The Grand Hall of the Metropolitan Tower shimmered with a thousand refracted lights, each crystalline droplet from the massive chandelier casting dancing rainbows across marble walls veined with gold. This was the annual Hero Gala, the one night of the year when Japan's most powerful heroes—and a select few from abroad—exchanged their battle-worn uniforms for meticulously tailored suits and glittering gowns that caught the light like captured starfire.

The air, usually thick with the metallic tang of ozone and the copper bite of righteous fury, was instead perfumed with expensive colognes that whispered of bergamot and sandalwood, mingling with the delicate aromas of gourmet food—truffle oil, aged wine, and chocolate so rich it seemed to melt on the tongue before it was even tasted. Laughter rippled through the crowd like champagne bubbles, and polite conversation replaced the harsh clamor of combat. The relentless, suffocating pressure of a hero's life—the constant vigilance, the weight of civilian lives in their hands—was, for a few precious hours, replaced by the gentle hum of live jazz that seemed to massage the tension from their shoulders.

Amidst the throng of heroes, Toshinori Yagi stood with a quiet dignity that belied his massive frame, his presence commanding attention without demanding it. Tonight, he was the very picture of health and power, his broad shoulders filling out a bespoke suit the color of midnight, the fabric so fine it seemed to absorb light rather than reflect it. The cut was perfect, transforming his imposing bulk into something elegant, almost regal.

Beside him, Mirai Sasaki cut an equally striking figure in a perfectly fitted dark gray suit that seemed to have been crafted by angels themselves. He moved with a controlled grace that seemed almost supernatural in such a boisterous room, each gesture precise and economical, like a master chess player contemplating his next move. The two men—a symbol of hope and a master strategist—looked less like coworkers and more like old friends, sharing a quiet understanding that seemed to create an invisible barrier against the superficiality swirling around them.

The weight of recent conversations hung between them like a shared secret, visible only in the way their eyes occasionally met with grim recognition.

"Quite the turnout," Mirai murmured, though his tone suggested he found the spectacle more tiresome than impressive. His silver eyes swept the room with analytical precision, cataloging faces and filing away information with the mechanical efficiency of a man who saw too much of the future for his own peace of mind.

Toshinori's laugh rumbled low in his chest, a sound like distant thunder that somehow managed to be both powerful and warm. "At least the food's better than hospital cafeteria fare."

The comment hung in the air between them, a reminder of darker times that seemed almost impossible to believe in this glittering environment.

Across the polished marble expanse, Endeavor held court near the bar like a king receiving tribute, his presence commanding even in civilian dress. The perfectly tailored tuxedo couldn't quite contain the intensity that radiated from him like heat shimmer rising from summer pavement. His very stillness was a warning—the kind of predatory quiet that preceded an explosion. Even in formal wear, flames seemed to dance just beneath his skin, casting subtle shadows that made lesser heroes unconsciously step back.

Hawks perched on a nearby chair—because of course he couldn't just stand like everyone else—his crimson wings folded but still catching the amber light from the chandeliers above. The wings seemed to have a life of their own, occasionally rustling with barely contained energy as he regaled a small crowd with some undoubtedly embellished rescue story. His hands moved as he spoke, painting pictures in the air that had his audience leaning in with rapt attention.

Best Jeanist stood ramrod straight near the windows, somehow making even breathing look fashionable. His posture was so perfect it seemed like a work of art, every line of his body arranged with the same meticulous care he applied to his hero costume. Even his casual conversation seemed choreographed, each word delivered with the precision of a master craftsman.

Edgeshot observed from the shadows cast by towering floral arrangements, his stillness so complete he might have been mistaken for a statue if not for the occasional shift of fabric that caught the light. He watched the crowd with the patience of a predator, his dark eyes missing nothing, cataloging every interaction with professional interest.

Gang Orca's imposing silhouette dominated one corner of the hall, his formal wear doing absolutely nothing to soften his intimidating presence. If anything, the elegant tuxedo only emphasized the raw power contained within his massive frame. Conversations seemed to naturally ebb and flow around him like tides, as if even in this civilized setting, people instinctively recognized the apex predator in their midst.

The evening hummed with polite conversation and carefully modulated laughter, crystal glasses chiming like tiny bells as they clinked together in toasts. But beneath the surface lurked something else—a subtle tension that only a select few could identify, like the electric charge in the air before a thunderstorm. Those who'd been in that conference room a week ago moved through the crowd with practiced smiles that never quite reached their eyes, their laughter just a beat too quick, their handshakes just a fraction too firm.

In a quieter corner, away from the main press of bodies and conversation, the U.A. faculty had carved out their own pocket of the festivities like survivors clustering around a campfire. The contrast between them and the flashier pro heroes was stark—where the others preened and postured, these were the ones who did the unglamorous work of actually training the next generation.

Shota Aizawa leaned against the wall like a human scarecrow, his black suit wrinkled in ways that suggested he'd pulled it from the back of his closet with profound reluctance. His tie hung askew, as if he'd tied it in the dark while cursing whoever had made formal events mandatory. He watched the proceedings with the jaded eye of a man who'd rather be grading papers in his sleeping bag, his expression suggesting he was calculating exactly how many minutes until he could make a socially acceptable escape.

The formal wear seemed to sit on him like a costume he'd been forced into, every line of his body radiating barely contained irritation at the necessity of playing dress-up.

"You know," Hizashi Yamada said, appearing at his elbow with characteristic enthusiasm that somehow managed to be both genuine and slightly overwhelming, "you could at least pretend to enjoy yourself."

Hizashi had embraced the evening's dress code with the same enthusiasm he brought to everything else. His own suit was impeccably tailored, the cut sharp enough to suggest he'd actually visited a professional rather than grabbing whatever was closest to hand. His hair was styled with just enough gel to keep it from its usual wild state while still maintaining his signature flair.

"This is me enjoying myself," Aizawa replied flatly, his tone so deadpan it could have been used as a teaching aid for sarcasm.

"Right. And I'm the Queen of England." Hizashi straightened his own impeccably tailored jacket with a theatrical flourish that was somehow both absurd and oddly charming. "Come on, Shouta. When's the last time you saw this many heroes in one place without someone trying to level a city block?"

Aizawa considered this question with the same serious attention he gave everything else, his dark eyes scanning the crowd as if looking for hidden threats. "Tuesday."

The response was delivered with such casual certainty that Hizashi couldn't tell if he was joking or being completely literal. With Aizawa, both were equally possible.

At the room's heart, positioned perfectly to see and be seen, Nemuri Kayama stood alone with the kind of confidence that comes from knowing exactly how striking you look. Her wine glass caught the light as she moved, the crystal throwing tiny rainbows across her elegant midnight-blue dress. The gown seemed to have been designed specifically for her, every curve and line complementing her figure while maintaining an air of sophisticated elegance that was somehow more alluring than any of her usual hero costume's deliberate provocations.

Her expression was distant and thoughtful, her dark eyes focused somewhere beyond the immediate festivities, until familiar voices broke through her reverie like stones thrown into still water.

"Well, well. Look who decided to show up."

Nemuri turned, her face brightening like sunrise breaking over mountains, to find Rumi Usagiyama approaching with her characteristic predatory swagger. The simple white gown she wore was a surprising choice that somehow made her look even more dangerous—like a shark in sheep's clothing. The elegant simplicity only emphasized the coiled strength in her movements, the way she seemed ready to explode into violence at any moment.

Behind her came Ryuko Tatsuma and Yu Takeyama, both dressed to kill in their own distinct ways. Ryuko's ensemble was elegant and understated, speaking of quiet confidence and refined taste. Yu had chosen something that sparkled and caught the light, reflecting her more exuberant personality while still maintaining the sophisticated air the evening demanded.

"Ladies," Nemuri's face brightened with genuine warmth, the kind of smile reserved for people who'd seen you at your worst and stuck around anyway. "I was wondering when you'd find me."

"Are you kidding?" Yu practically bounced on her heels, the movement causing her dress to catch the light in new and interesting ways. "I've been looking everywhere for you! Do you have any idea how hard it is to spot someone in a crowd when you can't use your Quirk?"

The complaint was delivered with such theatrical exasperation that it was impossible not to smile. Yu had always been larger than life, even when forced into normal proportions.

"Maybe try looking with your eyes instead of your ego," Rumi deadpanned, earning a playful shove from Yu that would have sent a normal person sprawling but barely made the rabbit hero shift her stance.

Ryuko smiled, more reserved but no less pleased, her expression holding the warmth of genuine friendship. "It's good to see you, Nemuri. Things have been..."

"Absolutely insane?" Nemuri supplied, her voice carrying the weary amusement of someone who'd been barely keeping her head above water. "Tell me about it. Between teaching fifteen-year-olds not to accidentally seduce their classmates and actual hero work, I'm lucky I remember my own name some days."

The complaint was familiar, the kind of comfortable griping that close friends shared like a form of bonding ritual. The weight of their respective responsibilities hung in the air between them—the constant pressure of being role models, the exhaustion of maintaining perfect public images while dealing with increasingly complex private lives.

"Speaking of which," Yu leaned in conspiratorially, her voice dropping to what she probably thought was a whisper but which carried clearly in the acoustically perfect hall, "I heard the most interesting rumor about you."

The words were delivered with the kind of gleeful anticipation that suggested whatever was coming would be thoroughly embarrassing.

"Oh, no. Here we go," Ryuko murmured, her expression shifting to one of fond resignation mixed with secondhand embarrassment.

"What kind of rumor?" Nemuri asked, though the slight pink flush creeping up her neck suggested she already knew exactly what kind of rumor.

"The kind that involves a mysterious boyfriend," Rumi cut in, her predatory grin widening to show teeth that had seen their share of violence. "Word is the R-Rated Hero has been thoroughly rated."

The innuendo hit the air like a physical force, causing nearby conversations to pause as heads turned in their direction. Nemuri felt her cheeks warm further, though whether from embarrassment or annoyance was unclear.

"Oh, for crying out loud." Nemuri took a generous sip of wine, using the pause to compose herself. "You three are worse than my students."

The comparison was clearly meant as an insult, but the fond exasperation in her voice undermined any real bite it might have had.

"So it's true?" Yu's eyes sparkled with delight, practically vibrating with barely contained curiosity. "Come on, you can't just drop a bombshell like that and not give us details! What's he like? Is he handsome? Rich? Famous? Please tell me he's not another hero—the drama alone would kill us all."

The rapid-fire questions came with the enthusiasm of someone who'd been starved for good gossip, each inquiry building on the last until they formed a crescendo of nosy excitement.

"He's..." Nemuri paused, choosing her words carefully while trying not to think about millennia-old beings. "He's older than me."

The admission came out carefully neutral, as if she were testing how the words sounded in the air.

"Older?" Ryuko's tone turned skeptical, her analytical mind already working through possibilities. "How much older?"

"A bit."

The non-answer hung in the air between them, obviously insufficient to satisfy their curiosity.

"That's not an answer," Rumi observed with the patience of a predator who knew her prey was trapped. "That's evasion."

The accusation was delivered with the kind of matter-of-fact certainty that made it impossible to deny.

"Fine." Nemuri sighed in defeat, recognizing the futility of trying to deflect their combined interrogation. "He's handsome enough that you'll probably understand why I said yes. He's not rich—he works as a janitor at U.A., actually. And he's..." She smiled softly, and for a moment her expression transformed completely, showing a vulnerability rarely seen from the R-Rated Hero. "He's kind. Really, genuinely kind."

The words carried a weight that suggested they meant more than their simple surface meaning. In their world of constant conflict and posturing, genuine kindness was rarer than diamonds.

Yu's expression cycled through several emotions—surprise, confusion, and finally settling on respectful approval. "You know what? Good for you, Nemuri. Seriously. Kind is... kind is actually really important."

The admission came with the kind of rueful recognition that suggested personal experience with the alternative.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Nemuri asked with mock offense, though there was genuine curiosity underneath the theatrics.

"Nothing!" Yu raised her hands defensively, her movements sharp with sudden anxiety. "Just that maybe going for the nice guy instead of the flashy hero type is actually pretty smart."

The words tumbled out in a rush, as if she were trying to outrun her own implications.

"You assumed I had a type?" Nemuri's eyebrow arched dangerously, her voice carrying the kind of silky menace that had made villains reconsider their life choices.

"Well, yeah, I mean..." Yu gestured vaguely, her hands painting meaningless shapes in the air as she struggled to explain without digging herself deeper. "You're you. Your whole thing is..."

The sentence trailed off as she realized she was approaching dangerous territory, like a hiker suddenly noticing the cliff edge beneath their feet.

"My whole thing?"

The question was delivered with deceptive calm, the kind of quiet that preceded volcanic eruptions.

Rumi snorted with amusement, clearly enjoying the show. "Dig that hole deeper, princess."

"What I meant," Yu said quickly, her words tumbling over each other in their haste to escape, "is that you're confident and powerful and, you know, intimidating in the best possible way. So I figured you'd want someone who could match that energy."

The explanation came out in a breathless rush, as if she were trying to defuse a bomb with words.

"Maybe I wanted someone who didn't feel the need to match it," Nemuri said quietly, her voice carrying a depth of emotion that stopped the conversation cold. "Maybe I wanted someone who could just... appreciate it."

The words hung in the air between them, heavy with unexpected sincerity and the weight of genuine feeling. In the sudden silence, the ambient noise of the gala seemed to rush back in—distant laughter, the clink of glasses, the soft murmur of a hundred conversations.

The group fell silent for a moment, the weight of unexpected vulnerability settling between them like morning dew. Around them, the party continued its glittering dance, but their little circle had become an island of genuine emotion in a sea of social performance.

"Well," Ryuko said finally, her voice gentle with understanding, "I'd like to meet him."

The words were simple, but they carried the weight of acceptance and genuine friendship.

"You will. He should be here soon—he had some work thing to finish up."

Nemuri's smile returned, soft and private, as if she were savoring a secret too precious to share completely.

"Work thing?" Rumi's eyes narrowed with interest, her predatory instincts sensing something worth pursuing. "What kind of work thing keeps a janitor busy at night?"

The question was casual, but there was steel underneath it—the kind of professional curiosity that had made her one of the most effective heroes in Japan.

Before Nemuri could formulate an answer that didn't involve explaining celestial bureaucracy and cosmic councils that existed beyond human comprehension, a warm voice called out behind her, cutting through the conversational noise like a blade through silk.

"Nemuri."

She turned, and her face transformed with a smile so radiant it could have powered the building's elaborate lighting system. Bunta Fujimoto approached through the crowd, moving with quiet confidence that seemed to part the sea of people without effort. In a perfectly fitted dark suit that seemed to have been tailored by masters, he carried himself with an understated elegance that drew the eye without demanding attention.

His golden eyes found hers immediately, as if the hundred other people in the room simply didn't exist, as if she were the only point of light in a universe of shadows.

The three women beside Nemuri went very still, their conversation dying mid-breath as they took in the approaching figure.

He was, without question, striking. Not in the aggressive, headline-grabbing way of most pro heroes, but with the kind of understated magnetism that drew the eye and held it like gravity. His features were clean and strong, carved from some idealized template that suggested both strength and gentleness. His dark hair was styled with casual elegance, as if he'd run his fingers through it once and achieved perfection by accident. When he smiled, the expression reached all the way to those unusual golden eyes, transforming his entire face with warmth that seemed to radiate outward like sunlight.

There was something else about him, something that operated below the threshold of conscious recognition but registered in the primitive parts of their brains—a sense of vast depths, of power held in careful check, of mysteries that went deeper than the ocean.

"Sorry I'm late," he said, reaching Nemuri's side with movements that seemed to flow like water. His voice was low, intimate despite the crowd pressing around them, carrying undertones that seemed to resonate in frequencies below human hearing. "The meeting ran longer than expected."

The simple words carried implications that none of the watching women could quite grasp, suggestions of responsibilities and obligations that existed in realms beyond their understanding.

"It's fine." Nemuri accepted his kiss on her cheek with obvious pleasure, the simple gesture somehow more intimate than anything flashier would have been. "I was just introducing you to some friends. Everyone, this is Bunta. Bunta, meet Yu, Ryuko, and Rumi."

Ryuko, recovering first from whatever spell his presence had cast, extended her hand with professional grace that didn't quite hide her curiosity. "Ryukyu. It's a pleasure to finally meet you."

His handshake was firm without being aggressive, his manner respectfully attentive in a way that suggested genuine interest rather than polite performance. When their hands touched, Ryuko felt a momentary sensation like touching live wire wrapped in silk—power barely contained beneath a facade of gentle humanity.

"The honor's mine, Ryukyu. Nemuri speaks of you often."

The words were simple courtesy, but delivered with such evident sincerity that they carried weight beyond their literal meaning.

Yu practically thrust her hand forward next, her enthusiasm overriding any attempt at sophisticated restraint. "Mt. Lady! And I have to say, you're not what I was expecting."

Her handshake lingered a moment longer than strictly necessary, as if she were trying to solve a puzzle through physical contact.

"I hope that's not disappointment I hear," Bunta replied with gentle humor that somehow managed to be both self-deprecating and utterly confident.

"Oh, no! Definitely not disappointment. More like... pleasant surprise?"

The words came out in a rush, accompanied by a flush that suggested she was suddenly very aware of how she sounded.

Rumi stepped forward last, her approach more calculating than her friends'. Her handshake lingered as she studied him with undisguised assessment, taking in his build—lean but strong, the kind of fitness that came from actual use rather than display. His hands were those of someone who worked with them, callused in places that spoke of honest labor, yet they moved with a precision that suggested capabilities beyond simple manual work.

What struck her most was his stillness. In a room full of heroes who crackled with barely contained energy, who moved with the constant awareness of those accustomed to violence, he possessed the calm of deep water. Not the stillness of someone holding back, but the peace of someone who had nothing to prove.

"Mirko," she said simply, her voice carrying the weight of professional evaluation. "You work out?"

The question was casual, but her eyes never left his face, cataloging micro-expressions and reactions with the intensity of a predator sizing up potential prey.

"When I can find the time."

The answer was equally casual, but something in his tone suggested that his definition of "working out" might be significantly different from the conventional understanding.

"Hmm." She released his hand, her expression shifting to something that might have been approval. "You'll do, I suppose."

The grudging acceptance was delivered with the kind of backhanded compliment that passed for high praise from the rabbit hero.

Nemuri laughed, the sound bright and genuinely amused. "High praise from Rumi. She usually threatens to fight my dates within the first five minutes."

"The night's still young," Rumi replied with a wolfish grin that showed entirely too many teeth.

Before Bunta could respond—and the watching women found themselves genuinely curious about how he might handle Rumi's particular brand of intimidation—the hall's ambient lighting began to dim with theatrical precision, drawing every eye toward the stage like iron filings to a magnet.

Conversations quieted to expectant murmurs as spotlights blazed to life with the intensity of miniature suns, illuminating an announcer who practically vibrated with theatrical energy. The man seemed to have been designed specifically for this moment, his every gesture calibrated for maximum dramatic impact.

"Ladies and gentlemen, heroes and honored guests!" His voice boomed across the hall with practiced showmanship that somehow managed to make even the most jaded heroes lean forward in anticipation. "Welcome to the Hero Billboard Chart Japan!"

The crowd's energy shifted palpably, anticipation crackling through the air like electricity before a thunderstorm. Even the most sophisticated heroes couldn't quite suppress the child-like excitement of waiting to see where they'd ranked, the validation or disappointment that came with public recognition of their efforts.

"So without further delay... this year's Top Ten Heroes!"

The massive screen behind him erupted in a cascade of light and sound, names appearing one by one with all the drama of a royal coronation. The crowd leaned forward collectively, breath held, hearts pounding with the peculiar anxiety that came with public judgment.

The names materialized with cinematic flair:

1. All Might

2. Endeavor

3. Hawks

4. Best Jeanist

5. Edgeshot

6. Crust

7. Mt. Lady

8. Yoroi Musha

9. Ryukyu

10. Gang Orca

The hall erupted in thunderous applause that seemed to shake the very foundations of the building, but no sound could match Yu's shriek of pure, undiluted joy. The noise that escaped her throat was barely human, more like the call of some exotic bird announcing its dominance to the world.

"NUMBER SEVEN!" She spun in a circle, tears streaming down her face in rivers of mascara and pure emotion. "I'm actually—oh my god, I made it! I'm in the top ten!"

The words came out in a breathless rush, as if she couldn't quite believe them even as she spoke them. Years of struggle, of being dismissed and overlooked, of fighting for recognition in a field dominated by legacy heroes and established names—all of it vindicated in that single, shining moment.

She threw herself at her friends with the abandon of someone who'd forgotten that she possessed superhuman strength, nearly bowling them over with enthusiasm that threatened to create a domino effect through the nearby crowd. Nemuri caught her in a fierce hug while Ryuko steadied them both with the practiced grace of someone accustomed to managing chaos. Even Rumi cracked a genuine smile, the kind of expression that transformed her entire face and revealed the softer person beneath the predatory exterior.

"You earned it," Ryuko said warmly, her voice carrying the weight of genuine pride and friendship. "Every single ranking point."

The words were simple, but they carried the validation that came from someone who understood the sacrifices required, who knew the cost of climbing the heroic ladder one bloody rung at a time.

Through the crowd, moving with the measured steps of someone who'd learned hard lessons about the price of ambition, Kamui Woods approached. His recent trials had changed him in ways that went deeper than surface scars, carved away the desperate hunger for recognition and left something steadier in its place. The man who stopped before Yu bore little resemblance to the glory-hungry hero who'd once seen her as competition rather than colleague.

"Congratulations, Mt. Lady."

The words were simple, but they carried a weight of sincerity that cut through the noise and celebration like a blade. His smile was gentle, genuinely pleased, without a trace of the bitterness that might have been expected from someone who'd been displaced.

Yu's celebration faltered as she realized what her rise meant for him, the mathematics of success that meant someone else's fall. The joy in her eyes flickered, replaced by a guilt that threatened to poison her moment of triumph.

"Kamui, I..."

The words stuck in her throat, caught between celebration and apology.

"You deserved this," he said simply, his voice carrying the conviction of hard-won wisdom. "Don't let my old spot dim your shine. You've worked too hard for that."

The sincerity in his voice, the complete absence of resentment or bitterness, nearly started her crying again. In a world where heroes often saw each other as competition first and colleagues second, such genuine grace was rarer than diamonds.

"Thank you. That... that means everything."

The words came out thick with emotion, carrying the weight of gratitude that went beyond simple politeness.

He nodded once, a gesture that somehow conveyed both blessing and benediction, then melted back into the crowd with the same measured grace he'd shown in approaching. His exit left Yu to bask in well-earned glory, surrounded by friends who understood exactly what this moment meant to her.

Across the hall, positioned like a monument to controlled fury, Endeavor stood with the rigid posture of a man barely containing volcanic forces. His eyes were locked on the display showing his name in that familiar, maddening position—a number that had haunted him for years, that followed him through nightmares and waking moments alike.

Number Two. Again.

The designation seemed to burn itself into his retinas, a brand of perpetual inadequacy that no amount of success could erase. His jaw worked silently, muscles bulging with the effort of containing words that wanted to explode outward like his flames. He drained his wine glass in one sharp motion, the crystal nearly cracking under the pressure of his grip.

"Tough break," Hawks said casually, appearing at his elbow as if materialized from thin air, his characteristic smile never wavering despite the waves of barely contained heat radiating from his companion.

The bird hero's timing was either perfectly calculated or utterly suicidal—with Hawks, it was often impossible to tell the difference.

"Don't." Endeavor's voice was granite scraped against steel, each word ground out with the effort of someone maintaining control through sheer force of will.

"What? I'm just saying, second place two years running—that's got to sting a little."

The casual tone was vintage Hawks, delivered with the kind of cheerful obliviousness that could either defuse tension or ignite it completely. His wings rustled slightly, feathers shifting with subtle readiness that suggested he was more aware of the danger than his tone implied.

Enji turned slowly, his movement deliberate as tectonic plates shifting, his glare capable of melting steel beams at fifty paces. The temperature around them rose noticeably, causing nearby heroes to unconsciously step back as their primitive brains recognized the presence of something that could incinerate them without effort.

"Do you have a death wish, bird?"

The words were delivered with the kind of cold fury that had made lesser men wet themselves, each syllable carrying the promise of immolation.

Hawks' smile never wavered, though something in his eyes suggested he was calculating flight trajectories and exit strategies with the part of his brain that had kept him alive through countless dangerous situations. "Relax, big guy. I'm not here to rub salt in the wound. Just figured you might want some company in the 'almost but not quite' club."

The words were delivered with just enough sincerity to take the sting out of them, though the underlying barb remained sharp enough to draw blood.

"You're third."

The observation was delivered flatly, as if Hawks needed reminding of his own position in the cosmic order of heroic achievement.

"Exactly. I know what it's like to look up at that number one spot and wonder what it would take." Hawks' tone grew more serious, his usual flippant mask slipping to reveal something more thoughtful underneath. "Difference is, I'm not killing myself trying to get there."

The words hung between them like a challenge, carrying implications that went far beyond simple rankings. They spoke to the cost of ambition, the price paid in blood and sanity and relationships sacrificed on the altar of being number one.

Endeavor said nothing, his flames flickering just beneath the surface like banked coals waiting for the right breath of air to roar into inferno. His silence was more eloquent than words, carrying the weight of years spent chasing an impossible dream.

"You know what your problem is?" Hawks continued conversationally, his tone suggesting he was discussing the weather rather than psychological warfare. "You keep fighting the same fight. Same tactics, same approach, expecting different results. Maybe it's time to try something new."

The suggestion was delivered with the kind of casual confidence that suggested Hawks had given this considerable thought, though whether his insights were welcome was another matter entirely.

"Such as?"

The question was torn from Endeavor's throat like a confession extracted under torture, curiosity warring with pride in ways that left him feeling exposed and vulnerable.

Hawks shrugged, the gesture somehow managing to be both casual and calculated. "I don't know. Smiling occasionally? Not terrifying small children? Being the kind of hero people actually want to look up to instead of just fear?"

Each suggestion landed like a perfectly aimed dart, finding the soft spots in Endeavor's armor with surgical precision. The temperature around them rose noticeably as his control began to fray at the edges.

"Or," Hawks added quickly, recognizing the warning signs with the instincts of someone who'd spent too much time around dangerous predators, "you could keep doing exactly what you're doing and see if the third time's the charm."

With that parting shot, he sauntered away with the kind of casual confidence that had made him famous, leaving Endeavor alone with his familiar frustration and a half-formed thought he wasn't quite ready to examine. The words echoed in his mind like stones thrown into still water, creating ripples that spread outward into territories he'd spent years avoiding.

Later, as the city lights blurred past the car windows like streaks of liquid neon, Nemuri let her head fall back against the passenger seat with a contented sigh that seemed to release hours of accumulated tension. The evening's formal mask had finally slipped away, leaving her face soft and unguarded in the dashboard's amber glow.

The contrast between the gala's controlled chaos and this moment of quiet intimacy was striking—like stepping from a blazing stage into a candlelit room, trading performance for authenticity.

"Yu had quite the celebration," she murmured, her voice carrying the warm affection of someone who'd witnessed a friend's triumph firsthand.

Bunta chuckled, his eyes on the road but his awareness encompassing far more than traffic patterns. The sound was rich and warm, carrying undertones that seemed to resonate in frequencies beyond human perception. "She earned the right to celebrate. Making the top ten is no small achievement."

His hands on the steering wheel were steady, competent, but Nemuri found herself studying them with new appreciation—hands that had touched cosmic forces, that had shaped reality itself, now performing the mundane task of navigating traffic with casual expertise.

"She tried to kiss you, you know."

The observation was delivered with amusement rather than jealousy, though there was something in her tone that suggested she'd been watching his reactions carefully.

"I noticed. Three champagne toasts and a sake bomb will do that to a person."

The response carried the kind of gentle humor that came from someone who'd seen enough of human nature to find its excesses charming rather than concerning.

Nemuri turned to study his profile in the dashboard light, cataloging the strong lines of his jaw and the way shadows played across features that seemed carved from some divine template. "You took it well. Most men would have been either flattered or terrified."

"Neither seemed appropriate. She was happy, not serious." He glanced at her with amusement that transformed his entire expression. "Besides, I had something of a reputation to maintain."

The words carried implications that went far beyond their surface meaning, suggestions of responsibilities and expectations that existed in realms she was only beginning to understand.

"Oh? What reputation is that?"

Her question carried a playful challenge, though underneath lay genuine curiosity about this man who seemed to exist simultaneously in her world and somewhere infinitely larger.

"The kind that gets me invited back to these things."

She laughed, the sound bright and genuine in the car's enclosed space, but something in his tone made her grow thoughtful. The evening had revealed layers to their relationship that she was still processing, implications that stretched far beyond the comfortable routine they'd established.

"You know, I realized something tonight. You and your..." She paused, searching for the right words to encompass concepts that strained the limits of human language. "Your colleagues must have hierarchies too, don't you?"

The question emerged carefully, as if she were testing the waters of a conversation that might lead into depths she wasn't prepared to navigate.

Bunta's smile turned mysterious, carrying secrets that seemed to stretch back to the dawn of creation itself. "We do, though it's different from your hero rankings. Less competition, more... responsibility assignment."

The words were chosen with the precision of someone accustomed to explaining cosmic concepts to mortal minds, each phrase carefully calibrated to convey meaning without overwhelming.

"Like what?"

Her curiosity was genuine, tinged with the kind of fascination that came from being granted glimpses into a world that existed beyond human comprehension.

"Well, after me comes Graviel."

The name fell into the car's quiet space with the weight of revelation, carrying implications that made Nemuri's breath catch.

"Graviel?" Understanding dawned in her eyes like sunrise breaking over mountains, pieces of a vast puzzle suddenly clicking into place. "Gabriel. Of course. Why didn't I see that before?"

The realization brought with it a cascade of implications—if the archangels walked among them with casual names and earthly concerns, then everything she thought she knew about the universe required fundamental revision.

"He likes the nickname. Says it's more approachable."

The casual tone with which he delivered this earth-shaking information was somehow more unsettling than any dramatic revelation could have been. This was simply his reality, as mundane to him as discussing the weather.

Nemuri was quiet for a moment, wrestling with concepts that threatened to overwhelm her carefully constructed worldview. The city lights continued their hypnotic dance past the windows, but she barely noticed, too absorbed in processing the implications of casual conversations with archangels.

Finally, she asked in a small voice that carried the weight of existential dread, "Is it real? The trumpet, I mean?"

The question hung between them like a blade suspended over their comfortable intimacy, threatening to cut through the careful barriers she'd built around thoughts too large for mortal minds to fully grasp.

Bunta's expression grew gentle, his voice carrying the infinite patience of someone accustomed to comforting creatures whose lifespans were mere heartbeats in the cosmic scale. "Not in the way humans imagine. It's not a physical instrument. When the time comes, it will be more like a... signal. A call that resonates through every plane of existence."

His words painted pictures of realities that existed beyond human perception, of forces and energies that operated on scales that reduced entire galaxies to motes of dust.

"And then the world ends."

The words escaped her in a whisper, carrying all the helpless terror of a mortal confronting infinity.

"Eventually." His voice carried the weight of eons, of time measured in the birth and death of stars. "But that's a very long time from now, my dear. So long that worrying about it would be like a mayfly fretting over the heat death of the universe."

The comparison was both comforting and terrifying, offering perspective that somehow made the incomprehensible seem manageable while simultaneously emphasizing just how small and brief human existence truly was.

He reached over to squeeze her hand, his touch warm and reassuring and utterly human despite everything she now knew about him. "Besides, I thought we agreed—no spoilers."

Despite everything—the cosmic implications that threatened to crush her sanity, the casual discussion of apocalypse as if it were distant weather, the sheer impossible weight of her situation—Nemuri found herself laughing. The sound bubbled up from someplace deep inside, carrying equal parts hysteria and genuine amusement.

Because somehow, impossibly, this felt like the most natural thing in the world. This man who commanded cosmic forces with casual authority, who spoke of archangels as colleagues and the end of existence as a distant appointment—he worried about her comfort, made sure she felt included at parties, and drove her home with the same careful attention any earthbound boyfriend might show.

The car carried them through the sleeping city, two beings from vastly different worlds sharing a moment of perfect, ordinary peace that somehow managed to encompass both the mundane and the infinite.

The humid summer air wrapped around Izuku like a damp blanket as he jogged through the quiet streets, each breath carrying the weight of moisture that seemed to settle in his lungs like morning fog. Sweat beaded on his forehead despite the early hour, mixing with the condensation that clung to everything in Japan's merciless summer humidity. His footsteps created a steady rhythm on the pavement, the sound echoing off sleeping storefronts and empty apartment buildings with the lonely cadence of the dedicated.

These morning runs had become sacred to him—a ritual that bordered on religious devotion, carved out of each day like a prayer offered to the god of self-improvement. In these quiet hours before the world woke up, when the air still held the coolness of night and the streets belonged only to delivery trucks and the occasional insomniac, his mind could finally quiet itself. The constant chatter of analysis and worry that normally filled his head like white noise would fade to a manageable whisper, replaced by the simple rhythm of breath and heartbeat and the soft impact of feet on concrete.

Training camp loomed ahead like a mountain on the horizon, another milestone in what still felt like an impossible dream that he might wake up from at any moment. Sometimes he had to pinch himself just to believe it was real—the Hero Course, real friends who didn't just tolerate his quirks but actually seemed to enjoy his company, finding Aoyama as another soul carrying the weight of transformation and secrets that couldn't be shared with normal people.

He passed Dagobah Beach without slowing, though his eyes lingered on the now-pristine shoreline that gleamed like a jewel in the early morning light. The sand was white as sugar, the water clear enough to see the bottom, a transformation so complete it seemed almost magical. Hard to believe that mountain of garbage had once been his training ground, the place where everything changed, where a quirkless boy had first dared to dream of becoming something more.

The irony wasn't lost on him—a beach that had been forgotten and discarded, just like he had been for so many years, now gleaming in the morning sun like a promise of redemption. Sometimes the universe had a sense of poetry that bordered on the cruel.

But even the peaceful rhythm of his run, the meditative quality of movement and breath, couldn't keep darker thoughts at bay for long. They crept in like shadows at the edges of his vision, carried on the same air that brought the scent of blooming flowers and fresh bread from early-opening bakeries.

All Might's behavior lately had been... different. Somber in a way that went beyond his usual dad jokes falling flat or his tendency toward melodramatic speeches about justice and hope. There was a weight to his silences now, a gravity that suggested knowledge of things too heavy for casual conversation. Izuku knew it had to be connected to those reports—the ones about traffickers targeting Quirkless people, stories that made his stomach clench with familiar anger and helpless rage.

His chest tightened with the particular fury that came from wanting to do something, anything, but being stuck on the sidelines while people like him suffered. The knowledge that somewhere, other Quirkless individuals were being treated like commodities, like things to be bought and sold, made his hands clench into fists that ached with the need for action.

You're still just a student, he reminded himself firmly, the words carrying the weight of frustrated acceptance. Some fights aren't yours to pick.

The thought should have been comforting, a rational reminder of limitations and appropriate boundaries. Instead, it felt like swallowing glass, sharp and painful and fundamentally wrong in ways that made his teeth ache.

A sound stopped him mid-stride—not a sound, exactly, but a resonance that seemed to vibrate through his bones like a tuning fork struck against his skeleton. The sensation was immediate and unmistakable, carrying with it a primal recognition that bypassed conscious thought and went straight to the deepest parts of his brain.

His blood turned to ice water, every nerve ending screaming danger as killing intent washed over him like a physical force. The sensation was so intense it was almost visible, like heat shimmer rising from summer pavement, warping the air around him with malevolent purpose.

Lord.

But this felt different from the others, wrong in ways that set his teeth on edge. The malice was too focused, too personal, carrying undertones of hunger that had nothing to do with testing or challenge. This wasn't one of Kagutsuchi's servants testing his limits or pushing him toward growth. This was something that wanted him dead with the kind of focused intensity that spoke of personal investment in his destruction.

Izuku forced himself to keep jogging, though every muscle coiled with tension like springs wound to the breaking point. His breathing remained steady through sheer force of will, but his eyes darted constantly, searching shadows and doorways for the source of the malevolence that seemed to press against him like a physical weight.

He needed to get away from the main road, away from anyone who might get caught in the crossfire if this turned violent. The thought of innocent people being hurt because of him was worse than any personal danger, a cold fear that cut deeper than any physical threat could.

His route shifted subtly, leading his pursuer through narrower streets that wound between sleeping apartments and shuttered shops. Each turn was calculated, drawing whatever was following him away from populated areas and toward places where a fight wouldn't endanger civilians. The morning light seemed dimmer here, filtered through buildings that pressed close together like conspirators sharing secrets.

Finally, he ducked into an alley choked with overflowing recycling bins and the lingering scent of last night's rain. The space was narrow and confined, walls rising on both sides like the sides of a canyon, but it was isolated. If violence was coming, at least it would be contained.

The moment he was hidden from view, shielded by shadows and the detritus of urban life, he spun around with movements honed by months of training. His fists were already clenched, his stance balanced and ready, every lesson All Might and Mirai had drilled into him suddenly sharp and present in his mind.

"Alright," he called out, proud that his voice didn't shake despite the fear that threatened to lock his throat. "I know you're there. Come out!"

The shadows seemed to part like curtains drawn by an invisible hand, revealing a figure that made Izuku's prepared battle stance falter. His muscles, coiled for immediate violence, went slack with shock as his brain struggled to process what his eyes were showing him.

This Lord was... magnificent, in a way that was both beautiful and utterly terrifying. Dark armor gleamed with zebra-like patterns that seemed to shift and move in the dim light, each plate fitted with the precision of master craftsmanship. Golden trim caught what little illumination filtered into the alley, creating highlights that seemed to glow with their own inner fire. An orange cape flowed behind broad shoulders like liquid sunset, moving with a life of its own despite the absence of any breeze.

But it was the creature's head that truly stopped Izuku cold—some nightmarish fusion of horse and demon that should have been absurd but instead radiated an intelligence that was both alien and utterly focused. The eyes that regarded him held not the mindless hunger he'd grown accustomed to, but the calculating gaze of a warrior, a predator that thought and planned and chose its battles with careful deliberation.

This wasn't just a monster driven by instinct. This was a soldier, a professional, something that fought not from hunger or madness but from duty and skill.

Izuku tensed, expecting the immediate brutal assault he'd grown accustomed to, muscles coiling for the kind of desperate defense that had become second nature. Instead, the Lord reached toward his side with movements that were casual, almost leisurely, and Izuku's hands flew up defensively—

Only to stop in complete bewilderment as the creature produced a small, leather-bound notebook that looked like it had been crafted by medieval monks and blessed by angels.

The Lord opened it with careful deliberation, thick fingers handling the delicate pages with the reverence of someone consulting holy scripture. When he began to read aloud, his voice was measured, almost scholarly, carrying the cadence of someone working through a complex technical manual.

"Let's see..." The voice carried an accent Izuku couldn't place, something that suggested languages older than human civilization. "'Avoid excessive force that might harm mortals.' Check. 'Engage Agito away from public areas.' Also check. 'Fight without intent to kill'—that's important..." He looked up briefly, meeting Izuku's bewildered stare with what might have been embarrassment, if angelic beings could feel such mundane emotions. "There's quite a bit more, but I think we can skip the administrative details."

Izuku slowly lowered his hands, his brain struggling to process what he was witnessing. The incongruity of the situation—a divine warrior reading from what appeared to be an instruction manual—was so profound that it threatened to short-circuit his ability to think rationally.

"Um... excuse me, but... why are you reading from that?"

The question emerged more confused than confrontational, carrying the bewildered tone of someone trying to make sense of a world that had suddenly stopped following logical rules.

The Lord looked up with what definitely was embarrassment now, his equine features arranging themselves into an expression that was almost sheepish. "First mission in the mortal realm," he explained matter-of-factly, as if this revelation should make everything clear. "And my first mission from my High Lord, Barachiel."

The name fell between them with the weight of revelation, carrying implications that made Izuku's head spin. Barachiel—another name from religious texts, another piece of the vast cosmic puzzle that his life had somehow become entangled with.

Izuku paused for a moment, processing the surreal information that seemed to pile on top of itself like layers in some impossible sandwich. The morning had started with a simple run, and now he was standing in an alley having a polite conversation with what appeared to be an angelic warrior consulting a handbook before their fight.

Finally, he gave a small, bewildered nod. He just wanted to get this over with, to move past the bizarre pleasantries and into the familiar territory of violence and survival that he at least understood. The strangeness was more unsettling than any threat could be.

He took a breath, his resolve hardening like steel cooled in winter air, and held out his right arm. A sleek metallic belt materialized around his waist with the smooth precision of technology that transcended human understanding, its surface gleaming with inner light that seemed to pulse in rhythm with his heartbeat.

He brought his left hand to meet his right, the motion carrying the weight of ritual and transformation, completing his Agito transformation with a word that resonated through dimensions beyond the physical: "Henshin!"

With a flash of golden light that turned the alley into a cathedral of radiance, the familiar, powerful armor of his Agito form enveloped Izuku like the embrace of destiny itself. The transformation was always jarring, the shift from vulnerable human flesh to something that could stand against forces beyond mortal comprehension, but today it felt particularly necessary.

He was now a warrior, ready to face this strange, handbook-wielding foe who treated battle like a bureaucratic procedure that required proper documentation.

Equus Noctis—as the Lord would soon introduce himself—met his stance with regal readiness that spoke of training that spanned centuries and battles fought on fields beyond human imagination. The two adversaries squared off in the confined space of the alley, surrounded by the detritus of urban life but existing in a moment that transcended such mundane concerns.

The fight began with a flurry of blows that seemed to make the air itself cry out in protest, a brutal hand-to-hand exchange that was both fluid and powerful. Each strike carried enough force to shatter concrete, but both combatants moved with such precision that their battle seemed almost like a dance—violent and deadly, but possessed of its own terrible beauty.

Izuku's training with All Might and Mirai allowed him to read movements before they fully developed, to anticipate attacks through the subtle shifts of weight and muscle that preceded violence. But Equus Noctis's grace was deceptive, each motion flowing into the next with the inevitability of water finding its path to the sea.

In a moment of clashing forearms that sent shockwaves through the narrow space, the Lord's hand shot out like a striking serpent, grabbing Izuku's arm in a vise-like grip that felt like being caught in the jaws of some primordial machine. The pressure was immediate and overwhelming, threatening to crush bone despite the armor's protection.

"Equus Noctis," he grunted, the introduction sounding more like a threat than a courtesy, his voice strained with the effort of maintaining his hold while delivering the formal greeting that some cosmic protocol apparently required.

Izuku, straining against the grip that felt like being trapped in a hydraulic press, replied through clenched teeth that tasted of copper and determination, "Izuku Midoriya," before twisting his body with desperate strength and delivering a powerful kick to the Lord's chest.

The impact sent shockwaves up his leg and forced Equus Noctis to release his grip, the Lord skidding back across the grimy concrete with controlled grace that turned even retreat into something elegant. The two fighters immediately resumed their dance of death, each strike a testament to strength that transcended normal human limitations, each block and parry evidence of skill honed through trial and suffering.

Suddenly, a blur of motion exploded into the alley like a cannonball fired from some impossible weapon, moving with such speed that the air itself seemed to tear in its wake.

The newcomer hit Equus Noctis with the force of a guided missile, the impact producing a sound like thunder contained in a bottle. The collision sent the Lord tumbling across the ground in a controlled roll that somehow maintained dignity even in defeat, his cape billowing dramatically as he came up in a defensive crouch that suggested this was merely a tactical adjustment rather than a genuine setback.

Izuku blinked in shock at his unexpected ally—a small, elderly man in a rumpled trench coat who moved with the fluid grace of someone who'd forgotten he was supposed to be old. The stranger bounced on the balls of his feet like a prizefighter half his age, grinning with the kind of unhinged joy that suggested he was having the time of his life.

There was something unsettling about the way he moved, as if his body was operating according to rules that physics hadn't been consulted about. His stature was diminutive, but something in his posture suggested that size was merely a polite fiction he maintained for the comfort of others.

"You holding up alright there, kiddo?" the old man called out cheerfully, his voice carrying the kind of casual confidence that came from someone who'd survived more fights than he could count.

"I—yeah, I'm fine," Izuku stammered, his mind struggling to process this latest impossible development, "but you need to get out of here! This is dangerous!"

The concern in his voice was genuine, born from the knowledge of just how much destruction two beings of their caliber could unleash in such a confined space.

The old man's grin widened to show teeth that had seen too many fights and somehow emerged victorious from all of them. "Dangerous? Kid, I was throwing punches before you were even a twinkle in your daddy's eye. Don't you go underestimating your elders."

He cracked his knuckles with sounds like breaking branches, each pop carrying more menace than should have been physically possible. Despite his diminutive stature, something about the gesture made even Equus Noctis take a cautious step backward, recognition flickering in those alien eyes.

The Lord stared at the newcomer with obvious bewilderment that was almost comical in its intensity. "A... a mortal?" He fumbled for his handbook again, thick fingers flipping through pages with increasing desperation. "There's nothing in here about mortal intervention. This wasn't covered in the briefing!"

The complaint carried the tone of someone whose carefully laid plans had just encountered an unexpected variable, like a computer program trying to process input it wasn't designed to handle.

Before anyone could respond to this surreal declaration—before Izuku could warn the old man about the dangers of interfering with cosmic forces, before Equus Noctis could consult his manual for the appropriate protocol—the Lord made a decision that spoke more to pragmatism than valor.

With a frustrated shake of his head that somehow managed to convey both disappointment and professional resignation, he tucked the handbook away in whatever dimensional pocket he'd produced it from and leaped—not at them, but straight up, disappearing over the alley's walls in a single bound that defied several laws of physics.

The sudden absence of his overwhelming presence left the alley feeling strangely empty, like the moment after thunder when the air itself seems to exhale in relief.

Izuku powered down, his armor dissolving in streams of golden light that seemed reluctant to leave, fading back into whatever realm such power resided in when not needed. The sudden return to his merely human form was always jarring, like stepping from a warm room into winter air, but today it felt particularly abrupt.

The sudden quiet felt strange after the intensity of battle, broken only by the distant sounds of a city beginning to wake up—the rumble of early traffic, the cry of birds, the mundane symphony of ordinary life continuing its course despite the impossible things that had just transpired.

He turned to his mysterious savior, gratitude and concern warring in his chest like competing symphonies. "Thank you for the help," he began carefully, choosing his words with the precision of someone walking through a minefield, "but that really was dangerous. You could have been seriously hurt."

The old man scoffed, his expression shifting from mischievous to mildly offended with the speed of someone accustomed to having his capabilities underestimated. "Rude! That's what you young people are these days—no respect for experience. Think you've got to shoulder every burden by yourselves."

The complaint was delivered with the kind of exasperated affection that suggested this was a familiar refrain, worn smooth by repetition.

"No, sir, that's not what I meant!" Izuku protested, hands raised in a placating gesture that he hoped would prevent any further misunderstanding. "I just—"

But the old man had gone still, his entire demeanor shifting like a switch being thrown. His eyes narrowed as he studied Izuku's face with sudden intensity, recognition dawning slowly like sunrise breaking through clouds heavy with revelation.

The change was dramatic and somehow unsettling, as if a mask had suddenly been discarded to reveal something far more dangerous underneath.

"Well, I'll be damned," he muttered, the words carrying the weight of genuine surprise. "That armor... you're the kid from the Sports Festival. The one with that fancy transformation Quirk."

Izuku nodded reluctantly, uncomfortably aware that his secret identity was apparently about as secure as tissue paper in a rainstorm. "Yes, sir, but—"

"Ha!" The old man clapped his hands together with obvious delight that transformed his entire face. "What are the odds? You know, Toshinori's been bending my ear about you for months now. You and that Mirio boy—promising this, potential that. Gets downright obnoxious after a while."

The casual mention of All Might's civilian name hit Izuku like a physical blow, sending his mind reeling as he tried to process the implications. This wasn't just any random elderly man who happened to be good in a fight—this was someone who knew Toshinori personally, who spoke about him with the familiarity of long acquaintance.

Before Izuku could fully process this revelation, before he could ask the thousand questions that suddenly crowded his mind like hungry birds, the old man's hand shot out and grabbed his jacket with surprising strength that belied his fragile appearance.

"Come on then!" he announced, already beginning to drag a protesting Izuku toward the alley's entrance with the inexorable force of a natural disaster. "Time you met the old gang properly. Can't have you running around getting into mysterious fights without proper supervision."

"Wait—who are you? How do you know All Might? Sir, I really should get home—"

His protests fell on deaf ears as he found himself being hauled along by a grinning stranger who somehow knew more about his life than he was comfortable with. The morning that had started as a peaceful jog had officially become something far more complicated, another thread in the increasingly tangled web that his existence seemed determined to weave.

And despite everything—the strangeness, the unanswered questions, the growing sense that his life was spiraling into territories beyond his control—he couldn't shake the feeling that this was exactly what All Might would have wanted.

The thought was both comforting and terrifying in equal measure.

Izuku's feet hit the ground with less grace than he would have liked, stumbling slightly as the iron grip on his jacket finally released him like a fish being thrown back into the water. He found himself standing on a modest front lawn, the grass still heavy with morning dew that soaked through his running shoes, staring up at a house that looked suspiciously familiar in the growing daylight.

The building was modest but well-maintained, with the kind of careful attention to detail that spoke of someone who took pride in their surroundings. Window boxes overflowed with flowers that caught the early morning sun, and the front walk was lined with stones that had been placed with almost mathematical precision.

Before he could fully orient himself or formulate any of the dozen questions crowding his mind like hungry birds, his captor was already striding up the front walk with the confidence of someone who owned not just the place, but possibly the entire neighborhood. His movements carried an authority that seemed to bend reality around him, making the ordinary suburban scene somehow more vivid and significant.

The old man didn't bother with such pedestrian concerns as knocking or waiting for permission. He simply turned the handle and pushed the door open as if locks were merely suggestions that didn't apply to him, his voice booming through the quiet morning air with the force of a sonic boom.

"Toshinori! Get your scrawny ass out here! I brought you a present!"

The words echoed through the house like artillery fire, carrying with them the kind of casual authority that suggested this was not an unusual occurrence.

The response came immediately—a crash of something heavy hitting the floor, followed by the unmistakable sound of ceramic shattering, and then a familiar voice cracking with shock that seemed to shake the very foundations of the building.

"Sorahiko-sensei?!"

The name hit Izuku's consciousness like a physical blow, sending his world tilting sideways as pieces of an impossible puzzle suddenly clicked into place with the inevitability of fate itself. Sorahiko. As in Gran Torino. As in the legendary Pro Hero who had trained All Might himself, who had worked alongside Nana Shimura in battles that had shaped the very foundation of hero society, who was supposed to be practically mythical—a figure from history books rather than someone who could grab you by the jacket and drag you across half the city.

And this whirlwind of a man who had just materialized out of nowhere to save him from cosmic forces, who moved like physics were merely polite suggestions, who spoke about All Might with the casual familiarity of family—he was that legend made flesh.

"Oh no," Izuku whispered, the words carrying the weight of dawning horror as the full implications crashed over him like a tsunami of realization.

The front door flew open with the violence of an explosion, revealing Toshinori in his civilian form. His hair was disheveled as if he'd been running his hands through it in distress, his eyes wide with the kind of panic usually reserved for natural disasters or the end of the world. He took in the scene with the rapid assessment of someone accustomed to crisis management—Gran Torino grinning like a cat who'd not only caught a canary but had somehow convinced it to sing opera, and Izuku standing frozen on his lawn like a deer caught in headlights the size of small suns.

"Inside," Toshinori hissed, the word carrying more authority than entire speeches, grabbing both of them by the arms and practically hauling them through the doorway with the desperate efficiency of someone trying to prevent a international incident. "Now."

The sitting room was a study in comfortable domesticity, decorated with the kind of casual care that spoke of recent attention from someone who understood the difference between a house and a home. Comfortable furniture arranged for conversation rather than display, warm lighting that made everything seem golden and peaceful, and the lingering scent of fresh tea that somehow made the impossible situation feel more manageable.

Melissa appeared as if summoned by some domestic magic, carrying a tray with the practiced ease of someone accustomed to unexpected guests and crisis management. Her movements were efficient and graceful, but her eyes kept darting between Gran Torino and Izuku with barely concealed curiosity that spoke of someone who recognized that significant events were unfolding in her living room.

The tray itself was a work of art—delicate porcelain that caught the light like captured sunshine, steam rising from the teapot in elegant spirals that seemed to carry with them the promise of civilized conversation and rational explanations.

Gran Torino settled into an armchair like a king claiming his throne, the furniture seeming to adjust itself to accommodate his presence rather than the other way around. He accepted the offered tea with a grunt of thanks that somehow managed to convey both appreciation and the expectation that such service was his natural due, using his hat to fan himself with movements that were both casual and oddly theatrical.

His sharp eyes never left Toshinori's increasingly nervous face, studying him with the intensity of a scientist examining a particularly interesting specimen under a microscope.

"Last time I saw you," he said conversationally, taking a deliberate sip that seemed calculated for maximum dramatic effect, "you looked like death warmed over. Barely holding yourself together, all skin and bones and that ridiculous fake smile that fooled absolutely no one who knew what to look for."

His gaze swept the room appraisingly, cataloging details with the thoroughness of someone accustomed to extracting information from his environment. "Now you look healthy as a horse, living in a nice house with—" he nodded toward Melissa with the kind of recognition that suggested he'd already figured out far more about the situation than anyone was comfortable with, "—company. So. Start talking."

The words were delivered with the kind of casual authority that made refusal seem not just impossible but somehow cosmically inappropriate.

Toshinori's laugh was strained, carrying undertones of hysteria barely held in check, his hand automatically moving to rub the back of his neck in a gesture that spoke of old habits and nervous energy. "Sensei, I can explain—"

"Can you now?" Gran Torino interrupted mildly, his tone suggesting that he found this claim dubious at best. "Because from where I'm sitting, either you've been holding out on some miracle cure that you've selfishly kept to yourself, or something very interesting has been happening in your life." His eyes flicked to Izuku with laser precision. "Something involving armor-wearing teenagers, perhaps?"

The silence stretched taut between them like a wire under tension, thick with unspoken implications and the weight of secrets that threatened to crush anyone foolish enough to bear them alone. Izuku could practically hear the gears turning in everyone's heads, weighing options and calculating risks with the desperate efficiency of people trying to defuse a bomb with words.

Finally, Toshinori and Melissa exchanged a look—one of those wordless conversations that spoke of deep trust and shared secrets, of decisions made together and burdens carried in partnership. The communication that passed between them was so intimate and complete that it made Izuku feel like an intruder witnessing something private and precious.

Toshinori sighed, the sound carrying the weight of months of carefully guarded truths, of information held close like radioactive material that could contaminate everything it touched. "It's... complicated."

"Most interesting things are," Gran Torino replied dryly, settling back into his chair with the patience of someone who had eternity to wait for answers. "I've got time and tea. Enlighten me."

What followed was perhaps the most surreal conversation of Izuku's life, and that was saying something considerable given the recent trajectory of his existence. Toshinori spoke carefully at first, like someone testing the structural integrity of ice before committing their full weight, using language that danced around concepts too large for comfortable discussion.

He spoke of ancient powers that predated human civilization, of beings that walked among them wearing faces that suggested humanity while concealing natures that transcended mortal understanding. When Gran Torino's expression shifted from skepticism to sharp attention—the change as dramatic as sunrise breaking through storm clouds—the floodgates opened like a dam finally surrendering to pressure it could no longer contain.

The story that emerged was staggering in its scope and implications. He told him about the Lords—creatures of immense power that operated according to rules that defied human understanding, beings whose casual actions could reshape reality itself while they pursued agendas that spanned millennia. About the Agito, warriors chosen not through merit or desire but through some cosmic selection process that identified souls capable of standing against forces that existed beyond normal comprehension.

About Kagutsuchi, who had taken the humble guise of a janitor while orchestrating miracles that redefined the very nature of what was possible. The juxtaposition was almost absurd—a being capable of commanding the fundamental forces of existence spending his days mopping floors and emptying trash cans, maintaining a facade of ordinary humanity while working wonders that defied every law of physics and biology.

"He healed me," Toshinori said simply, his voice carrying a wonder that hadn't faded despite the months that had passed since that impossible moment. "Not just patched me up or gave me more time, not some temporary fix that would fail when I needed it most. Actually healed me. Restored what I thought was lost forever, what I'd accepted could never be recovered."

Gran Torino was quiet for a long moment, his tea growing cold in his hands. "That's quite a story, Toshi. Got any proof?"

In response, Toshinori simply lifted his shirt. Gran Torino's eyes widened at the unblemished skin where the devastating scar should have been. "I doubt even modern medicine could do work this good, Sensei."

"Well," Gran Torino said faintly. "That's... that's actually..."

"There's more." Toshinori's voice grew distant. "He gave me something else. A chance I never thought I'd have." He paused, gathering himself. "I got to see her again, Sensei. Nana. All of them. The previous holders of One For All."

The teacup slipped from Gran Torino's fingers, hitting the floor with a crash. His face had gone pale, his usual sharp composure cracking.

"What did you just say?"

"I saw Nana," Toshinori repeated, conviction ringing in his voice. "She was exactly as I remembered. Still worried about everyone else, still trying to shoulder the world's problems." A smile ghosted across his features. "She told me I wasn't alone anymore. That I should keep fighting."

Izuku felt his throat tighten. He remembered that moment—the warmth in Nana's eyes, the way she'd looked at him like he was something precious. The memory of her embrace, maternal and fierce and heartbreakingly brief.

"She hugged me," he found himself saying. "Like... like a mother would."

All eyes turned to him. "I was there too," he explained quietly. "When All Might met them. She was kind."

Melissa reached over and squeezed his hand, understanding passing between them.

Gran Torino stared at them both, his expression cycling through disbelief, hope, and grief. "You're telling me you actually spoke to Nana Shimura. That some part of her still exists?"

"In One For All, yes," Toshinori confirmed. "They all do. Every holder who came before lives on in the power they passed down. Kagutsuchi found a way to make that connection tangible. Just for a moment."

The old hero was quiet for so long that Izuku wondered if he'd gone into shock. When he finally spoke, his voice was rougher than before.

"What did she... how did she seem?"

"At peace," Toshinori said without hesitation. "Worried about us, of course—that's just who she was. But at peace with her choices. Proud of what we've accomplished."

Gran Torino's composure finally cracked completely. His shoulders shook as he buried his face in his hands, and Izuku realized the legendary hero was crying.

"I never got to say goodbye," he whispered. "When All For One took her... there was nothing left. No body, no closure, just... gone."

Toshinori leaned forward, his own eyes bright with unshed tears. "She knows, Sensei. She knows how much you cared. How much you did to honor her memory."

The moment stretched between them, heavy with decades of grief and the impossible gift of closure. Finally, Gran Torino straightened, wiping his eyes.

"Right then," he said, his voice steadier but still rough. "What else haven't you told me? Because I get the feeling we're just getting to the good parts."

Toshinori's expression darkened, and Izuku felt his stomach drop.

"There's something else," Toshinori said heavily. "Something terrible. Nana's grandson—Tenko Shimura. All For One took him in after what happened to his family. He's a villain now. Goes by Tomura Shigaraki."

The color drained from Gran Torino's face. "No," he breathed. "After everything she sacrificed... you're telling me it was all for nothing?"

"Not for nothing," Izuku interjected firmly, surprising himself. "Never for nothing. What she did, the power she passed on, the example she set—that still matters. Shigaraki's choices are his own, but that doesn't erase the good she did."

Gran Torino looked at him sharply. "And what would you know about it, boy?"

"I know what it feels like to be written off," Izuku replied quietly. "I know what it means when someone believes in you anyway. And I know that sometimes the people we save don't stay saved—but that doesn't mean we stop trying."

The room fell silent, but this time it felt thoughtful rather than heavy.

Finally, Gran Torino nodded slowly. "Smart kid," he said to Toshinori. "I can see why you're fond of him."

"He has his moments," Toshinori agreed, warmth creeping into his voice despite everything.

"So," Gran Torino said, settling back with renewed purpose. "What exactly are we going to do about all this?"

"For now," Toshinori replied wearily, "we do nothing. We continue as before. We prepare for the training camp."

Gran Torino's expression twisted in disbelief. "Nothing?" he scoffed. "Toshinori, you just told me that angels are living among the public, and you expect us to do nothing? I saw the news. I saw the raids you've been pulling, the Quirkless traffickers you've been busting. Are you telling me you're just going to let these bastards operate freely?"

Toshinori didn't answer right away. When he met his teacher's eyes, Sorahiko saw not the flustered boy he had trained, but a man who had stared into the face of a god and been humbled by it. A grim, weary resolve shone in his blue eyes.

"You don't understand, Sensei," Toshinori said quietly. "I've fought Kagutsuchi. Once as a challenge, the second time in a friendly spar. Nothing I did could even phase him. My strongest attacks were just a breeze to the High Lord."

Gran Torino scoffed. "Then you hit harder! I didn't raise you to be a quitter, Toshi!"

"I also know better than to be careless," Toshinori snapped back, his voice regaining its old fire. "I know what it means to go up against a force you can't defeat, and it's not a memory I'm eager to revisit."

The two men stared at each other, a lifetime of shared history and mutual frustration passing between them. Finally, Gran Torino's shoulders slumped.

"Fine," he conceded heavily. "Fine. But don't think I'm just going to take it. I'm not about to let these bastards manage us like sheep."

Another tense moment passed before Gran Torino spoke again, more to himself than to the others.

"Still... I can't believe it. All For One getting his hands on Nana's grandson." He took a slow breath, the weight of painful memory in his voice. "We placed her children in separate orphanages, called in every favor we had to wipe any record of them being related. Kotaro and Inko. No one was ever supposed to find them."

Toshinori froze, his face going pale. Izuku felt the words hit him like a physical blow, cold dread settling in his stomach. His own mother's name...

"S-Sorahiko-sensei?" Izuku's voice was barely audible. "The names... what were their names?"

Gran Torino raised an eyebrow, oblivious to the twin looks of horror on their faces. "Kotaro and Inko," he repeated. "Why?"