“Nice to see you too, Grandma.”

The familial title did nothing to endear Saiki to her. If anything, she scowled harder. “We already talked to that school. You don’t get anything else from us.”

Assumed he was there for a handout. *That* was something special. He hadn’t spoken to them more than ten times in ten years. A situation both he and they were happy with. Sure enough, Saiki didn’t want anything to do with them, and they were disgusted by his continued existence, let alone having to interact with him. But, even with that mutual distaste for contact, she thought the only reason he could be talking to her was for *that?* “You say that like I come begging to you every week.”

“You have yet to say that isn’t what you’re doing *now*.”

Never. *Never*. Never had he asked them for anything, and they—! “No. I’m not here to ask for money, Grandma,” he said with admirable restraint, if he did think so himself. “You’re not gonna invite me in? Leaving family on your doorstep? That’s terrible manners for you. You’d think you’d be more dignified than that.” After all, that was all they cared about.

“You still presume to call yourself family,” she noted, taking subtle but visible satisfaction from rejecting him that way.

“No. *You* do,” he corrected her. “Because like you said, you’re still helping me pay my way and you’d never do it without that hanging over you.” He waited for a long few seconds, for her to respond. To do anything. “Well?”

The sneer returned in full force, until she, just like he did, showed remarkable restraint and ‘manners’ by pasting on a fake welcoming expression. “*Please*. Come in.”

As she led him inside, he had to take the opportunity to look around this home that was never his. It was... Austere. Pretty classically Japanese. He was sure there was a deer scare somewhere on the grounds even if he didn’t see one out front, just for that little extra traditional flair. It was weird he felt more at home in Momo’s place despite it skewing a fair amount more western. This place... It didn’t feel like a home. It felt like a place people lived. Maybe to his grandparents it felt like a home, but to him, it felt like every inch of it was rejecting his existence just like they did.

He couldn’t help but notice the photographs on the walls. There were few smiles in them. Two people he knew. Many people he didn’t. Some with the same eyes his grandmother had. The same eyes he had. Family members he never met. People who presumably neither knew nor cared about his existence.

Saiki wasn’t the only notable absence from those family photographs. There was no sign of his mother in them either.

His expectations were confirmed by the sound of water and a wooden ‘donk’ as they emerged through the back door out into the garden. Deer scare. Just like he thought. No deer in this area though. It was just a feature that was considered appropriate as part of this particular style of garden. They were so rigidly Japanese it felt like a parody. Or maybe he was responding to their attitude with his own. As unfair as they were.

It didn’t matter. Really, he didn’t care about them the same way they didn’t care about him. They weren’t why he was here.

Saiki’s grandfather glanced up at him from his comfortable chair that looked over the garden. To his credit, the man was sat with gardening gloves by his side, wearing a mild sheen of sweat from the exertion under his dark grey hair. Looked like he took the visitor as a chance to take a break from upkeep. The glance at the young man turned his peaceful expression to an admittedly milder scowl than Saiki’s grandmother gave him. “You. Have you come begging for a handout? You won’t get anything more from us.” Resignation more than spite.

And Saiki matched that resignation with his own as he answered. “I don’t need a handout. I make enough to pay my own way.”

“Is that so? Then I can stop funding your tuition.”

Saiki laughed a little. Why did it seem like money was always their first thought? Not that he couldn’t relate to that from his own upbringing. Of course, the difference there was *they* lived in this big house with a fancy zen garden, or *any* garden, and they made sure he didn’t and stuck him in a shoebox apartment so they didn’t have to look at him. Little bit of a difference. Would’ve been cheaper for them if he lived here, really. Couldn’t have that though. Everything about them was frustrating.

But... He wasn’t in a position where he had to take that anymore. After accepting their scorn and abandonment for his whole life, afraid of offending them for fear they’d rip away his only chance at the future he wanted, he was already achieving it. “If that’s what you want to do, I won’t complain.” He was stable, financially. Apprentice heroes weren’t paid amazingly well, but definitely enough to cover UA tuition.

“Won’t complain,” the old man echoed with a derisive smirk. “What a show of gratitude for all the support I’ve given over the years.”

“Gratitude. Support.” Saiki fought not to let his anger show. “That’s what you call it. Right, okay, can I ask. Was I family, or was I an orphan you decided to sponsor? I just want to,” no he didn’t, “To figure out what we are to one another, make sure we’re on the same page.”

There was an answer to that question that would have chipped away pieces of him. Of the person he had become over his time at UA. If that was the answer, he didn't want to hear it, but he did need to hear it.

It was hard for Saiki to see it in the moment. But he wasn't the only man simmering with anger and hurt on that porch. The old man took in a quick deep breath and let it out just as quickly. "You're the son of the daughter who abandoned us for criminal scum. You begged us for help. We gave it."

"What?" That just raised a new question, even as a knot untwisted in his insides. "When did I beg you for help?"

"After he died, we were contacted as your next of kin. You begged us not to abandon you, and so we chose to support you to this day, until you could stand on your own two feet." There was almost, almost, respect in the man's eyes as he looked Saiki up and down. "It's good to see our daughter shone through despite him if you can stand on your own now."

But... That wasn't what Saiki had said back then. He remembered the moment. The first time he met his grandparents. They way they looked at him. How ready they were to turn their backs on him. He had asked for help but...

No. It didn't matter.

"Is that why you're here, Saisei?"

Saisei. Last name. His father's name. How intentional was it? Right after praising him for not being his father, it felt pretty deliberate. The digs didn't matter. The snide passive-aggressive insults didn't matter. "No. I want to know what happened back then. With you, and my parents."

"So you're only here to open old wounds," came the scornful voice of his grandmother.

"Heiyu." Just her husband speaking her name, the woman scoffed and turned her back on their guest. "What do you expect to learn that you don't already know?"

"How much do you think I already know? I know how it ended, and Grandma made sure to let me know it was all their fault." Why did he ever take that at face value?

Because he was a child. That was why. A child, hurt and angry, abandoned and scorned by everyone who all said the same thing. It was so easy to believe it when no one thought anything different. But now the memories Kyoka had unwittingly dragged up told him there was more to it.

"Hm... We won't speak of this again." The old man leaned back in his chair. "Chiyu was a good girl. A good, naive girl. We raised her right, made sure she had a bright future ahead of her. I remember, she wanted to be either a nurse or a teacher depending on when we asked her. She

was bright enough she could have been either, or both. If she hadn't made two mistakes. The first was Goken Saisei." The man's jaw clenched. "He was the one who took that bright future from her."

"I'm assuming this is where I enter the picture?" Saiki asked, his tone bitter and dry. How else was he supposed to speak after being tacitly called a mistake?

"Mm. He got her pregnant. She decided she was in love with him and told us they were getting married. Her second mistake was not realising the first was a mistake. She turned her back on us for the sake of living with that criminal and raising his child."

"How terrible for you." Did he have to be so obvious about leaving out the inconvenient parts of his story? Actually no, Saiki was grateful for that. He didn't want this story to be more difficult to pull out of him than it already was. "And what forced her to turn her back on you?"

"That man convinced her that her life would be better with him. He proved just how false that was."

Fine. If he was going to make Saiki come out and say it. "You forced her to choose, didn't you?" With how they wielded their keeping Saiki out of the gutter as a child, like it was excessive generosity he didn't deserve... It felt like a particularly safe guess.

"She needed to understand she was making a mistake. She failed to realise it to the very end, ruined her life because of it." The old man shook his head. "That man took her from us, and dragged her down to be as worthless as him."

"Did you ever reconsider?" Saiki tightly controlled his voice, kept his words and tone neutral.

"Every day," his grandfather answered as though it was obvious. "If she ever came to her senses, we would have welcomed her back. When she became ill, I asked her. We offered her the best care and treatment money could buy."

"And all she had to do was leave him." Saiki's father. Saiki himself. Both. He didn't know which he meant, but he doubted it mattered and didn't want to ask.

Something of his feelings must have leaked through. Hands clenched around the arms of the man's chair. "You say that as though it was unreasonable! It was the obvious choice! He was scum! A criminal!"

"... Was he a criminal *then?*" Saiki asked, even though he felt he already knew the answer.

"He showed his true colours in the end!"

Saiki blinked at the man's sudden show of anger. Then... Laughed. It started small, almost like a choke, then a full and open laugh.

"How dare you laugh at me in my own home!" the man snarled, throwing himself to his feet. "Get out! Get out! I never want to see your face again!"

"I wasn't laughing at you, I was laughing at me," Saiki told him, not that it would matter. Why had he never considered it before? The idea that the people who were pieces of shit to him, were also pieces of shit to other people? If family didn't mean anything when it came to him, why would it mean anything when it came to his mom? Hell, they saw a little kid, their grandson, asking them not to leave, and they thought he wanted money. Or at least, that a monthly stipend would be all it took to solve the problem. They didn't approve of his dad, and that was so horrific they not only cut off all contact with his mom, but let her waste away. They let their daughter die because they didn't like her husband.

Holy shit, he was worried about being his dad? He should've been worried about becoming *these* creatures. He was ashamed that he ever took money from them, no matter how necessary it was. In fact, "You can stop paying my tuition. In fact, please, stop paying my tuition. I don't want anything from you, ever again."

Even as his money-conscious tendencies flared danger signs in his brain, it was nothing compared to the freedom he felt for saying those words. The one thing, the one part of his life that undermined his self-image as someone dragging himself kicking and screaming toward success by his own merits. It was the money they sent him. The money that was barely enough to live on as a child, and not enough to live on the moment he was old enough for part time work. As much as it was less than the bare minimum expected of real family, it was still a handout just like they said. And now he could, no, he wanted nothing more than to slap that hand away.

Saiki was no longer laughing, but continued to smile as he was compared to his father, screamed at for his disrespect, told he would always be worthless, that they should have turned their back on him from the beginning. Every word cemented his decision as the correct one. But he didn't need to hear any more of them. His wings spread behind him, and he took off without another word, high into the sky as the furious voice faded into nothing.

Even though he felt he could be, he knew he wasn't done. If Saiki wanted to put all of this behind him, fully understand everything about where he came from, then there was one more person he had to talk to. Unfortunately... He didn't know how to find him.

However, he knew someone who could.

Lowering himself onto a nearby tower roof, he pulled out his phone and made a call.

"Hi hi! Nejire here!"

“Hey Nejire, it’s Saiki. I need a favour.”

“Oh! Of course! Just say the word and—”

“Ah, sorry, I meant, I need a favour from boss,” he amended.

“Eh, that, hm...! M’kay, let’s hear it!”

“I need the contact details of a retired hero who went by the name Alphabetica.”

“Riiight, and since you need a full pro license to access the Hero Network, I get it, I get it. Okay, I’ll see what I can do. I’ll call you back.”

“Thanks.”

Hanging up the call, he sat there for a short while, processing the last while. He felt relieved, almost giddy, even. Telling the shittiest people in his life to go fuck themselves was some of the most powerful catharsis he’d felt since he first got to fuck a pro hero. What did any of this really mean for him? He had no idea. That would take longer to figure out than he’d be sitting on this rooftop.

His phone rang. “Yeah?”

“Flygon.”

Not Nejire. Ryukyu. “Yeah, boss.”

“Nejire just gave me your request. I’m going to assume you’re not asking for this as part of any hero work investigation.”

“No, boss.”

“Are you going to tell me why you want the contact details of the hero that killed your father?”

Yeah... Okay, admittedly that didn’t sound good. “It’s for personal reasons.”

“That’s not helping your case, Flygon.”

“Not that kind of—! How stupid do you think I am, boss?! If I did something nefarious you’d instantly know it was me!”

“And you know there is such a thing as someone with nothing to lose.”

Okay, he understood why she was a little suspicious, but still. “I have a lot to lose. I have too much to lose. I only want to talk to him. I know it wasn’t his fault.” That part was well documented. That almost all of Goken Saisei’s injuries were self-inflicted. “He was the last person to see him. I wanna know... Well, I don’t know what I wanna know until he tells me. But that’s all.”

There was a several second pause. Then a sigh. *“I’m too lenient with you. You’re picking up night shifts next week, and you can cover Nejire-Chan’s for tomorrow since she brought this to me for you.”* There was an excited ‘Yay!’ in the background. *“I’ll give you his contact number, but that’s it. Anything else will be up to him.”*

“Thank you, boss.”

“Don’t think about asking me for any more favours.”

The call ended. And seconds later, another began.

“Yallo, Oji— Uh, I mean, Alphabetica here.”

... The hero student hadn’t really thought this far ahead. What he would actually say to his father’s killer. “Hello, uh, hi, this is Saiki Saisei. This is—”

“Ah shit, how did you get this number?”

“I asked my boss to—”

“Look, I know, I didn’t want it to go like that. I never thought he would’ve—”

“You know what I’m calling about.” That saved time, but also made it more difficult. “I’m not angry or out for anything stupid like revenge. I know he did it to himself.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“No, really. I’m a UA student, a provisional hero, and I work for the Ryukyu agency. I’m not about to throw away my life over some dumb vendetta that wouldn’t even make any sense. I just...” If he was doing this, there were things he had to admit, even to a stranger. “You’re the last person who saw my dad. I barely know anything about him except what everyone who never met him tells me.” And his grandparents who hated him for stupid and shitty reasons. “You at least... You have to know something. That’s all I want.”

“I... Look, I... I’m sorry. I really am. But that day was the worst day of my life. And I just realised that’s a pretty bad thing to say; it probably wasn’t great for you either. But I really don’t want to relive it, and I don’t think there’s much worthwhile I could tell you. It’s not like he and I had a heartfelt talk while it was happening.”

“Was it why you retired?” Alphabetica was only active for a few more months before he stopped patrolling. It was never made official, mostly because he wasn’t a big enough deal for anyone to care. Or at least, so Saiki assumed. “If this is something you’ve been carrying, maybe it’ll be good for you too. I’ve recently been shown talking through shit like this can help.”

Everyone was sighing at him today. Not that Saiki could blame them. He’d spent the past while making his problems everyone else’s problems. *“Fine. What do you want to know?”*

“Can we meet face to face?”

“Ha! Yeah. In a nice, public place.” It was said as a joke, but Saiki let the statement hang in silence until the former hero realised. *“You’re serious. You want to... Yeah. A nice, public place. When can you be in Chiba?”*

“Half hour, maybe.”

“Alright.” The former pro rattled off a location. A waterside park that would be busy this time of day, then hung up.

It was a long flight. Probably the longest single flight Saiki had ever taken. Soaring over downtown Tokyo, then across the deepest part of Tokyo Bay. It was a kind of peaceful that was new. Open skies above and open water below, with all of greater Tokyo spread out around him. It was like the feeling of freedom and release before, as a place.

He needed to fly more. In fact, he needed to take Kyoka, Momo or Izuku flying. That would be cool. Katsumi probably wouldn’t feel it the same way, she’d see it as a challenge to learn to fly herself.

Ugh. He... Ah, he really messed up before, didn’t he? Not that he thought he could do anything different at the time, he had pretty much been on autopilot. But bailing on Kyoka like that right after she tried to do something nice for him, that was a dick move. Pulling out his phone, he shot her a message. Apologising. Telling her he had some stuff to figure out. That he would be back in a little while.

He immediately got one back asking if he was okay.

And a response that he would be.

Soaring down, he landed on the shore and pulled out his phone to call Alphabetica so they could link up. A quick zip over to an outdoor dining area lined with food stands and he found his mark.

“Flying quirk, huh?” the slightly pudgy middle-aged man said as opposed to a greeting. “That always means success. Lucky.”

“Wasn’t lucky how I got it,” Saiki answered. “And it’s not why I’m gonna be great.”

Alphabetica, or whoever he was now that he was retired but Saiki didn’t know or need to know his real name so would continue calling him Alphabetica, didn’t respond to that. It was probably an idle observation and he didn’t actually care that much. “You really grew up, huh?”

“And you let yourself go.” On top of putting on some weight, his image was very different from the clean cut hero Alphabetica. His face had of course aged, but on top of that was the replacing of short and neat dark hair for a long and kind of greasy ponytail.

“Classy.”

Yeah, that probably wasn’t earned. Seemed the irritable antsiness was back. “Wait, what do you mean I grew up?” Aside from the obvious.

“I saw you before, on that day,” the former hero explained. “At the police station. You know we have to make a police statement when a villain dies during an arrest. I guess they found you pretty quickly. You were already there with the Child Guidance Office people.” He shrugged. “I didn’t talk to you, obviously. What could I have said? Nothing a kid who just lost his dad would want to hear from the guy responsible.”

Saiki let out a long breath. They were both going to be reliving some rough days. “I’m gonna get something,” he said as he gestured at the food stands. “You want anything?”

“Uh, yeah, sure. Tea would be good. It’s cold out here. Thanks.”

The young hero nodded, went and grabbed that and a drink of his own, then returned.

It took a good minute for the two of them to settle into that awkward silence long enough that Saiki was willing to break it. “How did it happen?”

The retired hero stared into his drink. “I should’ve asked for booze.”

“I’m nineteen. You want booze, get it yourself.”

“Was trying to make a joke.” But obviously it didn’t land. Shaking his head, he began to recount events as he remembered them. “I didn’t know the background, who he was or how he operated. Only reason I came across him was because I changed my patrol route that day. This was All Might’s heyday. Rule of thumb was, if he was in the area, go somewhere else, especially for nobodies like me.” Saiki nodded, understanding immediately. Other heroes around All Might were just wasting their time. “Turned out, your dad figured out usual hero patrol routes and used

them to keep off the radar. So when everyone scattered to let All Might do his thing, I ran smack into Goken Saisei in the middle of a robbery."

Taking a long drink, he obviously wished it was booze despite trying to play it off as a joke before. "He ran the second he saw me. Threw the loot at me and ran for it. Didn't make it far." Raising a hand, he put it over the table. A large, blocky kanji for 'wall' materialised under his hand. A demonstration of his quirk. "I made a wall behind him with my quirk, penned him in. Showboated a little. You're in the life, you know how it is. Told him to come quietly but instead he stabbed himself in the arm, then burst right through my wall. They're not actually that sturdy, but usually enough that human strength isn't enough."

"Well... It wasn't hard to follow him. Especially when he was bleeding. I kept trying to stop him but he wouldn't have it. Any time I tried to box him in, he'd bust through it. Anything I said, he'd ignore." He didn't look at Saiki. Instead, his eyes were on his cup as his fingers tapped it in a rhythm. "Blood loss started to get to him after a while. I didn't have a way to stop him, but I couldn't let him get away. I called for an ambulance. When I next found him, he was slumped against a wall. He looked through me when he saw me, he must've barely been conscious. But he was there enough to... Stab himself again. The cops told me later that with as many old scars as he had, he knew what he was doing, but he must've been in such a bad state that he missed his target. Hit something important. I did what I could but..." The tapping slowed, slowed, then stopped. Alphabetica drained the cup, then let go of it, leaned on his elbow as he hid half his face with his hand.

So that was it. "He didn't say anything?"

The hero sniffed. "Sorry. Just, refusing to turn himself in. That he couldn't. That's all."

No dramatic deathbed confessions of why he was doing it. Just what Saiki was left to assume. That times were tough, that he needed money for something that would help and was stealing it. Going to prison would've ruined whatever that plan was. Or maybe he would've been willing to go to prison if he knew the alternative was death.

"I'm sorry. I never wanted it to end like that. I thought it was my lucky day, all alone in the right place at the right time but... It all went so wrong so fast. And when I saw you, and realised, I couldn't see myself the same way anymore. Couple months later, I looked at my suit and couldn't bring myself to put it on."

The former hero went quiet. Contemplative, or maybe expected Saiki to answer, to say something. Condemn him or whatever else. "... You ever learn that something you always thought was true, wasn't true? But then find out... In the end, the difference doesn't mean all that much?" His question only got a confused look, which was probably deserved. "Sorry. That's a weirdly specific scenario." Shaking his head, he told the man what he wanted to hear. Which, conveniently, was what Saiki really felt. "It wasn't your fault. You did what you could, and you did what you were trained to do. Honestly, I never blamed you. I won't *thank* you for it, but I wouldn't

have thanked you for it if he went to prison either. What happened that day was one man's decision. You don't have to carry guilt over it. I don't know if that helps, but..."

Alphabetica grimaced. "... No, it does," he said eventually. "Thank you for saying that. I don't think I can let it go that easily... But it helps."

"If you could let it go easily, you were a piss poor hero."

"Well, I *was* a piss poor hero. I was never destined for greatness. And a better hero could've done something to stop the guy. I guess... We were just two nobodies who crashed into each other, only I had delusions of being something better."

"Ha!" It was a bark of laughter, a bark of disbelief. "You're putting yourself on his level? No. It may not have worked out, but trying alone made you better than that guy."

"He was your dad."

"And I'm me." Grabbing his wallet, Saiki pulled out his provisional license. "And if trying to be more than I'm supposed to be doesn't mean anything, then what the fuck am I doing?"

-(-)-

After another half hour flight over the bay at sunset, man did he need to bring a girl for something like this, Saiki returned to the UA campus. Checked in at the gate, then went straight back into the air to land on Kyoka's balcony. Knocking on the door, he waited, heard the rustle of her curtains, then the sliding of the door. "Sorry," he said before she said a word.

His lover huffed as she joined him outside, leaned on the railing beside him. "Better be. See if I do something nice for you again." Even if the words were harsh, it was clear she was joking. Mostly. "You okay?"

"Yeah. And I really appreciate what you did. Seriously. It just... Brought up some things that I guess I repressed."

As he gave her the cliff notes of the memories it brought up, her expression gradually shifted into a regretful frown. "No wonder you bailed."

"Well, still, sorry. Anyway, I guess I needed to figure things out. Find out who they really were since I'd thought they were the worst people for my whole life. Turns out, my *grandparents* are the worst people? I mean, in that way that's nice and polite so no one minds that their souls are made of tar and fungal infections?"

"... Gross?"

“Mm. Well. I don’t have to think about them anymore so, that’s whatever. And my parents...”

Kyoka gave him a slight smile. “Not the monsters you thought?”

“Not really?” he admitted, though remained unsure. “Well, I never thought my mom was shit. I didn’t know enough about her. But now...” It took a lot of thinking, but he had come to a frustrating conclusion. “My parents were fucking *stupid*.”

“Huh?”

“My mom could’ve gone back to my grandparents. It would’ve been fucking awful, I get that, but she would’ve been alive. I wouldn’t have watched her waste away to the point she didn’t even recognise me by the end. Maybe she could’ve helped quietly. At least she would’ve been alive. Instead, she died and left me with the idiot who decided his best path forward to provide for us was to be a shitty thief who killed himself rather than let a D list hero catch him.” He shook his head, angry at them in a whole different way, but knowing that nothing had really changed. “He wasn’t a monster or a power junkie. He was an idiot doing his best, and his best was dumb villain shit because he was an idiot. And my mom was too proud to get the help she needed. I guess I was important to them both after all, but...” There wasn’t really any other way for him to see it as the one left behind. They both killed themselves with their stupid decisions, and left him an orphan because of it.

Maybe that was unfair. It was *probably* unfair. They probably had a bunch of other circumstances that would make it all make sense, make it all less stupid than how it looked with the information Saiki had. But... “When I remembered all of it, I thought there would be more to it. That I misunderstood everything, that maybe there’d be a reason I could be proud of my parents. I guess I wanted that. Instead... I learned a whole bunch more about them, and it barely changes how I feel about them at all.” Maybe his dad couldn’t get a real job. Maybe his mom didn’t want to go back because his grandparents were even bigger monsters than they seemed. Maybe his dad was pressured by bigger villains or something. What would it matter? In the end, Saiki had still been left behind, alone. “I wanted something to change.”

Kyoka’s arm wrapped around his waist, her head leaned on his shoulder. “I don’t know what to say... I guess... Yeah. Nothing changed. They still did what they did, and you’re still you because of it. But even if the why doesn’t mean much now, it still means *something*, doesn’t it?”

“... Hm.” There wasn’t the kind of seismic shift in his world that he hoped for. Or even much of a new way to look at his parents. But if he tried to take something from all of this... “Even if they were stupid... They held on and fought for something that mattered.” In stupid, self-destructive ways, but they tried. Kyoka was right. That did mean something.

“You live for the fight when it’s all that you’ve got?” Kyoka asked with a teasing smile in her voice.

“Heh. Guess so.” That song really was cheesy as all hell. But he didn’t hate it. “Hey,” he said, his tone lighter and more casual as he held his lover close. It was time to put all of that aside again. He’d have plenty of time to process all of it. Maybe one day he’d feel differently, but for now he had to show his appreciation for his thoughtful girlfriend. “Wanna go flying?”