

The forest was a beautiful place, lush with greenery, lovely flora and exotic animals as far as the eye could see. Unfortunately, however, when there were so many different kinds of animals in one place, one could be assured that some were far friendlier than others...and that others could be a downright terror. Terrors that could drop on anyone who dared venture into those deceptively beautiful woods unprepared for what dangers lurked within...

Thankfully, the recently terrorized village had a savior keeping them all safe. That savior, of course, being a young, green-haired hunter who was in the middle of carefully stalking through an open meadow, ever vigilant of his surroundings. He gazed at the odd tree here and there, perfect for any cunning creature to lay an ambush for an unsuspecting hunter.

But this hunter, of course, was anything but unsuspecting, if the way he carefully caressed the trigger of what appeared to be a hunting rifle was any indication. He had on a white buttoned shirt with a green vest and dark blue trousers along with long, brown boots. The young hunter certainly looked the part, even had a leather belt with a sword attached to it for when things got really hairy...

...He was just let down by the widest, most innocent eyes a person could possess, and the sweetest, freckled face imaginable.

“I did another sweep, Deku-kun, I can't find that big dopey wolf anywhere,” called out a female voice. This belong to a young brown-haired lady by the name of Uraraka. She had on a pink cloak with a red hood and black pants with a thick transparent shield at her side along with a wooden sword of her own.

Unlike the green-haired lad though, she also happened to possess brown-feathered wings from her arms and hawk-like talons in lieu of feet. Whereas the boy was human, she was a bird demi.

“He's out here somewhere...keep your eyes peeled and we'll find him...” the boy spoke up quietly and thoughtfully, more to himself than to Uraraka.

“Hell yeah we'll find him, Midoriya! 'Cuz we got the numbers AND the good looks, baby!” called out another voice, this time by a male bird demi. This one, a young mid-length, blond-haired teenager looking to be around the same age as the green-haired human boy. He had on a white shirt with a yellow vest and leather strap attached to it, along with black trousers and a black hat with a long white feather attached to it. Like Uraraka, he had blond wings of his own attached to his arms, only his wings were significantly smaller, and instead of talons...he had webbed duck-like feet.

...So yeah, basically, he was a demi-duck...which was more than a little embarrassing to ever admit out loud...

...Buuuut as one would come to learn about this duck boy named 'Kaminari', things like shame and subtly were not terms he was accustomed to...

Not that it mattered too much in the end. For the young hunter leading the group of three, Izuku Midoriya, he already knew whether they were subtle like Uraraka or loud and brazen like Kaminari, their foe was already on their tail. He could see them, *sense* them, and all it was going to take was one clean shot to end this game of cat & mouse.

...Speaking of cats...

“AHA!!!!” finally bellowed the target in question.

Out from the trees above them, pounced down the tallest and broadest of them all, a young but positively fiendish-looking demi-cat who dropped down on the startled Uraraka, pinning her down beneath his clawed hands. He had on a bright white buttoned shirt buttoned all the way up the collar, black slacks with suspenders pulling his pants up way too high, and a pair of thick glasses.

Minus his impressive physical frame, one would be hard pressed to take a rather nerdy-looking individual even remotely seriously. But those sharp claws, sharper fangs and the positively psychotic look in his eyes made it a lot easier.

“MWUAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH!!!!” laughed the cat-boy as if he'd perfected the evil laugh after years of practice before hammily bellowing out “I'VE GOT YOU NOW, HUNTERS!!!!”

Uraraka appeared genuinely startled while Midoriya and Kaminari stumbled back. The green-haired boy quickly drew his rifle but the fiend in question raised his hand up high and bared his claws for both to see.

“NOT SO FAST, DO-GOODER!!! ONE WRONG MOVE AND I MIGHT JUST SLASH YOUR FEATHERY MORSEL OF A COMPANION HERE TO RIBBONS!!!”

Uraraka had a rather stunned look on her face from beneath the creature in question. A mixture of genuinely intimidated and utter bafflement.

...*He is...way too into this...* she thought in a comically deadpanned sort of manner.

“HAAAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!!!!” the cat-boy howled with evil, victorious laughter. “WHAT WILL YOU DO NOW, MISTER HUNTER?! HOW WILL Y-”

****THWACK!****

“Gah! What the-?!” the cat-boy in question stammered uncharacteristically suddenly when, out of nowhere, Uraraka's discarded shield got chucked at his head and nearly knocked his glasses off.

Both Midoriya and even Uraraka turned to the culprit who just tossed the shield to see Kaminari blinking back at them and smiling sheepishly like a child with his hand caught in the cookie jar. “...Eh h-heh, my bad...kinda got me all jazzed up, ya know?”

But the cat-boy in question frowned back at Kaminari and shouted, “You could've hurt somebody with that, you know! Or...broken my glasses! Do you have any idea what my mom would say if I-”

****PING!****

Before he could finish complaining, a pop-shot painlessly bounced off of the cat-boy's broad chest and made him freeze in place. He looked down at the spent shot and turned to Midoriya with a more disappointed frown. “...Seriously?”

Midoriya grinned and shrugged innocently then said, “You left yourself open, Iida-kun.”

“I'd just been bludgeoned over the head...!” the cat-boy, Iida, complained.

“True, but I still had you the moment you pinned Uraraka down. You were completely exposed and wouldn't have been quick enough to slice down on Uraraka before I got my shot off,” Midoriya explained. “Really, if you wanted to win, you should have tried to get the drop on me first.”

“...Then why didn't you shoot me?” Iida asked with a confused look in his eyes.

Midoriya bit his lower lip and snickered while Kaminari snorted and said, “Cuz watchin' ya ham it up was too much fun?”

Iida glared and shouted back, “I'll have you know that I spent a good half hour writing and rehearsing those lines! And if I do say so myself, I'd make a half-way decent Big Bad Wolf! Nevermind the fact that I am, in fact, a cat, and therefore, the exact polar opposite of some mangy, deranged mutt, but that's the power of acting! Something certain uncultured avians would know nothing about!” Funnily enough, as Iida's tangent continued, he made almost robotic chopping motions at the air itself. Kaminari couldn't help but snicker even more at the action while Midoriya rolled his eyes in a good-natured way.

“Furthermore, I'll have you both know that-”

“...Hiiiiii,” Uraraka finally spoke up, cutting Iida's tirade short. The young, tall cat-boy blinked and glanced down at the bird girl who added, “...still down here.”

Iida blushed a little, then quickly hopped back up so he could help his friend up to her feet. “I didn't pounce too hard, did I? I was trying to spread my limbs out to avoid dropping directly onto you.”

“No, I'm fine,” Uraraka assured him before adding, “...a bit traumatized, but fortunately, Deku was here to save the day.”

Midoriya beamed proudly (and rather adorably) at that while Iida scratched the back of his neck.

“Still, next time, I should probably save the pouncing for the actual hunter. I'd have dropped onto Kaminari, but my feline instincts warned me against it.”

Kaminari grinned widely and pointed his thumb at his chest proudly. “Course they did! 'Cuz they knew you wouldn't last two seconds against someone like me?”

“...No, because you were behaving so slow-witted that I just naturally assumed that you were using yourself as bait. The way you loudly proclaimed your presence and made a buffoon of yourself? I must admit, that was rather clever of you! You'd make yourself easy prey for anyone not cunning enough to know that Midoriya was right around the corner ready to take his shot. So well played!”

Kaminari's cocky grin was frozen in place. One could almost literally FEEL the 'dot dot dot' radiating from his mind upon hearing that.

“.....*Yep...that was...definitely the plan...mm-hmm...*”

Both Midoriya and Uraraka shared a look but said nothing. Iida didn't catch that, but nonetheless bowed directly before Midoriya in a swift, almost TOO noble sort of fashion. “The game is yours, my friend. Well played!”

Midoriya smiled and was about to speak up, but before he could get a word out...

GRRUUUUOOOORRRRBL!!!

A rather hungry-sounding growl very loudly cut through the air.

Midoriya froze in place, eyes wide as saucers, freckled cheeks as red as tomatoes. Quietly he rested a hand atop his flat, grumbling stomach and rubbed it gently while it rumbled noisily. “Ehhh, h-heh...m-maybe we could take a lunch break...?”

Kaminari laughed and patted Midoriya on the back, making the boy stumble forward unexpectedly as he wrapped a feathery arm around Midoriya's neck and tugged him close. “Hey, I'm starving too! And s'long as ya don't wanna eat roasted duck, I'd say we definitely earned ourselves a bite to eat!”

Uraraka giggled and teasingly poked Midoriya's stomach, making the boy blush even more as she said, “For a second, I thought that was the wolf!”

Iida frowned softly to himself at that comment, but nonetheless stood to his full height and loudly declared that, “Very well. Hard to train efficiently on an empty stomach. A hearty lunch sounds like just what we need!”

Kaminari and Uraraka headed off with Midoriya still 'firmly' tugged around Kaminari's arm. As they walked, Iida's body language softened as he glanced back at his green-haired friend with a stern look of concern, but nonetheless followed closely behind the trio.

Deep within the woods, however...

A pile of partially chewed bones littered the grass, discarded in careless fashion. Hunched over the bones was a scruffy-looking hunter. He had long black hair, a deep scar under his right eyelid, five o'clock shadow, and the sort of black, leather gear worn only by hunters and assassins...and last this hunter checked, his only targets were dangerous beasts.

The black-haired man was hunched down on the ground, observing the bone fragments.

“Sooooo0000? What's the good word, Sleepy-zawa?”

Aizawa, as he much preferred to be called, glanced over his shoulder briefly back at another, far skinnier hunter. He had a tiny mustache, absurdly tall blond hair, a popped collar and steampunk-esque goggles. Though he looked to be the same age as Aizawa, though, the catchy tune he was whistling suggested he wasn't remotely as serious.

After glancing down at the equine-like skull among the bones, Aizawa's gloved finger rested against the top of the skull, specifically, against a few odd, subtle growths against the top of the skull; little lumps, to be specific. Aizawa counted the lumps to himself and after reaching the end, grunted quietly in acknowledgement.

“It's definitely the old lady's donkey...same weird lumps on its head as she described,” remarked Aizawa in his low, dreary voice.

“...Tch, poor, stupid thing...it always kept wandering off chasing the lady asses around, no matter how many times they bucked its stupid face,” frowned the other hunter.

“...Is *that* where the lumps on its skull came from...? How could it get bucked that hard and keep coming back for more...?” Aizawa asked, still in that dry way of his.

The other hunter shrugged. “It was determined?”

“I'd say more 'perverted' than anything else, but who am I to speak ill of the devoured...” Aizawa remarked before a thought entered his mind. “...How far out did this thing use to wander past the old lady's acre, Yamada?”

Yamada; the other hunter, folded his arms and tapped his chin in exaggerated thought. “...Hmmm, honestly, not far enough that we should've found its remains this deep into the woods...”

Aizawa's gaze hardened more seriously. “Tch...then it's starting to attack things closer to the village than before. Damn beast is getting tenacious...if we don't stop it soon-”

Aizawa's musings were interrupted by the sound of rustling from the foliage behind him. Both he and Yamada froze in place, until Aizawa, like lightning, snap-spun onto his heel and drew his hunting rifle. Yamada stammered a bit but quickly did the same.

The two hunters kept their aim trained on whatever was coming out of the woods, ready for it. Despite Yamada's stammering and more animated personality, his aim was steady as he held his breath, cautiously awaiting whatever may come. Aizawa kept the rifle trained at his bicep while he slowly reached towards his hip for a long, strange-looking snare he had on his belt, his trademark weapon for subduing beasts.

When the rustling stopped, neither man lost their edge. They stood on stunted breath, ready for the beast to lunge out...

...What exited the woods instead, however...?

...*A tiny little jackrabbit.*

It hopped out from the woods and twitched its cute little nose as both men blinked dully, and slowly lowered their weapons.

Yamada chuckled and said, “Heh, y'got worried for a sec there, didn'tcha?”

Aizawa placed his rifle back over his back and clicked his tongue dismissively. “Better to have an abundance of caution than a lack of it. Besides, I knew it wasn't Toshinori at least...”

Yamada slung his rifle back over his shoulder and laughed. “Ha! Yeah, at least the big guy's got his oh so subtle codephrase so we know he's-”

“-I AM HEEERE!!!!” bellowed a strong, mighty voice that caused both hunters to flinch and made the jackrabbit hop away for dear life.

“...Yeah, *that*...” Yamada muttered in a dry sort of manner.

Both hunters sighed and slowly turned to see a third hunter emerge from the woods. And in contrast to Aizawa and Yamada, this man was an absolute behemoth. Not only was he well over a foot taller than both Aizawa and Yamada (even with his crazy hair), but he was practically all muscle. He had biceps as thick as logs, a perfectly chiseled face, striking blond hair, and...oddly shadowy eyes. He had on the same sort of gear as Aizawa and Yamada, only his gear looked more official, more the standard image one imagined when they thought of a hunter.

“...Toshinori... *volume*...” Aizawa murmured dryly.

The largest and eldest of the three hunters, Toshinori, put his arms at his hips and bellowed a heroic, mighty laugh.

“HA HA HA HA!! Fear not, Aizawa! I already scoped out everything within our field of search while you two were investigating this area! There's not a wild beast anywhere near these parts of the woods!” Toshinori declared with the sort of bravado one might expect from a noble knight...or a thespian playing a knight.

The all mighty hunter stepped towards the two hunters and looked down at the bones besides Aizawa. Immediately, his bravado dipped a bit and he sighed a little more softly.

“...Found him, did you...?”

Aizawa just nodded quietly.

“...Poor, little Mineta...this was no way for a donkey to go...” he spoke out somberly before turning to Aizawa. “You know, I searched all over the section of the woods closest to the village outskirts, not even a sign of it...”

“What about the deeper woods?” Aizawa asked.

“Just what was left of some lamb bones last time,” Toshinori remarked, adding, “it doesn't seem to have any pattern to where it consumes its prey...”

“Which means it knows what it's doin’,” Yamada interjected, causing both Aizawa and Toshinori to turn to him. “Think about it, if you're some big, bad beast and ya know there's skilled, handsome hunters on your mangy hide, you're not gonna keep nomming on your prey in the same area. You'll keep findin' different spots to leave your trash behind'n keep those hunters guessin'.”

“But what about dens? There's only so many spots a beast can sette in within these woods,” Aizawa insisted.

Toshinori seemed fixated on something else, given the light blush on his chiseled cheeks. “... *You think I'm handsome...?*” Nonetheless, he shook his head and stood strong. “Whatever the case, the villagers are counting on us to put a stop to this reign of terror! Wherever that beast lurks, we'll find it!”

Yamada grinned and said, “Daaaaamn straight we will, Mighty Boyyyyyyyyy!”

Again, Toshinori's grin dipped a bit. “... *I'm almost fifty...*”

Aizawa's expression didn't change, but Toshinori could literally FEEL his soul trying desperately to evacuate its body...

And without another word (except for Yamada), the trio of expert hunters was off on the prowl for this cunning and brutal prowler...

Elsewhere...

“BRRRAAAHAAAAPH!!!!”

“Good heavens, Kaminari! There's obliviousness to the concept of table manners, and then there's outright disdain towards them!” Iida bellowed in indignant outrage after being subjected to his blond, duck-demi companion releasing such an unruly belch.

“Heh, and where does indifference fall under there, professor?” Kaminari teased before slumping back with a boorish sigh as he gave his belly a couple of satisfied pats. “Whew! Maaaan, I'm STUFFED...”

“We noticed,” Uraraka remarked teasingly, giggling a bit at the crudeness.

“Oh come on, don't encourage him!” Iida practically whined.

“Well, we DID eat a lot, even my tummy's feeling pretty full,” Uraraka insisted as she leaned back and rubbed her own stomach up and down with a soft sigh. Suddenly, a surprisingly loud burp exited her own mouth, catching her completely off guard. Her cheeks flared bright pink at that...well, pinker than they already did naturally. “Oops! Sorry about that!”

“Heh, hey, it's like ya said, we had a helluva spread!” Kaminari insisted with an amused snicker.

He wasn't kidding, that was for certain. The four friends had set up a little picnic area out in the field, and judging from the scraps left behind, a fair bit of sandwiches and treats galore had been consumed. Predictably, a much larger portion of food went straight down Kaminari's gullet, but funnily enough, the most seemed to be consumed by the one, highly mild-mannered, sweet-faced human of the four friends.

Midoriya sighed, running his hand up and down his stomach, which, while normally lean and surprisingly muscular, was pushing out a bit against his shirt and felt far heavier than usual as it digested its rather hearty contents.

Iida huffed through his nostrils before sitting up straight and adding, “Well, at least Midoriya and I-”

...Poor Iida couldn't even finish his sentence before a HUGE burp rattled out to his side. He didn't even need to turn his head to know where that shockingly loud eruption came from. Fate was kind of just toying with him at this point...

Midoriya's face went beat red; his wide eyes shrank to pinpricks as he promptly covered his mouth and smiled bashfully at the group.

“...Uhhh...h-heh...eh...e-excuse me...” he sputtered quietly.

Kaminari burst into a fit of laughter, hollering, “BAHAHAHAHA!!! Jeez, Midoriya! Did a BOMB go off in your gut or somethin'?!”

Even Uraraka was giggling hysterically at that outburst, earning more timid chuckles from the would-be, teenage hunter.

All Iida could do was sit there, shoulders slumped in defeat. He'd have to make a point to mourn the untimely loss of table manners later this week...

Eventually, the four friends settled back and got to chatting some more. The topic once again came down to the inevitable hunt. Oddly, Iida was silent throughout this part of the conversation.

“Y'know, ya gotta wonder about this wolf. Those three hunter guys from your village are, like, unstoppable, right?” Kaminari asked.

Midoriya nodded eagerly and beamed as he said, “They're all really amazing. Especially Mister Toshinori. He's such a brave, selfless person. He doesn't hunt for glory or because he wants to hurt anything, but just because he wants to keep people safe. And if he doesn't have to, he'll go out of his way to move a beast to a different location far away from the village.”

“See, if it were me, I'd never take that chance. There's NOOOOO way that thing ain't comin' back and gobblin' me up just outta spite if I did that...” Kaminari remarked with a shudder.

Uraraka giggled but smiled at Midoriya, chiming in with, “It sounds like you really admire him, huh.”

“Yeah...” Midoriya said with a soft, admiring smile. “He's the kind of hunter I'd love to be one day. Brave, strong, heroic, and just trying to help those he cares about...”

“Well, the thing I was gettin' at is, like, if those guys are supposed to be the best of the best, how is it THEY haven't caught this stupid thing yet?”

Both Midoriya and Uraraka thought to themselves for a moment. Admittedly, it was something Midoriya had never considered. How could this beast keep terrorizing the livestock of the village for this long without any of the big three hunters catching it yet?

“...Hmmm, it's possible this wolf isn't quite as 'stupid' as you keep saying it is. To be able to evade someone like Mister Aizawa for this long, the wolf HAS to be really good at masking its tracks. Or finding the right spots to stay out of sight...” Midoriya pondered aloud. Then, he grinned with a sense of confidence and determination as he pumped his fist up and said, “That's why I'm going to stop this wolf myself! There's places even Mister Aizawa may not have considered to look. And instead of a head-on assault, I'd lure the wolf into a trap and stop him so no one else gets hurt!”

“Hell yeah ya are!” Kaminari said with an equally confident grin while Uraraka beamed back at Midoriya and nodded in agreement with her demi-duck companion.

Eventually, however, Iida sighed and shook his head. He could only stay quiet for so long. “I'm sorry, but I need to speak out...this is a *bad* idea...”

Both Midoriya and the two avian-demis turned to the tall cat-demi as he adjusted his glasses and continued.

“Training, having these little games, that's one thing. But you've only ever heard about this wolf and how dangerous it is. You've never hunted one before. Heck, you've never hunted anything in your entire life!” Iida insisted.

Midoriya's previous smile dipped while Kaminari glared back at Iida.

“Way to bring the mood down, four-eyes,” Kaminari spat back.

Uraraka stood up straight and held her fist up high as she said, “Besides, Deku's the smartest boy in his entire village! I'd bet he's even smarter than the adults too, hunters or not! If anyone can outsmart that wolf, it's him!”

But still, Iida frowned and shook his head. “No one is doubting Midoriya's cunning mind. But we've all heard the stories, have we not? We know what this wolf is capable of. So then, we also know that there are no second chances with creatures like that. They can't be reasoned with or guilted. All they know how to do is maim and devour...and even if you do everything right, he could just be stronger, and then...well...that would be it...”

Midoriya and his two demi-avian companions shifted uncomfortably at that reminder, with Midoriya nodding softly and quietly.

“You're right, I've never hunted anything before. I've tried, countless times, I've tried to join in on hunts but the others in my village just don't think I have what it takes, they think I'm too *weak*...” Midoriya began to explain, softening Iida's glance when he added that last part before continuing on. “Being a huntsman in my village is the most respected job anyone could have, their sole purpose is to keep the villagers safe. It's what's expected of men in my village, and if a man can't hunt...well, that's why they call me 'Deku'...”

“Useless, right?” Kaminari asked, before yelping when Uraraka thwacked him upside the head, causing him to pout and hold up his hands defensively. “Hey, I wasn't CALLING him useless, but that's what the word means!”

“It also means he can do something, which means he can do anything,” Uraraka insisted.

“...Ohhhh, THAT'S why you call him Deku? Jeez, all this time, I thought you were just being a jerk to him...GAH!” Kaminari replied...earning himself another whack from Uraraka and causing him to scoot as far away from her as his flightless winged arms could take him.

Midoriya and Iida blinked at the exchange before turning back to each other.

“...She's not wrong. Just because the others say I'm good for nothing doesn't mean I can't hunt. I don't just wanna stop this wolf to keep the village safe. That's a BIG part of it, but...I...I wanna prove that I'm not useless, I need to!”

Iida frowned softly and sympathetically, nodding his head quietly at Midoriya's words of bitter determination. He was about to offer some words of comfort for his friend, but before he could speak up...

“IZUKU!!! WHERE'D YOU RUN OFF TO, BOY?!?!” bellowed a fierce, angry, and very, *very* old sounding voice, making Midoriya yelp and sputter rather comically in place.

“Oh crap, uh, y-you guys run off! No reason you should ALL get yelled at,” Midoriya insisted, but the others frowned at that notion, despite being nervous. They would have objected, but upon seeing a tiny, angry old man stomping his way through the field, they followed through with Midoriya's advice and hung back behind a nearby tree.

Gulping nervously to himself, Midoriya gathered his pop gun and rushed off to meet the old man.

“Uhhh, h-hi, Grandpa Torino! I'm over here!” Midoriya called out, waving his arm up high in a rather dorky sort of fashion.

The old man, simply named 'Grandpa Torino', spotted Midoriya, glared angrily and marched his tiny, old self towards the boy. Or at least, hobbled really sternly towards him as his walking stick lugged him towards the boy. He was well under half Midoriya's size, and Midoriya was pretty small himself...yet, the way the old man carried himself, one would be forgiven for feeling like an insect compared to him.

“THERE you are! What's the big idea runnin' off like that, you runt?!” barked the old man as he stood directly before Midoriya and huffed with irritation. “And why are you out here in the field? Don'tchu know there's some mangy wolf runnin' around?! What do you think you were...”

Grandpa Torino's voice trailed off when he saw the pop gun slung on Midoriya's shoulder. Again, Midoriya gulped nervously when he saw the old man's eyes harden.

“...How many times have we been through this, boy?”

“...I-I know, but Grandpa, please, I really think that-”

“-I DON'T PAY YOU TO THINK, BOY!” Grandpa Torino bellowed.

...Again, Midoriya blinked blankly with confusion.

Even the others, as they watched from behind a nearby tree, did a double-take, as if they weren't sure if they heard that correctly.

“...Uhh, you don't pay me at all, Grandpa...” Midoriya said slowly, as if his own brain were trying to process what the old man just said.

“...I...*huh?*” Grandpa Torino muttered back in confusion.

The two stood there in confused silence. Sometimes, it really was hard to tell if the hardened old man was just losing his grip with his incredibly old age...or if he was REALLY good at messing with Midoriya at the most random of times...

Grandpa Torino looked off for a moment and scratched his head with confusion. “...Remind me to send you off to the store and get more taiyaki at some point. And, uh...OH, right, I'm still mad at you, punk!” Grandpa Torino's train of thought returned as he lightly thwacked Midoriya's arm with his walking stick. It wasn't hard enough to hurt him, just to get his point across, hence why Midoriya didn't react beyond looking nervous. “Now, c'mon, we're going home and that's final!”

He grabbed Midoriya's arm and began marching the boy back towards the village once more.

...Or, more accurately, he began marching in place as holding onto the much larger teenager's arm was preventing from actually moving at all.

It took a bit longer than it probably should have for Grandpa Torino to catch on.

“.....I'm not actually moving, am I...” Grandpa Torino spoke up in a blank yet subtly defeated sort of manner.

“...Unfortunately not, sir...” Midoriya said softly.

Grandpa Torino stopped marching on and released Midoriya's hand with a huff and a shake of his head.

“...Well, just, uh...you know the way, right?”

“...Y-Yes, sir,” Midoriya answered.

“Good, I'm goin' home and expect to see you there immediately, boy,” Grandpa Torino said firmly before march-hobbling off.

...

.....He slowly returned back to Midoriya with a blank yet defeated look on his face yet again.

“.....*Which way is home again...?*”

...Again, Midoriya wasn't certain if his grandpa was just really, really old, or messing with him. But either way, the boy headed back to the village with the old man not far behind.

His friends watched on, all with sympathetic looks on their demi-faces.

“...But Grandpa, it's not fair! I've been training nonstop for this!” Midoriya insisted, now sitting on his bed while Grandpa Torino pace-hobbled back and forth, shaking his head.

“This ain't some grand derby, kid! You don't-”

“-What's a derby...?” Midoriya asked in confusion at the thing which hadn't even been invented yet.

“...What's a *what??*” Grandpa Torino asked with a confused brow raised, before waving his oversized hand dismissively and adding, “Don't change the subject! This ain't some game, y'know! Bein' a huntsman is an incredibly dangerous profession! There's no comin' in second or third or gettin' any stinkin' participation trophy! You either bag the beast, or you end up its lunch!”

“But it won't just be me!” Midoriya insisted. “I have friends, and together, the four of us can outsmart this beast and-”

“-Out. Of. The. Question!” Grandpa Torino snapped back with his walking stick pounding the ground beneath them with each word. “You're just a kid, Izuku. It takes years before someone's truly ready to confront a beast of any kind.”

“... *You* weren't much older than I was when you first became a hunter,” Midoriya insisted, before adding, “and you're the greatest hunter this village has ever known! Mister Toshinori was my age too when he first started out, wasn't he?”

Grandpa Torino begrudgingly nodded to acknowledge the point.

“W-Well, see? You still took him on and now he's one of the greatest hunters too! I just...I wanna prove that I can do some good for our people too! That I'm NOT useless...!”

Grandpa Torino's scowl softened when he heard Midoriya say that. He glanced aside, then shook his head. “...Kid... *Izuku*...I didn't just decide I wanted t'be a huntsman. Where I came from, it was hunt or be hunted. 'n I trained Toshinori 'cuz I didn't have a choice then either. The village was vulnerable, no one was left t'protect it from monsters. I was gettin' too old, and he volunteered...”

He hobbled towards Midoriya and poked at him with his walking stick, but did so in the same manner one would gently rest a hand on someone's shoulder to comfort them.

“...I get it. I do. You wanna prove somethin'...not to *them*, but to yourself...”

Midoriya's shoulders slumped at that, his head hanging a little lower as he nodded softly.

“...But that ain't why anyone should ever be a huntsman. Glory seekers are all jackasses. Y'ever meet anyone with a stuffed wolf in their cabin? Total jackass. Guys who put reindeer heads over their fireplaces? Jackasses! And kinda creepy...”

“B-But I don't wanna do it for THAT reason! I don't even want to kill any of these beasts, I just-”

“-That's even WORSE!” Grandpa Torino spat back. “You wanna go at a giant wolf with some rope? That's how ya end up in its belly before noon!” Grandpa Torino sighed. “See, that's exactly why I know you ain't ready for this, kid. You're too good, too *soft*. Those monsters? They aren't. Y'said that you'n those weird lil demis had a plan to outsmart the thing, right? Well, if your plan is t'capture, all you're gonna do is give that wolf out there a four-course meal!”

Grandpa Torino hobbled back away from Midoriya, drumming his fingers atop his walking stick in thought. He looked over his shoulder and saw Midoriya's shoulders beginning to tremble somewhat and rested his old, weary eyes softly. Even if he didn't always seem like he was altogether there, Grandpa Torino was acutely aware of his grandson's feelings, and he never enjoyed seeing him hurt the way he was in that moment.

He especially didn't like being the *reason* dear Midoriya felt so hurt either...

“...You're a good kid, Izuku. Better than I ever was. Ya got the biggest heart outta anyone in this dump of a village. But...I don't want that big heart'uh yours be the reason you go missin' one day and never, ever come back...I...I couldn't bear the thought'uh that happenin' to you...”

Torino hobbled over to the door and grabbed a pair of keys from the oversized keyring attached to his leather belt.

“...Dinner's at six. You're grounded til then, got it? No leavin' this room. Am I clear?”

He turned back towards Midoriya who wiped his eyes with his forearm and tried desperately to hold back a sniffle as he nodded shakily and quietly.

Again, Torino looked away and shook his head softly.

“...You're not useless, Izuku. Don't ever let anyone tell you otherwise...”

And with those last words, Grandpa Torino closed the door behind him, leaving Midoriya alone in his bedroom. The sound of the door locking behind him made the boy flinch, only reminding him just how useless he truly felt...

Torino's cabin was on the outskirts of the village, nearing the forest itself. From outside Midoriya's bedroom window, his three friends watched the whole scene transpire, just at the edge of the woods behind a nearby tree. They saw their green-haired friend sob softly, trying his damndest not to start crying, unaware that the young demis were watching with sympathy etched on all three of their conflicted faces.

“...It's not fair,” Kaminari complained. “Midoriya just wants to help out his village. Why's his grand pops gotta be so mean?”

Iida frowns and cleans his glasses. “His tone isn't exactly warm, but his grandfather is just concerned for his grandson's wellbeing. He clearly cares about Midoriya an awful lot...”

“He doesn't have a lot of faith in him though,” Uraraka said with a sad look on her face.

“Y'know what? The three of us oughta bust him outta there! Yeah! Prison Break, whadduya two say??” Kaminari insisted with an eager, all-too-ready grin.

Uraraka blinked dully at him while Iida shook his head at the bumbler. “First of all, none of us knows how to pick a lock. Second of all, that's just going to get him in even more trouble...” Iida remarked.

“...What if...what if we just talk to Deku's grandpa and try reasoning with him to let Deku do this? Deku can beat this wolf, I *know* he can!” Uraraka insisted with determination in her own wide eyes.

“...Maybe he could, but if he can't...you heard what his grandfather said...there will be no second chance for him,” Iida reminded the two grimly. He sighed softly and said, “...Midoriya's my best friend. I care for him like I do my own brother. Nevermind the fact that our OWN lives could be in peril. How would either of you feel if anything happened to him...?”

Both Kaminari and Uraraka seemed deflated at Iida's words, but they had to admit, despite their support for their friend...they DID also value his being alive a bit more...

Iida glanced back at the window from afar and looked back at Midoriya still struggling to hold back his tears. His own heart grew heavier at the sight.

“...I know it hurts him now, but I truly feel like, deep down, he knows that his grandfather is correct. All these games we've been playing are all well and good, but great an actor though I may be, I'm not a wolf. I've never even SEEN a wolf in person. Have you?”

“...Uh...question...” Kaminari sputtered nervously, all of the sudden. “...D-Do wolves have pointy ears, big, bushy tails, sharp black claws and really, REALLY sharp looking fangs...?”

Iida, who was still looking at the cabin, cocked a brow curiously as he said, “...That, erm, sounds about right. Why?”

“...*Think, uhh...think I see one right now...*” Kaminari barely peeped with near-petrified terror in his voice.

At first, he was confused, but the second Iida turned his heel, the color vanished from his face completely.

Suddenly, all three demis were frozen stiff in place. They were absolutely terrified beyond belief at what now stood before them in the woods.

A low, menacing growl permeated the air, sending a chill down the trembling spine of the three teenage demi's.

But nowhere near as much as the fiend in question baring its terrifying claws at them...

“...*Hrraaaaah... 'sup, extras...how nice'uh ya t'join me...fer lunch...*”

To be continued...