdraws suddenly, looking fearful. “My... my Quirk?”

The kirin moves to speak. “Do not worry, Eri,” it rumbles, and something about the mortal form’s voice takes on a strange and echoing quality, distorted until it is almost in the second intonation, but not quite. “Your power cannot hurt us.”

Her mouth parts in awe as she stares up at them, and they smile at her reassuringly. Then they crouch down with their back towards her. “Alright, then, it’s time to get out of here. Climb on!”

Eri clumsily clambers on, wrapping her arms around their neck nervously, and they spring up. The kirin’s energy courses through him, golden and overflowing and so full of vitality, mingling with the boy’s strange, inert, and so very condensed energy. They go to the cell door to turn the knob. It’s locked. But it doesn’t bother them; they just put their hands to the door and *push*. It crumples under their force, and a moment later, they are standing in the hall.

“Wow,” Eri whispers into their ear. They chuckle, and scanning the second plane, they lope towards the most likely location for the stairs. In short order, though, they see the skin-beast block their path. Its eyes are hungry, and the many faces stitched into its skin are stretched grotesquely, the holes where their mouths should be stretched wide open as if screaming.

What an interesting development, time-walker, it says. To think you would join with the name-eater. How curious.

Get out of the way, they say.

No, I don't think so. It peels its muzzle back into a grin. I'd much rather skin you instead.

It leaps. They send out a sweep of golden fire, and the hall ignites. The skin-beast crashes into them with its pelts on fire. It sends a pulse of ugly, slimy energy slithering into them, but a careless flick and the energy is burned out, easy as anything. And then they put their hands to the skin-beast's face; the room pulses once with their energy, and then the skin-beast is frozen mid-growl, unable to move.

You could not defeat me even when we were not united, the kirin says, amused, what made you think you could defeat us now?

They leave the skin-beast caught frozen in time, golden flames licking at its heels. It will break free soon, but if it is wise, it won't come after them again.

"What happened, Deku?" Eri whispers.

"We had to take care of an unexpected enemy," they reply. "We may have another few fights before we are truly free. But do not be afraid, Eri. We will protect you."

"We?" Eri asks.

"You have never been alone," they say. Then, more kirin than boy, "I have always been with you."

They climb up the stairs and lope through the maze-like halls. Avoiding other humans or spirits is easy, so long as they keep an eye on everyone's auras on the second plane. It is easy to ghost through this floor, and the next...

The fire alarm goes off. *Weird, do they not have fire alarms on the floor I was on?* the nameless boy thinks. *We probably should have put out that fire.*

It does not matter. They cannot stop us, the rest of them says. Eri clings tighter to them, but doesn't say a word. They climb up to the next floor.

This time, they come across a few of Overhaul's masked human subordinates. "Hey! Who the hell--" one of them says, and then, "Put the girl down right now!"

"Get out of the way," they say.

In response, the skinnier human draws on its guardian spirit's power, and its hair shoots out towards them at blinding speed.

Not fast enough. They skip out of the way, grab the hair, and with a flare of their energy, set it ablaze. The human screams, and they blur forward to grab it by the throat and slam it into the wall, knocking it out. They turn to the other human. "Will you fight, too?"

Its face splits into a huge grin. "Came here to put out a fire, but instead I get to fight you," it says with obvious pleasure. "So you're the kid who defeated All for One, huh? I'm going to enjoy this."

Enough talking. They blur forward, claws outstretched -- but the human grabs their clawed arm and sends them skidding down the hall. Annoyed, they set the hall on fire. The human barrels right through the wall of flame, heedless of how its clothes and hair ignite. With a joyous roar, it charges forward at them. They frown and catch its energy-enforced punch. Ah; its spirit's power has coated it in bronze armor. They pull on the boy's well of energy, then, sending the white energy through the armor and vibrating it at just the right frequency until the armor shatters.

Then they break the human's arm, throw the human away, and continue on.

Except they sense the human rush them again, and annoyed, they whirl around and catch the human's punch again, shattering its armor just as before. "You are outclassed," they say, annoyed. "Leave."

The human laughs. "It ain't over 'til one of us is dead!" it roars. "You'll have to kill me if you want us to stop! So show me what you got!"

What an annoying amount of bluster. They send out a wave of their energy and wind back time on the human, watching dispassionately as it collapses to the ground with a scream. Soon it will wither away into nothing. Such is the nature of time. They turn to walk away--

No! the boy says suddenly, strongly. *Don't kill him!*

Their vision goes double, and Izuku suddenly feels them splitting down the middle where they used to be a harmonized whole. *Why?* the kirin queries. *His life is of no worth.*

Yes it is! He's alive, so it's worth something! He's not a threat to us, so just -- let it go!

There's a long pause, and then the kirin cuts its energy off. The human stops screaming. Their vision stabilizes, they come back together. They march down the hall.

I think you scared Eri, the boy murmurs in their mind.

A real wave of regret settles in the kirin, then. "How are you feeling, Eri?" they say.

Her arms tighten around their neck. "I'm scared," she whispers. "I thought -- I thought he was gonna die."

"I'm sorry, that won't happen again. No one is going to die."

See? Don't do that, the boy says. *Humans have different rules than you.*

The kirin remains silent, but they both know the boy is right.

Why hasn't Overhaul appeared yet? Perhaps he is away on business, and entrusted care of the compound to his underlings. It doesn't matter. They scan the second plane to pinpoint the rest of the auras on this floor... no one, really. But somewhere beyond, there are plenty of auras clustered along a grid. They've reached street level. "Eri, do you know where the door is?"

She doesn't. They wander the floor for a little bit before they finally find an exit, and then they're stepping out into a well-kept backyard. The sky above is dark and filled with stars. *Three hours until sunrise,* the kirin in them notes.

Someone stumbles out into the yard. "Wait!" They turn around with a frown to see the same annoying persistent human from before, the one they'd spared. "Hey, kid. You could kill Overhaul easy as anythin' right now, couldn't ya?"

They ponder the question for a moment. "Yes. His power is trivial compared to his spirit's. It would only take a moment."

Eri, on their shoulder, shivers. They frown. "But that's none of our concern. Sorry, Eri. Let's get out of here."

They flick their hands, golden flames roaring to life.

"Wait!" the man yells, running forward.

Perplexed, they spare him only a glance before leaping up, using their flames to propel themselves over the compound walls and into the night sky.

We need to land a decent distance away, the boy in them mutters. *They can track us through the sky by the brightness of our flames.* They switch their vision to the second plane and gauge the city; there, far in the distance -- a darkened patch, devoid of auras. Likely a public park, abandoned at this time of night. That will do. Shifting their hands, they steer themselves towards their chosen landing spot and send themselves higher into the air -- and higher, and higher...

The buildings below them shrink and shrink. When they're at a good height, they cut out their flames. Velocity alone should carry them most of the way from here; and now, there are no flames to track them by.

Eri screams. "Don't worry!" they shout. "We'll land safely. Just hang on tight!"

They hurtle down towards the ground, and the wind rushes past them so cold and sharp it could *cut* them. The stars are beautiful, glittering and distant above the thin and misty clouds. The nameless boy in them can't help but open their mouth and laugh, exuberant, at the weightless feeling of their fall -- nothing to catch them, nothing around them, nothing but this sweet and utter freedom.

"We're free, Eri!" he enthuses, and he laughs again. "We're free!"

Not quite yet, the kirin reminds them. *We must still land.*

Izuku laughs as they fall down towards their landing spot -- and sure enough, it's a nice public park with plenty of trees. *Time-walker, your turn!* he shouts.

We have been using my power this whole time, the kirin points out, but it pulls its golden energy around them, catching them and Eri in a golden bubble. Their racing descent slows down to a brisk leap to a casual downward saunter, and then in a cheerful exuberance, they set the trees beneath them on fire to burn the branches in their way.

Ah, we probably shouldn't have done that, Izuku remarks. *Someone will see it.*

Hm, says the kirin, and puts the fire out.

They land lightly on the grass. They crouch down and let Eri tumble off their back onto her feet. She looks around with wide eyes, then looks up at them -- and they can't help but grin and sweep her up into a hug, spinning her around. She squeaks, her aura flaring with surprise -- but then a creeping, insistent awe. "We did it! We're out!" Izuku laughs, and the golden sheen fades from his vision as the kirin retreats from him and ends the possession. "We did it!"

He sets her down, breathless and grinning so wide it hurts, and she gives him a small, hesitant smile back.

"Now, all we have to do is get you somewhere safe," he says cheerfully. "I could take you to the police--"

The smile drops from her face. He stops. "No?"

"He might... he might look for me there," she whispers.

"Oh, Eri." He tries to think of someone else to give her to. "Do you want me to take you to the heroes?"

She shakes her head. Izuku frowns, but no one else comes to mind. "Then... Do you want to stay at my house until we figure something out?"

She looks up at him shyly. "C... can I?"

He tugs at his lip and looks askance at the kirin. Guardian spirits usually don't want him around their charges longer than strictly necessary. But the kirin shakes its head and says, *She will be safe with you. If you would take her with you... I would owe you a great debt.*

You don't owe me a debt for doing what's right, Izuku says, rolling his eyes. He holds out his hand to Eri, and she takes it tentatively. "Then let's go home for the night, Eri-chan. We'll figure everything out in the morning."

They walk down to a nearby bus station, where Izuku grabs a flyer and scans the subway train schedule. There's a station about half a mile away, and it has trains running every hour all night. Good enough for him. He walks with Eri down the streets; she seems happy to be outside, although she glances around nervously on occasion.

They pass an apartment where some clothes are being hung out to dry, and Izuku steals a beanie to hide Eri's hair with, bunching her long hair into a bun before sliding the beanie over it. Izuku also exchanges his hoodie for a baggy brown coat and finds a red sweater to replace Eri's jacket. There. It's not much of a disguise, but better than nothing.

The station is nearly abandoned. He doesn't have any money or a train pass, but after scuffing up his hair a bit and making himself look sufficiently distressed, someone is kind enough to scan him and Eri through the gates for free. After fifteen minutes of waiting, they board the train that'll take them closest to his apartment. They sit down by the window, with Eri taking the window seat. There's no one else in this particular car.

Izuku doesn't think much of it until he sees a man with long, light-colored hair enter through the doors with a large, armored lion spirit stalking at his heels.

The kirin, at Izuku's side, bristles. *It's him*, it snarls.

Izuku sits up straighter. The man strolls down the corridor and sits down in the row behind them. "Hey, kid," he says. "Why'd you go running off like that, huh?"

He and Eri both stiffen at his voice. It's him -- that guy Izuku told the kirin not to kill. He turns to make eye contact with the man over the edge of his seat. "How did you find us?"

"My Quirk makes me real sturdy," the man replies with a grin. "Ran after ya over the rooftops, followin' that fire of yours. 'Course, I lost you for a bit, but then you set those trees on fire. I just followed you from there."

Izuku grits his teeth. The kirin, at the side, flares its aura, angry and regretful. “What do you want?”

“You didn’t stick around to hear me out, back there.” The man shakes his head with a *tsk*. “Been following Overhaul ‘cause I couldn’t beat him. If I’m gonna follow anyone for bein’ stronger than me, though, you’re way more interesting. Prolly less boring, too.” He grins at Izuku. “Ain’t leaving until I beat you, fair ‘n square.”

“When we fought you said it wasn’t over ‘til one of us *died*, ” Izuku hisses.

“That’s right.”

“You’re just -- you want to follow me because you want to *fight me to the death*?”

You should have let me kill him, the kirin says darkly.

Don’t even think about it, the lion spirit says, bored, appearing at its side. *He’s just looking for a good fight, like anyone would.*

“Got it in one,” the man confirms. “I’m from an underground fight club, and there ain’t no match there that don’t end in death.”

“This is fucking real life, not some -- some stupid fight club!” Izuku whisper-yells.

“Who cares? I’m just looking for a good fight.”

“I’m fifteen!”

“Damn good for a fifteen-year-old. Didja really take down All for One? Had a hard time believing it ‘til you broke my arm.”

Izuku twists around fully to face the man, feeling something bubbling hot and furious in the pit of his stomach. “What the fuck is wrong with you?” he demands. “Don’t you have anything better to do than pick a fight with a teenager a decade your junior? Go outside and get a hobby!”

The man just laughs at him. “Hobby? Kid, this is my life. I want nothin’ but a good fight where I can go to fuckin’ *town* with my Quirk. But there ain’t many who can take a punch from me and still stay standin’ on their feet. I punched you, and you weren’t even phased.”

He seems to find this incredibly funny. The lion spirit licks her paw and remarks, *It’s true. There aren’t many who are worthy out there.*

This man is so fucking stupid. “I honestly don’t give a shit. Find someone else.”

“Ah, but a match ain’t over ‘til one of us is dead,” the man says cheerfully. “I lost this time, but next time I’ll give you a run for your money, you’ll see.”

“Absolutely not,” says Izuku.

“There’s nothing I want more than a proper fight,” the man says wistfully. “One that makes me afraid for my fuckin’ life... one that pushes me to the absolute edge! One filled with the kind of raw power that comes from putting your life on the line! I want to have that kind of brawl -- I’ve been searching my whole life for it! And then here you come along!”

Eri is trembling in her seat, and something dark and ugly is stirring in Izuku. This man, strolling in without a care in the world -- and for what? Just to throw his life haphazardly at whatever he finds in hopes that it’ll -- what? Give him a thrill? Is this all he has in his life? Is he so empty? He breathes deep to try and curb the anger in him, but -- this man has also outright declared his intent to kill Izuku. Izuku can understand that kind of declaration from a spirit, but from a *person* --

He can feel himself flaring out his energy, leaking his hostility all through the air. He tries to reign it in, but -- god, this man is so fucking dumb, and his motives are so -- so -- *meaningless*.

“Is that all you have to say?” he says, flat and low. There’s something dark in his voice, every ounce of his disdain and dispassionate apathy compressed into a gunmetal blade.

The man draws back, and some quicksilver unease flashes through his eyes, but the grin remains. “Not interested?”

Izuku forces himself to breathe in through the nose, past the black temper clotting in his chest. When he exhales, he lets his energy pool in the shadows beneath his feet in a vague effort to release his anger. The kirin and the lion spirit are drawing away, ears pressed back against their heads. “Of course I’m not interested,” he says, in a voice as calm as a river in the night. “Who would care for such a petty, asinine thing?”

The grin is gone from the man’s face, and he’s looking at Izuku with the same deeply unsettled look that everyone always does. It doesn’t touch Izuku. “‘Power,’ ‘fighting...’” he mocks. “Shut the fuck up. If that’s all your life is worth, then get out of my sight.”

He glares. The man is barely breathing, watching him with clear, sharp eyes, but unmoving in his seat, as if some distant power has seized him and held him frozen there. His aura churns dark with fear, fluttering rapidly at the edges with confusion. He doesn’t seem like he’ll say anything else. Izuku turns away.

Sitting next to him, Eri looks up at him uncertainly, and it occurs to him, then, that he just swore in front of her.

“Fuck,” he says, and then slaps himself in the face. He did it again. “Eri-chan, how are you holding up?”

She glances uncertainly at the man behind them. “...Is Rappa-san going to follow us...?”

“He better not,” Izuku says darkly. He’s got enough on his plate.

“S-say,” Rappa says suddenly. “That fightin’ ability of yours -- you can’t use it all the time, can you? Otherwise you never would’ve gotten caught by Overhaul in the first place.”

Izuku sets his jaw and very determinedly does not look back. “None of your business.”

“Ah, but you’ve got everyone after you now, don’tcha? You were arrested by the heroes, weren’t you? And the girl’s important somehow, I hear. The rest of Overhaul’s gang is gonna come running after you.”

Izuku just *knows* Rappa is grinning again, and he really wishes he could wipe it off his face. “I *said*, it’s none of your business.”

“If I stick with you,” Rappa says, “you get an extra bodyguard for the kid, and *I* get my pick of good fights.” He sounds incredibly smug.

Izuku’s first instinct is to say no, but -- he stops, and looks at Eri. He doesn’t have any fighting ability on his own, except the ability to occasionally circumvent someone’s Quirk. But it won’t do him any good against fast fighters like the ones in Overhaul’s employ. If someone came to take Eri back, he... wouldn’t be able to protect her. Not by himself.

“Eri-chan,” he says. “Did Rappa ever do anything to you?”

She bites her lip and shakes her head. “He... he’s newer,” she says. “I didn’t... see him a lot.”

“Would you be scared of having him around?”

It's a stupid question, actually. Izuku grimaces at himself, but Eri says, "I... Is he going to take us back?"

"Well, Rappa?" Izuku says curtly.

"Nah," the man says with a laugh. "This is way more fun."

Eri bites her lip again, then shakes her head. "Um... whatever Deku-niisan thinks is best..." she mumbles.

Izuku glances at the kirin. It looks incredibly displeased, but it's also assessing Rappa and not dismissing the offer outright.

If he ever wants a good fight from you, the lion spirit offers, just call for me. I'd be more than happy to tussle with him.

The kirin casts a distasteful look at it. *Extra insurance never hurts, it says begrudgingly. He seems straightforward enough, but his loyalties are fickle. I do not like it.*

I can't think of a way to get rid of him. If he could find us after we leaped halfway across the city, he could follow me any time, no problem, Izuku mutters darkly. He should just turn Rappa in to the police, honestly, but then Rappa might injure them and escape back to the Eight Precepts. Turning him in to the heroes...

Izuku isn't feeling particularly amenable to contacting the heroes at this point in time.

"Fine," he says out loud, feeling like he's losing some kind of game. "You can come along, but there's ground rules, okay? Otherwise the deal's out."

"Sure, kid," Rappa says cheerfully. "Lay 'em on me."

“No picking fights or purposefully drawing attention,” Izuku says. “No attacking me or Eri. If you put Eri in danger in any way, actually, we’re done. Also? No murder. Except in self-defense or defense of others, I guess.”

Rappa gives a theatrical sigh. “You make this so difficult. I want to fight you too, you know.”

Izuku makes a face and glances at the lion spirit. She looks back at him with interest. “...I’ll consider it on a case by case basis.”

“Eh, I guess that’s the best I’ll get. I’m gonna have a go at anyone who attacks me, though.”

Izuku sighs. “Fine, whatever. But that’s it. Okay?”

“You got it,” says Rappa cheerfully. “So, what’re your names, anyways? Never bothered to learn them.”

Izuku sighs again and puts his head in his hands. He hates every decision he’s ever made, for leading him up to this moment. He regrets this so much.

--

They reach Izuku’s apartment, and Rappa and Eri watch as Izuku digs out a spare set of lockpicks from the soil in the flowerpot and breaks in through his own front door. “You sure this is your apartment?” Rappa says, amused.

“Shut up,” Izuku says. “I lost my keys.”

Rappa laughs at him. Izuku shoots him a dirty look and lets them into his apartment.

His apartment seems so much dirtier and more crowded with two other people in there. Izuku kicks his clothes on the floor into a pile and straightens up his bed, then tells Eri she can go to sleep there if she wants. Eri hesitates until Izuku tells her that it's no problem, not to worry about it. After that, she crawls under the blanket covers and is out like a light.

"Nice place you got here," Rappa says to Izuku when he walks into the kitchen.

"Shut *up*," Izuku grouses. He digs through the fridge. Oh, thank god, leftover takeout. He tosses it into the microwave. "I don't have a lot to eat here, and I don't know if I've got the money to feed two more people, but you can make yourself welcome to the contents of my fridge while you're here."

Rappa hums, but he doesn't make for the fridge or anything. He just kind of sits there and watches while Izuku rapidly devours his food. Izuku is so fucking hungry. He's expended so much energy in the past twenty-four hours -- it's a miracle he's still awake, honestly. It's probably the adrenaline.

Sure enough, when he finishes eating, the exhaustion hits him like a truck. He blinks, sways, catches himself on the table; it's all he can do to put his dish in the sink and walk back to his bed. "I don't have an extra bed," he tells Rappa, "but there's a couple extra blankets in the closet, plus a few spare pillows lying around. Sorry, I'm exhausted. You'll have to fix your own bed."

He collapses into his bed, next to Eri, and his fatigue truly crashes over him then. He sighs deeply, eyes drooping closed, rapidly drifting away from consciousness. He's so tired after everything that's happened today.

In the distance, Rappa murmurs something -- "just a kid, huh," he thinks he hears, but it's so murky and far away. His exhaustion swamps him.

And then he's out.

Chapter End Notes

chapter title is from [this poem](#) by elisabeth hewer

thank you [pooch](#) and [crossy](#) for beta reading this chapter!

End Notes

come visit me on [tumblr!](#)

thank you to [salvainterra](#) for beta reading, enabling me, and always encouraging me to make the worst possible decisions. <3

Works inspired by this one

[Gifts and Givers](#) by [Combat_Wombat](#)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!