The massive, polished gates of U.A. High loomed before Izuku, their familiar silhouette stark against the crisp morning air. A few months ago, standing on this very spot at the beginning of the first semester, his heart had been a chaotic symphony of fear and fervent hope, a single, all-consuming question burning in his mind: Could I really do this? Now, as he contemplated the start of the second semester, that question had long since faded, replaced by a new, more somber one: How much longer can we do this?

So much had changed. The boy who once trembled at the thought of a Quirk-filled world now carried the weight of a secret so profound it possessed the power to reshape that world entirely. The quiet, shy student had become a symbol of strength and resolve, a leader among his peers. The school itself, once a bastion of impenetrable security, had been breached—its halls now silent witnesses to battles that had shaken not just U.A., but the entire nation.

A gentle hand on his shoulder pulled him from his thoughts. "Izuku!" Uraraka Ochako's bright, genuine smile cut through the swirling vortex of his reflections like a beacon of warmth. "Iida and I were just looking for you! Ready for the second semester?"

Izuku's own smile felt more genuine than it had in days. "Uraraka! Iida!" he said, turning to face his two best friends. Iida Tenya, as always, stood ramrod straight, his posture impeccable despite the easy grin on his face.

"Good morning, Midoriya," Iida said, bowing his head slightly. "We are indeed ready. It feels strange, does it not? To be returning after such an... eventful winter break."

"Strange is one way to put it," Uraraka said with a light laugh, though her eyes held a deeper, more serious quality. "It feels like we've lived a lifetime since the first semester ended."

"I know what you mean," Izuku agreed, his gaze falling back on the imposing U.A. building. "But I don't think things are going to get any easier."

A flicker of shadow crossed Iida's face, and he nodded reluctantly. "You are likely correct. The world is changing, and we must be ready to change with it. But... I have some wonderful news. Something to lift our spirits." He paused, a different, more heartfelt kind of smile replacing the previous one. "My brother, Tensei... he's been doing incredibly well in his therapy. The doctors are very optimistic about his progress."

Ochako's eyes widened with joy. "Oh, Iida, that's amazing! I'm so happy for him!"

"Yeah, that's incredible news!" Izuku exclaimed, his own heart feeling a little lighter. "Please tell him congratulations from both of us. That must be such a relief for you."

Iida nodded, his hands clasped together in front of him. "It is. It will mean a great deal to him to know he has your support. We're even starting to hope... well, there may be a chance he can return to hero work someday. Nothing too strenuous, of course, but invaluable work in rescue operations and related missions."

The possibility hung in the air like a small but powerful spark of hope in a world that often felt dark and uncertain. With a shared glance, the three of them began walking toward the school, their footsteps echoing the quiet, determined promise of a new semester—a semester that, for all its potential dangers, was already starting with a victory.

The classroom was unusually quiet, a stark contrast to the lively conversations that usually filled its space before class began. Izuku, Iida, and Ochako slid into their seats, nodding to Yaoyorozu and Shoji, who were already there.

"Good morning, everyone," Yaoyorozu said warmly, a small, polite smile gracing her features. "I hope you all had a restful break."

"You too, Yaoyorozu!" Ochako replied, setting her bag down. "It's so good to be back! Well, mostly good, anyway. The villain attacks over the break were... a lot."

Shoji's deep voice rumbled in agreement. "A lot is an understatement. I'm glad we're all back safely."

The small talk faded as the classroom door slid open. The students, expecting to see their homeroom teacher, Aizawa, fell silent. But it wasn't the tired, black-clad hero who stood in the doorway. Instead, a short, wizened old man with a bushy white beard and dark goggles over his eyes hobbled into the room, leaning heavily on a cane. He wore a yellow cape over his simple white and yellow suit, walking slowly to the front of the class, his piercing gaze sweeping over the students like a searchlight.

"Alright, alright, settle down," he rasped, his voice a surprising mixture of age and authority. "You brats listening now? Excellent, because as of this day, for this wonderfully fresh second semester you've all been blessed with—when logic should have dictated otherwise—I'm going to be your homeroom teacher."

A murmur of confusion spread through the room like ripples on water. "New homeroom teacher?" a student whispered. "Where's Aizawa-sensei?"

Before anyone else could speak, Izuku's voice cut through the noise, filled with a familiar mixture of surprise and apprehension. "Gran Torino...?"

The old hero, Sorahiko, stopped in front of the teacher's desk and turned his gaze directly to Izuku. A small, knowing smile tugged at the corner of his lips. "Been working on your respect for the elderly, have you, boy? Good. You're going to need it."

The rest of the class looked on in baffled silence, until a few of them, quickly searching on their phones, gasped as they found their answers. The old man was not just any old man. He was Sorahiko, Gran Torino—a legend in his own right, one of Japan's most prominent veteran heroes, whose speed and skill were the stuff of heroic lore.

"Now listen up!" Gran Torino's voice, though raspy, cut through the quiet like a whip crack. "I know some of you are feeling pretty good about yourselves. You took down some real villains. You stared death in the face and walked away. You think you're hot stuff, don't ya? Well, let me tell you something."

His gaze, sharp and penetrating, swept across the class, and a cold wave of realization washed over them. This wasn't a hero there to praise them. This was a man who had seen it all, and who saw right through them.

"You're not hot stuff," he continued, the words landing like physical blows. "You're a bunch of wet-behind-the-ears pups who got lucky. The real world isn't a training camp. You're going to face things that will make you wet yourselves and empty your stomachs. And my job is to make sure you do it here, in this school, where you'll be safe, before you have to do it out there, where you're not."

A wave of disgusted murmurs rippled through the class. Kirishima, ever the earnest one, looked physically ill. Bakugo scoffed, but even he fell silent under the weight of the old man's stare. This was a different kind of training. This was a different kind of teacher.

Two weeks earlier...

The U.A. faculty conference room had been a place of quiet contemplation, not explosive pronouncements. Sorahiko, leaning on his cane, had been ushered in by a member of the staff. He had an appointment with Principal Nezu. The old hero, retired for years, felt the familiar pull of this place—the memory of battles fought and students mentored echoing in the quiet halls. He'd come to ask for a teaching position.

Nezu, perched behind his desk with a cup of tea, greeted him with a knowing smile.

"Sorahiko-san! To what do we owe the pleasure of this visit? I was under the impression that you were enjoying a well-earned retirement."

Sorahiko grunted, taking a seat. "I was. But recent events have... inspired me. Made me think that maybe there's still a fire in this old dog's belly after all."

Nezu's smile widened. He took a delicate sip of his tea. "I see. And what might these 'recent events' be?"

The old hero fixed Nezu with a look that was part annoyance, part grudging respect. He knew Nezu was playing a game with him, testing him. "Don't play coy, you damn rat. You know exactly what I'm talking about. The whole 'angels and Agito' nonsense."

Nezu let out a soft chuckle. "Ah, so the rumors have reached even your ears. And I suppose you came to see if they were true?"

Sorahiko leaned forward, his voice dropping to a serious tone. "I'm not an idiot. When I heard that Toshinori's old injury was gone, I thought maybe he just got the best damn doctor in the world to finally perform some miracle surgery. But... I can't shake the feeling. I can't dismiss the possibility that it was a real miracle that healed him. That all this hullabaloo is real."

Nezu's smile vanished, replaced by an expression of profound seriousness. "You would be right to entertain that possibility, my old friend. The truth is, Toshinori was cured over a year ago. By one of those 'angels,' as you put it. He also happens to be our school janitor—Kagutsuchi."

Sorahiko's eyes widened in genuine shock, and he slammed his fist on the arm of his chair. "You fool! You let one of those bastards into the school? The one that caused all this madness in the first place? Have you lost your mind?!"

"Rest assured, Sorahiko-san, we are far from foolish enough to fully trust him," Nezu said, his voice calm and even. "However, Kagutsuchi has done nothing but be an asset to U.A. And even if his methods aren't always straightforward, they at least cut to the heart of the problem whenever one presents itself. The first semester... it was an ordeal. We had a student, Midoriya, who was struggling with the Agito's power—a power he was born with. Then, another student, Aoyama, was exposed as a traitor. He was also a natural Agito, but Kagutsuchi had intervened by taking away his Navel Laser Quirk as atonement for his treason. Because of these events, Class 1-A was forced to endure a trial that pushed them to their limits and beyond."

Nezu went on to explain the details—the fight with Graviel, Aoyama's redemption, and how the students had, through it all, grown into a unit of true heroes. When he was finished, Sorahiko just sat there, silent, processing the impossible information.

Finally, he spoke, a hint of weariness in his voice. "So you're saying... with everything these kids have been through, with all the power they have access to... you don't need me. The students don't need another old mentor to teach them to be heroes."

Nezu waved a paw dismissively. "Nonsense, Sorahiko. You are an invaluable source of knowledge and experience. Your addition to our faculty is most welcome. And besides," he added, a glint returning to his eyes, "there's still the small matter of those 'angels' you were so concerned about. Having you here... is the perfect way to keep an eye on them. A mutual benefit, wouldn't you say?"

Sorahiko scoffed, a dry, humorless sound. "Keep an eye on them? What in blazes am I supposed to do if this Kagutsuchi fellow really is divine? Throw my cane at him?"

Nezu took another slow sip of his tea, his gaze never leaving Sorahiko's. He didn't deny the premise. "Divine or not, Sorahiko-san, there is always strength in numbers. You are not a human who faces the divine alone; you are an experienced hero, and a powerful mind. With the rest of us, you are part of a collective—a collective that is already well-acquainted with this man."

The old hero let out another puff of air, but the fight had gone out of his voice. "Fine. But I can't just walk in there blind. I need more information, Nezu, if I am to consider my options properly. I need an idea of what we're dealing with."

"I would be more than happy to oblige," Nezu said, setting his teacup down with a soft click. He turned and activated a large monitor on the wall, bringing up a secure video file. The screen flickered to life, showing a familiar figure in his prime—All Might, in his muscled form, standing in a large, open training area. He was facing a man in a simple black suit, the fellow resembling more a salaryman than some honest-to-goodness angel. The footage was accompanied by an audio recording, and Sorahiko's ears perked up, grim fascination etched on his weathered face.

He watched in silent, horrified fascination as the fight unfolded. The raw, unbridled power of his former student was on full display—punches that shattered the ground, bursts of speed that blurred his form, a ferocity that had made him the Symbol of Peace. And yet, the man in the black suit moved with an effortless grace, deflecting every blow with a simple flick of his wrist, dodging every attack with a step or two to the side. Toshinori, the one Sorahiko had trained from the ground up, the one who had become the greatest hero of his generation, was being manhandled. He was a greenhorn again, a novice who had no chance against a master.

The video ended with All Might, bruised and badly beaten, being dropped to the ground like a discarded doll. Kagutsuchi was smiling, entirely unscathed. The screen went black, leaving the two men in the quiet conference room with nothing but the low hum of the projector.

Sorahiko just sat there, the air heavy with his silent contemplation, his eyes fixed on the blank screen. The bluster, the anger, the outrage—it was all gone, replaced by a profound, chilling quiet. He had witnessed the impossible, and the reality of it was a weight that settled deep in his bones. The greatest hero he had ever known, his greatest achievement, had been humbled, almost effortlessly, by a being of unknown origin. And that being was a janitor at U.A.

He finally looked at Nezu, his eyes filled with a weary, knowing look. "Alright, you damn rat," he said, the words barely a whisper. "You have my attention. Now what's next?"

The U.A. faculty room, a space that had been home to decades of strategic planning and weary sighs, now had a new occupant. Sorahiko, the legendary Gran Torino, sat hunched over a stack of forms at what had once been his own desk, the familiar oak a comfort he hadn't realized he'd missed. His first day with Class 1-A had been... intense. The students were a chaotic mixture of raw power and youthful exuberance, and his introductory speech had been met with a combination of fear, defiance, and quiet, grudging respect. It felt good to be back, even if it meant dealing with the utter nonsense that was modern hero society.

The quiet was a welcome reprieve, broken only by the scratching of his pen and the rhythmic, almost meditative hum of Aizawa's sleeping bag in the corner. The man was a creature of habit, it seemed, and Sorahiko could appreciate that. He finished signing a form and leaned back, stretching his tired muscles.

Just then, the sliding door to the faculty room was pushed open with a theatrical flourish. "Hey, hey! I'm back!" Nemuri Kayama, the pro hero Midnight, strode in, a whirlwind of energy that seemed to blow the dust off the entire room. She was dressed in her teacher's suit, but it seemed to fit her with a new kind of confidence. A noticeable tan gave her a radiant, healthy glow, and her smile was wider and more genuine than Sorahiko had ever seen it.

From the depths of his sleeping bag, a single, muffled groan emerged. "Oh, here we go," Aizawa mumbled, his voice thick with a mixture of resignation and amusement.

Nemuri, oblivious to her coworker's sarcasm, dangled a couple of shopping bags in one hand. "I come bearing gifts! Souvenirs, really. You won't believe the places I've been over winter break. You absolutely won't believe the stories I have!"

Hizashi, the ever-enthusiastic Present Mic, seemed to materialize from his own desk, his bright blond hair a beacon of excitement. "Whaaat?! Nemuri-chan, you went on a trip during the break and you didn't tell me?! Spill! Where'd you go?! Who'd you go with?!"

Anan, the pro hero Thirteen, floated gently over to join him, her voice a gentle, curious sound. "It's wonderful to have you back, Nemuri-sensei. You look incredibly well-rested."

Sorahiko watched the exchange with a bewildered frown, his eyes flicking from Nemuri's vibrant demeanor to the bags she was dangling. He finally turned his gaze to the lump in the corner. "What's gotten into her?" he rasped to Aizawa. "She looks like she's glowing."

Aizawa's head shifted slightly inside the yellow cocoon, a single, tired eye-roll audible in his voice. "You're better off asking her yourself, sir."

Nemuri, finally catching his eye, froze. Her wide smile faltered as she stared at the man behind the desk. "S-Sorahiko-sensei?" she stammered, the mischievous glint in her eyes replaced by genuine shock. "Is that... is that really you?" She took a tentative step toward him, the bags in her hand forgotten.

Sorahiko grunted, the corner of his mouth twitching into a slight, amused smile. "Last time I checked, it was. Good to see you again, Nemuri. It's been what, twenty years? You're looking well."

Nemuri waved a dismissive hand. "Please, it hasn't been that long. You know how time flies. But... what are you doing here?" she asked, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper, a hint of her usual playful persona returning. "Did Nezu finally reel you back in?"

Sorahiko let out a dry chuckle. "You should have a good idea of why I'm here. Especially with how much time you've been spending with that man."

A look of understanding dawned in Nemuri's eyes, and her smile softened into something more respectful. She set her bags down and bowed at a polite angle, a gesture that was both sincere and surprising. "Welcome back to U.A., Sorahiko-sensei. With you here, it feels like my early years all over again. A nice, nostalgic kind of terrifying."

"Bah! You've all survived worse," Sorahiko replied gruffly, waving a hand dismissively. "I sure as hell made sure of that." He swept his eyes over the rest of the faculty for emphasis, causing Hizashi to scratch the back of his head and Anan to turn away timidly. With a sigh, he looked back at Nemuri, his expression softening slightly, a hint of genuine concern in his weathered features. "So... you're really seeing that Kagutsuchi fellow I've been hearing so much about?"

Nemuri's smile became a gentle, tender thing. "Yes," she answered softly. "We're dating."

Sorahiko let out a heavy sigh, the sound more paternal than a simple expression of annoyance. He stared at Nemuri with a mixture of happiness and profound worry. "I'm glad you've found someone, kid, truly. But... him?" Sorahiko's tone was heavy with caution and concern. "He's an... overly complicated man from what I've been hearing. A man who has brought chaos and miracles in equal measure. I mean no offense by this, my dear, but I reckon you deserve better than to get yourself tangled up in all that."

Nemuri's voice was gentle but firm, a steady counterpoint to his gruff concern. "I understand, Sorahiko-sensei. You don't have to trust him, and he wouldn't expect that of anyone."

Hizashi snorted. "Trust him? It's not a matter of expecting people to trust him, so much as him not giving a damn if they do or don't!"

Nemuri, with a playful glare, slammed a fist on his head. "Hizashi, hush! He's still a good man," she said, before turning back to Sorahiko. "Just... not the kind that most people would consider simple."

Sorahiko stared at her, his piercing gaze reading into her demeanor, searching for any hint of deceit or manipulation. He found none. Just pure, unadulterated sincerity. "He must be something real special, then," he finally said, his tone a mixture of surprise and grudging respect.

Nemuri's eyes, which had been fixed on Sorahiko, blinked once, then a genuine smile of affection bloomed across her face. "He is," she said with a nod, the gleam in her eyes an open book of her feelings.

The hallway stretched before them like a gleaming expanse of possibility, freshly mopped and still damp from their meticulous work. The afternoon sun streamed through the tall windows, casting geometric patterns of light across the polished floor. Kagutsuchi moved his mop in steady, practiced strokes, the rhythm almost meditative, while Jin worked beside him with equal precision—though his movements carried a nervous energy that never quite seemed to settle.

The silence between them was comfortable, broken only by the soft swish of mops against tile and the distant sounds of students in other parts of the building. Jin glanced sideways at his colleague, noting the subtle tan that hadn't been there before their winter break, and the relaxed set to Kagutsuchi's shoulders that suggested genuine rest.

"So," Jin began, wringing out his mop with perhaps more force than necessary, "how was your winter break? You look like you actually got some sun for once."

Kagutsuchi's lips quirked into a small smile as he dipped his mop in the bucket. "Went on a luxury cruise with Nemuri. Nothing special." The casual way he delivered the statement, as if discussing the weather, made Jin pause mid-motion.

"Nothing special?" Jin scoffed, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "Oh yeah, absolutely mundane. Just casually sailing the high seas on a floating palace with your gorgeous girlfriend. How incredibly boring for you."

Kagutsuchi snorted, a sound of genuine amusement. "Your point being?"

"My point is—" Jin gestured wildly with his mop, sending a few droplets flying, "—that you're either the most understated man alive or completely oblivious to how good you have it."

"Probably both," Kagutsuchi replied with a shrug, then fixed Jin with that piercing gaze that seemed to see straight through people. His smile took on a knowing quality. "Speaking of breaks... what were you up to during the winter break? Anything equally 'not special'?"

Jin's grip tightened on the mop handle, and he suddenly found the floor tiles fascinating. "Oh, you know, the usual," he said, his voice pitched slightly higher than normal. "Lazing about when I wasn't doing odd jobs around my apartment. Caught up on some reading. Very exciting stuff."

But Kagutsuchi's scrutinizing stare never wavered, and that knowing smile only grew wider. The weight of that gaze was like a gentle but insistent pressure, and Jin felt his resolve crumbling under it.

"Okay, okay!" Jin threw his free hand up in surrender, his cheeks flushing pink. "Fine! I... I went on a few dates too. Happy now?"

Kagutsuchi's expression shifted to one of genuine amusement, his eyes twinkling with mirth. "I already know who the lucky girl is," he said, leaning casually on his mop handle. "But I want to hear it straight from you."

Jin's blush deepened, and he rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. "It's... it's Emi. Ms. Joke. We met back at the Sports Festival, and she... well, she asked me out for coffee afterward." A small, genuine smile tugged at his lips despite his embarrassment. "Turns out we have more in common than just bad jokes. We've been texting and video chatting throughout the break."

"Congratulations," Kagutsuchi said, and the simple sincerity in his voice made Jin look up in surprise. There was no teasing, no mockery—just honest warmth.

They resumed their mopping in comfortable silence for a few minutes, the rhythm of their work synchronizing naturally. The hallway was nearly finished, gleaming under the afternoon light, when Jin suddenly stopped. He stood there, mop in hand, staring down at his reflection in the wet floor.

"Kagutsuchi," he said quietly, his voice carrying a vulnerability that was rare for him. "I... I wanted to thank you. For finding me. For helping me get my life back together. I know I was... I was pretty messed up when you first approached me."

Kagutsuchi paused in his own work, turning to face Jin fully. His expression was gentle, understanding. "You did most of the work yourself, Jin. I just gave you the helping hand you needed to get the head start."

"Still," Jin insisted, meeting his eyes. "I don't know where I'd be without that chance you gave me. Probably still talking to myself in some dingy apartment, driving myself crazy with my own thoughts."

"But you're not," Kagutsuchi said simply. "You're here, you're stable, you're building something good with someone who cares about you. That's all your doing."

Jin nodded, unable to speak for a moment as emotion threatened to overwhelm him. Instead, he returned to his mopping with renewed vigor, channeling his feelings into the simple, honest work.

They were just finishing up, preparing to move to the next hallway, when the sound of footsteps echoed from around the corner. A female student appeared—one of the third-years, judging by her bearing—walking quickly while engrossed in her phone. She didn't notice the wet floor warning signs they'd placed, and her foot hit the still-damp tiles at exactly the wrong angle.

Jin moved without thinking, his reflexes sharp from his hero training days. He dropped his mop and lunged forward, catching the girl's arm just as she began to slip, steadying her with practiced ease.

"Whoa there," he said with a gentle smile, helping her regain her balance. "Floor's still wet. Sorry about that—we should have put up more signs."

The girl looked up, startled, then smiled gratefully. "Oh my gosh, thank you! I wasn't paying attention at all." She glanced down at Jin's maintenance uniform, then back at his face. "You probably saved me from a very embarrassing fall."

"Just doing my job," Jin replied, his tone warm but professional. "Watch your step on the way back—we haven't finished this section yet."

"I will, thank you again!" The girl waved as she continued on her way, now carefully avoiding the wet spots.

Jin bent to retrieve his mop, feeling pleased with the simple interaction, when he noticed Kagutsuchi watching him with an unreadable expression. There was something in his colleague's gaze—a intensity that seemed to linger on the corner where the student had disappeared, as if he were analyzing something Jin couldn't see.

"Everything alright?" Jin asked, following Kagutsuchi's line of sight.

Kagutsuchi blinked, seeming to return to himself, and his expression shifted back to its usual calm neutrality. "Of course," he said, picking up his bucket. "Just thinking. Should we finish this hallway before the next class change?"

Jin nodded, though he couldn't shake the feeling that he'd missed something important in that moment. Still, he fell back into step beside Kagutsuchi as they resumed their work, the comfortable rhythm of their partnership restored.

The air in the U.A. Development Studio was a fragrant mixture of ozone, solder smoke, and triumph. Izuku Midoriya stepped inside, his eyes widening at the controlled chaos around him. Workbenches overflowed with blueprints, half-finished support items, and a dizzying array of tools. Holographic displays flickered with schematics, and the low hum of machinery created a constant, industrious soundtrack. He had been called here by Melissa Shield, and a brief message had only told him that she had something important to show him—something they had to show him in person.

"Izuku-kun!" Melissa's voice was bright and cheerful, cutting through the noise. She was wearing her usual workshop uniform, her brow smudged with what looked like grease, and she greeted him with a warm smile. "Thanks for coming! I know you're probably still adjusting to the new semester, but this couldn't wait."

"Of course, Melissa-san!" Izuku replied, his gaze still darting around the room, taking in every detail. "It's... amazing in here."

Melissa chuckled, a sound of pure satisfaction. "It's our little home away from home. I was just about to show you what we've been working on over the break, but I wanted to give you a quick tour first." She gestured with a practiced sweep of her arm. "This is where we do most of our prototyping. Over there is the 3D printing bay, and the testing range is through that door. We've got a lot of exciting things in the pipeline. New gauntlets for Kirishima, some upgrades for Iida's boots... you name it."

Just as Izuku was about to ask a question, a blur of pink hair and goggles shot past him, a streak of manic energy.

"Melissa! Melissa! He's here! He's really here!" Mei Hatsume declared, skidding to a halt with an impressive puff of dust. Her golden eyes, magnified by her goggles, were fixed on Izuku with an intensity that made him instinctively take a step back. "You didn't tell me you called him here! He's the perfect test subject for my new babies!"

Before Melissa could protest, Mei had Izuku by the arm, her grip surprisingly strong, and was dragging him away. "Sorry, Melissa-chan! Izuku's needed for real work now! Come on, come on, come on!"

Mei pulled him through a maze of equipment, past a machine that was sparking dangerously, and into a secluded corner of the lab. There, under a tarp, sat a large, intricate device. It looked less like a machine and more like a work of abstract art—an almost-finished suit of armor, crafted from a strange, silvery-green metal that shimmered with an inner light.

"Ta-da!" Mei exclaimed, ripping the tarp off with a flourish. "This, my friend, is my magnum opus! Project G-1!"

Izuku stared, his analytical mind trying to process the complex design. "What... what is it?" he asked, his voice barely audible.

"It's a replication of your Agito armor!" Mei explained, practically vibrating with excitement. "Melissa and I noticed the incredible properties of your armor, and we've been working tirelessly over the break to understand its structure, its functions, everything! This prototype, my glorious baby, is our first step toward recreating it! We think we can eventually produce this for others! Imagine the possibilities! Agito armor for heroes! The sheer beauty of the design! It's a game-changer, Izuku! A beautiful, glorious baby that will change everything! What do you think?!"

Izuku could only stand there, speechless. His eyes moved from the suit of armor, to Mei's excited face, and then to Melissa, who had finally caught up and was watching them with a mixture of exhaustion and pride. The implications of Mei's "baby" were staggering. This wasn't just a support item. They were attempting to manufacture a power that was born from an ancient, divine entity—and he was the template for it all.

His mind was a whirlwind of awe and apprehension. He stared back up at the prototype, this incredible, impossible work of engineering that so closely resembled the power he wielded. His hand, as if acting on its own, slowly lifted, a hesitant tremor running through his fingers. He wanted to touch it, to feel the difference between his organic armor and this meticulously crafted mechanical copy. He wanted to understand.

He glanced at Mei, a silent question in his emerald eyes. She seemed to understand his request instantly. A wide, encouraging smile spread across her face, and she gave him a single, enthusiastic nod.

Taking a deep breath, Izuku's fingertips made contact with the metallic surface. It was cool and smooth under his touch, utterly solid. He traced the lines of the incomplete chest plate, the intricate conduits that mirrored the veins of his own armor, but here they were just wires and complex circuits. The resemblance was uncanny, but it was also a stark reminder of the fundamental difference: this was a machine, a tool, a man-made creation. His was an ancient, unknowable power.

He turned his head to look at both of them, his expression a mixture of wonder and newfound analytical curiosity. "What... what exactly could this be used for? I mean, besides physical enhancement."

Melissa stepped forward, a thoughtful expression on her face. "Well, that's where the real ambition comes in. The physical enhancement is a given, but our primary focus is on adaptability and survivability. We believe with the right materials and reinforcements, we could make a suit that's impervious to extreme conditions. We're talking about protection from things like high-temperature environments, deep-sea pressures, or even the vacuum of space, all while maintaining the wearer's full mobility."

"Exactly!" Mei jumped in, her hands gesturing wildly as she warmed to her favorite topic. "Think about it! Rescuing people from an erupting volcano! Diving to the deepest ocean trench to save a stranded submarine crew! Or even just giving heroes a full, sealed suit for gas attacks and chemical spills without worrying about their Quirk interfering with a traditional suit! The possibilities are endless! This isn't just about fighting villains, Izuku! It's about fighting the impossible! A revolutionary rescue support item that could change the very face of hero work!"

Izuku stared at the unfinished Project G-1, listening to the passionate explanations. He had always seen his Agito power as a tool for combat, a means to an end. But Mei and Melissa, in their boundless ingenuity, had found a way to reframe it, to see its potential for something else entirely: a symbol of hope, not just for the battlefields of a hero's life, but for every impossible situation where rescue was needed.

"Is it... is it wearable now?" Izuku asked, his voice low with a hint of genuine excitement. "Could a hero use it?"

Mei's eyes lit up. "Of course it's wearable! We can put it on you right now, in fact! To help me gather some preliminary data and—"

"Mei!" Melissa cut in, a nervous tremor in her voice as she gently grabbed Mei's arm. "It's still in the trial phase. We haven't even run the preliminary tests yet. Putting a human being in there might do more harm than good."

Izuku's face fell slightly, but he nodded in understanding. "Right. Of course. That makes sense. I'm sorry for getting carried away, Hatsume-san. Just... good luck with the project. It's really incredible."

Just then, the lab door slid open, and Power Loader walked in, carrying a fresh mug of coffee. He stopped, taking in the scene with a wry look on his weathered face. "I see you've gotten acquainted with Hatsume's little pet project, Midoriya. Unsurprisingly, really. You were the spark needed to light the fire for it."

Izuku chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck in awkward modesty. "I don't know if I can really be called that."

"Oh, you absolutely can!" Mei declared, her enthusiasm unbridled once more. "I got one good look at your armor when you first debuted it at the Sports Festival, and I just had to work on it! My first idea was to abduct you and run some tests on how the armor worked, but since Power Loader-sensei was insistent that I couldn't do that, I decided to settle for the next best thing and make my own!"

A profound, speechless silence descended upon the room. Izuku's mouth hung slightly open, his eyes wide. Beside him, Melissa stared at Mei, a similar look of dawning horror and confusion on her face. Both of them blinked twice in unison before turning their gaze to Power Loader.

The pro hero took a long, slow sip of his coffee. "Yeah," he said, his voice flat. "You're welcome, kid."

The afternoon sun, now a brilliant disc of gold, cast long shadows across U.A. High School's manicured courtyard. Izuku Midoriya walked slowly, his mind still buzzing from the impossible conversation in Mei Hatsume's lab. He passed a few classmates—Iida and Uraraka were in animated discussion near a bench, while Bakugo and Kirishima were sparring good-naturedly a short distance away—but he barely registered their presence. He felt a hundred different emotions at once: awe at the ingenuity of Mei and Melissa, relief that he hadn't been abducted for science, and a deep, gnawing weight of a secret that was getting bigger and heavier with every passing day. He found a quiet spot under a large cherry blossom tree and sank onto the grass, pulling his knees to his chest and staring at nothing in particular, just letting his thoughts swirl.

He was completely unaware that he was being watched.

High above, from the third-story window of a classroom, Itsuka Kendo, Yui Kodai, and Ibara Shiozaki watched him. Their expressions were a mixture of grim determination and weary confusion. They had been discreetly keeping tabs on Izuku and Aoyama all semester, ever since their startling discovery at Dagobah Beach during the first semester. The memory of the two boys fighting monstrous, otherworldly creatures in what could only be described as divine armor was seared into their minds, a reality that refused to be dismissed.

"There he is," Kendo murmured, her voice low and serious. "He's alone now."

"We're going to tail him after school," she continued, a glint of resolve in her eyes. "This is our chance to get a closer look at what's going on."

Yui's head tilted slightly, her usual stoic demeanor faltering with a hint of apprehension. "We could just maintain our observation at school in a safe manner," she stated flatly, her voice barely a whisper. "Following him... that's all kinds of weird, Kendo."

"It's not weird, it's practice," Kendo countered, her tone firm. "When we're pros, we'll have to perform surveillance. This is a perfect opportunity to hone our investigative skills."

Ibara, her expression serene but intense, didn't object. "I am not against it. If our schoolmates are truly straying from the righteous path, then it is our duty to ascertain the truth. I will not have my classmates led astray by forces they do not understand."

Kendo's face broke into a decisive grin. She slammed a fist into her palm with a quiet thud. "Okay, we've got a plan! But we have to be inconspicuous. We'll depart separately after the last bell rings and rendezvous at the train station. I'll keep tabs on him from a distance to make sure we don't lose him."

Yui and Ibara gave her solemn nods, their shared look conveying a silent mixture of resignation and bewilderment.

"Alright," Kendo said with finality. "Operation Mosshead is a go."

Yui and Ibara exchanged an even more puzzled look this time.

Kendo caught their expressions and sighed. "What? It was the best name I could come up with on short notice."

Izuku sat hunched on the grass beneath the sprawling branches of a cherry tree, his notebook open on his lap. He wasn't sketching heroes or analyzing Quirks today, but rather meticulously detailing his own progress. He had dedicated an entire page to a series of diagrams and notes on how he could improve his efficiency with his Agito forms—a sort of strategic blueprint for his own evolution. He was so engrossed in his thoughts that he didn't notice the approaching footsteps until a shadow fell over his notebook.

He looked up to see Kagutsuchi standing there, a can of lemon-lime soda in his hand, a small, knowing smile on his face. The caretaker's uniform was pristine as always, the embodiment of mundane normalcy that had become a welcome sight in Izuku's increasingly extraordinary life.

"How's the second semester treating you so far, Midoriya?" Kagutsuchi asked, taking a long drink from his can.

"It's been... fine," Izuku replied with a weary sigh, pushing his glasses up his nose. "Other than Gran Torino being our new homeroom teacher, it's been pretty peaceful."

Kagutsuchi hummed, his smile never fading. "He's an interesting choice, that one. Full of conviction. He'll keep you on your toes." He took another swig, his eyes glinting with mischief as he looked out over the courtyard. "You should be extra careful this semester, though. As you know, things are going to escalate from now on, especially since we've been observing All For One's growing interest in you."

Izuku groaned, closing his notebook with a soft thud. "I shouldn't be surprised, should I?"

There was a moment of comfortable silence between them, the kind that only exists when two people are carrying the same impossible burden. Izuku's analytical mind, however, was already working on a new, very different kind of puzzle. He ran a hand through his unruly green hair.

"Kagutsuchi-san..." he started, his voice a low grumble. "I have to ask. Tomura, or Tenko, is my cousin from my mother's side, right? And, since All For One's been raising him all this time, shouldn't that technically make him my adoptive uncle?"

Kagutsuchi just grinned, taking a final, loud slurp from his soda can before crushing it in his hand. "What do you think?"

Izuku let his head fall back against the tree trunk, a deep sigh escaping his lips. "Great. The classic evil uncle. All that's missing is the secret inheritance and a dramatic reveal."

"It's rarely so simple, Midoriya," Kagutsuchi said, his voice dropping to a more serious tone. He tossed the crushed can into a nearby recycling bin with a practiced flick of his wrist. "The lines between hero and villain, between family and foe, are not as clear-cut as a storybook. Your connection to him isn't just a dramatic reveal; it's a profound, fundamental truth about the nature of this conflict. This isn't just about good versus evil. It's about two sides of the same coin, two paths born from the same lineage, now set to clash."

Izuku stared at the sky, the dappled sunlight playing on his face. He felt the full weight of the words, the idea that his fight was not just for the world, but for a twisted, broken family member. It was a new kind of pressure, one that settled deep in his bones.

"So... it's not a joke," Izuku murmured, more to himself than to Kagutsuchi. "It's real."

"It's very real," Kagutsuchi affirmed, his expression solemn. He began to walk away, his steps quiet and unhurried. "But don't lose your sense of humor about it all. You're going to need it."

Izuku watched him go, a profound sense of isolation settling over him. He was no longer just a hero-in-training with an incredible power. He was a piece of a legacy he never asked for, a player in a game that had been going on long before he was even born. He was a son, a student, and a cousin to a villain. And the semester had only just begun.

The last bell rang, its chime a jarring intrusion into the quiet contemplation of the classroom. Izuku, lost in thought, was slow to pack his bag, allowing the rest of the students to file out. He took his time, walking the familiar route out of the school gates and toward the train station, a heavy sense of purpose in his stride. He was completely unaware that a pair of amber eyes, belonging to Itsuka Kendo, was watching his every move from across the bustling street, a notebook and pen clutched in her hand.

The train station was a kaleidoscope of rushing colors and hurried footsteps. Kendo, her gaze locked on Izuku, moved with practiced ease through the crowds, her phone in hand as she messaged her team. He moved through the turnstiles and onto a train, disappearing into one of the cars. Kendo, after a moment's hesitation, bought her own ticket and boarded the next car—a separate compartment that would allow her to keep a discreet watch without being seen. As the train pulled away, she saw a blur of green and white join the train at the last possible second—Yui and Ibara, who had apparently made it in time, having boarded a different car just as planned.

The train ride was a blur of motion and noise. Izuku, lost in his thoughts, never once noticed the three girls. When the train stopped at his station, he stepped out and began walking down the familiar streets, the rhythmic motion of his feet a soothing contrast to the whirlwind in his mind. A short distance behind him, the three girls trailed him, their footsteps light and quiet.

Yui, her hand resting on her chin in a thoughtful gesture, leaned closer to Kendo. "Nothing is happening," she whispered. "This seems... pointless. We can't follow him straight to his house, can we?"

Kendo sighed, her gaze fixed on the back of Izuku's head. "I know, Yui. We're not going to be able to follow him all evening. This is just the start. The rest of the semester is going to be our canvas for investigation. We can't be discouraged just yet."

Ibara, who had been quiet up until now, suddenly straightened up, her eyes narrowing. "He has stopped," she murmured, her voice a hushed rustle.

Both Kendo and Yui immediately looked up. Izuku had indeed stopped, turning his head from side to side before suddenly sprinting down an alleyway, disappearing from sight. The trio made a break for it, careful to keep their distance, their shared sense of purpose now a tangible force pulling them forward.

As Izuku ran, his senses screamed. A familiar, bone-deep killing intent, cold and precise as a scalpel, radiated from the shadows. It was the same predatory aura he had felt before, the one that had drawn Gran Torino's intervention during the first semester. Equus Noctus. The name, a brand of fear and respect, flashed in his mind. He didn't hesitate, fueled by the adrenaline that now coursed through his veins.

He rounded a corner, his feet pounding against the pavement as he plunged deeper into the narrow alley. There, the air grew heavy, and the shadows seemed to thicken into a physical presence. The familiar belt materialized around his waist. It was warm, humming with power, and a welcome weight against his racing heartbeat.

"Henshin!" he roared, the word a battle cry that echoed off the brick walls. A brilliant, blinding flash of light erupted, momentarily turning the dark alley into a photographic negative. When it receded, Izuku was gone, replaced by the imposing form of Agito. His black-and-gold armor was sleek and powerful, a divine shell against the urban decay. The transformation was complete just as a dark, monstrous shape launched itself from the rooftop above. Equus Noctus, a terrifying blend of man and beast, his body a twisted mass of muscle and equine features, descended with a savage roar. The Lord had been waiting patiently, his fury and anticipation a palpable weight in the air. Now, with no interruptions, the fight could finally continue.

Equus landed with a heavy thud, cracking the asphalt beneath his hooved feet. His eyes, burning with a furious golden light, were fixed on Izuku. "I'm relieved, boy," he growled, a low, rumbling sound that vibrated through the alley. "Barachiel scolded me for my last failure during the first semester. He will be pleased when I return with your head."

"Sorry to hear that," Izuku shot back, his voice a dry, sarcastic deadpan. He pushed against Equus's outstretched arm with a sudden burst of strength, trying to create distance, but the Lord's grip was like iron. Izuku then went for a swift, powerful kick, a blur of motion aimed at Equus's midsection. Equus, having learned from their last encounter, was ready. He blocked the blow with a raised knee, a dull thud echoing through the alley.

With a final, powerful burst of strength, Izuku shoved back, sending the Zebra Lord staggering a few feet. He immediately pressed the right button module on his belt, and with a brilliant flash of crimson light, his black-and-gold armor was replaced by his sleek, red Flame Form. He pressed the module again, and with a dramatic flourish, pulled out the Flame Saber, the blade shimmering with inner heat.

"Hoho!" Equus chuckled, a sound of genuine delight, his grin wide and terrifying. "I see you want to make this a true duel to the death! Very well then." A golden halo of light appeared over his head, and from within it, a long, elegant staff emerged. Equus grasped it, revealing that the far end was a pointed spear. With renewed vigor, he declared, "Have at you!" and they charged each other, a clash of steel and divine will about to erupt in the quiet, forgotten alleyway.

The battle raged on. The alley, once a silent corridor of brick and shadow, became a maelstrom of furious strikes and counter-strikes. Izuku, with the mobility of his Flame Form, met Equus's brute force with an elegant, almost balletic ferocity. Their weapons clashed with a high-pitched shriek of metal on metal, a brutal symphony that echoed off the high walls. Sparks flew with every parry, every thrust, painting momentary constellations of light in the deepening gloom.

Izuku dodged a wide, sweeping strike from the spear, leaping back and gaining a precious few feet of space. He seized the opportunity, his Flame Saber glowing fiercely. With a fluid, diagonal motion, he unleashed a wide, sweeping slash of fire. The wave of heat and flame surged toward Equus, licking at the walls and casting a hellish orange glow on the Zebra Lord's form. Equus, however, remained unfazed. With a swift, practiced spin of his polearm, he neutralized the attack, the flaming arc dissipating into nothingness against the whirling staff.

"It will take more than parlor tricks to defeat me, boy!" Equus taunted, his voice a mocking rumble.

But Izuku simply smiled, a cold, grim curve of his lips visible beneath his helmet. He had a plan, and it was already in motion. His eyes flickered to the rear of the alley, where, hidden behind Equus, was a locked metal cage. It was a leftover from an old distribution center that had once fueled construction equipment. And within that cage, Izuku knew, were old and unused propane tanks, just waiting for a spark. The flame he had just launched was large, wide, and deliberately aimed. The explosion came an instant later. A deafening "BOOM!" ripped through the air, sending a concussive blast wave tearing through the alley.

A fiery shockwave tore through the alley, engulfing the Zebra Lord. The force of the blast launched Equus forward, sending him skidding across the cracked asphalt on his stomach. His spear, now a loose weight in his hand, flew from his grasp, landing with a series of rhythmic clanks before coming to a stop.

Izuku seized the moment. With a powerful leap, he rocketed into the air, his Flame Saber poised to strike, the blade a brilliant, burning lance aimed directly at the downed Lord. This was his chance—the final, decisive blow.

"Midoriya, stop!"

The cry, sharp and desperate, cut through the ringing in his ears. Before he could react, something wrapped around him, strong and resilient. It was a mass of thick, thorny vines, emerging from a nearby crack in the pavement. They coiled around his waist and legs, arresting his forward momentum mid-flight and yanking him forcefully back toward the alley's entrance. The vines, he realized, belonged to Ibara Shiozaki, who now stood alongside Kendo and Yui, their faces a mixture of shock and terror. The trio had rushed out of their hiding spot, their observation turning into an impromptu—and dangerous—intervention.

Equus, on the ground, lifted his head just in time to see the flames of the alleyway creeping closer. He saw the trio of girls, their faces etched with horror, and the vines that had ensnared the Agito rider. He slammed a massive fist down on the pavement, a crack spreading from the point of impact. "Oh, come on!" he bellowed, a sound of pure frustration. He regained his feet in a single, fluid motion. His golden eyes flared, and with a mental command, the spear on the ground shot back to his hand. With a final, furious glance at Izuku and the girls, he leaped back, disappearing into the shadows of the surrounding buildings as he had before, leaving only the sound of crackling fire and the echoing silence of his departure.

Now on all fours, Izuku looked up to see the flames, still dancing wildly, their heat threatening to spread to the surrounding buildings. With a sigh of frustration, he focused his will, extending his free arm. The fire, as if listening to his command, sputtered and died, leaving nothing but a smoldering, smoke-filled alleyway. He turned to look at the three girls, their expressions a mixture of shock, terror, and confusion. The reality of their presence, of their intervention, hit him with physical force. Breathing heavily, he released another sigh, this one of weary resignation, and got to his feet.

He began to walk past them, his armor dissolving in a cascade of brilliant light until he was once again just Izuku Midoriya in his school uniform.

"Midoriya, wait!" Kendo called after him, her voice trembling slightly.

"Stop!" Yui added, her tone flat with disbelief.

"Explain what happened!" Ibara demanded, her vines retracting from Izuku's body but still twitching with agitated energy.

Izuku only marched faster, his head down, a futile attempt to escape the inevitable. Kendo, however, was not about to be dismissed. She ran ahead and blocked his path, her hands on her hips, her expression a mixture of anger and fear.

"Izuku Midoriya," she said, her voice firm and unwavering, "you will stop right now and explain yourself. We witnessed... we witnessed an attempted murder. If you don't talk to us, we will have no choice but to call the police and report what we've seen." She held up her phone, her thumb hovering over the dial pad. Yui and Ibara, now beside her, mirrored the motion.

Izuku stopped, his shoulders slumping in defeat. He looked at the three of them, at the fear and resolve in their eyes, and knew he had no choice.

"Alright," he said, his voice barely a whisper. "You're going to need to listen."