The roar of the crowd had yet to fully subside when Izuku stepped off the scorched arena floor, his armor dissolving back into Ground Form before vanishing completely. Sweat trickled down his face beneath his now-normal features, but his posture remained steadfast.

Cameras continued to flash from every angle, and Present Mic's voice thundered over the lingering chaos.

"AND THAT'S IT, FOLKS! A SPECTACULAR VICTORY FROM U.A.'S OWN IZUKU MIDORIYA, UNVEILING—WHATEVER THAT WAS! WAS IT A NEW QUIRK ABILITY? A TRANSFORMATION? WHO KNOWS?! BUT IT WAS AMAZING! GIVE IT UP FOR HIM!"

The cheers rose again, deafening, yet Izuku kept his gaze low, walking swiftly toward the tunnel entrance leading to the competitors' waiting area.

Up in the reserved seats for pro heroes, murmurs spread like wildfire. Some were excited, others skeptical, and a select few… curious.

But no voice was louder—or more intensely interested—than Endeavor, Enji Todoroki himself.

Leaning forward in his seat, flames flickering along his arms in agitation, Enji's narrowed eyes tracked Izuku's retreating form.

"Interesting," he muttered, his deep voice carrying to those seated near him. "That was no simple resistance to heat. He redirected Shoto's flames. Controlled them. Like a living conduit."

A nearby hero raised an eyebrow. "You sound… impressed."

Enji's lips curled into a faint, almost grudging smirk. "Impressed? No. Intrigued. That kind of heat manipulation shouldn't even be possible unless his body was built for it. Whoever trained that boy either knows something the rest of us don't… or he's naturally evolved to handle fire at that level."

His gaze flicked briefly toward the staff booth, narrowing when he saw Kagutsuchi standing casually at the back, a smirk playing on his lips as if he'd anticipated this exact outcome.

"Whoever's responsible for him," Enji muttered, his flames flaring briefly, "they've created something… interesting."

The atmosphere in the competitors' waiting area was electric when Izuku entered. Conversations ceased the moment he walked in, replaced by whispers and direct stares.

Kaminari was the first to break the silence, practically leaping up. "Dude, what was THAT?!"

Mina leaned forward over her seat, eyes sparkling with excitement. "You were on fire! Literally!"

"Was that a new Quirk evolution?" Kirishima added, fists pumping excitedly. "Because that was the manliest thing I've ever seen!"

Even Jirou, who typically showed little overt excitement, glanced at him with a raised eyebrow. "You've been holding out on us, huh?"

Shoji and Momo remained quieter, both studying him with thoughtful expressions, while Iida adjusted his glasses, looking torn between exhilaration and the urge to deliver a lecture about revealing such dangerous power so publicly.

Uraraka simply smiled, though her eyes held a mix of amazement and genuine concern.

"Well," she said gently, "are you okay, Izuku?"

Izuku nodded, forcing a small, sheepish smile as he rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah… I'm fine. Sorry for making you worry."

"So," Kaminari pressed, leaning closer, "what is it? That armor, the fire—it didn't even look like a Quirk!"

Izuku hesitated for a moment, glancing briefly toward the staff booth above, where Toshinori and Kagutsuchi were watching. Kagutsuchi gave him a lazy two-fingered salute, almost as if daring him to say something bold.

Izuku shook his head. "It's… just something I've been training with. A different form from the one I usually use."

"A form?" Momo repeated, tilting her head.

Izuku nodded. "Yeah. My base form is more balanced—I call it my Ground Form. But what you saw out there… that was my Flame Form."

The name elicited quiet murmurs, the other students exchanging curious glances.

"That's… kinda cool," Kirishima said finally, grinning. "Sounds like something straight out of a hero comic!"

Uraraka smiled but gave him a worried glance. "Are you sure it's safe for you to use something like that?"

Izuku gave her a reassuring nod, though the Agito pulse thrummed faintly in his chest, a subtle reminder that it wasn't entirely under control yet. "Yeah. I can handle it."

The staff booth hummed with quiet conversation as the crowd roared below.

Toshinori stood near the front, arms crossed, his eyes fixed on Izuku as he stepped back into the waiting area. His usual smile was absent, replaced with a serious expression, but there was no anger—just profound concern.

Nezu sat at the console, sipping his tea, his tail swaying lazily. "Well, that was quite the performance. Revealing such a form this early in the Festival will certainly cause a stir."

Toshinori sighed, shaking his head slightly. "It was bound to happen sooner or later… but I'd hoped he could keep this part of himself quiet just a little longer. The attention he's going to get now…"

Kagutsuchi, leaning casually against the wall in his immaculate black suit and gray tie, smirked, his golden eyes glinting. "Come on, Toshinori. The kid handled himself just fine. Better than fine. If anything, this'll show everyone he's not just some lucky first-year with guts—he's a real contender."

Toshinori glanced back at him, his frown softening slightly. "You sound a little too pleased with this."

Kagutsuchi shrugged, scratching the back of his head with a grin. "What? I can't be proud? You've seen how hard he's been working. If he's going to step into the spotlight, I say let him. This is what heroes do—prove themselves when the world's watching."

Toshinori sighed again, but this time there was the faintest trace of a smile tugging at his lips. "You're not wrong. But I still worry. He pushes himself harder than anyone I've ever met."

Kagutsuchi's grin softened just a little, his tone losing its teasing edge. "Yeah… I know. But that's why he's going to make it. Because he doesn't know how to stop."

Nezu smiled knowingly, glancing between the two of them. "It's rare to see you two agree on anything."

Toshinori chuckled faintly, shaking his head. "Don't get used to it."

Kagutsuchi smirked, his casual bravado slipping back into place. "What can I say? The kid's full of surprises."

The waiting area quieted as the initial wave of excitement faded. The other students slowly turned back to their own matches, but every now and then, Izuku caught them stealing glances in his direction.

Uraraka, Momo, Shoji, and Iida stayed near him, their presence familiar and grounding. Kaminari and Kirishima had moved off to loudly discuss what had just happened, Mina throwing in animated gestures about how "super cool" the armor looked. But the whispers hadn't stopped.

Izuku sat down on the bench, his hands clasped loosely, staring at the floor for a moment as his breathing finally slowed. The Agito pulse was still there, faint but steady—like it was waiting for him to do something.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Uraraka asked gently, sitting next to him.

Izuku looked up, meeting her concerned gaze, and nodded. "I'm fine. Really. Just… tired."

"You did push your body hard," Momo said thoughtfully, her brow furrowed as she sat across from him. "That transformation—your Flame Form—it looked like it exerted tremendous heat. Is your body… resistant to that sort of stress?"

Izuku hesitated, rubbing the back of his neck. "Mostly. It's… built into how it works."

Shoji tilted his head slightly, his multiple arms crossing. "You're not telling us everything."

Izuku stiffened slightly at that, but Shoji's tone wasn't accusing—just matter-of-fact.

Iida adjusted his glasses with a sharp motion. "Shoji is correct, Midoriya-kun. None of us are asking you to reveal your deepest secrets, but this ability of yours—if it's not a standard Quirk—then it will naturally raise questions. Especially now that you've revealed it publicly."

Izuku glanced between them, then sighed quietly. "I know. And I'm… sorry if this causes problems for everyone. I just… didn't have another choice."

Uraraka gave him a soft smile. "You don't have to apologize. You were incredible out there."

Momo's expression softened slightly as well. "And strategic. You weren't just relying on raw power; you fought intelligently. That's what people will notice."

Izuku gave a small, grateful smile, but inside his mind was less settled. They're trying to understand, but how much can I even tell them?

When the group shifted their focus back to the remaining matches, Izuku leaned back slightly, letting his head rest against the wall. His thoughts drifted back to the firestorm, to the way his hand had moved instinctively to trigger the transformation. It wasn't just me deciding to change forms. It was like the Agito… guided me.

The pulse in his chest beat faintly again, almost in acknowledgment, sending a chill down his spine despite the lingering warmth in his body. I can control it. But for how long if I keep pushing?

He clenched his fists slightly, watching the screens as another match began. For now, all he could do was keep moving forward.

Not everyone had let the subject drop, however. A little ways across the room, Kaminari leaned closer to Jirou, his voice lowered. "So… you think that's really his Quirk?"

Jirou shrugged slightly. "If it is, it's not like any Quirk I've seen. Armor that changes forms? Feels more… engineered."

Kirishima grinned, his voice not nearly as quiet. "Who cares? It's awesome! He's finally showing everyone what he's made of."

Bakugo, sitting at the far end of the room, hadn't said a word since Izuku walked back in. His arms were crossed, his glare fixed on the arena screens, but his jaw was tight, and the occasional spark flickered from his palms.

When Kaminari joked, "Bet even Bakugo's impressed—"

Bakugo shot him a glare sharp enough to silence him immediately.

"Tch," Bakugo muttered under his breath, though his eyes never left the screen. "Damn nerd… always pulling crap like this…"

The tournament progressed quickly after Izuku's match, the roar of the crowd rising and falling with each bout. Names flashed across the brackets on the massive screens, competitors moving one after another into the arena.

Izuku sat quietly on the bench, eyes fixed on the display. His heartbeat had steadied, the Agito pulse no longer thrumming quite so insistently now that he was out of combat. But every so often, he caught himself flexing his right hand, remembering the instinct that had guided him into Flame Form.

I can't rely on it for every fight. Ground Form is safer, easier to control… but if I'm pushed again…

He took a quiet breath. I have to win, no matter which form I use.

"NEXT MATCH: IZUKU MIDORIYA VERSUS IBARA SHIOZAKI! WILL OUR HOT-BLOODED HERO KEEP UP THE HEAT, OR WILL HE GET TANGLED UP IN THE HOLY VINES OF JUSTICE? PLACE YOUR BETS, FOLKS!" Present Mic's voice boomed across the stadium, snapping him out of his thoughts.

The crowd cheered, the excitement still lingering from his last fight as Izuku rose from the bench. He gave Uraraka, Iida, and Momo a reassuring nod before walking toward the tunnel entrance.

The sunlight hit him as he stepped back into the arena, the crowd's energy surging again. Across from him stood Ibara Shiozaki, her vine-like hair already shifting in anticipation. Her calm, serene expression was a sharp contrast to the roaring crowd.

She clasped her hands together briefly, bowing her head. "May this match be a fair one, Midoriya-san. I pray for both our safety."

Izuku gave a small nod. "Thank you. I'll do my best."

The two took their positions as Midnight raised her whip to signal the start.

"BEGIN!"

Ibara moved instantly, her vine-like hair spreading across the arena floor like a living net, twisting and coiling to cut off Izuku's movement.

She's fast. Her vines cover a wide range, so staying mobile is key.

Izuku darted left, sliding across the stone floor as the vines lashed toward him. He switched into Ground Form mid-run, the segmented black-and-gold armor materializing around him with a flash of energy. The crowd cheered at the transformation, though not as loudly as before—this was the form they were now familiar with.

Vines lashed toward his legs, but Izuku leapt, grabbing one midair and swinging himself forward before it could tighten. He landed closer to her, rolling into a crouch.

She's controlling them from a distance, but she's staying defensive—she wants to trap me, not overpower me.

Ibara's vines coiled around him again, coming in from multiple angles. Izuku moved with sharp, calculated precision, ducking low, weaving through gaps, and occasionally slamming his armored fists into the ground to break apart clusters of vines before they could entangle him.

"Your movements are commendable, Midoriya-san," Ibara called, her voice calm even as her vines lashed forward again. "But you can't run forever."

Izuku gritted his teeth as vines finally wrapped around his left arm, pulling tight. More followed, coiling around his legs. I can break them, but if I use too much force, I'll waste energy for the next fight.

Ibara's vines tightened further, beginning to drag him toward her. "Please yield, Midoriya-san. There's no shame in admitting defeat."

Izuku shook his head. "I can't do that. Not yet."

The Agito pulse stirred faintly, as if sensing his rising determination, but Izuku forced himself to keep control. No Flame Form here. I can finish this in Ground Form.

With a sharp twist, he planted his feet and used the vines' own pull against her, yanking hard. The sudden force caught Ibara off guard, pulling her slightly forward.

Izuku used the opening, surging forward with a burst of speed. His armored gauntlet swung, not to strike her directly, but to slam into the ground just ahead of her. The shockwave cracked the stone floor, throwing her off balance.

The vines loosened slightly, and Izuku used the moment to break free, rolling to the side before closing the distance in a single leap.

Before Ibara could react, Izuku landed behind her, lightly tapping her shoulder with his gauntlet—enough for Midnight to raise her whip.

"SHIOZAKI IS OUT OF BOUNDS! WINNER: IZUKU MIDORIYA!"

The crowd erupted again as Izuku deactivated his armor, giving Ibara a small, respectful bow. She returned it gracefully, her calm smile unfaltering despite her loss.

"Well fought, Midoriya-san," she said as they left the arena.

Izuku smiled faintly. "Thank you."

The crowd's energy stayed electric as the tournament pushed forward, match after match filling the stadium with cheers, gasps, and bursts of applause.

Todoroki vs. Hanta Sero

Sero grinned nervously as he fired tape lines to swing around the arena, trying to stay out of range. "Sorry, Todoroki, but I'm not gonna let you freeze me that easily!"

Todoroki didn't answer. His right hand swept across the ground, and in one fluid motion, a massive wave of ice surged forward, freezing the tape midair and locking Sero's legs in place. Before the poor boy could react, another wall of ice rose behind him, gently but firmly pinning him upright.

The crowd cheered as Midnight raised her whip. "SERO IS IMMOBILIZED! TODOROKI ADVANCES!"

Todoroki didn't even look back as the ice receded, his face unreadable as he left the arena.

Bakugo vs. Ochaco Uraraka

This match was louder, fiercer—Bakugo blasting across the arena, explosions scattering debris everywhere. But Uraraka refused to back down.

She darted in and out of his attacks, touching bits of rubble with her fingertips, making them float quietly upward as Bakugo focused entirely on her movements.

"Nice try, Round Face!" Bakugo barked, launching another explosive burst that forced her to dodge again.

Only when he noticed the shadow above him did his grin widen. "Heh. Clever."

He blasted upward, detonating the falling debris before it could crush him. The resulting shockwave forced Uraraka to the ground, and she collapsed, her body exhausted from pushing herself to the limit.

Bakugo stood over her, his grin gone, replaced by a rare look of respect. "You were good. Better than most."

Midnight called the win, and the crowd gave Uraraka a standing ovation as medics rushed in.

Between matches, the competitors in the waiting area watched closely. Every fight changed how they viewed each other.

Kirishima was practically vibrating after Bakugo's match. "That was awesome! Uraraka nearly had him!"

Todoroki sat quietly, his eyes on the screen, unmoved by the noise.

Iida glanced toward Izuku. "It seems every match is pushing us closer to our limits. Are you prepared for your next one?"

Izuku nodded, though his mind was already on what lay ahead. I can't let my guard down. Everyone's improving.

When his name was called again, Izuku rose from the bench, the crowd cheering as he stepped back into the arena.

But this time, no one shouted questions, no one pressed him about Flame Form—not yet. All eyes were simply waiting, watching to see if his earlier display was just luck… or if he could keep up the momentum.

The next name flashed on the board.

Izuku Midoriya vs. Fumikage Tokoyami.

The crowd erupted again, excited murmurs rippling through the stands. Tokoyami's Dark Shadow flared briefly as he stepped into the sunlight, his sharp gaze locking on Izuku.

"Don't hold back," Tokoyami said, his voice calm but firm. "I won't."

Izuku nodded, lowering into a ready stance as his armor began to materialize again.

The match was about to begin.

The sunlight cast long shadows across the arena as Tokoyami stepped forward, his dark cloak fluttering slightly in the breeze. Dark Shadow loomed over his shoulder, its eyes glowing faintly as it twitched in anticipation.

"Do not hold back, Midoriya," Tokoyami said, his calm voice carrying a quiet intensity. "I would consider it an insult if you did."

Izuku lowered into his stance, his breathing steady as the segmented black-and-gold Ground Form armor materialized around him with a pulse of energy.

"I won't," Izuku said simply. "Let's make this a good one."

Midnight raised her whip. "BEGIN!"

Tokoyami moved instantly, Dark Shadow lunging forward with a speed that belied its size. Its claws slashed through the air, forcing Izuku to dive sideways, rolling to avoid the strike.

He's faster than I expected in broad daylight. He's controlling its movement perfectly.

Izuku sprinted forward, weaving between Dark Shadow's swipes, aiming to close the distance. Tokoyami countered, keeping just out of reach, his hands directing Dark Shadow like an extension of himself.

"You're trying to get close," Tokoyami observed, his tone even as Dark Shadow swung again. "But I won't make it easy."

Izuku ducked under another strike, his armored fist slamming into the ground. The resulting shockwave kicked up a cloud of dust and debris, forcing Tokoyami to shield his eyes for a split second.

Izuku used the moment to close the distance, darting low and attempting to sweep Tokoyami's legs.

But Dark Shadow intercepted, wrapping around Tokoyami and shoving Izuku back with surprising force. The impact sent Izuku skidding across the arena floor.

The crowd roared in approval.

Izuku pushed himself back up, his breathing steady. He's keeping me at mid-range, where Dark Shadow's reach gives him the advantage. If I can disrupt his rhythm—

Tokoyami didn't give him time to think, Dark Shadow darting forward again, its movements sharper, more aggressive now. Izuku weaved between the strikes, his armor taking a few glancing blows but holding firm.

Every step, every swing, Izuku was watching, calculating.

"Your armor is impressive," Tokoyami said between movements, his tone still calm. "But defense alone won't win you this match."

"Then I'll just have to do more than defend," Izuku replied, darting forward again.

He feinted left, baiting Dark Shadow into a wide swing, then used the momentum of his dodge to launch himself right, slipping into Tokoyami's blind spot. His armored fist shot forward, striking Tokoyami's side—but Tokoyami braced, Dark Shadow wrapping tightly around him to absorb most of the impact.

The two broke apart again, circling each other as the crowd cheered louder.

Tokoyami narrowed his eyes. "You're strong… but you're holding back something. I can feel it."

Izuku stayed silent, lowering his stance again. I can't use Flame Form here. Ground Form is enough—I just have to outthink him.

But Tokoyami wasn't giving him the chance.

"Dark Shadow—full pursuit!"

Dark Shadow surged forward faster than before, moving almost like a living creature untethered from Tokoyami's physical motions. Its claws slammed down, breaking apart the arena floor, forcing Izuku to keep moving.

Izuku leapt to the side, barely dodging as the shadow lashed out again, its claws gouging deep lines into the stone.

He's pushing harder now. If I don't turn this around fast—

Dark Shadow lashed from two angles at once, forcing Izuku to block with his armored forearms. The impact drove him back, his boots sliding against the stone.

Then it hit him. He's more aggressive because of the light—Dark Shadow's weaker in sunlight. He's pushing to finish this before I can exploit that.

Izuku ducked another strike, letting Dark Shadow's momentum overextend it just slightly. In that brief moment, he darted inside its reach, closing in on Tokoyami.

Tokoyami's eyes widened slightly, Dark Shadow trying to recoil, but Izuku was already moving. His armored fist struck Tokoyami's arm—not hard enough to injure, just enough to disrupt his control.

Dark Shadow flickered, its movements momentarily sluggish.

Izuku took the opening, sweeping Tokoyami's legs out from under him and pinning him with a controlled hold, his gauntlet pressing lightly against Tokoyami's chest.

The buzzer sounded.

"WINNER: IZUKU MIDORIYA!" Midnight's voice rang over the cheering crowd.

Izuku immediately released him, helping Tokoyami back to his feet.

"Sorry," Izuku said with a small smile. "That was closer than I expected."

Tokoyami adjusted his cloak, his expression calm but respectful. "You were calculating every movement… and you didn't need to show your other form. That makes you far more dangerous than I anticipated. Well done, Midoriya."

Izuku nodded once. "Thank you."

As they walked off the field, the crowd continued to cheer, though the buzz around his Flame Form still lingered in the background, every whisper carrying his name.

Kaminari vs. Shiozaki

The crowd buzzed as Kaminari shot a confident grin, electricity crackling faintly along his arms. "Sorry, Shiozaki, but I'm not gonna get wrapped up like Midoriya almost did!"

Ibara Shiozaki simply bowed her head. "I accept your challenge."

The match began, and Kaminari immediately fired off a wide electrical burst. Several vines recoiled instantly, but Ibara only smiled faintly, redirecting her hair in smooth, precise arcs.

Kaminari grinned, charging forward to close the distance—only for vines to slip under the floor cracks and coil around his legs before he could react.

"Wha—?! Hey, no fair!" he yelped, trying to blast them off, but Ibara had already closed the distance, wrapping him up neatly.

"Yield, please," she said politely as Midnight declared her the winner. Kaminari sagged, defeated, as the crowd laughed good-naturedly.

Yaoyorozu vs. Tokage Setsuna

This fight drew attention for being one of the more strategic bouts of the day. Momo stood calmly at the center of the arena, her hand on her hip, while Tokage grinned, her limbs already breaking apart into dozens of floating segments.

"Think you can hit me if I'm all over the place?" Tokage taunted.

Momo's expression remained steady. "I don't need to hit you. Just where you're going."

The fight turned into a game of cat and mouse—Tokage's limbs darting from every angle, Momo countering with shields, nets, and even a quickly assembled pulse emitter to disrupt the floating pieces.

In the end, Tokage found herself pinned under a heavy metal frame Momo had constructed mid-battle, forced to concede. The crowd applauded the display of ingenuity, many pros nodding in approval.

Hatsume vs. Iida

This one was less a fight and more a spectacle. Hatsume spent most of the match advertising her support gear, loudly naming each gadget she deployed as she clung to Iida, who was trying desperately to shake her off.

"Behold, my Baby Number Seventy-Two!" she shouted as a grappling hook latched onto Iida's leg.

"Hatsume-san, this is supposed to be a serious match!" Iida protested, his engines revving as he zipped across the arena.

"Exactly! I'm seriously showing off my tech!" she replied cheerfully, tightening her grip.

Eventually, Midnight called the match in Iida's favor when Hatsume voluntarily stepped out of bounds after finishing her "presentation." Iida looked exhausted, while Hatsume happily waved to the cameras, already fielding business offers from amused pro heroes.

Kirishima vs. Tetsutetsu

This fight was pure brute strength, the crowd eating up every second. Two near-identical hardening quirks collided repeatedly, fists slamming into armored skin, neither backing down.

"Manly, right?!" Kirishima yelled mid-punch.

"Damn right!" Tetsutetsu yelled back, grinning wildly.

The match ended in a double knockout when both of them landed simultaneous strikes that sent each other sprawling. Midnight declared a tiebreaker for later, and the crowd cheered the sportsmanship.

Ashido vs. Aoyama: Ashido's agility overwhelmed Aoyama's Navel Laser, causing him to surrender after his stomach began to cramp. Ashido celebrated with a dance to the delight of the crowd.

Jirou vs. Kuroiro: A tricky battle of sound versus shadows, ending with Jirou blasting Kuroiro out of hiding with a concentrated vibration burst.

Shoji vs. Ojiro: A close, respectful match of martial skill, with Ojiro edging out a win after a perfectly timed tail sweep.

As the matches wrapped up, the giant monitors displayed the updated brackets.

Izuku Midoriya, Shoto Todoroki, Katsuki Bakugo, and Tenya Iida stood among the final names advancing.

The crowd roared louder than ever as Present Mic's voice boomed.

"AND THERE YOU HAVE IT, FOLKS! THE SEMI-FINALISTS ARE SET! WHO WILL COME OUT ON TOP? WILL MIDORIYA KEEP HIS HOT STREAK BURNING, OR WILL BAKUGO BLAST HIS WAY TO VICTORY? STAY TUNED!"

The competitors' waiting area had grown quieter now. The excitement of the earlier matches had settled into a focused tension. Those still in the running kept mostly to themselves, conserving energy and sharpening their focus for what came next.

Todoroki sat alone near the far corner, his gaze fixed on the floor, steam still faintly rising from his right side. His earlier matches had been efficient, clinical—he hadn't needed to use his left side again since Midoriya.

But his mind kept replaying that fight.

Midoriya's words still lingered: "Fight me with everything you've got!"

He flexed his left hand unconsciously, the faint warmth still embedded in his palm from the last time he'd let his fire loose.

I didn't want to use it. But against him… I had no choice.

For a moment, he allowed himself to feel the faintest glimmer of respect.

He forced me to move forward. And that means… if we face each other again, I can't underestimate him. Not anymore.

Todoroki closed his eyes briefly, letting his breathing steady. When he opened them again, they held their usual calm determination.

On the opposite side of the room, Bakugo sat hunched forward, elbows on his knees, his palms sparking faintly with controlled bursts. His scowl hadn't left his face since Izuku's first big win, but now his expression was sharper, less angry and more… focused.

"Flame Form…" he muttered under his breath, his teeth gritting slightly.

He remembered every second of the Midoriya vs. Todoroki fight, how Izuku had bulldozed through Todoroki's ice and redirected his flames.

Bakugo clicked his tongue. That damn nerd… He's gotten stronger again. Always running ahead. Always…

A small explosion popped in his palm, the sparks briefly illuminating his grin—a dangerous, almost excited grin.

"Fine. Keep showing off, Deku. Because when we fight, I'm blowing that fancy armor to pieces."

Iida stood near the monitors, watching replays of the earlier matches, his glasses catching the light as he adjusted them with a precise motion.

He had advanced with clean victories so far, but his thoughts were far from relaxed. His brother's image flashed in his mind, a reminder of why he was here.

"Midoriya…" he murmured quietly. "I can't afford to hold back. Not against you, not against anyone. Ingenium wouldn't hesitate—neither will I."

The semi-finals were set.

The energy in the waiting area shifted as Present Mic's voice boomed over the loudspeakers.

"AND NOW, FOLKS, IT'S TIME FOR THE SEMI-FINALS! FIRST UP—IZUKU MIDORIYA VERSUS TENYA IIDA! WILL SPEED OR STRATEGY WIN THE DAY? PLACE YOUR BETS!"

The crowd roared as the two names flashed across the screens.

Izuku rose from his seat, rolling his shoulders once before heading toward the tunnel. Iida straightened his glasses, his engines already letting out a soft hum.

The two locked eyes briefly as they passed through the tunnel entrance, their expressions determined.

Izuku Midoriya vs. Tenya Iida

The stadium was alive with excitement, the cheers of the crowd vibrating through the arena floor. Izuku stepped out into the sunlight, his expression steady but focused. Across from him, Iida stood tall, his posture perfectly upright, his engines already letting out a sharp, steady hum.

"Midoriya-kun," Iida called, bowing slightly. "It's an honor to face you. But I will not hold back. I intend to win this."

Izuku nodded, lowering into a ready stance as the segmented black-and-gold Ground Form armor shimmered into place around him.

"Same here, Iida. Let's give it everything."

Midnight raised her whip.

"BEGIN!"

Iida launched forward instantly, his Recipro Burst engines roaring as he dashed across the arena in a blur. Izuku barely had time to sidestep before Iida zipped past, his afterimage lingering in the air.

He's fast—faster than I can react head-on. I need to predict his movement, not chase it.

Iida didn't let up, circling back in a tight arc, aiming a low sweeping kick to knock Izuku off balance. Izuku braced, blocking with his armored forearm, but the sheer force sent him skidding across the arena floor.

Iida pressed the attack, darting forward again, this time feinting left before pivoting sharply to the right. His engines flared, propelling him forward with incredible speed.

The crowd cheered wildly, impressed by the display of precision movement.

Izuku ducked under another strike, rolling out of the way just as Iida zipped past again.

He's not just fast—he's planning each angle. He's forcing me into the open so I can't use the environment to corner him.

Izuku planted his feet, eyes tracking Iida's every movement. The Agito pulse thrummed faintly, sharpening his focus, but he held back from letting it guide him completely. I can do this in Ground Form. I have to think, not rely on instinct.

When Iida made his next pass, Izuku didn't dodge immediately. Instead, he waited, gauging the angle, letting Iida commit to his strike.

As Iida swung his leg for another low kick, Izuku twisted sharply, catching Iida's armored shin with his gauntlet and using the momentum to spin himself out of the way.

Iida's eyes widened slightly as he stumbled half a step, surprised by the counter.

Izuku pressed forward, but Iida recovered instantly, blasting back with his engines to regain distance.

"Well done, Midoriya-kun!" Iida called, genuine admiration in his tone even as he shifted his stance. "But I won't let you catch me twice!"

Iida kicked his engines into full gear, the roar echoing across the arena as he activated Recipro Burst. In an instant, he was gone—just a blur of motion darting around Izuku.

The crowd erupted.

"HE'S GONE FULL BURST! CAN MIDORIYA KEEP UP?!" Present Mic shouted.

Izuku crouched low, eyes scanning the movement. Recipro Burst… he can only maintain that speed for a limited time. He'll try to overwhelm me before he burns out.

Iida appeared behind him, a blur of blue streaks as his leg swung for a finishing blow. Izuku twisted just enough to block, the impact rattling through his armored arms.

The force sent Izuku sliding backward, but his mind was already racing. If I can bait him into overcommitting to a strike…

Iida lunged again, this time aiming straight for Izuku's center. Izuku didn't move immediately—he waited until the last possible second.

As Iida closed the gap, Izuku shifted his weight and stepped forward into the strike, grabbing Iida's leg with both gauntlets. The momentum carried them both slightly off balance, but Izuku twisted his hips, using Iida's own speed to flip him over his shoulder.

The move sent Iida crashing to the ground, his engines sputtering briefly as the impact jarred his balance.

Izuku didn't waste the opening—he pinned Iida's arm with one gauntlet, his other hand lightly pressed against Iida's chest.

The buzzer sounded.

"WINNER: IZUKU MIDORIYA!" Midnight's voice rang out as the crowd erupted again.

Izuku immediately released him, helping Iida back to his feet.

Iida pushed his glasses up, still catching his breath, but his tone was respectful. "Impressive. You adapted to my speed faster than I expected. Well fought, Midoriya-kun."

Izuku gave a small smile. "Thanks, Iida. You almost had me with that last burst."

The two exchanged a firm handshake before leaving the arena, the crowd still buzzing with excitement.

The brackets updated on the massive screen as Present Mic's voice carried over the cheers.

"AND THERE YOU HAVE IT, FOLKS! MIDORIYA MOVES TO THE FINALS! WHO WILL HE FACE? WILL IT BE THE ICE-AND-FIRE PRODIGY, SHOTO TODOROKI, OR THE EXPLOSIVE WILDCARD, KATSUKI BAKUGO?! STAY TUNED!"

The crowd roared even louder as the next names flashed.

Todoroki Shoto vs. Bakugo Katsuki

The roar of the crowd hit a fever pitch as Todoroki and Bakugo stepped into the arena.

Todoroki stood calm, his breath even, ice already creeping faintly across the ground around his feet.

Bakugo, by contrast, was practically vibrating with explosive energy, his palms sparking violently as he grinned like a predator.

"Don't you dare hold back, Half-and-Half!" Bakugo barked, pointing at Todoroki. "If you think you can play defense with me, you're dead wrong. I'll blow through whatever crap you throw at me!"

Todoroki's eyes narrowed slightly, his tone level. "If that's what you want… don't regret it."

Izuku sat forward on the bench, his hands clasped, eyes glued to the massive monitor. Uraraka and Iida sat nearby, equally focused.

"Bakugo's not going to let Todoroki play passively," Izuku muttered under his breath. "If Todoroki doesn't use his fire, he might get cornered."

Iida adjusted his glasses sharply. "But if he does use it, it will put even more strain on him. This match might push both of them beyond their limits."

Izuku nodded slightly, his mind already running through possible outcomes. Whoever wins, I'll have to be ready for a completely different fight.

"BEGIN!" Midnight's whip cracked through the air.

Bakugo launched forward instantly, explosions propelling him across the arena like a missile. Todoroki slammed his hand down, a massive wall of ice surging upward in response.

But Bakugo blasted through it, shattering the spire into shards as he spun midair, firing a wide explosion to force Todoroki back.

The crowd roared as Bakugo landed, already dashing forward again.

"DON'T YOU DARE RUN, ICICLE HEAD!"

Todoroki's eyes narrowed, ice surging along the ground to create distance, but Bakugo was relentless, leaping from one jagged spire to the next, explosions blasting away every barricade.

Izuku leaned forward further, his mind racing as he tracked every movement.

"Bakugo's forcing him to stay defensive," he said quietly. "Todoroki's using more ice than usual to keep him at bay, but Bakugo's speed and mobility are closing every gap. If this keeps up—"

"Then Todoroki will be cornered," Momo finished from across the room, watching intently.

Izuku nodded grimly. If Todoroki doesn't commit soon… Bakugo will break through.

Bakugo leapt high, palms sparking violently.

"STOP RUNNING AND FIGHT ME, DAMN IT!"

Todoroki's expression shifted slightly at that, just for a second. Then his left hand twitched.

Flames ignited.

The crowd erupted, the sudden burst of heat melting sections of his own ice as fire roared across the arena.

Izuku's eyes widened slightly. He's using it… but not at full strength. He's still holding back.

Bakugo grinned wildly as the flames surged toward him. "FINALLY!"

He blasted through the heat, spinning midair as he closed the distance, the force of his explosions dispersing some of the fire.

The fight turned into chaos. Fire and explosions collided in massive shockwaves, sending steam and smoke swirling into the sky. Todoroki alternated between ice and fire in rapid succession, trying to keep Bakugo guessing, but Bakugo adapted instantly, using blasts to propel himself out of range or strike before Todoroki could fully switch.

The arena cracked under the repeated impacts, ice melting into streams of water that hissed against heated stone.

Bakugo landed another explosive burst close enough to blow apart one of Todoroki's defenses, forcing him back toward the edge.

"YOU THINK HALF MEASURES ARE GONNA BEAT ME?!" Bakugo shouted, his voice echoing across the stadium. "EITHER GO ALL OUT OR GET OUT OF MY WAY!"

Todoroki's left side flared hotter for a brief second, fire surging higher than before, but still—Izuku could tell—it wasn't everything.

Bakugo capitalized on a misstep.

As Todoroki tried to layer ice under his feet to regain distance, Bakugo shot forward, using a massive explosion to launch himself like a rocket. He slammed down in front of Todoroki, the shockwave knocking him off balance just enough for Bakugo to pin him with a point-blank blast that cracked the arena floor.

The buzzer sounded.

"WINNER—KATSUKI BAKUGO!" Midnight's voice rang out over the roaring crowd.

Bakugo stepped back, breathing hard, his palms still sparking, but his grin had dimmed slightly as he glared down at Todoroki.

"You held back," he said, his voice low and almost disappointed. "You could've given me more."

Todoroki said nothing, only lowering his gaze slightly before turning to leave the arena.

Izuku sat back slowly, exhaling. So it's Bakugo.

His hands clenched slightly in his lap. He's faster, more aggressive, and he's pushing harder than ever. If I hold back even a little, he'll crush me.

He looked up at the screen again, watching Bakugo's expression as the crowd cheered.

I'll have to give everything I have. Ground Form, Flame Form—whatever it takes.

The final match was set.

The roar of the crowd was deafening above, but in the tunnel leading to the arena, there was only the hum of the lights and the sound of footsteps.

Izuku walked forward, his pace steady, the Agito pulse faintly thrumming under his skin. His mind was clear now. This isn't just about winning. This is about proving I can stand as his equal.

Bakugo was already waiting at the tunnel's exit, his back to Izuku, arms crossed. Sparks popped from his palms, faint but constant, betraying his anticipation.

When Izuku approached, Bakugo turned, his red eyes sharp, his grin feral.

"Took you long enough, nerd," Bakugo said, his voice low but heated. "You better not hold back. I've been waiting for this."

Izuku met his gaze, his own expression calm but determined. "I wasn't planning to."

Bakugo's grin widened, sparks flaring brighter. "Good. Because when I win, I don't want excuses."

They stood there for a moment, the tension between them almost crackling as much as Bakugo's hands.

Midnight's voice echoed over the speakers: "FINAL MATCH—IZUKU MIDORIYA VERSUS KATSUKI BAKUGO! FINALISTS, PLEASE STEP INTO THE ARENA!"

Without another word, Bakugo turned and strode out, explosions propelling him upward in a short burst. Izuku followed, his steps steady as sunlight spilled across the stone battlefield.

The crowd's cheers hit them like a wave.

The arena floor bore the scars of every previous fight, cracks and scorch marks crisscrossing the stone. The air itself seemed to hum with anticipation.

Bakugo stood on his side, shoulders rolling, sparks dancing across his palms like restless lightning. His grin was sharp, almost savage.

Izuku faced him, the segmented black-and-gold Ground Form armor materializing with a sharp flash. His crimson compound eyes glowed faintly behind the visor.

Present Mic's voice boomed: "THIS IS IT, FOLKS! THE MATCH WE'VE BEEN WAITING FOR! STRATEGY VS. RAW POWER! AGITO VS. EXPLOSIONS! WHO WILL COME OUT ON TOP?!"

Midnight raised her whip. "BEGIN!"

Bakugo moved first, launching forward with a deafening explosion. Izuku darted sideways, the shockwave cracking the stone where he had just stood.

Bakugo didn't let up, blasting toward him again with explosive propulsion, swinging his right arm in a wide arc. Izuku blocked with his gauntlet, the impact rattling through his armor as Bakugo grinned.

"COME ON, DEKU! SHOW ME WHAT THAT FANCY ARMOR CAN DO!"

Izuku pushed back, sliding along the ground before twisting sharply, kicking off the floor to create distance. He's faster than before. Stronger, too. I can't outmatch him head-on, not yet.

Bakugo fired another burst, closing the gap instantly. Izuku ducked, sweeping his leg low, but Bakugo anticipated it, blasting upward and coming down with an aerial strike that sent shards of stone flying.

The crowd roared with every clash.

Izuku kept moving, weaving through Bakugo's relentless offense, every step calculated. His armor absorbed glancing blasts, but the hits were adding up.

I need to redirect his own momentum against him—force him into overextending.

When Bakugo lunged again, Izuku feinted left, baiting him into a wide swing. At the last second, Izuku pivoted inside his reach, grabbing Bakugo's forearm and using his own forward momentum to slam him to the ground.

The arena shook as Bakugo rolled, blasting himself back to his feet almost immediately. His grin only grew wider.

"THAT'S MORE LIKE IT!" he shouted, sparks flaring brighter. "BUT I'M JUST GETTING STARTED!"

Bakugo's explosions grew faster, hotter, his movements less predictable as he fired short bursts to alter his trajectory midair, keeping Izuku guessing. He zipped around the arena in erratic patterns, forcing Izuku to react in real time.

Izuku ducked another blast, his gauntlet scraping against cracked stone as he skidded backward. I can keep dodging, but he's wearing me down. If I stay in Ground Form, I'll lose.

The Agito pulse surged in his chest, almost urging him forward.

Bakugo landed a few feet away, explosions kicking up dust around him. He raised his hands, sparks growing brighter. "DON'T YOU DARE HOLD BACK, DEKU! USE THAT FLAME CRAP, OR I'LL BLOW YOU OUT OF THIS ARENA!"

Izuku's crimson eyes narrowed behind the visor. He wants me at my strongest. Then… I'll give him exactly that.

Izuku straightened, his right hand moving to the side module of his belt.

A sharp click echoed across the arena.

Flames ignited around him instantly, twisting and spiraling upward as the Ground Form armor shimmered, segments shifting and locking into new configurations. Crimson plates slid into place over his chest and shoulders, golden accents catching the sunlight, and his compound eyes blazed molten orange.

The crowd erupted as Present Mic practically screamed: "AND HE'S DONE IT AGAIN! MIDORIYA SWITCHES TO FLAME FORM!"

Bakugo's grin widened into something almost wild. "FINALLY!"

Izuku lowered into a ready stance, flames trailing faintly off his arms. "Let's finish this, Kacchan."

Bakugo didn't wait—he launched forward with a roar, explosions propelling him faster than before. Izuku charged to meet him, fire spiraling tighter around his gauntlets.

They collided midarena, fire and explosions erupting in a blinding burst of heat and light. The shockwave sent debris flying, the cracked arena floor splintering further.

Bakugo blasted himself upward, trying to strike from above, but Izuku followed, flames bursting from his boots for a brief boost. He swung, his fiery fist nearly connecting, but Bakugo twisted midair, countering with a close-range explosion that forced Izuku back.

The crowd was on its feet, cheering wildly as the two clashed again and again—fire against explosions, neither yielding an inch.

Bakugo darted behind him, blasting at his back, but Izuku spun, letting the flames swirl into a spiraling arc that deflected the worst of the blast. He lunged forward, striking with a flaming gauntlet, forcing Bakugo to block with an explosion that sent both skidding backward.

Both of them were breathing harder now, their movements still sharp but heavier with effort.

Bakugo grinned through the sweat and smoke. "DON'T YOU DARE STOP NOW!"

Izuku tightened his fists, the Agito pulse roaring louder than ever. "I wasn't planning to."

The crowd roared louder than ever as the two charged again, flames and explosions colliding in the center of the arena in a massive shockwave.

The arena was a battlefield of fire, smoke, and shattered stone. Both Izuku and Bakugo stood breathing heavily, their forms battered and scorched.

Izuku's Flame Form still flickered with residual heat, but his movements were measured, controlled. Bakugo, on the other hand, looked like he was falling apart—his shirt torn, his arms trembling, palms raw and bleeding from repeated, unrelenting blasts.

But he didn't stop.

Bakugo launched forward again, explosions sputtering weakly compared to earlier. His movements were slower now, sloppy in places, but his face burned with determination and rage.

"DON'T—YOU—DARE—HOLD BACK ON ME!" he roared, swinging his fist in a wide arc.

Izuku blocked easily, catching the weakened strike with his gauntlet. Bakugo grit his teeth, sparks flying as he swung again and again, his fists slamming into Izuku's armor.

"YOU THINK YOU'RE BETTER THAN ME?! HUH?!"

Another swing. Another. His breath came in ragged gasps, his eyes wild, and—finally—tears spilling down his face.

"I WON'T LOSE TO YOU, DEKU! NOT AGAIN! I'VE ALWAYS BEEN STRONGER! ALWAYS! SO WHY—WHY THE HELL—"

He slammed his fists against Izuku's chestplate again and again, each blow weaker than the last, his explosions barely flickering now. Blood streaked across his knuckles where his skin had torn, but still he kept swinging, ranting incoherently through gritted teeth.

The crowd had fallen silent. No one was cheering anymore.

Behind his helmet, Izuku stared in shock, his glowing eyes widening slightly as he took in the sight. Kacchan…

For a moment, he couldn't even react. He had seen Bakugo angry, furious, explosive—but not like this. Not this desperate.

His fists trembled slightly as he caught another punch mid-swing, his gauntlets closing around Bakugo's wrists to stop him from hurting himself further.

Bakugo struggled against his grip, snarling. "LET GO, DAMN IT! WE'RE NOT DONE YET!"

Izuku tightened his hold just enough to keep him still, his voice calm but firm through the helmet.

"Kacchan… if you want this win so badly…"

He released Bakugo's wrists and stepped back, his armor still glowing faintly in the heat.

"…then you can have it."

Izuku turned his back to him and began walking toward the edge of the arena.

The crowd collectively gasped.

Midnight, who had been watching in stunned silence, hesitated for only a moment before raising her whip.

"MIDORIYA IS OUT OF BOUNDS—KATSUKI BAKUGO WINS THE FINAL MATCH!"

The buzzer blared, but there was no eruption of cheers, no applause. The crowd sat frozen, whispering in confusion, some too stunned to react at all.

Bakugo stood in the center of the arena, staring at Izuku's retreating back, his face contorting from shock to fury.

"DEKU!" he shouted, voice cracking. "COME BACK AND FINISH THE DAMN MATCH! YOU THINK THIS MAKES YOU BETTER THAN ME?! YOU DAMN COWARD!"

But Izuku didn't stop walking. He deactivated his armor as he crossed the boundary, his back still to Bakugo, his pace steady.

Bakugo's voice grew hoarse as he kept shouting insults, his fists trembling, but none of it reached Izuku.

The silence of the crowd weighed heavier than any jeer or cheer.

Up in the staff booth, Toshinori exhaled slowly, his eyes soft with quiet understanding.

Nezu's expression was unreadable, his tail flicking slightly as he sipped his tea.

And Kagutsuchi?

The older man scratched the back of his head, smirking faintly despite the tension. "Well… not the ending the crowd wanted, but… that's so very him."

Toshinori gave a faint nod. "Yes… it is."

Down in the arena, Bakugo stood frozen for a long moment, his breathing heavy, fists still trembling.

The buzzer had stopped. Midnight's voice had gone quiet. And still, no one cheered.

The waiting area was unusually quiet for a victory lap. Normally, cheers and congratulations would fill the room after the final match, but now there was only a soft murmur of voices.

Izuku sat on the bench, still in his hero costume, elbows resting on his knees, his head slightly lowered. His armor had been deactivated the moment he'd stepped out of the arena, leaving only the faint smell of scorched fabric clinging to him.

His classmates had gathered nearby, but none of them were speaking loudly.

Kirishima finally broke the silence, his usual energetic voice softened. "Uh… that was… intense, dude."

"Why did you do it, Midoriya?" Momo asked, her brow furrowed, her tone quiet but serious. "You could have won."

Izuku looked up slightly, his expression unreadable but calm. "He wanted it more. And… it didn't feel right to keep fighting when he was like that."

Uraraka gave him a worried look. "But still… are you okay? With letting him take it like that?"

Izuku gave a small nod. "I'm fine. Winning wasn't the most important thing today."

Shoji, who had been silent, simply watched him for a long moment before nodding slightly, as if understanding.

The sound of shouting echoed from down the hall.

"DEKU! YOU DAMN COWARD! GET BACK HERE AND FINISH IT!"

Bakugo's voice was raw, filled with frustration as he stormed through the corridors, several pro heroes trying to keep him from barging back into the arena. His fists sparked, small pops of explosions going off uncontrollably as he struggled against them.

The crowd outside still hadn't cheered—only hushed voices whispered across the stadium, confusion and disbelief lingering in the air.

Iida adjusted his glasses sharply, his tone quiet but firm. "Even if I disagree with your decision, Midoriya-kun… it was your choice. And perhaps it was the right one."

Jirou crossed her arms, leaning back. "Maybe. But people are going to talk about this for weeks. Not everyone's going to understand why you did it."

Izuku gave a small shrug. "They don't have to."

There was no arrogance in his tone—just a quiet conviction that silenced the group again.

Up in the staff booth, Nezu sat back in his chair, the faintest smile tugging at his lips. "Interesting. This will certainly change how the public views him."

Toshinori exhaled slowly, his eyes soft. "He's growing… just not in the way everyone expects."

Kagutsuchi smirked, crossing his arms. "He just told the world who he is. And whether they like it or not, they'll remember it."

As the last match of the Sports Festival ended, the cheers that usually marked a champion's victory never came.

Instead, the arena sat in stunned silence as the boy who had refused to finish the fight sat quietly among his friends, his decision speaking louder than any trophy ever could.