The sun had barely crested the horizon, casting long, golden rays across the battered expanse of Ground Gamma's facility. It wasn't a training ground anymore; it was a scar. Scorched concrete, shattered steel, and craters like fresh artillery wounds. The air shimmered with residual heat, heavy with the scent of ozone and the metallic tang of sweat. Class 1-A moved through it all, not as a team, but as a single, multi-limbed organism.

The frantic shouts and commands were gone, replaced by a new language—a silent, visceral understanding. Bakugo's explosions detonated in perfect sync with Todoroki's ice walls, the blasts and ice flows a funnel for their unseen enemy. Sero's tape snared targets mid-air just as Kirishima, hardened to the limit, burst through the gaps. Tsuyu's tongue lashed out, redirecting Mineta's Pop Off balls into strategic, inescapable traps. And Izuku—Izuku was no longer just fast. He was a golden blur, his Agito armor shimmering with each pulse of power. Every movement was sharper, heavier, more deliberate than the last.

In the observation room, the faculty sat silent and transfixed.

Nezu's paws steepled on the console, his eyes gleaming with analytical fire. "They're no longer reacting. They're anticipating."

Aizawa, arms crossed, watched with a grim kind of pride. "Every move has purpose. No energy is wasted."

Midnight leaned forward, her voice a hushed whisper. "It's like watching a professional combat unit, not students."

Recovery Girl's gaze lingered on Izuku, a deep furrow in her brow. "And yet… they are still human. Barely."

At the center of the storm, Kagutsuchi stood, a silent, smiling pivot. His immaculate uniform bore faint scorch marks, a strand of his golden hair singed from a near-miss. A patch of sleeve fluttered from a grazing blast. He still moved with a dreamlike fluidity, still evaded with impossible grace—but the margin was narrowing.

Izuku's strikes forced him to pivot, not glide. Bakugo's explosions left ripples in the air that Kagutsuchi had to actively deflect. When Bakugo launched himself skyward, spinning violently, the air compressed around him into a spiraling vortex of heat and pressure.

Kagutsuchi's golden eyes widened just slightly, a flicker of something new—a ghost of effort.

"HOWITZER… IMPACT!" Bakugo roared, a thunderclap that echoed through the arena.

The blast descended, a miniature sun erupting downward, tearing a column of fire and force into the earth. For the first time, Kagutsuchi didn't dodge. He braced.

The shockwave sent dust and debris flying, and when the smoke cleared, Kagutsuchi stood amidst the wreckage—his mop bucket nowhere in sight, his sleeves tattered, his expression... amused.

"Well now," he said, brushing soot from his shoulder. "That was spicy."

Izuku landed beside Bakugo, his gauntlets glowing, his eyes locked on Kagutsuchi. "We're not done."

Kagutsuchi's smile widened. "I should hope not."

In the observation room, Toshinori leaned forward, his eyes wide with a mix of awe and terror. "They're pushing him."

Aizawa's voice was low, laced with something like reverence. "They're evolving."

Nezu's fingers steepled. "And the real test hasn't even begun."

The battle raged on, no longer a chaotic scramble, but a symphony of precision.

Sero's tape spiraled in a triple helix, his new move, Trident, slicing through the air with surgical precision. The reinforced strands wrapped around Kagutsuchi's legs, arms, and waist in a coordinated strike, forcing him to pivot sharply.

Mina followed up with Alma—her acid now a concentrated, glowing stream that she shaped mid-air like a whip, carving arcs of corrosive light. Kagutsuchi ducked, the tip of the acid lash grazing his sleeve with a faint hiss, leaving a curling edge.

Momo's creations had become fluid, seamless. She no longer paused to think; her body responded instinctively. A collapsible spear, a flashbang, a net launcher—all conjured in rapid succession, each handed off to a teammate mid-motion. She was no longer just support; she was a conductor.

Denki gritted his teeth, sparks dancing wildly across his skin. "Now or never," he muttered, slamming his palms into the ground. "Indiscriminate Shock: 1.3 Million Volts!"

The air exploded in a dome of light, electricity surging outward, engulfing Kagutsuchi in a blinding storm. But this time, Denki didn't short-circuit. His eyes remained sharp, his stance firm. A new capacitor embedded in his gear pulsed, absorbing the feedback. He stood tall, a fierce grin on his face. "Still standing."

And then came Iida.

He didn't just accelerate; his body twisted mid-dash, engines roaring, his trajectory shifting in a blur of blue light as he turned. The move was impossible, a violation of his own physics. But he did it. He made the turn. And Kagutsuchi had to leap—actually leap—to avoid the collision.

From the observation room, Toshinori stood, stunned. "He moved."

Aizawa's eyes narrowed. "They're forcing him to adapt."

Nezu's voice was a quiet whisper. "They're rewriting their limits."

Below, Izuku surged forward, his Agito armor glowing brighter than ever. His punches now left shockwaves, his footwork a blur of golden arcs. Bakugo launched upward once more, his body twisting violently as the atmosphere buckled around him—a second Howitzer Impact forming, fiercer than the last.

Kagutsuchi landed lightly, his black hair tousled, his uniform singed in multiple places. He looked around at the students—sweating, panting, eyes blazing.

He smiled.

"Well now," he said, brushing a fleck of ash from his shoulder. "You're finally starting to move like you mean it."

The air was thick with the lingering heat of their battle, but no one moved to leave. Bakugo wiped blood from his lip, his eyes locked forward. Yaoyorozu steadied herself, her arms trembling from overuse. Even Mineta, wide-eyed and pale, didn't speak. They were bruised, scraped, half-spent—but they were still standing.

Izuku stepped forward first, his voice hoarse but steady. "We're not done."

Kagutsuchi watched him for a moment, then glanced at the others. No one looked away. He nodded once.

"Good," he said. "Then we keep going."

He raised a hand, and the heat surged again—not violently, but with purpose. A wave of warmth rolled over the students, sinking into their skin, mending torn muscle, knitting bruises. It wasn't gentle. Recovery was never gentle.

Ochako winced as her shoulder popped back into place. "Could've warned us," she muttered.

Kagutsuchi didn't respond. He waited until the last of the glow faded, then spoke again.

"Graviel's not going to dance around you. He won't dodge. He won't soften his hits. He promised to hold back, but that just means he won't break you on purpose."

He looked at Todoroki, then at Kirishima, then back to Izuku.

"So you need to be sharper. Faster. Smarter. You need to hit like you mean it, and brace like you expect to be hit back."

Bakugo scoffed. "Sounds like a regular Tuesday."

Kagutsuchi didn't smile, but his eyes flicked toward Bakugo with something like amusement.

"Then let's make it a long one."

He stepped back, the ground beneath him cooling slightly. "Pair off. No quirks for the first round. I want to see how you move when you've got nothing but your body and your intent."

The students hesitated for only a moment before scattering into loose pairs. The tension was still there—but now it had shape.

The fire burned low in the center of the clearing, its light soft against the growing dark. Around it sat Class 1-A, quiet, still. Their uniforms were clean again, restored. Their bodies felt different—refined, steadier. The soreness had faded, but the memory of effort remained in the way they held themselves. Shoulders squared. Breaths measured.

Kirishima sat with his arms resting on his knees, watching the flames. "It's strange. I feel like I've lived through something bigger than I can explain."

Yaoyorozu nodded, her voice soft. "We've changed. I can feel it in how I move. How I think."

Todoroki didn't respond, but his gaze was steady. Bakugo sat with his arms crossed, eyes half-lidded, not asleep but somewhere close.

Izuku looked around the circle, taking in the quiet. "We did more in three days than I thought was possible."

No one disagreed.

Kagutsuchi stood up slowly. He reached behind a stack of crates and pulled out a guitar—old, worn, but intact. He sat down again, adjusted the tuning, and strummed a few notes. The sound was low, rough, but carried.

He looked up at them, his expression unreadable. "We've got a fire. A circle. Might as well sing something."

The students looked at him, unsure how to respond.

Ashido shifted slightly. "Are you… serious?"

Kagutsuchi nodded. "It's tradition. Not mine, but it fits."

No one laughed. No one protested. The moment was too quiet for that.

He began to play—not Kumbaya, not anything familiar. Just a slow, wordless melody. Something simple. Something that filled the space without demanding attention.

The fire crackled. The stars hung overhead, distant and clear. Around the circle, the students listened. Not because the music was beautiful, but because it was offered without expectation.

For the first time in days, they weren't training. They weren't bracing. They were just there.

And that was enough.

In the viewing room, the faculty sat in silence, watching the final embers of the fire flicker around Class 1-A. The door opened quietly. Kagutsuchi stepped inside, his presence immediate but not imposing. He didn't look at the screens. He looked at them.

"Well?" he asked. "What did you see?"

The silence lingered a moment longer before Nezu leaned forward, paws folded neatly.

"They've grown," he said. "More than we anticipated. Their coordination, their resilience, their ability to adapt under pressure—it's all there. Based on our assessments, they're already operating at a level comparable to seasoned professionals."

Kagutsuchi didn't react. He stepped closer, his eyes on the monitor showing Izuku, sitting quietly by the fire.

"They're better," Nezu continued. "Not just physically. Mentally. They're beginning to understand what it means to move with purpose."

Kagutsuchi turned toward him, his expression unreadable.

"You're wrong."

Nezu tilted his head slightly. "Oh?"

"They're strong," Kagutsuchi said. "Stronger than they were. But seasoned pros are ants to High Lords. Graviel won't stand still. He won't wait for them to catch up. He'll hit. And when he does, it won't be a test. It'll be a statement."

Aizawa's eyes narrowed, but he didn't speak. Midnight shifted in her seat. Present Mic looked down at his hands.

Nezu nodded slowly. "Still, what you've done for them—it's more than we could have asked for."

Kagutsuchi waved the words away. "I did what I could. Whether it's enough… I doubt it."

The room fell quiet again. The teachers exchanged uneasy glances, the weight of Kagutsuchi's words settling in. They had seen the growth. Felt the hope. But they knew better than to argue with someone who had seen the scale of what was coming.

Finally, Aizawa spoke, his voice low. "Then we prepare for what happens after."

Kagutsuchi didn't respond. He turned back to the monitor, watching the students one last time.

For the students, the preparation had already begun.

The locker room was quiet, with the hum of overhead lights the only sound. Steam from the showers still lingered faintly, mixing with the scent of clean fabric and metal. One by one, the students changed back into their school uniforms, folding away the training gear they'd worn like armor.

In the far corner, Bakugo sat with his shirt half-buttoned and elbows resting on his knees, silent. He stared at the floor, jaw tight.

Three days. That's all it took to feel like everything had shifted. Not just in the others—but in him. His body felt sharper, his movements cleaner. He could feel the difference in how he planted his feet, how he reacted without thinking. Kagutsuchi had dragged them through hell and rebuilt them from the bones out.

But even now, after all that, Bakugo knew the truth.

Kagutsuchi hadn't broken a sweat.

Every time they pushed harder, every time they thought they were getting close, Kagutsuchi was already somewhere else—watching, waiting, never straining. It wasn't just power. It was something deeper. Something unreachable.

And then there was Izuku.

Bakugo clenched his fists, the fabric of his pants bunching under his grip.

He'd seen it. In the last stretch of training, when everyone was running on fumes, Izuku had moved like something had clicked. Like he wasn't just reacting anymore—he was leading. His strikes were cleaner, his timing sharper. There was a rhythm to him now, a kind of quiet certainty that Bakugo hadn't seen before.

It pissed him off.

Not because Izuku was improving. That was expected. But because Bakugo could feel the gap widening again. After everything, after all the work, Izuku was still pulling ahead. And it wasn't just effort. It was something else. Something Bakugo couldn't name.

He hated that feeling. That slow, gnawing sense of being left behind.

But he also knew what it meant.

He wasn't done.

Bakugo stood, finished buttoning his shirt, and grabbed his jacket. He didn't look at the others. Didn't speak. But as he walked out of the locker room, his steps were steady. Focused.

He wasn't going to catch up by thinking about it.

The locker room was quiet, save for the soft rustle of fabric and the occasional click of a locker door. Izuku sat near the center bench, his uniform folded neatly beside him. He pulled on his shirt slowly, fingers moving with practiced ease, but his mind was elsewhere.

Three days.

It didn't feel real. The training had blurred together—heat, movement, pain, recovery, again and again. Kagutsuchi hadn't let up, not even for a moment. And somehow, Izuku had kept pace. Not perfectly. Not effortlessly. But something had shifted inside him.

He could feel it now, in the way his body moved. In the way his thoughts aligned with his actions. There was less hesitation. Less noise. His instincts felt sharper, like they'd finally caught up to his intentions.

But it wasn't just that.

He'd seen the others grow, too. Kirishima's footwork, Yaoyorozu's timing, Todoroki's control. Even Mineta had stopped flinching. They'd all changed. Kagutsuchi had pushed them past their limits and then rebuilt them.

And yet…

Izuku glanced toward the far corner, where Bakugo had been sitting moments ago. He was already gone.

There was something in Bakugo's eyes during the last stretch of training. Not anger. Not pride. Something quieter. Something heavier. Izuku didn't know what to call it, but he felt it. Like a pressure between them that hadn't been there before.

He didn't want to leave anyone behind. That had always been the fear. That his growth would come at the cost of distance. That the stronger he became, the more isolated he'd feel.

He finished dressing, stood, and looked around the room. Most of the others were already gone, their voices echoing faintly down the hall.

Izuku took a breath.

Tomorrow, they'd face Graviel. And whatever he was now—whatever Kagutsuchi had helped him unlock—it had to be enough.

A truth that followed him all the way home.

The door opened with a soft click, and before Izuku could even step fully inside, arms wrapped tightly around him.

"Welcome home, baby," Inko whispered, her voice trembling just slightly.

Izuku blinked, caught off guard by the sudden embrace. He hadn't realized how much he missed the quiet warmth of his mother's presence until that moment. Her arms were small, but they held him like she was trying to shield him from the world.

"I'm okay, Mom," he said gently, hugging her back. "I promise."

She pulled away just enough to look at him, her eyes scanning his face, his posture, his uniform. "The school called. Said it was a training camp. No warning. Just—'he'll be gone for a few days.' I didn't know what to think."

Izuku nodded. "It was intense. But it was just training. That's all."

Inko didn't press. She just smiled, relief softening her features. "Well, you're back. That's what matters."

She stepped aside, motioning toward the kitchen. "I made Katsudon. Your favorite. I wasn't sure how hungry you'd be, so… I might've gone a little overboard."

Izuku walked in and stopped short.

The table was covered. Bowl after bowl of steaming Katsudon, perfectly arranged, the scent rich and familiar. His stomach growled immediately, louder than he expected.

He turned to her, eyes wide. "Mom… this is amazing."

She beamed. "You've been working hard. You deserve it."

Izuku sat down and began to eat, the first bite sending a wave of comfort through him. The warmth, the flavor—it was everything he hadn't realized he needed. He didn't rush. He didn't speak. Just ate, slowly, gratefully.

But as he reached the fourth bowl, his thoughts began to drift.

Graviel.

The fight tomorrow wasn't just another test. It was something else. Something final. Kagutsuchi had made that clear. And Izuku could feel it in his bones—that whatever happened, it would leave a mark.

His mind shifted again.

Aoyama.

He'd stopped by the infirmary before leaving UA. Just for a minute. Just to see him.

Still unresponsive. Still silent. But not as hollow. Recovery Girl had convinced him to eat, to drink. His face looked less sunken. His skin less pale. There was something there now. A flicker.

Izuku had stood beside him, watching the slow rise and fall of his chest, and made a promise.

He didn't say it out loud. He didn't need to.

Even if they lost. Even if Graviel crushed them. Even if everything fell apart.

He would not let anything happen to Aoyama.

Not again.

He finished another bowl, then another. Inko sat nearby, watching quietly, content just to be near him.

Izuku didn't speak. But the promise stayed with him, steady and silent.

The sun hadn't fully risen yet. Pale light filtered through the curtains, casting soft shadows across Izuku's bedroom. The air was still, the kind of silence that only existed before the world woke up.

Izuku sat at the edge of his bed, already dressed in his uniform. His boots were beside him, untouched. He stared at them for a moment, then looked down at his hands.

They were steady.

He wasn't sure if that was a good thing.

His room was just as he'd left it—posters on the wall, notebooks stacked neatly, All Might memorabilia tucked into corners. But something felt different. Like the room had aged in his absence. Or maybe he had.

He reached for his boots and began lacing them slowly, methodically. Every movement felt deliberate. Like he was sealing himself into something.

Outside, he could hear the faint clink of dishes. Inko was awake.

The soft hum of the refrigerator and the distant chirping of birds were the only sounds in the Midoriya household. Morning sunlight spilled gently across the kitchen floor, warming the tiles in golden streaks.

Inko stood at the stove, wearing her favorite apron with the little green clovers. She flipped tamagoyaki with practiced ease, humming a tune under her breath. The smell of miso soup and grilled fish filled the air—simple, comforting, familiar.

Izuku sat at the table, already dressed in his uniform. His hair was still damp from his shower, and he was quietly sipping tea, watching the steam curl upward.

"You're up early," Inko said cheerfully, plating the eggs. "You must really want to make a good impression at remedial class."

Izuku smiled, nodding. "Yeah. I don't want to be late."

She placed the breakfast in front of him, then sat down across the table with her own bowl. "I'm glad they're giving you extra training. You've been working so hard lately. It's nice to see the school recognizing that."

Izuku nodded again, chewing slowly. "Yeah. It's… important."

Inko took a sip of her soup, then looked at him fondly. "You've grown so much, Izuku. I still remember when you used to trip over your own feet trying to run to school."

He chuckled softly. "I still do sometimes."

She laughed, the sound light and warm. "Well, just don't trip today. I packed you a little something for later. Nothing fancy—just some rice balls and pickled plum. You'll need the energy."

Izuku glanced at the small bento box on the counter, then back at her. "Thanks, Mom. That means a lot."

They ate in silence for a while, the kind that only exists between people who know each other deeply. Inko chatted occasionally about a new sale at the market, or a neighbor's cat that had finally come home. Izuku listened, nodding, smiling—but his thoughts were elsewhere.

The fight ahead.

Izuku stood by the door, adjusting his bag. Inko handed him the bento, wrapping it in a cloth with a little smile.

"Don't forget to eat," she said. "And don't let them work you too hard."

"I won't," he replied, slipping the bento into his bag.

She reached up and brushed a stray hair from his forehead. "My little hero."

Izuku paused, then hugged her gently. "Thanks, Mom. I'll be back before dinner."

She waved as he stepped outside, the morning light catching his face just right.

"Have a good class!" she called.

Izuku didn't look back. He couldn't.

As he walked down the street, the weight of the day settled on his shoulders. But behind him, in that quiet little apartment, his mother smiled, thinking it was just another Saturday.

The gates of U.A. loomed ahead, familiar yet somehow more imposing than usual. The campus was quiet—too quiet for a Saturday morning. No chatter, no scattered students rushing to make up missed assignments. Just stillness.

Izuku stepped through the gates, his footsteps echoing faintly on the pavement. The air felt heavier here, like the school itself was holding its breath.

He made his way toward the main building, passing the training grounds where the grass still bore scars from recent battles. His eyes flicked toward the infirmary windows, just for a second.

Aoyama.

Still there. Still fighting in his own way.

As Izuku reached the entrance, a voice called out softly behind him.

"You're early."

He turned.

Shoto Todoroki stood a few feet away, dressed in his hero gear, arms crossed loosely. His expression was calm, but his eyes were sharp—watchful.

Izuku nodded. "Couldn't sleep."

Todoroki walked up beside him, glancing toward the sky. "Neither could I."

They stood there for a moment, side by side, the silence between them filled with unspoken understanding.

"Is everyone here?" Izuku asked.

"Almost. Iida's coordinating inside. Yaoyorozu's checking supplies. Bakugo's… pacing."

Izuku smiled faintly. "Sounds about right."

Todoroki looked at him. "You saw Aoyama?"

Izuku nodded. "He's stable. Recovery Girl's doing her best."

Todoroki's jaw tightened slightly. "He shouldn't have to fight anymore."

Izuku's voice was quiet, but firm. "He won't. Not alone."

Todoroki studied him for a moment, then nodded. "Let's go. They're waiting."

As they walked inside, the doors closed behind them with a soft thud—like the world outside had been sealed away.

The final preparations had begun.

The sky above Ground Omega was overcast, casting a muted gray over the sprawling arena. Located on the far edge of U.A.'s secured territory, Ground Omega was rarely used—reserved only for the most extreme simulations and sanctioned combat trials. Today, it had been cleared for something far more serious.

Faculty members stood at the perimeter, overseeing final preparations. Cementoss reinforced the outer walls. Power Loader calibrated the terrain's reactive systems. Midnight and Aizawa reviewed the emergency protocols, while Principal Nezu monitored everything from a secure observation booth.

At the center of the field, a wide circular platform had been raised—simple, stark, and symbolic. It was where Graviel had agreed to meet them.

This wasn't a trap.

This was a test.

The prep hangar was quiet, filled only with the soft sounds of gear being adjusted and boots hitting the floor. No one spoke unless necessary. The air was thick with anticipation—not dread, but a solemn stillness.

Izuku stood near the lockers, suiting up.

His costume wasn't new. It was the same one he'd worn from the beginning—dark, tactical, and stripped of ornamentation. The black emblem on his chest, shaped like a bird with outstretched wings, stood out against the matte fabric. It wasn't just a symbol—it was a statement. A promise.

Straps and pouches lined his suit, each one placed with purpose. His gloves were reinforced, his boots heavy and stable. His hair, dark green and spiky, framed his bare face—no mask, no visor. Just Izuku Midoriya, eyes clear, expression calm.

Across the room, Bakugo finished suiting up.

His costume had evolved—less bulk, more precision. The grenade gauntlets were gone, replaced by compact discharge nodes. His boots were reinforced, his collar lowered. It was still Bakugo—but honed.

He looked up.

Izuku met his gaze.

They didn't speak.

They didn't need to.

The stare they shared was quiet, intense, and full of everything they'd been through. Rivalry. Pain. Growth. Trust.

Bakugo gave a small nod.

Izuku returned it.

Behind them, Todoroki adjusted his cooling modules. Yaoyorozu reviewed her support gear. Iida calibrated his engines. The others moved with purpose, but the two of them—Izuku and Bakugo—were already still.

Already ready.

The hangar doors began to open, revealing the path to Ground Omega.

Without a word, Izuku turned and walked forward.

Bakugo followed.

The gates of U.A. opened without sound.

No one was expecting anything loud. But even so, the silence that followed felt heavier than usual.

A boy walked through.

He looked young—maybe sixteen, seventeen. White shirt, dark slacks, sleeves rolled just enough to show his forearms. His hair was tied back loosely, a few strands hanging over his face. He didn't carry anything. He didn't wear shoes.

Bare feet on pavement. Slow, steady steps.

He didn't look around. Just kept walking, hands in his pockets, like he knew exactly where he was going.

Inside the viewing room, the faculty had gathered. The monitors showed Ground Omega, already prepped. No one spoke. The air felt tight.

Then the door slid open.

The boy stepped in.

No one moved. No one greeted him.

He didn't offer a nod or a glance. Just walked in, stopped near the center of the room, and stood there. His posture was relaxed, almost casual. His eyes—golden, quiet—drifted across the room once, then settled somewhere vague.

Kagutsuchi stood up, brushing off his coat. "I'll take him."

The boy didn't respond. He turned and followed Kagutsuchi out.

The students stood in a loose formation, the concrete beneath their boots still warm from the afternoon sun. The sky overhead was dull, streaked with gray, and the wind barely moved.

Kagutsuchi stepped into view first, his coat swaying slightly as he walked. Behind him came the boy—barefoot, hands in his pockets, white shirt clean and untucked, hair tied back loosely.

He looked like one of them.

Young. Calm. Almost forgettable.

Kagutsuchi stopped a few paces from the group and gestured casually toward the boy beside him.

"This," he said, his voice even, "is Graviel."

The name hung in the air.

No one responded.

A few students glanced at each other. No one stepped forward. No one greeted him.

Mineta leaned toward Kaminari, whispering under his breath, "That's Graviel? Seriously?"

Kaminari didn't answer. He just stared.

Yaoyorozu's brows drew together slightly. Jirou shifted her weight. Even Bakugo, arms crossed, didn't say anything.

They'd expected something else. Something taller. Older. Maybe glowing. Maybe terrifying.

But this boy looked like he could be in their class.

Still… something was off.

It wasn't anything they could name. Just a feeling. A quiet wrongness. Like the air around him didn't move quite right. Like the space he occupied was slightly out of sync with everything else.

Graviel looked at them.

His gaze moved slowly across the group, not lingering on anyone in particular. His golden eyes didn't glow. They didn't pierce. But they unsettled. Not because of what they showed—but because of what they didn't.

Then he spoke.

"Hello."

Just one word. Soft. Clear.

His voice wasn't deep. It wasn't commanding. It was light—almost delicate. But there was something in it. A weight. A sharpness. Like a blade wrapped in silk.

Several students felt the hairs on their arms rise.

Todoroki's fingers twitched. Uraraka's smile faltered. Even Kirishima, usually steady, shifted his stance slightly.

No one answered.

Graviel didn't seem to mind.

He just stood there, barefoot on the concrete, watching them with that quiet, unreadable expression.

And the students, for all their training, for all their courage, couldn't shake the feeling that they were being measured—and that they didn't know the scale.

The wind moved lazily across the arena, stirring dust and loose strands of hair. The students stood in a loose semicircle, facing Kagutsuchi and Graviel. No one spoke. No one shifted.

Kagutsuchi glanced at the group, then at Graviel, who stood beside him with his hands still tucked into his pockets, barefoot on the concrete. His expression hadn't changed since he arrived—calm, unreadable.

Kagutsuchi cleared his throat lightly, as if starting a staff briefing.

"Alright," he said, his tone even. "Here's how this goes."

A few students leaned in slightly. Most just listened.

"It's a free-for-all," Kagutsuchi continued. "All of you, together, against Graviel."

No reaction. Just quiet tension.

"He's not allowed to use any divine abilities," Kagutsuchi added, almost offhand. "We sorted that out upstairs. Took a while to get the paperwork through."

Graviel reached up and scratched at his temple, fingers brushing through the loose strands of his tied-back hair. It wasn't dramatic—just a small, absent gesture. He didn't say anything.

The students exchanged faint glances. No one looked relieved, exactly, but the rule gave them something to hold onto. Something human.

No divine power. That helped.

But they'd trained with Kagutsuchi. They knew what "normal" looked like for beings like him. And Graviel was his peer.

Kagutsuchi let the quiet stretch for a moment before continuing.

"There's one condition for victory," he said. "If Graviel takes three clean hits—just three—that's it. That's the match."

The words landed softly, but they didn't bounce.

Three hits.

No one spoke. A few brows furrowed. Yaoyorozu's fingers twitched slightly, already thinking. Todoroki's gaze sharpened. Bakugo's jaw flexed, but he didn't say a word.

Izuku looked at Graviel, trying to read something in his posture. Nothing. Just stillness.

Mineta leaned toward Kaminari, his voice low. "Three hits? That's it?"

Kaminari didn't answer. He was still watching Graviel.

It sounded simple. Too simple.

But that was the problem.

Kirishima shifted his stance, muttering under his breath, "Clean hits… not just grazes."

No one responded.

Kagutsuchi looked over the group again, his tone still casual. "No tricks. No divine shields. No celestial resets. Just you, and him."

Graviel didn't move. Didn't blink.

The students stood quietly, the rule settling in like a slow weight.

Three hits.

That was all it would take.

And yet, none of them could shake the feeling that even one would be a miracle.

The students spread out across the arena, adjusting gloves, checking gear, stretching limbs that already felt too tense. No one spoke. The usual pre-battle chatter was absent. Even Bakugo was quiet.

Izuku stood near the center, his fingers flexing unconsciously. He glanced toward Graviel, who hadn't moved since Kagutsuchi finished speaking. Still barefoot. Still quiet. Still watching.

Izuku thought about walking over. Just to say something. Anything.

But the longer he looked at Graviel, the more that idea unraveled.

There was something in the way he stood. Not threatening. Not cold. Just… wrong. Like he didn't belong to the same world. Like gravity bent differently around him.

Izuku looked away.

Kagutsuchi, still standing beside Graviel, turned slightly. Their eyes met.

No words passed between them. But something did.

A shared understanding. A quiet exchange.

Then Kagutsuchi turned and walked away, his coat trailing behind him as he exited the arena without a word.

The students watched him go, the silence stretching.

It felt like hours.

They wished they felt ready.

None of them did.

Then Nezu's voice crackled over the speakers. Calm. Flat. Mechanical.

"Begin in ten seconds."

No cheer. No encouragement. Just numbers.

"Ten."

The students shifted, settling into stances. Breathing slower. Eyes narrowing.

"Nine."

Izuku's heart thudded once, hard.

"Eight."

Graviel didn't move.

"Seven."

Uraraka clenched her fists. Todoroki's fingers hovered near his side.

"Six."

Bakugo's palms sparked faintly.

"Five."

Kirishima exhaled through his nose.

"Four."

Jirou adjusted her earpieces.

"Three."

Mineta swallowed hard.

"Two."

No one spoke.

"One."

The pause before the final word felt longer than it should have.

Then—

"Go."

They moved.

Instantly.

A coordinated rush. Quirks activated. Boots slammed against concrete. Energy surged.

Graviel looked up.

Just that.

And it was like death had turned its head.

Not rage. Not violence. Just inevitability.

Unvarnished. Unblinking.

Some attacks landed—barely. A blast grazed his shoulder. A sonic pulse clipped his side.

But Graviel was already gone.

Not vanished. Not teleported.

Just… past them.

He walked through the chaos like it was mist. His movements weren't fast—they were precise. Clean. Efficient.

A palm to Kaminari's chest—he dropped.

A flick of his wrist sent Jirou spinning.

A step forward, and Kirishima staggered back, breath knocked from his lungs.

Graviel didn't chase. Didn't dodge wildly. He just moved. Casual. Surgical.

And the students, for all their training, for all their preparation, realized in that moment—

They weren't ready.

They might never be.

The air was thick with heat and movement.

Todoroki pivoted sharply, eyes locked on Graviel's new position. His left side flared—fire surged forward in a wide arc, aimed not to overwhelm, but to corner.

Graviel stepped through it.

Not hurried. Not strained.

Just a clean sidestep, the flames licking past him harmlessly—straight toward Uraraka.

She gasped, leaping back, the heat brushing her skin as she twisted midair, barely avoiding the blast.

Bakugo was already moving.

Two explosions—tight, controlled—detonated in quick succession, one at Graviel's feet, the other just behind him. The timing was perfect. The angles sharp.

Graviel didn't bite.

He ducked low, weaving between the shockwaves, his body folding with eerie precision. In a blink, he was in front of Bakugo.

A palm rose.

Not a punch. Just a touch.

It connected under Bakugo's chin, and the force sent him skyward, limbs flailing, breath knocked from his lungs.

Toru, invisible and silent, lunged from behind.

Her arms wrapped around Graviel's neck in a chokehold, bare skin against his.

For a moment, it looked like she had him.

Then his hand reached back, found her shoulder, and shoved.

She flew sideways, landing hard, the impact knocking the breath from her.

The others closed in.

Kirishima hardened mid-charge, aiming low. Yaoyorozu launched a volley of support items—nets, stun discs, anything that might slow him down. Iida blurred in from the flank, engines roaring.

Graviel moved like water.

He didn't block. He didn't counter.

He just wasn't there when they arrived.

A twist of his torso, and Kirishima's punch hit air.

A pivot, and Iida's kick missed by inches.

A step back, and Yaoyorozu's stun disc fizzled against the ground.

Every movement was deliberate. Every dodge was clean. He didn't waste energy. He didn't retaliate unless necessary.

But when he did—

A sharp elbow to Iida's ribs sent him skidding.

A flick of his wrist knocked Yaoyorozu's launcher from her grip.

A low sweep dropped Kirishima to one knee.

The fight was intense. Visceral. Real.

No one was holding back.

They weren't just trying to win.

They were trying to prove something.

That they could reach him.

That they could touch the untouchable.

But Graviel wasn't fighting like a god.

He was fighting like someone who had done this a thousand times.

And the students, for all their fury, for all their training, were still chasing shadows.

In the observation booth, the air was still and heavy with a palpable tension that defied the usual professional calm. The monitors showed the students' desperate, synchronized assault, a tapestry of power and movement that, just days ago, would have inspired awe.

Now, it was a tragedy in motion.

Aizawa's jaw was clenched, a thin, white line marking his face. His eyes, usually half-lidded, were wide and glued to the screen. He watched Kirishima fall to a simple sweep, his expression unreadable. He saw Yaoyorozu's launcher plucked from her hand with casual ease. He knew, with grim certainty, that a hero's instinct was to fight harder. He also knew that the harder they fought, the more they would expose themselves.

"They're not even landing grazes now," Midnight murmured, her voice flat. There was no theatricality in her tone, only a raw, subdued dread. The monitors showed Graviel's effortless ballet, a flawless dance of avoidance. He was not a brute; he was a surgeon, cutting through their coordinated offense with terrifying precision.

Present Mic, for once, was silent. He simply watched, his knuckles white where his hands gripped the console. He saw Kaminari get struck—a blow so precise it had shut him down instantly without a single spark of resistance. He saw the flicker of hope in his student's eyes before it was snuffed out.

Principal Nezu's voice was the only one that broke the quiet, his tone as detached and analytical as ever. "They are operating under the assumption that a Quirk, used well, is a counter to physical precision. Graviel, as we knew, is disabusing them of that notion." He steepled his paws, watching Iida get pushed back. "They're trying to win. But he isn't playing their game. He's simply demonstrating the rules of his own."

The weight of the room settled on Toshinori's shoulders, a physical ache that matched the hollowness in his gut. He had watched Izuku and the others push Kagutsuchi to a new limit, a moment that had filled him with a fierce, protective pride. But now, that hope felt naive, a fragile illusion shattered by the effortless display of a true High Lord. Graviel was not a challenge to be overcome, but an immutable fact of the universe. The students, for all their new strength and coordinated fury, were like children throwing pebbles at a fortress.

He watched as Graviel sent Bakugo flying with a casual touch, a small, helpless figure against the bruised sky. A chilling certainty settled over him, colder than any ice. Kagutsuchi's words from before now felt like a prophecy fulfilled. The statement wasn't just a hit—it was the demonstration of an unbridgeable gulf between them. And Toshinori knew, with a certainty that chilled him to the core, that the students were about to be taught that lesson, whether they were ready or not.

Their desperation was a physical thing, a pulse of frantic energy that surged through the air. The students, reeling from Graviel's effortless counters, regrouped. No longer was it a seamless symphony; it was a series of desperate solos, each player trying to find a rhythm.

Tsuyu's tongue lashed out, not to strike, but to snare. A long, prehensile ribbon, it wrapped around a broken piece of concrete and snapped it back, sending it hurtling toward Graviel. Mineta, seeing the opportunity, launched a volley of his sticky Pop Off balls at the airborne debris. The balls connected, and the concrete became a heavy, spiky projectile.

Graviel didn't dodge. With a blindingly fast, almost imperceptible strike from his open palm, he hit the projectile just off-center. The impact didn't destroy it, but it shifted its trajectory with a surgical precision that sent it veering sharply, harmlessly, into a support column. The concrete exploded into a shower of dust and debris, and Mineta and Tsuyu landed hard, panting, their coordinated plan having failed entirely.

Fumikage Tokoyami, standing in the shadows of the arena's perimeter, unleashed Dark Shadow. It wasn't a reckless, full-force assault. This time, Dark Shadow was a phantom, a living wall of darkness that spread out and engulfed Graviel, not to crush him, but to blind him, to create a moment of perfect sensory deprivation.

Graviel, standing in the center of the dark, didn't move. He simply shifted his weight slightly, his bare feet pressing into the concrete. His eyes, now open wide, adjusted instantly, seeing in the near-total darkness as if it were daylight. He moved, not with speed, but with an inhumanly fluid grace, weaving through Dark Shadow's form. He was a whisper in the gloom, a cold air current that found the central mass of the shadow and, with a quick, two-fingered strike to its core, caused it to recoil. Dark Shadow recoiled with a hiss, withdrawing back to Tokoyami, who stumbled back, clutching his head as if from a psychic blow, his mind reeling from the cold, clinical efficiency of the counter.

From a different angle, Mashirao Ojiro moved, his tail a blur. He didn't rush in headlong. He executed a series of impossible flips and acrobatic tumbles, using his tail to propel himself off walls and debris. He was a human pendulum, a fighter whose trajectory was a constant, unpredictable line. He aimed for a moment of vulnerability—a second when Graviel would be distracted by another attack.

That moment never came. Graviel simply extended a hand, and with a flick of his wrist, caught Ojiro's tail as if snagging a fishing line. The motion was so quick, so precise, that it didn't even break the rhythm of the battle. Ojiro, his momentum completely reversed, was sent spinning and was slammed to the ground.

Rikido Sato, his body already glowing from a fresh sugar boost, lunged forward. His movements were direct, his Quirk providing an explosive, raw power that he channeled into a single, devastating right hook. This wasn't a tactic; it was a desperate attempt to hit with pure force.

Graviel met the punch with an open palm. He didn't block it directly, but instead, with an infinitesimal twist of his wrist, redirected the full force of the blow. The power of Sato's punch, instead of transferring to Graviel, was sent spinning back into Sato's own arm, knocking his feet from under him. A thunderclap echoed through the arena, and Sato's arm, numb from the impact, was pushed back with such force that his feet left the ground. He landed hard, the air knocked from his lungs, his Quirk draining away instantly. The sweet aroma of sugar, so recently a sign of strength, now hung in the air like a bitter perfume.

Mezo Shoji, moving to cover the fallen Sato, expanded his Dupli-Arms. Not to attack, but to create a living shield. His massive, multi-limbed form became a barrier, the many hands and eyes serving as a wall against Graviel's inevitable counter-attack. The goal was to buy time, to provide cover, to be a protector.

Graviel simply stepped around him. The movement was effortless, fluid. He didn't push, didn't break the shield. He simply found the gap, the one small weakness in Shoji's defense, and slipped through it, a ghost moving through a solid object. Shoji, his arms spread wide, was left facing a blank wall of concrete, the fight having moved past him without a whisper.

The students were falling like dominoes. Their Quirks, honed and refined through Kagutsuchi's brutal training, were proving useless. Not because they weren't strong, but because Graviel wasn't playing their game. They were throwing punches at a concept, not a person.

And in the swirling chaos, a voice, a single, clear sound, cut through the noise.

"Now!"

The students, battered and bruised, looked for the source. They found Koji Koda, his face pale with concentration, standing near a far wall. He was shouting at something the others couldn't see.

Then they saw it—a flock of pigeons, birds that had been roosting in the arena's rafters, exploded into motion. Not flying in a panicked swarm, but in a perfectly coordinated formation, a living vortex of feathers and flapping wings that descended right toward Graviel.

Graviel, mid-stride, stopped.

Just for a moment. A fraction of a second. His head tilted up, his golden eyes tracking the birds as they spiraled around him. His unreadable expression shifted, not with annoyance, but with a quiet, almost curious fascination.

It was enough.

The students saw it. A single moment of vulnerability. A crack in the facade.

Bakugo roared, pushing himself to his feet. Iida activated his engines. Izuku, a golden blur, moved to strike. The coordinated, perfect assault they had been training for was finally, desperately, within reach.

But Graviel was already moving.

His body twisted, his hand a flash of white as he deflected Izuku's punch and then, with a single, precise flick of his wrist, he sent Bakugo spinning away. He closed the distance to Koda in an instant, a blur of motion that defied sight. He didn't use a Quirk. He simply moved faster than humanly possible. His hand, a flash of white, found Koda's neck. Not to strike, but to press. A precise, surgical application of pressure on a nerve cluster in Koda's throat.

The birds scattered, their formation broken. Koda's body crumpled to the concrete, his face pressing against the cold dust. He lay there, still and silent. The students' eyes went wide, their assault faltering. They stared, not at Graviel, but at the motionless form of their classmate. A gasp escaped a few lips. For the first time, a real fear—a cold, sickening dread—replaced their fighting spirit. Graviel simply looked at them, then with a slow, silent gesture of his hand, he motioned for them to continue.

The dread was palpable, a suffocating blanket that threatened to extinguish their will to fight. Koda's form, still on the concrete, was a stark reminder of their powerlessness. But that moment of silence, that pause, was all the opening Yaoyorozu needed.

"He's trying to phase us," she called out, her voice cutting through the fear. "Don't let him psych us out with Koda. We can't fight him with force alone."

A chorus of pained groans and staggered breaths was her only answer. But she kept talking, her mind already moving at a furious pace.

"Todoroki! Flash freeze the ground! Not to trap him, but to change the friction! Iida, you're the only one fast enough to disrupt his footing! Create a chokepoint! Kirishima, with me!"

The students moved, their fear giving way to a grim determination. Todoroki's right side flared, but not with a wall of ice. Instead, a thin, shimmering sheet of frost raced across the concrete, making the surface slick and unpredictable. Iida, seeing the new opportunity, activated his engines and began a series of high-speed passes, the air pressure from his movements creating small, jarring eddies of wind that Graviel had to constantly correct for.

Graviel, caught off-guard by the sudden change in terrain, had to adjust his steps, his perfect posture faltering for a microsecond. It was all they had. Yaoyorozu, having created a large, flexible Kevlar net, flung it forward with Kirishima, who was now hardened to an extreme degree. But it wasn't a net. It was a sling. The Kevlar net, taut between them, became a catapult.

"NOW, DEKU!" Bakugo screamed, his voice a raw, furious thunderclap that cut through the sound of battle. "NOW!"

Izuku, who had been a ghost, a silent observer of the new plan, surged forward. He didn't just activate his Agito armor; he became it. The golden glow that had previously pulsed from his body now erupted, a blinding, physical transformation that was both terrifying and beautiful. His flesh, his bones, his very essence reshaped itself into the black and gold armor, the twin horns on his helmet flashing into existence in a single, fluid motion. The change was so fast, so seamless, that it wasn't an action—it was a reaction.

He moved, not as a human, but as a force of nature. His boots didn't hit the ground so much as they annihilated the space between him and Graviel. He was a golden blur, a living projectile of pure, unbridled power, the culmination of all the training, all the pain, all the hope. The sling from Yaoyorozu and Kirishima hit Graviel from the side, a new, massive distraction. Graviel's head snapped towards the unexpected trajectory of the net just as Izuku, a silent, golden thunderbolt, was already there.

The punch was not just a blow. It was a testament. The fist, forged in the crucible of his armor, connected with a sound like a world-ending crack, a sound that rang in the ears of every student and every faculty member. Graviel's body, for the first time, didn't move like liquid. It bent.

In the viewing booth, the silence was absolute. No one spoke, no one moved. The sound of the monitor had been muted by the sheer force of the impact, but the image remained. It was a still frame, a tableau of the impossible. Izuku's golden fist was buried in Graviel's torso, the High Lord's body bent at an unnatural angle, his feet just leaving the ground. The casual, unreadable expression on his face was gone, replaced by a momentary flicker of pure, unadulterated shock.

Aizawa, his eyes still wide, felt a slow, grudging exhale escape his lips. He hadn't realized he'd been holding his breath. There was no theatrical cheer, no shout of victory. Only the quiet, deep satisfaction of a teacher watching his students finally, truly, surpass themselves.

Midnight's hand came up to her mouth, her gaze locked on the screen. A single, silent tear tracked a path through her makeup. She had seen their fear, their desperation, the moment where all hope seemed lost. And now she was seeing the moment of its return, not as a fragile ember, but as an incandescent supernova.

Present Mic simply leaned back in his chair, his head tilted back, a small, genuine smile on his face. He didn't need to say a word. The sound they had made was a symphony of hope, the loudest sound he had ever heard.

Recovery Girl's hands were clasped tightly in her lap, her knuckles white. She had seen the raw power of their punches, the fury of their resolve. She had mended their bodies, but they had mended their own souls. She knew better than anyone the cost of that kind of effort, but she also knew, with a certainty that had settled deep in her bones, that this was a cost they were willing to pay.

And Toshinori… Toshinori simply stood. A gentle, proud smile spread across his face, not a flashy, heroic grin, but a quiet, honest one. He had seen the raw, unpolished form of Izuku's will in the boy who had once tripped over his own feet. He had watched this child, who had once been Quirkless, find his own path to power. And now, he was watching that hero, in his own right, not run, but soar. Not just for himself, but for all his friends, for all his classmates. The hollow ache in Toshinori's stomach was gone, replaced by a warm, encompassing sense of profound and utter pride. This was it. This was the moment. He had raised a new hero. And the world, whether it knew it or not, was a little bit safer for it.

Kagutsuchi watched the monitor, a small, almost imperceptible smile tugging at the corner of his lips. The raw power of the hit, the perfect timing, the desperate coordination—it was everything he had pushed them for. He saw the shock on Graviel's face, the first true emotion he had shown, and he felt a brief flicker of satisfaction. But the smile faded as quickly as it came, replaced by the cool, hard analysis of a strategist. He glanced at the tally board on the side of the monitor. "Clean hits: 1." They needed two more. That punch wasn't a victory—it was a single, hard-won point. And the cost of the next two would be higher still. This was for Aoyama, a chance at redemption and a hope for a better future, but they still had a long way to go to earn it.

A ringing silence descended upon Ground Omega. The dust, kicked up by the punch, settled slowly back to the scarred concrete. Izuku's Agito armor hummed, a low, steady sound as a fine mist of steam rose from his gauntlet. He stood perfectly still, his fist still buried in Graviel's torso. Around them, the other students, scattered and battered, stared in stunned disbelief.

A triumphant shout—a cry of "We did it!"—was on the tip of someone's tongue, but it died there, caught in the thick, disbelieving air. For a precious few seconds, the world felt still. The impossible had just happened. They had done it. They had landed a clean hit.

Then, the illusion shattered.

A faint, golden ripple of energy radiated from Graviel's chest, where the blow had landed. A small crack snaked across the concrete beneath him. The High Lord, for the first time since the battle began, groaned softly, a low sound of genuine discomfort. His golden eyes, which had been wide with surprise, slowly refocused.

He didn't need to speak.

He slowly pulled his body free from Izuku's fist, his hand coming up to touch the spot on his torso. A faint bruise, a mark of their success, was visible. Then, with a silent, deliberate motion, he held up a single finger on his left hand.

And then, he held up two fingers on his right.

The message was clear. One down. Two to go.

The air was thick with their renewed understanding. The hope of victory, so incandescent just a moment ago, was replaced with the cold, hard reality of the challenge. The punch was not a finishing blow. It was a single, hard-won point. They needed two more miracles. And the man they had just fought, the man who was now standing up, was not going to give them a third.

The exhaustion, the pain, and the terror of the fight flooded back, amplified by the realization that they had just used everything they had to land a single blow. And it hadn't even been enough to knock him off his feet permanently. They were bruised, battered, and on the verge of collapse. Graviel, in contrast, looked… fine. His hands were tucked casually into his pockets. The faint bruise on his chest was already fading. He had moved on.

Izuku retracted his fist, the golden glow of his Agito armor still pulsing with latent energy, and looked at Graviel. His heart, which had been pounding with the fierce joy of victory, now thudded with a new, heavier rhythm. He glanced back at his classmates. Their faces were etched with a mix of awe and despair. They had given everything, and it wasn't enough. Not yet.

But then, the despair faded. It was replaced by a grim determination.

They looked at Graviel.

They looked at Izuku.

And then they looked at each other.

Kirishima, who was still on one knee, pushed himself up with a grunt. Yaoyorozu, her body trembling with exhaustion, created a small, collapsible shield. Bakugo, who had just been sent flying, landed hard, rolled with the impact, and was already pushing himself to his feet, a furious scowl on his face. He spat a curse at Graviel, then at the sky, then at himself.

The fight wasn't over.

The students moved again, a desperate energy replacing their momentary paralysis. The second point, the second impossible miracle, was all that mattered. They couldn't afford to hesitate. The shock of Graviel's resilience had already cost them too much time.

Yaoyorozu, her mind racing, took a new approach. Instead of a weapon or a net, she focused on something more subtle. With a grimace of concentration, she created a small, intricate device—a "conduction matrix" she called it. It was a complex, web-like object of fine, metallic wire, no bigger than her palm. She tossed it to Mineta, who, with an uncharacteristic seriousness, attached it to one of his Pop Off balls. He launched it in a high arc, aiming not at Graviel, but at a broken piece of concrete high above him. The ball stuck, and the metallic matrix unfurled like a spiderweb, a silent trap hanging in the air.

As Graviel moved, his flawless motions a study in liquid grace, he passed directly under the trap. The matrix, responding to the subtle distortion of space around him, pulsed with a faint, violet light.

"NOW!" Yaoyorozu screamed.

Bakugo, who had been charging his own attack, spun and launched a powerful explosion not at Graviel, but directly at the matrix. The blast wasn't meant to cause damage; it was meant to trigger the device. The matrix, hit by the kinetic force of the explosion, detonated not with a bang, but with a silent, electromagnetic pulse that washed over Graviel's form.

Graviel stopped.

Just for a split second. Not in pain, but in confusion. The subtle, disruptive field had interfered with his inherent ability to perceive and navigate the world. His movements, for a brief, priceless moment, were thrown out of sync.

That was the opening.

Izuku didn't just move. He transformed. A fierce, crimson light exploded from his body, the golden armor melting away to be replaced by something more primal. His suit turned a stark, vibrant red, his horns elongating and curving like the head of a bull. Flames, real and tangible, roared to life around his gauntlets and his boots. His eyes, once golden, now burned with a furious, unbridled heat. He was no longer a blur; he was a meteor, a force of raw, unchecked power. This was Agito's Flame Form, and it was a powerful declaration.

No strategy. No subtlety. Just fire. This was a blow meant to hit, to hurt, to burn. He met Graviel's gaze, which had just cleared from the electromagnetic haze, and in a single, guttural roar, he lunged.

The punch was not just kinetic force. It was pure, elemental power. It carried the weight of rage, of determination, of every ounce of hope from his classmates. It connected cleanly with Graviel's head.

The impact was a detonation of sound and fire. A searing, concussive wave of heat blasted outwards, and for the first time, Graviel was not just pushed back. He was sent flying. His body spun end-over-end, a streak of human debris sent careening across the arena until he slammed into a far wall, a small, human-shaped crater left in the reinforced concrete. The students watched in silent, stunned awe.

Izuku stood at the center of the arena, his Flame Form humming with power. The air around him was still shimmering from the residual heat. His eyes, burning with fire, were fixed on the wall where Graviel had fallen. The fight wasn't over, but they had just proven, for the second time, that they were not just fighting for a miracle. They were fighting to win.

A slow, deliberate groan of shifting concrete announced Graviel's return. From the human-shaped crater, a single hand emerged, pushing aside the rubble. He slowly sat up, dust motes dancing in the air around him. He patted his head, checking for damage, then simply brushed the dust from his shoulders as he rose to his feet. He looked at the assembled students, a faint, condescending smile gracing his lips as he buried his hands into his pockets once more.

"My, my," he said, his voice a low, melodic purr. "It would seem I really need to try a bit harder now."

And with that, the world went silent.

He moved not as a force, but as an absence. The space where he was standing was suddenly empty. A sharp, almost musical crack echoed across the arena as Iida's armored leg buckled. The speedster fell, a look of profound shock on his face. Behind him, Jirou and Toru, who had been trying to set up a new distraction, were already on the ground, their forms limp. Jirou's earlobes, which had been extended to listen for Graviel's movements, lay uselessly at her sides.

Then, with a sickening thud, something slammed into Izuku's chest. It was Mineta, his body a projectile, thrown with impossible precision. He was still screaming, a high, pained shriek, as his body connected with the fiery crimson armor. The heat immediately began to melt the Pop Off balls stuck to his hair.

"MINETA!" Izuku roared, the heat from his Flame Form dying down instantly as he tried to catch the boy. The crimson energy receded, replaced by the familiar golden glow of his base Agito armor, the heat no longer a threat. He clutched Mineta, who could only sob in pain from the impact, and began to pry him free from the adhesive balls that were beginning to stick to the suit.

Behind him, Ochako, her mind still reeling, finally reacted. She turned just in time to see Graviel's hand, a blur of motion, flick her on the side of her neck. It was a gentle, almost dismissive tap, but it was enough. Her world tilted, and she collapsed, the zero gravity she'd been holding onto finally letting her go.

One by one, the others fell. A shadow, Dark Shadow, lunged at Graviel, a desperate, valiant attempt at an offensive, but it simply passed through the High Lord's form. Graviel moved again, and a moment later, a sharp jab to Tokoyami's solar plexus left the boy breathless, doubled over in pain.

All that was left was Bakugo.

"DON'T YOU DARE LOOK AT ME LIKE THAT!" Bakugo screamed, his hands glowing with a ferocious, determined energy. "I'M NOT DONE YET!"

He launched himself into the air, a Howitzer Impact, his ultimate attack, his final gambit. The massive explosion of compressed air and fire was a monument to his rage, his pride, and his unwillingness to surrender. It connected with Graviel's face, a perfect strike that consumed the High Lord in a pillar of concussive force.

The explosion died.

Graviel stood at the center of the crater, posture relaxed, his arms hanging loosely at his sides. His hair was disheveled, a few strands of gold singed at the ends, but his face was perfectly, infuriatingly, fine. He looked at Bakugo, who was now a few feet away, breathless and on the verge of collapse. Graviel's hand came up, and with a lazy motion, he grabbed Bakugo's arm by the wrist.

He locked eyes with the enraged boy, a flicker of genuine curiosity in his gaze.

"Barely enough," Graviel said, a quiet, almost disappointed tone in his voice. "For a warmup."

Bristling from the insult, a furious snarl contorted Bakugo's face. He tried to yank his arm free, but Graviel's grip was like a vice. With his free hand, Bakugo wound up for a punch, a desperate, raw strike meant to land on Graviel's face and finally secure that third, and final, point.

But Graviel, with a dismissive flick of his wrist, tossed Bakugo away. The motion was so casual, so effortless, that it was a greater insult than the words themselves. Bakugo flew through the air, a ragdoll in a storm, but his instincts kicked in. He fired a small explosion from his free hand, catching himself in midair and halting his momentum. He then launched himself back at Graviel, a furious comet of sound and fury.

He screamed a crude insult at the High Lord, his voice a raw, cracked thing. He didn't care about strategy, or winning, or points. All he cared about was landing a single, solid hit.

Graviel simply sidestepped.

"Why are you trying so hard?" Graviel asked, his voice calm, almost placid, as Bakugo's fist sailed harmlessly through the air where he had been a moment ago. "You already know you're going to fail."

"SHUT UP!" Bakugo screamed, his fist still glowing with latent energy. He wound back again, a furious punch aimed at Graviel's jaw.

But before it could connect, Graviel's hand came up, a graceful, almost gentle motion. He merely deflected the punch with a simple, quiet knock of his wrist against Bakugo's. The force was negligible, but the timing was perfect. The deflection threw Bakugo off balance, his body twisting in midair, his momentum gone. He hit the ground face-first, a final, embarrassing thud echoing across the silent arena.

For a moment, all that could be heard was Bakugo's ragged breathing. He pushed himself up, his body trembling with exhaustion, the effort alone an immense strain. His face, still marred by a furious scowl, was streaked with dirt and sweat. Graviel loomed over him, his presence a quiet, suffocating weight—no stance, no tension, just stillness.

"Katsuki Bakugo," Graviel began, his voice a low, analytical tone that was more unsettling than a shout. He wasn't speaking to Bakugo so much as observing him. "Father, Masaru. Mother, Mitsuki. A well-off upbringing, you might say. Masaru works in the fashion industry, while Mitsuki holds the fort at home."

Bakugo, still on his hands and knees, tried to push himself to his feet. He couldn't. His body had given all it could.

Graviel continued, a hint of something that might have been pity, or perhaps genuine confusion, in his voice. "It's a wonder, with such a stable foundation, how… tense you can be."

The words, so casually delivered, were a final, devastating blow. This wasn't a physical attack; it was a personal one, a violation of his very being. The calm, dismissive tone was worse than any insult Bakugo had ever heard.

He couldn't stand, but he could still move. With a guttural roar, a sound of pure, unadulterated fury and frustration, he lunged forward, his free hand, still glowing with the last remnants of his Quirk, aiming for Graviel's knee.

"SHUT UUUUUUP!" he screamed, his voice raw, hoarse from the effort.

Graviel watched the pathetic lunge, the last gasp of a proud warrior, with a detached, clinical interest. He simply took a single, elegant step back, and Bakugo's fist hit nothing but air and then the scarred concrete. He lay there, his face buried in the dirt, his body finally, completely, spent. The arena was silent once more.

Graviel slowly turned away from the fallen hero and his gaze settled on Izuku. The boy had just laid a spent Mineta against a crumbled pillar, his tiny form curled up, whimpering from the impact and the proximity to Izuku's earlier Flame Form. Izuku's own armor was now back to its base golden, the crimson glow of his transformation gone. He looked back up, his body weary, but his gaze unwavering. Through the visor, his red compound eyes seemed to glow, a simmering, fierce resolve that had not been extinguished.

Meanwhile, in the faculty room, the teachers were dead silent. The live feed from Ground Omega played on the monitors, showing the aftermath of Graviel's effortless assault. One by one, their students had fallen, meticulously and near-systemically neutralized by a man who still looked as pristine as he had upon his arrival, save for some small singes on his immaculate clothes.

Toshinori, now in his muscle form, stood rigid, his hands clenched into fists so tight his knuckles were white. Every instinct screamed at him to interfere, to charge into the arena and end this brutal exhibition. He was a hero; he was supposed to save people. But a different, colder logic held him in place. Calling on Kagutsuchi to end the match would mean surrendering Aoyama to the Lords for execution. They needed to win this. Toshinori stood frozen—not by fear, but by necessity. To move would be to lose Aoyama. To act would be to surrender the only chance they had as the fate of one student hung on the desperate resolve of the one still standing.

Izuku met Graviel's gaze, the silent challenge hanging in the air between them, a thread of raw resolve connecting the two of them across the ruined concrete. Izuku, clutching the injured Mineta, laid him as gently as he could beside the crumbled pillar and then slowly, deliberately, rose to his feet. He didn't rush. He didn't make a sound. Every movement was a struggle, his body screaming in protest from the hits he had taken and the effort of the Flame Form. But he ignored it, his gaze never leaving Graviel's. His red compound eyes, visible through the visor of his golden armor, seemed to burn with a quiet, fierce intensity.

Graviel, in turn, watched him with the same unreadable, placid expression. He stood with his hands still in his pockets, his posture relaxed, his bare feet still on the concrete. He was a statue of perfect stillness, an immovable object waiting for a desperate, frantic force.

Izuku swallowed hard, the action barely visible through his helmet. The fear was a cold, sharp thing in his gut, but it wasn't paralyzing. It was fuel. He could feel a new resolve building, a cold, hard certainty that this wasn't over. He would not, could not, fall here. Not for Mineta, not for Bakugo, not for Aoyama. Not for anyone.

He blinked.

In that single, infinitesimal fraction of a second, the space between them was gone.

Graviel wasn't in the center of the arena anymore. He was right in front of Izuku, his hand already a blur of motion, his body an elegant line of devastating force. He wasn't moving to deflect or to dodge. He was moving to strike. The red eyes of Izuku's armor widened just slightly in pure, unadulterated shock. He didn't have time to think. He only had time to react.

His body, acting on a primal, trained instinct, twisted violently to the side. The punch, a blur of white, connected with the air where his stomach had been a moment ago, the force of it a physical pressure that made the armor hum in protest. But the punch didn't just miss. It tore through the air, creating a vacuum that pulled Izuku slightly forward, and Graviel, a master of physics, used the moment to his advantage. His hand, already in motion, twisted, and a new blow, a sharp, concussive elbow, was aimed directly at Izuku's temple.

The attack was too fast. It was too precise. Izuku knew, with chilling certainty, that he couldn't dodge. So he didn't.

A violent, almost inhuman scream erupted from him, a sound of raw defiance. The golden armor flared into a blinding light, not red this time, but a shimmering, brilliant green. The twin horns on his helmet elongated into a sweeping, streamlined curve, and his body, his very being, became a vortex of kinetic energy. This was Agito's Storm Form, a manifestation of pure speed and momentum. He shifted not to fight, but to survive. The blow from Graviel, which would have ended the match instantly, was met not with flesh and bone, but with a swirling, green-hued blur.

The impact was a flash of light, a crackle of displaced air, and a sound like a whip-crack. Graviel's elbow connected, but it hit nothing. Izuku's new form, a whirlwind of emerald energy, had already zipped past him, a blur of motion that defied sight. He was gone.

Graviel stood in the center of the arena, his arm still in the position of a strike, his golden eyes flicking around in confusion. Izuku was nowhere to be seen. He was a silent, impossible ghost, a spiraling vortex of green light that was already beginning to circle the arena, the kinetic energy of his movement causing small dust devils to form in his wake. Izuku's plan was simple: he would disorient the High Lord with impossible speed and endless, unrelenting motion, forcing Graviel to waste energy and lose his placid, unreadable cool.

Graviel's placid expression finally, truly, faltered. A small, almost imperceptible frown creased his brow as he tried to track the impossibly fast hero. He was a statue in a storm, a fixed point in a world of dizzying, chaotic speed.

Then, Graviel moved.

It was not a dash. It was not a leap. It was a single, silent, elegant step. The first step was all that was needed. Graviel's body became a line of focused, inexorable force. He didn't become a blur of light like Izuku. He simply became faster than sight, a ghost that trailed the emerald vortex, a shadow that followed the storm.

He was a half-second behind Izuku, a silent, white-shirted figure that was an eerie mirror of Izuku's own breakneck speed. Izuku, a maelstrom of green energy and kinetic force, continued to whip around the arena, but now there was a tail—a silent, placid shadow that was gaining on him.

In the observation booth, the teachers' shock was absolute.

"He's… he's matching him," Aizawa breathed, his voice a disbelieving whisper. "Without even trying."

Midnight, her hands clasped to her chest, simply shook her head in a silent, horrified denial. "It's not just speed… it's… perfect. He's not expending a single ounce of wasted energy."

Present Mic was silent. Even Nezu, his analytical fire gone, simply stared at the monitor, his paws un-steepled, his brow furrowed with genuine bewilderment.

Toshinori, his mouth agape, felt a fresh wave of ice-cold dread flood his system. The Storm Form was Izuku's ultimate speed. It was the absolute pinnacle of what he could achieve with his Quirk. And Graviel, a man who had claimed to be holding back, was matching it with a placid, dismissive ease that was a testament to a power Izuku couldn't even comprehend.

Izuku felt it first. Not with his eyes, but with a prickling, cold sensation on the back of his neck, a profound and sickening violation of his personal space. His emerald-hued form, a living blur, was no longer alone in its chaos. He glanced over his shoulder.

For a moment, he thought it was a mirage. Just a few feet away, a white shirt and a placid face, a man who was somehow keeping pace with his impossible speed.

And Graviel, seeing that Izuku's eyes had widened in shock, spoke. His voice, a soft, almost conversational tone, carried across the thunderous roar of the wind Izuku's form was generating.

"Did you really think that you were the only one who could go fast?"

Izuku didn't have time to answer. As Graviel spoke, his free hand, a placid, relaxed thing, shot forward. It wasn't a punch. It was a jab, a sharp, precise strike to a nerve cluster on the side of Izuku's temple.

Izuku reacted on pure instinct. His body, his Storm Form, twisted in on itself, the green vortex of energy condensing into a single, tight sphere of kinetic force. He dodged the blow, but barely. He felt the wind of the missed strike on his cheek, a sharp, concussive pressure that was a chilling testament to its speed. The blow, which would have ended the fight, missed by a fraction of an inch, and Izuku, his body a blur of motion, was forced to put all of his energy into dodging.

Graviel smiled.

"Good," he purred. "Now we can finally begin."

He didn't need a running start. He didn't need to change his form. He simply moved, his hands coming out of his pockets and blurring into a series of impossible strikes. This was not the placid, surgical man who had neutralized his classmates. This was a man who was fighting with speed, with fury, with the grace of a god.

Izuku, his body a maelstrom of green energy, was forced to match him blow for blow. He was a force of pure speed, a hurricane of punches and kicks, but Graviel was a lightning bolt, a sharp, precise strike that was always just a half-second faster.

A sharp blow to Izuku's armored shoulder. Izuku twisted, his body moving in on itself, and countered with a kick to Graviel's thigh. The blow was deflected with an easy, almost dismissive twist of Graviel's hips. The two of them were no longer sprinting. They were an unstoppable tornado of raw, unchecked power, their fists and feet a blur of kinetic force. The air around them was thick with concussive force, the sound of their blows a high-pitched sonic boom that echoed across the arena, a symphony of violence that defied the laws of physics. They were two gods, two forces of nature, locked in a dance of death. And Izuku, for all his training, for all his power, was just barely keeping up. He could feel his body, his Storm Form, begin to falter. The energy was draining from him, a torrent of power being expended just to keep up with a man who was barely breaking a sweat.

And then, Graviel landed a second hit.

It was not a punch. It was a slap, a dismissive backhand to the side of Izuku's helmet that sent a jarring, teeth-rattling shock through his entire body. The helmet itself was fine, a testament to its design, but Izuku's head rang with the sound of the impact, his ears buzzing with a high-pitched tone that threatened to overwhelm his senses. His vision, for a split second, became a blur of white light, and his momentum, his Storm Form, faltered.

It was enough.

Graviel, seeing his opening, smiled again, and his hands, once again, were a blur of motion. He didn't bother to feint. He didn't waste time on a windup. The third strike was a precise, surgical jab, a flick of his wrist aimed at the exact center of Izuku's chest, right where the black bird emblem rested. It was a blow meant to not only land but to dismantle.

Izuku, his senses reeling, saw it coming. His body, his very being, screamed in protest, a cacophony of pain and exhaustion and warning. But his Storm Form, the very energy he had used to match Graviel's impossible speed, had begun to fail him. He was a car running on fumes, and the finish line was still miles away.

There was no time to dodge. There was no time to block. There was only time for one last, desperate, impossible act.

With a final, desperate roar, a sound that was less a cry of defiance and more a testament to his unbreakable will, Izuku twisted his body in on itself. He didn't try to move away. He didn't try to counter. He simply turned, his back to Graviel, and in that single, suicidal motion, he opened himself up, exposing a crucial, undefended part of his body.

The final blow landed.

It wasn't a punch. It was a push, a simple, concussive pressure from Graviel's open palm. But it was enough. The force, instead of landing on Izuku's chest, landed squarely on his spine, between his shoulder blades, and a crack—a sickening, physical sound—echoed across the arena.

Graviel watched as Izuku, his Storm Form immediately sputtering out, was sent flying, a ragdoll in a storm. He flew across the arena, a trail of green sparks in his wake, his body slamming into the far wall with a force that made the concrete groan in protest. His form, the shimmering, emerald-hued armor, flickered out of existence as his body, battered and broken, slid to the floor in a crumpled heap. He lay motionless, a small, still form against the ruined concrete.

The air was still. The wind had died. The students, who had been watching in stunned silence, simply stared, their faces a tableau of horror. The fight was over. Graviel, standing at the center of the arena, his posture placid once more, slowly lowered his hand.

The silence in Ground Omega was suffocating.

Dust hung in the air like ash, settling slowly over the broken bodies of Class 1-A. The arena, once alive with motion and fury, now resembled a battlefield long since abandoned. The only sound was the faint hum of Izuku's armor as it flickered and died, the golden glow dimming until it was gone entirely.

He lay on his side, curled slightly, his body bare beneath the shattered remnants of the Agito suit. His breathing was shallow, each inhale a struggle, each exhale a quiet gasp. His fingers twitched against the concrete, reaching for something that wasn't there. The pain was everywhere—his spine, his ribs, his head—but he didn't cry out. He just breathed. Barely.

Across the arena, a few students stirred.

Todoroki blinked slowly, his vision swimming. Yaoyorozu groaned, her shield cracked beside her. Kirishima, bloodied and bruised, pushed himself up just enough to see Izuku's crumpled form. Their eyes met—just for a moment—and Kirishima's heart sank.

They had failed.

Graviel stood at the center of the arena, his white shirt stained faintly with soot, his golden eyes calm once more. He looked around at the fallen students, then turned his back to them. His hands slid into his pockets. His bare feet padded softly against the concrete as he began to walk away.

In the observation booth, the silence was unbearable.

Toshinori's fists trembled at his sides. Midnight stared blankly at the screen. Aizawa's jaw was clenched so tightly it looked carved from stone. Present Mic didn't speak. Recovery Girl's eyes were wet.

Nezu lowered his head.

"That's it," he said quietly. "We've lost."

No one responded.

Aoyama's fate was sealed. The promise of redemption, of survival, had slipped through their fingers like dust. Graviel had not just won—he had dismantled them. Piece by piece. Blow by blow.

Then Kagutsuchi moved.

He stepped forward, his coat brushing the edge of the console, and tapped the monitor with two fingers.

"Wait," he said.

The voice was calm. Not urgent. Not hopeful. Just… certain.

Everyone turned.

"What are you talking about?" Aizawa asked, his voice hoarse.

Kagutsuchi didn't answer. He tapped a few keys, rewinding the footage. The screen flickered, then froze—paused at the moment Graviel began his final sprint toward Izuku.

"There," Kagutsuchi said, pointing.

The faculty leaned in.

At first, there was nothing. Just the blur of motion, the chaos of the fight. But then—just as Graviel shifted his weight, just as his foot left the ground—a flicker. A blur. A spark.

Kagutsuchi slowed the footage to a frame-by-frame crawl.

And there it was.

A miniature explosion, no larger than a fist, erupted from behind Bakugo's right elbow. His body, limp and broken, had moved. Just barely. Just enough. The blast launched his arm forward, and his knuckles—bloodied, trembling—connected with Graviel's calf.

A clean hit.

The room went silent.

Toshinori stepped forward, eyes wide. "That… that counts?"

Kagutsuchi nodded once. "It was deliberate. Coordinated. Clean. The third hit."

Midnight covered her mouth. Present Mic let out a breathless laugh. Recovery Girl whispered, "Katsuki…"

Nezu stared at the screen, then turned slowly toward Kagutsuchi. "You're certain?"

Kagutsuchi didn't smile. He didn't gloat. He simply nodded again.

"I'm certain."

On the battlefield, Graviel stopped walking.

His head turned slightly, just enough to glance toward the observation booth. His golden eyes narrowed—not in anger, but in confusion. He had felt the hit. Registered it. But dismissed it.

Now, he understood.

He turned fully, facing the booth, his expression unreadable.

Izuku, still curled on the ground, felt the shift in the air. He opened his eyes slowly, blinking through the haze of pain. His gaze found Graviel, then drifted to the booth.

He knew.

A faint smile tugged at the corner of his lips. Not triumphant. Not proud. Just… grateful.

He whispered, barely audible, "You did it, Kacchan."

The others, slowly regaining consciousness, began to stir. They didn't understand yet. But they saw Izuku's smile. They saw Graviel stop. And they felt something shift.

Hope.