The League of Villains' hideout reeked of stale cigarettes and defeat. What had once been their sanctuary—a place where grand schemes were hatched over cheap liquor—now felt like a mausoleum. The television in the corner sat dark and silent, its black screen reflecting the hollow faces of those who had tasted bitter failure.

Tomura Shigaraki sat hunched over the bar, his fingers working methodically at the raw, bleeding scratches along his neck. The motion had become automatic, a physical manifestation of his inner turmoil. He ignored the empty glass beside him entirely, instead lifting the bottle of whiskey directly to his lips. The amber liquid burned down his throat, but it did nothing to quench the fire of his rage.

His tactical vest hung loose on his frame—a cruel reminder of their botched assault. Each buckle and strap seemed to mock him, whispering of plans that had crumbled to dust.

"Tomura Shigaraki," Kurogiri's voice cut through the oppressive silence, measured and careful. The misty figure stood behind the bar, his yellow eyes glowing with genuine concern. "You executed every aspect of the plan flawlessly. The variables that led to our... setback... were beyond anyone's ability to predict."

"Flawlessly?" Tomura's laugh was sharp and bitter. He slammed the bottle down so hard that whiskey sloshed over the rim. "Tell me, Kurogiri, what's so flawless about coming home empty-handed? What's so perfect about watching a bunch of children make fools of us?"

From his position against the far wall, Dabi let out a low chuckle. He traced lazy patterns on the peeling wallpaper with one finger, his blue flames flickering just beneath his skin. "Careful there, boss. Your daddy issues are showing."

"Shut your mouth, Dabi." Shigaraki's voice dropped to a dangerous whisper.

At a corner table sticky with spilled drinks, Toga Himiko sat in eerie stillness. Her collection of knives lay spread before her like surgical instruments, each blade catching the dim light as she polished them with obsessive precision. The lack of blood on their surfaces was a personal insult.

"I was so close to him," she murmured, her voice carrying that unsettling musical quality. "Midoriya was right there, all shiny in his new armor. I could practically taste how sweet his blood would be..." She held up one knife, examining her reflection in its surface. "But I didn't even get to make a single cut. Not one tiny little slice."

The television suddenly crackled to life, washing the room in harsh blue light. All For One's imposing silhouette filled the screen, his presence immediately commanding attention despite the grainy feed.

"Well?" The single word carried the weight of expectation and judgment.

Shigaraki took another pull from the bottle, using the gesture to buy himself time. His silence stretched uncomfortably long.

"I see." All For One's voice remained perfectly controlled, but there was something underneath—disappointment, perhaps, or calculation. "Another setback has left you... emotional."

"Emotional?" Shigaraki finally looked up, his red eyes blazing with fury. "I'm not emotional, sensei. I'm furious. Those brats humiliated us. They moved like... like..."

"Like professionals," All For One finished smoothly.

"Exactly!" Shigaraki slammed his palm on the bar, his Decay quirk automatically activating. The wood began to crumble beneath his touch before he consciously reeled it back in. "First-year students shouldn't fight like that. They were coordinated, tactical, experienced. It was like fighting seasoned heroes, not academy kids."

Dabi pushed off from the wall, his interest finally piqued. "Maybe U.A.'s training program got an upgrade. New teaching methods, better simulation exercises..."

"No." Shigaraki shook his head vigorously. "This was different. And there's something else—something that's been eating at me since the fight."

All For One's image leaned forward slightly. "Continue."

"My Decay didn't work on Midoriya. Again." The words came out through gritted teeth. "The first time I thought maybe it was the armor—some kind of protective coating or material. But sensei, the first time I grabbed him, he wasn't even wearing that suit. His costume rotted away just like everything else, but when it reached his actual skin..." He trailed off, running his hands through his pale hair.

"The decay stopped," All For One mused. "Interesting."

"More than interesting—it's impossible. My quirk doesn't just stop. It spreads until there's nothing left. But with him, it's like his body itself is resistant." Shigaraki leaned forward, his voice dropping to an intense whisper. "And that armor quirk of his... it doesn't behave like any quirk I've ever seen."

Kurogiri tilted his misty head. "In what way?"

"Quirks have patterns, limitations, specific functions. But Midoriya's armor... it was like watching someone change costumes. The transformation was too clean, too complete. And the abilities it granted—enhanced strength, speed, durability—they seemed almost... artificial."

All For One was quiet for a long moment, processing this information. When he spoke again, his voice carried a note of intrigue. "I have been reviewing footage from various encounters. The boy's capabilities have expanded at an unprecedented rate. Such rapid development, combined with the anomalous nature of his abilities..."

"There's something U.A. isn't telling us," Shigaraki finished.

"Indeed. And when we factor in the remarkable improvement shown by his entire class..." All For One's chuckle was low and predatory. "It suggests a deeper mystery than we initially suspected."

Shigaraki straightened suddenly, his eyes widening. "Sensei... do we still have assets at U.A.? Other moles besides the ones we've already burned?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Aoyama." The name fell from Shigaraki's lips like a revelation. He pressed his palms against his temples, pieces clicking together in his mind. "That flashy little peacock—during the fight, he wasn't using his Navel Laser at all."

Toga looked up from her knives, suddenly interested. "The sparkly boy? He was being all boring and fighty instead of doing his light show."

"He was wearing armor," Shigaraki continued, his voice gaining urgency. "The same type as Midoriya's, but different. They transformed at the same time—I saw it happen. It wasn't identical, but the similarities were unmistakable."

Dabi whistled low. "Two kids with the same mystery quirk? That's either one hell of a coincidence or..."

"Or it's not a quirk at all," All For One finished, his tone suddenly sharp with interest. "Tomura, describe this transformation in detail."

"They both raised their hands, made the same gesture. There was light, some kind of energy field, and then they were both in full armor. But here's the thing—Aoyama's usual quirk creates that beam from his navel, right? It's biological, tied to his body. But this armor... it covered him completely, changed his entire combat style."

"Two students with access to the same anomalous power source." All For One's voice carried satisfaction now. "This changes our approach considerably. We're no longer hunting for a single exceptional individual—we're investigating a potentially larger phenomenon."

Shigaraki felt the familiar thrill of a new hunt beginning to override his frustration. "So what's our next move, sensei?"

"We watch. We learn. And we begin to ask ourselves: if two students have access to this power, how many others might there be?"

Ground Beta stretched out like a concrete wasteland under the afternoon sun. The training facility's massive structures cast long shadows across the artificial cityscape, creating a perfect arena for what Class 1-A had come to call "Agito training."

Izuku Midoriya stood at the center of the main plaza, his Trinity Form radiating quiet power. The armor was a masterwork of gold and energy, with veins of crimson and azure that pulsed like a living heartbeat. The crown-like crests on his helmet caught the sunlight, making him appear less like a student and more like a warrior-king from legend.

Across from him, Yuga Aoyama cut a very different figure in his Gills form. The green and gold armor was sleek, more predatory, with those distinctive crimson eye lenses that seemed to burn with their own inner fire. But it wasn't the intimidating appearance that concerned Izuku—it was what he could see beneath it.

Aoyama's usual flamboyant posture had been replaced by a low, feral crouch, his body coiled like a predator preparing to strike. His head tilted to the side, and the crimson lenses of his helmet seemed to track Izuku's every movement with an unsettling intensity.

"You sure about this, Aoyama-kun?" Izuku's voice carried clearly through his helmet's external speakers. "We can do regular combat training instead."

"Non." The response was barely recognizable as Aoyama's voice. Gone was the musical French accent and theatrical flair. This was something rougher, hungrier. "I need this, mon ami. I need to see how far this form can push."

From the sidelines, their classmates watched with a mixture of excitement and concern. Kirishima bounced on his toes, pumping his fist. "This is gonna be so manly! Two Agito forms going all out!"

"Something feels off about this," Iida murmured, his hand hovering near his glasses in that nervous gesture of his. "Aoyama-kun seems... different today."

Aizawa's eyes were already glowing red, his capture weapon loose and ready. "If either of you lose control, this ends immediately. Are we clear?"

Both armored figures nodded, but Izuku noticed how Aoyama's acknowledgment was more of a predatory bob of the head.

"Begin," Aizawa called out.

The fight erupted into motion immediately. Izuku launched forward, his Trinity Form allowing him to move with incredible speed and precision. His attacks were controlled, calculated—each strike designed to test Aoyama's defenses without causing serious harm.

But Aoyama met him with something far more intense.

The Gills armor user moved like a wild animal, all fluid motion and brutal efficiency. His counters weren't just blocks—they were attempts to redirect Izuku's momentum and create openings for devastating strikes. When he attacked, it was with claws extended and a snarling sound that definitely wasn't coming from the armor's speakers.

"Aoyama-kun," Izuku called out as he barely avoided a swipe that would have torn into his armor's joint seals, "you're fighting really aggressively today!"

The only response was a low growl.

From the sidelines, Momo covered her mouth with her hand. "Is it just me, or does Aoyama-kun seem... feral?"

"That's not his usual fighting style at all," Todoroki observed, ice crystals already forming around his right hand in unconscious preparation. "He's attacking like he's trying to seriously hurt Midoriya."

Back in the fight, Aoyama's aggression continued to escalate. His strikes were no longer aimed at Izuku's armored torso or limbs—he was targeting joints, seams, any vulnerable point that might allow him to breach the Trinity Form's defenses.

"Mon dieu," Aoyama snarled, his voice distorting through the helmet. "Why won't you just... break?"

A particularly vicious kick sent Izuku sliding backward across the concrete. He caught himself, raising his hands in a peaceful gesture. "Aoyama-kun, that's enough! This is supposed to be a training exercise!"

But Aoyama was already charging again, and this time something new extended from his forearm—a curved, scythe-like blade that gleamed with deadly sharpness. The weapon moved with lethal intent, aimed directly at Izuku's helmet.

Time seemed to slow. Izuku could see his reflection in the crimson lenses of Aoyama's helmet, could hear the bestial roar building in his friend's throat. This wasn't sparring anymore—this was a real attack.

Izuku moved faster than he ever had before, catching Aoyama's wrist in an iron grip just inches from his face. The scythe blade trembled with the force behind it, but held fast.

"AOYAMA!" Izuku's voice cut through everything—the armor's interference, the bloodlust, the rage. "STOP! We're done!"

For a moment, they stood frozen—Trinity gold locked against Gills green, friend restraining friend. Izuku could feel the trembling in Aoyama's arm, could hear the ragged breathing coming through the mouth plate.

Then, like a switch being flipped, the fight went out of Aoyama completely. The Gills armor flickered and dissolved, leaving him to collapse heavily to his knees on the concrete. His face was pale and drawn, his usual perfect hair plastered to his forehead with sweat.

"Stay back," Izuku called to their classmates as they started forward. His own armor receded to its basic form as he knelt beside his friend. "Aoyama-kun? Can you hear me?"

"Oui," Aoyama whispered, his voice barely audible. "I... I am so very sorry, Midoriya. I did not mean... I would never..."

"Hey, it's okay." Izuku's voice was gentle, reassuring. "But I need you to tell me what happened. That wasn't you fighting—that was something else."

Aoyama's hands shook as he pressed them to his face. "It has been growing worse since the training camp. During the villain attack, when I was fighting Magne... for just a moment, I wanted to kill him. Not defeat—kill. The urge was so strong, so... hungry."

"The Gills form is affecting your mind?"

"C'est ça." Aoyama nodded miserably. "It whispers to me, especially during combat. It wants me to hunt, to tear things apart with my hands. Most of the time I can resist, but when I saw you in that new Trinity Form..." He looked up with haunted eyes. "It saw you as prey, Midoriya. Or perhaps... as a rival that needed to be eliminated."

Izuku felt a chill run down his spine that had nothing to do with his armor. "Aoyama-kun, how long has this been going on?"

"Since the night I first transformed. But it grows stronger each time I use the armor. And today, fighting against your Trinity Form... it was like adding gasoline to a fire." Aoyama's voice dropped to a whisper. "I am afraid, mon ami. Afraid of what I might become if this continues."

From the sidelines, Aizawa approached with careful steps. "Problem child number two, care to explain what just happened here?"

Izuku looked up at his teacher, then back down at his shaking friend. "I think we have a problem, sensei. The Agito forms... they might be changing us in ways we didn't expect."

The weight of those words settled over the training ground like a shroud. Class 1-A gathered in a loose circle around their shaken classmate, their usual chatter replaced by concerned murmurs. Even Bakugo, typically the first to dismiss weakness in others, remained uncharacteristically quiet as he studied Aoyama's trembling form.

"This is bad," Kirishima whispered, running his hands through his spiky red hair. "If the armor is messing with people's heads..."

"We need to find a solution," Iida declared, his usual precise gestures more agitated than normal. "There must be some way to help Aoyama-kun regain control."

Todoroki nodded slowly, ice crystals still flickering around his right side. "Shouldn't Kagutsuchi-san know something about this? He might understand what's happening with these... Agito powers."

"Yeah!" Kaminari chimed in, his voice bright with hope. "He should have all the answers, right?"

All eyes turned to Aizawa, who had been listening to their suggestions with his usual stoic expression. But instead of his typical dry response, something almost resembling embarrassment flickered across his features. He ran a frustrated hand over the back of his neck, his capture weapon feeling suddenly heavy on his shoulders.

"About that..." he began, his voice carrying an unusual note of reluctance. "Kagutsuchi is currently unavailable."

"Unavailable?" Yaoyorozu echoed, her dark eyes sharp with concern. "But surely for something this serious—"

"He's on vacation," Aizawa cut her off flatly, the words coming out like he was admitting to some personal failing. "For the summer. On a luxury cruise."

The silence that followed was deafening. Nineteen pairs of eyes stared at their teacher in various states of disbelief.

"A vacation?" Midoriya repeated weakly.

"With Nemuri," Aizawa added, and somehow managed to look even more dead inside.

The reaction was immediate and varied. Sero nearly choked on his own spit. Kaminari's jaw dropped so far it nearly hit the ground. Todoroki blinked slowly, as if processing this information required a complete system reboot. Mineta, however, was already getting lost in a lustful fantasy about Midnight in a bikini, a reverie that was cut short by a swift lash of Asui's tongue.

But it was Mina who broke the stunned silence, letting out a dreamy sigh that echoed across the training ground. "Oh my god, that's so romantic!" She clasped her hands together, her pink cheeks practically glowing. "A luxury cruise with a mysterious, powerful man! Living the dream!"

"Ashido," Aizawa warned, but there was no real heat in it.

"I mean, think about it!" Mina continued, completely ignoring the warning as her imagination ran wild. "Sunset dinners on the deck, dancing under the stars, moonlit walks along the ship's promenade..." She spun in place, lost in her romantic fantasy. "Midnight-sensei is living in a romance novel!"

"Can we get our heads out of our asses?!" Bakugo roared. "Frenchie's going psycho, and Angel Face is playing footsie on a damn boat!"

Aizawa sighed heavily, pulling out his phone with the resigned expression of a man who knew he was about to make his day significantly more complicated. "We can still call him for advice," he muttered, more to himself than to the students.

The phone rang exactly twice before a warm, familiar voice answered. But instead of the professional tone they were used to hearing in the school hallways, Kagutsuchi sounded completely relaxed, with what might have been steel drums playing softly in the background.

"Shouta! What a pleasant surprise." Even through the phone's speaker, his voice carried that unmistakable hint of amusement. "Though I have to say, calling during my vacation suggests either an emergency or a complete lack of respect for work-life balance."

"It's an emergency," Aizawa replied flatly, though several students noticed the slight twitch at the corner of his mouth. "Where exactly are you right now?"

"Sitting poolside on the Quantum of the Seas, which I'm told is the go-to for the most luxurious and romantic vacation a couple could ever ask for." There was a pause, followed by the sound of ice clinking in a glass. "Nemuri is currently working on her tan and occasionally making commentary about the other passengers' choice in swimwear. It's... remarkably peaceful, actually."

The mental image of the High Lord lounging by a pool in swim trunks was almost too much for most of the students to process. Tokoyami looked like he was having an existential crisis, while Hagakure was making barely contained giggling sounds. Mineta once again allowed his lurid fantasies to run away with him, only to get another taste of Asui's tongue.

"Anyway," Kagutsuchi continued, his tone shifting slightly more serious, "I'm assuming this has to do with young Aoyama and his control issues with his Gills form?"

"Yes," Aizawa answered flatly.

"Of course." The sound of Kagutsuchi taking a sip of his drink came through clearly. "The boy's been fighting the more... primal... aspects of his transformation since the training camp, hasn't he? Getting more aggressive, more feral during combat?"

"Exactly right," Aizawa admitted grudgingly.

"Mmm. The Gills condition has that effect. It's naturally aggressive since it's far from a perfect awakening. The mental adjustments that come with it can be... challenging... for someone not prepared for them." Another pause. "So, he lost control during a sparring match with Midoriya."

Aizawa's free hand came up to massage his temple. "I hate it when you do that."

Kagutsuchi's chuckle was warm and completely unrepentant. "So what can be done about it, you're wondering? The answer is disappointingly simple, I'm afraid. Aoyama has to do most of the heavy lifting himself. The Agito powers respond to the user's mental state, their sense of self. He needs to learn to integrate the Gills instincts without being overwhelmed by them."

"And how exactly is a fifteen-year-old supposed to do that?" Aizawa's voice carried more than a hint of frustration.

"Practice, patience, and support from people who care about him. The same way anyone learns to control any aspect of themselves, really." The background sounds shifted slightly, suggesting Kagutsuchi was moving. "The armor isn't evil, Shouta. It's just... intense. Like giving someone a sports car when they've only ever driven a bicycle. Eventually, they'll figure out the clutch."

There was a pause, and when Aizawa spoke again, his voice carried a note of incredulous disbelief. "That's really all we need to do? Practice and patience?"

"Sometimes the most profound truths are frustratingly mundane." There was definitely amusement in Kagutsuchi's voice now. "Though if it makes you feel better, I can dress it up in mystical language. 'The warrior must find harmony between the beast within and the man without, walking the razor's edge between savage instinct and civilized restraint.' Better?"

Aizawa was quiet for a long moment, and when he spoke, his voice was flat and emotionless. "I hate you."

"I know you do, my friend. It's part of your charm." Kagutsuchi's response was so cheerful it was almost insulting. "Now, unless there's anything else earth-shatteringly urgent, I have a dinner reservation at eight, and Nemuri will never forgive me if we're late because I was giving parenting advice to surly teachers."

The line went dead, leaving Aizawa staring at his phone with an expression that could have curdled milk.

"Well?" Iida prompted after a moment. "What did he say?"

"He said," Aizawa replied, pocketing his phone with deliberate care, "that Aoyama needs to figure it out himself. With support."

"That's it?!" Bakugo exploded. "Mr. Know-It-All's advice is 'figure it out yourself'?"

"Apparently."

Meanwhile, several hundred miles away on the sun-drenched deck of a luxury cruise ship, Kagutsuchi set his phone aside and reached for his drink—something tropical and entirely too colorful, complete with a tiny paper umbrella that looked ridiculously delicate in his hands.

The Quantum of the Seas stretched around them like a floating city, its multiple decks bustling with vacationers enjoying the perfect Caribbean weather. The pool area where they'd claimed their spot was an oasis of luxury—crystal-clear water reflecting the brilliant blue sky, comfortable lounge chairs arranged with mathematical precision, and staff members who appeared at exactly the right moment with fresh towels and drink refills.

"What was that about, dear?" Nemuri asked without opening her eyes, her voice carrying that lazy contentment that came with three days of perfect weather and zero work responsibilities. She was sprawled on the lounge chair next to his like a cat in a sunbeam, wearing a bikini that had probably cost more than most people's monthly salary and looking like she belonged on the cover of a travel magazine.

The designer sunglasses covering half her face were large enough to hide her expression, but Kagutsuchi could tell from the slight tilt of her head that she was listening intently despite her relaxed pose. Her skin had taken on a golden glow over the past few days—a far cry from the pale complexion that came from spending too much time in U.A.'s windowless faculty lounge.

Kagutsuchi shrugged, a gesture made slightly awkward by the tropical drink in his hand and the unfamiliar feeling of swim trunks. The sunglasses perched on his nose were aviator-style and definitely too expensive for their purpose, but Nemuri had insisted they matched his "mysterious entity aesthetic" while somehow making him look more approachable.

"Nothing too important," he said, taking another sip of his drink and wincing slightly at the aggressive sweetness. "Just some growing pains that'll sort themselves out by the time we get back for the next school year."

"Mmm." Nemuri shifted slightly, turning onto her side to face him with fluid grace. The movement caused her sunglasses to slide down her nose just enough to reveal one amused dark eye. "You know, for someone who claims to be taking a vacation, you're awfully calm about work calling. Most people would be at least a little stressed about mysterious supernatural problems involving their students."

"Most people," Kagutsuchi replied with that slow, knowing smile that had first caught her attention months ago in that upscale restaurant, "aren't me."

She laughed—a sound that was somehow both sultry and genuinely delighted. "Modest as always, I see."

"I prefer 'acutely self-aware,'" he countered, setting his drink on the small table between their chairs. The ice clinked softly against the glass, nearly drowned out by the gentle lapping of pool water and the distant sound of steel drums from the ship's afternoon entertainment.

Nemuri pushed her sunglasses up to rest on top of her head, fixing him with that direct stare that had probably intimidated countless villains and definitely made more than a few colleagues uncomfortable. But there was warmth in it now, affection mixed with the kind of exasperated fondness usually reserved for beloved but impossible partners.

"So what you're telling me," she said, propping herself up on one elbow, "is that our kids are having a bit of trouble that needs solving from our resident guardian angel?"

Kagutsuchi glanced down at his admittedly ridiculous swim trunks—navy blue with tiny white anchors scattered across the fabric. Nemuri had picked them out during their shopping expedition in the ship's boutique, claiming they were "adorably nautical" and that he needed to embrace the full vacation experience.

"I didn't solve anything," he corrected. "I merely provided perspective. They'll figure it out—they always do. Besides," he added, reaching over to adjust the umbrella shading her chair with careful precision, "some things are far more important right now."

The gesture was small, domestic, utterly at odds with his usual role. But the way Nemuri's expression softened in response made it feel like the most important thing he'd done all day.

"You know," she said quietly, her voice taking on that particular tone that usually preceded either something deeply romantic or completely outrageous, "six months ago, if someone had told me I'd be on a luxury cruise with an archangel who wears anchor-print swim trunks and makes terrible tropical drinks look sophisticated, I'd have recommended they seek professional help."

"And now?"

Her smile was radiant enough to rival the Caribbean sun, and when she reached over to lace their fingers together, Kagutsuchi felt something shift in his chest—a warmth that had nothing to do with the tropical climate and everything to do with the woman beside him.

"Now," she said, "I'm thinking this might be the best vacation I've ever had."

Around them, the cruise ship continued its lazy journey through crystal-clear waters, carrying its cargo of vacationers toward another tropical paradise. But in their small bubble of contentment, surrounded by the gentle sounds of leisure and luxury, time seemed to slow to a perfect, golden crawl.

Kagutsuchi squeezed her hand gently and decided that perhaps mortality had its perks after all.

The transition from the sun-soaked luxury of a cruise ship to the cramped, oppressive atmosphere of a villain hideout was jarring enough. But the shift to the quiet residential streets of Musutafu felt almost surreal—as if the world itself was holding its breath before the next storm broke.

Toshinori Yagi stood before the familiar door of the Midoriya residence, a small box of manju clutched in hands that trembled despite his best efforts to steady them. The cheerful chime of the doorbell seemed to mock the gravity of what he was about to do, its bright melody at odds with the leaden weight in his chest.

How do you tell someone their entire life has been built on a necessary lie?

When the door opened, Inko Midoriya's gentle smile was exactly as he remembered—warm, genuine, tinged with the slight surprise of an unexpected visitor. She wore a simple floral apron over her everyday clothes, and the rich aroma of katsudon drifted from the kitchen behind her, speaking of the comfortable domesticity she'd built for herself and her son.

"Oh, Yagi-san! What a lovely surprise!" Her voice carried that same musical quality as Izuku's, though mellowed by years and maternal warmth. "Please, come in! Is Izuku with you today?"

"No, Midoriya-san." His voice came out rougher than intended, formal in a way that made her tilt her head slightly. "He's... at school. Training with his classmates."

The slight pause before 'training' didn't escape her notice—mothers had a radar for these things—but she simply smiled and gestured him inside. "Well then, you'll just have to settle for my company instead. These are beautiful, thank you!" She accepted the manju with gracious hands, her cheeks coloring slightly at the unexpected gift. "Please, make yourself comfortable. I'll put on some tea."

As she bustled toward the kitchen, Toshinori found himself standing in the entryway like a giant among dollhouse furniture. Everything about the space spoke of love carefully cultivated—from the precisely arranged photos chronicling Izuku's journey from quirkless child to U.A. student, to the small touches that transformed a modest apartment into a true home.

His eyes lingered on one photograph in particular: a much younger Inko with bright, determined eyes and a radiant smile. The resemblance to Nana hit him like a physical blow—not just in the shape of her face or the curve of her smile, but in something deeper. That quality of gentle strength that had made Nana Shimura the symbol of hope for an entire generation.

She doesn't know, he thought, watching Inko hum softly as she prepared tea in the next room. She has no idea that she carries the legacy of the greatest hero I ever knew.

When she returned with a laden tray, her movements held that same unconscious grace he remembered from Nana. She set down two steaming cups and a plate of still-warm katsudon, the simple gesture somehow profound in its care.

"I made extra earlier," she said, settling across from him at the small dining table. "It's always better when it's fresh and warm."

"Thank you." He accepted the bowl but made no move to eat, his appetite thoroughly crushed by the weight of what he'd come to do. "Your home is... it's beautiful, Midoriya-san. You've created something special here."

Her smile softened, taking on that particular glow that mothers wore when speaking of their children. "It's nothing fancy, but it's ours. It's where Izuku learned to dream of being a hero." A shadow of old pain flickered across her features. "Even when everyone told him it was impossible."

The opening was there, perfect and terrible. Toshinori set his chopsticks aside with deliberate care, his hands suddenly too heavy to hold them.

"Midoriya-san," he began, his voice carrying a gravity that made her straighten unconsciously. "There's something I need to discuss with you. Something... important. About your family."

The change in her was immediate and heartbreaking. Every trace of casual warmth vanished, replaced by the sharp, focused alarm of a mother sensing danger to her child.

"Is it Izuku? Is he hurt? Has something happened at school?" The questions tumbled out rapid-fire, her hands already moving to grab her purse, her phone, anything that might help her reach her son.

"No!" Toshinori's voice cracked with urgency, his own hands rising in a gesture of reassurance. "Nothing like that. He's perfectly safe, I promise you. This isn't about him being in danger. This is about..." He struggled for words that could encompass the enormity of what he was about to reveal. "This is about the past. About secrets that have been kept to protect the people we love."

Inko's posture remained tense, maternal instincts still on high alert despite his reassurances. "I don't understand, Yagi-san. What kind of secrets? And what does any of this have to do with my family?"

He looked at her—really looked at her—taking in the gentle curve of her face, the way she held herself with unconscious dignity even in her confusion. So much like Nana, yet entirely her own person. A woman who had built a life of quiet heroism without ever knowing the legacy that flowed through her veins.

"Midoriya-san," he said carefully, "do you remember anything about your early childhood? Before your parents... before the people who raised you took you in?"

The question hit her like cold water. Her hands stilled in her lap, fingers intertwining in a gesture he recognized as self-soothing. "I... what kind of question is that?" But even as she asked, something flickered behind her eyes—not memory, exactly, but the acknowledgment of a blank space where memories should be.

"My parents adopted me as a baby," she said slowly, as if the words were stones she was placing carefully one by one. "They never hid that from me. But they said I was too young to remember anything from before. That it was better to focus on the family I had rather than the one I'd lost."

"And you never questioned that?"

A longer pause this time, and when she spoke, her voice was smaller, more uncertain. "Sometimes... sometimes I had dreams. Fragments, really. A woman with dark hair singing lullabies. Strong hands lifting me up to touch the sky. But children have vivid imaginations, don't they? My parents always said I was just creating stories to fill in the gaps."

Toshinori felt his heart break a little more with each word. "Those weren't stories, Midoriya-san. Those were memories."

"Memories of what?" But even as she asked, he could see that some part of her already knew this conversation was going to shatter something fundamental about her world.

He reached into his jacket and withdrew a photograph—old, worn at the edges from years of careful handling. With infinite gentleness, he placed it on the table between them.

"Memories of her," he said quietly. "Your mother. Your real mother."

Inko's breath caught as she stared down at the photograph. It showed a woman in her twenties wearing an older style of hero costume, her dark hair flowing freely around her shoulders as she smiled with radiant joy at the camera. But it wasn't the costume or even the obvious heroic context that made Inko's hands begin to tremble.

It was the face. Her own face, reflected back at her across the years.

"Her name was Nana Shimura," Toshinori said, his voice thick with old grief and deep love. "She was the seventh wielder of a power called One For All. She was my mentor, my teacher... and one of the greatest heroes this world has ever known."

"That's..." Inko's voice was barely a whisper, her eyes never leaving the photograph. "That's impossible. My parents would have told me if... if my real mother was..."

"A hero?" Toshinori finished gently. "They couldn't have told you, Midoriya-san, because they were kept in the dark themselves. Nana made sure every record of your connection to her was wiped clean, all to protect you from danger."

She finally looked up at him, and the raw vulnerability in her expression was devastating. "Danger from what?"

"From the man who killed her," Toshinori said, the words falling like hammer blows in the quiet apartment. "A villain so powerful, so evil, that even speaking his name draws his attention. He has been hunting those connected to One For All for over a century, and when he discovered that Nana had a family..."

He didn't need to finish. The implication hung between them like a blade.

"She gave you up to save you," he continued, his voice breaking slightly. "Both of you—you had a brother, older than you by a few years. Nana made the most horrible choice any parent can make. She gave away the children she loved more than life itself because it was the only way to keep you safe."

Inko stared down at the photograph, one trembling finger tracing the edge of the frame. "She's... she's really gone?"

"Yes. She died fighting him. Died to buy time for her successor to grow strong enough to carry on her mission." Toshinori's own eyes grew bright with unshed tears. "But her sacrifice wasn't just about the power she passed on. It was about ensuring that you and your brother could live normal, happy lives. That you could love and be loved without the shadow of that ancient war falling across your children."

"My children," Inko repeated, and suddenly her face went very pale. "Oh god. Does Izuku know? About... about any of this?"

Toshinori nodded heavily. "Yes. He learned the truth recently, along with... other things about the world we thought we understood. He's been carrying this knowledge, trying to process what it means for both of you."

Inko was quiet for a long moment, her hands still clutching the photograph. When she spoke again, her voice was steadier, though tears tracked down her cheeks.

"That's why he's been different lately. More thoughtful, more... burdened." She looked up at Toshinori with sudden understanding. "He's been protecting me from this, hasn't he? Just like she did."

"It's in his nature," Toshinori said gently. "That drive to shield others from pain, to carry weights that aren't his to bear—that comes from both sides of his heritage. From you, and from the legacy that flows through your bloodline."

"But why now?" Inko asked, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. "Why tell me this now?"

Toshinori was quiet for a long moment, choosing his words with infinite care. "Because the war that took your mother's life isn't over. Because the enemy she died fighting has returned, and he's targeting the students of U.A. Academy. Your son..." He paused, meeting her eyes with steady resolve. "Your son has become something extraordinary, Midoriya-san. His power—his Agito abilities—they're drawing attention from forces that most people can't even imagine."

"The armor," Inko said quietly. "Those transformations he can do. That's not... that's not a normal Quirk, is it?"

"No. It's something far older, far more significant. And it makes him a target." Toshinori leaned forward, his expression intense but kind. "I thought you deserved to know. To understand that the extraordinary young man you raised didn't become a hero despite being quirkless—he became one because heroism runs in his very blood."

Inko looked down at the photograph one more time, then back at Toshinori. When she spoke, her voice was steady despite the tears still glistening in her eyes.

"Tell me about her," she said quietly. "Tell me about my mother."

And as the afternoon sun slanted through the windows of the small apartment, Toshinori began to speak of Nana Shimura—of her laughter and her strength, her unwavering dedication to protecting others, and the love she had carried for the daughter she'd been forced to leave behind.

Outside, the world continued its inexorable march toward the conflicts that were brewing on multiple fronts. But for this one stolen moment, in the quiet sanctuary of a modest home, a daughter finally learned about the mother who had loved her enough to let her go, while understanding that the son she had raised carried that same heroic legacy in ways that transcended any power passed down through generations.

The truth was finally out, shared between them like a bridge across decades of necessary lies. And for the first time since this all began, Inko Midoriya understood exactly why her quirkless son had always dreamed of saving everyone—it wasn't despite his circumstances, but because of who he truly was, deep in his bones where heroes are born.

Principal Nezu sat in his office as the late afternoon sun cast long shadows across his desk, a steaming cup of tea growing cold beside an untouched stack of administrative papers. The school was unusually quiet during summer break, with only the essential staff maintaining the facilities and the soft hum of air conditioning breaking the stillness. He'd only come in today to review some paperwork that couldn't wait until the new semester, but found himself lingering in the familiar comfort of his high-backed chair, contemplating how much had changed since the students had left for their well-deserved vacation.

He steepled his paws beneath his chin, his dark eyes reflecting a depth of contemplation that would have surprised anyone who knew him only for his cheerful demeanor and love of elaborate schemes. But then again, very few people in his position had been forced to recalibrate their understanding of reality quite so dramatically.

Divine beings, he thought, the concept still feeling foreign despite months of processing. Actual angels walking among us, masquerading as everyday people.

The irony wasn't lost on him. He'd spent his entire career as an educator preparing students for a world he thought he understood—a world of Quirks and heroes, of scientific advancement and societal evolution. Now he found himself guardian to young people who wielded power that predated human civilization itself.

Nezu reached for his tea, taking a contemplative sip as his mind wandered to the two students who had unwittingly become the center of this cosmic storm. Izuku Midoriya—earnest, determined, carrying the weight of his newfound abilities with the same careful consideration he'd once applied to hero analysis notebooks. And Aoyama Yuga, whose theatrical facade had concealed depths that even Nezu's considerable intellect hadn't fully plumbed.

Speaking of which...

The memory of that particular revelation still sent a chill through his fur. Aoyama's tearful confession before the faculty and his classmates—how All For One had approached his parents when he was just a child, how the burden of his artificial Quirk had come with strings attached that only revealed themselves years later. The boy's relief at finally unburdening himself had been palpable, but so had his terror at the consequences.

If they hadn't caught it when they did...

Nezu shook his head, dispelling the dark thoughts. They had caught it. Aoyama's courage in coming forward, combined with their ability to verify his story through increasingly unorthodox means, had potentially saved not just U.A. but the entire hero society from infiltration on an unprecedented scale.

Since then, the school's security had undergone what he privately termed "aggressive enhancement." To outside observers, it might have seemed like standard protocol updates—new identification systems, revised visitor procedures, updated surveillance networks. But the reality was far more comprehensive.

He'd quietly enlisted Jin Bubaigawara and Ectoplasm for weekly sweeps of the entire campus, their combined abilities perfect for detecting any surveillance equipment that might have been planted. The Double user's clones could access every nook and cranny while Ectoplasm's duplicates provided the methodical thoroughness needed for such a task. Week after week, they found nothing—a testament to All For One's calculated restraint in using Aoyama as his sole inside source.

Careful, Nezu mused. Always so careful. Until now.

The background checks on every staff member had been discreetly but thoroughly updated. Student records had been cross-referenced against databases that officially didn't exist. Every contractor, every delivery person, every temporary worker who set foot on school grounds was now subject to scrutiny that would have impressed intelligence agencies.

And through it all, life at U.A. continued with an almost deliberately maintained normalcy. Classes proceeded on schedule. Students complained about homework and worried about upcoming exams. Heroes-in-training pushed themselves to new limits in pursuit of their dreams, blissfully unaware that some of their classmates were wielding power that could reshape the fundamental nature of reality itself.

Nezu's mouth twitched in what might have been a smile. There was something beautifully absurd about it all—teenagers worrying about pop quizzes while cosmic forces moved around them like chess pieces on a board that spanned dimensions.

His computer chimed softly, drawing his attention to an incoming message. Another status report from the security team, another day without incident. He filed it away with the dozens of others, each one a small confirmation that their vigilance was holding.

But even as he maintained the careful balance of enhanced security and normal operations, Nezu found himself grappling with larger questions. How do you prepare students for a world that includes beings who could erase mountains with a thought? How do you maintain the illusion of normalcy when reality itself had proven to be far stranger than fiction?

One day at a time, he decided, reaching for his tea once more. One careful, calculated day at a time.

The sun continued its slow descent toward the horizon, painting his office in warm gold and amber tones. Somewhere out in the city, Class 1-A was probably enjoying their summer break after the intensity of training camp—beach trips and shopping excursions, the comfortable chaos of teenagers finally free from academic pressure. Two of them carried the weight of cosmic responsibility, while the others remained wonderfully, blissfully focused on summer fun and the anticipation of their second year at U.A.

It was a delicate balance, this new world they found themselves navigating. But if there was one thing Nezu had learned in his years as an educator, it was that young people possessed a remarkable capacity for adaptation. They would rise to meet whatever challenges awaited them, just as they always had.

Even if those challenges now included the occasional divine intervention.

He raised his teacup in a small, private toast to the complexity of it all, then finally turned his attention to the stack of thoroughly mundane administrative paperwork that still demanded his attention. After all, even in a world touched by angels and ancient powers, someone still had to make sure the cafeteria orders were properly filed.

Some things, thankfully, never changed.

The gravel crunched beneath their feet as they wandered through Central Park's winding pathways, the rhythmic sound creating a steady percussion that accompanied their leisurely afternoon stroll. Children's laughter echoed from the nearby playground while the distant hum of Manhattan traffic provided a constant urban backdrop that somehow made the park's green spaces feel even more precious.

Cathleen pulled out her phone as it buzzed with a news alert, her expression brightening as she scanned the headlines. "All Might's at it again," she said with obvious approval, holding up the screen to show footage of the Japanese hero standing amid what looked like the remains of an underground facility. "Another trafficking ring busted—Quirkless victims again. The man just doesn't quit, does he?"

She shook her head in admiration as they paused beside the Bow Bridge, watching ducks glide across the still water below. "Even at his age, he's still going strong. Most heroes his generation have either retired or moved into administrative roles, but there he is, still kicking down doors and saving lives like he's half his age."

Kaoru made a noncommittal sound of acknowledgment as he watched the water ripple around the ducks.

"You know," Cathleen continued, glancing at him sideways, "you were in Japan for three months. Did you ever run into All Might? Maybe see him at one of those medical conferences, or catch him during a hospital visit?"

Kaoru let out a dry chuckle. "With my schedule? Between the surgical rotations and conference presentations, I barely had time to sleep, let alone keep track of celebrity heroes. My world consisted of operating rooms and hotel beds, with the occasional glimpse of whatever convenience store was still open at midnight."

Cathleen's face fell into an exaggerated pout. "That's such a waste. Here I was hoping you'd have some interesting professional encounters to report back."

Despite their height difference, she easily looped her arm through his as they resumed walking, her head tilting down slightly to match his eye level during conversation. The gesture had become natural over the years they'd known each other, a small adaptation that made their physical disparity feel less awkward.

"So," she said, her tone shifting to something more serious, "how have you been feeling? Any more episodes while you were away?"

Kaoru was quiet for a moment, watching a jogger pass them on the left before responding. "They come and go. Had a few specialists in Tokyo run some tests—everything comes back normal except what they're calling 'occupational stress syndrome.' Apparently, spending twelve hours at a time holding people's lives in your hands takes a toll on the nervous system."

He rolled his shoulders, working out tension that seemed permanently embedded there. "I was careful, though. No complex procedures without a colleague monitoring, mandatory breaks between surgeries. The episodes were manageable, and I think I'm ready to get back to real work soon. Consulting pays well, but it doesn't scratch the same itch as actually fixing people."

Cathleen squeezed his arm gently. "You know you're not invincible, right? Even the best surgeon needs to pace himself."

"Being Quirkless has never stopped me from doing the impossible before," Kaoru replied with a slight smirk that carried years of proving doubters wrong. "If anything, it's made me better at finding solutions others overlook. When you can't rely on supernatural enhancement, you learn to be more creative with what you've got."

Cathleen chuckled—a genuine sound that seemed to brighten the entire afternoon around them. "There's that stubborn streak I missed. Never met a challenge you didn't think you could handle through pure determination."

They continued their leisurely pace through the park, the late afternoon sun filtering through the canopy above as New York continued its endless dance of life around them.

Later...

The glass facade of Central Park Tower stretched toward the darkening sky like a monument to human ambition, its surface reflecting the golden hour light that painted Manhattan in warm, deceptive hues. At street level, the building's entrance maintained that carefully cultivated atmosphere of understated luxury—marble floors polished to mirror perfection, subtle lighting that suggested wealth without ostentation, and the kind of quiet efficiency that money could buy.

Kaoru and Cathleen stood before the entrance, their afternoon together drawing to its inevitable close. The park across the street was still alive with joggers and dog walkers making the most of the pleasant evening, but here in the shadow of one of the city's most exclusive residential towers, everything felt hushed, almost reverent.

"Thank you for today," Cathleen said, her voice carrying that particular warmth reserved for genuine affection. "It was good to have you back. Really good."

She leaned down—even in her casual clothes, she still towered over him—and their lips met in a kiss that spoke of familiarity, comfort, and something deeper that neither of them had ever quite put into words. It wasn't passionate so much as it was complete, the kind of connection that came from years of understanding each other's rhythms and silences.

When they parted, Kaoru's expression carried a gentleness that would have surprised anyone who knew him only in professional settings. "I missed this," he admitted quietly. "More than I expected to."

"Good," she replied with a smile that could have powered half the building behind him. "That's what I like to hear. Call me when you're settled back into your routine?"

"Always do."

She squeezed his shoulder once—another of those small gestures that acknowledged their physical differences without making them awkward—then turned and walked back toward the park, her stride confident and unhurried. Kaoru watched her go for a moment, noting how even her casual departure carried that particular brand of authority that made her such a formidable hero.

Then he turned and entered the building.

The lobby's marble floors echoed softly with his footsteps as he crossed toward the elevator bank. Behind the reception desk, a young woman with perfectly styled hair and a smile that probably cost more to maintain than most people's monthly salary looked up from her computer.

"Good evening, Dr. Kino," she said with professional warmth. "Welcome home."

"Evening," he replied without breaking stride, his tone pleasant enough but carrying no invitation for further conversation. It was the voice of someone accustomed to being recognized but preferring not to engage—polite, distant, efficient.

The elevator arrived with barely a whisper, its brass doors sliding open to reveal an interior that was all understated elegance—dark wood paneling, soft lighting, and the kind of silence that spoke of serious soundproofing. Kaoru stepped inside and pressed the button for the 84th floor, then settled back against the rear wall as the doors closed with mechanical precision.

As the elevator began its smooth ascent, he caught his reflection in the polished brass of the control panel. The man looking back at him was composed, professional, every inch the successful surgeon who'd just returned from a prestigious international rotation. He adjusted his tie with practiced movements—a navy silk piece that probably cost more than some people's weekly salary—and checked his watch. A Patek Philippe, naturally, because some affectations were worth maintaining.

The numbers climbed steadily: 50, 60, 70, 80...

The elevator chimed softly as it reached the 84th floor, and the doors opened onto a private vestibule that served only two units on this level. Kaoru's was to the left, behind a door that looked deceptively simple until you noticed the subtle security features built into its frame.

He used his key card and stepped inside, immediately enveloped by the particular silence that came with high-end construction and perfect insulation. The afternoon light filtering through the floor-to-ceiling windows cast geometric patterns across the hardwood floors, but he made no move to turn on any lights. Instead, he simply stood by the door, letting it close behind him with a soft click that seemed to echo in the gathering dimness.

For a long moment, he remained perfectly still, as if allowing himself to be absorbed by the shadows that were slowly claiming the apartment. His breathing was controlled, measured, but there was something in his posture—a tension in his shoulders, a tightness around his eyes—that spoke of a man wrestling with thoughts he couldn't quite voice.

Finally, he moved.

His steps across the polished floor were silent, each footfall placed with the precision of someone accustomed to moving without being heard. The apartment opened before him—minimalist furniture arranged with mathematical precision, artwork that spoke of refined taste and considerable expense, the kind of space that appeared in architectural magazines and inspired envy in anyone fortunate enough to see it.

But he ignored it all, walking directly to the wall of windows that offered an unobstructed view of Manhattan's skyline.

The city spread out below him like a circuit board made of light and steel, millions of lives playing out their individual dramas in the gathering dusk. Central Park was a dark rectangle of green surrounded by the endless grid of streets and buildings that stretched to every horizon. From this height, it all looked so orderly, so manageable—a perfect example of human achievement and organization.

Kaoru placed one hand against the glass, his fingers spread wide as he stared out at the view that real estate agents probably described as "breathtaking" and "once-in-a-lifetime."

And felt nothing but disgust.

Not at the city itself—Manhattan was what it was, neither good nor evil, simply the sum of millions of human choices played out across concrete and steel. No, the revulsion that washed over him came from somewhere deeper, something that had been building during his months away and had finally crystallized in this moment of perfect, expensive solitude.

His reflection stared back at him from the window, superimposed over the glittering cityscape like a ghost haunting his own life. Dr. Kaoru Kino, successful surgeon, respected professional, the kind of man who inspired confidence in patients and colleagues alike. A man who saved lives with his hands and his intellect, who had built a career on precision and dedication.

A man who was living a lie so complete, so fundamental, that even he had almost forgotten what lay beneath it.

The disgust deepened, not at what he saw outside, but at what he knew existed within—the carefully constructed facade that allowed him to move through this world of healing and heroism while carrying the weight of what he truly was. What he had always been, beneath the medical degrees and professional accolades and the comfortable fiction of being just another Quirkless individual making his way in a world of the extraordinary.

He closed his eyes, pressing his forehead against the cool glass, and for just a moment allowed himself to feel the full weight of the performance he'd been maintaining for so long that it had become second nature.

Outside, the city continued its eternal dance of light and motion, oblivious to the man standing in his expensive cage, struggling with truths that no amount of success or professional achievement could ever quite silence.

The darkness was gathering now, both outside the windows and within the apartment itself. Soon, he would need to make decisions about what came next. But for now, he simply stood there in the growing shadows, a figure of carefully maintained composure wrestling with the fundamental question of what it meant to be human in a world where humanity itself was just another role to be played.