The fluorescent lights of U.A.'s deserted hallways hummed a dull, rhythmic tune, a mechanical heartbeat that filled the empty corridors. It was an hour before classes were set to begin, and the only other sounds were the gentle slosh of soapy water from a wheeled bucket and the soft, methodical scrape of a well-worn mop head against the polished tile. Kagutsuchi, dressed in his unremarkable janitor's uniform—navy blue with the U.A. logo embroidered small on the chest—moved with a practiced, almost meditative rhythm, his mind drifting far from the mundane reality of cleaning supplies and floor wax.

He whistled a quiet, airy melody, the smooth, jazzy notes of Miki Matsubara's "Stay With Me" echoing softly in the empty corridor. The tune carried a melancholic sweetness that seemed at odds with the sterile school environment, adding an unexpected warmth to the cold morning air.

Just last night...

The scent of roasted chicken with rosemary and fragrant basil had filled Nemuri's apartment, mixing with the subtle vanilla of the candles she'd lit for their dinner. The flickering flames danced across the walls, casting warm, golden shadows that made her small dining room feel intimate and alive. Nemuri sat across from him, her dark hair catching the candlelight as she laughed at something he'd said—a dry observation about Nezu's latest bureaucratic innovation—and her smile was so genuine, so radiantly human, that it put the flickering flames to shame.

He had smiled back, feeling his chest expand with a lightness he hadn't experienced in millennia. For that perfect, crystalline moment, he wasn't an archangel carrying the weight of divine duty. He wasn't Michael, the sword of God, the protector of humanity. He was simply Kagutsuchi, a man sharing dinner with someone who made him remember what it felt like to be alive.

Then his phone buzzed against the table.

He picked it up, expecting a message from Nezu about some administrative matter or perhaps a status update from one of the other faculty members. Instead, the screen displayed a single text from Izuku, the words glowing harsh and white against the warm candlelight:

sorry

A heavy, familiar sigh escaped him—the kind of exhalation that seemed to carry the weight of centuries. He didn't even need to ask what Izuku was apologizing for. He knew exactly what that simple, devastating word meant in his young ward's context. It meant Izuku had done something profoundly stupid, something that would cause a major headache and require a significant amount of explaining in the very near future. It was a message of apology, yes, but more than that, it was a message of weary, resigned inevitability—the quiet acceptance of consequences that couldn't be avoided.

He set the phone back down on the table with deliberate care, a grimace tugging at the corners of his mouth as the perfect evening began to crumble around him.

"Everything okay, Kagutsuchi-kun?" Nemuri asked, her voice soft with concern as she noticed the change in his expression.

He forced a small smile, the practiced expression of someone who had been managing crises for far longer than any mortal should have to. "Yes, Nemuri. Everything is... just fine."

But even as he said it, he knew it was a lie, regardless of how subjective it could be interpreted. Nothing was ever 'fine' when Izuku sent messages like that.

...and here he was, cleaning up messes again. Both literal and metaphorical.

The whistling stopped abruptly as his awareness snapped back to the present. A few feet down the hallway, near the corner where the corridor branched toward the cafeteria, stood Ibara Shiozaki. She was perfectly still, her hands clasped loosely in front of her, the thorny vines of her Quirk draped over her shoulders and down her arms like a living mantle of green and gold. Her school uniform was immaculate despite the early hour, and her face was a blank mask of barely contained disbelief.

But her eyes—her eyes were wide and filled with a stark, almost terrified awe that made something cold settle in his stomach. Those dark orbs were locked on him with an intensity that spoke of recognition, of sudden, overwhelming understanding that no seventeen-year-old girl should have to carry.

Kagutsuchi paused his mopping, leaning on the handle with practiced casualness. He offered her a polite, questioning look, as if this were any other morning and she were any other student who had wandered into the halls before classes began.

"Good morning, Shiozaki-san," he said, his voice calm and friendly, carefully modulated to suggest nothing more unusual than a janitor greeting a student. "You're up quite early today. Is there something I can help you with?"

Ibara didn't answer immediately. She stood there for a long moment, her breathing shallow and quick, as if she were trying to process something far too large for her mind to contain. Then, slowly, deliberately, she took one small, shuffling step forward, then another, until she was standing directly in front of him. Her eyes never left his face, and he could feel the profound, almost electric spiritual energy radiating from her—the kind of divine awareness that he'd encountered countless times, but had hoped to avoid in this place, at this time.

Without a word, without warning, she lowered herself to her knees on the cold tile floor. Her hands came together in the classic posture of prayer, fingers intertwined, and she bowed her head low until her forehead nearly touched the ground.

"Blessed Michael, Archangel of the Most High," she began, her voice a soft, tremulous whisper that carried with perfect clarity in the empty hallway. "Prince of the Heavenly Host, defender of the faithful, who stands at the right hand of God... I have seen your true nature revealed, and I am humbled beyond measure."

Kagutsuchi's jaw tightened involuntarily. His eyes closed for a long, pained moment as a slow, profoundly weary sigh escaped him. It was a quiet exhalation that seemed to carry the weight of a thousand similar encounters, a thousand moments of unwanted recognition, a thousand times when his carefully constructed human facade had crumbled away to reveal the terrible truth beneath.

"In your mercy, you walk among us as one of us," Ibara continued, her voice growing stronger with conviction. "You tend to our needs with your own hands, you guide the lost, you protect those who cannot protect themselves. The boy—Midoriya-kun—he bears your blessing, doesn't he? Your power flows through him because you have chosen him as your vessel in this world."

He opened his eyes and looked down at the girl kneeling before him. At the top of her bowed head, crowned with green vines that seemed to shimmer with their own inner light. At the perfect stillness of her posture, the absolute certainty in her voice. Then he glanced down the long, empty hallway, as if hoping desperately that someone—anyone—would walk by and take over this awkward and deeply embarrassing situation.

This kind of fervent, divine attention wasn't new to him. It was a wearying inconvenience that had followed him for centuries, through countless lives and identities. The recognition in mortal eyes, the sudden understanding that they were in the presence of something far greater and more terrible than they had imagined. The prayers, the pleas, the desperate hope that he could solve all their problems with a wave of his hand.

"Please," Ibara whispered, and there were tears in her voice now. "Please watch over us in the trials to come. We are so small, so fragile. But you... you are eternal. You are strength itself. Grant us your protection, your guidance. Help us to be worthy of the grace you have shown us."

Kagutsuchi stood there for a long moment, mop handle still in his hands, bucket of cooling, soapy water beside him, fluorescent lights humming their mechanical tune overhead. A divine being disguised as a janitor, being worshipped by a teenage girl on the floor of a hero school at six in the morning.

He'd deal with the theological crisis later. Right now, his floor was getting cold and streaky, and he had work to do.

Two days earlier...

The walk to Izuku's apartment was suffocatingly quiet, each footstep on the pavement echoing like a countdown to an inevitable confrontation. Izuku's mind raced through a dozen different scenarios, each one ending with disaster. His shoulders were tense, hunched as if he could physically shield himself from what was coming. Behind him, the three girls followed in formation—Kendo in the lead with her determined stride, Yui's measured steps never faltering, and Ibara bringing up the rear, her expression serene yet watchful.

The weight of their stares bore into his back like physical pressure. Every few seconds, he could feel Kendo opening her mouth as if to speak, only to close it again. The questions were building up behind her lips like water behind a dam, and Izuku knew that when that dam finally burst, he'd be swept away in the flood.

"Midoriya," Kendo finally said, her voice cutting through the evening air. "Is... is it really okay for us to come to your apartment? I mean, we're practically strangers barging into your personal space."

Izuku didn't slow his pace, but his voice carried back to them with a hint of resignation. "It's the only place we can talk in private about... this. Besides," he added quietly, "my mom already knows."

There was a pause before Yui's flat voice asked, "What about your father?"

Izuku's steps faltered for just a moment, his hands clenching into fists at his sides. Then he resumed walking, his pace slightly faster than before. The question hung in the air, unanswered, until the weight of the silence made it clear that no answer was coming.

"Never mind," Kendo said quickly, shooting a warning glance at Yui. "That's... that's not important right now."

The Midoriya apartment building was modest, the kind of place where working families lived quiet, unremarkable lives. As they climbed the stairs to the third floor, Izuku's hand trembled slightly as he reached for his keys. The familiar click of the lock seemed unnaturally loud.

"I'm home," he called out as he pushed open the door, his voice carefully controlled.

"Welcome back, Izuku!" Inko's warm voice drifted from the kitchen, followed by the sound of running water and the gentle clatter of dishes. "You're a bit later than usual—did you stop by the convenience store again? I told you I can handle the shopping—"

She appeared in the doorway, dish towel in hand, and stopped mid-sentence. Her green eyes, so similar to her son's, widened as she took in the three girls standing awkwardly in their small entryway.

"Oh! Hello there," she said, immediately bowing politely. The girls responded in kind, their bows deeper and more formal.

"I'm sorry for intruding on your home," Kendo said, her voice respectful but tense. "We're classmates of Midoriya-kun's from U.A."

"From Class 1-B," Ibara added softly. "We apologize for the sudden visit."

"No intrusion at all!" Inko replied warmly, though confusion flickered across her features. "It's still early in the school year... are you here for a study group?"

She looked at her son questioningly, and something in his expression—the way his shoulders sagged, the defeated set of his mouth—made understanding dawn in her eyes. Her smile became more forced, more protective.

"Well, I was just starting dinner," she said carefully. "You girls are welcome to stay—"

"Oh no, we couldn't!" Kendo interrupted, waving her hands frantically. "We really don't want to impose. We'll just... we won't be staying long."

Inko's brow furrowed with concern, her maternal instincts clearly picking up on the tension in the room. "Are you sure? I hate the thought of you going home without eating something. At least let me pack you some snacks for the trip back—"

"Mom," Izuku said quietly, "we need to... talk. In my room."

The way he said it, the weight behind those simple words, made Inko's expression shift from confusion to worry. She nodded slowly, understanding that whatever was happening was serious.

"Of course, dear. I'll just... I'll be in the kitchen if you need anything."

As they headed toward Izuku's room, Kendo couldn't help but feel a growing sense of unease. "Are you sure about the food? We really don't want to trouble your mother..."

"She won't take no for an answer," Izuku replied with a weak smile. "Trust me on that one."

The moment they stepped into Izuku's room, all three girls stopped dead in their tracks. The walls were covered—absolutely covered—in All Might memorabilia. Posters, figurines, limited edition merchandise, framed magazine covers, and even what appeared to be a signed photograph took up every available inch of space. It was less a bedroom and more a shrine to the Symbol of Peace.

"Holy..." Kendo breathed, her eyes wide as she slowly turned in a circle, taking it all in.

Yui's usual stoic expression cracked slightly, her eyebrows rising. "This is... comprehensive."

"It's a testament to your dedication," Ibara said diplomatically, though even she seemed a bit overwhelmed.

Izuku's face turned scarlet, rivaling the color of some of his All Might posters. "I... I know it's a lot, but—" He stopped mid-sentence, suddenly acutely aware that he had three girls in his bedroom. The realization hit him like a physical blow, and his face somehow managed to turn an even deeper shade of red.

"Um," he stammered, gesturing vaguely toward his bed, "you can... you can sit... on the..." His brain seemed to short-circuit as he realized what he was suggesting.

Kendo snickered, the tension breaking slightly. "It's okay, Midoriya. We're not going to bite." Her amusement was infectious, earning small smiles from Yui and Ibara.

"Right. Right, of course," Izuku muttered, grabbing his desk chair and wheeling it around to face them. "This is fine. This is... normal."

The three girls settled onto his bed—Kendo cross-legged in the center, Yui sitting primly on the edge, and Ibara folding her hands in her lap with perfect posture. The sight of them there, in his personal space, surrounded by his All Might collection, felt surreal.

Izuku took a deep breath, steeling himself for what was coming. The weight of his secret felt heavier than ever, pressing down on his chest like a physical burden.

"Alright," he said quietly, his hands clasped tightly in his lap. "I suppose... I suppose I should start from the beginning."

The girls leaned forward slightly, their full attention focused on him. The room fell silent except for the distant sounds of Inko moving around in the kitchen.

"What I'm about to tell you," Izuku continued, his voice growing steadier, "is going to sound completely insane. But I need you to understand that everything I'm saying is true, no matter how impossible it sounds."

He met each of their eyes in turn, seeing curiosity, apprehension, and determination reflected back at him.

"That thing you saw me fighting—that wasn't a heteromorph villain or someone with an unusual Quirk. That was a Lord. An angel." He paused, letting that sink in. "And what I have... it's not a Quirk either. It's something called an Agito power."

Kendo's brow furrowed. "An Agito power? What does that mean?"

"It means," Izuku said, his voice growing more confident as he found his rhythm, "that what you witnessed today was essentially a battle between two representatives of humanity's potential future. The Agito power is ancient—older than Quirks, older than recorded history. It was granted to humanity to stimulate our evolution, to help us become what we were meant to be."

He stood up from his chair, beginning to pace in the small space between his bed and his desk. The familiar motion helped him think, helped him organize his thoughts.

"Quirks," he continued, "as amazing as they are, were never part of the original plan. They're an unintended deviation from humanity's true evolutionary path. The Agito power represents what we were supposed to become—the true next step of human evolution."

"And these... Lords?" Ibara asked, her voice soft but intense. "What role do they play in all of this?"

"The Lords were created as part of a trial system," Izuku explained. "They're meant to test humanity, to see if we're worthy of the power we've been given. But they can only target those who already possess Agito power—they're forbidden from harming anyone else."

"So they're only after people like you?" Kendo asked, her brow furrowing.

"It's more complicated than that," Izuku said, running a hand through his hair. "The Lords see Agito as a threat to the natural order. We have the potential to become... divine. To transcend what humanity is." He paused, his voice dropping to barely above a whisper. "No matter how powerful Quirks can get, there's always a ceiling, a limit to what they can achieve. But Agito? We... we don't have that limit."

The weight of his words settled over the room like a heavy blanket.

"The Lords test us to determine if we're worthy of that kind of power," he continued. "Those who pass their trials are allowed to continue growing stronger. Those who fail..." His expression darkened. "Those who fail are eliminated to protect the natural order. The one you saw me fighting—Equus Noctus—he's one of those conducting these trials."

The silence that followed was deafening. The three girls stared at him with expressions that could only be described as skeptical disbelief. Kendo's mouth opened and closed several times, as if she were trying to find words for what she'd just heard.

"So," Kendo finally said, her voice carefully controlled, "you're telling us that you're some kind of... chosen one? With ancient divine powers? Fighting angel-monsters who want to destroy humanity?"

"I know how it sounds," Izuku said desperately. "I know it's completely crazy, but—"

"It does sound crazy," Yui interrupted, her tone flat. "Extremely crazy."

"Midoriya-kun," Ibara said gently, "perhaps you should consider that what you experienced might have been... influenced by stress? Or trauma? These kinds of elaborate delusions can seem very real to those experiencing them."

Izuku felt his heart sink. He'd expected skepticism, but seeing the doubt in their eyes—the way they were looking at him like he might be having a mental breakdown—was worse than he'd imagined.

"I'm not delusional," he said quietly. "I know how this sounds, but every word I've told you is true. That transformation you saw, that armor, the way I fought—none of that could come from a Quirk."

"Couldn't it though?" Kendo asked, leaning forward. "There are Quirks that can create armor, Quirks that enhance physical abilities, Quirks that—"

"Not like that," Izuku insisted. "Not with that level of power, not with that kind of versatility. And certainly not against something like Equus Noctus."

The three girls exchanged glances, a silent conversation passing between them. Izuku could practically see them debating whether their classmate had lost his mind or if there was some grain of truth in his impossible story.

"Prove it," Kendo said finally.

"What?"

"Prove it," she repeated, crossing her arms. "If what you're saying is true, if you really have this ancient power, then show us. Transform right here, right now."

Izuku shook his head slowly. "Even if I transformed right here in front of you, it wouldn't convince you. You've already seen me do it once—you've grown used to it. You could easily rationalize it as just another Quirk, no matter how unusual it might seem."

"Then how do you expect us to believe you?" Kendo challenged. "You're asking us to accept that angels are real, that evolution is controlled by some ancient power system, and that you're some kind of chosen warrior. But if you can't provide proof—"

"I can provide proof," Izuku interrupted quietly. "But not the kind you're thinking of." He took a deep breath, steeling himself for what he was about to suggest. "There's someone at U.A. who can verify everything I've told you. Someone who... who isn't what he appears to be."

"Another Agito?" Ibara asked softly.

"No," Izuku said, meeting her eyes. "A Lord. One of the angels I was talking about. He works at our school as a janitor under the name Kagutsuchi."

The three girls exchanged incredulous glances.

"You're saying there's an angel mopping floors at U.A.?" Yui asked, her flat tone carrying a note of disbelief.

"I know how it sounds," Izuku said desperately. "But he's the only proof I can offer you. He's... he's different from the others. He doesn't want to eliminate Agito users—in fact, he's been helping me learn to control my power."

Izuku sank back into his chair, feeling defeated. They were right to be skeptical—in their shoes, he'd probably react the same way. But the truth was the truth, no matter how impossible it seemed. He stared at the three girls for a long moment, watching doubt flicker across their faces. Then, with a resigned sigh, he turned toward his desk and powered up his computer. The familiar blue glow of the monitor illuminated his face as he opened his messaging app.

"If my word isn't enough," he said quietly, his fingers moving across the keyboard, "then maybe theirs will be."

The three girls watched with growing confusion as Izuku opened what appeared to be a group chat labeled "The Situation" with nearly a dozen participants. His fingers flew across the keys as he typed:

Emergency meeting. Now. Someone saw me transform and I had to tell them everything. Need backup ASAP.

The responses came almost immediately:

Tsu: Ribbit. On my way to computer.

Ochako: Oh no! Are you okay?!

Tenya: This is most concerning! I shall join immediately!

Momo: Understood. Give me two minutes.

Bakugo: Fucking hell, Deku. What did you do now?

Mineta: Wait, is this about girls? Please tell me this is about girls.

Within minutes, Izuku had initiated a video call. One by one, familiar faces appeared in small windows on his screen. Asui sat calmly at what appeared to be her family's computer, Ochako looked worried and slightly out of breath, Iida was adjusting his glasses with mechanical precision, and Momo appeared to be in what looked like a home office or study.

Bakugo's feed showed him slouched in a chair, his usual scowl somehow looking more tired than angry. A floating school uniform appeared in one window - clearly Toru, though only her clothing was visible. Shoji's multiple arms were partially visible in his frame, and Mineta was practically bouncing in his seat with barely contained excitement.

"Alright, everyone's here," Izuku said, glancing nervously at the three girls who were now staring at his computer screen with a mixture of confusion and growing unease. "So, uh... Kendo, Kodai, and Shiozaki from Class 1-B are here with me. They saw me fighting Equus Noctus today and..."

"You WHAT?!" Ochako's voice cracked through the speakers, her face going pale. "Izuku, you fought another Lord?! Are you hurt? Do you need us to—"

"I'm fine, Uraraka-san," Izuku interrupted quickly. "But they saw me transform, and now I've had to explain everything. The problem is..." He looked at the three girls apologetically. "They think I was about to kill someone and that I'm having some kind of breakdown."

"Oh," said Asui's calm voice from the speakers. "That's understandable, ribbit. It does sound completely insane when you first hear it."

"Wait, wait, WAIT!" Kendo said, pointing at the screen. "You all KNOW about this? About the... the angel thing and the ancient powers?"

"Unfortunately, yes," Momo's refined voice came through clearly. "We've all been... involved in this situation for some time now."

"Define 'involved,'" Yui said flatly, though her stoic expression was beginning to crack.

Bakugo's harsh laugh crackled through the speakers. Instead of his usual explosive reaction, he simply ran a hand over his face with what looked like bone-deep exhaustion. "This kind of shit is getting tedious," he muttered. "Every few weeks it's something new. Angels, ancient powers, cosmic trials... I swear to God, Deku, your life is like a bad anime."

"Three girls in Midoriya's bedroom," Mineta's voice whined through the speakers, practically vibrating with jealousy. "This is so unfair! Why does he get all the—"

"One more word and you're out of the call," Izuku said flatly, his finger hovering over the mouse. The threat in his voice was unmistakable.

"Okay, okay! I'll behave!" Mineta squeaked.

"If I may," Momo's voice cut through the chaos with diplomatic precision, "while this situation is certainly unexpected, I believe we have little choice but to present what evidence we can." Her image shifted slightly as she leaned forward. "The three of you witnessed something extraordinary today. Rather than dismissing it, perhaps it would be more productive to examine the facts."

"What facts?" Kendo challenged, though her voice carried less conviction than before.

"Well," Iida's formal tone came through the speakers, "for starters, we have all been receiving combat training from the individual known as Kagutsuchi—the janitor Midoriya-kun mentioned."

"Training for what?" Ibara asked softly.

"To fight a High Lord named Graviel," Ochako said, her voice gaining strength. "One of the leaders of the minor Lords. Kagutsuchi-san, who is also a High Lord, had been preparing us because Graviel was trying to claim Aoyama-kun—he's also an Agito like Izuku."

"You're all being trained by an angel," Yui said, her flat tone making it sound like a statement rather than a question.

"I know how it sounds," Asui said calmly, "but it's true, ribbit. We've seen things that can't be explained by Quirks. Abilities that go beyond anything we learned about in school."

Toru's floating clothes shifted as she apparently nodded. "The things Kagutsuchi-san can do... it's not like any Quirk I've ever seen. And trust me, being invisible gives you a pretty good perspective on what people can actually do versus what they claim they can do."

"Not to mention the other things we've witnessed," Shoji's deep voice added from his frame. "Phenomena that defy conventional understanding of physics, biology, and everything else we thought we knew about how the world works."

The three girls sat in stunned silence as the voices continued to corroborate Izuku's impossible story. Each new detail, each casual confirmation of supernatural events, chipped away at their skepticism.

"This... this could all be some elaborate prank," Kendo said finally, though her voice lacked conviction. "You could all be in on it, trying to—"

"With respect, Kendo-san," Momo interrupted gently, "what would be the purpose of such a deception? What would any of us gain from convincing you of something so outlandish?"

"Besides," Bakugo's gruff voice added, "you saw Deku fight that thing today. You telling me that looked like some kind of joke to you?"

Kendo's mouth opened and closed several times as she struggled to find a response. The memory of that battle, of the sheer otherworldly power she'd witnessed, made it impossible to dismiss everything as mere fantasy.

"I..." she began, then paused, looking at Yui and Ibara. "We saw him transform. Him and Aoyama on Dagobah Beach. We saw them fighting those... things that didn't seem human. But all of this is just so..."

"Impossible?" Ochako suggested gently. "Yeah, we all went through the same thing. It takes time to accept."

"But after everything we've experienced," Iida added firmly, "after all the evidence we've gathered, there's simply no other explanation that fits the facts."

The room fell silent except for the soft hum of the computer and the distant sounds of Inko moving around in the kitchen. The three girls stared at the screen full of their classmates' faces—faces that showed no signs of deception, no hints that this was all some elaborate joke.

"You're all serious," Ibara said quietly. "This is all real."

"Afraid so, ribbit," Asui confirmed. "Welcome to our world. It's a lot more complicated than we thought."

"Yeah, but you know what's even crazier?" Mineta's voice suddenly piped up, completely oblivious to the gravity of the moment. "All of that might sound insane, but what's really wild is that Kagutsuchi is actually the Archangel Michael! And oh, Lucifer may or may not still be hanging around Japan after doing some kind of business with Yaoyorozu's family—"

"MINETA!" Multiple voices shouted simultaneously through the speakers.

"What?! I thought they should know—"

"YOU ABSOLUTE MORON!" Bakugo's explosion finally came, his face filling his camera frame as he leaned forward. "THAT WASN'T YOUR INFORMATION TO SHARE!"

"Mineta-kun!" Momo's usually composed voice cracked with horror. "How could you just—"

"Oh no, oh no, oh no," Ochako was muttering, her hands covering her face.

"This is most improper!" Iida declared, his arms chopping frantically. "Such sensitive information requires careful consideration before disclosure!"

The three Class 1-B girls sat in absolute, stunned silence. Their faces had gone completely blank, as if their minds had simply shut down from information overload. Kendo's mouth hung open, Yui's stoic mask had completely shattered into wide-eyed shock, and Ibara looked like she might faint.

"I..." Kendo started weakly, then stopped.

"The Archangel..." Ibara whispered, her voice barely audible. "Michael..."

Yui said nothing at all, just stared at the screen with the expression of someone whose entire worldview had just been obliterated.

"Well," Asui said with her characteristic calm, though even she sounded a bit strained, "I guess they know everything now, ribbit."

Present...

The viewing room was smaller than either class expected, its walls lined with soundproofing foam and equipped with a single, large monitor at the front. Rows of chairs had been arranged in a semicircle, with Class 1-A occupying the front rows and Class 1-B filing in behind them. The atmosphere was thick with tension and barely contained curiosity.

Principal Nezu sat at a small control panel beside the screen, his small paws moving deftly over the buttons. Behind him stood the U.A. faculty—Aizawa with his usual stoic expression, All Might looking unusually grim in his skeletal form, Midnight with her arms crossed, and several other teachers maintaining professional masks that couldn't quite hide their unease.

"What you are about to see," Nezu announced, his voice carrying its usual cheerful tone despite the gravity of the situation, "is classified material of the highest level. The footage has been compiled from various security cameras and training exercises over the past several months. Under no circumstances are you to discuss what you witness here with anyone outside this room."

Kendo shifted uncomfortably in her seat, glancing around at her classmates. Monoma looked skeptical, his usual smirk replaced by genuine confusion. Tetsutetsu sat rigid, his metallic hands clenched in his lap. Even Ibara, still pale from her morning encounter, kept her eyes fixed on the screen with an intensity that spoke of desperate need for answers.

In the front rows, Class 1-A sat with the weary resignation of people about to relive trauma. Bakugo's jaw was clenched tight, his hands sparking faintly. Izuku stared at his lap, his shoulders hunched as if bracing for impact. Ochako bit her lip nervously, while Iida sat ramrod straight, his glasses catching the light from the monitor.

"The first segment," Nezu continued, "is from approximately six months ago, during what was intended to be a simple demonstration."

The lights dimmed, and the screen flickered to life.

The footage showed U.A.'s Gamma Gymnasium in broad daylight. At the center stood All Might in his muscle form, cape billowing, every inch the Symbol of Peace. Across from him, looking almost comically ordinary in comparison, was a man in a crisp suit—Kagutsuchi.

Class 1-B leaned forward collectively as the two figures began to circle each other. Even through the security camera's distant perspective, the weight of the moment was palpable.

"Is that...?" Kendo whispered, her voice barely audible.

"All Might," Tetsutetsu finished, his voice filled with awe.

Then All Might moved. The camera couldn't fully capture his speed, but the explosive burst of power was unmistakable. Dust and debris flew everywhere as he launched himself forward with a devastating punch that should have ended any fight instantly.

The slapping sounds came next—a rapid-fire series of impacts so fast they blurred together into a continuous whip-crack rhythm. When the dust cleared, All Might was staggering backward, his face red and welted, while Kagutsuchi stood exactly where he'd been, hands in his pockets, looking bored.

"What the hell..." Monoma breathed, his usual arrogance completely absent.

The beating that followed was systematic, methodical, and utterly one-sided. Kagutsuchi's movements were barely visible to the camera, but the results were devastatingly clear. Each strike landed with surgical precision, each counter-attack was effortlessly avoided, and through it all, the enigmatic man's expression remained maddeningly calm.

When All Might finally hit the ground, broken and gasping, several members of Class 1-B actually flinched. The Symbol of Peace—their Symbol of Peace—was on his knees, coughing blood onto the gymnasium floor.

"This is impossible," Jurota Shishida whispered, his usually composed demeanor cracking. "No one can defeat All Might like that. No one."

The footage continued to Kagutsuchi's casual departure, his mocking wave, his cheerful declaration about starting work as a janitor. Then the screen went black, and a new timestamp appeared.

"The next segment," Nezu announced, "shows Kagutsuchi's first training session with Class 1-A."

This footage was even more devastating to watch. Class 1-B watched in growing horror as their rival class—students they knew, students they'd competed against, students they'd considered equals—was systematically dismantled by a man who never stopped smiling. The sheer effortlessness with which Kagutsuchi avoided their attacks, the casual way he corrected their form while dodging explosive blasts and ice walls, the almost paternal amusement in his voice as he praised their "improvements" while remaining utterly untouchable.

"He's not even fighting back," Sen Kaibara observed, his voice hollow. "He's just... playing with them."

"Like a cat with mice," Reiko Yanagi added quietly, her usual whisper somehow carrying more weight than usual.

The final segment showed Kagutsuchi healing Class 1-A with a casual snap of his fingers, the golden light that washed over the exhausted students restoring them completely in seconds. The casual display of power—not just physical dominance, but miraculous healing—left Class 1-B in stunned silence.

When the screen went dark and the lights came back up, the room remained silent for a long, heavy moment. Principal Nezu turned in his chair, his black eyes scanning both classes with that unsettling intelligence that made him such an effective leader.

"Well?" he asked simply.

The silence stretched for another heartbeat. Then it exploded.

"WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT?!" Tetsutetsu's metallic voice rang out above the sudden cacophony.

"—impossible, no human can move like—"

"—completely destroyed All Might, how is that even—"

"—healing powers, did you see that golden light—"

"—been working here as a JANITOR this whole time?!"

"—Class 1-A knew about this and said nothing—"

"—angels and ancient powers, what kind of—"

"ENOUGH!" Aizawa's voice cut through the chaos like a blade, his red eyes flashing as he activated his Quirk purely out of habit. The room fell silent instantly, though the tension remained thick enough to cut with a knife.

Nezu cleared his throat delicately. "I understand this is overwhelming. That's precisely why we're having this discussion. Please, raise your hands if you have questions, and we'll address them one at a time."

Every hand in Class 1-B shot up immediately.

Nezu pointed to Kendo first. "Kendo-san?"

"Principal Nezu," she began, her voice shaking slightly, "what exactly is Kagutsuchi? Because that..." she gestured helplessly at the now-dark screen, "that wasn't human."

"You are correct," Nezu replied calmly. "Kagutsuchi is what's known as a High Lord—specifically, the Archangel Michael. He is not human, and never has been."

A fresh wave of shocked murmurs rippled through Class 1-B. Nezu pointed to Awase next.

"If he's so powerful," Awase asked, "why is he working as a janitor? Why is he here at all?"

"He's training Class 1-A," All Might answered, his skeletal form looking even more fragile than usual. "Preparing them for threats that normal hero training simply cannot address."

"What kind of threats?" This came from Monoma, whose usual smugness had been completely replaced by genuine fear.

Aizawa stepped forward. "Threats like the creature Midoriya fought the other day. What Kendo, Kodai, and Shiozaki witnessed wasn't a villain with an unusual Quirk—it was another angel, what's called a minor Lord, who is a subordinate to their respective High Lord. And there are more of them."

Ibara's hand trembled as she raised it. When Nezu nodded to her, she whispered, "Are we... are we in danger?"

The faculty exchanged glances before Nezu answered. "Not directly. Minor Lords can only target those who possess what's called Agito power—an ancient form of human evolution that predates Quirks. Currently, only two students at this school possess such power."

"Midoriya and Aoyama," Iida called out from the front row, earning sharp looks from the faculty.

"Thank you, Iida-kun," Nezu said dryly. "Yes, Midoriya and Aoyama possess this power, which makes them targets. The rest of you are, theoretically, safe from direct conflict."

"Theoretically?" Kodai asked, her flat tone making the question sound even more ominous.

"Collateral damage," Midnight explained bluntly. "If a minor Lord attacks and you're in the vicinity, your safety cannot be guaranteed. That's why Class 1-A has been receiving specialized training."

Shiozaki raised her hand again. "This morning, when I..." she swallowed hard, "when I encountered Kagutsuchi-san in the hallway... he didn't deny what I said, what I prayed to him. About being the Archangel Michael."

"Because Lords in general cannot lie," All Might confirmed. "It's a fundamental aspect of their nature. Everything Kagutsuchi has told you, everything he will tell you, is truth—though not always the complete truth."

The questions continued for another hour, each answer revealing new layers to the impossible situation. By the end, Class 1-B sat in stunned silence, their worldview thoroughly shattered and rebuilt around the terrifying reality that angels walked among them, that their classmates were soldiers in a war they'd never imagined, and that the cheerful janitor who cleaned their hallways was one of the most powerful beings in existence.

"One final thing," Nezu announced as the session drew to a close. "Kagutsuchi has deliberately chosen not to attend this briefing. He felt his presence would be... distracting to the educational process."

Kendo let out a hollow laugh. "Distracting. Right. Because having the Archangel Michael mopping our floors is totally normal."

"Now you know how we feel," Izuku deadpanned from the front row, finally looking back at Class 1-B with a flat, exhausted expression.

The silence that followed carried the weight of understanding—and the terrifying knowledge that nothing would ever be the same again.

Later...

The U.A. cafeteria, a place usually bustling with the energetic clamor of teenage heroes-in-training, was unnaturally quiet. The familiar symphony of clashing trays, scraping chairs, and overlapping conversations had been reduced to a muted whisper, as if the very air had grown thick with unspoken tension. Class 1-B, huddled at their usual cluster of tables near the windows, found their gazes constantly drifting toward Class 1-A like iron filings drawn to a magnet—now seated at what felt like an entirely different planet rather than just across the room.

The distance wasn't merely physical. It was a chasm carved from terrifying, impossible knowledge that had fundamentally altered the landscape of their reality. Where once there had been rivalry and competition, now there was something far more complex and unsettling—a mixture of awe, resentment, and the uncomfortable realization that they had never truly been playing the same game.

Kendo sat with her arms crossed defensively over her chest, her enlarged fists resting against her ribs as if she could physically shield herself from the weight of what she'd learned. She couldn't bring herself to meet the eyes of the students across the room—students she'd once considered equals, rivals, and even friends. Her classmates mirrored her unease, their usual boisterous energy replaced by a heavy, contemplative stillness that felt foreign in their bones.

Tetsutetsu, his metallic skin catching the fluorescent lights in harsh, clinical flashes, pushed a piece of tonkatsu around his plate with mechanical precision. The sound of his steel fork against ceramic was jarring in the quiet—a sharp, repetitive scraping that seemed to echo the grinding discomfort everyone was feeling. He'd barely eaten anything, his appetite lost somewhere between the classified footage and the crushing realization that everything he'd believed about strength, about fairness, about earning your place through hard work, had been turned upside down.

"It's just... weird," Awase muttered from across the table, his voice barely audible above the ambient hum of the cafeteria's ventilation system. His usual confident demeanor had been replaced by something fragile and uncertain. "We've always been rivals. Competitors. And now..."

He trailed off, his words hanging in the air like an unfinished prayer. How could he possibly articulate what they were all feeling? That their rivalry had been built on a fundamental misunderstanding? That while they'd been pushing themselves to their limits, struggling with the ordinary challenges of heroic training, their supposed equals had been operating in an entirely different reality?

"And now we're just... the B-team," Monoma said from the other end of the table, his voice carrying a venomous bitterness that was stripped of its usual theatrical flair. Gone was the playful mockery, the grandiose gestures, the carefully crafted persona of the attention-seeking rival. What remained was raw, unfiltered resentment—the kind that had been festering in dark corners for months, fed by every small slight and perceived injustice.

He shot a resentful glare across the room, his pale blue eyes moving with predatory precision as they landed first on Izuku—sitting hunched over his lunch as if trying to make himself invisible—then on Aoyama, who was picking delicately at his meal with an unusual lack of his characteristic sparkle. Finally, his gaze settled on the back of All Might's skeletal head where the Symbol of Peace sat with the faculty, looking more fragile and human than Monoma had ever wanted to see him.

"Suddenly, they get to be the heroes in some secret holy war," Monoma continued, each word dripping with acid. "A literal guardian angel on speed dial. Private tutoring from the Archangel fucking Michael himself. What's their Quirk supposed to be? 'Chosen One'? 'Main Character Syndrome'?"

The crude language felt wrong coming from him—usually, his insults were crafted with theatrical precision, designed more for show than genuine malice. But this wasn't performance art. This was pain, raw and unfiltered, finally given voice.

He was met with silence—not the usual mixture of laughter and agreement that typically greeted his Class 1-A commentary, but a heavy, uncomfortable quiet that settled over their table like a funeral shroud. Even the most cynical members of Class 1-B, the ones who had always rolled their eyes at what they saw as 1-A's special treatment, knew instinctively that this was different.

This wasn't about favoritism or publicity or even the simple unfairness of talent distribution. This was about cosmic forces, about divine intervention, about their classmates being thrust into roles that transcended everything they understood about heroism. This wasn't a petty rivalry anymore—it was a matter of life and death, of faith and ancient power, of forces so far beyond their comprehension that they felt like children who had stumbled into a war between gods.

And they had been left out. Completely, utterly, left out.

Sen Kaibara, normally one of the more level-headed students in their class, stared down at his untouched bento with an expression that could only be described as lost. "Do you think," he said quietly, "that they knew? This whole time, when we were competing with them, when we were trying so hard to prove we belonged in the hero course... do you think they knew they had advantages we could never match?"

The question hung in the air like a toxic cloud. It was the thought that had been gnawing at all of them since the briefing—the possibility that every competition, every joint exercise, every moment of friendly rivalry had been built on a lie.

Jurota Shishida, usually so articulate and composed, found himself struggling for words. "The ethical implications are... staggering," he managed finally. "If they were aware of their supernatural advantages and continued to compete against us as if we were equals..."

"That would make them liars," Kinoko Komori finished softly, her usually cheerful demeanor completely absent. "Not just to us, but to themselves."

Reiko Yanagi, her voice barely above its usual whisper but somehow carrying more weight than a shout, added her own haunting observation: "Or maybe they're just as trapped as we are. Caught between worlds they never asked to inhabit."

The conversation died there, each student lost in their own thoughts, their own attempts to reconcile the people they thought they knew with the impossible reality they'd been forced to confront.

Later, in a joint training exercise that felt more like a funeral procession than a competitive event, the tension was even more palpable. The usual competitive fire that had always defined the relationship between the two classes had been replaced by something far more complex and uncomfortable—a cautious, almost reverent deference from Class 1-B that felt wrong in ways none of them could properly articulate.

When Kendo was paired with Aoyama for a sparring match, she found herself moving with uncharacteristic hesitation. Her large fists, usually clenched in eager anticipation of a good fight, hung loose at her sides as if she'd forgotten how to form them properly. She knew what he was capable of now—not just his Navel Laser Quirk, but the ancient power that flowed beneath it, the cosmic forces that had chosen him as a vessel. The idea of striking him, of treating him like just another classmate, felt wrong on a fundamental level. Almost sacrilegious.

It was like being asked to spar with a living saint.

Aoyama, for his part, seemed to notice her reluctance immediately. His usual preening confidence was absent, replaced by something that looked almost like guilt. "Do not be holding back, Mademoiselle Kendo," he said, his voice softer than she'd ever heard it, stripped of its characteristic theatrical flair. "The stars, they demand a glorious performance, yes?"

But even his trademark phrase felt different now. Once, she'd dismissed his talk of stars and destiny as harmless vanity, the eccentric affectations of a boy desperate for attention. Now, after everything they'd learned, his words carried an entirely different weight. When he spoke of stars, was he referring to actual celestial forces? When he mentioned destiny, was he talking about cosmic plans that stretched back to the dawn of human evolution?

Kendo just nodded, unable to trust her voice, a hollow feeling settling in her stomach like a stone. She listened to his words with new ears, hearing layers of meaning she'd never noticed before. The usual extravagant flair was gone, burned away and replaced by a quiet gravity that spoke of trials she couldn't even imagine. And what trials they must have been, she thought—to be exposed as a traitor, to have your every action scrutinized, to discover that your entire life had been manipulated by forces beyond your control.

She remembered Monoma's reaction during the briefing, the way his voice had cracked with genuine outrage as he'd demanded answers about Aoyama's continued enrollment. Kamakiri and Kuroiro had joined in, their accusations of blatant favoritism toward Class 1-A loud and insistent, fueled by the kind of righteous anger that came from watching someone get away with what should have been an unforgivable betrayal.

But looking at Aoyama now—really looking at him, seeing the weariness in his posture, the way his usual sparkle had been replaced by something that looked dangerously close to defeat—Kendo found it harder to maintain that anger. How do you hate someone who had been as much a victim as anyone else?

Back at the Viewing Room...

The viewing room's fluorescent lights hummed with mechanical persistence, casting their sterile, clinical glow over the exhausted faces of Class 1-B. The briefing had concluded nearly an hour ago, but none of them seemed capable of leaving. They sat in their chairs like survivors of a natural disaster, shell-shocked and struggling to process the wreckage of everything they'd once believed to be true.

The screen at the front of the room, which had displayed the impossible reality of Kagutsuchi's true nature—the footage of him systematically dismantling All Might, the casual displays of power that defied every law of physics they'd ever learned—was now a blank, black rectangle. But the images it had shown seemed burned into their retinas, playing on endless loop behind their closed eyelids.

"This is completely unacceptable," Monoma's voice suddenly cut through the oppressive silence like a knife through silk, sharp and furious and trembling with barely contained rage. His usual performative dramatics were completely absent, replaced by something raw and genuine and far more dangerous. "You're telling us that Aoyama—one of their 1-A's prized 'heroes'—was feeding information to the most dangerous villain in history, and he's just... being allowed to stay? With no consequences? No expulsion, no criminal charges, no nothing?"

Principal Nezu, still perched behind the main control console like some kind of omniscient puppet master, folded his small paws with deliberate calm. His dark, intelligent eyes—the kind that seemed to see through everything and everyone—studied Monoma with the detached interest of a scientist observing a particularly volatile chemical reaction.

"We have not denied that from an outside perspective, it may appear exactly as you've described, Neito-kun," he said, his voice maintaining that characteristic cheerful tone that somehow made his words even more unsettling. "And I fully understand your anger. From your position, with the limited information you've been given, you have every right to be incensed over this arrangement."

Kamakiri and Kuroiro, sitting on either side of Monoma like bodyguards flanking their charge, nodded in sharp agreement. Their faces were grim masks of indignation, reflecting the sentiment that had been building in Class 1-B since the moment they'd learned about Aoyama's betrayal.

"It's favoritism, plain and simple," Kamakiri grumbled, his blade-like protrusions twitching with agitation. "If this were one of us—if any of us had been caught feeding information to All For One—we'd be expelled faster than you could blink. Probably arrested too. But because it's precious Class 1-A..."

"If this were one of us, there wouldn't even be a discussion," Kuroiro added, his voice carrying the cold certainty of someone who had thought about this extensively. "We'd be gone. No second chances, no special consideration, no benefit of the doubt."

"But it is not that simple," Nezu interjected, his gaze fixing on the three students with laser precision. His tone remained pleasant, almost conversational, but there was an undercurrent of something far more serious—the voice of someone who had seen the full scope of the tragedy they were discussing and found their righteous anger to be painfully naive.

"To see this as a matter of unfair privilege is to miss the full scope of the tragedy that has been young Aoyama's entire existence," he continued, his words carefully measured. "Young Aoyama has been a victim for nearly his entire life, exploited and manipulated by All For One from the moment he was old enough to understand what it meant to be different. His free will, his very agency as a human being, was systematically stripped away from him by circumstances that were entirely out of his control."

The principal's words hung in the air, carrying a weight that seemed to press down on everyone in the room. Kamakiri and Kuroiro's expressions wavered, their indignation faltering as they were forced to confront a more complex reality than the simple narrative of favoritism they'd constructed.

But Monoma was undeterred, his anger too deeply rooted to be dismissed by appeals to sympathy. "A victim or not, he still made choices!" he shot back, his voice cracking with the effort of maintaining control. "He still chose to give information to All For One! He still chose to put our classmates in danger! People could have died because of what he did! Being manipulated doesn't erase the consequences of your actions!"

The raw emotion in his voice was startling—gone was the theatrical persona, the carefully crafted image of the attention-seeking rival. What remained was a teenage boy struggling with the fundamental unfairness of a world that seemed determined to protect some people while leaving others to fend for themselves.

Kendo, who had been listening to the exchange with growing discomfort, suddenly stepped forward. Her usual diplomatic restraint was strained to its breaking point as she watched her classmate spiral deeper into his resentment.

"That's enough, Monoma," she said, her voice carrying the firm authority that had made her Class 1-B's unofficial leader. "This wasn't another one of your pathetic attempts to one-up Class 1-A. This was about a real person—a person our age—who had been through something none of us could even imagine. The faculty had made their decision based on information we didn't have, considerations we couldn't understand. We had to trust that they knew what they were doing."

Monoma recoiled slightly under the force of her direct gaze, his bravado deflating like a punctured balloon. The rest of the class watched in uncomfortable silence as their usual dynamics played out against the backdrop of this new, terrible knowledge.

But the damage had been done. The questions had been raised, the resentments given voice, and no amount of reasonable explanation could fully address the fundamental unfairness they all felt. They were wrestling with truths too complex for simple answers—a hero who was also a victim, an enemy who was also a peer, a world that had revealed itself to be far more morally ambiguous than any of them had been prepared to handle.

Their universe, once painted in the clear blacks and whites of heroism and villainy, had been revealed to be nothing but shades of gray, and they were all struggling to find their footing in this new, uncertain landscape.

Back at the present…

The sparring match between Kendo and Aoyama had just concluded when Monoma Neito stepped onto the field. His usual theatrical entrance was absent—no grandiose gestures, no elaborate posturing. Instead, he moved with the deliberate, measured pace of someone who had been building up to this moment for hours, days even. His hands were stuffed deep in his pockets, knuckles white with tension, and while his trademark smirk was plastered across his face, it looked more like a grimace barely held in check.

The familiar mockery that usually danced in his pale blue eyes was gone, burned away and replaced by something far more dangerous—a cold, calculating fury that had been festering since the moment he'd watched that classified footage. Since the moment he'd realized that everything he thought he knew about their rivalry, their competition, their entire dynamic had been built on a lie.

He ignored the stunned looks from both classes, the way conversations died mid-sentence, the way even the instructors tensed as they recognized the shift in atmosphere. His gaze swept across Class 1-A like a spotlight, dismissing each face until it landed on its intended target.

"I'll fight you," he announced, his voice stripped of its usual bombastic flair. The words came out flat, controlled, but carrying an undercurrent of barely restrained venom. He raised one trembling finger and pointed it directly at Izuku Midoriya. "Mr. Chosen One himself."

The title dripped from his lips like poison, each syllable carefully enunciated to maximize its impact. It wasn't just a challenge—it was an accusation, a condemnation, a verbal slap that landed with surgical precision.

Izuku shifted uncomfortably under the weight of that pointing finger, the title hitting him like a physical blow. It was a reminder of a burden he'd never asked for, a responsibility that had been thrust upon him by forces beyond his comprehension or control. But it was Bakugo, standing a few feet away, who had the most visceral reaction. He flinched—a subtle but unmistakable twitch of his shoulder, his face contorting into an expression of pure, unadulterated revulsion.

The phrase "Mr. Chosen One" was the exact same bitter epithet Bakugo had spat at Izuku during their own confrontation about Kagutsuchi's revelation. To hear those words coming from Monoma—the insufferable, green-eyed copycat he detested more than anyone else in their year—felt like some kind of karmic punishment. His jaw clenched so hard his teeth ached, a silent, internal scream of shared dialogue echoing in his head.

Monoma, either oblivious to or deliberately ignoring the reactions he'd caused, began his approach toward Izuku. Each step was deliberate, measured, like a predator circling wounded prey. His usual theatrical flair had been replaced by something far more unsettling—genuine, unfiltered resentment.

"Don't think you're so special, Midoriya," he said, and there was no playful mocking in his tone now. This was raw emotion, months of suppressed jealousy and frustration finally given voice. "Just because you have a guardian angel on speed dial doesn't mean you're invincible. We're all in the hero course here. You're not the only one who can save people."

But even as he spoke, Monoma could feel the lie in his own words. The footage they'd just watched had made it painfully, brutally clear that Izuku was different. That he had access to power, to protection, to knowledge that the rest of them could never hope to touch. And worse—far worse—was the realization that this had been going on for months. While Class 1-B had been competing in what they thought was a fair rivalry, Class 1-A had been operating on an entirely different level.

"You know what really gets me?" Monoma continued, his voice rising despite his attempts to maintain control. "It's not just that you have these... these 'advantages'. It's that you've been pretending this whole time that we were equals. That our competitions meant something. That when we lost to you, it was because you were better heroes."

His laugh was sharp, bitter, devoid of any humor. "But it was never a fair fight, was it? While we were struggling with our Quirks, pushing ourselves to our limits, trying to prove we belonged in the hero course, you had the fucking Archangel Michael giving you private tutoring sessions!"

Kendo, her face flushed with embarrassment at her classmate's outburst, ran forward and grabbed Monoma's shoulder, trying to pull him back. "Monoma, stop it! This isn't the time or place for this!"

He shrugged her off with more violence than necessary, his eyes never leaving Izuku's face. "No, Kendo, this is exactly the time and place. This is where we prove that we're not just the B-team. That we're not just some backup dancers waiting in the wings while Class 1-A gets to star in their own personal apocalypse."

The words tumbled out of him now, months of suppressed resentment finally finding their voice. "Do you have any idea what it's like? Watching you people get all the attention, all the opportunities, all the special treatment, and being told it's because you're just better than us? And now we find out that half your class has been getting trained by a literal angel, that two of you have ancient divine powers, that you've been fighting cosmic battles while we've been worrying about pop quizzes!"

His voice cracked slightly on the last words, betraying the depth of emotion he was trying so hard to contain. "We've been working twice as hard for half the recognition, and the whole time it was rigged. The whole goddamn thing was rigged from the start."

Monoma's challenge wasn't really about proving his strength—it was about dignity. About the crushing realization that everything he'd worked for, everything he'd believed about merit and fairness and earning your place through effort, had been exposed as naive fantasy. The cosmic joke was that while he'd been desperately trying to copy Quirks to level the playing field, Izuku had been handed power that transcended Quirks entirely.

"So yeah, I want to fight you," he said, his voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. "Not because I think I can win. But because I need to know—when you beat me, will it be because you're a better hero? Or just because you're the teacher's pet of the entire fucking universe?"

The training ground fell silent, the only sound the harsh rasp of Monoma's breathing as he stood there, trembling with the effort of finally voicing what had been eating at him since the moment those classified files had shattered his worldview.

Izuku, his hands clenched into fists at his sides, could feel the weight of every eye on him. Class 1-A's gazes were a mixture of concern and protectiveness, while Class 1-B's held a cold, new kind of scrutiny—the look of people reassessing everything they thought they knew.

"Monoma," Izuku said quietly, his voice carrying a weariness that seemed far too old for his seventeen years. "This isn't a game. I never asked for any of this. I never wanted—"

"But you got it anyway!" Monoma snapped, cutting him off. "You got the power, you got the protection, you got the choice to be special. And the rest of us? We got to find out we've been living in your shadow this whole time without even knowing it."

Just as Izuku was about to take a step forward, accepting the challenge despite every instinct screaming at him not to, a sharp, familiar voice cut through the tension like a blade.

"Stop."

Shouta Aizawa stood at the edge of the training grounds, his face a mask of weary disapproval that somehow managed to convey both exhaustion and barely contained irritation. The sight of him was enough to make everyone in both classes automatically straighten up. His Quirk, Erasure, wasn't what they feared in this moment—it was the sheer, unadulterated annoyance he radiated at having his carefully planned lesson disrupted by teenage drama.

But Monoma was beyond caring about authority figures. The dam had burst, and months of suppressed feelings were flooding out. He jabbed his finger at Izuku again, his arm shaking with emotion.

"Why does he get to have these secrets?" he demanded, his voice cracking with the effort of containing his rage. "Why do he and Aoyama get to break every rule in the book while the rest of us have to follow protocol? Is it because they're from Class 1-A? Because they're different? Because they're special?"

His voice rose to nearly a shout, years of feeling like a second-class student finally exploding into the open. "It's not fair! None of this is fair! We've been competing in the special olympics while they've been running the regular race, and nobody thought to mention it!"

Aizawa's eyes, already narrowed with displeasure, fixed on Monoma with the intensity of a targeting laser. "Fairness is not a factor in heroism, Monoma," he said, his tone dry as sandpaper and twice as abrasive. "And if you have an issue with the decisions of the faculty, you can discuss it with Principal Nezu. After this exercise is over. After you've had time to think about whether throwing a tantrum in front of both classes is really the mature, heroic response to new information."

But the damage was done. The words hung in the air between the two classes like a toxic cloud, poisoning the atmosphere with resentment, jealousy, and the bitter taste of shattered illusions. Monoma stood there, chest heaving, having finally voiced what many in his class had been thinking but hadn't dared to say.

He wasn't just angry at Izuku—he was angry at a universe that seemed determined to make some people more equal than others, no matter how hard the rest of them tried to catch up.

The apartment was a shrine to normalcy—a carefully constructed illusion of innocuous teenage life that stood in stark contrast to the buzzing chaos of U.A. High and the frenetic, destructive energy of the League of Villains' hideouts. The walls were painted a cheerful, almost aggressively optimistic yellow, the kind of color chosen by someone who desperately wanted their living space to feel warm and inviting. They were dotted with photographs of a smiling girl—candid shots of school events, family gatherings, casual moments with friends—whose face Toga now wore with disturbing perfection.

She sat perched on the edge of a meticulously made bed, the comforter pulled tight with military precision, every pillow positioned exactly as its original occupant had left it. In her hand, she held a small, sleek communicator barely larger than a coin, its matte black surface reflecting none of the room's cheerful lighting. The device hummed with a low-grade static that seemed to vibrate through her fingers—the only sound breaking the oppressive silence that had settled over the space like a burial shroud.

"Yeah, it's me, Boss," she said, her voice a flawless imitation of the student whose life she had stolen, though her eyes held none of the original's natural warmth or playful glint. The vocal mimicry was perfect down to the smallest inflection, the result of weeks of careful observation and practice. "Everything's going according to plan. I got everything you asked for and then some. The security measures, a detailed map of the faculty areas, even some schematics for the ventilation system that took me a day and a half to photograph properly."

A low, grating voice, thick with irritation, crackled through the communications device. The static made it sound even more unpleasant, like nails dragging across a chalkboard. "You sound too relaxed, Toga. Don't get comfortable playing house in that pathetic little shrine to normalcy. The only way this works is if you're a flawless shadow of that girl. Are you absolutely certain you haven't attracted any undue attention? We can't afford any slip-ups, not when we're this close to the main event."

"Calm down, Tomura," Toga replied, allowing a hint of her natural smile to play across her borrowed features. The expression looked wrong on the stolen face—too sharp, too predatory, like a wolf wearing sheep's skin. She could almost see him on the other end of the connection, his scrawny neck probably itching with stress, his fingers twitching with that constant, nervous urge to disintegrate something just to feel the rush of power. "I'm the absolute picture of a perfect student. I even helped Kendo-chan and the others with their homework yesterday—differential equations, can you believe it? No one suspects a thing. I've got them all completely fooled."

There was a moment of crackling silence on the other end, filled only with the soft hiss of the encrypted connection. When Toga spoke again, her voice carried a note of genuine excitement that was entirely her own—the kind of twisted glee that came from contemplating violence and chaos.

"So, how's our little guest doing?" she asked, practically purring with anticipation. "Is she still... properly contained? Still providing adequate entertainment?"

"Of course she is," Tomura snapped, his voice thick with irritation that suggested this question had been asked too many times already. "She is far more than just 'contained,' Toga. She has become something beautiful—a symbol. A living, breathing message to this rotten world about the true nature of their precious heroes. When our grand design reaches its crescendo, she will be released to tell them everything. She'll scream our names to the heavens like some kind of apocalyptic herald, a monument to their helplessness and our inevitable victory."

Toga's eyes rolled so dramatically they nearly disappeared into her skull, the motion so exaggerated it was almost comical. Dramatic little shit, she thought, keeping the silent assessment carefully locked away where Tomura couldn't hear it. He always did have a flair for the theatrical, even when it made their plans unnecessarily complicated. She resisted the overwhelming urge to hum dismissively with the communicator still pressed to her ear.

"Right, a herald of the apocalypse," she said, forcing her tone to sound as earnest and reverent as she could manage without choking on her own sarcasm. "Very poetic. Got it, Boss. So, about the pickup tomorrow—is it still scheduled for right after the morning combat drills? The timing needs to be perfect if we want to avoid the faculty patrols."

"Of course it's still on schedule," Tomura said, the familiar irritation seeping back into his voice like poison through cracks in a foundation. "Don't you dare mess this up, Toga. The Nomu will be waiting for you at the designated extraction point, perfectly positioned and ready to move. Just act natural, exactly as you always do, blend in with those pathetic sheep, and we can finally put this phase of our grand plan into motion. Then—finally—we can crush these so-called heroes once and for all. We can show the world what happens when they put their faith in false idols."

"I won't let you down, Boss," she said, allowing just enough reverence to creep into her voice to sell the performance. "Everything will go exactly according to plan."

With a soft click that seemed unnaturally loud in the oppressive quiet, the transmission ended. The room was silent once more, the cheerful yellow of the walls now feeling like a silent mockery of the darkness that had settled over the space. The normalcy felt suffocating, artificial, like a stage set designed to fool casual observers.

Toga walked over to the small desk positioned in the corner of the room, her stolen features settling into an expression of professional focus. Her eyes fell upon the organized chaos of her intelligence work—weeks of careful observation and meticulous documentation spread across the wooden surface like the components of some elaborate puzzle.

Pages of handwritten notes were scattered in carefully organized piles, each one representing a piece of the larger picture she had been methodically assembling. Her handwriting was neat, precise, completely unlike her usual chaotic scrawl—another layer of the disguise she had crafted with obsessive attention to detail. Photos of U.A.'s latest security measures lay next to a crude but surprisingly detailed map of the school grounds, with key entry points circled in red ink and patrol routes marked in blue. Guard schedules, faculty movement patterns, and student routines—all of it catalogued with the kind of thoroughness that would have impressed even the most dedicated intelligence operative.

Reports from Class 1-A and 1-B's joint exercise from earlier that day were also there, her observations about their strengths and weaknesses carefully noted in the margins. She could still feel the residual tension that had been hanging in the air during the drill like a storm cloud ready to burst—the sharp, angry words of that blond boy from 1-B, whose name she'd learned was Monoma, and the quiet but unmistakable disappointment radiating from the faculty as they watched their students tear each other apart with words instead of working together.

The drama had been absolutely delicious—the kind of juicy interpersonal conflict that made her whole body tremble with anticipation. She had wanted so badly to fan those flames, to whisper just the right words in just the right ears to turn that tension into something truly explosive. The only thing that had stopped her was the vivid mental image of Tomura's decay-touched fingers wrapped around her throat, the promise of a slow, dusty death or, perhaps even worse, a quick abandonment to the authorities who would love nothing more than to get their hands on a League infiltrator.

Her eyes drifted over the scattered notes, scanning the familiar information with practiced efficiency, when one name seemed to leap off the page and strike her like a physical blow: Izuku Midoriya. All the tension she had observed, all the drama and conflict and barely contained resentment—it all seemed to circle around him like he was some kind of gravitational center pulling everything into his orbit.

But why? What made him so special? What was it about this one unremarkable-looking boy that seemed to generate such intense reactions from everyone around him?

A sharp, sudden ache formed behind her eyes, starting as a dull throb and quickly intensifying into something that felt like someone was driving an ice pick through her skull. She pressed her palms against her temples, trying to massage away the pain, when something flickered at the edge of her consciousness—a phantom memory that felt both alien and intimately familiar.

For just a moment, less than a heartbeat, she saw a figure wreathed in impossible light, beautiful and terrible beyond description, with wings that seemed to span the entire world. The image was gone as quickly as it had come, leaving her confused, disoriented, and strangely empty, like someone had reached into her mind and stolen something precious.

"What the hell was that?" she whispered to the empty room, shaking her head violently as if she could physically dislodge the lingering fragments of the vision. "What was I even thinking about?"

The name—Izuku Midoriya—still sat there on the page in front of her, but now it felt different somehow. Familiar and distant at the same time, like an echo of a memory she couldn't quite grasp. It was as if someone had taken a photograph and torn out the most important part, leaving only the ragged edges to suggest what had been lost.

Shaking her head to clear away the lingering confusion, she forced herself to return to her work. The familiar scent of ink and paper provided a comforting anchor in the strange, unsettling quiet that had settled over the room like a blanket. Whatever that had been—a hallucination, a migraine, a stress response—it didn't matter. She had a job to do, and failure was not an option.

The faculty room at U.A. was a sanctuary of mundane professionalism, a carefully maintained bubble of normalcy that existed in sharp contrast to the heroics and villainy that defined so much of the students' daily lives. The air was thick with the familiar scent of lukewarm coffee that had been sitting too long in glass carafes, the rustle of administrative paperwork, and the quiet hum of conversation about lesson plans and student evaluations.

In a quiet corner, deliberately positioned away from the main clusters of faculty discussion, Kagutsuchi sat with his back to the wall. He was dressed in his crisp, immaculately maintained janitor's uniform, the U.A. logo a small but precisely placed patch on his chest. In his hands, he held a newspaper that he appeared to be reading with complete absorption, though anyone observing closely might have noticed that his eyes hadn't moved across the page in several minutes.

The headline that had supposedly captured his attention was a splashy report about a "freak accident" at an urban renewal site—one of those vague, carefully sanitized news stories that revealed nothing while pretending to explain everything. But Kagutsuchi's focus wasn't really on the meaningless words. He was listening, monitoring, keeping track of a dozen different conversations and subtle power dynamics playing out across the room.

From a few tables away, Gran Torino sat hunched over his own cup of coffee, which had gone completely cold and untouched. The old hero's weathered face was set in lines of deep concentration, his sharp eyes fixed on the seemingly innocuous janitor with the kind of wary, predatory focus usually reserved for dangerous enemies. He had been watching Kagutsuchi for weeks now, ever since he had come out of retirement and rejoined the faculty.

There was something fundamentally wrong about him—not anything Gran Torino could put his finger on, not from his awareness of the man's true identity, but a deep-seated hum of wrongness that made every heroic instinct he had developed over decades of combat experience scream warnings. It was like looking at a perfectly realistic painting and slowly realizing that all the shadows were falling in impossible directions.

As if summoned by the old hero's intense scrutiny, Kagutsuchi's phone began to vibrate against the wooden table with violent intensity, the old-fashioned ringtone cutting through the room's professional atmosphere like a chainsaw through silk. He picked up the device with unhurried precision and held it to his ear, his expression shifting to one of barely contained resignation as a torrent of sound erupted from the tiny speaker.

"—AND THEN, THOSE DAMN MORTALS!" a voice bellowed from the phone, so loud and furious that it was clearly audible to anyone within a ten-foot radius. "MEDDLING IN THINGS THEY DON'T UNDERSTAND! INTERFERING WITH CAREFULLY LAID PLANS! MY SUBORDINATE WAS MERE MOMENTS AWAY FROM COMPLETING HIS ASSIGNED TASK! DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW DIFFICULT IT IS TO FIND COMPETENT HELP IN THIS DAY AND AGE, KAGUTSUCHI?!"

The voice was deep, resonant, carrying the kind of authority that suggested its owner was accustomed to being obeyed without question. But there was also something almost comically petulant about the tone, like a cosmic being throwing a temper tantrum.

Kagutsuchi flinched visibly, holding the phone away from his ear for a moment before responding in a tone of practiced calm that suggested he had dealt with this particular type of outburst many times before. "Barachiel, please calm yourself. These things happen. Setbacks are an inevitable part of any complex operation."

"HAPPEN?! HAPPEN?!" The voice—Barachiel—screeched, somehow managing to become even louder and more indignant than before. "I HAVE HAD TO PUT EQUUS NOCTUS ON ADMINISTRATIVE LEAVE! HE HAD THE ABSOLUTE AUDACITY TO SUBMIT AN OFFICIAL VACATION REQUEST! DO YOU UNDERSTAND THE IMPLICATIONS OF A COSMIC ENTITY SHAPED LIKE A HORSE ASKING FOR TIME OFF?! I'M SURROUNDED BY INCOMPETENCE, KAGUTSUCHI! ABSOLUTE, MIND-NUMBING INCOMPETENCE!"

The other teachers in the room had developed what appeared to be a practiced immunity to these sorts of bizarre interruptions. They continued with their work—grading papers, planning lessons, discussing administrative minutiae—as if supernatural beings screaming through cellular devices was just another Tuesday at U.A. High School. A few shot curious glances in Kagutsuchi's direction, but most seemed to accept that the mild-mannered janitor simply had eccentric contacts.

Kagutsuchi pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger, exhaling a long, profoundly weary sigh that seemed to carry the weight of millennia. "I understand your frustration, but perhaps we should discuss this matter privately. At a more appropriate time. And at a considerably lower volume."

"FINE!" Barachiel's voice crackled through the speaker one final time. "But this conversation is far from over, Michael. We have serious matters to discuss regarding your... unorthodox methods."

The line went dead with a sharp click, leaving Kagutsuchi to set his phone down with deliberate care. He returned his attention to his newspaper as if nothing unusual had occurred, though the slight tightening around his eyes suggested the conversation had been more taxing than he cared to admit.

The cavernous space of Gym Gamma was filled with the fading echoes of combat—the distant memory of explosions still seemed to reverberate off the reinforced walls, mixing with the sharp hiss of compressed air systems and the metallic clang of training equipment being secured for the evening. The afternoon sun streamed through the high, industrial windows, illuminating thousands of dust motes that danced in the air like tiny spirits, the particles disturbed by the intense physical activity that had just concluded.

The joint drill between Classes 1-A and 1-B had been a grueling combat simulation designed to push both groups to their absolute limits, testing not just their individual abilities but their capacity to work together under pressure. For Class 1-A, despite the obvious fatigue etched into their faces, there was an unmistakable air of quiet confidence. They stood with the practiced ease of students who had been through this type of intense training countless times before, their movements efficient and controlled even in their exhaustion.

For Class 1-B, the story was dramatically different. They were battered and bruised, both physically and emotionally, their usual competitive fire dimmed to barely glowing embers. Resentful glares shot across the space toward their supposed rivals, who seemed to have navigated the brutal exercise with an almost casual indifference that only made their own struggles feel more pronounced and humiliating.

A hush fell over the assembled students as Kagutsuchi entered the gymnasium, pushing a heavy-duty industrial cleaning cart with the quiet, methodical rhythm of someone who had performed this exact routine hundreds of times before. He wore his standard-issue janitor's uniform, the fabric crisp and clean despite the demands of his job, the U.A. logo positioned exactly where it should be—a small, unassuming patch on his chest that somehow managed to look more official than most heroes' costume emblems.

His movements were deliberate and unhurried, creating a stark contrast to the high-octane energy and barely controlled chaos that had dominated the space just minutes earlier. There was something almost meditative about the way he navigated around the scattered training equipment, as if the simple act of cleaning was a form of spiritual practice.

Ibara Shiozaki, her distinctive vine-like hair coiled neatly around her head in an intricate pattern that spoke of hours of careful maintenance, noticed his entrance immediately. The sight of him seemed to trigger something profound in her—a recognition that went far deeper than mere awareness of his presence. She approached him with movements that were both reverent and purposeful, her posture automatically shifting into something that resembled a formal bow.

"Lord Michael," she said, her voice a soft, melodic whisper that carried clearly through the vast space despite its gentle volume. The title rolled off her tongue with the kind of natural reverence usually reserved for prayer. "Have you come to bless us with your divine presence?"

Kagutsuchi stopped his cleaning cart, one hand resting casually on the handle as he turned to face her. A small, knowing smile played at the corners of his mouth—the kind of expression worn by someone who had been through this particular conversation more times than he cared to count.

"No, Shiozaki," he replied, his voice gentle and warm, carrying none of the cosmic authority that his true nature might have suggested. "I'm just here to clean up the mess you've all made. That's my job, nothing more, nothing less."

"Oh, but you needn't concern yourself with such menial tasks, sir," Ibara insisted, her expression shifting to one of genuine concern mixed with something that looked almost like distress. "We are perfectly capable of cleaning up our own mess. It would be deeply disrespectful—perhaps even sacrilegious—to allow someone of your... nature to perform such mundane labor on our behalf."

The other students in both classes were watching this exchange with expressions ranging from confusion to fascination to barely disguised discomfort. Most of them still hadn't fully processed what they'd learned about Kagutsuchi's true identity, and watching one of their classmates address the school janitor as if he were a religious figure was surreal enough to make reality feel unstable.

"I genuinely appreciate the offer," Kagutsuchi said, his eyes reflecting a deep sense of peace that seemed to emanate from somewhere far beyond normal human experience. "But this is precisely why I chose to work as a janitor in the first place. This is my duty—chosen freely and fulfilled willingly—and I find genuine purpose in even the smallest acts of service."

From somewhere in the back of the assembled students, a low, derisive scoff cut through the moment of quiet reverence like a blade through silk. Neito Monoma stood with his arms crossed defensively over his chest, his usually carefully maintained facade completely abandoned in favor of naked fury. The expression on his face was one of pure, unadulterated contempt.

"Yeah, right," he said, his voice dripping with bitter sarcasm and loud enough to ensure everyone in the gymnasium could hear him clearly. "He's obviously just here to give Class 1-A another one of their special power boosts. Can't let the precious chosen ones go too long without their divine intervention."

The words hung in the air like a toxic cloud, poisoning the atmosphere with their venom. The students of Class 1-A, who had endured Monoma's verbal attacks for nearly two years, immediately stiffened with a mixture of offense and protective anger. Several of them took half-steps forward, as if preparing to physically defend their mysterious benefactor from the blond boy's accusations.

Ibara whirled around to face her classmate, her usually serene features twisted into an expression of profound disappointment and barely contained outrage. "Monoma," she said, her voice sharp with reproach, "that is not only highly disrespectful, it's completely inappropriate. You will apologize to him immediately."

But Monoma was far beyond the reach of social pressure or appeals to basic decency. The resentment that had been building inside him for months had finally found its voice, and he seemed determined to let it speak regardless of the consequences. His eyes blazed with a bitter jealousy that appeared to be consuming him from the inside out, transforming him into something desperate and dangerous.

"Why should I apologize?" he shot back, his voice cracking with the strain of containing emotions too large for his seventeen-year-old frame to properly handle. "It's not like he hasn't already handed them the entire world on a silver platter! What's wrong with throwing in a few more perks while he's at it? Maybe he can arrange for them to get automatic A's in all their classes too!"

Kagutsuchi simply stood there, his expression completely unreadable as he regarded Monoma with steady, unblinking eyes. The silence stretched between them like a taut wire, filled with a tension that made the other students shift uncomfortably. Several members of Class 1-B shot their classmate nervous, worried looks, clearly fearing that he had finally crossed a line that couldn't be uncrossed.

As the seconds ticked by, something subtle but unmistakable began to change in Kagutsuchi's demeanor. A slow, almost imperceptible smile started to spread across his lips—not the warm, gentle expression he had shown Ibara, but something colder, more calculating. The smile didn't reach his eyes, which remained fixed on Monoma with the kind of predatory focus that suggested the janitor was seeing far more than anyone else realized.

"Tell me something, young man," Kagutsuchi said, his voice soft and conversational but carrying an unmistakable edge that made several students instinctively take a step back. "Does it feel satisfying to try and tear others down simply because they happen to be different from you? Is that how your old classmates used to treat you when they discovered the limitations of your copying Quirk?"

The question hit the gathered students like a physical blow. The rest of Class 1-B blinked in visible surprise, their faces shifting as pieces of a puzzle they hadn't even known existed suddenly clicked into place. This explained so much about Monoma's behavior, his desperate need to prove himself, his constant comparisons to Class 1-A.

But Monoma himself reacted as if he'd been struck by lightning. His eyes went wide with disbelief and something that looked dangerously close to panic as painful memories came flooding back with vivid, devastating clarity. He could see the faces of his middle school classmates with perfect accuracy—their cruel, mocking smiles, their whispered conversations that stopped whenever he approached, their casual dismissal of his abilities.

He remembered their words with crystalline precision: "Quirkless wannabe." "Parasite who's nothing without stealing from others." "Empty shell with no real power." And the worst part—the part that had haunted him through sleepless nights and bitter days—was that they had been right. Without someone to copy, without borrowed strength, he truly was nothing.

With a sound that was half scream and half sob, Monoma lunged forward, his fist drawn back in a wild swing that carried with it years of accumulated rage and humiliation. He moved with a speed that startled even the battle-hardened students of Class 1-A, covering the distance to Kagutsuchi in a matter of heartbeats.

His fist connected squarely with the janitor's stomach, landing with a solid thud that echoed through the gymnasium. For a moment, the world seemed to hold its breath, waiting to see what would happen next.

Kagutsuchi didn't even flinch. His serene expression remained completely unchanged, as if the punch had been nothing more than a gentle tap on the shoulder. The blow that should have doubled him over, that would have sent any normal person staggering backward, might as well have been a butterfly landing on his uniform.

Monoma stared for a moment in disbelief, then began hitting him again and again—a desperate, frantic barrage of strikes that served no purpose other than to release the torrent of rage and self-loathing that had been building inside him for years. His fists bounced off Kagutsuchi's form like raindrops off stone, each impact accomplishing nothing except to further demonstrate his own powerlessness.

Tears began to spill from his eyes, mixing with the sweat and dust on his face as he continued his futile assault. The other students could only stare in stunned silence, having never seen this side of their usually cocky and composed classmate. This wasn't the theatrical Monoma they knew—this was something raw and broken, a seventeen-year-old boy finally confronting the demons that had been chasing him since childhood.

His barrage of punches finally came to an end when exhaustion overwhelmed rage, leaving him bent over with his hands on his knees, his whole body heaving as he struggled to catch his breath. When he finally looked up at Kagutsuchi, his face was streaked with tears but still held that familiar spark of defiance, that stubborn refusal to submit even in the face of absolute defeat.

"I don't need your fucking opinion," he spat, his voice trembling with emotion and barely contained hysteria, before turning and storming toward the gymnasium's main doors. His exit was dramatic but somehow pathetic, leaving behind a silence that felt heavier than any words could have been.