The timing had been everything.

Even a fraction of a second off would have ruined it, tarnishing their one chance at victory. The entire plan had hinged on Katsuki striking at the exact instant Graviel's singular, dangerous focus narrowed—locked onto Izuku like a predator recognizing prey. The Agito. And perhaps, somewhere in the marrow of his bones, Izuku had known. Known that Graviel would devote every ounce of his terrifying attention to him. That he would see Izuku as the only threat worth watching, and nothing more.

Katsuki neither complained nor asked for credit; he didn't need the spotlight burning his retinas or the weight of recognition crushing his shoulders. He just needed to execute. One strike. Clean. Precise. A single moment of violence to tip the scale. It hadn't been flashy—no explosion of light, no thunder of triumph. Graviel was still standing, still breathing, still more than capable of dragging them all through hell's own furnace all over again.

But that wasn't the point.

Their objective had never been to win a war. It had been to save a life.

And Katsuki, for all the molten fury that lived in his chest, could set aside his pride for that.

The cold screen light was an assault on Aoyama's senses, stabbing through his skull like needles of ice. He blinked against the glare, his vision swimming in a sea of white static, the sterile fabric of the infirmary cot beneath him feeling vast as an ocean for how small and broken he felt. His fingers trembled against the phone, the device slick with sweat that tasted of salt and fear. The faint tremor of exhaustion ran through his body like an earthquake's aftershock, muscles twitching with phantom pain.

Kagutsuchi had connected the feed without ceremony, placed the phone beside him like a loaded weapon, and left him alone with the weight of watching.

He hadn't expected to watch. He hadn't expected to matter.

But he did. And now, he couldn't stop the tears from carving hot tracks down his cheeks.

The image on the screen blurred and sharpened, distorted by tears that fell like rain. His classmates—his friends—were broken, bruised, painted in shades of purple and red that no seventeen-year-old should wear. They had fought like gods torn from mythology, endured like legends carved in stone. And they had done it for him. For him.

Mucus dripped from his nose, mixing with saliva that clung to his lips like shame. His sobs were ugly, unfiltered—the kind that clawed their way up from somewhere too deep and dark to name, somewhere that housed all his failures and lies. His body shook with each breath, chest heaving as though the very air had turned to lead, as the weight of their sacrifice crashed down on him like a building's collapse.

Aoyama curled in on himself, clutching the phone to his chest like a drowning man clutches driftwood. The screen dimmed, but he didn't care. He could still see Izuku—crumpled like discarded paper, broken like a toy, but smiling. That impossible, radiant smile. He could still see Bakugo—face down in dirt and blood, but victorious in a way that had nothing to do with winning.

They hadn't forgotten him. They hadn't given up.

And for the first time in what felt like forever, Aoyama believed he might be worth saving.

The silence was unnatural. Not the comfortable quiet that follows triumph, nor the peaceful hush that invites relief. This was the silence of held breath, of eyes that refused to blink, of hearts that couldn't decide whether to race or stop entirely. The air, thick with ozone and the acrid bite of burnt concrete, pressed against their skin like a living thing.

Graviel hadn't moved. He stood at the center of Ground Omega like a monument to inevitability, back turned, posture relaxed as a man admiring a sunset. His hands remained buried in his pockets, and the faint scorch marks on his shirt were the only evidence that twenty-one heroes-in-training had thrown everything they had at him. His bare feet rested on cracked concrete, surrounded by the wreckage of Class 1-A's dreams.

No one dared to breathe.

Jirou's voice, barely above a whisper, cracked the silence like breaking glass. "…What's with him?"

Kaminari didn't look up, couldn't tear his eyes from the ground beneath his face. He reached out blindly, fingers finding her sleeve and tugging with desperate need. His voice was hoarse, scraped raw. "Don't. Just... don't. He might start again."

The others stirred like wounded animals—slow, careful movements that spoke of bones held together by will alone. Todoroki sat up, one arm cradled against his chest like something precious and broken. Yaoyorozu leaned against a broken slab of wall, each breath a conscious effort, air rattling in her lungs. Kirishima wiped blood from his brow with the back of his hand, blinking hard against unconsciousness that beckoned like a warm bed. Even Mineta, curled near a pillar like a child hiding from monsters, whimpered softly.

Izuku remained on one knee, a knight without armor. The brilliant light of his power had faded, leaving behind torn fabric that clung to bruised skin like accusations. His breath came in short, uneven bursts that fogged in the cool air, but his gaze never left Graviel's back. There was no triumph in those green eyes. Just wariness sharp as broken glass. Alarm that sang in his bones. A quiet readiness to rise and fight again, even if it killed him.

And then—

Katsuki Bakugo stood.

Slowly. Painfully. Like a man dragging himself out of his own grave, his body hunched, breath ragged as torn paper. Dust clung to his skin like war paint, blood streaked his jaw in crimson lines, but he was upright. His boots scraped against concrete with the sound of defiance itself as he found his balance.

He looked down at his right arm—the one that had moved when it shouldn't have, the one that had delivered salvation disguised as violence. It hung at his side, swollen and trembling, skin mottled with bruises that bloomed like dark flowers. He flexed his fingers once, winced at the symphony of pain, then let them curl into a loose fist.

That arm had won them the fight. That arm had saved them all.

He didn't speak. Didn't need to.

Izuku saw him across the battlefield—two warriors, broken but breathing, bound by an understanding deeper than words. Their eyes met for a heartbeat, and everything that needed saying passed between them in that glance.

They had done what they came to do.

But Graviel was still standing.

And no one knew what came next.

Graviel moved.

No warning. No shift in the electric tension. No crack of knuckles or roll of shoulders. Just motion—fluid as water, unhurried as eternity, as if he'd simply remembered he had somewhere else to be.

He walked past the shattered remnants of Ground Omega like a man strolling through a garden. Past bodies that painted the concrete in shades of heroism. Past blood that had been freely given and dust that tasted of dreams. His gaze didn't linger—not on Izuku, still kneeling in his private hell; not on Bakugo, standing through sheer force of will; not on the others, watching with eyes wide as wounds.

He didn't speak. Didn't offer a final word, a threat wrapped in silk, a promise dipped in poison. Not even a glance of acknowledgment. Just the soft whisper of bare feet against broken concrete, each step fading like an echo of what might have been.

Those still conscious watched him go with the intensity of prey animals watching a predator. None dared to look away. It wasn't fear—not exactly. It was something colder, something that settled in the marrow of their bones like winter. The kind of dread that comes when you realize the world is bigger than your understanding, crueler than your hope, and more indifferent than your nightmares.

He was leaving. Just like that.

As if he hadn't just reduced a class of heroes-in-training to wreckage. As if he hadn't made them bleed and scream and break without ever truly trying. As if their training, their resolve, their desperate all-consuming effort had been nothing more than background noise to his existence.

They had given everything—every drop of sweat, every ounce of strength, every fragment of their souls. And he hadn't even flinched. The best they'd managed was to distract him. To disrupt his rhythm. To make him blink.

But to actually hurt him? To land a clean, undeniable blow that mattered?

That was fantasy. That was the kind of story you tell yourself when sleep refuses to come.

And maybe that was the real danger.

Because if he ever did—if Graviel ever looked at them and saw something worthy of his full attention—that might be the end of everything.

He reached the exit, a doorway that led back to a world that suddenly felt impossibly fragile. He paused, and the light beyond cast his silhouette in stark relief—tall and still and distant as a mountain peak. For a moment that stretched like eternity, it felt like time itself held its breath.

Then he stepped through.

Gone.

The silence returned, heavier than before, pressing down on them like the weight of realization. And somewhere, deep in the wreckage where heroes learn to be human, a low groan signaled someone stirring. A cough that tasted of copper. A whisper that might have been a prayer.

The aftermath wasn't over.

Not yet.

The infirmary was a sanctuary wrapped in the scent of antiseptic and the soft hum of machines that measured heartbeats. The air, sterilized and cool, felt like absolution after the dust-choked atmosphere of Ground Omega. This was the quiet after the storm—not the comfortable peace of victory, but the hollow stillness of survival.

Recovery Girl moved between cots like a small, determined force of nature, her hair escaping its bun in silver wisps. Her Quirk worked with gentle persistence, each kiss a small miracle, but the healing was slow. This wasn't the instant, complete rejuvenation of Kagutsuchi's power—this was a long negotiation between her abilities and the profound damage carved into young bodies.

Most of the students had surrendered to unconsciousness, their bodies finally accepting what their minds had refused: that they could rest. That the fight was over. That they could let their guard down long enough to let healing begin.

Izuku lay separated from the others by a privacy curtain that felt more like exile. He stared at the sterile white ceiling, counting tiles because counting kept his mind from wandering to darker places. Recovery Girl had tended to him with hands that shook slightly—frustration and resignation warring in her weathered features. His natural immunity to her Quirk's full effects meant she could only bandage the surface wounds while the deeper damage had to heal on its own time.

He was healing—bones knitting together with the peculiar itch of accelerated recovery. But he was also hurting, and he had to endure both processes without the comfort of her healing touch.

All he wanted was to sleep. To feel the mercy of unconsciousness wrap around him like a blanket. To escape the ceaseless ache of mending bones and the sharper pain of memory. But sleep wouldn't come. His mind was too active, too filled with the image of Graviel's silent, indifferent departure.

The silence in the infirmary had weight to it—not the absence of sound, but the presence of things unspoken. Most of Class 1-A had succumbed to exhaustion, their bodies finally claiming what their spirits had denied. But a few remained awake, not from strength but because their minds refused the mercy of rest.

Jirou shifted slightly, her movement causing bandages to pull against tender ribs. She winced, the sound sharp in the quiet. Her bed was close enough to Kaminari's that she didn't need to raise her voice above a whisper.

"That wasn't like Kagutsuchi," she said, words barely disturbing the air between them. "Not even close."

Kaminari didn't look at her. His eyes remained fixed on ceiling tiles that had become his entire world. When he spoke, his voice carried the hollow ring of revelation. "Night and day. Kagutsuchi made us sweat. Graviel made us bleed."

Jirou's fingers twitched against sheets that smelled of hospital starch and defeat. "I couldn't track him. My Quirk picks up everything—heartbeats, footsteps, breathing. But he was just... gone. Then I was on the ground with stars dancing behind my eyes."

Kaminari blinked slowly, replaying memories that felt like scenes from someone else's nightmare. "I hit him with enough voltage to fry my brain three times over. Enough electricity to light up half of Tokyo. And it didn't even slow him down."

The silence that followed wasn't empty—it was full of understanding, heavy with the weight of inadequacy. They had trained their entire lives for moments like this, had pushed their Quirks to their limits and beyond. And it hadn't been enough.

Jirou turned her head, eyes scanning the room. Most of their classmates were unconscious, but even in sleep, some twitched and murmured. Trauma, it seemed, didn't rest easy.

"I don't think we even scratched him," she said eventually, the words tasting like ash. "Not really."

Kaminari's gaze drifted toward Izuku's corner, where their class president lay awake and staring at nothing. The boy who had awakened as something legendary, who had power that made the ground shake and the air itself bend to his will. Even he had been reduced to this.

"I don't think we were supposed to," Kaminari said softly. "I think that was the point."

Jirou frowned, the expression pulling at a cut on her lip. "Then what was the point?"

Kaminari's voice grew quieter still, as if he were sharing a secret with the darkness. "To prove we'd try. Even if it was hopeless. Even if we knew we couldn't win."

The silence that followed felt different—not empty, but expectant. Like the pause before thunder, or the moment before someone finally speaks the truth everyone's been avoiding.

Bakugo hadn't moved since they'd brought him in. He lay flat on his back, arms at his sides, staring at ceiling tiles that offered no answers to the questions burning in his chest. The room around him hummed with quiet conversations and the steady beep of monitors, but he might as well have been alone in a void.

They were calling it a fight. That was generous.

Bakugo had trained for fights his entire life—sparred with classmates who pushed him to his limits, faced simulations that tested every aspect of his abilities. He'd even encountered real villains during his internships, petty criminals who had given him a taste of what heroism might feel like. But Graviel...

Graviel wasn't a villain. He wasn't even an opponent.

Bakugo's fingers twitched against sheets that felt too soft, too clean after the grit and blood of battle. His palms still stung from his final blast—the one that was supposed to change everything. His strongest explosion, fueled by every ounce of rage and determination he possessed. It should have been enough. It should have sent Graviel flying, should have proven that Katsuki Bakugo was strong enough to protect what mattered.

Instead, Graviel had walked away as if nothing had happened.

Bakugo clenched his jaw until his teeth ached. This wasn't how it was supposed to work. Heroes were supposed to win. They were supposed to stand tall over their defeated enemies, to make the world safer through strength and will. But Graviel hadn't been defeated. He hadn't even been inconvenienced.

The truth sat in Bakugo's chest like a stone: he had thrown everything he had at an immovable object, and the object hadn't even noticed.

He thought of All Might—not the symbol of peace, but the man behind the legend. The one who had fought impossible battles and somehow found a way to win. Would he have done better? Would his strength have been enough to make Graviel take notice?

Bakugo didn't know. And that uncertainty felt worse than any physical pain.

Across the room, he could see Izuku's corner, separated by a curtain that might as well have been a wall. Another Agito. Another person with power that defied explanation. And even he had been reduced to this—lying broken and staring at nothing.

What did it mean to be a hero when your best wasn't enough? What did strength matter when faced with something that didn't acknowledge its existence?

Bakugo didn't have answers. For the first time in his life, he wasn't sure he ever would.

Sleep eluded Izuku like a half-remembered dream. His body lay still, but his mind raced through the events of the day like a film stuck on repeat. The quiet of the infirmary pressed against him—broken only by the soft conversations of his classmates and the steady rhythm of medical equipment that measured the aftermath of heroism.

But his focus wasn't on the present. It was trapped in memory, replaying every moment of his encounter with Graviel. Not the violence—there hadn't been much of that, really. Just the way the man had moved. The way he hadn't moved. The way he had looked at them like they were part of the scenery, interesting but ultimately irrelevant.

Izuku's fingers curled against the blanket, feeling the dull ache of bones that were busy knitting themselves back together. His body was healing at an accelerated rate—one of the benefits of his Agito nature—but it couldn't touch the wounds that mattered most.

Graviel hadn't come to fight them. He hadn't come to test their resolve or measure their strength. He had come for something else entirely, and when they had tried to stop him, he had simply... left. Not out of mercy—mercy implied care, implied seeing them as worth sparing. Graviel's departure had felt like dismissal, as if they weren't worth the effort of a real confrontation.

That stung more than any physical blow could have.

Izuku had spent his entire life wanting to matter. First as a Quirkless boy desperate for recognition, then as an emerging hero trying to prove himself worthy of the power he'd been given. But Graviel had shown him a truth he wasn't ready to face: that no matter how strong he became, there would always be things in the world that dwarfed his strength.

Across the room, he could sense Bakugo's wakefulness—a familiar presence in the darkness. His childhood friend, his rival, the person who had always believed that strength was the answer to every question. Now they both lay broken, not from losing but from discovering that winning might not have been possible in the first place.

Izuku wanted to reach out, to offer some word of comfort or understanding. But what could he say? That it was okay to feel small? That strength wasn't everything? The words felt hollow in his mind, inadequate to address the magnitude of what they had experienced.

So he remained quiet, letting his presence speak for itself. Sometimes that was enough—just knowing you weren't alone in the darkness, that someone else understood the weight of questions that had no easy answers.

The faculty meeting room felt smaller than usual, as if the weight of what they had witnessed had compressed the very air. The lights were dimmed—not from necessity, but because brightness felt inappropriate for the conversation they needed to have. The large monitor at the center of the table played the footage again, slowed and annotated, each frame a study in desperation and resolve.

Graviel moved across the screen like a force of nature, his form a blur of contained violence and terrible purpose. Around him, Class 1-A moved like a single organism—battered, bleeding, but never breaking. Even in replay, even knowing the outcome, the faculty couldn't look away.

The final moment played again: Bakugo's arm, hanging limp and useless, somehow finding the strength for one last explosion. The brief contact with Graviel's leg. The third hit that had satisfied some cosmic requirement and ended their ordeal.

Midnight was the first to break the silence, her voice barely above a whisper. "It doesn't feel like a win."

Aizawa's eyes never left the screen, where Izuku's final transformation flickered like green lightning. "It wasn't."

All Might, still maintaining his muscle form despite the late hour, sat rigid in his chair. His jaw was tight, his eyes shadowed with something that might have been regret. "But it was enough."

Nezu's small paw moved across the console, rewinding the footage to show Izuku's Storm Form in all its desperate glory. The boy's armor was cracked, his body failing, but his eyes burned with a determination that transcended physical limits. "They weren't supposed to win," the principal said quietly. "Not in any conventional sense. Graviel was a wall—impossibly high, impossibly strong. They couldn't hope to climb it."

Recovery Girl's voice carried the weight of years spent healing young heroes. "But they climbed it anyway."

The room fell silent again, each member of the faculty lost in their own thoughts. They had watched it happen in real-time—had felt the helplessness of being unable to intervene, the dread of watching their students face something beyond their capabilities. And then, impossibly, miraculously, it had worked.

"They didn't beat him," Present Mic said, his usually boisterous voice subdued. "They outlasted him."

Aizawa finally looked away from the screen, his expression unreadable. "And that's what mattered."

The silence stretched between them, heavy with implications. They were teachers, tasked with preparing the next generation of heroes for a world that grew more dangerous by the day. But how do you prepare someone for the impossible? How do you teach them to face opponents who operate on a completely different level of existence?

"They fought for Aoyama," Midnight observed, her voice soft with something approaching reverence. "Not for glory or recognition. Just for him. For one of their own."

Nezu nodded slowly. "And that's why it worked. Power alone wouldn't have been enough. Strategy wouldn't have been enough. But their willingness to sacrifice everything for a friend—that was something Graviel couldn't ignore."

All Might leaned forward, his voice barely audible. "They weren't strong enough. But they were willing."

The words hung in the air like a benediction. Outside, dawn was breaking over UA, painting the sky in shades of hope and possibility. But inside the conference room, the faculty remained in the dark—watching, remembering, and trying to understand how love could bend the rules of power.

The weight of the battle clung to Aizawa's shoulders like a physical thing as he made his way through UA's quiet corridors. The polished floors reflected the dim emergency lighting, and his footsteps were silent—a conscious choice born from years of hero work and an understanding that some moments demanded discretion.

His destination was the medical wing's detention area, where Aoyama had been kept since his secret was revealed. The boy who had been the catalyst for everything, the unwilling spy whose presence had nearly torn Class 1-A apart. As Aizawa approached the door, he could hear the soft sound of muffled breathing, the kind that came from someone who had been crying but was trying to hide it.

He paused at the threshold, words forming and dissolving on his tongue like smoke. How do you comfort someone whose entire world has been built on lies? How do you offer hope to someone who had watched their friends nearly die for a secret they didn't deserve to keep?

The door opened with a soft click, revealing the small room where Aoyama sat on the edge of his bed. The boy looked up, and Aizawa was struck by how different he appeared. Gone was the preening confidence, the theatrical flair that had defined Yuga Aoyama. In its place was something raw and vulnerable—a seventeen-year-old boy carrying the weight of consequences he had never fully understood.

"Why are you here, sir?" Aoyama's voice was thin, stretched tight like a wire about to snap.

Aizawa stepped into the room, closing the door behind him. His usual sharp demeanor softened slightly, though he couldn't entirely suppress the exhaustion that clung to him like dust. "I wanted to check on you. See how you're holding up after... everything."

The simple question seemed to break something in Aoyama. His carefully constructed composure crumbled, and tears began to fall freely down his cheeks. "I saw the footage," he whispered, his voice thick with guilt and self-recrimination. "I watched them fight for me. I watched them get hurt because of my lies."

"How did it make you feel?" Aizawa asked gently, settling into the chair beside the bed. It was a simple question, but one that cut to the heart of everything.

Aoyama's response came in broken fragments, words tumbling over each other in their haste to escape. "I lied to everyone. I pretended to be something I wasn't, someone I wasn't. I was too scared to tell the truth, and I let you all think... I let them risk everything for someone who didn't deserve it."

The confession hung between them like a confession of sin. Aizawa listened without judgment, his dark eyes patient and understanding. This was what he had expected—the crushing weight of guilt that came from watching others suffer for your secrets.

"I have to pay for it," Aoyama continued, his voice growing stronger with desperation. "I'll surrender myself to the police. I'll tell them everything. I'll accept whatever punishment—"

"And what crimes have you committed, Aoyama?" Aizawa interrupted gently, his voice cutting through the boy's spiral of self-condemnation.

The question seemed to physically stop Aoyama mid-sentence. He blinked, confusion replacing despair for a moment. "I... I was a spy. I betrayed everyone's trust."

"You gave daily reports to All For One," Aizawa stated calmly. "Information that he could have obtained through other means. Public training exercises, patrol routes, general activities. Nothing classified, nothing that would have put anyone in immediate danger."

Aoyama's eyes widened as the reality of his situation began to sink in. He had built his guilt on the assumption that he was a dangerous criminal, but the truth was far more complex. He had been manipulated, coerced, used as a tool by someone far more powerful and dangerous than he could have imagined.

"Your parents," Aizawa continued, his voice softening further. "They're safe. Under Principal Nezu's protection. You can see them soon."

The relief that washed over Aoyama was visible, his entire body sagging as if a massive weight had been lifted from his shoulders. But the guilt remained, etched into his features like scars.

"Don't count yourself out," Aizawa said firmly, leaning forward to catch the boy's eyes. "Your classmates didn't fight for a lie, Aoyama. They fought for you. For the person they saw beneath all the theatrics and pretense. That person is real, and he's worth saving."

Aoyama stared at his teacher, hope and disbelief warring in his expression. "How can I face them again? How can I look them in the eye after what I've done?"

"By being honest," Aizawa replied simply. "By showing them the person you really are, not the mask you've been wearing. They've seen you at your worst—now let them see you at your best."

The words settled into the silence between them like seeds in fertile ground. Aoyama closed his eyes, taking a shuddering breath as he tried to imagine a future where he could stand beside his classmates without shame.

"It won't be easy," Aizawa warned. "There will be training, supervision, therapy. You'll have to prove yourself every day. But you won't be doing it alone."

When Aoyama opened his eyes again, there was something new there—not the artificial sparkle of his former persona, but a quiet determination that seemed to come from deep within. It was the look of someone who had touched bottom and decided to swim back to the surface.

"Thank you," he whispered, and for the first time since this nightmare had begun, the words felt completely genuine.

The silence in Principal Nezu's office was different from the oppressive quiet that had filled Ground Omega. This was the silence of two beings who existed on entirely different scales of power and understanding, each measuring the other across an impossible divide.

Graviel stood before the massive windows, his golden eyes fixed on some distant point beyond the campus grounds. The afternoon light seemed to bend around him, as if even photons understood the dangerous nature of what they illuminated. Nezu sat behind his desk, small paws wrapped around a cup of tea that had long since grown cold.

"A satisfactory outcome, I presume?" Nezu began, his usual cheerful demeanor tempered with wariness. "Class 1-A did meet your conditions, after all."

Graviel's attention shifted slowly, like a mountain turning to acknowledge a whisper. The movement was deliberate, carrying the weight of eons. "They did," he admitted, his voice resonating through the room like distant thunder. "They showed remarkable resolve. Their determination to protect one of their own, even against impossible odds... it was noteworthy."

Nezu's smile grew sharper, more calculating. He could hear it in Graviel's tone—this wasn't grudging acknowledgment. The ancient being had been genuinely impressed, though whether that was a good thing remained to be seen.

"I'm pleased to hear it," Nezu said carefully. "Perhaps this marks the beginning of a more... collaborative relationship between us."

Something that might have been amusement flickered in Graviel's golden eyes. "You believe you've won breathing room," he observed, his voice carrying the dry warmth of desert wind. "But now you possess two Agito, and one of them is dangerously unstable. The challenge you face now may prove far greater than the one you just survived."

The words sent a chill down Nezu's spine that had nothing to do with temperature. "What kind of instability are we dealing with?"

Graviel turned fully to face him, and for a moment Nezu felt the full weight of that ancient gaze. It was like being studied by a force of nature, catalogued and measured against standards he couldn't begin to comprehend.

"The power within young Aoyama will eventually drive him berserk," Graviel explained, his voice dropping to barely above a whisper while somehow filling every corner of the room. "When an Agito loses control, the destruction is... considerable. Keeping him stable will require constant vigilance, especially where Midoriya is concerned."

"Why Midoriya specifically?" Nezu asked, though part of him already suspected the answer.

"Agito are drawn to each other," Graviel said simply. "Across any distance, through any barrier, they will find one another. It's written into the very nature of what they are. Aoyama's unstable power will respond to Midoriya's presence, potentially triggering episodes of violent frenzy."

Nezu's mind raced through possibilities and contingencies, already forming plans within plans. With proper training, careful monitoring, and the right support systems, it should be manageable. They had handled difficult cases before, students with dangerous or unpredictable Quirks who had gone on to become successful heroes.

"I trust you understand the stakes," Graviel continued, moving toward the door with fluid grace. "Failure here would be... unfortunate. For everyone involved."

The threat was delivered with the casual tone of someone discussing the weather, which somehow made it infinitely more terrifying. As Graviel reached the threshold, he paused, golden eyes meeting Nezu's one final time.

"Do not disappoint me, Principal."

Then he was gone, leaving behind only the lingering sense of power and the weight of impossible expectations. Nezu sat alone in his office, staring at the door through which a force of nature had just departed, and began to plan for a future that suddenly seemed far more complicated than he had imagined.

The detention ward had been transformed into something approaching a gathering place, though the sterile walls and medical equipment served as constant reminders that this wasn't a normal classroom reunion. Class 1-A stood in a loose semicircle around Aoyama's bed, their faces bearing the marks of their recent battle—bandages, bruises, and the thousand-yard stare that came from facing the impossible and surviving.

Aoyama sat on the edge of his bed, hands fidgeting with the hem of his blanket like prayer beads. He couldn't bring himself to meet their eyes, couldn't bear to see the disappointment or anger or—worse—the pity that might be waiting there.

"We wanted you to know," Uraraka began, her voice carrying the warmth that had made her the emotional heart of their class. "It's okay, Aoyama. We understand why you did what you did. We're not angry."

The words hit Aoyama like physical blows. He had been bracing himself for accusations, for the righteous fury of people who had been betrayed. Instead, he was met with forgiveness he didn't deserve, kindness that made his chest ache with guilt.

"Yeah!" Kirishima added, stepping forward with a grin that was only slightly forced. "We're a team, right? Teams stick together, no matter what. That's what being manly is all about!"

Tears began to well in Aoyama's eyes—not the theatrical tears of his former persona, but genuine emotion that he couldn't control or contain. These people, these friends, had nearly died for him. They had faced something beyond their capabilities and emerged broken but victorious, all for someone who had been lying to them from the very beginning.

The moment of fragile peace was shattered by the thunderous entrance of Bakugo Katsuki. He shoved past his classmates with his usual lack of ceremony, crimson eyes blazing with an anger that seemed to heat the very air around him.

"Don't think it's gonna be that easy, Twinkletoes!" Bakugo snarled, planting himself directly in front of Aoyama's bed. "We didn't break our backs fighting that monster just so you could sit here wallowing in self-pity! You want our forgiveness? Earn it!"

The harsh words cut through the gentle atmosphere like a blade, but they carried a truth that everyone else had been too kind to voice. Forgiveness wasn't something that could be given freely—it had to be earned, one day at a time, through actions that proved you were worthy of the trust that had been shattered.

Aoyama's jaw worked silently, processing the brutal honesty of Bakugo's words. There was pain there, but also something else—relief. Finally, someone was treating him like he mattered enough to be held accountable for his choices.

The tension in the room shifted as a new presence made itself known. Izuku stepped forward, moving with the careful deliberation of someone whose body was still remembering how to function after being pushed beyond its limits. His green eyes, usually so warm and encouraging, held a weight that made everyone in the room unconsciously hold their breath.

"Aoyama," he said quietly, his voice carrying across the space between them like a bridge. "You're an Agito. Like me."

The simple statement detonated in Aoyama's mind like a flashbang grenade. Pain lanced through his skull—sharp, immediate, overwhelming. He grabbed his temples, gasping as memories that weren't quite memories flickered behind his eyelids. Uraraka and Yaoyorozu were at his sides in an instant, their hands on his shoulders offering what comfort they could.

But Izuku didn't waver, didn't apologize for the pain his words had caused. He simply waited, patient as stone, for the worst of it to pass.

"We've fought before," Izuku continued when Aoyama's breathing had steadied slightly. "You were out of control. I was trying to defend myself, trying to stop you from hurting innocent people."

The words resonated in Aoyama's chest like struck bells, awakening echoes of violence he couldn't quite grasp. "I... I don't remember," he whispered, his voice thick with confusion and growing horror. "But I've been having these flashes. Dreams, maybe. Of you in armor that blazed like emerald lightning, moving like you were fighting something terrible."

Izuku nodded, his expression compassionate but unflinching. "That was you. Your unstable transformation, your Agito power running wild. You were fighting me, and I had to fight back."

A stunned silence fell over the room as the implications sank in. The other students stared from Izuku to Aoyama, pieces of a puzzle they hadn't known existed suddenly clicking into place.

"You two... you actually fought each other?" Jirou asked, her voice thin with disbelief. "That's how this whole nightmare started?"

Izuku's gaze dropped to the floor, weighted with the burden of memory. "The first time, you managed to escape before I could subdue you completely. The second time..." He looked up, meeting Aoyama's eyes directly. "I had to knock you unconscious. That's when I realized who you really were. Everything that followed—Graviel, the battle, all of it—it started with those fights."

Aoyama flinched as if he'd been struck, a broken sob escaping his throat. The guilt that had been crushing him doubled, tripled, became a weight that threatened to flatten him entirely. Not only had he betrayed his classmates' trust, but his very existence had forced their class president into a position where he'd had to use violence against a friend.

But Uraraka, ever the voice of compassion, looked from Izuku to Aoyama with fierce determination. "Izuku, you did what you had to do," she said firmly. "You saved him. You saved all of us. We're here, stronger than before, because you made the hard choice."

Murmurs of agreement rippled through the assembled students. Even Bakugo, for all his harsh words, gave a grudging grunt of acknowledgment. "Messy way to handle it, but it worked. Now stop sniveling and figure out how to move forward, Twinkletoes."

"But we're different," Aoyama whispered, the words barely audible above the hum of medical equipment. "You were born with a Quirk naturally. I was... I was Quirkless. What does it mean that I'm like you?"

Izuku's expression softened with understanding born from shared experience. "That's the requirement," he explained gently. "You have to be born Quirkless to become an Agito. Your parents... if they had just waited, if they'd been more patient..." He trailed off, but the implication hung heavy in the air.

The words struck Aoyama like a physical blow. He stared at Izuku, his mind reeling with what-ifs and bitter regrets. His parents' desperation, their love, their fear of seeing their child suffer in a world that valued power above all else—it had led them to make a deal with the devil himself. "You must have gone through hell," he said, his voice heavy with newly understood anguish.

Izuku didn't deny it. The simple acceptance of that truth sent ripples of discomfort through the room. Many of his classmates glanced at Bakugo, who turned his head away, his expression unreadable but troubled.

"It was hell," Izuku admitted, his honesty cutting through the air like a scalpel. "Being Quirkless in a world where everyone else had powers... being looked down on, dismissed, treated like I was broken. Most adults wouldn't even look at me when I asked for help. Eventually, I learned to stop asking."

A wave of sympathy and shame washed over Class 1-A. Here was their class president, their symbol of hope and determination, laying bare a past they had never truly understood. The boy who smiled in the face of impossible odds, who threw himself into danger to save others, had grown up in a world that had systematically crushed his spirit.

"That's why I wanted to be a hero so badly," Izuku continued, his voice growing quieter with each word. "I thought... maybe if I tried hard enough, if I pushed myself beyond my limits, I could prove that I was worth something. That I deserved to exist in the same world as everyone else."

He paused, a bitter smile ghosting across his lips. "Kagutsuchi shattered that illusion. He made me face the truth—that what I really wanted wasn't to save people. I wanted to be noticed. To be valued. To not be treated like garbage anymore."

Aoyama's face crumpled as the weight of Izuku's words settled into his bones. While he had been living a lie, performing a role designed to make him seem special and unique, Izuku had been fighting just to be seen as human. The contrast was devastating, a mirror that reflected all of Aoyama's privilege and selfishness back at him.

"At first, I was ashamed," Izuku went on, his voice barely above a whisper. "I couldn't deny what Kagutsuchi had shown me. I wanted to be a hero for selfish reasons—to earn love and admiration I'd never received. And when I finally awakened as an Agito, when the praise came..." He shuddered slightly. "It felt wrong. All that validation I'd craved for so long, and it only came because I finally had power. It made my skin crawl."

The room was silent except for the soft sounds of breathing and the distant hum of hospital equipment. Every student in Class 1-A was confronting their own assumptions, their own complicity in a system that had made their friend suffer in silence.

But then Izuku straightened, and when he spoke again, his voice carried a quiet strength that hadn't been there before. "Kagutsuchi was right about my motivations. They weren't pure. But he was wrong about what that meant. Everyone deserves to be seen, to be valued, to matter. Even if my reasons for wanting to be a hero started from a selfish place, I can still choose to do good with the power I've been given."

He looked up, meeting Aoyama's tear-filled gaze with steady determination. "I'm not going to apologize for wanting to be loved. For wanting to matter. Those are human needs, and there's no shame in having them. What matters is what I do now, with the second chance I've been given."

Aoyama stared at Izuku through blurred vision, seeing not just his classmate but a reflection of every struggle he'd never had to face. The boy who had been crushed and rebuilt, who had found strength in acknowledging his own weakness. "I'm sorry," he whispered, the words carrying the weight of a thousand regrets. "I'm sorry you had to go through that. I'm sorry for everything."

But as he spoke, something shifted in Aoyama's posture. The crushing guilt was still there, but alongside it grew something else—a fragile seedling of determination. His classmates had fought for him. Izuku had shared his deepest pain to help him understand. They had given him something precious: a second chance.

With tremendous effort, Aoyama pushed himself to his feet. His legs shook, whether from physical weakness or emotional exhaustion, he couldn't tell. But Izuku was there instantly, steadying him with a gentle hand on his arm.

"Teach me," Aoyama said, his voice stronger than it had been since this nightmare began. "Guide me. Help me learn to control this power, to be worthy of the sacrifice everyone made for me. So we can stand together as real heroes."

Izuku's response was immediate and unhesitating. He clasped Aoyama's hand in both of his own, his grip firm and reassuring. "Always," he said simply. "We'll figure this out together."

The rest of Class 1-A watched this exchange with varying degrees of emotion. Kirishima wiped tears from his eyes, his voice thick as he said, "That's the manliest thing I've ever seen."

Shoji, who understood better than most what it meant to be judged for things beyond your control, simply nodded in silent solidarity. Others murmured their support, their encouragement, their renewed commitment to their friend.

Even Bakugo, standing apart from the group with his arms crossed, seemed affected by what he'd witnessed. His usual scowl had softened into something more complex—regret, perhaps, or recognition. When he spoke, his voice lacked its usual harsh edge.

"Just... don't make us regret this, Aoyama. We've all got scars now because of your mess. Make sure they mean something."

Aoyama nodded, understanding that this was as close to forgiveness as he was likely to get from Bakugo—and that it was exactly what he needed to hear. Not empty reassurance, but a challenge to prove himself worthy of the trust they were offering.

As the students began to file out of the detention ward, their voices mixing in quiet conversations and gentle laughter, Aoyama remained by the window. The sun was setting over UA's campus, painting the sky in shades of gold and crimson that reminded him somehow of hope.

He had a long road ahead of him—training to control his power, rebuilding trust with his classmates, learning to live with the consequences of his choices. But for the first time since this ordeal began, he felt like he might actually be strong enough to walk that road.

After all, he wouldn't be walking it alone.