The stadium hushed, not with awe, but with the suffocating quiet that follows something profoundly uncomfortable. Bakugo stood alone in the shattered arena, his fists trembling, weak, desperate sparks sputtering from his palms like dying embers. His chest heaved, each breath a ragged gasp, his eyes wide with raw, unbridled frustration.

"COME BACK, DAMN IT!" His voice, hoarse and cracked, tore through the silence, echoing through the vast, empty stands. "WE'RE NOT DONE! YOU COWARD!"

Izuku didn't turn. He simply walked toward the dark maw of the tunnel, his vibrant Flame Form already dissolving into flickering motes of emerald light, scattering like dust motes in the stadium's harsh glow. His back was ramrod straight, his steps deliberate, each one a silent dismissal that cut deeper than any retort.

Midnight watched from the sidelines, her expression a mask, her gaze sharp and judging. She didn't repeat the announcement everyone already knew, the unspoken truth hanging heavy in the air. When medics moved to escort Bakugo, she gave a curt, almost imperceptible nod. Bakugo resisted, jerking his arm away with a snarl, but eventually allowed himself to be led. His head remained high, a defiant mask, but his jaw was clenched, humiliation seeping through every twitch of his face.

The crowd didn't cheer. They whispered, a low, buzzing murmur, exchanging furtive glances, phones raised like weapons to record the moment. By the time Bakugo was halfway through the tunnel, the footage was already spreading like wildfire. On giant monitors in public squares, in bustling cafés, on every major social platform, the same thirty-second clip looped endlessly: Izuku walking away calmly, his fiery armor fading, while Bakugo screamed, pathetic sparks crackling weakly from his fists.

HeroNet and TV commentators dissected it with clinical precision:

"This Midoriya kid has the composure of a pro already. He knew when to stop, to preserve the integrity of the fight."

"Passion is vital, but Bakugo's outburst? Dangerous. Heroes need absolute control, especially under pressure."

"Frankly, Midoriya looked like the real winner out there today. A true symbol."

Hashtags trended instantly, a digital roar of public opinion: #HeroSpiritMidoriya #UnstableBakugo #TheRealWinner. The public consensus was clear, etched into the collective consciousness: Bakugo possessed raw strength, but Izuku Midoriya embodied the very spirit of a hero.

At home, the Bakugo family watched the same footage, the glowing screen reflecting their strained faces. Mitsuki sat cross-legged on the sofa, arms folded tightly, a deep scowl etched onto her features. "That idiot," she muttered, her voice sharp enough to cut glass. "First big national debut, and he throws a tantrum like a five-year-old. Does he even think about how this looks? He's making us look like we raised a feral animal!"

Masaru, perched nervously beside her, winced. "He's… he's under a lot of pressure, Mitsuki. People will see how determined he is—"

"Determined, my ass," Mitsuki snapped, her eyes flashing. "Every pro hero in the country is watching, and he's screaming like a villain who lost his favorite toy."

Masaru sighed, his brows furrowed with worry lines. "I just hope someone can get through to him."

In the waiting area, the tension was a palpable, suffocating blanket. Most students sat stiffly, sneaking furtive glances at Bakugo, who remained rigid on his bench, jaw clenched so tight it ached, sparks occasionally flaring from his palms like suppressed explosions.

Suddenly, Iida's phone rang, a jarring sound in the quiet room. He stood quickly, excusing himself with a tight, almost robotic nod before stepping into the hall.

The voice on the other end was a panicked, breathless gasp. "Tenya! Tenya, oh thank goodness you answered—!"

"Mother?" Iida's voice sharpened with immediate worry, his usual composure cracking. "What's wrong? Please, calm down."

She didn't. Her words tumbled out, shaking, a torrent of fear: "Your brother—Tensei—he was attacked. They—they said it was Hero Killer: Stain! He's in critical condition, Tenya—he…" Her voice fractured, dissolving into quiet sobs. "He might not—"

Iida froze mid-step, his free hand gripping the cool wall for balance, his knuckles turning white. His straight, perfect posture crumbled, his shoulders slumping as his mother's voice broke into quiet, desperate sobs.

"Mother…" he said softly, hollowly, the word a mere whisper. "How… how bad is it?"

Silence stretched, long and agonizing, broken only by her shaky, ragged breathing.

"They don't know if he'll ever walk again," she whispered, the words a hammer blow.

Iida's hand tightened around the phone until his knuckles turned stark white. His breath caught, trapped in his throat. For the first time in his meticulously ordered life, Tenya Iida had no words.

When he returned to the waiting area, he sat quietly, his gaze fixed on his clasped hands, his usual unshakeable composure shattered into a million pieces.

Uraraka leaned forward, her brow furrowed with genuine concern. "Iida? Are you okay?"

"I…" Iida forced a strained, mechanical smile, a grotesque parody of his usual cheer. "I'm fine. Please… don't worry about me." But the almost imperceptible tremor in his hands, hidden in his lap, betrayed him completely.

The stadium's mood hadn't improved by the awards ceremony. Present Mic tried to rally the crowd, his voice booming with forced enthusiasm: "AND NOW, THE AWARDS CEREMONY! LET'S CELEBRATE OUR FINALISTS!"

The three stepped onto the podiums, bathed in the harsh glare of the spotlights: Todoroki, an enigma of calm and unreadable stillness. Izuku, steady, composed despite the thousands of eyes dissecting his every move. And Bakugo, rigid on the highest podium, his fists clenched so tightly they trembled, his jaw locked in silent, furious frustration.

Toshinori, in his civilian form, approached with the gleaming medals. His smile was warm, genuine, a beacon of reassurance as he presented each award.

He placed the medal gently around Todoroki's neck, then pulled him into a brief, firm hug. "You fought with strength and precision, Shoto," Toshinori said warmly, his voice a low rumble. "But more than that… you chose to move forward, even when it wasn't easy. That's something to be proud of."

Todoroki blinked, startled by the unexpected warmth, but nodded, his expression softening almost imperceptibly. "…Thank you."

Toshinori moved to Izuku, placing the medal around his neck with a proud, almost paternal smile before embracing him tightly. "You've grown so much, young Midoriya," Toshinori said, his voice low but thick with pride. "Not just in power, but in heart. What you did out there—it's the undeniable mark of a true hero."

Izuku's face flushed crimson, but he smiled, a genuine, heartfelt expression. "Thank you, All Might… I just did what felt right."

Toshinori squeezed his shoulder, a silent affirmation. "That's why it was right."

Toshinori turned to Bakugo last, his smile softening into something more serious, laced with a hint of sorrow, as he placed the medal. Then, to everyone's surprise, he pulled Bakugo into a hug as well.

Bakugo stiffened instantly, his body tense, rigid, his jaw clenched so tight it trembled.

"You're strong, young Bakugo," Toshinori said, his voice quiet but firm, resonating with a deeper meaning. "But strength alone isn't enough. Heroes need more than power—they need to know when to stop, when to protect, and when to let go of pride. You have the potential to be truly great, but you must learn control."

Bakugo's fists tightened further, trembling uncontrollably in Toshinori's hold. He didn't respond, his furious glare fixed straight ahead, teeth gritted so hard they audibly scraped. Toshinori stepped back, his gaze lingering a moment longer, filled with a quiet plea, before moving on.

The ceremony concluded with polite, almost hesitant applause, utterly lacking its usual vibrant energy. The three students stood under the spotlight, each lost in their own private thoughts—Todoroki in quiet, profound reflection, Izuku in determined, unwavering calm, and Bakugo in silent, simmering, all-consuming rage.

Hours later, the Sports Festival's oppressive weight still lingered for Izuku, a phantom ache in his bones. Cheers, the brutal clashes, even Bakugo's raw, desperate screams—everything felt distant, muffled, as he stepped into the familiar, comforting warmth of home.

"Mom, I'm back," he called softly, his voice a little hoarse.

"Izuku!" Before he could even take off his shoes, his mother rushed from the kitchen, tears already streaming down her face as she threw her arms around him in a fierce, crushing hug.

"YOU WERE AMAZING!" Inko wailed, her voice thick with emotion, clinging to him tightly. "Absolutely amazing! I can't believe how much you've grown!"

"Mom, it's okay, really—"

"No, it's not okay!" Inko sniffled, clutching him tighter, her tears soaking his shirt. "You fought so hard, and you looked so brave—"

Izuku's own throat tightened, a sudden, overwhelming wave of emotion washing over him. Tears welled in his eyes, blurring his vision, and soon, they were both crying—loudly, comically, clinging to each other in the narrow hallway, a shared release of tension and pride.

"I-I didn't even win!" Izuku sobbed, his voice cracking.

"I don't care!" Inko wailed back, her voice muffled against his shoulder. "You're my champion, Izuku!"

They stayed like that, laughing through their tears, before finally pulling back, sniffling and wiping their faces with embarrassed, tear-streaked smiles.

Later, at the dinner table, steam rose in fragrant wisps from Inko's home-cooked food, filling the air with comforting aromas. The quiet warmth of the house wrapped around them like a soft blanket.

Inko glanced at him, her expression softening, a hint of sadness in her eyes. After a long, thoughtful pause, she gently set her chopsticks down. "Your father… called during the awards ceremony," she said softly, her voice barely above a whisper.

Izuku paused, chopsticks halfway to his mouth, a sudden stillness settling over him.

"He wanted me to tell you congratulations," Inko continued, her eyes searching his face, trying to gauge his reaction. "He said he's proud of you."

For a moment, Izuku said nothing. His smile came slowly, polite but a little too practiced, a little too thin. "That's… nice of him," he said, his voice carefully even, devoid of any real emotion. "Please thank him for me, Mom."

Then, without another word, he went back to eating, his tone cheerful, almost forced, but his eyes remained carefully unreadable, a curtain drawn over his true feelings.

Inko watched him, her heart twisting with a familiar ache. She smiled sadly, picking up her chopsticks, saying nothing—because she already knew how he really felt.

The Sports Festival hadn't really ended; its fumes still lingered, a pervasive scent of controversy and judgment. Overnight, every news outlet, streaming platform, and social feed was alive, buzzing with analysis and debate. The fights replayed across Japan, but one clip dominated, endlessly looping: Izuku Midoriya walking away with quiet resolve, his armor dissolving, while Bakugo Katsuki stood alone in the arena, fists trembling, pathetic sparks sputtering as he screamed after him.

On HeroTV, a sharply dressed commentator gestured to the frozen image of Bakugo's furious, contorted face. "This was supposed to be a hero showcase," she said firmly, her voice cutting through the studio's quiet hum. "What Katsuki Bakugo displayed wasn't heroic. He won, yes, but he lost his composure completely. Pro agencies won't overlook that kind of liability."

Another panelist, a veteran hero with weary eyes, nodded grimly. "Meanwhile, Izuku Midoriya? Remarkable restraint. Even knowing he could've pushed for outright victory, he walked away before things escalated too far. That's hero instinct right there, pure and unadulterated."

A third, trying to mediate, offered a placating hand. "Bakugo is undeniably powerful. His destructive capabilities are immense. But heroes aren't just fighters. They're public symbols. You simply can't be seen as unstable, not in this profession."

Social media exploded with edits, memes, new hashtags, and furious debate. The most shared video was a slow-motion clip of Izuku turning his back as Bakugo raged, captioned simply: "The Hero and the Hothead."

Comments flooded in, a relentless tide of public opinion:

"That Midoriya kid has the heart of a real hero. Unwavering."

"Bakugo's strong, but if he acts like this now, what happens in a real crisis? He'd be a danger to civilians."

"Can you imagine him yelling at civilians like that? No thanks. Hard pass."

A few brave souls defended Bakugo, calling him "passionate" and "determined," but the vast majority agreed: Midoriya had looked like the true professional, the one worthy of admiration.

In agency offices across Japan, decisions were already being ironed out, futures quietly shaped. "Drop Bakugo from consideration," one PR manager said bluntly, flipping through profiles with a dismissive flick of her wrist. "He's too much of a liability, too unpredictable."

"Combat-only agencies might still want him," another admitted, tapping a pen against her chin, "but rescue and support-heavy agencies won't risk their reputation on someone so volatile."

By stark contrast, Midoriya's name came up again and again, a beacon of promise:

"Smart, calm under pressure, and shows incredible initiative."

"He's a natural strategist—exactly the type we need for complex operations."

"He came in second, but his sportsmanship and poise sold him to the public. He's marketable."

The consensus was clear, solidified with each passing hour: Izuku Midoriya was already seen as the kind of hero people wanted to believe in, the future they craved.

Class 1-A gathered in their homeroom, the country's reaction still hanging in the air like an unspoken accusation. Phones lit up with HeroNet notifications, a constant, subtle glow, but no one dared mention it out loud—not with Bakugo sitting in the room, a coiled spring of barely contained fury.

He sat at his desk, stiff and silent, his fists clenched, small, angry sparks occasionally popping from his palms. His jaw was locked tight, a rigid mask, his glare fixed straight ahead, burning a hole in the empty space before him.

Iida sat nearby, equally quiet but for a very different, far more agonizing reason, his hands clasped tightly in his lap, his gaze distant. His mind clearly wasn't on the Sports Festival, or anything as trivial as internship offers.

The door slid open with a soft thunk, and Aizawa stepped in, his tired, bloodshot stare scanning the class, missing nothing. "The results are in," he said flatly, his voice a low monotone, as the classroom monitor flickered to life, bathing the room in a pale glow. "Internship offers. Pay attention. The numbers matter."

The list appeared in bold, stark letters, names descending from most to least offers.

At the very top, as expected, a name that drew no surprise: Todoroki Shoto – thousands of offers. Todoroki sat calmly, a statue of indifference, giving no reaction whatsoever.

Then the next name drew surprised whispers, a ripple of astonishment through the room: Midoriya Izuku – far, far higher than anyone expected.

"Whoa, Midoriya got that many?" Kaminari muttered, his eyes wide.

Jirou raised an eyebrow, a flicker of admiration in her gaze. "Guess the pros really liked how he handled himself. That composure."

Uraraka smiled brightly, her face alight with genuine happiness. "That's amazing, Izuku!"

Izuku gave a sheepish smile, rubbing the back of his neck, a faint blush creeping up his cheeks. "I-I guess they liked how I fought…"

Then came Bakugo Katsuki—ranked lower than expected for the festival's champion. Not low, no, but nowhere near Todoroki or, more gallingly, Midoriya.

Kirishima frowned, his usual cheerful expression replaced by a thoughtful grimace. "Huh. That's… a lot less than I thought he'd get."

"Guess the pros didn't like the whole screaming thing," Kaminari whispered, earning a sharp elbow from Jirou, who shot him a warning glare.

Bakugo didn't move. He sat rigid, a statue of barely contained fury, his glare locked on the screen, his fists clenched, knuckles white. Small, agitated sparks popped faintly from his palms, and the grinding of his teeth was audibly sharp in the sudden quiet. The air grew thick, heavy with unspoken tension, as the brutal realization settled in: the country had judged him—and found him lacking.

While the rest of the class buzzed with hushed excitement, Iida remained quiet, his gaze fixed downward, his tablet lying dark and untouched on his desk. Izuku noticed how tightly his friend's hands were clasped, the faint tremor in his fingers.

Iida's mother's panicked, broken voice from the night before still rang in his head, a relentless, agonizing echo.

"Your brother—Tensei—he was attacked. Hero Killer: Stain. He's in critical condition, Tenya. They don't know if he'll ever walk again…"

Iida's jaw tightened, a muscle twitching in his cheek, his usual perfect posture faltering as his thoughts darkened, consumed by a chilling, singular purpose.

Izuku glanced at him, a flicker of worry in his eyes, but said nothing, respecting the unspoken wall Iida had erected.

The classroom continued its quiet buzz after Aizawa turned off the monitor. Most students whispered about their offers, comparing numbers, their excitement slowly returning.

But Bakugo sat frozen at his desk, fists clenched, knuckles white, sparks popping faintly, a low, angry hum vibrating from him. His jaw was tight, teeth grinding. The longer the chatter continued, the quieter it seemed to get around him, as if the entire class could feel the suffocating tension radiating from his desk, a silent warning.

Finally, with a sharp BANG, his palms slammed onto the desk, the sudden, violent sound making several students jump, their whispers dying instantly.

"WHAT THE HELL IS THIS?!" Bakugo barked, his voice cracking with raw, unadulterated fury. The room went silent instantly, every eye snapping to him.

He stood abruptly, glaring at the now-dark screen. His face was flushed, a furious crimson, his breathing sharp, ragged. "I'M THE ONE WHO WON!" he shouted, sparks flaring violently around his hands. "I BEAT EVERY SINGLE ONE OF THEM, SO WHY THE HELL ARE THESE NUMBERS SO LOW?!"

No one spoke. Kaminari opened his mouth, a nervous sound escaping, but Jirou elbowed him sharply, a silent command to stay quiet.

Bakugo turned sharply, his furious glare locking onto Izuku, a direct, venomous challenge.

"And YOU—" His voice dripped with venom, a poisonous hiss. "You got more offers than me. You. The loser who WALKED AWAY from our fight!"

Izuku stayed seated, calm, unmoving, but his eyes narrowed slightly, a hint of steel entering their emerald depths.

"You're angry because of the numbers, Bakugo," Izuku said evenly, his voice steady, unwavering. "But you know why they're low. The pros saw how you acted. They don't just care about who's stronger. They care about who can be a hero."

"DON'T YOU DARE TALK LIKE YOU'RE BETTER THAN ME!" Bakugo roared, stepping closer, his explosions flaring bright and hot enough to make the desks rattle, the air crackle with volatile energy. "YOU THINK YOU KNOW WHAT IT TAKES TO BE A HERO?!"

Izuku didn't flinch, didn't even twitch. He met Bakugo's furious gaze head-on.

"I'm not saying I'm better than you," he said firmly, standing now, his tone calm but resolute, a quiet strength radiating from him. "But they saw who you were out there, Bakugo. They saw you lose control. Heroes can't do that. Not when lives are on the line."

Bakugo's teeth grit, a harsh, grating sound, his breathing sharp, almost ragged, like a cornered animal. His hands shook violently, sparks popping dangerously close to Izuku's desk, threatening to ignite the air.

For a terrifying moment, it looked like he was about to attack, to unleash a full-blown explosion in the classroom, but Aizawa's voice cut through the tension, sharp and cold, like a blade of ice.

"Bakugo."

The single word froze him mid-step, mid-explosion, a sudden, absolute halt.

"If you even think about throwing an explosion in this classroom," Aizawa said, his tired eyes, now glowing red, locking onto him with an unnerving intensity, "I'll have you suspended for the week. Sit down. Now."

Bakugo stood rigid for a long, agonizing moment, his furious glare still locked on Izuku, his body vibrating with suppressed rage, but finally he clicked his tongue sharply, a sound of pure frustration, turning back to his desk.

"Tch."

He sat down heavily, the chair screeching in protest, his fists still clenched, his body practically vibrating with barely contained anger, a low, dangerous hum.

The room remained silent for several moments after, no one daring to speak, the air thick with the aftermath of the confrontation. Izuku sat back down slowly, his gaze briefly flicking to Bakugo, then settling on Iida. He's not just angry about the numbers. He's angry at himself… but he doesn't know how to deal with it. He let out a quiet sigh, his gaze shifting toward Iida, who still sat quietly, staring at his hands, a shadow of despair on his face. And Bakugo isn't the only one hurting right now…

The suffocating silence after Bakugo's outburst slowly faded as Aizawa tapped the monitor again, bringing up a new list, a new distraction. "Enough staring at numbers," he said flatly, his voice devoid of emotion. "Choose your internships. Agencies will expect responses within the day. If you don't choose, you won't get the experience—and for some of you, this may be your only chance to leave an impression."

The tension eased, a collective exhale, as students turned to their tablets, scrolling through agencies, a tentative buzz of conversation beginning.

Kaminari leaned over to Kirishima, a nervous grin on his face despite the earlier tension. "Man, you're so lucky. Look at all these combat agencies! Totally your thing, bro."

Kirishima grinned back, though his eyes were still thoughtful. "Yeah, but I gotta pick someone manly, you know? Someone who actually fits my style, someone with guts."

Momo sat nearby, meticulously flipping through listings, her brow furrowed in concentration. "It's important to think long-term. Some specialize in rescue, others in combat. Pick based on what kind of hero you truly want to be, what kind of impact you want to make."

Uraraka nodded, smiling brightly as she scrolled through her own options. "I'm definitely picking someone who can help me with rescue stuff. You know, so I can… save people like a real pro, lift them to safety!"

The class atmosphere grew lighter, the earlier storm slowly dissipating, replaced by a hopeful, excited hum.

Izuku stared at his tablet, scrolling through the flood of offers, a dizzying array of names. Some were huge, legendary pros he'd only seen on TV, figures of almost mythical status.

Shoji leaned slightly toward him, his voice a low rumble. "Have you decided?"

Izuku shook his head, a small, thoughtful frown on his face. "Not yet. Honestly, I'd be fine with any decent hero. I just… want to learn as much as I can, absorb everything."

Shoji nodded, a quiet understanding in his eyes. "Practical mindset. That's good."

"Yeah," Izuku said with a small, earnest smile. "If they can teach me how to use what I have better, how to truly master it, then that's all I need."

Across the room, Todoroki sat silently, his tablet idle, his thoughts clearly elsewhere, a distant look in his mismatched eyes. He didn't even glance at the list; his focus was internal, on a battle only he could fight.

Bakugo, meanwhile, scrolled stiffly, his jaw still locked, a muscle twitching in his cheek. Though he said nothing, his white-knuckled grip on the tablet told everyone he was still simmering, a volcano of suppressed rage.

Aizawa let them continue in peace, his gaze briefly flicking to Bakugo, then to Iida, who still sat unusually quiet, his tablet untouched, his face a mask of internal turmoil.

"Make your choices by the end of the period," Aizawa said simply, his voice a flat command. "Don't waste this opportunity. It won't come again easily."

As the class settled back into murmured discussions, Izuku glanced once more at Iida. His friend hadn't moved, hands clasped tightly, eyes downcast, a picture of profound distress. Something was wrong—deeply, fundamentally wrong. But for now, Izuku said nothing, a silent promise forming in his mind. One thing at a time.

The class slowly relaxed again as everyone compared notes on agencies, their earlier tension giving way to a lighter, almost excited atmosphere, the promise of new experiences shimmering in the air.

Uraraka leaned over Izuku's desk, her tablet clutched in her hands, her face bright with enthusiasm. "Izuku, look! I think I'm going to pick this rescue-focused agency. They've got a great record, and… well, I want to be good at saving people first, you know? Lifting them to safety."

Izuku smiled at her infectious enthusiasm. "That's a great choice, Uraraka. Rescue work is… it's the very heart of being a hero. The most important part."

Momo, sitting nearby, glanced up from her own meticulously curated list. "I'm still debating, but I think I'll pick someone with strong tactical training. If I'm to use my Quirk more efficiently, to truly master its potential, I need structured, rigorous guidance."

Shoji nodded thoughtfully, his multiple arms folded. "Good thinking. I'll pick someone focused on reconnaissance. Better to learn from specialists, to become a master of observation."

Izuku nodded. "That's a smart plan. Everyone's thinking strategically."

But the cheerful hum dimmed slightly when Shoji's gaze shifted toward Iida. The class president sat stiffly at his desk, his tablet untouched, his hands clasped so tightly his knuckles were white. His posture, normally perfect and upright, looked forced, almost brittle, his eyes fixed downward, lost in a private abyss.

Shoji frowned slightly, a ripple of concern crossing his usually impassive features. "Iida… you haven't chosen yet?"

Iida jolted, as if pulled violently from a deep, dark thought. "O-Oh, no, I just… haven't decided," he stammered, his voice unnaturally high.

Uraraka tilted her head, her brow furrowed with genuine worry. "You're usually the first one to take things seriously, Iida. Is everything okay? You seem… distant."

Iida's smile came too quickly, too polite, a fragile mask. "Of course. Please don't worry about me. I'm perfectly fine." But his voice lacked its usual booming confidence, and his hands tightened almost imperceptibly, a tell-tale tremor.

The others exchanged uneasy glances, unconvinced, but no one pressed further, sensing the invisible wall he'd erected. Iida looked back down at his tablet, but his eyes were distant, unfocused, as though he wasn't really seeing it at all.

The end-of-period bell chimed, a sharp, metallic sound, and Aizawa waved them off lazily, already retreating into his sleeping bag. "Decide before you leave today. Don't make me chase you for it. This isn't a game."

Students began packing up, chatting excitedly again, a wave of eager anticipation washing over the room, but Izuku's gaze lingered on Iida as they stood to leave. He's lying. Something's profoundly wrong. But for now, Izuku said nothing, a silent promise forming in his heart.

The afternoon sun cast long, stretching shadows over the U.A. courtyard as students trickled out, their voices a cheerful murmur, chatting about internships and the lingering excitement of the Sports Festival.

Izuku walked alongside Uraraka, Momo, and Shoji, their tablets clutched in hand as they discussed their choices, the future unfolding before them.

"I think I'll go with Gunhead," Uraraka said cheerfully, her voice bright. "It's a bit more combat-oriented than I planned, but maybe it's good to toughen up, right? To be ready for anything."

"Good thinking," Momo agreed, her tone thoughtful. "Even rescue-focused heroes need to understand close-quarters combat. Versatility is key."

Shoji nodded, his multiple arms folded. "The more versatile you are, the better. Adaptability ensures survival."

Izuku smiled faintly, a thoughtful expression on his face. "I'm still deciding, but… honestly, any agency that can help me refine what I already have, to truly master my Quirk, would be fine. Even if it's not a big name, a flashy one."

"Always so humble," Uraraka teased, grinning, nudging him playfully. "You got so many offers, Izuku. That's amazing, really!"

Izuku chuckled nervously, a faint blush on his cheeks. "It's not really that amazing. I just… got lucky this time. Honestly, after everything with Bakugo, I can't—" He stopped himself mid-sentence, the words catching in his throat.

The three paused, looking at him curiously, a sudden stillness in their steps.

Momo tilted her head, her expression one of gentle inquiry. "Everything with Bakugo?"

Izuku hesitated, shifting uncomfortably, his gaze darting away. "…It's just… his behavior at the Festival wasn't really new to me. He's always been… intense. Lately, though, it's gotten worse. All the pressure's just been making it… stronger, more volatile."

Shoji frowned, his brow furrowed. "So what we saw wasn't really that unusual for him? That outburst?"

Izuku glanced away, his voice quiet, almost a whisper. "…No. Not really. If I'm being honest, if he'd been this intense back in junior high, I probably would've kept my distance completely. Avoided him entirely."

Momo stopped walking, turning to face him fully, her expression serious. Her tone was calm, but firm, leaving no room for doubt. "In other words, bullying."

Izuku froze, his mouth opening slightly to try and deny what all of them already knew, what he had tried to bury for years, but nothing came out. His shoulders sagged, a heavy weight of resignation settling over him. "…I guess you could call it that," he admitted quietly, the words tasting bitter.

Uraraka frowned, genuine concern in her eyes, her hand reaching out instinctively. "Izuku…"

He forced a small, reassuring smile, a fragile attempt at normalcy. "It's fine. That was a long time ago. He's… different now? Or at least, he's trying to be. The Festival just… pushed him too far, made him snap."

The three exchanged uneasy glances, a silent acknowledgment of the unspoken truth, but none pressed further. They started walking again, but the mood was quieter now, heavier, a shadow cast over their earlier cheer. Behind them, a few passing students slowed, catching fragments of the conversation, exchanging knowing looks before hurrying off—whispers already starting to form, spreading like a ripple in a still pond.

By evening, the whispers in the courtyard had turned into quiet, insistent conversations in dorm lounges, hushed tones in hallways, and furtive murmurs in cafeterias. At first, it was just students from other classes, their curiosity piqued:

"You heard about Bakugo, right? Midoriya apparently said his attitude's nothing new. That he's always been like that."

"Makes sense. You don't just suddenly act like that under pressure. It's gotta be ingrained."

But it didn't stay confined to U.A. for long. A post on HeroNet started gaining traction late that night, a digital spark igniting a wildfire:

KawasakiRyo: Not surprised at all. I went to Aldera Junior High with Bakugo. He always picked on the Quirkless kids, especially that green-haired Midoriya guy. He acted like he owned the place, the king of his own little castle.

Replies flooded in, a torrent of digital outrage:

Ayane\_Chan: "Wait, seriously? So the Sports Festival wasn't a fluke? This is just… him?"

MoriHeroFan: "Explains the attitude. If he bullied Quirkless kids before, imagine what he's like with power now. Terrifying."

Keiji\_Go: "Wow. And THIS kid wants to be a hero?! The irony!"

More so-called "former classmates" chimed in—some genuine, their memories vivid, some likely exaggerating for clout, for their moment in the digital spotlight:

HeroNerd42: "I saw him blow up a notebook once. Pretty sure it belonged to Midoriya. Just disintegrated it."

Anon\_Truth: "Bakugo called kids 'extras.' Literally said that to people's faces, like they were beneath him."

Mitsuki Bakugo slammed her palm against the kitchen counter, the sharp crack echoing in the quiet room, glaring at her phone, her face a mask of exasperation. "Oh, for crying out loud," she muttered, a low growl. "Now this? That idiot kid's making himself look worse by the day, digging his own grave."

Masaru sighed, rubbing his temple, a weary gesture. "People love to exaggerate online, Mitsuki. They sensationalize everything. But… it's not like some of it isn't true. We know that."

"Don't remind me," Mitsuki grumbled, her voice tight with frustration. "If he doesn't straighten out soon, no agency's gonna touch him with a ten-foot pole. He'll be blacklisted."

Morning light filtered through the classroom windows, casting soft, pale rectangles on the desks, but Class 1-A was unusually subdued. The usual vibrant chatter was replaced with hushed voices, low enough to pass as background noise—except everyone could feel the tension, a thick, suffocating blanket in the air.

A small group whispered near the back. "Did you see HeroNet last night?" Kaminari whispered to Mina, his voice barely audible. "People are saying Bakugo used to bully Midoriya in junior high. Maybe even longer, like it was a long-standing thing."

Mina frowned, twirling her pen idly, her expression thoughtful. "Honestly… it doesn't sound that far-fetched. He's been going after Midoriya since day one, like a magnet."

Sero shrugged, a casual gesture that didn't quite hide the unease in his eyes. "Yeah, but people tend to exaggerate online, right? Who knows how bad it really all was? It could be blown out of proportion."

Jirou, crossing her arms, shot him a sharp, knowing look. "We all saw him at the Festival. He snapped. If that's how he acts now, imagine him back in school when he had less to lose, less to control."

At the front, Kirishima sat quietly, arms crossed, listening despite trying not to, every word piercing through his usual easygoing demeanor. His usual bright, confident grin was gone, replaced by a thoughtful frown, a deep crease between his brows. He'd always defended Bakugo—told himself the guy was just passionate, driven, a force of nature. But now, hearing it from classmates and seeing how quickly the rumor caught fire, how it spread like an uncontrollable blaze, that justification felt hollow, crumbling to dust.

Mineta, perched beside him, leaned in, his voice hushed, conspiratorial. "Hey, Kirishima… you're close to Bakugo, right? Do you think it's true? That he bullied Midoriya?"

Kirishima's jaw tightened, a muscle twitching, his eyes fixed on his desk, avoiding Mineta's gaze. "…I don't know," he muttered after a long, heavy pause, the words dragged from him. "But if it is…" His brow furrowed deeper, his voice dropping to a low, grim whisper. "…that's not very manly at all. Not heroic."

Mineta blinked, surprised by the unexpected edge in his tone, but didn't press further, sensing the raw emotion beneath.

The classroom door slid open sharply, a sudden, jarring sound, and silence dropped like a stone, instant and absolute.

Bakugo strode in, his glare as sharp as ever, a cutting blade, his jaw tight, a rigid line. He could feel the eyes on him, a thousand silent judgments, even as students pretended to look away, their gazes darting. The air was thick, heavy with unspoken words, with accusation. He dropped into his seat with a loud thunk, sparks crackling faintly around his hands as he stared hard at his desk, willing it to disappear.

For a moment, no one said anything. The quiet was suffocating, a heavy blanket of unspoken tension.

Then Kaminari, too distracted, too nervous to keep his mouth shut, muttered under his breath, "Guess the rumors got to him…"

Bakugo's head snapped up immediately, crimson eyes burning with a furious intensity. "The hell did you just say?!" he barked, standing so fast his chair screeched against the floor, a piercing sound.

Kaminari flinched, hands up in a placating gesture. "I-It's nothing, man, relax—"

"Shut it!" Bakugo snarled, his gaze sweeping the room, a furious, predatory gleam in his eyes. "All of you—what the hell are you whispering about behind my back?!"

No one answered. The terrified silence only made his anger spike, a red haze descending. His glare landed on Izuku, a direct, burning accusation, and that was all it took.

"You!" Bakugo jabbed a finger, his hand trembling with rage. "You started this, didn't you?! Running your damn mouth about crap that doesn't matter anymore!"

Izuku stood slowly, calmly, meeting his glare with steady, unwavering eyes. "Bakugo, I didn't tell anyone anything. People overheard yesterday. I wasn't trying to spread anything. It just… came out."

"Bullshit!" Bakugo snapped, stepping closer, explosions sparking violently around his hands, the air crackling with his fury. "Don't act like you didn't know this would happen! You think you're better than me now, huh?! Just because the pros like you more, you think you're hot stuff?!"

Izuku's expression hardened, a quiet resolve settling over his features. "This isn't about being better. People are talking because of how you acted at the Festival. And… because of how you treated me before. You can't just pretend it never happened, Bakugo. It's part of your history."

Bakugo's teeth grit, a harsh, grinding sound, his body trembling with uncontrollable rage, and then—

"Yeah, fine!" he shouted, his voice cracking slightly, a raw, desperate sound. "So I pushed you around when we were kids! So what?! You think I give a damn what a bunch of extras think?!"

The class went silent, a collective gasp, the brutal, raw admission hanging heavy in the air, a shocking, undeniable truth.

Kirishima stared, jaw tight, his usual bright expression gone, replaced by a look of profound disappointment. "…So it's true," he said quietly, his voice calm but firm, a quiet accusation. "You really did bully him. All this time…"

Bakugo froze for half a second, his glare twitching toward Kirishima, a flicker of surprise, then a deeper rage. For a moment, it looked like he might deny it, might lash out, but instead he clicked his tongue sharply, a sound of pure frustration, turning back toward his desk. "Tch. Whatever. Believe whatever you want. It doesn't matter." He dropped into his seat heavily, glaring at his desk, his fists still sparking faintly, a low, angry hum.

Kirishima kept his gaze on him for a long moment, disappointment clear in his eyes, before finally looking away, a silent judgment passed.

Izuku sat back down slowly, glancing at Kirishima, then at Bakugo. Kacchan… you didn't even try to deny it. The room remained quiet, the oppressive weight of Bakugo's words still hanging over them, a heavy shroud.

Class 1-A filled with soft chatter as students finalized internship selections, the air buzzing with a renewed sense of purpose. Excitement was palpable, a vibrant energy, but for some, the tension from the Sports Festival still lingered like a shadow, a persistent, unwelcome guest.

Uraraka leaned toward Izuku's desk, smiling brightly, her face alight with eagerness. "So, have you picked yet, Izuku? You've got so many big names! Ryukyu, Thirteen, Kamui Woods—this is huge! You're in demand!"

Izuku's eyes scanned the list, fingers scrolling slowly, deliberately. Those names were tempting, legendary figures, but he paused when another appeared, a name that commanded respect and demanded excellence: Sir Nighteye.

Uraraka noticed his hesitation, her brow furrowed slightly. "You're thinking about him? Isn't he, like… super strict? I heard his internships are brutal, like a trial by fire."

Izuku nodded slightly, his expression calm but resolute, a quiet determination settling over him. "That's why. If I want to keep improving, to truly push my limits, I can't just pick someone who's easy to work under. Sir Nighteye won't hold back, he'll demand everything, and… I need that. I need to be pushed."

Shoji, sitting nearby, tilted his head, his multiple eyes observing Izuku keenly. "You sound like you've already decided."

Izuku gave a small, almost imperceptible smile, his eyes still locked on the name, a silent commitment. "I have." With a deliberate tap, he selected Nighteye's agency, sealing his fate.

Uraraka grinned, though she looked slightly worried, a hint of trepidation in her eyes. "Well… good luck. You're definitely going to need it. He's a tough one."

Izuku just smiled back, a quiet, unwavering determination burning in his emerald eyes.

The sun reflected off the sleek, pristine glass of Sir Nighteye's agency, its immaculate facade gleaming under the midday light, almost blinding in its perfection. Izuku stood before the imposing entrance, his bag strap gripped tightly, his knuckles white. The building loomed, a silent, unyielding giant, but it wasn't the size that tightened his chest—it was the weight of what this choice meant, the unspoken expectations.

He drew in a steadying breath, the cool air filling his lungs, but a memory surfaced, unbidden. After training weeks ago, Mirio had stayed behind to help with drills, pushing him, guiding him. They'd sat together on the edge of the field, sweat clinging to their uniforms, the setting sun casting long shadows.

Mirio's tone had been softer than usual, serious in a way that made Izuku pay closer attention, his usual boundless energy subdued. "You know, Midoriya… Nighteye doesn't usually do internships."

Izuku blinked, surprised. "Really? But he's one of the top pros, a legend—"

Mirio shook his head, his bright, optimistic smile fading, replaced by a thoughtful frown. "I mean it. In all the years I've trained under him, he's never taken anyone else. Not once. So if he asked for you, if he specifically sought you out, it's because he already has something in mind. Nighteye doesn't do anything without a reason, a calculated purpose."

Izuku frowned, a knot of unease tightening in his stomach. "…Do you think that's a good thing?"

Mirio hesitated, then smiled again, a hint of worry, a shadow of concern in his eyes. "That depends. On whether you're ready for him to really see what you can do. All of it. The good, the bad, and the potential."

The memory faded, leaving Izuku staring at his reflection in the agency's gleaming glass doors. He's never chosen anyone else before. He's going to be watching everything I do. Not just as a student—maybe not even as a hero-in-training. To him, I'm still a risk he's trying to solve, a variable to be understood.

His hand tightened on his bag strap, green eyes sharpening with quiet, fierce resolve. "…Then I'll prove him wrong. I'll show him I'm not a risk. No matter what it takes."

With that, Izuku pushed open the glass doors, the faint hiss of the mechanism echoing in the hushed lobby, and stepped inside. His footsteps echoed on the polished floor, each one firm and deliberate, a silent declaration, as he moved toward whatever awaited him.

The lobby of Sir Nighteye's agency was immaculate—polished floors gleamed under soft, recessed lighting, perfectly organized files stood in silent rows, and an almost oppressive stillness permeated the air, a sense of controlled order. Izuku stood at attention, his bag neatly at his feet, his posture rigid. His heartbeat quickened, a frantic drum against his ribs, each second heavier than the last, stretched taut with anticipation.

Then he heard it: slow, deliberate footsteps, echoing with a quiet authority.

Mirai Sakaki—Sir Nighteye himself—entered with the same precise, almost mechanical movements that defined him. His posture was impeccable, his crisp suit as sharp as his gaze behind rectangular, wire-rimmed glasses.

"Midoriya Izuku," Mirai said, his voice calm, clipped, devoid of warmth. "You arrived precisely on time. Good. Punctuality is the bare minimum, the foundation of discipline."

Izuku straightened instinctively, bowing slightly, a respectful, almost automatic gesture. "Yes, Sir Nighteye. Thank you for accepting me."

Mirai's eyes, sharp and analytical, swept over him once, a swift, dispassionate glance, and Izuku felt dissected—measured, categorized, judged in the profound silence.

"You chose me," Mirai said after a long, assessing moment, his tone neutral, but with the faintest, almost imperceptible hint of curiosity, a flicker of interest. "I had a feeling you would, of course. Hence why I threw in my name. Still, I am interested in hearing it from you. Why?"

Izuku met his gaze, his voice steady, unwavering, infused with a quiet conviction. "Because I want to get stronger. To truly understand my power. And I know you won't go easy on me. I need someone who can push me past my limits—and someone who can teach me how to control myself better, how to master my instincts."

For a brief second, Mirai's brow twitched, a fleeting, almost imperceptible movement, as if amused by the honesty, though his expression quickly returned to its customary severity.

"You're self-aware enough to know you need control," he said evenly, his voice a flat statement of fact. "Good. But awareness doesn't equal discipline. And discipline doesn't equal mastery. They are distinct concepts."

Mirai stepped closer, his presence looming without ever raising his voice, an aura of quiet authority radiating from him. "Understand this, Midoriya: I didn't bring you here to praise you, to coddle you. I brought you here because I need to know whether you're a potential hero… or a potential disaster waiting to happen, a force unleashed without proper guidance."

The words hit hard, striking Izuku like a physical blow, Mirai's tone matter-of-fact, not cruel—like stating a simple, unavoidable, brutal truth.

Izuku tightened his fists, his knuckles white, but nodded, his voice firm, resolute. "Then I'll show you that I'm not. I'll prove it to you. I'll earn your trust."

Mirai adjusted his glasses, the faint gleam reflecting the overhead lights, studying him a moment longer before turning toward the door that led deeper into the agency, into the unknown. "Good. Then follow me. We'll see if your actions can match your words, if your resolve is as strong as you claim."

Without waiting, Mirai walked ahead, his footsteps precise, measured, echoing in the quiet. Izuku inhaled once, a deep, steadying breath, before following, stepping into the challenge.

The training chamber was nothing like U.A.'s bright, spacious gyms. It was a fully enclosed urban simulation—rows of faux buildings, their facades scarred with mock damage, narrow, winding alleyways, scattered debris arranged with surgical precision. Every corner looked intentional, designed to funnel, trap, or misdirect, a labyrinth built for combat.

Mirai stood on an elevated observation platform, his arms folded behind his back, his gaze locked onto Izuku below, a silent, judging presence. Monitors displayed multiple camera angles, feeding live data into a complex system recording Izuku's every movement, every breath, every flicker of hesitation.

Izuku stood at the starting point, glancing at the intricate, dangerous layout. His heart was steady, a calm drum in his chest, but the weight of Mirai's intense scrutiny pressed down on him, a palpable force.

"Sir Nighteye… what exactly is the objective?" Izuku asked carefully, his voice cutting through the hum of machinery.

Mirai's voice came through a speaker, calm and clipped, devoid of emotion. "Survive. The scenario mimics a villain ambush in a dense urban zone. Neutralize hostile targets while minimizing collateral damage. Excessive destruction will be counted against you. Precision is paramount."

Izuku nodded, already analyzing the terrain, mapping out potential routes and escape paths. "Understood."

Mirai's gaze sharpened, adjusting his glasses, the faint gleam reflecting the monitors. "You may begin."

Immediately, the walls whirred with a low, mechanical growl. Multiple drones shot from hidden compartments, sleek black machines armed with non-lethal stun rounds and blunt, impact-absorbing projectiles.

Izuku dashed forward, movements fluid, almost instinctual, calculating angles and cover with lightning speed. He ducked behind a faux wall as rubber bullets shattered against concrete, sending chips flying, then leaped over an alley barrier, knocking a drone out of the air with a precise, controlled kick.

But the drones adapted quickly, their artificial intelligence learning, evolving. More emerged, attack patterns shifting to cut off his escape, to box him in. From the platform, Mirai's eyes narrowed, noting every single move, every micro-adjustment. He's already reading their patterns… good. But he's still reactive. Instinctive. He needs to control the field, to dictate the terms, not just survive it.

Below, Izuku landed in a low crouch, breathing steady despite the increasing barrage, the relentless assault. His mind raced, mapping routes, calculating trajectories. Too many drones in the open areas… need to funnel them into tighter alleys where they can't surround me, where their numbers become a disadvantage. He darted into a narrow street, baiting two drones to follow, then vaulted off a wall, striking them down with quick, controlled kicks, a blur of motion.

Mirai's fingers tapped once against the railing, a faint, almost imperceptible sound, the only sign of approval.

But Mirai wasn't done. "Release secondary units," he ordered calmly, his voice echoing through the chamber.

New drones activated, larger and more aggressive, some with shimmering energy shields and heavier stun cannons, their whirring growing louder. Izuku gritted his teeth as they descended into the alley, cutting off his retreat, blocking his every escape. Stronger units… they're trying to trap me in. If I stay on the ground, I'll get boxed in, overwhelmed.

Without hesitation, he sprinted toward the nearest wall, running along it briefly before launching himself upward, flipping over the drones and landing silently behind them. He spun, knocking one into the other with a calculated strike, a domino effect of destruction.

Mirai watched closely, his analytical mind dissecting every movement, every decision. His mobility is exceptional. But he's relying on raw adaptability again. No preemptive strategy. If these were real villains, unpredictability could cost him his life, could be fatal.

Mirai pressed a button. "Activate environmental hazards."

The ground rumbled with a low, guttural groan as sections of the simulated street collapsed, revealing uneven terrain and moving platforms, turning the battlefield into a shifting, treacherous maze.

Izuku landed awkwardly on a crumbling platform, quickly regaining his balance, his heart pounding harder, a frantic drum against his ribs. He's not making this easy… but that's the point. If I can't think faster than him, if I can't anticipate his moves, I won't last in the real world.

A drone charged with a stun cannon, its barrel glowing with stored energy. Izuku sidestepped, sliding under its arm before vaulting over another. He scanned the shifting terrain, a plan forming in his mind, a spark of inspiration. If I can lure them into the unstable platforms, their combined weight will collapse it faster—take them out together, efficiently.

He dashed between two larger drones, baiting them into pursuit, leading them into the trap. The platform cracked loudly under their combined weight, sending both tumbling into the dark pit below. Izuku landed on a safer ledge, panting slightly, but a faint, triumphant smile touched his lips.

Above, Mirai's gaze remained unreadable, a stoic mask, but there was a brief, almost imperceptible pause before he spoke. "…Not bad. But you're still too slow to predict outcomes. You react well, but heroes don't just survive—they control the narrative, they dictate the flow of battle."

Izuku looked up at the observation deck, nodding despite his exhaustion, his body aching. "Then I'll get better. However long it takes. I'll master it."

Mirai's eyes narrowed, adjusting his glasses, the faint gleam reflecting the monitors. "We'll see." He pressed another button, a final, decisive action. "Final wave."

Izuku straightened, breathing steadying, a quiet resolve settling over him, ready for whatever came next, ready for the ultimate test.

The following days at Sir Nighteye's agency were relentless, each session designed not just to push Izuku, but to tear him down, to break his old habits, and to measure how quickly he could rebuild, how resilient he truly was.

The training chamber was a constant urban disaster simulation—collapsing walls, their plaster crumbling, fire hazards spewing artificial flames, scattered civilian dummies lying in precarious positions. Izuku darted through falling debris, narrowly pulling two dummies clear as a section of ceiling crashed behind him with a deafening roar.

From the observation deck, Mirai's voice echoed, calm but cutting, each word a precise, surgical strike. "You succeeded, but at unnecessary risk. Heroes don't gamble on luck, Midoriya. Every move should be a calculated certainty, a predetermined outcome."

Izuku, crouched behind a crumbling concrete slab, nodded, breathing heavy, sweat dripping into his eyes. "I understand. I'll make it cleaner next time. More efficient."

Mirai didn't respond, his eyes scanning monitors, recording every single movement, every micro-adjustment, every flicker of hesitation.

The chamber shifted seamlessly into a combat scenario, drones flooding the area in randomized, unpredictable attack waves. Izuku wove between them, a blur of motion, using quick feints and improvised tactics—flipping one drone into another, baiting two into a corner before knocking them out with a single, spinning kick, a fluid, graceful dance of destruction.

But when the simulation ended, Mirai's critique was blunt, unsparing. "You adapt quickly, yes, but you still let the environment dictate too much of the engagement. Pro heroes create openings—they don't wait for them. They seize control."

Izuku wiped sweat from his forehead, his jaw tight, nodding again, absorbing the criticism. "Then I'll make sure I do. I'll learn to create them."

Mirai's gaze lingered briefly, a flicker of something unreadable in his eyes, before turning back to the monitors, his expression a stoic mask.

The scenario shifted again, seamlessly, to a hostage simulation, forcing Izuku to slow his pace, to plan carefully, to prioritize. He scanned corners, using reflections in broken windows to spot hidden drones. When one lunged from a shadowed alley, Izuku was already there, anticipating, intercepting it with a precise kick that sent it crashing into a wall with a loud thud.

Mirai watched closely, his eyes narrowing, a faint flicker of recognition in their depths. "…Predictive action," he murmured, a rare, almost imperceptible note of approval in his voice.

When the session ended, he finally descended into the chamber, his footsteps echoing in the sudden quiet. "Better. You're beginning to think ahead rather than just react. But don't mistake progress for mastery. They are distinct."

Izuku straightened, still catching his breath, his muscles aching, but nodding firmly. "I won't. I'll keep pushing."

By the fourth day, Mirai escalated the challenge, pushing Izuku to his absolute breaking point. The chamber's streets shifted constantly—moving platforms appearing and disappearing, crumbling debris falling without warning, heavy stun drones with shimmering energy shields coordinating their attacks with terrifying precision.

Izuku's muscles screamed with fatigue as he dodged a collapsing walkway, sliding under a barrage of rubber rounds before vaulting off a wall to kick a drone into another. For a brief second, cornered between three advancing drones and a crumbling floor, his instincts screamed for a solution he didn't have—his base form was all he had to rely on, stripped of his Flame Form, and he could only press forward, raw power his only option.

With a sharp breath, he calculated quickly, a desperate, last-minute plan forming, baiting the drones onto a cracked platform. As their combined weight shattered the surface, sending a shower of concrete dust into the air, Izuku leapt to safety, letting them plunge into the dark pit below.

The simulation halted, the hum of machinery filling the quiet, a sudden, jarring silence. Izuku dropped to one knee, breathing hard, ragged gasps escaping his lips, sweat dripping from his chin, forming small puddles on the floor.

Mirai stepped into the chamber, tablet in hand, his expression unreadable, a blank slate. "You nearly hesitated when cornered," Mirai said flatly, his voice devoid of emotion. "Your body still wants to rely on brute force when pressured. If you had armor to fall back on, you would have used it, wouldn't you?"

Izuku didn't deny it, forcing himself to stand upright, his body trembling with exhaustion. "…You're right. But I didn't. I stayed within the limits you gave me. I controlled it."

Mirai adjusted his glasses, staring at him for a long moment, his gaze piercing, before nodding slightly. "Good. Remember this. Control is not restraint when it's convenient—it's restraint when every instinct tells you to abandon it, to unleash everything."

There was the faintest flicker of approval in his gaze, though his voice stayed clinical, detached. "Rest for today. Tomorrow, we begin live-tactical drills. I need to see if you can keep this same discipline when real civilians are involved, when the stakes are truly high."

Izuku nodded, exhaustion heavy in his voice but determination burning like a fierce flame in his eyes. "Yes, Sir."

As he left the chamber, Mirai watched him go, a silent, assessing figure, murmuring to himself, barely audible. "…A variable, yes. But one that may still be guided—if he doesn't break first."

The agency's office was quiet, save for the faint hum of a computer and the soft, rhythmic scratching of pen on paper. Mirai sat at his desk, meticulously reviewing data from Izuku's training sessions, charts and graphs spread before him. His posture was, as always, perfectly straight, his sharp eyes flicking between the numbers, dissecting every detail.

The door opened with a soft click. Izuku stepped inside, his uniform slightly rumpled, a testament to the day's grueling training, but he still straightened instinctively, snapping to attention. "Good evening, Sir Nighteye."

Mirai glanced up, adjusting his glasses, the faint gleam reflecting the overhead light. "Midoriya. Sit."

Izuku did as instructed, his movements precise, folding his hands neatly in his lap. For a moment, Mirai continued writing, his pen gliding in crisp, elegant strokes across the paper, before he finally set it down and regarded Izuku directly, his gaze piercing.

"Well?" Mirai asked, his voice calm but probing, a quiet challenge. "You've been here nearly a week now. How do you find the internship so far? Your honest assessment."

Izuku thought for a moment, choosing his words carefully, weighing each one. "Exhausting," he admitted honestly, a faint smile touching his lips. "Every session pushes me harder than I thought possible. But… that's the point, isn't it? If I can't keep control under pressure now, if I can't master myself, I won't have it when it really matters, when lives are on the line."

Mirai's gaze lingered, and though his expression didn't change, there was the faintest, almost imperceptible glint of approval in his eyes, a silent acknowledgment. "Good answer," Mirai said finally, his voice a low rumble. "Too many confuse effort with progress. At least you understand why you're being pushed, why this rigor is necessary."

Izuku nodded, a wave of relief washing over him, but Mirai didn't look away. Instead, he leaned back slightly, eyes narrowing—not critically, but curiously, a new line of inquiry forming.

"Tell me something personal, Midoriya," he said suddenly, his voice cutting through the quiet. "What do you think of Toshinori?"

Izuku blinked, startled by the abrupt shift in topic, by the unexpected familiarity. "All Might?"

"Yes," Mirai said simply, his tone unreadable, a challenge in his eyes.

Izuku didn't hesitate. His face lit up with genuine, unbridled enthusiasm, a pure, childlike joy, words tumbling out in a rush. "He's incredible! I've admired him since I was little—his strength, his smile, everything he stands for, everything he embodies! I have all his merch, all the biographies, and I've watched every video of his fights more times than I can count, memorized every move!"

Mirai raised an eyebrow, a faint, almost imperceptible twitch, but Izuku was too caught up in his adoration to notice. "I even practiced his signature smile!" Izuku added sheepishly, his cheeks reddening, a faint blush spreading. "I don't really do it in public, but—well—"

At Mirai's expectant silence, a quiet, challenging presence, Izuku hesitated… then squared his shoulders, took a deep breath, and shifted his expression into a perfect, uncanny imitation of All Might's iconic wide grin. Every muscle in his face seemed to fall into place, capturing the very essence of the Symbol of Peace.

Mirai stared, unreadable, his expression a blank slate. Then, without a word, he stood, a tall, imposing figure.

Izuku blinked in confusion as Mirai approached, his tall frame looming, adjusting his glasses with a practiced, almost ritualistic motion. "You're close," Mirai said finally, his tone suddenly serious, devoid of any humor, but with a glint of something softer, a hint of nostalgia. "But your left eyebrow twitches too much, and the corners of your mouth pull upward too sharply. All Might's smile is wide, yes, but controlled. The key to his symbol wasn't just joy—it was reassurance. An unwavering promise of safety."

Before Izuku could respond, before he could even process the words, Mirai's face shifted—his features settling into an eerily perfect All Might smile. Every detail, from the confident tilt of his head to the steady, reassuring gleam in his eyes, was flawless, a living embodiment of the hero.

Izuku stared, wide-eyed, stunned by how completely the normally stern, unyielding man transformed, becoming the very image of his idol.

Mirai held the smile for a few seconds, a powerful, silent lesson, then relaxed, his expression returning to his usual severe calm, the transformation dissolving. "Study it," Mirai said simply, returning to his desk, picking up his pen. "The symbol is as important as the strength. Toshinori understood that better than anyone, that a hero is more than just power."

Izuku, still slightly in awe, nodded firmly, a new understanding dawning on him. "…I will. I'll practice."

For a brief second, Mirai's gaze softened, almost imperceptibly, a fleeting moment of warmth, before he turned back to his papers, his work. "Good. Tomorrow, training resumes. Don't be late. There's much more to learn."

Izuku stood, bowing slightly, a renewed sense of purpose filling him. "Yes, Sir Nighteye. Good night."

As he left, the door closing softly behind him, Mirai allowed himself one quiet moment, staring at the empty doorway, a faint, wistful expression on his face. "…Toshinori was right about you," he murmured, barely audible.

The days following the Sports Festival were a whirlwind across the country, a blur of news cycles and public opinion, and U.A.'s Class 1-A dispersed to their chosen agencies, each beginning their first tentative steps as provisional heroes, stepping into a world far larger than their classroom.

Kirishima gritted his teeth, blocking a heavy, bone-jarring strike with hardened arms, his mentor—a pro hero known for raw, unyielding strength—grinning, a fierce, encouraging expression. "Good! But you're thinking too much, kid! When you harden, commit to it! A real hero's toughness comes from guts, from unwavering conviction, not hesitation!"

Kirishima straightened, sweat beading on his brow, his muscles screaming, and nodded fiercely, a renewed fire in his eyes. "Right! I'll get manlier, you'll see! I'll be unbreakable!" Yet, even as he forced a smile, his mind wandered back to U.A., to the raw, unadulterated rage of Bakugo. Manly or not… bullying your friend? That's not the kind of hero I want to be. That's not what true strength looks like.

"Don't hold back, girl!" Gunhead barked, his voice a cheerful roar, lunging with controlled, precise strikes.

Uraraka deflected clumsily, stumbling, rolling aside, before forcing herself back into stance, her body aching, her breath coming in ragged gasps. I can't just think about rescue anymore… If I want to save people, to truly protect them, I need to be able to fight too. I need to be strong. Even as her arms ached, as fatigue threatened to overwhelm her, she kept moving, determination burning brighter in her eyes.

Momo crouched beside her mentor, a renowned strategist, carefully analyzing a map of a mock crime scene, her brow furrowed in concentration. "Creation is only as good as your decisions," her mentor said, her voice calm and measured. "Every item you make costs time and energy. Efficiency is survival. Every choice must be precise."

Momo nodded, committing every word to memory, absorbing the wisdom. Izuku was right… control matters as much as power. Strategy is as vital as strength.

Far away, Todoroki stood atop a training field, a vast, empty expanse, launching precise waves of ice to contain simulated fires, his movements fluid, almost effortless. His father, Endeavor, praised his efficiency, his raw power, but Todoroki barely reacted, his mind elsewhere, consumed by a deeper, more personal battle. Midoriya's words… they're still echoing in my mind, a persistent whisper. Am I really fighting for myself now, or just to spite my father? Is this my path, or his? The ice spread perfectly, forming intricate, beautiful patterns, but his expression stayed unreadable, a mask over his inner turmoil.

Days later, U.A.'s classrooms felt quieter, almost empty, remaining students focused on studies, on their own paths. But not all were focused on hero work, not all were driven by the same noble purpose.

Iida sat alone in the empty hallway, the fluorescent lights humming softly overhead, his phone clutched tightly in his trembling hand. His mother's panicked, broken voice from that night still echoed in his mind, a relentless, agonizing loop: "Tensei's in critical condition… he was attacked by the Hero Killer—Stain."

His usually perfect posture was stiff, unnatural, almost brittle, his hands trembling slightly as he stared at his message history, a grim testament to his brother's fate. "Stain…" he whispered, his tone colder, harder than anyone had ever heard it, devoid of his usual warmth. His jaw tightened, a muscle twitching in his cheek, and his usually bright, polite eyes had turned hard, filled with a quiet, simmering fury, a dangerous resolve. You won't get away with this. Not after what you did to Tensei. I swear it.

The faint sound of approaching footsteps broke his thoughts, jolting him from his dark reverie. Iida quickly shoved his phone into his pocket, forcing a polite, practiced smile as two general course students walked past, their voices a cheerful murmur, but his hands remained clenched, hidden. As soon as they were gone, his polite facade fell, replaced by that same simmering anger, a cold, focused rage. I'll find you. No matter what it takes. I'll make you pay.

"Hands out of your pockets. Stand straight. Chin up. You are representing the image of a hero, young Bakugo, and heroes do not scowl at civilians, they inspire confidence," Best Jeanist said firmly, his immaculate hair shimmering under the sunlight, a perfect, sculpted wave, as they walked through a crowded street, the sounds of the city a dull roar.

Bakugo's scowl deepened anyway, a defiant grimace. "Tch. Heroes fight villains, old man, not pose for cameras. That's for models."

Best Jeanist didn't flinch, his expression unperturbed. "Heroes inspire confidence. That is part of the job, young man. If you can't project stability, if you can't be a beacon of calm, people will never trust you, no matter how many villains you defeat. You will be seen as a liability."

Bakugo clenched his fists, his knuckles white, biting back a furious retort, a torrent of angry words. His every instinct screamed to argue, to blast apart the suffocating calm of this mundane patrol, to unleash his explosive energy. But every time he looked around, civilians were watching—some whispering, some judging, their eyes filled with a mixture of fear and curiosity. And, deep down, a bitter, unwelcome truth, he knew Jeanist was right. Still, it felt like being caged, his explosive energy bottled behind a polite smile he could barely hold, a mask of civility.

Jeanist glanced at him sidelong, his calm tone softening, a hint of understanding in his voice. "You're better than you think, young Bakugo. You have immense potential. But only if you can keep that temper from defining you, from consuming you."

Bakugo looked away, jaw tight, a muscle twitching in his cheek. …Damn it. He's right. And I hate it.

Meanwhile, in Manual's agency, the tone couldn't have been more different, a stark contrast to Best Jeanist's rigorous discipline. Iida followed the mild-mannered pro hero along a busy street, Manual gesturing to pedestrians, his voice a cheerful murmur, as he cleared the way for rescue drills, a picture of calm efficiency.

"Remember, Iida! Street work isn't glamorous, it's not about flashy moves, but these people need to trust us. A hero's job isn't just catching villains—it's keeping communities safe, building a sense of security!"

Iida forced a polite nod, his smile fixed, almost brittle. "Yes, Manual-sensei." But his mind wasn't on the patrol, not on community safety. His eyes scanned every alley, every shadowed corner, every rooftop, his hands twitching, a restless energy thrumming beneath his skin. Stain could be anywhere…

Manual's cheerful voice barely registered, a distant hum. The hero's words about community safety blurred into meaningless noise as Iida's thoughts darkened, consumed by a singular, burning purpose. I didn't choose this agency to learn crowd control. I chose it because it's close to Hosu. Close to where Stain is. He clenched his fists tighter, jaw locking, a cold resolve settling over him. I'll find you. I'll stop you. Not as a hero—but as Tensei's brother. For revenge.

The training chamber was reset to its most brutal configuration yet, a terrifying, unpredictable labyrinth. Buildings shifted unpredictably, their facades groaning, narrow corridors collapsed without warning, and drones fired from multiple vantage points, coordinating attacks with near-professional precision, a relentless, intelligent assault.

Izuku stood at the starting point, breathing steadily despite the exhaustion weighing on his muscles, a profound weariness deep in his bones.

Mirai's voice echoed through the speaker, calm and unyielding, a voice of absolute authority. "Today's objective is simple: neutralize all hostiles while securing three civilian dummies placed throughout the field. Efficiency and control will be evaluated. Excessive collateral damage will result in failure. There will be no second chances."

Izuku tightened his gloves, his mind calculating paths, mapping out every possible scenario with lightning speed. "Understood."

"Begin," Mirai ordered, the single word a trigger.

The simulation roared to life, a symphony of whirring machinery and artificial chaos.

Izuku dashed forward, a blur of motion, weaving through collapsing structures, his mind racing ahead of his movements, anticipating every shift. A drone fired from above—he leapt to a narrow ledge, using falling debris as cover before springing forward and disabling it with a clean, precise strike, a single, decisive blow.

Another two cornered him, their whirring growing louder, their movements coordinated. Instead of reacting instinctively, he scanned the crumbling walls above them, kicked out a support beam, and let the debris bury them without wasting energy on direct combat, a testament to his newfound control. Control. Always control. Don't waste movement. Don't let instinct run wild. Be efficient.

Mirai watched from the observation deck, his eyes sharp, analytical, his pen poised over his tablet, recording every detail. His predictions are getting faster. Less reactionary now. But will he hold if I increase the pressure further? Will his discipline break?

"Release advanced units," Mirai ordered, his voice cutting through the hum.

Heavier drones rolled into the streets, shielded and more aggressive, their stun cannons glowing with stored energy. One launched a barrage of non-lethal rounds, forcing Izuku to dive behind cover, the impact shaking the concrete. His heart pounded harder, a frantic drum, his breathing quickening. A primal part of him urged him to go all out, to throw himself headlong into the fight, to unleash his full power. But he forced it down, gripping the broken wall, a silent battle of will. No. Not this time. Think first. Always think.

He baited two drones to fire, then ducked, letting their blasts collapse the unstable floor beneath them, sending them tumbling into the dark. The last drone lunged as Izuku dashed forward, sliding low and knocking it off balance before flipping it onto its back, pinning it with a precise, controlled movement.

The chamber fell silent, the hum of machinery fading, replaced by the sound of Izuku's ragged breathing.

Izuku stood, panting, sweat dripping from his chin, forming small puddles on the floor. His arms ached, his muscles screamed, but his movements had been deliberate to the very end, a testament to his unwavering discipline.

The doors hissed open, and Mirai descended, tablet in hand, his expression unreadable, a stoic mask. "You resisted the urge to rush. Even when cornered, you kept your movements calculated. That is… acceptable progress." His voice was flat, but the words carried a weight of rare approval.

Izuku straightened, despite the profound fatigue that threatened to pull him down. "I'm not done improving. But I won't lose control—not here, not in the field. I promise."

Mirai regarded him quietly, his gaze piercing, and for the first time, a faint but genuine note of approval crept into his tone, a warmth that was almost startling. "Good. Keep that mindset. The moment you stop thinking, you stop being a hero. You become a liability."

Izuku nodded firmly, determination burning in his eyes. "Yes, Sir Nighteye."

Mirai turned, heading back to the observation deck. "Rest. Tomorrow, we transition to field observation. I want to see how you handle yourself with real civilians watching, when the stakes are truly real."

As Izuku left the chamber, his exhaustion was heavy, a profound weariness, but a determined spark burned in his eyes, a quiet, unwavering flame.

The next morning at Nighteye's agency, Izuku adjusted the collar of his borrowed field jacket, the fabric a little stiff, standing near the lobby's gleaming glass doors. His uniform replaced with casual, patrol-friendly attire, but his posture was straight, rigid, nerves and determination warring inside him. Today would be his first official field observation. Real streets. Real civilians. No controlled simulations, no safety nets.

Mirai entered with his usual precision, clipboard in hand, a silent, efficient presence. His sharp eyes swept over Izuku, taking in every detail. "Punctual," Mirai remarked, his voice even, devoid of inflection. "Good. First impressions matter. Civilians must feel secure when they see a hero, even a trainee. They must feel safe."

Izuku nodded firmly. "Understood. I'll keep that in mind. I'll be a symbol of reassurance."

Mirai's gaze lingered, as if calculating something, assessing, before he finally turned toward the door. "Follow my lead. Do not engage unless I order it. Your primary objective today is observation, not heroics. Remember that. Your role is to learn, not to act."

Izuku tightened his grip on his bag strap, his knuckles white, his voice steady, resolute. "Yes, Sir Nighteye."

As they stepped out into the bustling city streets, a vibrant symphony of sounds and sights, Izuku's green eyes scanned the crowd, watching how civilians moved, how their eyes followed Mirai's calm, controlled presence, a silent beacon of authority. He's right. Every move matters out here. If I'm going to be a hero, I need to make people feel safe just by being here, just by my presence.

Mirai walked ahead with his usual composure, a picture of quiet authority, but he glanced back briefly, his voice low, a soft command. "…Try to smile, Midoriya. A hero's presence is as much about reassurance as it is about strength. It's about hope."

Izuku blinked, surprised by the unexpected instruction, then gave a small, tentative smile. It wasn't perfect, a little stiff, but it was genuine, a true reflection of his heart. Mirai didn't comment, but there was the faintest softening of his expression before he faced forward again, continuing his patrol.

Far from the controlled calm of Nighteye's patrol, Hosu's streets felt different—quieter, heavier, as if the very air itself carried a palpable tension, a sense of foreboding.

Iida stood at the edge of a crowded intersection, the sounds of the city a dull roar, Manual chatting with civilians a few meters away, oblivious. His mentor's voice faded into the background as Iida's eyes darted across the streets, scanning every alley, every shadow, every rooftop with a desperate intensity. He's here somewhere. I can feel it. He's close.

Manual turned toward him, smiling warmly, his expression one of cheerful contentment. "Iida! We'll be moving to the next block soon. Everything okay? You seem a little… distracted."

Iida forced a polite nod, his usual bright smile plastered on, though it didn't quite reach his eyes, which remained cold, focused. "Of course, Manual-sensei. Just… observing the area carefully. Being vigilant."

Manual chuckled, oblivious to the turmoil beneath the facade. "That's the spirit! Always vigilant, always aware. That's the mark of a true hero."

But as his mentor turned back to the civilians, his attention diverted, Iida's smile fell, replaced by a cold, focused stare, a burning intensity. Tonight. I'll find him tonight. Stain won't escape me. I swear it. The distant roar of a passing train echoed, a mournful sound, but to Iida, it sounded more like the steady, relentless pounding of his own heart, a drumbeat of vengeance.

The sun dipped lower, casting long, stretching shadows across the bustling streets as heroes and interns blended into the crowds, a tapestry of capes and casual attire. For some, it was routine observation, a mundane task. For others, a profound lesson in what being a hero truly meant, a test of their very souls.

"Keep your hands up, even on patrol!" Gunhead barked, his voice cheerful, booming.

Uraraka flinched, adjusting her stance, her body aching from the day's training. "But… we're just walking right now! There's no threat!"

"And what if someone jumps you right here, right now?" Gunhead grinned, a fierce, challenging expression. "A hero's guard doesn't drop, no matter how quiet the street is! You must always be ready!"

Uraraka puffed out her cheeks in frustration but nodded, determination flickering in her eyes, a renewed resolve. I need this. I have to be ready for anything. For every threat.

Momo trailed beside her mentor, who carried a data tablet, carefully explaining crime patterns, their voices a low murmur. "Remember, Yaoyorozu," her mentor said, gesturing to a flickering map, "information wins battles before they even begin. Don't just react—plan for three outcomes, for every contingency, before you take a single step. Be a strategist."

Momo nodded thoughtfully, absorbing every word, every nuance, her mind a sponge. Just like Izuku said… I can't just make things. I need to think like a strategist, like a commander.

Kirishima laughed awkwardly as his pro hero mentor slapped him on the back, a bone-jarring impact that nearly knocked the air out of him. "Loosen up, kid! Heroes don't just fight villains—we cheer people up! We inspire them! Look at those smiles around us. That's what you're protecting, that's your purpose."

Kirishima grinned, though there was a lingering heaviness in his eyes, a shadow of doubt. Still… being manly isn't just about smiling. It's standing up for people too. Respecting them. Bakugo… I hope you figure that out soon. Before it's too late.

Far away, the patrol under Endeavor was a different story, a stark contrast to the other agencies. The streets were quieter, almost eerily so, the air thick with unspoken tension. Todoroki followed a few paces behind his father, their long shadows stretching across the sidewalk, two solitary figures.

Enji glanced back, his expression unreadable, a stoic mask, but his tone was firm, demanding. "That boy. Midoriya. He pushed you harder than anyone else at the Festival. He made you use your fire."

Todoroki didn't flinch, his voice calm, steady, devoid of emotion. "Yes. He was… formidable. A challenging opponent."

Enji stopped briefly, turning to face his son, his gaze piercing. "Then surpass him. You have fire that outclasses his by nature. Your power should overwhelm his. It is your birthright."

Todoroki's mismatched eyes met his father's, calm but serious, a quiet defiance in their depths. "It wasn't just his fire. It was like… he took control of mine. Even though he didn't use it directly, when I fought him, it felt like my flames weren't fully my own. Like I was reacting to him instead of the other way around. He dictated the flow."

Enji was silent for a moment, his sharp gaze narrowing, a flicker of surprise in his eyes. "…I noticed," Enji admitted quietly, a rare concession. "That Flame Form of his… it mimicked fire usage with terrifying efficiency. But it doesn't matter. Not in the long run."

Todoroki raised an eyebrow, a silent question. "…Doesn't matter?"

Enji stepped closer, his voice firm, almost forceful, resonating with a deep conviction. "You are my son. His flame is his own, but yours must be more than that. You don't just need to match him—you need to make your fire yours. Not mine. Not his. Yours. A unique, unyielding force."

For a rare moment, his tone held no arrogance—just an intense, unyielding certainty, a profound truth.

Todoroki stared for a long second before finally looking away, thoughtful, the words echoing in his mind. "…I'll consider that."

Enji gave a single approving nod, then turned, his long coat swaying as he resumed his patrol, a silent, powerful presence.

Todoroki followed silently, his mind replaying Izuku's determined stare, his unwavering conviction. My fire… my own fire. Maybe… that's what Midoriya's been trying to tell me all along. To find my own path.

And in Hosu, a different kind of patrol was taking place, a grim, determined hunt. Iida followed Manual along a quieter street, his polite smile fixed, a brittle mask. But his eyes kept flicking to alleyways, shadows, and rooftops, searching for a different kind of target, a specific, hated presence.

Manual gestured to the crowd, smiling warmly. "See? A hero's presence calms people. That's why we keep patrols steady and efficient. Just being present is enough to give people assurance of their safety, a sense of peace."

Iida nodded mechanically, his voice polite but hollow, devoid of genuine emotion. "Yes, Manual-sensei." But his thoughts were elsewhere, consumed by a burning rage. Stain… I know you're close. And when I find you… this ends. Tonight.

The sun dipped lower, bathing the city in deepening orange light, then fading to twilight, as two very different patrols continued—one built on learning to inspire hope, to be a beacon of light, the other on quiet, smoldering vengeance, a dark, consuming fire.

The city changed as night settled in, a shroud of darkness descending. Neon signs flickered to life, painting the streets in garish, artificial colors, and the crowded thoroughfares slowly thinned, becoming hushed, almost deserted. Patrols became quieter, slower, less vigilant—at least for most heroes. But for Iida Tenya, every shadow felt alive with purpose, every corner a potential ambush.

He walked a few paces behind Manual, his polite smile firmly in place as his mentor waved to passing civilians, a picture of calm normalcy. But his phone buzzed softly in his pocket, a silent tremor against his thigh, and he glanced at it just long enough to see the latest update from one of the anonymous social media groups he'd been quietly following all week, a digital breadcrumb trail.

"Another Hero Killer sighting near Hosu's industrial sector. 3 heroes injured, one critical. #StainIsRight #PurgeTheFakes"

Iida's jaw tightened, his grip on his phone so hard his fingers ached, his knuckles white.

#StainIsRight…

The tag had been trending for days, a sickening mantra, and every time he saw it, his stomach turned, a wave of nausea. People praising that murderer, calling him a "necessary evil," idolizing him for "purifying" hero society. He wanted to scream every time he read those comments, to tear them apart. They don't even know what they're talking about. He's not a symbol. He's a coward who cuts down real heroes like Tensei…

His brother's smiling face flashed in his mind, vibrant and full of life, which greatly contrasted the Tensei he arrived to, hooked to hospital monitors, unconscious, his career, his very future, stolen in a single night.

Iida forced his expression back into polite neutrality as Manual glanced back at him, a casual inquiry. "You're quiet tonight, Iida," Manual said, smiling warmly. "Something on your mind? Patrol can be tiring your first week, but you're doing great work, really."

Iida straightened immediately, giving a practiced, formal nod, his voice a little too stiff. "Thank you, Manual-sensei. I'm just… staying focused. Being vigilant."

Manual chuckled, turning his attention back to the street, oblivious to the storm brewing within Iida. "Good attitude! Vigilance is the mark of a true hero, a constant awareness."

But as they turned the corner, Iida's eyes caught something—a faint streak of red on the side of an alley wall. Dried blood, smeared across the bricks in a streak that looked recent, still glistening faintly in the dim light. Manual didn't notice, too busy greeting a pair of pedestrians, his attention elsewhere.

Iida's heartbeat quickened, a frantic drum against his ribs, his mind racing, connecting the dots. That's recent. He's close. I can feel it. The scent of him.

Another buzz from his phone. Another update, a silent confirmation. "Industrial block, south side. People say they saw him moving toward the storage yards. Be careful."

Manual turned back to him, smiling, ready to continue their patrol. "We'll finish this block and loop back to the main district. Come on—"

Iida's polite smile returned instantly, a mask of calm. "Understood, Manual-sensei."

But inside, his decision was already made, etched in stone. He's close enough now. If I wait any longer, he might disappear again… vanish into the night. His grip on his phone tightened, pulse pounding in his ears, a relentless rhythm. This isn't about being a hero right now. This is about justice—for Tensei. For my brother.

As Manual turned down another street to talk to a shopkeeper, his back to Iida, Iida quietly slipped into the alley, moving with precise, measured steps, a hunter stalking his prey. His phone screen glowed faintly as he mapped the industrial district's side routes, his movements quick and deliberate, driven by a singular purpose.

The further he got from the main streets, the quieter it became, the sounds of the city fading into a distant hum. The smell of oil and rust filled the air, acrid and metallic, the distant hum of machinery blending with the occasional bark of a stray dog. He crouched low near a stack of crates, scanning every shadow, every rooftop, every potential hiding spot. You're here somewhere… and I'll find you. I swear it. This ends tonight.

Somewhere deeper in the industrial maze, a faint scraping sound echoed—the unmistakable rasp of metal against concrete, a chilling whisper in the silence.

Iida's breath hitched, a sharp intake of air, his eyes narrowing, burning with a cold fire. His hands trembled, but not from fear. From anticipation. From rage.

"…Hero Killer," he whispered, his voice low, almost reverent in its anger, a vow. "Tonight, this ends. For Tensei."

Hosu's industrial district was a maze of steel and shadow, a labyrinth of concrete and corrugated iron. Dim streetlights flickered weakly, casting long, distorted shapes along the cracked pavement, painting the world in shades of gray. The air smelled of oil, rust, and something faintly metallic—blood that hadn't yet dried, a coppery tang.

Stain moved like a phantom through the alleys, his tattered scarf trailing just above the ground, his steps soundless despite the weight of his gear, a silent predator. His jagged, custom-made sword gleamed faintly under the weak light, still streaked with the dried crimson of his earlier victims, a grim trophy.

A rat scurried across his path, a fleeting shadow, disappearing into a gutter as his single visible eye, sharp and piercing, scanned the rooftops, assessing, observing.

Too many fakes walking these streets. Too many wearing that title for money, for fame. "Heroes." He scoffed inwardly, a silent, bitter sound.

He crouched low near a rooftop ledge, a dark silhouette against the pale sky, watching a patrol of two pro heroes making their rounds below. Their easy laughter carried faintly in the night air, a jarring sound in the grim silence.

Laughing while the city rots… You don't deserve that title. Not like him.

For a brief moment, his gaze softened, a flicker of something almost tender, and the image of All Might—the true symbol, the only one worthy, the embodiment of heroism—flashed in his mind.

"All Might…" he murmured under his breath, his voice almost reverent, a whisper of devotion. "You're the only one who embodied what a hero should be. The rest of them… they dishonor everything you stood for. They corrupt your legacy."

His grip on his blade tightened, his knuckles white.

"I will purge them. Until this world is cleansed of those who stain your name, who defile the very concept of heroism."

With that, he leapt from the rooftop, a silent, deadly shadow, vanishing into the deeper shadows below, silent as a predator closing in on its unsuspecting prey.

Deeper in the industrial sector, the alleys grew narrower, quieter, the only sounds the distant hum of machinery and the steady drip of condensation from steel pipes, a monotonous rhythm.

Stain crouched beside a stack of crates, his blade resting casually across his knee, his body a picture of stillness, of coiled power. His ears, finely tuned, caught every faint sound, every shift of air, his body still and patient, waiting.

Someone's been following my trail all night. Amateur. Predictable. But persistent. A foolish tenacity.

He could feel it now—footsteps closing in, steady but determined, echoing faintly on the cracked pavement. Whoever it was, they weren't just wandering. They were hunting him.

A slow, almost amused smile crept across his face beneath his mask, a chilling, predatory curve of his lips.

"…Finally. A real conviction. Let's see if it's worth anything. Let's see if it's more than just a fleeting emotion."

The rhythmic echo of running footsteps grew louder, more distinct, as Iida turned the corner, his breath steady but his eyes burning with quiet, unyielding rage.

And there he was.

The Hero Killer stood in the alley, waiting as if he'd been expecting him, his posture relaxed, almost casual, his blade resting lazily against his shoulder, a silent challenge.

"Hero Killer… Stain," Iida said, his voice tight, almost trembling with restrained anger, a barely contained fury.

Stain tilted his head slightly, studying him with that single, piercing eye, an unnerving intensity. "You've been following me for some time. Not bad for someone so green, so inexperienced. What's your name, boy? State your purpose."

Iida's jaw tightened, a muscle twitching. "You don't deserve to know my name. But you'll remember it after I stop you. I am here to bring justice for my brother—Tensei Iida, Ingenium!"

At that, Stain's posture straightened slightly, a subtle shift, his visible eye narrowing, almost contemplative. "Ingenium…" He tilted his head, a faint, almost mocking smile playing on his lips. "Ah. So you're the brother of that one. He's alive, then. A pity."

Iida's hands trembled, sparks almost crackling at his engines as he crouched into a fighting stance, every muscle tensed, ready to spring. "Don't you dare speak his name! You defile it!"

Stain didn't flinch, his gaze unwavering. "Your brother was a true hero. Brave. Selfless. But even he was flawed—too many ties to a corrupt system, too willing to compromise. But you…" His tone darkened, his smile sharpening beneath the mask, a chilling, predatory gleam. "You're not here for justice. You're here for revenge. That's not heroism. That's selfish."

"Shut up!" Iida's voice cracked, a raw, desperate sound, his engines roaring to life, a sudden burst of power, as he lunged forward, a straight, unthinking charge. "You don't get to lecture me! You ruined his life! You destroyed everything!"

Stain moved like a shadow, a blur of motion, stepping aside with inhuman speed as Iida's kick sliced through empty air, the metal of his engines scraping against concrete, a harsh, grating sound.

The Hero Killer's blade flashed once, precise and controlled, a surgical strike, nicking Iida's arm just enough for a thin streak of blood, a crimson line, to drip to the ground, a single, ominous drop.

Iida skidded back, his breathing heavy, ragged, but his glare never wavered, fixed on Stain with furious intensity.

Stain crouched low, licking his blade casually, a chilling, ritualistic gesture, his eye glinting with a dangerous, predatory light.

"Revenge makes you sloppy, boy. It blinds you. But fine. Show me what you're willing to sacrifice. Let's see if you can prove yourself worthy of even calling yourself a hero, of wearing that title."

And with that, the fight began in earnest, a brutal dance of vengeance and judgment.

The alley rang with the clang of metal and the sharp hiss of Iida's engines roaring at full power, a symphony of fury. He lunged forward again, his kicks coming fast and hard, each strike fueled by raw, unthinking fury rather than calculated precision, a desperate, wild assault.

Stain ducked and weaved effortlessly, his movements minimal but precise, a fluid, deadly grace, his blade flashing under the dim light as it parried Iida's desperate strikes.

"You're fast," Stain said calmly, his tone almost instructional, a detached observation, as he pivoted out of another kick, slashing once and forcing Iida to stagger back, off balance. "But speed without control is wasted. You're fighting for yourself, for your own satisfaction, not for anyone else. That's not heroism. That's selfishness."

"I said SHUT UP!" Iida roared, his voice cracking with rage, his engines flaring, a sudden burst of power, as he dashed forward in a straight, predictable line.

Stain sidestepped smoothly, a ghost in the shadows, slicing across Iida's thigh just enough to draw blood, a thin, crimson line. Iida gasped, stumbling slightly, his engines sputtering for a fraction of a second, his body seizing.

Stain crouched low, licking the blade with practiced precision, his quirk activating as Iida's legs locked in place, his muscles stiffening, freezing him.

"You're weak because you're selfish," Stain said flatly, his eye glinting with a cold, merciless light as he approached, his steps slow, deliberate. "Your brother fought for others. He was a true hero. You? You're just playing hero to satisfy your pride, your petty revenge."

Iida's body trembled as he struggled to move, to break free, his glare filled with rage and desperate frustration. "I… won't let you… insult him! You don't know him!"

Stain's steps were deliberate, slow, almost mocking as he raised his blade, the sharp point glinting in the dim light. "Then show me. Prove to me you're worthy of being called a hero… or die like a fraud, a pretender."

Meanwhile, not far from the industrial district, Izuku and Sir Nighteye moved briskly through the streets, their footsteps purposeful, heading straight for the reported location of the Hero Killer, the tension in the air growing palpable.

Izuku kept pace with Nighteye, his mind racing, a thousand thoughts swirling. "Sir Nighteye, do we have any details on who's been attacked? How many injured?"

"Three pros injured, one critically," Mirai replied, his voice calm but firm, his gaze fixed ahead. "We prioritize civilian safety first, then subdue Stain. Under no circumstances do you act on your own. Understood? You follow my lead."

"Yes, sir," Izuku said firmly, his fists clenched, a quiet resolve in his eyes.

As they turned down a quieter street, a familiar figure caught Izuku's eye, a jarring sight in the tense atmosphere.

Kagutsuchi stood near a vending machine, leaning casually against the wall, his signature dark coat draped loosely over his shoulders, a picture of nonchalance. In one hand, he held a half-eaten convenience store Onigiri, chewing leisurely as if he hadn't a care in the world, as if the fate of heroes wasn't hanging in the balance.

Izuku blinked, slowing slightly, a flicker of surprise on his face. "Kagutsuchi-san…?"

Nighteye stopped as well, his brows furrowing slightly, a hint of annoyance in his expression. "What are you doing here? This is an active situation."

Kagutsuchi looked up, his golden eyes gleaming faintly under the streetlight, and raised the Onigiri slightly, a casual gesture. "Eating a rice ball. What does it look like I'm doing, Mirai?"

Izuku and Nighteye shared a look—one part confusion, one part exasperation, a silent communication.

"Kagutsuchi," Nighteye said sharply, his voice firm, clipped, "this isn't the time for jokes. The Hero Killer has been sighted in Hosu. This is serious."

At that, Kagutsuchi's chewing slowed for just a second before he swallowed, tilting his head thoughtfully, a faint smirk playing on his lips. "Ah, Stain. You mean Chizome Akaguro, right? Dropped out of his hero school for being too unhinged, too extreme. Poor kid. Always had a stick up his ass about 'true heroes.'"

Izuku blinked, startled, his eyes wide. "Wait—what? You know who he is? His real name?"

Kagutsuchi shrugged lazily, taking another bite of his Onigiri, unconcerned. "Sure. Same old story. Someone can't make it through the system, blames everyone else, and throws a tantrum about 'justice.' Just another drama queen with a twisted sense of morality."

Izuku exchanged another glance with Nighteye, who narrowed his eyes slightly, though he didn't comment, his gaze fixed on Kagutsuchi.

Kagutsuchi finished the last bite of his rice ball, dusted his hands off on his coat, and smiled faintly, a knowing, almost mischievous glint in his eyes. "Anyway, good luck with that. Hope you two don't get cut up too badly. He's a nasty one."

And with that, he turned casually and strolled off down the opposite street, humming to himself, disappearing into the night as if he hadn't just dropped that bombshell revelation, as if he were merely taking a leisurely evening walk.

Izuku stared after him, stunned, his mind reeling. "He's… just leaving? Not helping?"

Nighteye adjusted his glasses, his voice calm but clipped, a sharp command. "We don't have time to waste worrying about him. Focus, Midoriya. Stain won't wait. He's a dangerous opponent."

Izuku nodded quickly, shaking off his surprise, forcing himself back to the task at hand. "Right!"

The two broke into a run, the streets blurring as they raced toward the industrial sector, the distant sounds of conflict growing louder.

Iida's legs trembled, locked in place by Stain's Quirk, his muscles stiff, unresponsive. His breathing was ragged, his hands shaking as he forced his stiffening muscles to respond, to obey, but his body refused to move, a prisoner in its own skin.

Stain crouched slightly, blade in hand, his visible eye studying Iida not with anger, but with something closer to disappointment, a profound disillusionment.

Pathetic. He burns with hate, not conviction. His movements are fast, but his strikes are sloppy—wild, desperate, unthinking. His brother fought for others, for a greater good, but this one? He's here only for himself, for his own selfish revenge.

Stain slowly circled Iida, his boots quiet against the concrete, a silent, predatory dance.

"You're not worthy of the title of hero," Stain said calmly, his tone like a judge delivering a final, unappealable sentence. "Even your brother, flawed as he was, had conviction. He believed in something beyond himself. You? You're just another fake—a child playing hero for revenge, a hollow shell."

Iida's teeth clenched, his engines sputtering weakly, a desperate, dying sound, as he strained against his frozen muscles, his body screaming in protest. "Shut… up…"

Stain tilted his head slightly, his expression unreadable beneath his mask, a silent judgment.

If All Might saw you, he'd be ashamed. Heroes are selfless. Sacrificial. They give everything for others. If you can't give yourself entirely to the people… then you're no better than the frauds who chase glory, who seek only fame and fortune.

He raised his blade, leveling it with Iida's chest, the sharp point glinting ominously in the dim light.

"…I will purge you, as I have purged the rest. This world has no place for pretenders, for those who taint the sacred name of hero."

Iida's eyes widened, his muscles screaming to move, to escape, but he could do nothing as the Hero Killer stepped closer, the blade glinting, a cold, merciless promise.

The sound of boots striking pavement echoed sharply through the alley, a sudden, jarring intrusion.

"Stain!"

The Hero Killer paused, his blade stopping inches from Iida's chest as he turned slightly toward the voice, his single eye narrowing.

Izuku stood at the mouth of the alley, his fists clenched tight, his green eyes blazing with determination, a fierce, unwavering fire. Beside him, Sir Nighteye's tall figure loomed, calm but unwavering, his sharp gaze locked on Stain like a predator sizing up its prey, assessing its weaknesses.

Stain's eye narrowed slightly, scanning the two of them in silence for a brief, assessing moment.

"…Izuku Midoriya," Stain murmured under his breath, recognition flickering in his tone, a hint of surprise. "The boy from the Sports Festival. I watched your fight. You… might be different. You possess a certain purity."

Izuku stiffened slightly at the name, at the unexpected recognition, but his glare didn't falter. "Let him go, Stain. Iida's not your enemy. He's a hero."

Stain tilted his head, his expression unreadable beneath his mask, a faint, mocking smile. "Not my enemy? He came here to kill me. He's no hero. He's a stain on the title he claims to protect, a hypocrite."

"Don't talk like you get to decide that!" Izuku snapped, stepping forward, his voice sharp with indignation.

Nighteye raised a hand slightly, a silent command, his voice firm but calm. "Midoriya. Stay focused. Don't let emotion cloud your judgment."

He turned his sharp gaze fully on Stain. "Chizome Akaguro. Drop your weapon. You're surrounded, and you know you won't win against both of us. The odds are against you."

Stain's shoulders relaxed slightly, but his grip on his blade didn't loosen. Instead, he smiled faintly, his tone almost amused, a chilling, predatory sound.

"…Two true heroes? Or just another fraud and his pupil, blindly following orders? I'll see for myself. I'll judge you."

With that, he moved, faster than a normal eye could follow, a blur of motion, lunging toward Nighteye first, a calculated, decisive strike.

Izuku's muscles tensed instinctively, his mind already calculating paths, predicting movements, his heart pounding, a frantic drum against his ribs.

I have to be careful. If I rush him, I'll fall into his rhythm. He'll exploit my impulsiveness. But I can't let him hurt Iida… or Nighteye.

The alley became a whirlwind of motion the moment Stain lunged, a blur of flashing steel and rapid movement.

Nighteye moved first, stepping into Stain's attack with measured precision, his long legs shifting his weight in a perfect counter stance, a dance of calculated defense. Stain's blade slashed in a sharp arc, a deadly whisper, but Nighteye twisted just enough that it sliced past him, barely grazing his coat, a near miss.

"Predictable," Nighteye said calmly, his voice flat, devoid of emotion, his hand snapping forward with surprising speed, aiming to grab Stain's wrist, to restrain him.

But Stain moved like liquid shadow, slipping out of reach with a backstep, his single visible eye narrowing, a flicker of annoyance.

He's fast. Not just fast—he's reading me… almost like he knows where I'll strike, where I'll be.

Stain's boots scraped against the concrete as he repositioned, his blade flashing again toward Nighteye's side, a relentless assault.

Nighteye's calm voice cut through the chaos, a sharp command. "Midoriya! Free Iida, now! He's vulnerable!"

Izuku was already moving, a blur of green, dashing toward Iida, who knelt frozen against the wall, his eyes wide with frustration and shame, a prisoner in his own body.

"Iida!" Izuku shouted, sliding beside him, his voice filled with urgency. "Are you hurt?!"

Iida's jaw tightened, a muscle twitching. "I can't move—his Quirk… my legs… they're locked."

"I'll get you out of here," Izuku said firmly, glancing briefly at the faint cuts on Iida's arms and legs, crimson lines against his skin. Not deep, but enough for his Quirk to work… If I can just get him away from Stain for long enough—

The sharp sound of metal scraping concrete yanked Izuku's attention back just in time to see Stain twist past Nighteye's defensive strike, his blade slicing toward them, a deadly arc.

Izuku shoved Iida backward instinctively, a desperate, unthinking action, planting himself between them, a human shield.

Stain's blade met Izuku's raised forearm guard with a metallic clang, a jarring impact, forming armor around the limb just in time. The force vibrated through Izuku's arm, a painful jolt, but he held his ground, unyielding.

Stain's eye locked onto him, his tone shifting slightly, almost curious, a flicker of intrigue. "You blocked me. And you didn't hesitate… Interesting. A quick reaction."

Izuku gritted his teeth, pushing back against the blade, his muscles straining. "You're not touching him again! Not while I'm here!"

Stain slid backward with practiced ease, a fluid, almost graceful movement, flipping the blade in his hand, his stance lowering as his focus shifted fully onto Izuku, a new target.

"Izuku Midoriya," Stain said, his voice low, almost reverent, a chilling recognition. "I saw your fight. That fire armor of yours… It was pure. Powerful. But you're still holding back now. Why? Why not unleash it?"

Izuku didn't flinch, meeting his gaze with unwavering resolve. "Because I don't need to use it to stop you. And I won't lose control just to fight you. I'll fight on my terms."

Stain's lips curled slightly beneath his mask, something almost like approval in his eye, a rare, unsettling expression. "Self-control… rare in this age. A commendable trait. But words mean nothing. Show me. Prove it."

"Midoriya, don't engage recklessly!" Nighteye's voice cut in sharply as he lunged forward again, his movements precise, controlled, a blur of motion. His hands darted for Stain's wrists, trying to restrict his movement, to pin him down.

But Stain was already spinning away, a ghost in the shadows, his blade grazing Nighteye's sleeve, tearing fabric but not flesh, a near miss.

"Your movements are calculated," Stain said, almost admiringly as they exchanged rapid blows, a deadly dance. "You fight like you've already seen the outcome. Like you know the future."

Nighteye's calm voice remained steady, even under the flurry of strikes, a testament to his composure. "Prediction and control win battles. Not mindless killing. Not senseless violence."

Stain's blade flashed again, a lethal gleam, but Nighteye twisted, his hand finally catching Stain's wrist in a firm grip, a decisive move. "You're not leaving this alley. This ends now."

But Stain simply grinned beneath his mask, a chilling, predatory smile, his other hand flicking his smaller knife toward Izuku and Iida, a desperate, last-ditch effort.

Izuku caught the movement instantly. His mind calculated trajectories in a fraction of a second—That knife's not aimed to kill, just to cut. He's trying to freeze me with his Quirk, to disable me.

He lunged sideways, swatting the blade out of the air with a quick backhanded strike. The knife clattered harmlessly to the ground, a metallic sound in the quiet, but in that split-second, Stain twisted sharply, breaking Nighteye's hold and vaulting backward into the open alley space, gaining distance.

"Good reflexes," Stain said, his tone almost approving, a grudging acknowledgment. "You protect others before yourself. That's… closer to what a hero should be. A true hero."

Izuku stayed low, his fists clenched, his breathing steady despite his pounding heart, a frantic drum against his ribs. He's testing us. He's not just trying to kill—I think he's measuring us, judging us, looking for something.

Nighteye stepped closer, his eyes locked on Stain, a silent challenge. "Don't give him what he wants, Midoriya. We end this now. No more games."

Stain lowered into a crouch, his blade gleaming under the faint streetlight, reflecting the dim glow.

"Then come," he said, his voice quiet, almost eager, a chilling invitation. "Show me if you're worthy. Prove your conviction."

The alley was a blur of motion, steel flashing through the darkness, feet scraping against cracked pavement, a symphony of conflict. Nighteye held his ground with surgical precision, his movements cutting off Stain's advances, a master of defense, while Izuku stayed close, reading every shift in the Hero Killer's posture, anticipating his next move.

But Stain was relentless, a force of nature. His blade flicked in sharp, deliberate arcs, forcing both of them to keep moving, to stay on their toes, to react.

Izuku's eyes narrowed, his mind racing, a desperate plan forming. He's too fast. If this keeps up, someone will get hurt… badly.

Then his gaze flicked to Stain's katana, watching how the villain angled it, how he always aimed for shallow cuts, for disabling wounds. His Quirk wasn't about brute damage—it was about paralyzing, about rendering his opponents helpless.

An idea formed instantly. Risky, dangerous, but… If I let him think he has me, if I give him what he wants, we can end this now. I can turn his strength into his weakness.

"Nighteye!" Izuku shouted, stepping forward, his voice firm, resolute. "Cover Iida! He's still vulnerable!"

Nighteye gave him a sharp, questioning look, a flicker of concern, but, trusting him, shifted to keep Iida shielded, a silent acknowledgment of the plan.

Izuku crouched low, his green eyes locking with Stain's as he advanced, a silent challenge in his gaze.

"Come on, Hero Killer," Izuku said, his tone calm but challenging, a quiet dare. "You want to test me, right? Then try. Give me your best shot."

Stain tilted his head slightly, his visible eye narrowing with something close to intrigue, a flicker of interest in his cold gaze. "…Bold. Foolish. Fine."

He lunged.

Izuku moved deliberately—not recklessly, but just slow enough to give Stain what he wanted, to allow the precise strike. A shallow slash cut across Izuku's forearm that he forewent armoring, a thin, crimson line appearing, blood splattering to the ground, a dark stain.

Stain's movements were precise as ever, his tongue flashing over the blade in one smooth, chilling motion, a ritualistic act.

"Fool," Stain said, stepping closer as Izuku stiffened, his legs locking just as expected, his body freezing. "You had potential. But you were careless. A hero who lets himself fall this easily doesn't deserve the title. You are a disappointment."

Izuku kept his head lowered, his breathing slow, controlled, his body trembling just slightly—not from fear, but from the immense effort of staying perfectly still, of maintaining the illusion.

Stain crouched closer, his blade raising to deliver the finishing strike, the killing blow. "Disappointing. I thought you might be different, but you're just like the others. Another fraud."

Then Izuku looked up, his green eyes sharp and unflinching, blazing with a fierce, cold fire.

"…You talk too much."

Before Stain could react, before he could even process the words, Izuku moved.

In an instant, Izuku surged forward, his muscles snapping back into motion as if he'd never been frozen, as if Stain's Quirk had never touched him. His right fist slammed into Stain's stomach with a sharp, bone-crunching impact, the Hero Killer's eyes widening in shock as the air burst from his lungs, a choked gasp.

"…What—?!" Stain coughed, stumbling back, dropping his katana with a loud clang, the metallic sound echoing in the alley.

Izuku didn't stop. His voice was calm, steady, almost cold, infused with a chilling certainty.

"Sorry, but your Quirk doesn't work on me. I let you cut me on purpose. It was a calculated risk."

Stain staggered back another step, his eyes narrowing, fury flickering behind his mask, a desperate, confused rage. "H-How…?"

Izuku's fists tightened as he stepped forward, each movement deliberate, purposeful. "Doesn't matter. I'm not going to let you hurt anyone else. This ends now."

Izuku launched forward, his strikes coming fast and precise, every punch landing with controlled, devastating force. Stain tried to counter, to defend himself, but the relentless rhythm left no openings—each blow targeted his joints, his ribs, his stomach, forcing him further and further back, overwhelming him.

Finally, a particularly brutal punch to the gut sent Stain sprawling back, coughing heavily, his second katana sliding out of reach, clattering uselessly against the concrete.

But Izuku didn't stop, landing one last good hook to the side of his head, a decisive blow, sending him collapsing to the ground, unconscious.

A faint ripple of Agito energy flickered along his arm, his restrained power barely contained, a silent testament to the immense strength he held back.

Stain, half-conscious, kept mumbling, his words slurred, barely audible. "The world… doesn't need… fakes… only true—"

Izuku slammed his fist into the ground close to Stain's head, sending a wave of spiderweb fractures along the concrete, silencing the madman, his glare burning with righteous anger, a fierce, unwavering flame.

"Shut. Up. You're the biggest fake here."

Stain's eye twitched, a flicker of defiance, but he stayed silent, his breath ragged, defeated.

"You couldn't become the hero you wanted to be," Izuku continued, his voice low but cutting, each word a precise, surgical strike. "So you gave up. You blamed everyone else for your own failure. You're not purging fakes—you're just taking out your anger on people who worked harder than you ever did, who never gave up."

Stain's breathing hitched, a ragged gasp, his visible eye flickering with something unsteady—anger, denial, maybe even shame, a profound, unwelcome truth.

Izuku's glare didn't waver, unyielding. "Don't you dare blame your shortcomings on other people. Heroes aren't the problem, Stain. You are."

For the first time, Stain didn't respond. He lay still, breathing heavily, his eye darting briefly toward Izuku before lowering in quiet, absolute defeat.

Nighteye stepped forward as Stain lay slumped against the cracked pavement, his breathing heavy, ragged, his katana discarded, useless. With practiced efficiency, the pro hero slipped a pair of reinforced cuffs around the Hero Killer's wrists, securing him tightly, a final, definitive act.

"Chizome Akaguro," Nighteye said, his voice calm but firm, a statement of unyielding authority. "You are under arrest."

Stain said nothing, his single visible eye staring at the ground, unblinking, his body still trembling from Izuku's precise, devastating strikes.

Nighteye glanced briefly at Izuku, his sharp gaze lingering for a moment, an unreadable assessment. "That was reckless… but calculated. You deliberately let him cut you to confirm your immunity. That was a dangerous gamble, Midoriya. A foolish risk."

Izuku straightened, still catching his breath, his chest heaving, but keeping his composure, his gaze steady. "I couldn't risk him cutting anyone else. I had to end it. It was the only way."

For a moment, Nighteye's usual stern expression softened ever so slightly, a fleeting, almost imperceptible change. "And you did. Good work, Midoriya. Very good work."

As Nighteye secured Stain, a silent, efficient process, Izuku turned toward Iida, who sat slumped against the wall, his legs still stiff but his breathing steadying, his body slowly returning to normal. His eyes were wide, his face a mixture of shame and exhaustion, a profound weariness.

"Iida," Izuku said, crouching beside him, his voice soft, gentle. "Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

Iida swallowed hard, looking down at his trembling hands, avoiding Izuku's gaze. "Midoriya… I—"

Izuku shook his head, cutting him off gently, his voice kind but firm. "Iida, your reasons were understandable. Your anger was valid. But… you should have told me. Or Todoroki. Or anyone. We could have been here sooner, together. We could have helped."

Iida's eyes closed tightly, his jaw tightening, a muscle twitching in his cheek. "You wouldn't have understood… You couldn't. You haven't lost someone like that."

"Yes, I do," Izuku said, his voice steady but not unkind, filled with a quiet empathy. "You were angry. You wanted to make Stain pay for what he did to Tensei. That doesn't make you less of a hero for feeling that way, Iida. It makes you human."

Iida's eyes opened again, glistening with unshed tears as he turned toward Izuku, a desperate plea in his gaze. "But my actions… They were selfish. I wasn't thinking of saving anyone. I was only thinking of revenge. That isn't what a hero does. I haven't been a true hero at all."

Izuku held his gaze firmly, his tone quiet but certain, unwavering. "Only the people you help get to decide that. Not you. Not me. Not anyone else. Their trust is what matters."

Iida stared at him, stunned by the conviction in his words, by the simple, profound truth. "…Do you really believe that?"

Izuku gave a small, earnest smile, a genuine warmth in his eyes. "You can take my word for it… but don't ever take Stain's. He doesn't get to decide who's a hero. He's just a broken man."

Iida glanced briefly at Stain, now held firmly by Nighteye, a defeated figure, and then back at Izuku, his eyes clearing.

Tears spilled freely down his cheeks now, but his voice was steadier than before, infused with a newfound resolve. "You're right. Doubting myself like this… it would only bring more shame to Tensei. He fought for others until the very end. I can't dishonor that. I won't."

Izuku placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder, a silent gesture of support. "Then keep fighting, Iida. For the right reasons. For the people. That's what your brother would want. That's his legacy."

Iida nodded firmly, wiping his eyes with his sleeve, a new light in his gaze. "…Thank you, Midoriya. Truly. You saved me."

Nighteye approached, his grip firm on Stain's cuffs, a silent, imposing presence. "The authorities will take him from here. Manual should be arriving soon. Midoriya, Iida—stay put until medical assistance arrives. You both need to be checked out."

Izuku stood, helping Iida to his feet, the weight of the night slowly settling on both of them, the adrenaline fading, leaving behind exhaustion.

But for the first time since the fight began, Iida's posture straightened, his breathing calmer, as if a heavy burden had finally been lifted from his shoulders, replaced by a quiet, determined strength.

And Stain, barely conscious but still awake, stared at Izuku for a long moment, his single eye unreadable, devoid of its usual fury. For the first time, there was no anger in it—only a quiet, lingering recognition, a silent acknowledgment, as if he had nothing left to say, nothing left to prove.

The alley had quieted after the authorities arrived, the flashing lights casting eerie, shifting shadows. Nighteye handed Stain over to the local police, his expression unreadable but his grip firm, a silent transfer of custody. Iida sat against the wall, exhausted but calmer now, his gaze fixed on the receding police car, while Izuku stood nearby, keeping a watchful eye on everything, a quiet guardian.

Then, from the shadows near the mouth of the alley, a familiar, amused voice broke the silence, a jarring, unexpected sound.

"Well, now… that was entertaining."

Izuku and Nighteye turned sharply as Kagutsuchi stepped into the dim light, his long dark coat swaying as he approached casually, hands tucked into his pockets, a picture of effortless cool.

"Kagutsuchi-san?" Izuku blinked, surprised, his brow furrowed. "You were here? All this time?"

"Maybe," Kagutsuchi said lazily, stopping just short of them, a faint smirk playing on his lips. "Or maybe I just have good timing. A knack for dramatic entrances." His golden eyes shifted briefly to Stain, then back to Izuku, a faint, knowing gleam in their depths. "Not bad, kid. That was one hell of a speech. Even made me stop for a second, and I've heard a lot of speeches."

Izuku looked slightly embarrassed, glancing aside, a faint blush creeping up his cheeks. "I… just said what I thought needed to be said. What felt right."

"Exactly," Kagutsuchi replied with a quiet chuckle, a low, amused sound. "Sometimes that's all it takes. Forget fancy moves or flashy quirks—half the world wouldn't know what to do with that kind of honesty, that kind of raw truth."

Nighteye's gaze narrowed slightly, his tone clipped, a sharp command. "If you're done making cryptic remarks, Kagutsuchi, this is still an active crime scene. There's work to be done."

Kagutsuchi tilted his head, feigning innocence, a playful glint in his eyes. "Relax, Mirai. I'm not here to get in the way. Just curious how it played out. Always interesting to see how these things unfold." His eyes flicked back to Izuku, sharp but oddly approving, a rare commendation. "You handled yourself better than most pros would have. Keep that up. You've got potential."

Izuku nodded, trying not to look too flustered, a faint smile touching his lips. "…Thank you."

With that, Kagutsuchi turned to leave, giving a lazy wave over his shoulder, a casual dismissal. "Don't let this get to your head, kid. But… good work tonight. Seriously."

He strolled away into the night, disappearing into the city streets as if he'd never been there, a fleeting, enigmatic presence.

An hour later, footage began circulating online, a silent, digital explosion.

A short clip—raw, unedited, shaky, but undeniably powerful—captured the moment Izuku stood over Stain, his voice sharp and unwavering as he tore apart the Hero Killer's twisted ideology: "You're the biggest fake of all. Don't you dare blame your failures on anyone else."

The source of the video was unknown, a mystery, and no one could confirm who had filmed it. But by the end of the night, the clip had already gone viral across every major platform, a phenomenon.

"That kid… He's got more conviction than most heroes."

"This is what real heroism looks like."

"Whoever he is, he just humiliated Stain in front of the whole country."