The city skyline shimmered under a perpetually bright sun, a kaleidoscope of towering skyscrapers and vibrant, bustling streets. Below, a young boy with unruly green hair stood on the precipice of a colossal building, the wind whipping around him. His eyes, wide with unshakeable resolve, reflected the sprawling metropolis.

"I will save everyone!" Midoriya Izuku declared, his voice ringing with pure, unadulterated hope. "Just like All Might!"

He leaped, not falling, but soaring. The city rushed past in a blur of cheering faces and outstretched hands. He moved with a grace he'd only ever imagined, a strength that defied his Quirkless reality. He saw a child trapped, a villain rampaging, and with a single, powerful punch, the threat was neutralized. The crowd roared, a symphony of gratitude and admiration. This was it. This was his dream. The feeling of pure, unburdened heroism filled every fiber of his being. He was strong. He was capable. He was a hero.

But as the cheers reached a crescendo, a discordant note began to hum beneath the joyous sound. The bright sun above him seemed to dim, its light receding as if pulled away by an unseen force. The vibrant city colors leached into muted greys and deep, oppressive blues.

The ground beneath his feet began to crack, not with the force of his landing, but with an unnatural tremor that resonated deep within his bones. The cheering faded, replaced by a chilling silence that pressed in on all sides.

Then, it appeared.

From the deepening shadows that now clung to the edges of his vision, a figure emerged. It was tall, impossibly so, cloaked in an inky blackness that seemed to absorb all light. Its form was indistinct at first, a shifting void, but as it drew closer, horrifying details sharpened into focus. Sharp, clawed hands, each digit ending in a blade-like point, slowly unfurled from beneath its shadowy cloak. Two menacing, jagged horns, like obsidian shards, pierced the gloom above its head.

But it was the eyes that truly seized Midoriya's gaze. Two wide, glowing red orbs burned with an intensity that seemed to look straight into his very soul, stripping him bare. They held no malice, no anger, only an ancient, cold judgment that promised absolute finality. He couldn't move. He couldn't breathe.

The creature began to grow, slowly at first, then with an accelerating, horrifying speed. It towered over him, its form expanding until it blotted out the last vestiges of the sky, becoming a living, breathing void above him. The air grew heavy, thick with an unseen pressure.

Then, its mouth, a gaping maw that seemed to rip open the fabric of reality itself, began to form. It was a grotesque, bottomless pit, lined with unseen horrors, threatening to swallow him whole, to consume his very essence. The silence screamed.

Midoriya's eyes snapped open.

He was not falling, nor was he floating. He was slumped over his desk, head resting on his arms, the familiar drone of his teacher's voice filling the classroom. The fluorescent lights of Aldera Junior High hummed above him, starkly contrasting the cosmic darkness of his recent vision. His heart hammered against his ribs, a frantic drum against the lingering chill of those red, judging eyes. He was back in his mundane, Quirkless reality, but the nightmare felt terrifyingly real.

"Midoriya! Still dreaming of being a hero, are we?" a snide voice cut through the lingering terror.

A ripple of laughter spread through the classroom. Bakugo Katsuki, leaning back in his chair with his feet on the desk, snickered. "Look at Deku, drooling all over himself! Probably dreaming he has a Quirk."

More jeers erupted. "Quirkless Deku, always in his own little world!" "Wake up, loser, you're just going to be a punching bag!"

Midoriya flinched, his head snapping up. His eyes darted frantically around the room, searching for any sign, any lingering shadow, any hint that the horrific vision had been real. The familiar classroom, the bored teacher scribbling on the whiteboard, the mocking faces of his classmates – it was all too normal, too mundane, to contain such a cosmic terror. Yet, the icy dread still clung to him, a phantom limb of fear.

He clutched at his chest, his heart still thumping erratically. Was it just a dream? A nightmare, brought on by his constant anxiety about his future? Or was it something more? The red eyes, the vast, swallowing maw... it felt too vivid, too real to simply be a product of his imagination. The mockery continued, a dull roar in his ears, but his mind was elsewhere, replaying the horrifying transformation, the silent, judging gaze of the shadowy entity.

Later, as the final bell shrieked, signaling the end of the school day, the classroom emptied in a noisy rush. Midoriya, however, moved with a slow, almost mechanical precision, gathering his notebooks and pens, meticulously placing them into his worn backpack. The vibrant, heroic dreams of his sleep felt a million miles away, replaced by the chilling memory of the monstrous figure.

"Hey, Bakugo, are you really going to UA?" one of Bakugo's cronies asked, his voice dripping with sycophantic admiration.

Midoriya's hand paused over his All Might notebook, but he didn't look up. His head remained bowed, his green curls obscuring his face.

Bakugo scoffed, a loud, disdainful sound. "Huh? What kind of stupid question is that? Of course, I am! UA's the top hero school in the country. Only the best get in, and that's me, obviously." He punctuated his statement with a small, crackling explosion in his palm. "Not like some powerless nobody we all know."

His cronies snickered, their eyes flicking towards Midoriya's hunched form. Midoriya didn't flinch. He simply continued to clear his desk, his movements subdued, almost as if he hadn't heard a word. The usual sting of Bakugo's insults was dulled by the lingering terror of his dream. The mockery was a familiar, irritating hum, but the image of those glowing red eyes, the gaping maw, still held his mind captive. He just wanted to get out of the classroom, away from the mundane reality that felt so fragile after his horrifying vision.

Just as he reached for his last notebook, a hand shot out and snatched it away. Midoriya gasped, looking up to see Tsubasa, a rotund boy with an orange mohawk and bat-like wings, grinning maliciously. Flanking him were two of his own stooges: Kenma, a boy with a drill for a nose, and Niwatori, a humanoid rooster.

"What's this, Deku?" Tsubasa sneered, flipping through the pages of Midoriya's meticulously detailed 'Hero Analysis for the Future No. 13' notebook. "Still writing down hero notes? You seriously think you can be one of them?"

Kenma snorted, his drill-like nose twitching. "He's probably writing about how to be a hero without a Quirk! Good luck with that, Midoriya."

Niwatori clucked, flapping his small, feathered arms. "Yeah, like that's ever gonna happen! You're just a glorified fanboy!"

Midoriya's face flushed, a mix of embarrassment and a familiar surge of helpless frustration. "T-Tsubasa! Give it back! That's mine!" He reached out, his hand trembling slightly, but Tsubasa easily held the notebook out of his reach.

"Oh, look, he's begging!" Tsubasa laughed, flipping to a page with a detailed sketch of a Pro Hero. "You really think you can analyze Quirks when you don't even have one? What a joke!" His cronies joined in the derisive laughter, their voices echoing in the now mostly empty classroom.

Midoriya's plea grew a little stronger, a desperate edge creeping into his voice. "Please, Tsubasa! It's important to me! Just give it back!"

Tsubasa stopped flipping, his grin widening into something truly malicious. He stared at Midoriya, his bat-like wings twitching slightly. "Important, huh, Deku?" he drawled, his eyes glinting. "Sure, I'll give it back."

With both hands, he gripped the open notebook, one hand on each side of the spine. Midoriya's eyes widened, a flicker of hope mixed with dawning dread. Then, with a sickening RIIIP, Tsubasa tore the notebook in two. The pages, filled with Midoriya's meticulous notes, his careful sketches, and his earnest dreams, fluttered to the floor like discarded confetti.

Midoriya froze, his mouth agape. The small, desperate plea died on his lips, replaced by a profound, shocked silence. He stared at the two ragged halves of his notebook, then at Tsubasa's sneering face, his mind reeling. The mockery from Kenma and Niwatori, though still present, seemed distant, muffled by the sudden, sharp pain in his chest. His dream, his efforts, his very hope, lay torn and scattered on the dusty classroom floor.

Tsubasa threw the ripped halves onto the floor with a flourish, then laughed uproariously, a harsh, grating sound. "What's wrong, Deku? Cat got your tongue? Or did your hero dreams just get shredded along with your little book?"

Midoriya slowly knelt, his hands reaching for the scattered, ruined pages. His fingers brushed against a torn corner, a detailed drawing of All Might's muscular form now severed in two. A lump formed in his throat, hot and painful. He tried to gather the pieces, his movements clumsy, his vision blurring.

Then, Tsubasa's heavy shoe landed squarely on one of the pages Midoriya was reaching for, crushing it underfoot. The paper crumpled with a sickening crunch, a faint image of a hero's costume distorting under the pressure.

"Don't bother," Tsubasa scoffed, grinding his heel into the page. "It's trash now, just like you. Give it up, Deku. You'll never be a hero."

Kenma and Niwatori snickered, nudging each other. Midoriya could only stare at the crushed page, his hands hovering uselessly above the ruined remnants of his hopes. The pain in his chest intensified, a sharp, twisting agony that felt far worse than any physical blow.

"Alright, let's go. Don't want to waste any more time on this loser," Tsubasa said, kicking a few more pages with his foot before turning to his cronies. "See ya around, Deku. Probably in the unemployment line!"

His laughter, along with Kenma's snorts and Niwatori's clucking, faded as they exited the classroom, their voices echoing down the hall. Midoriya remained on his knees, his hands still trembling as he carefully, painstakingly, gathered the torn fragments. He smoothed out a crumpled corner, trying to piece together a hero's face, but it was no use. The damage was done.

Slowly, he pushed himself up, his knees aching. The classroom was silent now, eerily so. The desks were empty, chairs pushed askew, a few forgotten pencils lying on the floor. Bakugo, of course, had long since vanished, probably already halfway home, his own path to greatness clear and unimpeded. Midoriya was alone. Completely, utterly alone, surrounded by the wreckage of his aspirations. The silence pressed in, amplifying the hollowness in his chest. They had all left, not wanting to be around someone like him, someone so utterly useless.

Just as he was about to finally leave, a sharp, unexpected jab of pain assaulted his head. He gasped, clutching his temples, the sudden, intense throb like an ice pick being driven directly into his skull. The fluorescent lights seemed to flicker erratically, casting dancing shadows, and the familiar classroom walls momentarily wavered, as if the very fabric of reality was stretching and distorting. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to ride out the agonizing wave, the nightmare's lingering chill returning with a terrifying familiarity.

When the pain finally began to subside, leaving a dull ache in its wake, Midoriya slowly opened his eyes. He took a deep, shuddering breath, trying to get his bearings. Another one. He had been experiencing a series of these headaches for the past half-year. At first, they were trivial, easily dismissed as stress or fatigue, perhaps from his obsessive hero studies. But recently, their intensity had spiked, and their frequency had become alarming. Each one felt like a brief, violent tremor in his very being, a fleeting glimpse into something vast and terrifying, just beyond his comprehension. He shook his head, trying to clear the lingering fog, the unsettling feeling that something was subtly, irrevocably, changing within him.

Finally, with his crumpled notebook tucked despairingly into his bag, Midoriya stepped out of the school building. The afternoon sun, though bright, felt strangely muted, a pale imitation of the vibrant light in his dream. He walked slowly, his shoulders hunched, letting himself just bask in the quiet solitude. Alone. That was how it always was, wasn't it? Just him and his thoughts, drifting through a world that had no place for a Quirkless boy.

He thought about graduation, looming closer with each passing day. What would he do? The temptation to apply to UA, to cling to that impossible dream, was a persistent ache in his chest, a siren song trying to lure him in with the promise that he could somehow, miraculously, start on his heroic path. He could almost see himself there, standing tall, a symbol of hope.

But then he blinked, and the fantasy dissolved. He looked down at his own small, unremarkable hands, his expression subtly expressing the profound disappointment that was a constant companion. He didn't have a Quirk. He never had. Not since he was diagnosed at four years old, the extra joint in his pinky toe a definitive, anatomical indicator of his utter, undeniable mundanity. Just a regular, powerless human in a world of superpowered individuals. The dream, the nightmare, the headaches... they were all just cruel reminders of a reality he couldn't escape.

Just as he turned into his usual street, a narrow alleyway cutting between two drab apartment buildings, something seemed to move around the corner, hidden in the deeper shadows. Midoriya, his mind still clouded by the day's humiliations and the unsettling memory of his dream, barely registered it. He just kept walking, his gaze fixed on the cracked pavement, lost in his own despair.

Suddenly, a cold, slimy sensation enveloped his left arm. Before he could react, another tendril, thick and viscous, wrapped around his right. His leg was snared next, and he stumbled, a gasp catching in his throat. A disgusting, wet mass slammed into him, pushing him against the grimy wall of the alley.

"You'll make a perfect skin suit for me!" a gurgling, distorted voice slithered into his ear, thick with a sickening, liquid sound.

His mouth was grabbed last, a thick, slimy hand clamping over his lips, silencing his choked scream. The creature was a horrifying, amorphous blob of mud and sewage, its body a disgusting, pulsating mass that threatened to suffocate Midoriya. He thrashed, desperately trying to pull free, but the slimy tendrils held him fast, dragging him deeper into the suffocating, putrid darkness. His lungs burned, and the world began to spin.

Just then, in a blur of movement, Midoriya was suddenly freed from his bonds. He tumbled forward, coughing and choking, desperately sucking in air to catch his breath. The putrid smell of sewage still clung to him, but the suffocating pressure was gone. He looked up over his shoulder, his eyes wide and disoriented.

Standing tall in the dim light of the street corner, a figure loomed. His muscular physique seemed carved out of marble, radiating an aura of immense power. With his hands planted firmly on his hips and a dazzling, almost blinding smile, All Might let out his characteristic booming laugh, a sound that usually filled Midoriya with unbridled joy, but now felt strangely surreal after his ordeal.

He was dressed simply, in a plain white t-shirt and green cargo pants, a stark contrast to his usual hero costume. Only when Midoriya looked down at the man's hand did he see it: a two-liter soda bottle, seemingly containing the entire disgusting, muddy liquid that had just tried to consume him.

"Are you alright, young man?" All Might's voice boomed, full of concern.

Midoriya could only stare, starstruck and still reeling from the attack. His idol, the Symbol of Peace, was right there, in front of him! Words failed him.

Used to this kind of silent awe, All Might chuckled, seemingly in a hurry. "Good, good! Just be careful on your way home, alright? Villains can pop up anywhere these days!" With a final, reassuring smile, he crouched slightly, then launched himself into the air.

He soared upward, a blur of muscle and green fabric, clearing the tops of the apartment buildings in a single, impossible bound – a height that could easily have been mislabeled as flying. But just as he reached the apex of his leap, a faint, odd weight around his side made him pause mid-air for a fraction of a second, a fleeting sensation he quickly dismissed as he continued his trajectory, disappearing over the rooftops.

It was only when Midoriya, still dazed, managed to find his voice, letting out a distorted, high-pitched sound of desperation and fear from the sheer air friction, that All Might suddenly noticed the extra weight. The hero's eyes, usually gleaming with confidence, widened in genuine shock and panic. His powerful leap faltered, and he began to descend rapidly, a look of utter horror replacing his signature smile.

Fortunately, with a jarring thud, the two managed to barely land on a random rooftop, the impact rattling Midoriya's teeth. All Might, now hunched over, was breathing heavily, his broad shoulders heaving with the effort, a stark contrast to his usual effortless demeanor. The shock of the unexpected passenger, combined with the sudden, stabilizing movements, had clearly taken a toll.

Midoriya, sprawled on the grimy concrete, coughed violently, trying to clear his burning lungs. His backpack, miraculously, still clung securely to his back. He shakily pushed himself up onto his elbows, his gaze fixed on the heaving hero.

"A-All Might!" he gasped, his voice raspy. "I-I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to... to cling on! You should have waited for me to... to find the words... back down there!" He gestured weakly in the direction of the street below, his face a mixture of terror, awe, and profound embarrassment.

With a deep, theatrical release of breath, All Might straightened, his hands once again settling on his powerful hips. He checked his pocket, his hand patting his side, and with an imperceptible sigh of relief, he felt the familiar shape of the soda bottle still there. He looked down at the boy, not with anger or annoyance, but with a profound patience that might have held a familiar weariness for this kind of scenario. It wouldn't be the first time a zealous fan had gone the extra mile, or, in this case, the extra several hundred meters into the sky.

"Young man," All Might began, his voice still booming, though a touch softer now, "what were you thinking, pulling a stunt like that? That was incredibly reckless!"

Midoriya immediately bowed his head, his face burning. "I-I know! I'm so, so sorry, All Might! It was stupid! I just... I had so many questions, and you were leaving, and I just... I didn't think!" He rambled, deeply ashamed and embarrassed, his words tumbling out in a frantic rush. "It was so reckless, I could have put you in danger too! I apologize profusely!"

All Might sighed again, a sound that seemed to deflate some of the air from his mighty frame. "Just... don't do it again, alright, young man? You could have been seriously hurt. Quirk or no Quirk, nobody could survive that kind of height unless they knew exactly what they were doing, and even then..." He trailed off, a flicker of something unreadable in his eyes.

As he spoke the word "Quirk," All Might noticed a subtle, yet distinct, shift in the boy's demeanor. Midoriya flinched, his shoulders hunching almost imperceptibly, and his gaze dropped from All Might's face to his own small, trembling hands. The light in his eyes, which had been a mix of awe and terror, dimmed, replaced by a familiar, self-deprecating shadow.

All Might's smile softened, a hint of concern replacing his usual heroic confidence. He stopped, his booming voice lowering. "Hmm? Young man, what's wrong?"

There was silence for a long moment, broken only by the distant sounds of the city below and the gentle rustle of the wind across the rooftop. All Might's brow furrowed, a flicker of worry crossing his face. He began to worry that the boy might actually have been hurt by the fall, despite his own efforts to cushion the landing.

Then, a barely audible murmur escaped Midoriya's lips.

"Pardon me, young man?" All Might asked softly, leaning in slightly, his patience unwavering. "Could you repeat that a little louder?"

Midoriya took a shaky breath, his gaze still fixed on his hands, as if the words themselves were too heavy to lift. "I... I'm Quirkless," he whispered, the confession a raw, painful admission.

All Might's expression softened further, a profound understanding replacing the slight concern. "I... I see," he murmured, the booming resonance of his voice momentarily subdued. There was another long moment of silence between them, the only sounds the distant city hum and the wind's soft sigh.

Toshinori Yagi, however, was no longer just All Might. A hot, painful sensation began to bloom in his side, a familiar, unwelcome warning. His body began to tremble almost imperceptibly, the mighty muscles of his frame starting to twitch, a precursor to the inevitable. His time limit was rapidly approaching.

Midoriya, meanwhile, finally mustered up what courage he could, his voice gaining a desperate, pleading quality. "All Might! I... I actually wanted to ask you something! A question that's been on my mind for ages! And if... if a man like you, the Number One Hero, could tell me the answer...!"

As Midoriya spoke, Toshinori was barely holding it together. The trembling intensified, his muscular form shaking visibly now. A faint wisp of steam began to rise from his skin, almost imperceptible at first, but growing thicker with each passing second. The vibrant colors of his eyes seemed to dim, and his face, usually so defined, began to soften, to lose its heroic edge.

"...can someone like me, even without a Quirk, become a hero?!" Midoriya finally blurted out, his voice cracking with the raw intensity of his lifelong dream. He looked up, his eyes wide with a desperate hope, just as the steam around Toshinori's increasingly shrinking frame became a thick, obscuring cloud.

Midoriya's words caught in his throat, the last syllable drawing out into a high-pitched, choked sound. His eyes, fixed on the rapidly deflating figure before him, widened to their absolute limit. The muscular hero, the Symbol of Peace, was shrinking, shriveling, his vibrant form collapsing inward like a punctured balloon.

"...WHO ARE YOU?!" Midoriya shrieked, the question a sudden, terrified explosion of sound, as the steam cleared to reveal a gaunt, skeletal man standing in All Might's place.

All Might, now just a shadow of his former self, a shockingly thin figure with hollowed cheeks and sunken eyes, let out a deflating breath, a tired sigh that seemed to carry the weight of his entire existence. The cat was out of the bag, and there was nothing he could do about it now. He said nothing, simply moving slowly, deliberately, to the corner of the rooftop. With a weary groan, he sat down, resting his back against the barrier, letting the exhaustion wash over him.

Midoriya, stunned, could only look on in disbelief. His eyes, wide and disbelieving, darted over the skeletal frame, the sharp angles where muscles used to be, the tired, almost defeated expression on the man's face. This couldn't possibly be All Might. The Symbol of Peace. The man who always smiled, who always won.

"Don't stare too much," the gaunt man rasped, his voice a dry, strained whisper, a stark contrast to the booming confidence Midoriya knew.

Midoriya clamped his unhinged jaw shut, his face still pale with shock. He stood rigidly, his body tense, the chilling realization that he might have just seen something he shouldn't have, something profoundly secret and dangerous, crawling up his spine.

Looking up, Toshinori met Midoriya's stunned gaze. "Relax, young man," he said, his voice still weak, but with a hint of his former warmth. "I'm not going to hurt you. If anything, your encounter with that sludge villain may have already done a number on you." He gestured vaguely towards Midoriya's still-damp clothes. "This little revelation is just the icing on the cake, I suppose."

After the initial shock had begun to wear off, and the two had calmed down somewhat, they could be seen sitting a few meters apart on the rooftop, the silence between them heavy with unspoken revelations. The afternoon sun beat down, but the air felt strangely cool, a stark contrast to the internal turmoil both were experiencing.

Midoriya, still reeling but his initial terror subsiding into a profound bewilderment, finally worked up the nerve to speak again. His voice was a hesitant, barely audible whisper. "A-All Might... why... why do you look like that?"

Toshinori Yagi, his voice now far from its bombastic cadence, was a raspy, fragile sound. He sighed, a deep, weary exhalation. "An injury, young man," he admitted, his gaze distant, fixed on the city skyline that he once soared over effortlessly. "Suffered it years ago. Would have... would have nearly ended my career right then and there, had it not been for the surgeries that kept me alive."

With a slow, deliberate movement, he lifted his simple white shirt, revealing a horrifying, grotesque scar that covered most of his left side. It was a mass of twisted, mangled flesh, a testament to a devastating blow that had clearly ravaged his internal organs. The sight was sickening, a stark reminder of the brutal reality beneath the Symbol of Peace.

"The therapy was only enough to get me back on my feet," he explained, his voice laced with a bitter resignation. "But now... now I have to take care of myself. I can only maintain my 'hero form' for a limited time each day. And I have to rest, lest my condition worsen." He pulled his shirt back down, the grim reality of his hidden weakness now laid bare for the awe-struck boy.

Midoriya's eyes were fixed on the spot where the scar had been, his mind racing through his extensive knowledge of All Might's history, cross-referencing every major villain encounter. "Was it... was it the Toxic Chainsaw?" he asked, recalling the infamous incident from six years prior, a battle that had left a path of destruction in its wake.

Toshinori let out a bitter, humorless scoff, a faint, almost cruel smile touching his lips. "Toxic Chainsaw?" he repeated, the name a distant memory. "I wish it had been him. No, young man. It was... someone worse. Someone you are better off not knowing." His eyes, though tired and sunken, held a deep, unshakeable resolve, and a warning that brooked no argument, a silent command for Midoriya to drop the subject.

There was another stretch of quiet, the wind whistling softly around the rooftop. Midoriya's mind whirred, trying to process everything. The Symbol of Peace, reduced to this frail form, hiding such a devastating injury. Should he be disappointed? This, his hero, the invincible All Might, had been reduced to such a state? A treacherous thought, a flicker of disillusionment, tried to take root in his mind, but he quickly shook it away, his head twitching almost imperceptibly. No. All Might was still All Might. His strength might be limited, his body broken, but his spirit, his unwavering resolve, that was still there. That was what truly made him a hero.

He took a shaky breath, gathering his courage once more. His eyes, though still wide, held a renewed determination as he looked at the slumped figure of Toshinori. "All Might," he began, his voice a little stronger now, carefully repeating the question that had been ripped from him moments before, "can someone like me... someone without a Quirk... can I truly make it as a hero?"

Toshinori, who had been staring blankly at the city below, slowly looked up. His tired eyes met Midoriya's, a flicker of something unreadable passing through them – perhaps recognition, or simply remembering. He held Midoriya's gaze for a long moment, then slowly looked down again, his gaze fixed on his own frail hands resting on his knees.

"Why... why do you want to be a hero, young man?" Toshinori asked, his voice a low, thoughtful murmur, devoid of any judgment.

Midoriya didn't hesitate. The words poured out of him, earnest and heartfelt. "Because... because I want to save people with a smile, just like you! I want to be a symbol of hope, someone who can make everyone feel safe! Even if I don't have a Quirk, I want to be able to help people, to stand up to villains, to make a difference! I want to be like you, All Might!"

Toshinori seemed to be deep in thought, his eyes closed, a faint, almost imperceptible tremor running through his thin frame. The boy's words, so pure, so full of the same naive, burning desire that had once fueled him, stirred something deep within the hero. A distant memory, perhaps of a younger, equally determined version of himself, flickered behind his closed eyelids.

Then, with a heavy sigh, he opened his eyes. The weariness was palpable. He looked at Midoriya, his gaze direct, but filled with a painful realism.

"Young man," Toshinori said, his voice quiet, almost a whisper, but each word resonated with a crushing weight. "I understand your desire. Truly. But you need to be realistic." He paused, the silence amplifying the starkness of his next words. "The way you are... without a Quirk... there's no way you could survive being a hero out there."

Midoriya's hopeful smile, which had been tentative at best, froze on his face. His eyes, wide with anticipation, slowly blinked, the light in them dimming as his expression transitioned to a stunned, disbelieving stare. "Huh?" he murmured, the single syllable barely escaping his lips.

Toshinori, as if he didn't want to say those words at all, continued, his voice heavy with a reluctant truth. "You wouldn't be able to move fast enough, or last long enough, to face someone with a Quirk. Be it something as simple as increased strength, or even the ability to shoot pressurized water. Even with training, the gap is simply too vast." He paused, his gaze drifting over the city below, where heroes with incredible powers were undoubtedly at work. "Unless you had specialized equipment, perhaps. But even then, it would be incredibly expensive, and the risks... the risks would be astronomical."

He shifted, turning slightly towards Midoriya, his expression softening with a genuine, albeit pragmatic, suggestion. "The best you could hope for, young man, is to become a policeman. There's immense value even in that, you know. It's something most people tend to neglect, but even heroes need the extra hand. Law enforcement, first responders... they're all vital."

Midoriya, however, wasn't listening halfway anymore. Toshinori's words, meant as a dose of harsh reality, were instead echoing the cruel pronouncements he'd heard his entire life. Years of bullying, of similar remarks over his Quirklessness, reverberated in his head like a swarm of angry bats, drowning out the hero's well-intentioned advice. You can't. You're useless. Give it up. The familiar, crushing weight of his reality settled over him once more, heavier than any physical blow.

Midoriya snapped out of his stupor as a gentle hand landed on his shoulder. He focused, his blurry vision clearing to see Toshinori looking at him, his gaunt expression no longer tired, but fraught with genuine concern. The skeletal face held a surprising depth of understanding.

"I'm not belittling you, young man," Toshinori said, his voice soft, almost empathetic. "Believe me, I can understand, all too well, what you might be going through. And while that might sound cheap coming from someone like me, who was born with... with a certain gift, I do understand." His gaze was steady, piercing through Midoriya's self-pity. "You're... being bullied, aren't you?"

Midoriya's eyes darted away, averting his gaze in vain. The sudden question, so direct and unexpected, struck a nerve. He couldn't meet the hero's eyes, his silence a stark admission. That was enough of an answer for Toshinori.

A small, sad smile touched Toshinori's lips, a faint, almost imperceptible curve on his gaunt face. "You really want to help people, don't you?" he asked, his voice gentle.

Midoriya hesitated, then nodded hesitantly, his throat tight.

"It's admirable," Toshinori admitted, his gaze drifting back to the city below, then settling back on Midoriya. "Truly. But recklessly pursuing heroics that could cost you a limb, or worse, isn't what makes a hero, young man." He paused, letting the weight of his words sink in. "You could still go to UA, you know. Work in General Studies, or even Support. Your analytical skills, your keen mind... those are talents, incredibly valuable ones, that you could use to help people in ways no one else can."

He leaned forward slightly, his voice gaining a quiet intensity. "There's still hope for you, young man. You shouldn't just give up, or let other people bring you down. Including me." Toshinori gently tapped his own chest with a bony finger, a subtle, self-deprecating gesture.

Incredibly, despite the harsh truth of his words, this gentle, understanding encouragement from his idol, the very man who had just crushed his dream, managed to bring a small, genuine smile to Midoriya's lips. It was a fragile thing, but it was there, a spark of hope in the face of overwhelming despair.

Toshinori then patted Midoriya gently on the back, a light, reassuring touch. "Now, you should head home, young man. It's getting late."

Midoriya, hearing the quiet command, came back to his senses, the swirling despair in his mind finally settling. He looked at Toshinori, truly seeing the earnest concern in his eyes, the genuine desire to guide him, not to dismiss him. He realized, with a sudden clarity, that his hero truly wasn't trying to bring him down. He was trying to protect him. Midoriya nodded, a firmer, more resolute nod this time. "Right," he murmured, a newfound determination flickering in his gaze.

Smiling genuinely, Toshinori slowly pushed himself up from his slumped position, his movements a little stiff from the sudden transformation and the earlier exertion. He then extended a hand to Midoriya, helping the boy to his feet as well. "Good," he said, his voice still soft. "Now, I should go and bring that Sludge Villain to justice."

He patted his pocket, a familiar, routine gesture to confirm the villain's containment, only to blink. The expected weight wasn't quite right. He patted it again, a little more frantically this time, his brow furrowing. Sensing something amiss, a cold dread began to creep up his spine.

Slowly, his hand trembling slightly, he took out the soda bottle and raised it to examine. The plastic was still intact, the cap still on, but the muddy liquid that had contained the villain was... gone. The bottle was empty.

Toshinori's eyes, already wide with a dawning horror, met Midoriya's. Both of their faces paled in unison, a silent, shared realization of the catastrophic mistake. The Sludge Villain had escaped.

Meanwhile, in a narrow, dimly lit alleyway a few blocks away, Bakugo Katsuki leaned against a graffiti-scarred wall, his hands shoved into his pockets. His two hangers-on, Aki and Daichi, chattered excitedly beside him. Aki, a lanky boy with perpetually messy hair, bounced on the balls of his feet, while Daichi, stockier and with a perpetually bored expression, chewed gum loudly.

"Man, Bakugo, UA's gonna be awesome for you!" Aki gushed, a wide, admiring grin on his face. "You'll totally ace the entrance exam, no sweat! Then it's straight to the top of the hero rankings!"

Daichi popped his gum. "Yeah! You're gonna be the best, Bakugo! Number one for sure!"

Bakugo just clicked his tongue, a low, irritated sound. "Tch. Shut up already. I know that. You think I need you two to tell me that? I'm sick of hearing it." He pushed off the wall, a bored expression on his face. "Let's just get some ramen. I'm starving."

As they started to walk, Aki fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a crumpled pack of cigarettes. He was about to light one, but before the flame even touched the tip, Bakugo's hand shot out, slapping it down with surprising force.

"Don't you dare," Bakugo growled, his eyes narrowed. "I don't want that stink sticking to me. You trying to ruin my image before I even get to UA, huh?" Aki quickly put the cigarette away, chastised. Bakugo just scoffed, continuing to walk, oblivious to the impending chaos that was about to erupt in the very alley they were in.

A few minutes later, down a different street, a man who looked to be in his early twenties ambled along. Light stubble dusted his chin, contrasting with his black hair that fell casually to his neck. He wore a simple coat over a grey sweater and black jeans, his hands shoved idly into his coat pockets. His eyes wandered, seemingly without a destination, as if he were merely observing the world around him. He scratched at his neck, a thoughtful frown on his face. Ramen or okonomiyaki today? The eternal dilemma of a casual afternoon.

A sudden commotion, a distant roar followed by a series of sharp, percussive booms, tore him from his culinary musings. His head snapped up, his eyes narrowing, a flicker of something unreadable passing through them. He quickened his pace, walking until he reached the edge of a growing crowd of people, all craning their necks and murmuring in alarm.

Pushing past them, he looked over their shoulders and through the gaps, his casual demeanor slowly dissolving as he took in the truly horrifying sight. The Sludge Villain, now grown to grotesque proportions, writhed in the center of the street, its viscous body engulfing a struggling figure. Around it, Pro Heroes, identifiable by their costumes, tried to surround the monstrous entity, but they couldn't get close. The young man trapped within the villain's grasp kept setting off his Quirk, a barrage of powerful explosions that ripped through the air, setting fires around them and pushing the heroes back. The scene was chaos, a raw display of power and desperation.

The man's expression settled into apathy, as if the scene were a tired cliché, overdone and seen a million times before. He was about to turn and leave when a subtle shift in the commotion snagged his attention. His eyes widened fractionally, then swept the agitated crowd, searching. His gaze locked onto a thick mop of dark green hair, belonging to a boy standing next to a lanky, blonde man in oversized clothes. The boy was clearly panicking at the gruesome sight. Midoriya, finally recognizing Bakugo, could only cry out his name, while Toshinori, beside him, wished desperately he could intervene, his time limit having already passed. Sensing a peculiar resonance from the boy, the man decided to stay and observe the ensuing chaos, a flicker of knowing anticipation touching his features. He narrowed his gaze on the boy, seeking clarity, before his expression settled back into an unreadable, almost impossibly bored, facade.

Midoriya, wishing desperately to help Bakugo, was about to move and run towards the scuffle, when a firm hand grabs him by the shoulder. Toshinori silently shook his head, looking just as anguished as Midoriya was. He too wished to intervene, and seeing Midoriya's fear mixed with his resolve, decided to, when he suddenly froze and clutched at his injury. A thin wisp of steam, almost imperceptible, began to rise from his gaunt frame. The man, still observing the scene with a detached air, noticed the subtle change in Toshinori's demeanor, a faint flicker of recognition in his otherwise bored eyes.

"All Might!" Midoriya cried out, his voice laced with a fresh wave of panic as he watched his hero, the Symbol of Peace, visibly weaken before his eyes. The sight of Toshinori clutching his side, his face contorted in pain, was a stark, horrifying reminder of the hero's hidden vulnerability.

Toshinori, his breath coming in ragged gasps, could only shake his head again, a silent plea for Midoriya to stay put. The pain in his side flared, a searing agony that threatened to buckle his knees. He was useless. His time was up. The thought, bitter and humiliating, twisted in his gut.

The man in the crowd, however, had seen enough. A faint, almost imperceptible smile touched his lips, a knowing glint in his eyes. He began to move, not towards the chaos, but subtly, almost casually, away from the immediate crowd, his gaze still fixed on the struggling Bakugo. He seemed to be calculating something, a silent assessment of the unfolding disaster.

Meanwhile, the Sludge Villain, emboldened by the heroes' inability to act, grew even larger, its viscous body pulsating with a grotesque power. Bakugo's explosions, once a defiant roar, were becoming weaker, more desperate. The fire around them crackled, casting dancing shadows that made the scene even more nightmarish. The pro heroes, frustrated and helpless, could only watch, their expressions grim.

Midoriya's heart hammered against his ribs, a frantic drumbeat of despair. He looked from the struggling Bakugo to the pained Toshinori, then back to the villain. He couldn't just stand there. He wouldn't. His legs, seemingly of their own accord, began to move, dragging him forward, a raw, unthinking surge of pure, unadulterated resolve overriding all fear.

"Young Midoriya! What are you doing?!" Toshinori rasped, a desperate plea in his voice, but Midoriya was already running, a small, insignificant figure charging headlong into the heart of the chaos, his eyes fixed on the struggling Bakugo.

As Midoriya sprinted towards the Sludge Villain, a frantic voice in the back of his mind screamed, What are you doing? Just as Toshinori had warned, this was beyond reckless, a suicidal dash that promised injury or worse. Yet, the more he waited, the more he stared into the raw horror etched on Bakugo's face, the more his feet simply propelled him forward. But as he ran, something shifted. The chaotic images before him began to blur, not with speed, but with an odd, almost ethereal distortion. He skidded to a halt, just as a Pro-Hero lunged to intercept him, intending to sweep him to safety. But Midoriya, with a shocking, almost instinctual grace, sidestepped the hero's grasp, continuing his advance at a slower, deliberate pace. More heroes converged, their attempts to apprehend him failing. He wove through their desperate efforts with a shocking dexterity and agility that seemed utterly impossible for a Quirkless boy.

The man in the crowd paused, his head cocked slightly, a flicker of genuine interest now replacing his apathy. "Oh?" he murmured, a low, almost amused sound. "Now this is interesting." He watched Midoriya's reckless charge, a faint, almost predatory gleam in his eyes. The scene, once a tired cliché, had suddenly become far more compelling.

Then, a searing heat, like liquid fire, coursed through Midoriya's veins, followed by a chilling cold that prickled his skin. His vision sharpened, the blurry chaos resolving into hyper-detailed clarity. A dark, metallic sheen began to spread across his skin, starting from his forearms and shins, hardening into segmented plates of what looked like an insectoid warrior's dark armor. It crept up his arms, encasing his elbows and shoulders in sharp, angular forms, and down his legs, covering his knees and thighs. Around his head, a sleek, dark helm began to form, its contours wrapping around his temples and jaw, leaving his unruly green hair perfectly uncovered at the top. Two glowing red eyes, like burning embers, now stared out from the visor of the nascent armor, giving him a menacing, yet focused, appearance.

With this newfound, terrifying transformation, Midoriya moved. The Sludge Villain, sensing his approach, lashed out with a viscous tendril, but Midoriya, with the same shocking dexterity and agility he'd just displayed, dodged the attack with effortless grace. Another slimy limb whipped towards him, and he weaved under it, his movements a blur. Then, with a blinding flash of movement that even the Pro Heroes struggled to track, Midoriya lunged. His armored hand clamped around Bakugo's leg, and with a powerful, tearing yank, he ripped his struggling classmate free from the villain's suffocating grasp. Bakugo tumbled out, a shocked number of heroes scrambling to catch him before he hit the ground.

Deprived of his "meat suit," the Sludge Villain let out a guttural roar of pure, unadulterated rage. Its form surged, a monstrous wave of putrid sludge attempting to smother Midoriya, to consume him whole. But just as the viscous mass descended, a familiar, thunderous boom ripped through the air. A massive, muscular figure, radiating an aura of immense power, appeared in a flash of white and green. All Might, back in his glorious Muscle Form, his signature smile blazing even amidst the chaos, delivered a devastating, earth-shattering punch directly into the heart of the Sludge Villain, sending waves of pressurized air rippling through the street.

The Sludge Villain's form exploded from the blow, scattering into a disgusting rain of viscous green and brown goo that splattered across the street, coating the now cheering, then disgusted crowd. The villain's consciousness was utterly obliterated, his amorphous body reduced to inert, foul-smelling chunks. All Might, having forced himself beyond his time limit by sheer, indomitable will, stood panting, a visible wisp of steam rising from his powerful frame. He turned his attention to Midoriya, who remained stationary amidst the now concluded madness. With a sickening, chitinous noise, like an insect's armor contracting, the dark plates on Midoriya's arms, legs, and around his head began to recede, melting back into his skin until only his normal school uniform remained. Utterly bewildered by what had just transpired, Midoriya then swayed and fell forward into unconsciousness.

Unbothered by the slime that had splattered on him, the man in the crowd stared intently at Midoriya's now crumpled form on the concrete. "He hasn't fully awakened..." the man thought to himself, his lips curving into a subtle, knowing smirk. With a final, lingering glance, he turned and melted away into the dispersing crowd, leaving the heroes and the stunned onlookers to deal with the aftermath.

A soft, sterile light slowly filtered into Midoriya's awareness, a stark contrast to the chaotic, slime-drenched street he vaguely remembered. He stirred, a dull ache throbbing behind his eyes, and a wave of grogginess washed over him. Home? he thought, his mind still clouded, trying to piece together his surroundings. He rubbed at his eyes with a tired hand, the rough texture of a hospital gown against his skin feeling foreign.

He chanced a look around, and his eyes snapped wide open in shock and surprise. Instead of the familiar All Might posters and cluttered hero notebooks of his bedroom, he found himself in a pristine, white-walled hospital room. The air hung heavy with the scent of antiseptic, and a silent, beeping monitor stood beside his bed. He was hooked up to an IV drip, a clear tube running into his arm. A sudden jolt of adrenaline cleared some of the fog from his brain, and he gaped, his mouth slightly ajar. What had happened?

Just then, the soft click of the door latch echoed in the quiet room. Midoriya's head whipped towards the sound. Two figures entered, their voices hushed, almost whispers. One was a male doctor, his face round and his nose long and pointed, giving him an almost cartoonish resemblance to a penguin. He wore a crisp white lab coat. Beside him, her shoulders slumped with exhaustion but her eyes wide with a desperate hope, was none other than Midoriya Inko, Midoriya's mother.

They were speaking in low, concerned tones, their backs to him, until the doctor subtly gestured towards the bed. Inko's head snapped up, her eyes immediately finding her son, now sitting upright, awake and staring. A gasp escaped her lips, a sound choked with relief and overwhelming emotion. Her eyes welled up instantly, tears streaming down her face as a joyous sob tore from her throat. "Izuku!" she cried, her voice thick with love and worry, and in the next instant, she lunged across the room, enveloping her bewildered son in a fierce, tearful hug.

Midoriya, still disoriented, was almost knocked back by the force of his mother's embrace. He buried his face in her shoulder, the familiar scent of her laundry detergent a comforting anchor in the swirling confusion. "M-Mom?" he mumbled, his voice muffled, a mix of relief and lingering bewilderment. He could feel her trembling, her sobs shaking her entire frame. "I'm okay, Mom, really. What... what happened?"

Inko pulled back slightly, her hands cupping his face, her tear-streaked eyes scanning every inch of him as if to confirm he was truly unharmed. "Oh, Izuku, my baby! You scared me half to death!" she wailed, fresh tears springing forth. "The news... they said there was a villain attack, and you were there! And then... then the hospital called!" She dabbed at her eyes with a tissue she'd seemingly conjured from thin air. "Are you hurt anywhere? Does anything ache?"

The penguin-faced doctor, who had patiently waited, cleared his throat with a gentle ahem. "Mrs. Midoriya, if you'll allow me," he said, his voice calm and reassuring, though still with a hint of professional detachment. "Young Midoriya appears to be perfectly fine. In fact, his recovery was quite remarkable. No injuries to speak of, despite the... unusual circumstances." He gestured vaguely, as if referring to a very strange, unwritten medical report.

Midoriya looked from his tearful mother to the composed doctor. "Unusual circumstances?" he echoed, his analytical mind, despite the grogginess, already trying to piece together the gaps in his memory. The Sludge Villain... Bakugo... the armor... it was all a jumbled mess. "What exactly happened, Doctor? And why am I here?"

Inko, still sniffling, squeezed his hand. "Oh, Izuku, don't worry about that now! The important thing is you're safe! You're awake!" She looked at the doctor, her expression a mix of gratitude and lingering anxiety. "He really is alright, Doctor? No lingering effects?"

The doctor offered a small, reassuring smile. "As far as our tests show, he's in perfect health, Mrs. Midoriya. A very lucky young man, indeed. We just wanted to observe him for a few hours after he regained consciousness." He then turned a more scrutinizing, yet still kind, gaze towards Midoriya. "Though I must admit, young man, your sudden unconsciousness after such an... energetic display was quite the puzzle for us."

Midoriya's brow furrowed, a flicker of frustration crossing his face. "Energetic display? But... I don't remember much after... after running towards the villain. Everything's kind of blurry. Did... did All Might save me again?" He glanced at his mother, then back at the doctor, hoping for some clarity. The memory of the black armor, the glowing red eyes, felt too vivid to be a dream, yet too impossible to be real.

Inko's eyes widened slightly, her hand instinctively going to her mouth. She exchanged a quick, worried glance with the doctor. The doctor, in turn, adjusted his glasses. "Well, young man," he began, choosing his words carefully, "All Might did indeed intervene, as did several other Pro Heroes. It was quite the spectacle. As for your... involvement, let's just say you displayed an incredible amount of bravery." He paused, a subtle shift in his posture suggesting he was holding back details. "The official reports will be released soon, of course. For now, rest is paramount."

"But... but what about Bakugo?" Midoriya pressed, ignoring the doctor's subtle redirection. "Is Kacchan okay? He was... he was stuck in the villain." The image of Bakugo's terrified face flashed in his mind, overriding his own confusion.

Inko quickly interjected, her voice softer now, trying to soothe his anxiety. "Yes, Izuku, he's fine. Bakugo is perfectly alright. The heroes managed to get him out safely. He's already been released, in fact. He just had a bit of a shock, that's all." She patted his arm, a reassuring gesture.

Midoriya let out a shaky breath he hadn't realized he was holding. "Oh. Good. That's... that's good." He slumped back against the pillows, the adrenaline beginning to recede, leaving him feeling utterly drained. The doctor's evasiveness, however, still gnawed at him. He knew there was more to it, something beyond "bravery." He remembered the heat, the cold, the feeling of something changing. But he was too tired to push further, his eyelids feeling heavy.

"See, Mrs. Midoriya?" the doctor said, observing Midoriya's fading energy. "He needs his rest. We'll keep him for observation for a little longer, just to be absolutely certain, but he should be able to go home by tomorrow morning." He offered another polite, penguin-like nod.

Inko, still tearful but now visibly calmer, nodded vigorously. "Thank you, Doctor. Thank you so much for everything." She turned back to Midoriya, her hand gently stroking his hair. "Get some sleep, my darling. We'll talk more when you're feeling better." Her voice was a soft lullaby, and Midoriya, despite his unanswered questions, felt himself drifting, the sterile room slowly fading into a comforting darkness.

Meanwhile, in a quiet, somewhat cramped office at the police precinct, Detective Naomasa Tsukauchi sat across from Yagi Toshinori. The detective, known for his Quirk that allowed him to discern truth from lies, had a thoughtful, almost weary expression on his face. Toshinori, now dressed in a dark jacket and blue jeans, looked far more like a civilian than the Symbol of Peace. He nursed a mug of steaming black coffee, the warmth a small comfort against the lingering chill in his bones.

"So, Yagi-san," Naomasa began, his voice low and even, "you were an eyewitness to the Sludge Villain incident today. Off the record, of course." He took a sip of his own tea, his eyes never leaving Toshinori's face. "The official reports are... quite something. Particularly concerning the young man who rushed in."

Toshinori sighed, the sound a tired exhalation. He took a long gulp of his coffee, the bitter taste a familiar companion. "Indeed, Tsukauchi," he replied, his voice a gravelly whisper, a stark contrast to his booming heroic persona. "It was... quite the spectacle." He paused, choosing his words carefully. "That young Midoriya... he's a remarkable boy."

Naomasa leaned forward slightly, his gaze sharpening. "Remarkable, you say? The reports indicate he was Quirkless. Yet, he managed to evade several Pro Heroes and even pull the hostage free with surprising speed and strength. And then... his sudden collapse. It's all rather perplexing." He tapped a pen against a stack of papers on his desk. "My Quirk tells me you're holding something back, Yagi-san."

Toshinori's grip tightened on his mug. He knew Naomasa's Quirk was absolute. There was no point in lying. "It's... complicated, Naomasa," he admitted, his eyes distant, recalling the brief, terrifying sight of the dark armor forming on Midoriya. "What I saw... it wasn't something that can be easily explained by a 'Quirkless' boy. It was... a transformation." He hesitated, then continued, his voice barely audible. "A dark, almost insectoid armor. Glowing red eyes."

Naomasa's pen stilled. His expression remained neutral, but a flicker of surprise crossed his eyes. "An unmanifested Quirk, perhaps? Or something else entirely?" He scribbled a quick note. "And you say he collapsed immediately after?"

"Yes," Toshinori confirmed, his gaze fixed on the swirling black coffee. "As soon as the... transformation receded. It was as if his body couldn't handle the strain. He was utterly bewildered before he passed out." He looked up, his gaunt face etched with concern. "Naomasa, this is highly sensitive. The boy... he's just a child. And he has no idea what happened to him."

Naomasa nodded slowly, his expression serious. "Understood. This will remain strictly off the record, between us. But this 'transformation'... it sounds incredibly potent. And dangerous, if uncontrolled." He leaned back in his chair, a thoughtful frown on his face. "Do you think we should question young Midoriya about this, Yagi-san? Or would that simply cause him more distress, given his current state?"

Toshinori took another slow sip of coffee, the warmth doing little to calm the unease settling in his stomach. "I... I don't know, Naomasa," he admitted, his voice heavy with indecision. "He's already been through quite an ordeal. And if he truly has no memory of it... forcing him to confront something so profound and potentially terrifying could do more harm than good. Especially if it's something he can't control." He ran a hand through his thinning hair. "For now, let's just keep a very close eye on young Midoriya. Very close."

The following day, a quiet hum filled Midoriya's hospital room. He was a day away from discharge, and the initial grogginess had long since faded, replaced by a restless energy. His mother had gone home to prepare for his return, promising to be back in the morning. Left alone with his thoughts, and a steadily charging phone, Midoriya found himself scrolling aimlessly through his social media feed. News of the Sludge Villain incident was everywhere, of course, plastered across every hero news outlet and trending hashtag.

He tapped on a video link, a shaky, bystander-recorded clip titled "Bug Kid Saves Hostage?! Unbelievable Footage!" Curiosity, and a nagging sense of incompleteness about his own memories, compelled him to play it.

The scene unfolded as he vaguely remembered: the chaotic street, the Pro Heroes struggling, Bakugo's terrified face engulfed in the villain's viscous body. He watched himself, a small, insignificant figure, darting past the heroes, his heart pounding in his chest as if he were reliving the moment. Then, the camera jostled, and the footage became momentarily blurry, just as his own vision had.

When it cleared, the "him" on screen was no longer just Midoriya. A gasp, sharp and involuntary, tore from his throat. His eyes widened, fixed on the screen, his phone almost slipping from his trembling fingers. The figure on the video, moving with impossible speed and grace, was undeniably him, yet utterly alien. Dark, segmented plates of what looked like an insect's armor covered his forearms, shins, elbows, and shoulders. A sleek, dark helm encased his head, leaving his green hair untouched, but two glowing, malevolent red eyes stared out from it.

He watched, horrified and mesmerized, as this armored version of himself dodged the villain's attacks with fluid, inhuman precision. He saw the blinding flash, the powerful yank, and Bakugo being torn free. He saw All Might's dramatic entrance, the earth-shattering punch. And then, he saw the armor recede with that sickening, chitinous sound, leaving his normal self to collapse.

Midoriya stared at the frozen image on his phone screen, his reflection staring back at him from the dark visor of the armored figure. His breath hitched. This... this couldn't be him. Could it? He brought a trembling hand to his face, touching his cheek, then his arm, as if to confirm his own normal, unarmored skin. The memory of the searing heat and chilling cold, the feeling of something changing within him, crashed back with terrifying clarity. He wasn't just a Quirkless boy who ran in bravely. He was... something else. And he had no idea what.

He replayed the scene in his mind, from his own perspective, but for some reason, it remained an infuriating blur, offering only brief, fragmented flashes of images, nothing clear or concise about that day. The memory of the black armor, the glowing red eyes, felt like a phantom limb – undeniably real, yet utterly detached from his conscious experience. He could still vividly recall the conversation he had with All Might on the rooftop, and it brought a different, more complex feeling than the sheer panic of seeing his alleged armored self. He mentally rewound the words his idol had spoken: You could still go to UA... Your analytical skills, your keen mind... There's still hope for you, young man. You shouldn't just give up. Looking down at his own small, ordinary hands, a treacherous, hopeful thought began to take root within his mind. This bizarre turn of events, this inexplicable power... could this be it? Could this be his chance to truly make a difference? The very idea was terrifying, exhilarating, and utterly unbelievable. Could he really be a hero now? A hero with a Quirk, even if it was one he didn't understand, one that felt both alien and intimately a part of him? The question echoed in the quiet room, a silent, desperate prayer.

The next morning, the hospital room was filled with a different kind of energy. The sterile white walls seemed less imposing under the soft glow of the rising sun, and the air hummed with a quiet anticipation. Midoriya, dressed in his freshly laundered school uniform, was actively packing his few belongings into a small duffel bag, while Inko bustled around, her movements quick and efficient, double-checking everything. Her earlier tears had been replaced by a joyful, if still slightly anxious, smile.

"Are you sure you have everything, Izuku? Your toothbrush? Your spare socks? I packed your favorite All Might pajamas, just in case you wanted them at home," she chattered, her voice a comforting stream of maternal concern. She smoothed down a wrinkle on his shirt, even though it was perfectly fine.

Midoriya chuckled, a genuine, light sound that hadn't escaped him in days. "Yes, Mom, I have everything. And I'm really okay. The doctor said so." He swung his legs, a nervous excitement fluttering in his stomach. Going home. After everything. It felt surreal.

"Oh, I know, I know," Inko said, though her eyes still darted around the room, as if a forgotten item might suddenly materialize. She picked up his phone, which he'd left on the bedside table, and handed it to him. "Just... be careful, alright? No more running into danger, please. My heart can't take it." Her voice softened, a plea rather than a command.

Midoriya nodded, a serious expression on his face. "I will, Mom. I promise." The video, the armored figure, still haunted the edges of his mind, a secret he wasn't ready to share. Not yet. He needed to understand it first.

Just as Inko reached for the door handle, a soft, polite knock echoed through the room. Both Midoriya and Inko paused, turning towards the sound, a flicker of surprise on their faces.

Inko, ever the polite one despite her surprise, hesitantly called out, "Come in?"

The door clicked open, revealing a tall, gaunt man in a dark, impeccably tailored suit and tie. His eyes, set deep in a shadowed face, held a familiar intensity that Midoriya recognized instantly, even in this civilian guise. It was Yagi Toshinori, All Might in his depowered form. He offered a polite, almost formal nod to Inko.

"Good morning, Mrs. Midoriya," Toshinori said, his voice a low rumble, a far cry from the booming pronouncements of the Symbol of Peace. "My name is Yagi. Yagi Toshinori. I apologize for the unannounced visit, but I was hoping to have a word with young Midoriya, and with you, if you have a moment."

Inko, not recognizing the man, tilted her head slightly, a polite but cautious curiosity in her eyes. "Oh, good morning, Yagi-san. Is there something we can help you with? We were just about to leave, as Izuku is being discharged today."

Toshinori offered a small, almost imperceptible smile. Without a word, he reached into his inner jacket pocket and produced a sleek, professional-looking business card. He extended it towards Inko. Her eyes widened slightly as she took it, reading the embossed text.

The card simply stated: Yagi Toshinori, Public Relations, Might Tower.

Inko's brow furrowed, a mix of confusion and mild suspicion clouding her features. "Might Tower?" she echoed, her gaze flicking from the card to the man's face, trying to place him. Public relations for All Might's agency? It seemed... odd. She looked at Midoriya, who was now staring at the man with an intensity that bordered on awe, his face a mask of barely contained recognition.

Toshinori, seeing Midoriya's wide, knowing eyes, gave a subtle, almost imperceptible nod in his direction, a silent acknowledgment. He then turned back to Inko, his smile widening just a fraction. "Yes, Mrs. Midoriya. I'm here regarding the incident yesterday. Young Midoriya's... remarkable actions. I believe it's a matter best discussed with both of you, and perhaps in a more private setting, if you're amenable." His gaze, though polite, held a quiet weight, an unspoken urgency that transcended a simple public relations visit.

Inko, still holding the card, hesitated. The man's demeanor was calm, reassuring, yet there was something about his presence, an underlying gravitas, that made her take him seriously. And the way Midoriya was looking at him... "Oh, well, I suppose we have a few minutes before we officially check out," she said, her voice still a little uncertain. She looked at Midoriya, who was practically vibrating with silent anticipation. "Izuku, darling, why don't you finish packing your bag while Yagi-san and I... step out into the hall for a moment?"

"Actually, Mrs. Midoriya," Toshinori interjected smoothly, his eyes briefly meeting Midoriya's, "I was hoping to speak with young Midoriya directly. Perhaps... alone, for a few moments? What I have to discuss is quite sensitive, and it pertains directly to him." He gave Inko a reassuring, yet firm, look. "It won't take long, I assure you. And I believe it's important for him to hear it from me."

Inko's eyes darted between her son and the mysterious man from Might Tower. Her maternal instincts screamed caution, but Midoriya's silent, desperate plea in his eyes was undeniable. He wanted to hear what this man had to say. After a moment of internal debate, she sighed, a small, worried sound. "Alright, Yagi-san," she conceded, though her gaze lingered on Midoriya, a silent warning in her eyes. "But just a few minutes. I'll be right outside the door." She gave Midoriya a quick, reassuring squeeze on the shoulder before stepping out, pulling the door almost shut behind her, leaving a sliver of an opening.

The moment the door clicked, the air in the room shifted. Midoriya's composure crumbled, replaced by an explosion of nervous energy. He scrambled off the bed, bowing deeply, almost comically. "All Might! Sir! I... I mean, Yagi-san! I... I saw the video! I don't understand what happened! Was that... was that my Quirk? But I'm Quirkless! And... and what about what you said on the rooftop? About me not being able to be a hero? But then you said... and then this! I'm so confused!" His words tumbled out in a frantic, breathless rush, his hands flapping nervously.

Toshinori watched him, a faint, almost melancholic smile touching his lips. He walked over to the single visitor's chair by the window and sat down, gesturing for Midoriya to sit on the bed. "Slow down, young Midoriya," he said, his voice gentle. "One thing at a time. And yes, you are correct. I am All Might. And what I have to tell you... it will change everything you thought you knew about yourself."

Midoriya hesitantly sat back on the edge of the bed, his eyes wide and fixed on Toshinori. "Change... everything?" he whispered, his voice barely audible. "What... what kind of change? Was that... that armor... was that my Quirk? Is it finally here? After all these years?" The questions poured out, tinged with a desperate, fragile hope.

Toshinori's expression softened, a deep sadness momentarily clouding his eyes before he composed himself. "Young Midoriya," he began, his voice serious, "we've reviewed the footage from yesterday's incident. All of it. What you saw... what you experienced... it was indeed a manifestation of something extraordinary. Something that, until now, was dormant within you." He paused, letting the weight of his words settle. "It appears you are not, in fact, Quirkless. Or, at least, not in the way you believed."

He leaned forward slightly, his gaze piercing, yet kind. "Now, I have a very important question for you, young man. After everything you've witnessed, everything you've been through... are you still willing to pursue your dream of becoming a hero? Even knowing that this power, whatever it truly is, comes with a great deal of responsibility, and perhaps, a path far more challenging than you could ever imagine?"

Midoriya, absorbing Toshinori's words, looked down, his mind a whirlwind of conflicting emotions. This was it. This was the moment he had truly been waiting for all this time. For him to have a Quirk, to finally have power. The power to change his destiny, to make a difference, to stand on equal footing with those he admired. The thought sent a thrilling, almost dizzying rush through him. And yet... something deep within him, a quiet, insistent voice, whispered that it was wrong. This power, so sudden, so alien, so uncontrolled... it didn't feel like his. It felt like a force that had merely used him.

He opened his mouth, then closed it, his throat tight. The eager 'Yes!' that should have burst forth caught, tangled in a knot of profound uncertainty. He slowly lifted his gaze to meet Toshinori's eyes, his own green ones troubled, reflecting a turmoil far beyond simple bewilderment.

"Yagi-san," Midoriya began, his voice quiet, almost a whisper, laden with a vulnerability that surprised even himself. "If... if I have a Quirk now... this... thing... does that truly qualify me to be a hero?" He gestured vaguely to himself, then towards the closed door where his mother waited, a silent acknowledgment of the life he'd always known. "I mean, I've always wanted one, more than anything. To save people, just like you. But... is just having a power enough? Does it make me worthy? Does it make me... a hero like you? One who saves with a smile, who inspires hope, who is always in control?" The last questions were barely audible, a raw, desperate plea for understanding in his tone.

Toshinori looked down, his gaze distant for a moment, lost in thought. He considered Midoriya's earnest, vulnerable question, a question that cut to the very core of heroism. He then slowly lifted his head, his blue eyes meeting Midoriya's.

"Control, young Midoriya?" Toshinori mused, a faint, almost rueful smile touching his lips. "That is a question I am not entirely sure I can answer for you. Not yet. This power you displayed... it was indeed immense, but also, as you observed, seemingly beyond your conscious command. To wield such a force responsibly, to truly make it your own, will require incredible dedication and self-mastery. That much is certain."

He paused, then continued, his voice growing more serious, a deep conviction resonating within it. "But if having power is truly what it takes to be worthy of heroism... then perhaps society has long forgotten what it means to be truly heroic. A hero isn't defined by the strength of their Quirk, young man. A hero is defined by their heart. By their willingness to act when others cannot, or will not. By their unwavering desire to save, even when it seems impossible. By their spirit."

Toshinori then leaned forward, his voice dropping to a low, confidential tone, his eyes locking with Midoriya's, a profound secret about to be unveiled. "And speaking of spirit, young Midoriya... there's something else you need to know. Something that will truly change everything you thought you knew about me. About heroism itself." He took a deep breath, the air whistling slightly in his gaunt frame. "You see, young Midoriya... I wasn't always like this. In fact... I too was once Quirkless."

Midoriya's eyes, already wide, snapped open even further, his jaw dropping. "Q-Quirkless?!" he gasped, the word escaping him in a strangled, disbelieving whisper. "Y-Yagi-san?! But... but All Might... the Symbol of Peace... you're... you're Quirkless?!" The last phrase was almost a scream, a frantic, repeated utterance of the impossible truth.

"Shhh!" Toshinori hissed, his eyes darting towards the door, his panic evident. He leaned forward, his gaunt face close to Midoriya's, his voice a frantic whisper, "Not so loud, young Midoriya! This is highly confidential!" Midoriya's eyes, still wide with disbelief, frantically slammed both of his own hands to his mouth, a silent, desperate understanding dawning on his face.

After calming down, Toshinori released a slow, deliberate sigh, the sound a quiet exhalation in the hushed hospital room. His gaze, now steady and intense, locked with Midoriya's emerald green eyes. "Indeed, young Midoriya," he went on, his voice a low, gravelly confession. "I was once Quirkless. And like you, I too had dreams of becoming a hero, dreams that felt impossible in a world that seemed to demand powers I didn't possess. Once upon a time, young Midoriya," he began, his voice taking on a somber, almost historical tone, "Japan as we know it in the present was, to put it mildly, once entrenched in an era where villains dominated. It was a dark age, a time of chaos and fear, where the very fabric of society seemed to be unraveling. Heroes, though they fought valiantly, were barely holding the country together, their efforts often overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the despair. Many innocent people suffered, died, or were deprived of even their simplest dignities. Crime rates soared, and the streets were often battlegrounds where the strong preyed upon the weak. Evil was at its most rampant, and the light of hope flickered precariously, threatening to extinguish altogether."

Toshinori took a moment to catch his breath, his gaze distant, perhaps reliving those dark days. "And yet, I... did not lose hope. Or, heh, maybe I was close to it. Family, friends, they were all taken away from me even before I graduated from Junior High. The world felt like it was crumbling around me, and I, a scrawny, Quirkless boy, could do nothing but watch. I felt utterly useless, just as you might have felt, young Midoriya." He paused, a flicker of that old pain in his eyes.

"But then," Toshinori continued, his voice gaining a quiet strength, "there was a moment. A moment not unlike your own leap into action yesterday. I saw a hero, a pro, struggling against a villain. They were overwhelmed, and no one else was moving. The fear was palpable, paralyzing. The other heroes, weighed down by the collateral damage and the villain's sheer power, hesitated. But I... I just moved. My body reacted before my mind could even process the danger. I didn't think about my lack of a Quirk, or if I'd get hurt, or if it was hopeless. I just saw someone who needed help, and I grabbed the nearest thing—a rusty metal pipe, if you can believe it—and charged, my scrawny legs pumping, my heart hammering like a drum against my ribs. I just wanted to help. To do something. Anything that wasn't completely hopeless, even if it was just a distraction to buy the hero a second."

A faint, almost wistful smile touched his lips. "The hero, she was incredible. She managed to defeat the villain before I could even so much as touch them, a whirlwind of power that ended the threat in an instant. And then... she gave me a verbal lashing you wouldn't believe," he chuckled, a dry, self-deprecating sound. "She told me I was reckless, foolish, that I could have gotten myself killed. And she was right, of course. But even as she scolded me, there was something in her eyes. Something that saw beyond my Quirkless state, beyond my foolishness. It was in that moment, that chaotic, desperate moment, that the hero I tried to help eventually took me in under her wing. She saw the spark, the drive, the spirit of a hero, even in a boy with no power. It was there, under her guidance, that my fate had truly changed. She taught me what it meant to be a hero, beyond just having a power."

Toshinori leaned back slightly, his gaze now firm and direct on Midoriya. "And I believe, young Midoriya, that you could very well do the same. Your actions yesterday, your selfless leap, the sheer will you displayed... that is the true mark of a hero. The power you manifested, whatever its nature, is secondary to that spirit. It is merely a tool. The question is, what will you do with it?"

Stunned by his tale, Midoriya couldn't rightly respond, Toshinori's words cutting into him deeply. His mind reeled, trying to reconcile the image of the invincible Symbol of Peace with the scrawny, Quirkless boy who had once grabbed a rusty pipe. It was a revelation that shattered his entire worldview, yet simultaneously, it filled him with a warmth he hadn't known he was missing. All Might, his All Might, understood. He truly understood what it meant to be powerless, to feel helpless. And he had still become the greatest hero.

The frantic energy that had made him blurt out his questions earlier now settled into a profound, almost reverent silence. The questions about his newfound power, about its control, about his worthiness, suddenly seemed less urgent, less terrifying. They were still there, buzzing at the edges of his consciousness, but they were overshadowed by the sheer, overwhelming weight of Toshinori's confession. It was a secret so monumental, so personal, that it felt like a sacred trust.

Midoriya swallowed hard, his throat still dry from his earlier outburst. He looked at Toshinori, his eyes filled with a mixture of awe, understanding, and a budding, fierce determination. The "Bug Kid" video, the alien armor, the confusion – it all faded into the background, replaced by the raw, inspiring truth of All Might's origin. He, Midoriya Izuku, was not alone in his Quirkless past. His idol, the man he looked up to more than anyone, had walked the same path.

A slow, steady breath filled Midoriya's lungs. The fear that had gripped him, the sense of being an anomaly, began to recede. He still had a power he didn't understand, a strange, unsettling transformation, but now... now he had a guide. A mentor who knew what it was like to start from nothing.

He met Toshinori's gaze, a newfound resolve hardening his features. He didn't need to scream his answer. His eyes, burning with a quiet, unwavering fire, spoke volumes.

The following Monday morning, the air at Aldera Junior High was thick with an unusual hum, a palpable shift from its usual mundane drone. Whispers followed Midoriya Izuku like a shadow as he walked through the school gates. Every eye seemed to track him, every hushed conversation seemed to be about him. He kept his gaze fixed on the worn linoleum of the hallway, his shoulders hunched slightly, clutching the straps of his backpack. He could feel the stares, the curiosity, the disbelief – and something else, something he couldn't quite place, a mix of awe and lingering suspicion.

He reached his classroom, sliding the door open with a soft shikk. The chatter inside died instantly. Thirty pairs of eyes, wide and unblinking, turned to him. A few classmates pointed, others nudged each other, their mouths agape. Even the usually boisterous Bakugo Katsuki, slumped in his seat by the window, was staring, though his expression was a familiar mask of irritation and something far more complex Midoriya couldn't decipher.

"Midoriya!" His homeroom teacher, a perpetually tired-looking man with a thinning hairline, called out, his voice unusually sharp. "Good to see you back. Take your seat." There was a strange tension in the teacher's posture, a forced casualness that didn't quite hide the underlying scrutiny.

During homeroom, the teacher made a brief, formal announcement, praising Midoriya's "bravery" and "selfless actions" during the villain incident, carefully omitting any mention of the strange power he'd displayed. "He showed true heroic spirit," the teacher concluded, his eyes lingering on Midoriya for a beat too long. Instead of feeling vindicated, such remarks coming from his teacher, who had spent the better part of his tenure ignoring him and his struggles, filled Midoriya with a strange mix of disgust and irritation. He recognized the blatant hypocrisy, but he pushed it down, a quiet, simmering resentment that he couldn't afford to show.

As soon as the bell for the first class rang, a few of the braver, or perhaps less tactful, classmates swarmed his desk.

"Midoriya! Is it true? You have a Quirk now?!" "That armor! Was that it? It was so cool!" "Why did you hide it? You're not Quirkless after all?" "You actually saved Bakugo, didn't you? With that... thing?"

Midoriya flinched, shrinking back in his seat. He clutched his notebook tighter, his mind racing. What do I say? Yagi-san said it was confidential. And I don't even understand it myself. The memory of the searing heat and chilling cold, the metallic sheen, the glowing red eyes – it felt like a dream, a terrifying, impossible dream. He barely remembered moving, only the desperate urge to help.

"I... I don't know," Midoriya mumbled, his voice barely audible, avoiding eye contact. "It was... I just reacted. I'm not sure what happened. I just wanted to help." He offered a small, awkward shrug, hoping to deflect their questions. He didn't want to talk about it. Not when he felt so utterly out of his depth. He didn't want to lie, but he couldn't tell the truth either. Not yet.

From across the room, Bakugo Katsuki watched, his crimson eyes narrowed. He hadn't moved from his desk, but his gaze was fixed on Midoriya, a silent, seething fury radiating from him. He heard the whispers, the questions, the awe in their voices. He saw Midoriya's meek, evasive answers. A low growl rumbled in his throat, a dangerous spark igniting in his palms. He knew what he saw. He knew what Deku had done. And it burned him, a humiliation he couldn't comprehend, let alone accept.

Bakugo's crimson eyes narrowed further, a muscle twitching in his jaw. He had seen it. He had felt it. The sheer, impossible speed, the dark, terrifying armor, the way Deku had ripped him free as if he weighed nothing. It wasn't a trick of the light, wasn't some hero's intervention. It was Deku. The Quirkless, useless Deku, who had always been beneath him, always a step behind, always a pathetic, blubbering mess. And now, this. This thing had emerged from him, saving him, Bakugo Katsuki, the future Number One Hero. The humiliation was a raw, burning coal in his gut.

"What's with the mumbling, Deku?!" Bakugo snarled, his voice cutting through the classroom chatter like a whip. His palms sparked with tiny, volatile explosions, a clear warning. "You got something to say, say it! Don't go acting all innocent now!"

The other classmates flinched, some shrinking back, others looking between the two boys with a mix of fear and morbid curiosity. The air in the room grew heavy, charged with Bakugo's volatile anger.

Midoriya flinched again, his body tensing. He didn't dare look up, his gaze still fixed on his desk. He could feel the heat radiating off Bakugo, the barely contained fury. "K-Kacchan, I... I really don't know," he stammered, his voice barely a whisper. "It just... happened."

"Bullshit!" Bakugo roared, pushing himself out of his seat with a violent scrape of metal against the floor. He strode towards Midoriya's desk, his explosions growing larger, louder. "You think I'm stupid, Deku?! You think I didn't see that freakish armor?! You've been hiding a Quirk all this time, haven't you?! Playing the victim, the useless Deku, while you had that... that thing inside you!"

His fist slammed onto Midoriya's desk, narrowly missing his trembling hand. The impact rattled the entire desk, sending pens scattering. Midoriya gasped, shrinking back further, his eyes wide with fear.

"Bakugo Katsuki! That's enough!" the teacher finally interjected, his voice stern, though a tremor of unease was evident. "Return to your seat! Now!"

Bakugo ignored him, his crimson eyes blazing with a terrifying intensity, fixed solely on Midoriya. "You think you're hot stuff now, huh, Deku?! You think you're better than me?! Saving me?! Don't make me laugh! I didn't need your help, you damn freak!"

The word "freak" hung in the air, a familiar insult, but this time, it carried a new, venomous weight. It wasn't just about Quirklessness anymore; it was about the unknown, the unsettling power that had manifested.

Midoriya, despite his fear, felt a flicker of something else – a deep, unsettling confusion. He didn't feel like a freak. He felt scared, yes, and bewildered, but also... a strange sense of responsibility. He had saved Bakugo. He had helped.

Midoriya flinched, shrinking back further in his seat. He clamped his mouth shut, his eyes wide with fear, but a dull, familiar ache settled in his chest. What was the point? Bakugo wouldn't listen. He never did. He just slumped deeper, stewing in silence as Bakugo's rage washed over him. Bakugo's face was a mask of seething rage and bewildered confusion. The sparks in his palms were gone, but a dangerous glint remained in his crimson eyes. The rivalry, the dynamic between them, had fundamentally shifted. And Midoriya knew, with a chilling certainty, that this was only the beginning. The world was about to get a lot more complicated.

The final bell shrieked, a piercing sound that usually brought a surge of relief, but today, it only amplified the strange, unsettling hum in the air. Midoriya moved slowly, meticulously packing his bag, every movement deliberate, as if to delay the inevitable. He could feel the eyes on him, a constant, prickling sensation on his skin. The whispers, though hushed, were impossible to ignore.

"Did you see him? He actually has a Quirk!" "And it's so cool! That armor thing!" "He saved Bakugo! Can you believe it?" "I always knew Midoriya had something special in him!"

A bitter, almost nauseating taste filled Midoriya's mouth. Always knew? These were the same voices that had mocked him, called him useless, ignored him for years. The same classmates who had laughed when Bakugo blew up his desk, who had snickered when Tsubasa tore his notebook. Now, suddenly, he was "special."

As he stood up, slinging his backpack over his shoulder, a few students approached him, their smiles wide and eager.

"Hey, Midoriya! That was amazing yesterday! Want to hang out after school? We could go to the arcade!" "Yeah, Midoriya! Or maybe we could train together? Your Quirk is so unique, I bet we could figure out some cool combos!" "You're not Quirkless after all! That's so awesome! Why didn't you tell us?"

Midoriya forced a small, awkward smile, his stomach churning. He recognized every face, every voice. The boy with the stretchy fingers who used to flick paper balls at his head. The girl with the hardening Quirk who always "accidentally" bumped into him in the hall. The group that used to call him "Deku-the-loser."

"Uh, no, thanks," Midoriya mumbled, his voice barely audible, his gaze fixed on the floor. "I... I have to go home. My mom's waiting." He offered a small, dismissive wave, trying to convey a polite refusal without being outright rude. He just wanted to escape.

He walked through the crowded hallways, a surreal sense of unreality washing over him. The usual gauntlet of sneers and shoves was gone. Instead, students parted for him, some offering tentative smiles, others simply staring with wide-eyed curiosity. It was as if a switch had been flipped, and the entire school's perception of him had been instantly inverted. The looks of disdain he used to garner were replaced by admiration, interest, some even wanted to hang out with him after school. He had declined any who tried, a pit in his stomach forming that these were the ones who mocked him, belittled him, even ignored him. Literally overnight, the dynamic had changed.

He reached the school gates, the afternoon sun feeling strangely cold on his face. He pulled out his phone, scrolling aimlessly, trying to distract himself from the unsettling shift. News articles, social media posts, all about the "Bug Kid." He was a sensation. A hero.

But it didn't feel good. It felt… hollow. The admiration felt earned under false pretenses, a sudden outpouring of interest that had been conspicuously absent when he was just Izuku, the Quirkless boy with a dream. The bitterness was a sharp, unexpected taste, mingling with the lingering confusion about his new power. He had always wanted a Quirk, had always yearned for acceptance, but not like this. Not when it felt so conditional, so superficial. He was still the same Midoriya Izuku, but now, the world saw him differently, and he wasn't sure he liked what he saw in their eyes.

"So, none of it was to your expectation," a voice suddenly called out to him.

Midoriya stopped dead, his head snapping up. He spun around, searching frantically. The school gates were mostly empty now, the last stragglers disappearing down the street. He saw no one. His heart hammered against his ribs. Was he imagining things? The stress of the day, the strange power, it was all getting to him.

He was about to dismiss it, to go on his way, when he almost bumped into someone. He gasped, stumbling back a step, his eyes wide.

Standing directly in front of him, as if he had materialized out of thin air, was a man in a simple coat, his hands casually shoved into his pockets. He had a faint, almost knowing smile on his lips, and his eyes, dark and observant, seemed to pierce right through Midoriya, as if he could read his every thought.

The man continued, his voice calm and even, "But, isn't this what you wanted?"

Midoriya blinked, his expression that of bewildered confusion. "Wh-What?" he stammered, his mind racing, trying to process the man's sudden appearance and unsettling question. Who was this person? How did he know what Midoriya was thinking?

The man took out his right hand from his coat pocket, a subtle, almost theatrical gesture, and pointed at the phone still clutched in Midoriya's trembling hand. His smile widened just a fraction, a knowing glint in his dark eyes. "That. All of a sudden, you're the talk of the town. The 'Bug Kid,' they're calling you. The Quirkless boy who suddenly wasn't. The hero who saved the day." He paused, letting the words hang in the air, each one a subtle jab at Midoriya's raw nerves. "Isn't that what you've always dreamed of, Midoriya Izuku? To be seen, to be acknowledged, to be... a hero?"

Midoriya flinched, the man's words hitting too close to home. He clutched his phone tighter, his knuckles white. "S-Sir, who are you?" he managed to ask, his voice a little stronger now, tinged with a desperate need for answers. The man's presence was unsettling, but also, strangely, the first real thing that felt tangible after the day's bizarre events.

The man cocked a brow, the smile never leaving his lips. He then turned away, his gaze drifting towards the distant city skyline, the same right hand coming up to his chin in thought. "Who am I? Hmm, well… you can probably just call me Kagutsuchi." He turned back, his dark eyes twinkling with a hint of amusement. "Just Kagutsuchi. No titles, no formalities. They're rather... restrictive, wouldn't you agree?"

"Eh?" Midoriya blinked, caught off guard by the strange response. Kagutsuchi? It sounded... ancient. Mythological, even. And his casual dismissal of "titles" felt profoundly out of place in a world obsessed with hero rankings and Quirk classifications.

Kagutsuchi shrugged his shoulders, a fluid, almost lazy movement. "And you're Midoriya Izuku. Got that out of the way? Good." He took a step closer, his voice dropping slightly, though still perfectly calm. "So, tell me, Midoriya Izuku. How does it feel to be the local celebrity? To have all those eyes on you, all that sudden admiration? Is it everything you imagined?" His gaze was piercing, probing, as if he could see the churning conflict within Midoriya's mind. He wasn't asking for a superficial answer; he was demanding the truth.

And, as if he was snapping out of a trance, Midoriya once again shook his head, a frantic, almost desperate gesture. "I-I don't r-really know you, sir," he stammered out, his voice barely a whisper, his eyes darting around, searching for an escape. He began taking hesitant steps to leave, his feet dragging, when the man's arm shot out, not touching him, but barring his path with an almost invisible barrier of presence.

Kagutsuchi wagged a finger, a slow, deliberate motion that felt oddly menacing. His smile remained, but it seemed to sharpen, losing its casual amusement. "Just tell me how it feels, kid. Don't play coy. Did having your long coveted 'Quirk' suddenly make everything better for you? Did it wash away all those years of being looked down on, of being ignored?" He spread his hands out theatrically, his gaze sweeping over the empty school grounds, then back to Midoriya, as if to encompass the entire world that had suddenly changed for him. "Come on, those kids who used to trip you in the hall, the ones who called you 'Deku,' they wanted to be your friends. Hang out and everything! Isn't that what you always craved? To be noticed? To be seen?"

His voice dropped, becoming a low, almost hypnotic murmur, laced with a subtle, insidious understanding. "A turn that, if anything, you had indeed been craving for as long as you felt less than you did. The way people would look at you. The way you would get pitying glances, which would nowhere be near as bad as being ignored like you weren't there. The quiet, suffocating invisibility. Now, you're visible, Midoriya Izuku. Very visible. And that, my boy, is a power in itself, isn't it?"

Midoriya didn't know why, but he somehow felt…small, before this man. As if his presence was smothering him. "S-Sir, please, I…I just want to-"

"To what?" The man's tone sharpened, as did the glimmer in his eyes. "To go home? Sure, go ahead." He gestured with his head towards the street, a dismissive flick of his chin. "No one's stopping you. You're free to walk away, to go back to your quiet life, to pretend none of this ever happened." His smile returned, wider now, but chillingly devoid of warmth. "But then, what about all this newfound attention? All these eager faces, these 'friends' who suddenly see you? Will you just abandon it? Abandon the very thing you thought you wanted?"

Kagutsuchi took another step closer, his voice dropping to a near whisper, yet it resonated with an unnerving clarity in Midoriya's ears. "Or perhaps... you're afraid? Afraid of what this 'Quirk' truly is? Afraid of what it means for the 'Quirkless' boy who suddenly isn't? Afraid of what you might become?" His eyes seemed to bore into Midoriya's very soul, stripping away his defenses, exposing his deepest anxieties. "Because, Midoriya Izuku, what you manifested yesterday... that wasn't just some simple power. It was an awakening. And awakenings, my boy, always come with a price."

"A price…?" Midoriya thought to himself with a growing, cold dread. The word echoed in his mind, chilling him to the bone. What kind of price? Was it the searing heat, the chilling cold, the loss of control? Was it the feeling of something alien, something other, taking over his body? His eyes darted frantically, searching for an escape, for any sign of a familiar face, a hero, anyone to pull him from this suffocating conversation. This man, Kagutsuchi, knew too much, saw too much. He was like a predator, toying with his prey.

"Wh-What are you talking about?" Midoriya stammered, his voice trembling, barely a whisper. He wasted no more time. He turned and bolted, his legs pumping, a desperate, unthinking flight from the unnerving presence. He didn't know where he was going, only that he had to get away.

Kagutsuchi, in turn, merely watched him go, a faint, almost imperceptible chuckle escaping his lips. His smile remained, a knowing, satisfied curve. He made no move to follow, his hands still casually in his pockets, his dark eyes following Midoriya's frantic retreat until the green-haired boy disappeared around the corner. The setting sun cast long, ominous shadows behind him, stretching across the empty school grounds, as if the very world was acknowledging the new, unsettling game that had just begun.