

At Risk Of Death

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"That one," Omoikane said, without a hint of inflection, "Is Overhaul's."

His eyes flickered across the small face, sharp and appraising; his mouth, when done speaking, pressed tightly closed, as if to suppress something left unsaid. His gaze rose, buoyed on a challenging jut of the jaw, and Mizukun met it, steadily as he could. Ake's presence at his side, rooted and steady, helped - even if the Three of Clubs could hardly be said to be his right hand.

"Was," he said, simply, and hoped his voice was strong enough. Omoikane was surrounded by subordinates to Mizukun's single ally, after all, and strong ones at that - to show weakness, then, would have been the height of foolishness.

"So the rumours are true?" Omoikane asked, a pointedness to his voice that failed to cross his face. "Overhaul is dead."

"Ah, you're as well-informed as they say you are," Mizukun commented. "Yes, Pro-Hero Overhaul is dead."

He paused.

"Chisaki Kai," he admitted, "Is not."

"You failed, then," Omoikane said, but didn't move. It was just a statement, then - not a chastisement, yet.

Mizukun shook his head. "The aim," he explained, "Was not to kill Chisaki. Our only target was Pro-Hero Overhaul."

"And the child?"

Mizukun glanced over at the child in question. She clung to Ake's leg with bandaged hands, all wide ruby eyes and withdrawing figure, and it was Ake who spoke, placing a soothing hand on her tarnished-silver hair as he did so. "A stroke of good fortune," the teenaged Card declared, letting his arm wrap tighter around her as she pressed her tiny form closer to him. Omoikane shifted his gaze to Ake's - slowly, carefully, as if to discern the reason Ake had broken rank - and then slid smoothly back to Mizukun's, a slight quirk of the brows all that indicated his questions. At the latter's silence, he pursed his lips.

"I had wished," he said, dragging the words out, "To remove Pro-Hero Overhaul from this world myself."

The words generated a soft flurry of stifled motion behind Omoikane's back, twitches of heads and shuffling of feet, but nothing more than that, and the man himself remained still and relaxed - as relaxed as an aspiring career criminal could get, anyway. Not dangerous - not overtly. That was good; Mizukun had seen the aftermath of enough slights against the Nighteyes to know that they were more than capable of protecting their own.

"It's unfortunate," he said, politely. "I understand. I also have my own targets. But our hand was forced."

"Oh?"

"They've got cancellers in our territory," Ake growled. Mizukun sent him a sideways look; his face was twisted into a half-grin, half-grimace, jagged teeth on full display. Sometimes, it was easy to forget why the King of Clubs favoured Ake so - and sometimes it wasn't. "Permanent ones."

That got Omoikane's attention - his eyes widened a fraction, his whole head turning towards Ake, though he didn't let Mizukun out of his sight. Behind him, the shadows in the corner of the room twitched, rippled; unfurled into the shape of a young, dark-haired man with his head bowed. The youth didn't look their way - refused to - but stepped closer until he was at Omoikane's side.

"We knew of quirk cancellers, Ina- ah," he said quietly, "And their spread. Oyaji made sure of it. But we haven't heard of a permanent type."

Omoikane let his head tilt, just barely, towards the other, and Mizukun elected not to make any outward note of the fact that Suneater, too, had spoken out of turn.

"You wouldn't have," Ake said, blunt as a rock and twice as honest. "Ah, no offence to you, Suneater-san... but as far as anyone can tell -" he shot a look at Mizukun "-the first deployment was only a few days ago, against one of our wildcards."

Omoikane started at that - jerky, aborted. "Wildcards?" he asked, and Mizukun felt his own lips twitch.

"Well, the permanent cancellers won't be a problem, anymore," he said, in lieu of answering that particular question. "We can all sleep easy - or we will, once they run out."

"Killing Pro-Hero Overhaul," Omoikane said, deliberately, "Would not stop the flow - or creation - of cancellers. He is not the source. His death was always a question of the future, not the past. We all know this."

"We do," Mizukun agreed, easily. Let the statement hang. Watched the gears turn in Omoikane's head, the moment he put the pieces together and his gaze drifted, once more, to the little girl clutching the embroidered trefoil on Ake's trouser leg in her fist. A tiny, quailing thing worth her being in diamonds.

Or at least, that's what the heroes had seemed to think. He felt uncharacteristically inclined to agree with them.

"The girl is..." Omoikane said, disbelieving, nineteen years young, and Mizukun saw Ake nod out of the corner of his eye as he inclined his head.

"A concentrated application of time reversal. Or, timeline-breaking, rather," he offered. Waited.

Omoikane took a deep breath, back facing his men, and the façade of his predecessor split apart, and what was underneath peered through like cold iron through flesh.

The room inside the compound was much cosier than the one outside. It was a little odd, perhaps, to so obviously leave certain guests to suffer the discomfort of lacking seats and cold drafts while they spoke to the leader of the Nighteyes, but Izuku could appreciate a good intimidation attempt; especially when something so fancy came afterwards. He would have been nervous, really, at the display of splendour so deep into the compound, so far away from any escape routes; but his mentor had vouched for the Family's safety, and he'd known Toogata, briefly, before either of them was any major player. So he settled into his seat without complaint, confident that, at the very least, he wasn't about to be spontaneously assassinated.

No, if the Nighteyes decided he had to go, they'd say so to his face. They were nice like that.

Soft.

"I know I can't be exactly like - Oyaji-san," Tōgata admitted, pouring tea out as he did so. He'd produced the china from nowhere, as if its use was entirely routine. Izuku wondered if it was. The prior Omoikane had never offered him a drink; but then again, Tōgata's predecessor had disliked Izuku as much as was possible, in their circles, without breeding homicidal intent. "But someone has to do it. To make a family of one million... I couldn't do that as who I was before."

He pushed a cup towards Izuku, who took it, wrapping his tired hands around its warm surface. "I admired your goals," he offered. "Even before you took on the burden. I'm sorry we couldn't help you more."

"They really are manly," Eijirō added, warm and somewhat overeager. "Your work to infiltrate heroic command structures, to loosen their hold on the underground's grey areas -"

"All spearheaded by Oyaji-san, with me trailing along like the child I was," Tōgata said, glumly - but then he forced his face to brighten, turning to the child squished between Izuku and Eijirō. "And would you like some tea, Unicorn-chan?"

She jolted, curling into herself at being mentioned, but turned to look to Eijirō and Izuku in turn, questioning with a face far blanker than Toogata ever managed.

"Whatever you like," Izuku reminded her, not for the first time that day, and she twisted her fingers against each other uncertainly, dithering for a moment before she nodded jerkily. Tōgata smiled at her, well practiced, and poured her a shallow cup, setting it down next to Eijirō's on the table, and she hesitated, before carefully picking it up in both hands. She didn't drink, but the tremor in her limbs faded, just slightly.

"I wanna say something encouraging," Eijirō said. "But I bet everything I can think of, you've already heard from A - Suneater-san."

Amajiki, for his part, ducked his head, flushing slightly as he hid his face behind his cup. "You're too much," he muttered, and Izuku was abruptly

reminded that Eijirō had intended to be Amajiki's kōhai, once, before the older's own Sensei had been captured and the remains of his legacy folded into the Nighteyes, as if they'd never existed separately.

"I don't know where to take the agency, from here," Toogata said, eventually. "There's too much to do, and not enough resources for it. Overhaul gutted us."

Midway through a polite sip of tea, Izuku was reminded abruptly of certain images currently circulating the underground. He winced; though clearly unintentional, the wording was poor, if accurate. "Ah... well, I think you can do it. Omoikane-san believed you could, and I will too."

Tōgata stared into his tea as if it contained all the answers in the universe. "I don't know if I trust Oyaji's belief, anymore. It killed him, didn't it?"

Izuku didn't know what to say to that. It wasn't, he knew, as if the death of Sasaki Mirai had been a one-off fluke. There had been a single truth the man had failed to grasp, in the moments before his heart ceased to beat - ceased to exist - but behind that grain of failed comprehension had been a thousand others, multiplied eightfold for each sidekick and commandment and year outside of All Might's shadow. Faith was always a gamble; Sasaki's folding was the simple consequence.

"M- You..." Amajiki murmured, and his hand twitched, but didn't reach out.

Tōgata just sat, head bowed, and the second ticked past.

The shrinking child, finally, took the silence to raise her cup to her lips, sipping carefully at the hot drink. Her nose crinkled just slightly at the taste, but she didn't put it down.

"Do you like it?" Eijirō whispered to her, and she frowned, just barely.

"I don't know," she whispered back, and her soft, cracking voice seemed to bring Tōgata out of his stupor, the young man shifting in his seat and looking up as she took another delicate little drink. The crinkle in her nose didn't subside; it was, if you asked Izuku, rather adorable.

"So," Tōgata said, after a beat more. "I'm sure you're not here for my worries."

They really hadn't; but it would have been awfully rude to agree. For all that his mother had failed to raise a good son, she'd managed a polite one.

"Unicorn-chan," he said, instead. "I... we don't know if we can keep her."

Tōgata narrowed his eyes, glancing rapidly from Izuku to Eijirō and back again. Izuku marvelled at how easily he'd slipped from Omoikane's bug-catcher's gaze to his own, attentive expression. "Ah, but you want to, though," he said, faintly accusing, and it took all Izuku's practice not to duck his head in a shame he couldn't quite place the origin of.

"We do," he admitted. "But she's so young, and we're always - Sensei, Eraserhead-sensei, he always says we have a knack for *problems*, you know? And he's not a better choice. He's too - Sensei."

"Ah, I'd have thought he'd be great for it," Tōgata said idly. "Known for being good with kids, yeah?"

"Sensei is - real manly," Eijirō said slowly - dryly. "But he's also known for..." he trailed off.

For all the Cards called the man Sensei, the last time they'd met him had been a half-hour affair over fresh corpses of three-to-five people. That had been a fortnight ago. The closest they'd gotten to communications, since then, had been a few more murders, scattered haphazardly across the eastern half of Japan - and one hastily scribbled note fished out of a corpse.

It would have been a way to live for a teenager, if less ideal than the arrangement the Cards had in place - Eraserhead had been living like that since he *was* a teenager - but for a child...

Amajiki sighed, sending Eijirō a sidelong look. "Why Eraserhead?" he asked, tentatively. "I understand that he's competent and - not volatile towards those that matter, but - why was he your first choice?"

Why not Nightfall, who'd turned more than one unwary teenager into a red stain, but doted on *children* like an overbearing aunt? Why not the four Nekomata, fiercely clan-like and rumoured to already possess a child of their own? Why not Resonance, perpetually angry and bitter, yet the Underground's foremost source of young recruits who were more than just arrest fodder?

Why not All Might, the contact they all shared, the one who'd put his lineage's future in Izuku's hands in the first place?

The questions lingered unspoken in the still air, and the child they concerned, far too sharp for her own good, picked up on them as easily as breathing.

"I'm a Curse," she whispered, sad but matter-of-fact, and Izuku saw the two men opposite him share a look even as he turned to her.

"Hey, don't say that. It doesn't matter what - mean things - Overhaul said to you," he told her, and watched as she squeezed at the cup in her hands. "You aren't a Curse, Unicorn-chan. Promise."

It was an old argument, even having only had her a few days, and her response was familiar as the still-healing scrapes along his skin. "But, but, your friends are - and O-kā-san said - O-tō-san -"

"That's danger," Eijirō said, with a firm air of patience; his hair found its way to her hair again, awkwardly stroking it an attempt at soothing. "We're all dangerous, here. Nothing to be ashamed of. It's totally not m - not nice, I mean - for them to say such mean things to a sweet little girl like you. Okay?"

She mumbled something incoherent, but seemed to calm a little. Tōgata's eyebrows had hit his hairline at the mention of her parents; Amajiki's knuckles were paler than usual.

"Her okāsan?" he asked, tentatively, and Izuku waved a hand.

"Okāsan-haha-whatever," he said dismissively, and Tōgata huffed out a sharp exhale.

"You said time reversal?"

Izuku shrugged, faux-casual. "Yeah, we did. Interesting quirk, really. Stockpiles power in the horn - or the horn is proportional to the stockpile, one or the other. Reverts an object back to a prior state of existence, up to and including non-existence. We haven't figured out how, or what the parameters for "single object" are, or how to manipulate it. If the suppressants and the -" he pulled a face "--*chichi* are any indicator, what counts as a "prior state" is pretty malleable, too. And judging by the extent of my injuries going up against Overhaul-sama..."

He trailed off, pursing his lips. The sarcastic taste of his enemy's name was frustratingly unsatisfying. He covered it up with more tea.

"She won't fall into heroic hands again," he decided on, eventually, and something like amusement flitted across Tōgata's mouth.

"That's a lot of faith," he said wryly, and Izuku sighed.

"I don't want to have to kill anyone over it," he said. "None of us - well, maybe Ka - uh. Dai."

Eijirō muffled a snicker; Izuku coughed.

"There was a meeting amongst the Faces," he said, as dignified as he could muster, even as he was pinned down by three gazes incredibly knowing of what the King of Clubs was like, when it came to excessive violence. "It was - concluded - violent confrontation is not desired. We don't want to - resort to that."

"But you will." Tōgata said.

It wasn't a question, and it carried a double assumption; Izuku saw Eijirō's jaw jut out in irritated challenge, and Amajiki's teeth caught against his own lips for a moment, before the young Nighteye added,

"And you expect us to, as well."

Or else, he didn't finish; the just-past-teen could hardly be the second-in-command to the Nighteyes, but he had Tōgata's right hand as much as anyone could, and with that came a logical degree of discretion.

"If you'll take her," Eijirō said evenly. "It would be the manly - honourable - thing to do." And the logical one, he didn't say - because custody of a person was custody of a Quirk.

Neither man disputed the point; Tōgata placed his cup on the table with a sigh. "Sir always said you were a bleeding heart," he said, nodding in Izuku's direction, and the latter's fingers itched to run over the embroidered Suit on his arm. "He liked that part of you, at least. Said you understood where people like us stood better than most."

"To him, I was just a warped version of you," Izuku recalled, and didn't look Tōgata in the face; politely ignored the hitched sound the young man made. It was blunter than he'd ever been, as a child, kind and cruel all at once. He couldn't recall when he'd started speaking like that - wasn't sure it mattered, anymore. "Anyway, when it comes to Unicorn-chan, it's not just about my feelings, you know. I won't say she needs to be yours, but..."

"I know. You're not the only one who'd kill for her. If I liked you any less I'd easily go through you, and not with." Tōgata closed his eyes for a moment, drew a deep breath; opened them, and looked at the little girl staring into her drink as if she could curl up and hide beneath its surface. "Well, I supposed I should ask if Unicorn-chan has a name, shouldn't I?"

Izuku turned to her. Eijirō did, too, and sensing the eyes on herself, she twitched, gaze flickering up to skitter from one face before her to another.

"Do you want to give Omoikane-san your name?" Izuku asked, and the slight furrow of her brow was the only indication she was thinking.

"If you can't, Unicorn-chan will be just fine, for now," Eijirō said to her, gently as always, and Izuku wondered, offhandedly, if Eijirō would have fought to keep her, if the situation with the Cards hadn't been rapidly escalating to a crystalline delicacy. He dismissed the thought as soon as it came to mind; he could dwell on what-ifs later.

He knew what he would have done, in any case.

"Can O-moi-kun-san stop me cursing everyone?" the girl asked, eventually, and though the young men around the table stiffened - to the extent that their lives still allowed them to - Tōgata leant forwards with his best public-face.

"Between me, and Suneater, and everyone else here, we'll keep you safe, make sure you don't hurt anyone you don't want to," he said. He didn't mention curses; a point in his favour. "We're a big family, here. You'll fit right in. Sounds good, yeah?"

She surveyed him for a moment, as if to judge him - perhaps she was - then nodded, minutely. The decision was made; the decision had been made, long ago, but she accepted it with both hands, as well as she could. "Good," she repeated. "Yes. I'm called Eri."

"Eri-chan," Tōgata parroted back. "Yes, that's a good name to keep. And we'll give you another, so everyone knows you're one of us."

"Moashi-ojisan is going to have a field day," Amajiki muttered. "You know he likes leaning into the hierarchy around his underlings. It's going to be *Anesan* all over again. I'm running out of space to store the fingers... there's only so many you can keep in a bedroom before it gets off-putting."

"Eh, let him have his fun," Tōgata snorted. "Some of them are too uppity, anyway."

Amajiki stared at Eri, as if to impress upon her that she was about to be the cause of an awful lot of enforced auto-amputations. Eri, being six, gave no sign of getting the memo - which, Izuku thought, was probably for the best. Small children were rather prone to delicate morals; which made them rather sweet, honestly, but also prone to crying if you stabbed the wrong person.

He rather firmly didn't think too hard about whether the observation counted as hypocrisy.

"That's settled, then," he said. "Good. She doesn't have much in the way of possessions -"

Tōgata gave him a look that said it wouldn't be an issue. "Not going to ask for a favour?" he asked, and Izuku's mouth - twisted.

"I could ask you the same thing," he said, idly. "In a way, she is a favour - in one direction or another." He inclined his head. "Most would press that, you know."

The table digested that, for a moment.

"You're not cold," Tōgata said, eventually. "But you're getting there, aren't you?"

Izuku just sighed. It had been too long. "You too, Inari-kun."

And that was that.