The rhythmic thud of fists striking padded targets echoed through Gym Gamma, a percussive backdrop to the sharp crack of explosions and the hiss of compressed air. The Sports Festival was only days away, and Class 1-A pushed themselves harder than ever. Sweat slicked the mats, and the air buzzed with a palpable mix of tension, determination—and for Izuku Midoriya, a persistent, unsettling unease.

"Izuku, you're locking up again!" Uraraka called, her expression earnest, devoid of teasing. She ducked low, steps light and controlled, weaving effortlessly past his attempts to grab her arm. "You'll just burn out faster if you keep fighting your own movements!"

"R-Right!" Izuku adjusted his footing, a conscious effort to loosen his legs. He tried to focus on the subtle shift of her weight before each dodge. His notebook lay open on the bench nearby, a familiar comfort covered in hastily scribbled analyses of Quirks and movement patterns. Normally, that would ground him—data, logic, something he could control. But today, it felt like a flimsy distraction, paper-thin against the heavy, unsettling thrum in his chest.

Every punch, every push-off from the mat, carried with it that same creeping dread: the pulse of something deeper, something waiting. His muscles didn't feel entirely his anymore. There was a strange, almost alien responsiveness to them, a subtle coiling in his limbs that dragged his mind back to that night. The armor. The claws. The red eyes.

He forced himself to exhale, to shove the thought down. Not here. Not in front of them.

"Your reaction time's better," Uraraka added, stepping back, hands on her hips as she caught her breath. "But you're… I don't know, you feel like you're holding back. You're thinking too much again."

Izuku offered a strained smile. "S-Sorry. Just… trying to be careful."

Before he could elaborate, the soft whir of machinery filled the gym, followed by a metallic clank. The sharp, clean scent of newly-forged alloys cut through the sweat-laden air.

"Midoriya," Yaoyorozu called from the far side of the room, her voice calm and authoritative as ever. She knelt, her Creation Quirk already in motion, sleek metal components emerging from her forearm in rapid succession. They assembled themselves, piece by piece, into something far too professional to be handmade on the spot.

"I've finished the modifications we discussed," she said, rising to her feet. In her hands was a compact, wrist-mounted device attached to a bundle of weighted cables. "This will simulate high-intensity resistance training while forcing you to maintain mobility. You said you wanted to test how your muscles respond under stress similar to actual combat, correct?"

Izuku blinked, the heavy rhythm in his chest momentarily forgotten. "Y-Yes! That's exactly what I—thank you, Yaoyorozu-san!" His words tumbled out in a rush, but his hands were steady as he accepted the device. The metal felt cool against his skin, deceptively light for something so durable.

"Just be careful," she warned, adjusting the strap on his forearm with practiced precision. "If you push too hard, it could strain your joints. Start with a lower resistance setting."

"I'll keep that in mind," Izuku promised, though a part of him wasn't sure if his body would let him take it slow anymore.

Iida jogged over, adjusting his glasses as he surveyed the setup with a nod of approval. "Yaoyorozu-kun, this is remarkable work! With this kind of targeted training, Midoriya-kun should be able to push his limits in a controlled, systematic way. I'll monitor the timer to ensure he doesn't overdo it."

Uraraka tilted her head, watching Izuku secure the device. "Are you sure about this, Izuku? You've been pushing yourself so hard lately. If this is too much—"

"I need this," Izuku said, more firmly than he intended. He caught himself, softening his tone with a small, apologetic smile. "Sorry… I just… I want to be ready. For the Festival. For everything."

Uraraka didn't press, but her eyes lingered on him, a quiet worry flickering there.

"Alright," Yaoyorozu said, stepping back. "Engage the first setting. The weights will adjust dynamically based on your movement."

Izuku nodded and activated the device. With a low hum, the cables tightened, anchoring him to a weighted sled Momo had also created. He crouched, feeling the immediate, sharp pull against his muscles. His heart thudded harder, almost too hard, as he dug his feet into the mat and lunged forward.

The resistance was immediate and punishing. His arms strained, his legs burned, but his body moved—too well. Each stride felt unnaturally precise, as if some deeper instinct were guiding him. His fingers curled reflexively, nails biting into his palms as a strange heat began to pool in his forearms.

"Midoriya-kun, steady your breathing!" Iida called, stopwatch in hand.

Izuku gritted his teeth, pulling harder, faster. The hum of the device grew louder, the cables vibrating under the strain. His vision sharpened, colors gaining that same unnerving clarity he remembered from before. He could almost feel it—the pulse beneath his skin, the faint metallic itch crawling up his arms.

"Izuku! Slow down, you'll hurt yourself!" Uraraka shouted, stepping closer.

But he couldn't slow down. His movements were no longer careful, deliberate steps—they were surging, explosive lunges. His legs coiled like springs, his arms pulling the weighted sled with a force that made the gym floor tremble.

"I-I can handle it!" he managed, though his voice sounded distant, even to himself.

A flicker of something dark glinted across his vision—just for a heartbeat, his hands looked wrong, the faint outline of black, segmented plating crawling up his forearms.

Then—

"Enough!" Yaoyorozu's sharp command cut through his haze. She stepped in, pressing a button on the device. The resistance instantly released, the cables retracting with a metallic snap.

Izuku staggered forward, barely catching himself on his knees, breath ragged. The ghostly sensation of that creeping armor faded as quickly as it came.

The gym fell silent save for his gasps. Uraraka was the first to kneel beside him. "Izuku, are you okay? That didn't look… normal."

He forced himself to nod, hiding the panic twisting in his chest. "Y-Yeah. Just… pushed too hard."

But as he stared down at his trembling hands, he couldn't shake the truth. The Agito pulse was getting harder to suppress.

Izuku sat on the bench, a cold towel draped over the back of his neck, his breaths finally slowing to something resembling normal. His shirt clung damply to his skin, and his forearms still trembled faintly from the strain. The others had given him space at first, but the silence didn't last long.

The solid thwack of impact drew his gaze to the center of the gym, where Shoji was finishing his own training. His long reach and multiple arms moved in a blur, striking the practice dummies with precise, deliberate force. The air shook with every blow, but unlike Izuku's earlier frenzy, there was absolute control in every motion.

Shoji landed lightly on his feet after a final strike and glanced toward them, his expression unreadable behind his mask. He grabbed a water bottle and approached, his towering frame moving with surprising quietness.

"You pushed yourself harder than usual today," he said simply, his calm voice carrying no judgment—just observation.

Izuku managed a sheepish nod. "Y-Yeah… guess I got caught up in it."

Uraraka frowned, her arms crossed loosely as she leaned against the wall. "Caught up, sure… but that wasn't like you, Izuku. You weren't just overworking yourself—you looked like you were… I don't know, fighting something."

Iida adjusted his glasses, his usual brisk tone softening slightly. "Uraraka-san is correct. Your form was erratic near the end, almost as if your body was moving independently of your usual habits. For someone as analytical as you, Midoriya-kun, that's highly uncharacteristic."

Momo, who had been quietly dismantling the training device she'd made for him, finally spoke, her voice measured but tinged with concern. "Your muscles were responding abnormally to the resistance, Midoriya-san. I built that equipment to push your limits, yes, but not to make you move like that. It was almost as if… you were adapting too quickly. That doesn't happen without some underlying factor."

Izuku froze, his hands tightening around the towel. He could feel all their eyes on him—concerned, but determined to understand.

Shoji sat down across from him, resting his arms on his knees. His gaze was steady, almost piercing despite the mask. "You're holding something back."

The words landed like a physical weight in Izuku's chest. He opened his mouth to deflect, to give one of his usual half-truths about training stress, but when he met their eyes—Uraraka's worry, Iida's earnest focus, Momo's calm persistence, Shoji's quiet scrutiny—his throat tightened. These weren't just casual classmates. These were his friends. People who had stood beside him despite everything.

He exhaled slowly, lowering his gaze. "…You're right. I've been… keeping something from you. But it's not because I didn't trust you. I just…" His voice wavered. "I didn't want you to worry."

Uraraka knelt slightly to be at eye level with him. "Too late for that, Izuku. We're already worried. Just tell us."

Izuku's confession hung in the air for a long moment. The others didn't rush him, didn't pepper him with questions—they just watched, waiting for him to continue.

He took a shaky breath, staring at his hands. "The power… the Agito—it's getting harder to control. It's like it… reacts to stress. When I'm calm, it stays quiet, but if I push too far or…" His words faltered, and he swallowed hard. "If I let my emotions get away from me, it feels like it wants to move on its own. Like it's not just mine."

Uraraka sat back on her heels, arms folded loosely across her chest. Her voice was soft, but there was a quiet steadiness to it. "Then we figure out how to keep you calm when it matters. That's what training's for, right?"

Iida nodded sharply, adjusting his glasses. "Exactly. We refine your routines. Structure and discipline will help—controlled repetition until your mind and body respond automatically, even under pressure."

"I can help with that." Momo set the partially disassembled training device aside. "If this power reacts unpredictably to stress, then the best way to prepare is to safely recreate that stress in a controlled environment. I can create variable-weight equipment, maybe even a sparring simulation that forces you to think quickly without overloading your body."

Shoji crossed his arms, his masked face unreadable but his tone calm and sure. "And if things ever do get out of control, we're here to stop you. You don't have to fight against it alone."

Izuku blinked at them, his throat tightening. He'd expected worry—maybe even fear—but instead there was nothing but unwavering determination in their eyes. They weren't treating him like something dangerous. They were treating him like a friend.

"…I'm not sure if training will be enough," he admitted quietly. "But if anyone can help me keep this under control, it's you guys."

Uraraka smiled faintly, her usual warmth returning to her voice. "Then it's settled. You're stuck with us, Izuku."

For the first time in days, the tightness in his chest eased, just a little. He managed a small, genuine smile. "Right. Thank you."

The tension in the gym slowly ebbed, replaced by the softer sounds of stretching mats and the hiss of cooling water bottles. Uraraka plopped down cross-legged on the floor beside Izuku, letting out a tired sigh.

"Training this hard right before the Festival… I'm gonna need a whole new set of muscles by the time this is over," she joked, rubbing her shoulders.

"You should pace yourself, Uraraka-san," Iida said, already in the middle of his usual post-exercise stretches. "Proper cooldowns are crucial to muscle recovery, especially after high-intensity sessions like this!"

Uraraka laughed lightly, waving him off. "I know, I know! You sound like a fitness commercial sometimes, Iida."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Iida replied without missing a beat, adjusting his glasses with that familiar earnestness.

Momo, who was organizing the dismantled components of her training device into neat stacks, glanced over with a faint smile. "I can create some nutrient supplements if anyone needs them. Nothing too fancy, just something to help with recovery."

"Always prepared, Yaoyorozu-san," Shoji rumbled, his calm tone carrying just the faintest hint of approval.

Uraraka leaned closer to Izuku, her expression softening. "You're still shaking a little. You okay to keep going later?"

Izuku hesitated, then nodded, forcing a reassuring smile. "I'll be fine. I think… I just needed to say it out loud, you know? Now it doesn't feel so heavy."

Shoji tilted his head slightly, watching him. "That's what friends are for."

The words hung in the air for a moment, simple but solid. Izuku felt the weight in his chest lighten further, and before he could stop himself, he let out a small laugh—quiet, but genuine.

"Thanks. All of you."

"Don't thank us yet," Uraraka said with a grin, pushing herself back to her feet. "You still owe me a rematch in practice tomorrow."

"And me as well!" Iida added, standing with a brisk motion. "We must all push ourselves to our limits if we want to stand out at the Festival!"

Momo gave a thoughtful hum. "Perhaps we could schedule a group sparring session? Coordinated drills might benefit all of us."

Shoji nodded once in agreement.

Izuku looked around at them, their faces lit by determination rather than worry, and for a moment, the gnawing anxiety about the Agito power quieted. The Sports Festival was still coming, and the dangers after it were still very real… but for now, he let himself enjoy this.

Just friends, training together.

The group remained in the gym for another hour, cycling through lighter drills and cooldown stretches. Shoji offered to pair with Izuku for some light sparring, but Momo quickly insisted on modifying the intensity.

"No sudden bursts," she said firmly, adjusting the resistance bands now attached to Izuku's arms. "We're observing your coordination under controlled conditions only."

Shoji gave a quiet nod, settling into a defensive stance that allowed Izuku to dictate the pace. Their movements were slower this time, deliberate—Shoji blocking and countering with minimal force while Izuku worked on precision over power.

"You're moving better already," Shoji observed after deflecting a careful strike.

Izuku exhaled through his nose, trying to keep his breathing steady. "Feels… steadier than before. Like the Agito's not trying to… interfere as much when I focus on smaller movements."

"Good," Shoji said simply, stepping back to give him space. "Then we keep it this way for now."

By the time they finally decided to stop, the sun had dipped lower in the sky, warm light filtering through the gym windows. The weight of exhaustion pressed into their limbs, but it wasn't unpleasant—it was the kind that came from honest effort.

"Let's call it for today," Iida declared, hands on his hips. "We need to recover properly if we want to be at our best tomorrow."

"I agree," Momo said, wiping sweat from her brow with a towel. "I'll make adjustments to the training equipment tonight based on what we observed."

"Good idea," Uraraka said, stretching her arms over her head with a tired grin. "I think we all earned some actual rest after this."

Izuku nodded, feeling a flicker of something he hadn't felt in days: relief. "Thanks, everyone… really."

Shoji was the last to speak before they left the gym. "We'll be here again tomorrow. Same time." His tone left no room for argument.

The late afternoon sun stretched long shadows across the pavement as the five of them walked down the familiar street leading to the train station. The air was warm, carrying the faint hum of traffic and the distant chatter of other students heading home.

Iida strode ahead with his usual purposeful pace, gesturing animatedly as he spoke. "If we maintain a structured training schedule over the weekend, we can maximize efficiency before the Festival. Midoriya-kun, your progress today suggests that controlled repetition will yield the best results. Shoji-kun, perhaps you can assist him again tomorrow?"

Shoji gave a small nod, his calm tone cutting through Iida's brisk cadence. "If he's up for it, yes."

"I'll be there too," Uraraka added with a grin, walking beside Izuku. "But maybe we can mix it up a little? We can't just keep doing the same drills every day—we need to stay creative!"

"That's not a bad idea," Momo agreed, walking just behind them, a notebook tucked under her arm. "The more varied the training, the better Izuku-san will be able to react to unpredictable scenarios. I can prepare some equipment tonight to help with that. Perhaps obstacle-based exercises or weighted reaction drills."

Izuku glanced between them, his heart feeling strangely light despite the lingering exhaustion from earlier. "You guys don't have to go this far for me," he said softly, his voice almost lost beneath the city sounds.

Uraraka shot him a look that was part teasing, part serious. "Too late. We're already involved."

Shoji rumbled a quiet agreement. "You're not doing this alone anymore."

Iida nodded sharply, adjusting his glasses. "Indeed. We are all working toward the same goal, Midoriya-kun: to stand proud at the Festival. If helping you control this power benefits the team, then it is our duty as classmates and friends."

Izuku felt a genuine smile tug at his lips. "Thank you… really."

They continued down the street in companionable silence for a moment, the steady rhythm of their footsteps filling the gaps. A breeze tugged at Izuku's hair, and for once, the ever-present pulse of the Agito power felt distant, quiet—almost dormant.

Uraraka broke the quiet with a playful nudge to his arm. "So, Izuku—think you'll be able to beat me tomorrow in training? Or should I start planning my victory speech now?"

Izuku chuckled nervously, scratching the back of his neck. "I-I'll do my best, but… don't go easy on me, okay?"

"Wouldn't dream of it," she replied with a grin.

As the train station came into view, the group naturally began to drift toward their respective platforms, splitting off in pairs. Momo gave Izuku a small nod before heading toward her train, already scribbling new ideas for training equipment in her notebook. Shoji offered a quiet "See you tomorrow," before moving to his own platform.

That left Izuku, Uraraka, and Iida waiting at the same stop, the soft hum of approaching trains filling the air.

For a brief moment, standing there among the chatter of other commuters, Izuku allowed himself to feel something he hadn't in a long time—hope.

The train ride home was quiet, the rhythmic clatter of wheels on rails lulling Izuku into a rare sense of calm. By the time he stepped off at his station, the sun had dipped below the horizon, leaving the streets bathed in the soft glow of streetlights.

When he opened the door to their small apartment, the familiar scent of simmering miso greeted him.

"Izuku?" Inko's warm voice floated from the kitchen. "You're home a little later than usual."

"Yeah, Mom," Izuku replied, slipping off his shoes and setting his bag neatly by the door. "Training ran long. We… we're getting ready for the Sports Festival."

Inko peeked her head out from the kitchen, her hair slightly frizzled from the steam. "Oh, that's right! You must be working so hard…" Her expression softened with pride, but there was a flicker of worry in her eyes. "You're not overdoing it, are you?"

Izuku shook his head quickly. "No, no, I promise! We're pacing ourselves. I'm just… really trying to get better this time."

They sat down for dinner soon after, the soft clink of chopsticks filling the small dining area. For a while, they ate in comfortable silence, but Izuku couldn't stop glancing at his mother. The words had been sitting on his tongue all evening, and finally, he set his chopsticks down.

"Mom," he said, his voice quiet but steady, "will you… will you watch me at the Sports Festival?"

Inko blinked, her chopsticks pausing midair. "Oh, Izuku…" Her eyes softened, glistening faintly. "Of course I will. I wouldn't miss it for the world."

Izuku clenched his fists slightly under the table, his chest tightening—not from the Agito's pulse this time, but from something more personal. "I… I want you to be proud of me. I want you to see that I'm not just… just some Quirkless kid anymore. I can really do this."

Inko's lips trembled as she set her chopsticks down. She reached across the table, taking his hand gently. "Izuku, I've always been proud of you. Always. Even if you didn't have a Quirk, even if you never became a hero… you're my son. That will never change."

Her smile was warm, but then it faltered slightly. Her gaze drifted to the side, softening with a hint of sorrow. "I just wish… I wish Hisashi were here to see you now."

The words hung between them like an invisible weight.

Izuku went still, his appetite fading in an instant. He forced a polite smile, but his grip on his chopsticks tightened until his knuckles turned white. He didn't trust himself to speak immediately—not when that familiar, bitter thought rose unbidden:

If he really cared, he wouldn't have left in the first place.

Inko sighed, mistaking his silence for sadness. "I know he's busy overseas, but… maybe one day, he'll see what an amazing young man you've become."

Izuku nodded faintly, still quiet. His chest felt tight—not from the Agito's pulse this time, but from something older, deeper.

"Maybe," he managed, his voice low.

They finished the rest of dinner in silence, Inko occasionally glancing at him with a worried smile. Izuku forced himself to eat, forcing himself to smile back, but his thoughts lingered long after the plates were cleared.

Later that night, sitting alone at his desk, he stared at his hands, the faint scar on his knuckles catching the light.

I'll show you, Mom. I'll make you proud.

His fingers curled into fists.

And as for you, Dad… you don't get to come back when it's easy.

The Agito's pulse stirred faintly beneath his skin, almost as if it agreed.

The next morning, U.A.'s training grounds were already alive with activity. The early sun cast long shadows across Gym Gamma as Class 1-A trickled in for another round of practice. The crisp air carried the sound of running feet, sharp exhalations, and the occasional burst of Quirk activity.

Izuku arrived a little earlier than usual, a determined set to his shoulders. He had barely slept, his mind still replaying the conversation with his mother, but the lack of rest didn't matter. He was going to make her proud.

Uraraka spotted him first, waving as she jogged over. "Morning, Izuku! You're early today."

He gave her a small, slightly tired smile. "Morning, Uraraka-san. Just… wanted to get a head start."

Iida strode up next, already warming up with precise stretches. "Excellent initiative, Midoriya-kun! Today's session will be crucial if we're to refine our coordination before the Festival. Yaoyorozu-kun and I have drawn up a new training sequence."

Momo, walking up behind him, gave a polite nod. "I've prepared some new equipment to simulate unpredictable obstacles, just as we discussed yesterday. Shoji-san, I'll need your help setting them up."

Shoji, already standing near the center of the training area, simply nodded. "Understood."

Before long, the five of them were gathered together, the familiar hum of teamwork settling over the group.

Momo had arranged a series of moving platforms, weighted cables, and suspended targets that shifted unpredictably in midair. It was designed to force Izuku—and by extension, all of them—to react on instinct while maintaining balance and precision.

"All right," Momo explained, adjusting one of the mechanisms. "The targets will change positions every few seconds. The goal is to strike them accurately while keeping your movements steady, even when the platforms shift under your feet."

"I'll keep time," Iida added, stopwatch in hand. "Consistency over raw speed for now."

Izuku took his place first, hopping lightly onto one of the swaying platforms. The cables attached to his arms tightened, adding just enough resistance to mimic the weight of a real fight.

"Ready when you are," Shoji said, crouched nearby to spot him in case things went wrong.

Izuku nodded, focusing his breathing. Stay calm. Control it.

The first target swung into view, and he moved—his feet finding balance even as the platform wobbled beneath him. His strikes were deliberate, measured. One target after another fell to precise hits.

"Good control, Midoriya-kun!" Iida called. "Your movements are much smoother than yesterday!"

But as the targets began shifting faster, his muscles tensed. His instincts screamed to move faster, to hit harder. He could feel the Agito pulse stir faintly under his skin, urging him to react with more force than necessary.

Uraraka's voice reached him from the sidelines. "Easy, Izuku! You don't need to smash them—just keep your balance!"

He forced himself to breathe, to slow his strikes. The pulse faded slightly, retreating.

When the final target stopped moving, Izuku landed back on the mat, panting but steady.

"Well done," Momo said, her voice calm but carrying a hint of approval. "You adjusted to the changes much faster this time."

Izuku wiped the sweat from his forehead, a small smile tugging at his lips. "Thanks. I think… I think it's working."

Shoji tilted his head slightly, his many arms crossing. "Better. But we keep practicing until it's natural."

"Agreed," Iida said briskly. "Uraraka-san, would you like to go next?"

Uraraka grinned, stepping up to the platform. "You're on! And don't worry, Izuku—I'll beat your time."

Izuku chuckled softly, the tension in his chest easing for the first time in days.

For now, at least, things felt normal.

Uraraka finished her run on the shifting platforms with a small flourish, landing neatly on the mat.

"Time?" she asked, slightly breathless.

Iida checked his stopwatch. "Three seconds slower than Midoriya-kun's record, but still excellent work!"

"Three seconds, huh? Guess I'll have to try again later," she said with a playful grin, wiping sweat from her forehead.

Shoji was already stepping onto the platform for his turn, his movements steady and unhurried. Watching him navigate the shifting obstacles almost looked effortless—his extra arms anchoring him when the platforms tilted too far.

While Shoji trained, the others sat on the sidelines, catching their breath. Izuku glanced at them, hesitating before speaking. "Um… can I ask you guys something?"

Uraraka tilted her head. "Sure, what's up?"

"Well… the Sports Festival is a big deal, right? For internships and getting scouted by pros. So I was wondering… what kind of internships are you all hoping for?"

"Oh, that's easy!" Uraraka's eyes lit up, her voice warm with excitement. "I'd love to work with someone who focuses on rescue operations. A hero who really helps people directly, you know? Someone who can teach me how to save lives without always having to fight."

Iida nodded approvingly. "A noble choice, Uraraka-san! As for me, I aspire to study under someone who embodies the highest standards of hero conduct—someone who upholds justice and order with absolute integrity. A pro hero like that would be the perfect role model!"

Momo rested her chin on her hand, thinking for a moment. "I'd prefer to intern with someone who can teach me strategy. Combat is important, of course, but I think learning how to assess situations and coordinate effectively would be more valuable in the long run."

Shoji returned from the platform just as the question reached him, his calm voice filling the space. "Anyone who can help me learn to protect people better. That's all I need."

They all looked at Izuku then, expectantly.

"W-What about you, Izuku?" Uraraka asked, smiling.

Izuku blinked, his hands fiddling with the towel around his neck. "Me? Oh, um… I don't really have anyone specific in mind. If it's a decent hero… someone who can teach me how to be better, then I'd be fine with it."

Uraraka gave him a slightly puzzled look. "Just anyone?"

He smiled awkwardly, scratching his cheek. "I guess… I'm not really thinking about who's the best or most famous. I just want to learn. As long as I can improve, that's enough."

Iida gave a brisk nod. "A humble but respectable answer, Midoriya-kun!"

Momo's expression softened, her gaze lingering on him for a moment as if she wanted to say more, but she simply nodded as well.

Shoji returned to the group, handing the training cables back to Momo. "Your turn again, Midoriya."

Izuku stood, tightening the straps on his arms. "Right. Let's keep going."

As he stepped back onto the platform, he felt the faint thrum of the Agito pulse again beneath his skin, but this time, surrounded by his friends' encouragement, it felt… quieter. Easier to control.

The last day of training before the Festival ended in a blur of movement, sweat, and determination. Class 1-A pushed harder than ever, the usual chatter replaced by the rhythmic thud of impact pads, the controlled whoosh of Quirks, and quick, sharp instructions echoing through the gym.

Even Bakugo, off in his own corner, was uncharacteristically quiet—his explosions sharp and precise, every blast more focused than usual. Kirishima cheered him on from a safe distance, shouting, "That's how you do it, bro! Save some of that for the Festival!" Bakugo only snarled in response, but the feral grin splitting his face said everything.

Elsewhere, Mina and Kaminari were running a chaotic "tag" game to improve mobility, laughter and mock complaints echoing through the gym as Sero fired tape lines to trip them up. Even Jirou, normally reserved, cracked a small smile as she timed her sound attacks to mess with their rhythm.

Izuku's group kept mostly to themselves, refining their drills, but he couldn't help glancing around every now and then. This was real. The Sports Festival wasn't just a school event—it was a chance for all of them to prove themselves, and everyone was taking it seriously in their own way.

By the time Aizawa finally called an end to training, the sun was low in the sky, painting the gym in shades of molten gold and deep red.

"That's enough," their homeroom teacher said flatly, his scarf draped loosely around his shoulders, looking more like a tired cat than a pro hero. "Rest up. Tomorrow, you're not just students—you're future heroes being watched by the entire country. Don't embarrass me."

Most of the class groaned at his bluntness, a collective sigh of exhaustion, but they didn't argue. Even Aoyama, who usually had something dramatic to say, stayed uncharacteristically quiet, polishing his belt buckle with focused, almost obsessive intensity.

The students spilled out of U.A. in small groups, chattering with an electric energy that hadn't been there a week ago.

"Man, I can't wait to show off tomorrow!" Kaminari said, stretching his arms behind his head with a yawn that quickly turned into a wide grin. "I'm gonna have pro heroes begging me to intern with them."

"Or they'll just beg you not to short-circuit yourself," Jirou said dryly, a faint smirk playing on her lips, earning a laugh from Mina.

Meanwhile, Shoji, Iida, Momo, Uraraka, and Izuku walked together, their pace more relaxed but no less focused. The air around them hummed with a quiet anticipation.

"I've finalized the adjustments to the training equipment," Momo said, her notebook still clutched in hand, as if she might jot down another idea at any moment. "Once the Festival's over, we can resume refining our routines."

Iida gave a brisk nod, his glasses glinting in the fading light. "Agreed. But for now, we should focus entirely on performing to the best of our ability tomorrow."

"I'm just excited," Uraraka admitted, a nervous flutter in her voice despite her determined smile. "I've never been in front of that many people before… but we can do this, right?"

Izuku glanced at her, nodding firmly, a quiet strength in his gaze. "Yeah. We can."

Shoji said nothing, but his steady, imposing presence beside them was reassuring enough, a silent anchor.

As they neared the train station, the groups began to split off, exchanging quick farewells. There was no teasing, no last-minute distractions—just a shared sense of determination, anticipation, and, for some, quiet nerves that fluttered just beneath the surface.

Izuku stood at the platform, watching as the trains came and went, the chatter of his classmates fading behind him, leaving him with his own thoughts.

The roar of the crowd hit like a physical wave. U.A.'s stadium was packed to the brim, tens of thousands of spectators filling the stands, their cheers blending into a constant, electric hum that vibrated through the very ground.

The massive screens around the arena flashed between shots of the students warming up and excited commentators hyping the event with breathless enthusiasm. Vendors wove through the aisles selling snacks, their voices barely audible over the deafening noise.

Inside the competitors' waiting area, Class 1-A gathered, a microcosm of nervous energy. Some stretched, muscles taut, others paced like caged animals, and a few fidgeted nervously, unable to keep still.

Kaminari was practically vibrating with excitement, his grin wide as he nudged Mina. "This is insane! Look at all those people!"

"Don't let it get to your head," Jirou muttered, adjusting her earpiece, a subtle warning in her tone.

Kirishima slapped Bakugo on the back, his own excitement barely contained. "Dude, we're really here! This is gonna be awesome!"

Bakugo, of course, only grinned with his usual feral confidence, a spark of pure ambition in his eyes. "Damn right it is. I'm taking first place."

On the other side of the room, Izuku tightened his gloves, his expression a mask of focused intensity. Uraraka sat nearby, murmuring to herself, almost like a whispered pep talk, her hands clasped tightly. Momo double-checked the equipment she was allowed to bring in, her movements calm but purposeful, a stark contrast to the surrounding chaos. Shoji stood quietly against the wall, observing everything with the same steady patience as always, his many eyes taking in every detail.

Iida was giving an impromptu motivational speech, his hands chopping the air with precise, almost robotic gestures. "Remember, everyone—this is not only a competition, but a chance to show the world what U.A.'s first-years are capable of!"

Izuku tuned out the noise for a moment, his thoughts drifting to his mother watching from home. This is for you, Mom. I'll make you proud.

The Agito pulse stirred faintly under his skin, a low thrum, as if reminding him it was still there, waiting. He clenched his fists, the sensation intensifying. Not now. Not unless I have to.

"Contestants, take your positions!" Midnight's amplified voice boomed from the arena, dripping with playful, yet authoritative, energy.

The waiting area went silent for a heartbeat, then erupted into a surge of movement as the students filed toward the brightly lit entrance.

Izuku fell into step beside his friends, the brilliant light of the arena spilling in ahead of them, a beacon drawing them forward.

Tomorrow would decide a lot—internships, reputations, maybe even the first real glimpse of the danger he carried inside him.

But for now, he walked forward with everyone else, a quiet resolve settling in his chest, ready to face it head-on.

The sunlight hit Izuku like a physical wall as he stepped into the stadium. The roar of the crowd surged to a deafening pitch, a tidal wave of sound. Banners waved wildly, a kaleidoscope of colors, and flashes of cameras glinted across the massive stands like a thousand tiny stars. The sheer scale of it all made his chest tighten, a knot of anxiety and awe, but he forced himself to keep moving, to stand tall beside his classmates.

Mom's watching. I can't falter now.

Midnight's voice boomed across the arena, her playful energy still dripping from every word. "Welcome, everyone, to the U.A. Sports Festival! Let's kick things off with our first event—the Obstacle Race!"

The massive monitors shifted, displaying the sprawling track—a dangerous maze of shifting platforms, trap-laden terrain, and brutal choke points designed to test more than just raw speed. It looked like something out of a hero's nightmare.

"This isn't just about running!" Midnight continued, her voice echoing. "You'll need to think fast, fight smarter, and show us all why you're the future of hero society!"

Excited murmurs rippled through the competitors, a nervous energy building. Kaminari cracked his knuckles, a wide, confident grin spreading across his face. "This is gonna be fun."

"Focus, Kaminari," Jirou muttered, a hint of exasperation in her tone.

Bakugo, standing a few steps ahead, gave his trademark sharp grin, sparks already snapping at his palms, a dangerous glint in his eyes. "Tch. None of you extras are getting in my way."

Uraraka glanced at Izuku, her smile nervous but hopeful. "Good luck out there."

"You too," Izuku said, nodding, a shared understanding passing between them.

Present Mic's voice thundered, building the tension as the countdown began. "Contestants, to your marks! Three… two… one—GO!"

The explosion of movement was immediate and chaotic. Bakugo rocketed forward in a blast of smoke and concussive force, Todoroki surged ahead with a wave of ice spreading in his wake, and Iida's engines roared, a mechanical hum, as he charged ahead with perfect, almost inhuman precision.

Izuku pushed off the ground, his feet pounding against the track, the sound lost in the general din. The Agito pulse stirred faintly under his skin, reacting to the rush of adrenaline, a low, insistent thrum, but he forced it down, focusing on his movements, on his breathing. No losing control. Not here.

The first obstacle came into view—a massive corridor guarded by towering robots, the same formidable type from the entrance exam. Their heavy metal limbs swung through the air, clang, thump, knocking aside slower competitors like rag dolls.

"Figures they'd bring these back!" Kirishima shouted, a grin on his face as he hardened his skin, charging straight into one of them with a confident roar.

Izuku darted to the side, dodging a falling arm, analyzing their movements even as his instincts screamed at him to attack. His friends had kept telling him to move smarter, not harder—so he did. Sliding beneath a robot's legs, he hooked his arm around a joint, using its own weight to flip himself past it, a fluid, almost effortless maneuver.

Uraraka floated gracefully over one robot's head, touching down lightly on the other side, her movements like a dancer. Momo fired off a makeshift grappling line from her arm, vaulting forward with surprising speed, while Shoji's multiple arms grabbed and swung from the robots' limbs with steady, deliberate precision.

Izuku caught sight of Todoroki freezing the corridor behind him, a shimmering wall of ice, sealing off a whole section to trap competitors. He clenched his teeth, pushing harder, the unfairness stinging but fueling his resolve.

The next section of the course loomed: a massive pit filled with swinging platforms and suspended ropes, a treacherous gap.

"Careful here!" Iida shouted back, his voice strained as he leapt from one platform to the next, engines flaring, a blur of motion.

Izuku followed, his movements quick and precise, his body reacting almost before he thought. His hands gripped ropes at perfect angles, his legs coiling and springing forward with an almost inhuman rhythm. The Agito pulse wanted to move faster, to push harder, to unleash its raw power, but he forced himself to keep a steady, controlled pace, a tight leash on the burgeoning strength.

A sharp voice cut through the noise, clear despite the chaos. "You're moving differently, Midoriya."

Shoji was suddenly beside him, keeping pace with practiced ease, his many arms gripping ropes and platforms, his movements economical and efficient. His gaze was calm, but sharp, piercing through the adrenaline. "Whatever you're holding back… you're still controlling it, for now."

Izuku didn't answer—couldn't answer—not with the pulse thrumming harder with every leap, a frantic drumbeat beneath his skin.

The crowd roared louder, a crescendo of sound, as the competitors neared the final stretch: a narrow bridge spanning a chasm, shaking violently with every step, threatening to throw them into the abyss below. Bakugo and Todoroki were already nearing the finish, neck and neck, explosions and ice flashing in the sunlight, a dazzling, dangerous display.

Izuku pushed forward, his eyes narrowing, a singular focus taking over.

Not for first place. Not for glory. This is for Mom.

He leapt onto the shaking bridge, his feet finding balance instantly despite its violent movement. The Agito pulse surged again, filling his limbs with that unnerving responsiveness, that primal urge to unleash, but this time he didn't fight it completely—just enough to keep control, to guide its raw energy. His movements became sharper, cleaner, propelling him past several competitors as he closed in on the finish line.

As he crossed the line, the cheers of the crowd hit him all at once, a wave of sound that washed over him. He staggered to a stop, panting, his heart hammering in his chest, a frantic drum against his ribs.

He'd placed respectably—not first, but high enough to be noticed, high enough to make a statement.

And for the first time in a long while, Izuku allowed himself a small, triumphant smile, a genuine warmth spreading through him.

The echoes of the crowd's thunderous cheers still vibrated through the stadium air when Midnight's voice, a silken whip, cracked again, amplified to fill every corner of the arena.

"Congratulations on finishing the first event! But don't get too comfortable just yet, because the real fun starts now—the Cavalry Battle!"

On the colossal monitors, the rules flared into existence in bold, stark lettering, as Present Mic's voice, booming with uncontainable enthusiasm, took over.

"Points are based on your ranking in the first event, with the top finisher worth a whopping ten million points! Teams of two to four students will battle to collect each other's headbands. Whoever has the most points when the timer runs out wins!"

An instant, electric buzz surged through the room. Kaminari let out a low whistle, his eyes wide. "Ten million points… whoever got first is basically painting a target on their back."

Todoroki's gaze, cool and unreadable as glacial ice, drifted toward Bakugo. Bakugo, in turn, merely grinned, tiny, angry sparks already popping at his palms, a prelude to the explosions to come.

Izuku swallowed hard, the sound almost lost in the rising din. He hadn't placed first, a small mercy that spared him the immediate bullseye, but his high ranking was still enough to draw hungry eyes. More importantly, this wasn't just about survival anymore—this was about proving his strategic mind, showcasing his ability to think like a hero.

Mom's watching. I can't just rely on luck, not now. I have to show them I can think my way through this, that I'm more than just raw power.

The waiting room erupted into a flurry of motion, a chaotic scramble as students jostled and called out, desperate to form alliances. Izuku, cutting through the noise, immediately turned to the faces he trusted most, his gaze firm.

"Uraraka-san, Yaoyorozu-san, Shoji-san," he said quickly, his voice surprisingly steady despite the nervous energy thrumming beneath his skin. "Will you team up with me?"

Uraraka blinked, her eyes wide with surprise, before a bright smile bloomed on her face. "Of course! I was hoping you'd ask!"

Momo nodded, already adjusting the small, leather-bound notebook she seemed to conjure from nowhere. "I agree. Our Quirks complement each other well, Midoriya."

Shoji, a silent sentinel, simply inclined his head once. "I'll take the rear guard."

"Thank you," Izuku breathed, a wave of profound relief washing over him, settling the frantic flutter in his chest.

They gravitated to a quiet corner, a small island in the sea of strategizing students, and quickly began to sketch out their plan. Izuku crouched, his fingers tracing rough outlines on the dusty ground with a piece of white chalk Momo had instantly created, its texture cool and smooth against his skin.

"Okay… we're not aiming for the highest points right away," Izuku explained, his tone sharpening, the nervous energy receding as he slipped into analysis mode. "The ten-million-point headband is going to draw every team straight to Todoroki and Bakugo. If we rush in now, we'll just get crushed in the chaos, become collateral damage."

Uraraka nodded, her expression serious. "So we hold back at first? Let them thin each other out?"

"Exactly," Izuku affirmed. "We'll focus on picking off isolated teams, the ones straying too far from the main brawl. Small, quick strikes—take their headbands, retreat before anyone can retaliate. Momo-san, can you make weighted bolas or netting to slow down opponents?"

"Of course," Momo said, her hands already moving, pulling components from her skin with a faint shimmer. "And smoke bombs. We can use them for quick escapes, to disorient."

"Good," Izuku said, a flicker of satisfaction in his eyes. He turned to Shoji, his gaze direct. "Your job will be defense—use your Dupli-Arms to block and grab anyone who tries to get close, to shield us. If someone tries to flank us, you hold them off, become our wall."

Shoji inclined his head again, a silent promise. "Understood."

"And I'll be the front rider," Izuku finished, his voice firm. "I'll guide our movements and call targets. Uraraka, keep your Quirk ready to lighten us if we need to dodge fast, to make us nimble."

Uraraka grinned, a spark of excitement in her eyes. "Got it!"

Momo glanced at him, her brow furrowing slightly, a hint of surprise in her gaze. "You've already thought this through, haven't you?"

Izuku hesitated for just a second, a fleeting shadow of his old insecurity, then offered a small, determined smile. "I've been… thinking about strategy a lot lately. More than usual."

What he didn't say, what he couldn't articulate, was that his Agito instincts were already analyzing everything: counting movement patterns, predicting opponents' angles of attack, the subtle shifts in their weight. The pulse in his chest thrummed faintly, a low, resonant vibration, but for now, he welcomed it. If it helped him protect his team, if it gave them an edge, he'd use it carefully, keep it on a tight leash.

The countdown echoed through the arena, each number a heavy beat against the building tension. "Three… two… one… BEGIN!"

Chaos erupted instantly, a tidal wave of Quirks and shouts. Teams scrambled across the field, headbands flashing like colorful banners in the sunlight as Bakugo launched himself skyward in an explosive blast, screaming curses that were lost in the roar. Todoroki's team moved with cold, almost clinical efficiency, walls of ice forming shimmering barricades wherever he passed, carving a path through the melee.

"Stick to the plan!" Izuku called, his voice cutting through the din, his team moving as one, a single cohesive unit. Uraraka's Quirk lightened their load just enough for agile, darting movements, making them feel almost weightless, while Shoji's extended arms, like a living shield, kept enemies at bay, deflecting lunges.

"Target, two o'clock—low points but easy pickings!" Izuku barked, his mind working almost faster than he could speak, processing the battlefield in a blur.

Momo, without a word, tossed a weighted bola, its rope whistling through the air, tangling a pair of panicked students who had strayed too far from the main brawl, their cries of surprise swallowed by the noise. Shoji lunged, his Dupli-Arm snatching their headband with one swift, practiced movement before tossing it to Izuku, who caught it cleanly.

"Good! Move—smoke screen!"

Momo dropped a small canister, and a dense cloud of gray, acrid smoke billowed out, swallowing them just as another team lunged for their flank, their outlines blurring into the haze.

"Left!" Shoji warned, his voice a low rumble, intercepting a reaching arm with his own, the impact a dull thud.

Izuku's heart pounded, a frantic drumbeat in his ears, but not from panic. This… this was working. The plan was holding. They were a team.

One headband after another, their points climbed steadily, a quiet, accumulating victory. But as they maneuvered around the chaotic battlefield, Izuku couldn't ignore the growing weight of the Agito pulse under his skin, a restless energy building. His instincts screamed at him to push harder, to move faster, to strike with the brutal efficiency of prey cornering its quarry.

"Stay focused," he muttered under his breath, forcing his breathing steady, a silent command to himself.

Shoji gave him a sharp glance, his many eyes unblinking, but didn't comment, sensing the internal struggle.

The timer ticked down, each second a heavy drop, the final minute approaching with an almost palpable urgency. The chaos around them grew wilder, more desperate, as teams made frantic, last-ditch grabs for points. Bakugo roared somewhere in the distance, a sound of pure fury, and Todoroki's ice walls shifted, trapping several competitors in shimmering, frozen cages.

"Final push!" Izuku called, his voice tight with adrenaline. "One more headband, then we retreat! Secure our position!"

The timer ticked down—one minute left.

Izuku scanned the battlefield, his eyes darting between the frenzied, moving teams, a predator seeking its opening. One more headband—just one more to secure our position, to solidify our lead.

Then he saw them.

Todoroki's team was moving like a perfectly oiled machine, their path sweeping cleanly through the chaos, an unstoppable force. Ice walls erupted in precise, geometric arcs, cutting off escape routes with chilling efficiency, while Iida's engines roared, propelling them forward in calculated, powerful bursts. Hatsume clung to the rear, a whirlwind of tinkering, adjusting strange support gear, and Tokoyami's Dark Shadow darted out like a living shield, a shadowy, formidable guardian.

The ten-million-point headband gleamed bright, almost blindingly so, against Todoroki's forehead, a beacon and a challenge.

Uraraka followed his gaze, her face draining of color. "You're not thinking—"

"We don't need to take it," Izuku cut her off quickly, his voice sharp, clipped, his eyes locked on Todoroki's precise, almost dance-like movements. "We just need to make him adjust his strategy. Force him to break his rhythm, to falter, to slow him down. That buys us the last few seconds we need, the time to escape."

Momo's brow furrowed, her analytical mind already processing the risk. "And if we can grab a headband in the process?"

Izuku hesitated for a fraction of a second, the Agito pulse thrumming with a dangerous eagerness, then gave a decisive nod. "If the opening's there, we take it. But the primary goal is disruption."

Shoji gave a small grunt of agreement, a sound of readiness. "Then let's move."

They darted through the battlefield, a blur of motion, slipping through gaps in the chaos, the lingering smoke from earlier skirmishes curling like ghostly tendrils around their path. Todoroki's ice walls cracked sharply in the distance, the sound like splintering glass, as his team surged forward, clearing another opponent with chilling ease.

Izuku's heart pounded, a frantic rhythm against his ribs, his breath coming in controlled, shallow bursts. The Agito pulse thrummed beneath his skin, a low, resonant hum, almost thrilling at the prospect of the coming clash, the challenge of facing such power. Not now. Not unless I can control it, keep it reined in.

"Shoji, keep his Dark Shadow busy, draw its attention. Uraraka, be ready to lighten us for a quick retreat, make us elusive. Momo, smoke bombs when I give the signal, blind them," Izuku ordered, his voice low but firm, a general directing his troops.

Todoroki noticed them almost instantly, his heterochromatic eyes narrowing, two pools of ice and fire, as they closed the distance, a silent acknowledgment of the impending confrontation.

"You're coming for me?" Todoroki's voice carried over the noise, calm and cold, a chilling counterpoint to the surrounding chaos.

"Not just you," Izuku shot back, forcing confidence into his tone, a defiant edge, even as his pulse spiked, a sudden, sharp beat.

The clash began in an instant, a burst of controlled violence.

Shoji's arms lashed out, a blur of flesh and bone, blocking Dark Shadow's first swipe, multiple limbs bracing against the creature's surprising strength, holding it at bay. Momo hurled a smoke bomb, a small, dark sphere, clouding the space between them as Uraraka lightened their load, giving Izuku the crucial extra boost, the feeling of soaring, to dart forward, a quick, agile strike.

Todoroki raised his hand, ice forming instantly across the ground, a shimmering, deadly carpet, but Izuku anticipated it, a flash of insight, springing to the side, using the momentum of a shifting platform to redirect himself closer, a dizzying pivot.

"Good read," Todoroki said evenly, his tone almost impressed, a rare note of acknowledgment, before another wall of ice shot up, a sudden, impassable barrier, forcing Izuku to change direction again, to adapt on the fly.

"Left!" Izuku barked, and Uraraka shifted their balance just in time to avoid being boxed in, the ice closing around them like a trap.

The pulse surged harder in Izuku's chest, a violent, insistent thrum, and for a brief moment, his world sharpened—every movement, every angle of Todoroki's ice felt predictable, laid bare before him. His muscles coiled instinctively, a primal urge, ready to launch him straight through Todoroki's defense, to end it.

No. Not like that. Stay in control. This isn't about raw power, it's about strategy.

Shoji grunted as Dark Shadow slammed against him, a powerful impact, forcing him back a step, but he held his ground. Momo threw another smoke bomb, and the arena filled with a thick, acrid haze, obscuring their movements.

"Now!" Izuku shouted, the command sharp, decisive.

Uraraka lightened them further, making them feel like feathers, and Izuku lunged, his hands shooting out—just grazing Todoroki's headband, a fleeting touch, a near miss.

For a split second, Todoroki's calm, unshakeable expression faltered. His hand twitched toward his left side—the one he rarely used, the one he kept locked away. Ice cracked violently beneath their feet, spreading faster than before, a sudden, uncontrolled surge, as if he were about to ramp up his power, unleash everything.

But before he could, the buzzer blared, a harsh, piercing sound that cut through the chaos.

"TIME!" Present Mic roared, his voice booming over the sudden, stunned silence of the crowd, then erupting into renewed cheers.

The smoke cleared, slowly dissipating, revealing Todoroki's team still holding the ten-million-point headband, though his grip on it was tighter, almost possessive, than before.

Izuku's team landed back on the ground, panting, chests heaving, but intact, a small victory. Momo quickly counted their points, her eyes widening slightly as she tallied the numbers. "We held onto enough to qualify. We're moving to the next round."

Uraraka let out a relieved laugh, a bright, bubbly sound. "We actually did it! We survived!"

Shoji gave a short nod, steady as ever, his presence a quiet anchor. "Good coordination."

Izuku allowed himself a shaky smile, wiping sweat from his forehead, the adrenaline slowly receding. "Great job, everyone. We stuck to the plan. We thought our way through it."

Across the field, Todoroki glanced at him, his gaze sharp and thoughtful, a new intensity in his eyes. For just a moment, there was something unreadable in his gaze—curiosity, maybe even a flicker of respect—before he turned away, his expression settling back into its usual cool mask.

Izuku's chest still thrummed with the Agito pulse, a faint, lingering echo, but this time, it felt quieter, more subdued, as if satisfied.

For now, at least, strategy won over instinct. Control reigned.

The students were escorted back to the waiting area, the air still buzzing with the electric afterglow of the Cavalry Battle. Izuku sank onto a bench, briefly, to catch his breath, his muscles aching, but his mind was already turning, racing ahead to the next stage—the one-on-one tournament.

He stood after a moment, a strange, inexplicable tug pulling at him, an instinct he couldn't quite explain, drawing his gaze toward the staff booth high above the arena.

And then he saw him.

Kagutsuchi was standing by the glass wall of the booth, no longer in his unassuming janitor's uniform. Instead, he wore a crisp black suit, tailored perfectly, with a sleek gray tie, his long, dark hair tied back neatly, revealing the sharp lines of his jaw. The transformation was startling; the polished look made him almost unrecognizable, save for the familiar, amused smirk tugging at his lips as he caught Izuku staring.

When their eyes met, Kagutsuchi gave a small, almost imperceptible, beckoning wave.

Izuku excused himself from his friends, a quiet murmur, and made his way up to the booth, weaving past a throng of reporters and staff, their excited chatter fading as he approached. The closer he got, the more Kagutsuchi's presence felt… different. Not intimidating, exactly, but commanding, an unspoken authority that didn't need words.

"Well, well," Kagutsuchi said as Izuku stepped inside, the door hissing shut behind him. His voice was smooth, imbued with that same infuriatingly casual tone, yet it held a new depth. "Look at you, climbing the ranks like you actually know what you're doing. Color me impressed, kid. You're full of surprises."

Izuku flushed slightly, scratching the back of his neck, a nervous habit. "I-I just stuck to the plan. My team did most of the work, honestly."

Kagutsuchi raised an eyebrow, a sardonic arch, leaning back against the cool console. "Ah, the classic humble response. Very hero-like. But let's not pretend you didn't make half those calls on instinct. I was watching, you know. Every twitch."

Izuku blinked, surprised. "You were watching me?"

"Of course," Kagutsuchi replied, adjusting his cufflinks with a lazy, almost languid shrug, the movement precise. "It's not every day a kid tries to outmaneuver Todoroki Shoto and almost makes him break his perfect little ice routine. You made him twitch, Midoriya. That's no small thing. It takes a certain kind of audacity."

Izuku looked down at his hands, his chest tightening with a complex mix of pride and nerves, the weight of the compliment almost overwhelming. "I… I just wanted to prove I could think my way through it. I can't rely on power alone, not always."

"Good," Kagutsuchi said, his tone briefly losing its playful edge, becoming sharp, serious. "Because that's exactly why you're different from the rest of these kids. They're all out there swinging their Quirks around like baseball bats, hoping to land a lucky hit, brute force over finesse. You? You're learning to fight like someone who thinks. That's going to keep you alive, keep you ahead."

Then his smirk returned, a glint of wicked humor in his golden eyes. "But—and this is important—don't go trying to be some tragic, self-sacrificing hero for the cameras. No pulling ridiculous stunts just to look cool, just to garner sympathy. You're not here to win style points; you're here to survive and make it to the next round. Got it? This isn't a popularity contest."

Izuku gave a sheepish smile, a faint blush still on his cheeks. "I'll try not to overdo it."

Kagutsuchi leaned closer slightly, his voice dropping just enough for Izuku alone to hear, a conspiratorial whisper. "And, kid? You're allowed to want to win. Don't let that Quirk—" he paused, correcting himself, a subtle shift in his gaze, "—don't let that power convince you otherwise. Use it when you have to, yes, but use your head first. Always your head."

Izuku nodded firmly, absorbing the words, the weight of the advice. "I understand."

"Good." Kagutsuchi straightened, giving him a firm pat on the shoulder, a gesture of approval, as he turned back to the panoramic glass, surveying the stadium. "Now get out there and give them hell. And if you lose, make sure it's spectacular. I paid good money for this suit, and I expect a show worth watching."

Izuku couldn't help but laugh quietly at that, a genuine, unburdened sound, the tension in his chest easing just a little. "I'll do my best."

"Do better than your best," Kagutsuchi replied with a wide, challenging grin. "Do something only you can do."

The stadium roared, a wave of sound, as the brackets for the next round lit up across the massive screens, each name a flash of destiny.

Izuku Midoriya vs. Hitoshi Shinsou.

Izuku scanned the name, his heart steadying, a quiet resolve settling within him, even as the crowd buzzed with speculation. Shinsou… his Quirk is brainwashing. If the Agito power really is what Kagutsuchi says it is, if it rejects external influence, then…

The thought lingered, a daring hypothesis, as he stepped into the bright, unforgiving sunlight of the arena, the cheers a distant hum. This might be my only safe chance to confirm it. To test this new variable.

Shinsou was already standing at the far end, his posture relaxed, almost deceptively casual, hands in his pockets, his eyes half-lidded with a calm, almost bored look, yet a keen intelligence simmered beneath.

As Izuku approached, Shinsou tilted his head slightly, a subtle, predatory gesture. "You're the one everyone's talking about, huh? The clever underdog. Must be nice, getting all this attention just because you were Quirkless once. A real rags-to-riches story."

Izuku didn't answer, only watching him carefully, noting the deliberate, almost theatrical way Shinsou paced his words, each one a calculated jab.

"Don't ignore me, Midoriya," Shinsou continued, his voice steady, a low, hypnotic drone, his gaze sharp despite his lazy tone. "What's it like being everyone's favorite sob story? Bet you love it. Bet you think it makes you better than the rest of us, that your struggle elevates you."

Izuku's jaw tightened slightly, a muscle clenching, but he kept silent, circling slowly, maintaining distance, his mind a whirlwind of analysis.

"You don't deserve that Quirk," Shinsou pressed, his tone edging toward a raw, bitter resentment, the words laced with envy. "You don't even deserve to be here, among us."

The words stung, a familiar ache, bringing back flashes of Bakugo's old taunts, of his father walking out after the doctor's devastating diagnosis. His chest tightened, a knot of old pain, and for a split second, he almost snapped back, a knee-jerk reaction born of habit.

But then he made his choice, a conscious, deliberate decision. If I'm going to trust this power, this Agito, I need to know for sure. I need to push the limit.

He met Shinsou's gaze squarely, his own eyes unwavering, and said, clearly, firmly, "You're wrong."

Shinsou's smirk widened instantly, a triumphant, almost cruel twist of his lips, his Quirk activating—Izuku felt the shift, the faint, insidious tug of something trying to seize control of his body, to hijack his very will. His limbs went tense for half a heartbeat, a fleeting moment of paralysis… and then—

Nothing.

The pulse of the Agito stirred instead, a quiet, almost mocking thrum under his skin, a resonant vibration, like it was swatting away an irritating insect. The strange, instinctive awareness that had been growing inside him, a nascent power, flared for a brief moment, a surge of pure energy, rejecting the foreign influence entirely, pushing it away as if it were an allergen.

Izuku moved.

Shinsou's smirk faltered, his eyes widening in genuine confusion, when Izuku took another step forward, then another, his movements fluid, unhindered. "What—how are you—?!"

Izuku didn't answer, closing the distance with sudden, startling speed, a blur of motion. Shinsou stumbled back, caught off guard, scrambling to regroup, his composure finally cracking.

"You rely on your Quirk to hold people still," Izuku said, his voice steady now, calm, his movements sharp and calculated, each step purposeful. "But what happens when it doesn't work? When your main weapon is useless?"

Shinsou's eyes widened fully for the first time, a flicker of fear in their depths, as Izuku darted low, sweeping his legs with precision, a practiced move. Shinsou hit the ground with a grunt, the impact jarring, and before he could react, before he could even think, Izuku pinned him with a controlled hold—not hurting him, just making escape impossible, a firm, inescapable grip.

The buzzer blared, a sharp, decisive sound.

"Winner: Izuku Midoriya!" Midnight announced, her voice carrying over the thunderous, bewildered cheers of the crowd, a mix of awe and confusion.

Izuku stepped back, releasing Shinsou, and offered him a hand. The other boy stared at him, still looking stunned, his mind reeling.

"…You didn't even hesitate," Shinsou said quietly, his voice hollow, taking the offered hand reluctantly, his fingers brushing Izuku's. "My Quirk didn't work on you at all, did it? Not even a flicker."

Izuku shook his head slightly, keeping his tone calm, empathetic. "You're strong, Shinsou. Your Quirk is incredibly powerful. You just need to find a way to fight even without your Quirk, to develop other skills. You'd make a great hero, truly."

Shinsou looked at him for a long, searching moment, his expression unreadable, before letting out a short, bitter laugh, devoid of humor. "Hmph. Guess I'll have to. You've certainly given me something to think about."

As Izuku turned to leave, he glanced toward the staff booth. Kagutsuchi was watching him, arms crossed, his expression unreadable for a second before that familiar smirk returned, a flash of knowing amusement. He gave a subtle, approving nod—one that said, I knew you'd try it. And I knew you'd succeed.

Izuku let out a slow breath as he walked back to the waiting area, the weight of the confirmation settling over him. So it's true. The Agito power rejects Quirk Factor completely. It's a shield against their very essence.

The pulse under his skin throbbed faintly in agreement, a quiet, satisfied hum, as if proud of its performance.

The cheers of the crowd still echoed in Izuku's ears, a distant roar, as he returned to the waiting area. His friends were waiting for him—Uraraka gave him a bright, relieved smile, Iida offered an enthusiastic, chopping thumbs-up, and Momo nodded approvingly, a rare warmth in her gaze.

"You were incredible out there," Uraraka said, her eyes sparkling. "The way you just slipped past his Quirk—it was amazing!"

"I didn't just slip past it," Izuku interrupted quietly, his eyes lowering for a moment, a hint of something profound in their depths. "It… didn't work on me at all. It had no effect."

Momo tilted her head slightly, curious, her analytical mind already whirring. "Did you predict his Quirk's range of effect, or was it a counter-Quirk…?"

"It's something else," Izuku said, forcing a small, reassuring smile before she could press further, the full truth too complex, too dangerous to reveal here. "I'll explain later. For now… I need to focus. The next round is coming."

His gaze drifted to the tournament bracket, where the next matchups flashed on the screen, each name a new challenge. His next opponent's name lit up, stark and bold, a direct confrontation.

Izuku Midoriya vs. Shoto Todoroki.

The crowd erupted with excited murmurs, a wave of anticipation already buzzing through the stadium, sensing the magnitude of the coming clash.

Uraraka frowned slightly, her earlier cheer fading. "Todoroki… that's going to be tough, Izuku. He's on a different level."

Izuku nodded, his hands tightening slightly at his sides, a surge of adrenaline. Todoroki… half-cold, half-hot. If Quirks can't affect me directly, that means his ice and fire will still hurt me—Quirk Factor immunity doesn't mean I'm invincible. It just means his direct brainwashing won't work. But… if I can force him to rely on raw power instead of precision, if I can break his control, I might have a chance. I have to make him use everything.

The pulse under his skin thrummed faintly, a low, eager vibration, as if anticipating the coming battle.

Kagutsuchi's words echoed in his head again, a guiding mantra. "Use your head first. Always your head."

The arena roared louder than ever as the two of them stepped onto the field, the cheers a deafening wave. Todoroki stood at his end, calm and composed, a statue of ice and fire, his eyes locked onto Izuku with cool intensity, a silent challenge.

"You were impressive against Shinsou," Todoroki said as they approached their starting positions, his voice level, devoid of emotion. "But this won't be the same. I won't hold back."

"I know," Izuku replied, his voice steady, a newfound confidence in his tone. "I wouldn't want it to be."

The crowd quieted, a hush falling over the stadium as Present Mic's voice boomed, cutting through the silence. "On your marks! Three… two… one—BEGIN!"

Todoroki moved instantly, a blur of motion, slamming his foot down as a massive wave of ice surged across the arena, jagged spires racing toward Izuku with terrifying speed, threatening to engulf him.

Izuku sprinted forward, his movements sharp and calculated, each step precise. His mind worked furiously, analyzing every angle, every potential trap. He starts with ice, wide-range attacks, to control space, to box me in. If I stay in his rhythm, I'll be frozen, trapped. I need to force him to react, not control. I need to disrupt his flow.

Leaping onto one of the ice spires, Izuku kicked off it, using its slick, treacherous surface to propel himself toward Todoroki, a daring, acrobatic maneuver. The Agito pulse thrummed harder, sharpening his reflexes, making his senses hyper-aware, but he forced himself to stay in control, not letting the instincts take over, not yet.

Todoroki's eyes narrowed, a flicker of surprise, another wall of ice shooting up to intercept him, a shimmering barrier. Izuku twisted midair, landing on the side of the wall and running along it briefly, his boots finding purchase on the frozen surface, before launching off again, closing the distance with astonishing speed.

The crowd roared at the display, a wave of astonished shouts, and for the first time, Todoroki's calm, unshakeable expression flickered slightly, a hairline crack in his composure.

"You're not going to keep your distance?" Todoroki said, his tone almost questioning, a hint of disbelief.

"I can't win if I just run away," Izuku replied, darting low as Todoroki fired another wave of ice, a chilling blast. He slid under it, his hands digging into the frozen ground to keep balance, the ice biting at his skin.

Force him to break his rhythm. Make him think. Make him doubt.

Izuku lunged in close, his fist cocked—not for a full-strength strike, not to injure, but just enough to disrupt Todoroki's stance, to throw him off balance. Todoroki blocked with a sharp ice spike, a defensive reflex, but the momentum made him take a half-step back, a rare concession.

"Close range isn't smart," Todoroki said, raising his hand, ice already forming. "You know I can overwhelm you with power. I can freeze you solid."

Izuku met his gaze, determination burning in his eyes, a fierce, unwavering flame. "Then why aren't you using all of it? Why are you holding back, Todoroki?! You're denying yourself!"

The crowd roared louder at his words, sensing the shift in tone, the raw challenge in Izuku's voice. Todoroki's eyes narrowed further, the conflict flickering briefly across his face, a battle waging within him.

The Agito pulse surged again, almost urging Izuku to push harder, to break through Todoroki's defense entirely, to unleash his own hidden power, but he forced himself to hold back, staying controlled, disciplined.

I'm not here to crush him. I'm here to make him fight seriously. To make him face himself.

The arena was a frozen wasteland. Todoroki's ice spread in every direction, massive spires jutting upward like jagged teeth, a crystalline forest. Izuku darted across the battlefield, boots skidding against the slick, treacherous surface, his breath visible in the frigid air, each exhalation a cloud.

Think. Stay ahead of him. He's controlling the field, so break his rhythm. Force him to defend, to react, to lose his composure.

But Todoroki wasn't letting up. His expression stayed calm, his movements precise, almost methodical, as he advanced step by step, sealing off every escape route with walls of ice, a relentless, creeping siege.

"You're trying to push me to use my left side," Todoroki said flatly, his tone calm but carrying the slightest edge, a hint of accusation. "It's obvious."

Izuku vaulted over a growing spire, landing in a crouch, his muscles coiling. "You're holding back! You can't win if you keep refusing to use all your power! You'll lose to yourself before you lose to me!"

Todoroki's jaw tightened, a visible clench, but he didn't stop. His right hand slammed to the ground, and a massive glacier surged forward, an unstoppable wave of ice, boxing Izuku in from three sides, a towering, inescapable prison.

The crowd roared in excitement, a collective gasp, flashes from cameras lighting the frozen field, capturing the dramatic moment.

He's reading me now. He's adapting faster than I can counter. I'm cornered.

Another wall erupted behind him, cutting off his last escape, sealing him in completely. Todoroki stepped forward, his eyes narrowing slightly, a chilling finality in his gaze.

"You're good, Midoriya," Todoroki said, his voice level, devoid of triumph, only cold certainty. "But this ends here."

The walls closed in, the final sheet of ice surging upward to seal Izuku in completely, a massive, impenetrable dome of frozen power.

The arena went silent, a sudden, heavy hush. The cameras zoomed in on the massive frozen structure, mist curling around it like a shroud. Present Mic's voice, though booming, tried to keep the energy high, a forced cheerfulness.

"Whoooa! What a move from Todoroki! That's some top-tier control—Midoriya's got nowhere to go! He's completely trapped!"

But the crowd's excitement was mixed with unease, a ripple of nervous murmurs.

Inside the staff booth, Toshinori's jaw was tight as he watched the monitors, his knuckles white. His voice was low, strained, but it carried a weight only those who knew the truth could feel. "He's cornered himself. If he pushes too far, if he loses control—"

Aizawa glanced at him, his tone dry but serious, his eyes narrowed. "You knew this was a possibility, All Might."

Nezu's tail swayed behind him as he sipped his tea, calm as ever, his eyes twinkling with an almost mischievous interest. "And perhaps this is exactly what we needed. A demonstration of what he's truly capable of. A true test."

Toshinori's frown deepened, a worried crease between his brows. "He isn't ready for this kind of attention. Not yet."

Kagutsuchi, standing behind them in his sharp black suit and gray tie, looked utterly unconcerned, almost bored. He scratched the back of his head lazily. "Eh, let the kid handle it. He's the one who decided to play hero in front of a stadium full of people. This was gonna happen eventually. He'll figure it out."

Toshinori shot him a sharp look, a flash of irritation. "You're too casual about this, Kagutsuchi."

Kagutsuchi smirked, unperturbed. "What? You want me to panic? Please. If he's anything like me, he'll come out of this just fine… maybe with a bit of flair. He always does."

Todoroki approached the glacier cautiously, his steps echoing in the profound silence, each footfall a crisp sound. His breath misted in the cold air, his right hand twitching slightly as he stared at the frozen mass, a hint of regret in his eyes.

"…I didn't mean to push it this far," he muttered under his breath, a rare moment of vulnerability.

He raised his hand as if to break the ice himself, to release Izuku. But before he could—

The glacier cracked.

A sharp thrum pulsed through the air, faint at first, a low, resonant hum, then louder, rhythmic, like a colossal heartbeat echoing through the ice, vibrating through the very ground. The cracks spread rapidly, spiderwebbing across the frozen surface, glowing faintly as if something alive, something incandescent, burned beneath the surface.

Todoroki's eyes widened slightly, his stance shifting defensively, a primal instinct taking over.

Then, with a deafening SHATTER, the entire glacier exploded outward, a blinding burst of light and sound, shards of ice spraying across the arena like shrapnel. A gust of warm air, almost hot, cut through the frigid mist, scattering the lingering cold, pushing it away.

The crowd gasped, a collective intake of breath, falling silent, utterly stunned, as a figure emerged from the swirling haze, a silhouette against the dissipating steam.

Black segmented armor, sleek and predatory, covered Izuku's body, shimmering faintly. Golden crests, sharp and angular, caught the sunlight, gleaming. Crimson compound eyes, like twin embers, glowed with an intensity that seemed almost alive, scanning the field like a predator sizing up its prey, assessing the landscape.

For the first time in the tournament, Izuku Midoriya stood fully transformed. Agito.

The stadium erupted in chaos, a primal roar, cheers mixing with confused, incredulous shouts.

"Is that—what kind of Quirk is that?!"

"Did he just transform?! Like a monster?!"

"Was he hiding this the whole time?! Is this his true power?!"

Todoroki staggered back a half step despite himself, his calm expression finally cracking, shattering like the ice around him. "…Midoriya?"

Up in the staff booth, Toshinori's eyes stayed locked on the boy below, his jaw tight, but not shocked, only a deep, profound understanding.

"...So he finally chose to use it," Toshinori said quietly, his voice laced with a complex mix of apprehension and pride.

Nezu's eyes gleamed with interest, his smile small and measured, almost predatory. "A fascinating development. The audience will talk about this for weeks, perhaps even months. A new legend is born."

Kagutsuchi, on the other hand, looked almost delighted, scratching his head with a lopsided grin, his golden eyes sparkling with amusement. "About time. Guess the kid finally decided to stop running circles and actually fight. Took him long enough."

Toshinori shot him a sharp glance, a warning in his eyes. "This is no laughing matter, Kagutsuchi."

Kagutsuchi shrugged, unperturbed. "Sure it is. He's just being himself. Let him enjoy the show. Let him shine."

Down in the arena, Todoroki took a deep breath, his eyes narrowing, a new resolve hardening his features as frost spread under his feet once more, a defensive reflex.

Izuku shifted his stance, the Agito armor gleaming under the sunlight, a living, breathing entity. His glowing red eyes, fierce and focused, locked onto Todoroki, a silent challenge.

For the first time in the match, the crowd fell quiet, a heavy, expectant silence, anticipation hanging thick in the air, a palpable tension.

The real fight was about to begin.

The stadium trembled with anticipation, a collective held breath, as the two stood across from each other—Todoroki, his breath misting in the icy air, a pillar of calm power, and Izuku, now fully armored, his crimson compound eyes glowing like twin embers in the sunlight.

"...So this is your Quirk," Todoroki said, his tone calm but eyes sharper now. "I didn't expect this."

Izuku didn't respond, his stance low, the segmented armor shifting slightly as he moved. The Agito pulse thrummed in his chest, in sync with the faint hum of his transformation system. I can't hold back anymore. If I hesitate, I'll lose.

Present Mic's voice boomed over the roar of the crowd. "And they're off—AGITO VS TODOROKI, ROUND TWO!"

Todoroki attacked first, his ice exploding from the ground in massive sheets, but this time Izuku didn't try to dodge. He charged.

The crowd gasped as Izuku bulldozed through the first wall, shards spraying into the air. His armored arms slammed through the second, cracking the massive spire like brittle glass. Todoroki's eyes narrowed as he raised wall after wall, but Izuku plowed through every one of them, his movements unstoppable.

"Impossible… he's breaking through it?!" someone in the stands shouted.

Todoroki jumped back, increasing his output, ice surging faster, thicker, forming entire barricades in seconds. Izuku darted through them with brute force, his armored fists smashing through obstacles like they were paper. Every step left cracked ice in his wake.

He's adapting, pushing harder, Izuku thought, his glowing eyes tracking Todoroki's every move. I can't give him time to control the field.

"Not bad," Todoroki muttered, his tone finally breaking into something almost heated. "But you're still not going to make me—"

"Then don't hold back!" Izuku shouted, his voice echoing through the helmet, distorted slightly by the armor's systems. "Fight me with everything you've got, Todoroki! Or you'll lose!"

Todoroki froze for a fraction of a second, his left hand twitching. His father's shadow flickered across his face, memories of every lesson drilled into him. But Izuku's words—raw, honest, demanding—cut through that hesitation.

Todoroki clenched his jaw. I don't want to lose.

His left hand ignited.

The arena erupted in a collective gasp as flames roared to life, spiraling up Todoroki's arm. Heat flooded the icy battlefield, steam hissing as frost melted under the sudden temperature shift.

And then he unleashed it.

A massive wave of fire engulfed the arena, devouring the ice and swallowing Izuku whole. The crowd screamed, some shielding their eyes from the sheer heat radiating off the field.

"Todoroki just—did he just go full power?!" Present Mic yelled over the chaos. "This is insane!"

Toshinori's hands tightened on the console, his eyes glued to the monitors. "Damn it, Izuku…"

Even Kagutsuchi's grin twitched wider, his golden eyes glinting with interest. "Finally. That's the Todoroki I wanted to see."

The firestorm raged, flames curling and twisting around the arena, swallowing Izuku completely. For a long, tense moment, there was no movement—only roaring fire.

Inside the inferno, Izuku stood still, his armor glowing faintly as the heat pressed against it. The Agito pulse surged violently now, thrumming through his chest like a second heartbeat.

It's not enough… Ground Form can't hold this forever.

And then, as if guided by something deeper, something instinctual, his right hand moved on its own. His armored fingers pressed against the right button module of his belt.

A sharp click echoed faintly beneath the roar of fire.

The flames shifted unnaturally, spiraling inward toward the center of the inferno, as if drawn by a will of their own. The crowd gasped as the fire coiled tighter, no longer uncontrolled but moving with purpose.

Through the haze, a silhouette emerged—tall, unyielding, the heat shimmering off its frame.

A burst of steam tore through the arena as a figure stepped out of the fire, scattering embers with a single, deliberate stride.

The Ground Form was gone.

Now Izuku stood clad in crimson and black armor, the segmented chest and shoulders gleaming like heated steel, every plate shaped as if carved from muscle. Gold traced sharp lines along his gauntlets and forearms, catching the sunlight in brilliant flashes.

His helmet, sleek and aggressive, bore a striking golden crest that curved upward like twin blazing horns, framing his face like a warrior from another age. And behind that helmet, the compound eyes glowed a molten orange, brighter and fiercer than before, cutting through the smoke like burning coals.

The red core of his belt pulsed faintly, each beat in perfect rhythm with the flickering flames still dancing along his form.

The crowd erupted in chaos, Present Mic practically screaming over the roar.

"LOOK AT THAT! MIDORIYA—HE—HE'S ON FIRE! WHAT IS THIS NEW FORM?!"

Todoroki took an involuntary step back, his eyes widening. "…You're still standing…?"

Up in the staff booth, Toshinori's jaw tightened, his gaze unwavering.

Kagutsuchi, on the other hand, grinned wickedly, eyes gleaming with anticipation. "Oh yeah," he muttered under his breath, leaning forward slightly. "Now we're talking."

Izuku shifted into a low stance, his armor glowing faintly in the heat. This was no longer just survival. This was the start of a real fight.

The crowd's roar hit its peak as Izuku took his first deliberate step. The molten orange of his compound eyes glinted through the haze, and every movement made his crimson armor ripple with heat distortion, as if the very air bent around him.

Todoroki's breath misted in the superheated air, his own flames flaring higher instinctively. "…You changed again. But that doesn't mean you'll beat me."

Izuku tilted his head slightly, his stance lowering, every line of his body screaming readiness. "We'll see."

And then they moved.

Todoroki struck first, unleashing a massive wall of flames that engulfed the battlefield. The heat washed over the crowd, causing some spectators to shield their faces. But Izuku didn't hesitate—he sprinted straight into the inferno.

The crowd gasped as Izuku vanished into the blaze… only to reappear a heartbeat later, leaping through the flames with ease. The fire curled around him unnaturally, spiraling along his crimson armor as if pulled into his movements rather than resisting them.

This form is responding to the fire itself, Izuku realized in the middle of a mid-air spin, his instincts adjusting to the new flow of heat. It's not just protection. It's… guiding it.

He dashed forward, a blur of motion as his fiery gauntlets slashed through an incoming ice wall, melting it on contact. Steam exploded outward, clouding the field, but Izuku moved as if he could see perfectly through the haze.

Todoroki gritted his teeth, switching tactics—his right hand slammed into the ground, ice erupting beneath Izuku's feet to trap him. But Izuku's new form gave him agility he hadn't had before; his legs coiled, flames bursting briefly around his boots, propelling him into a rapid side-flip that shattered the frozen trap before it could hold.

"Too slow!" Izuku's voice echoed distorted through the helmet as he closed the distance again.

Todoroki raised another ice shield, but Izuku's flaming fist crashed through it, sending shards scattering like glass. Todoroki retaliated immediately, blasting a jet of fire at point-blank range.

The crowd roared as the flames swallowed Izuku completely.

For a brief moment, Todoroki thought he had landed a direct hit—until the fire twisted again, spiraling unnaturally in midair.

"What…?" Todoroki's eyes widened as Izuku emerged from the blaze, unharmed, flames trailing behind him like a living cloak. He spun, using his own momentum to send the fire whipping outward in a crescent-shaped arc, scattering heat and forcing Todoroki to leap back.

The audience went wild.

"HE'S USING THE FIRE—USING IT LIKE IT'S HIS!" Present Mic practically screamed, his voice cracking.

Izuku pressed the attack, his fists blazing brighter with each strike, every punch leaving streaks of fire in the air. Todoroki countered with wave after wave of ice, trying to keep distance, but Izuku bulldozed through every barrier, the heat of his armor melting through obstacles instantly.

Todoroki's breath came faster now, his right side frosting over again to compensate for his overheating left. He's pushing me… I can't keep up at this pace.

Izuku, however, kept moving, every strike sharper, every dodge cleaner as the form adapted further. The Agito pulse roared in his chest, syncing with his movements perfectly.

"This ends now, Todoroki!" Izuku shouted, fire flaring along his gauntlets as he charged.

Todoroki planted his feet, drawing in every ounce of his power. "Fine. Let's see if you can withstand this!"

He unleashed everything—flames erupted in a massive, spiraling torrent, the heat so intense the arena floor cracked beneath it. The firestorm surged forward, consuming everything in its path.

Izuku didn't stop.

He charged directly into the inferno, his right arm pulling back, flames swirling tightly around it. His steps left trails of molten heat as he sprinted through the blaze, the spiraling flames almost bending out of Todoroki's control as if drawn to Izuku.

In a single motion, Izuku leapt, his armored fist igniting with a brilliant surge of fire, and slammed it forward into the oncoming torrent.

The impact exploded in a burst of heat and steam, the shockwave rattling the entire stadium.

When the smoke cleared, Todoroki was down on one knee, his flames extinguished, his breath ragged. The ice on his right side had cracked from the heat.

Izuku stood a few feet away, still in his new form, his glowing compound eyes locked on his opponent. The flames along his armor dimmed slightly, but he remained ready if Todoroki stood again.

Todoroki looked up at him, his expression calm but finally accepting. "…You win."

The buzzer blared, signaling the end of the match.

"WINNER—IZUKU MIDORIYA!" Midnight's voice rang across the arena, followed by a thunderous cheer from the crowd.

Izuku exhaled slowly, his shoulders relaxing as the Agito armor pulsed once more before the flames faded, returning him to Ground Form. His compound eyes dimmed slightly as he straightened.

In the staff booth, Toshinori stayed silent, his expression unreadable but his worry evident.

Nezu's tail flicked in quiet amusement. "A truly remarkable display."

And Kagutsuchi?

Kagutsuchi grinned wickedly, his golden eyes glinting as he muttered under his breath, "Welcome to the big leagues, kid."

As Izuku stood in the center of the cracked, scorched arena, the cheers of the crowd washing over him, one thing was clear:

There was no hiding Agito anymore.