The police station hummed with a low, bureaucratic energy, a stark contrast to the chaotic, adrenaline-fueled battle in the park. Fluorescent lights cast a sterile glow on the beige walls. Izuku, now in a fresh, borrowed tracksuit, sat on a hard plastic chair in a small, windowless waiting room. The faint scent of disinfectant and stale coffee clung to the air. His body still ached, a dull throb in his ribs and stomach, but the more visible injuries had indeed healed, thanks to the Agito's accelerated recovery, even without Recovery Girl's Quirk. Yet, a deep, bone-weary exhaustion settled over him, and his mind replayed the horrifying disintegration of Luteus, a chilling loop he couldn't escape.

He'd heard the muffled voices from the interrogation rooms down the hall. Ochako, her voice usually bright, had sounded subdued. Iida's earnest, chopping declarations were punctuated by the officers' calmer questions. He imagined Momo's precise explanations, Shoji's quiet, observant responses. Each of them, in their own way, would be grappling with the inexplicable, trying to fit the impossible into the framework of their understanding. And Naomasa, with his Quirk, would know every truth, every bewildered, honest account.

The door creaked open, pulling Izuku from his reverie. Detective Naomasa Tsukauchi stood there, his expression unreadable, a folder tucked under his arm. His eyes, usually sharp and assessing, held a hint of weary concern as they met Izuku's.

"Midoriya-kun," Naomasa said, his voice quiet, devoid of the usual police formality. "They're ready for you."

Izuku nodded, pushing himself up from the chair, his muscles protesting. He followed Naomasa down a short, quiet hallway and into another small room. This one was even more sparse, with a single metal table and two chairs. A recording device sat silently in the center of the table.

Naomasa gestured to one of the chairs, then took the other, placing the folder on the table between them. He didn't immediately start the recording. Instead, he leaned back, his gaze steady on Izuku.

"Rough night, huh, kid?" Naomasa finally said, his voice soft. It wasn't a question, but an acknowledgment.

Izuku swallowed, his throat dry. "Yeah," he managed, his voice a little hoarse. He looked down at his hands, clasped tightly in his lap. "It was... a lot."

Naomasa nodded slowly. "I've heard the others' statements. They're... consistent. And truthful, as far as my Quirk can tell. They saw a villain, you fought him, and then he... well, he disappeared in a rather spectacular fashion." He paused, his gaze unwavering. "They're shaken, Midoriya-kun. Confused. They don't understand what they saw."

Izuku flinched, the image of Luteus dissolving flashing behind his eyes. "I... I don't really understand it either, Detective," he admitted, his voice barely a whisper. "Not completely."

Naomasa sighed, a long, weary sound. He reached forward and pressed the 'record' button. A small red light blinked on.

"Alright, Midoriya-kun," Naomasa began, his voice now taking on a more official tone, though it remained gentle. "Please state your full name for the record."

"Izuku Midoriya," he replied, his voice steadier now, the formality a strange comfort.

"And please, in your own words, tell me everything that happened tonight, from the moment you left UA until now."

Izuku took a deep breath, collecting his thoughts. He started from the walk to the train station, the casual chatter with his new friends. He described the sudden, chilling dread that had seized him, the inexplicable paralysis, and the primal fear that had made him bolt into the park. He recounted the ambush by Luteus, the brutal attacks, the searing pain, and the desperate, almost instinctual surge of will that had finally allowed him to transform.

He chose his words carefully, omitting the more cryptic details about Kagutsuchi and the Lords, adhering to the narrative he and Kagutsuchi had loosely agreed upon for public consumption: a new, unique Quirk, still in its nascent stages, that manifested as an armor and granted him enhanced abilities. He described the fight, the speed of Luteus, the difficulty in tracking him, and the moment he had pushed beyond his visual senses to anticipate the attack. He explained the final blow, the concentrated energy, and the overwhelming force of the kick.

He paused, then, before describing Luteus's end. He looked at Naomasa, who simply watched him, his expression unreadable.

"And then," Izuku continued, his voice dropping, a tremor returning to it, "he... he just started to dissolve. Into green light, and then dust. I... I don't know what happened, Detective. It was... it was terrifying." He shivered, despite the warmth of the room. "He just... ceased to exist."

Naomasa listened, his eyes fixed on Izuku. His Quirk, the Truth Serum, was silent. It registered nothing, no flicker of truth or falsehood, as if Izuku's very presence, his status as an Agito, naturally negated its effect. It was the same unnerving sensation he'd experienced with Kagutsuchi. He knew Izuku was speaking, but his Quirk offered no confirmation, no familiar hum. And that, in itself, was deeply unsettling.

When Izuku finished, the room was silent for a long moment, broken only by the faint whir of the recording device. Naomasa leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table, his gaze softening slightly.

"Midoriya-kun," he said, his voice low. "I believe you. Every word. And that's... concerning." He picked up a pen, tapping it gently on the folder. "This 'Quirk' of yours, this 'armor'... it's unlike anything in the Quirk registry. And what happened to this 'Luteus'... that's even more unprecedented. We have no record of villains, or even Quirks, that can cause complete, instantaneous disintegration like that."

Izuku nodded, looking down again. "I know. It's... it's a lot to take in."

"And that's understandable," Naomasa stated, his voice filled with genuine concern, his gaze searching Izuku's face. He then leaned in slightly, his voice dropping to a low, almost imperceptible whisper, barely audible over the hum of the recording device. "Midoriya-kun, sometimes... sometimes it's best to stick to what's easily understood. What makes sense to the public, and to the system. You understand?" He gave a subtle, almost imperceptible nod towards the recording device, then back to Izuku, a silent plea for discretion.

"Detective," Izuku began, his voice quiet but firm, "my Quirk... it's a bit more complex than just physical enhancement. It's an insect mutation type, and it seems to come with a very strong healing factor. That's why Recovery Girl's Quirk didn't work on me; my body was already handling the recovery on its own, adapting and evolving to the strain. It's a natural part of its function, I guess."

Naomasa's eyes remained steady on Izuku. He didn't interrupt, simply listened. His Quirk, the Truth Serum, remained silent, registering nothing. It was still unnerving, but Izuku's explanation, while extraordinary, at least fit within the realm of Quirks. "A unique mutation, with a powerful healing factor and rapid adaptation," Naomasa mused aloud, mostly to himself. "That would certainly explain Recovery Girl's confusion based on your earlier accounts after the Entrance Exam." He nodded slowly, outwardly accepting the explanation, though a flicker of private unease remained in his eyes.

"And this... unique aspect of your Quirk, Midoriya-kun," Naomasa continued, his voice calm, but with a subtle probing edge. "Did someone help you understand or develop it to this extent?"

Izuku looked directly into Naomasa's eyes. "Toshinori Yagi, a… friend," he said, the name hanging in the air between them. "He's the one who told me. He's... he's been helping me."

Naomasa leaned back, a hand going to rub his temples, the red light on the recording device continuing to blink, silently documenting a narrative that, for now, was all the world was ready to hear.

Just then, a sharp, insistent knock echoed on the door. Naomasa's head snapped up, his eyes narrowing slightly. He reached forward and pressed the 'stop' button on the recording device, the small red light extinguishing. He then rose, his gaze flicking to Izuku, a silent instruction to remain where he was.

Naomasa crossed the small room and opened the door. Standing in the hallway was Toshinori Yagi, still in his civilian guise, his suit a little rumpled from the long day, his face etched with a deep, palpable concern. Behind him, leaning casually against the wall, was Kagutsuchi. He had changed out of his dark coat and into a simple black button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, revealing toned forearms, paired with faded blue jeans. His usual enigmatic smile played on his lips, a stark contrast to Toshinori's worried expression.

"Naomasa!" Toshinori exclaimed, his voice low but urgent. "Is young Midoriya alright? We just heard about the incident at the park! What happened?!" His eyes darted past Naomasa to Izuku, relief flooding his features when he saw the boy, albeit tired, was mostly unharmed.

Naomasa, with a sigh that seemed to carry the weight of the entire night, stepped aside and ushered the two men into the small interrogation room. Toshinori immediately strode towards Izuku, his concern evident in every line of his body.

"Young Midoriya, are you truly alright?" Toshinori asked, his voice thick with worry, placing a gentle hand on Izuku's shoulder.

Izuku looked up at his mentor, a faint, weary smile touching his lips. "I'm okay, All Might," he mumbled, grateful for the familiar presence. His gaze then shifted past Toshinori, landing on Kagutsuchi.

Upon seeing the enigmatic man, Izuku stiffened. The words Luteus had uttered in the park echoed in his mind, a cold realization settling in. He remembered the cheetah-man's cruel smile, so chillingly similar to the one now widening on Kagutsuchi's face as the "angel's" dark eyes met his. A shiver ran down Izuku's spine, a fresh wave of unease washing over him.

Naomasa closed the door, the click of the lock echoing in the small room. He turned to face Toshinori and Kagutsuchi, his expression grim.

"The other children's statements were consistent," Naomasa began, his voice flat, devoid of emotion, a stark contrast to Toshinori's earlier outburst. "They described a sudden, unprovoked attack by a humanoid figure with cheetah-like features. They saw Midoriya-kun transform into that armored state, fight back, and ultimately defeat the assailant." He paused, his gaze hardening as he looked at Toshinori. "And then, according to all their accounts, and Midoriya-kun's own testimony, the villain simply... disintegrated. Into green light and dust. Just like what happened on Dagobah Beach."

Toshinori gasped, his eyes widening in profound shock, his hand flying to his mouth. "Disintegrated?! A Lord?!" The implications hit him with the force of a physical blow. He turned to Izuku, then back to Naomasa, a silent question in his eyes.

Naomasa's gaze, sharp and accusatory, snapped to Kagutsuchi. "And you," he stated, his voice cutting through the tension, "had something to do with this, didn't you, Kagutsuchi-san? This 'Luteus'... he was a subordinate of yours, wasn't he?"

Kagutsuchi's smile widened, a faint, almost imperceptible chuckle escaping his lips. He took a few unhurried steps until he was a short ways away from the interrogation table, his movements fluid and unnervingly casual. He met Naomasa's piercing gaze without a flicker of hesitation.

"Indeed," Kagutsuchi admitted, his voice calm and even, a chilling nonchalance in his tone. "Luteus is, or now was, one of my subordinates. And yes, Detective, I did give him permission to attack Midoriya-kun. It was... a test."

Toshinori's jaw dropped, his face paling further. "A test?!" he roared, his voice cracking with disbelief and a surge of protective fury. He took a step towards Kagutsuchi, his hands clenching into fists, the concern for Izuku momentarily overshadowed by a raw, unadulterated anger. "You deliberately put Young Midoriya in mortal danger?! What kind of 'test' involves a child fighting for his life?!"

Naomasa, though equally stunned by Kagutsuchi's casual admission, quickly moved to intercept Toshinori, placing a firm hand on his arm. "All Might, calm down!" he urged, his voice low and strained. He knew that Kagutsuchi's presence negated his Quirk, but the sheer audacity of the confession was enough to make his blood run cold. His own face was a mask of controlled fury, his eyes narrowed to slits as he stared at Kagutsuchi. "You call this a test?" Naomasa repeated, his voice dangerously quiet. "You endangered innocent civilians, and you subjected a minor to an unprovoked, potentially lethal assault. This isn't a 'test,' Kagutsuchi-san. This is a criminal act. And I intend to treat it as such. I could arrest you right now."

Kagutsuchi merely tilted his head, his smile unwavering, seemingly unfazed by their outrage. His dark eyes flickered between the enraged Toshinori and the seething Naomasa, a hint of amusement dancing within their depths. "On what believable charge, Detective?" he purred, his voice as smooth as ever. "Conspiracy to... what, exactly? 'Endangerment of a minor' where the minor in question not only emerged unscathed, but demonstrably stronger? 'Assault' when the alleged assailant is now a pile of dust, and the victim is a hero-in-training who claims it was a 'test' of his new Quirk?"

Toshinori, still fuming, interjected, "We could frame you! As a criminal whose accomplice assaulted Young Midoriya! We have witnesses!"

Kagutsuchi's smile widened, a cold, predatory glint entering his eyes. "And Luteus?" he countered, his voice dropping to a low, chilling whisper. "How exactly will you frame his death at the hands of Midoriya-kun?"

Izuku's head, which had been slowly rising as he listened to the exchange, suddenly fell, his gaze fixed on the sterile floor. The weight of Kagutsuchi's words, the inescapable truth of what he had done, settled heavily in his stomach.

"No court would be able to charge Midoriya-kun with anything but self-defense," Naomasa countered, his voice firm, though the underlying frustration was evident. "He was attacked, and he defended himself. That's a clear-cut case, Kagutsuchi-san. You won't be able to pin anything on him."

Kagutsuchi let out a soft, snide chuckle. "Oh, Detective, how long do you believe such a convenient framing will sustain itself?" His gaze drifted to Izuku, then back to Naomasa. "When Izuku-kun has to keep fending off more and more Lords? When the world starts to notice that these 'villains' keep appearing, only to vanish into dust at his hands? How long until the questions become too loud, too persistent, for your carefully constructed narrative to hold?"

Toshinori, his patience snapped, lunged forward. With a speed that belied his slight frame, he grabbed Kagutsuchi by the collar of his shirt, his refreshed strength causing a tremor to reverberate around the small, sterile room as he slammed the "angel" against the wall. Kagutsuchi's head hit the plaster with a dull thud, but his smile remained, unfazed.

"Enough of this dancing around, Kagutsuchi!" Toshinori snarled, his voice a low, dangerous growl, his face inches from Kagutsuchi's. "You brought this upon Young Midoriya! You should have stopped these 'Lords' from attacking him from the start! Tell them to cease! Order your subordinates to leave him alone!"

Kagutsuchi's dark eyes met Toshinori's furious gaze, his smile not faltering. "Ah, but I cannot do that, Toshinori," he replied, his voice calm, almost sympathetic, despite the force pinning him against the wall. "It would violate a decree. A very ancient, very powerful one. If not my own subordinates, then others will simply pick up the slack. The Will of Darkness is vast, and its agents are many. If they won't listen to me, who will they listen to? No one else but God, of course." He paused, his smile growing wider, more unsettling. "The best that Izuku-kun can hope for is just to keep fighting to stay alive. And perhaps," he added, his gaze flicking pointedly towards the recording device and then to Naomasa, "he should stop calling the police so we won't have a repeat of this little get-together. Because, frankly, this might just get old too."

Toshinori gritted his teeth, his grip tightening on Kagutsuchi's shirt, knuckles white. The raw, primal urge to simply cave the man's head in warred with his ingrained sense of justice and the logical part of his mind that knew such an act would only complicate matters further. He held the "angel" against the wall for another tense moment, his breath coming in ragged gasps, before, with a frustrated growl, he released him. Kagutsuchi slid down the wall, landing gracefully on his feet, smoothing out his shirt as if nothing had happened.

Kagutsuchi let out a soft, almost weary sigh, a sound that seemed out of place on his perpetually smiling face. "Look, the only thing any of you can truly do, is fight," he stated, his voice losing its playful edge, becoming stark and direct. "Something that simple shouldn't even be debated. If Izuku-kun is feeling the emotional burnout from this... well, he should get over it after a while. He has to. For the truth of the matter is that even hero work isn't that clean or glamorous. It's messy. It's brutal. And sometimes, the only way forward is through."

Toshinori scoffed, shaking his head. "Begrudgingly, I agree that fighting is necessary," he conceded, his voice laced with bitterness. "But the psychological toll on Young Midoriya would be immense! He isn't built for that kind of constant, existential dread, Kagutsuchi! And he most certainly isn't an unfeeling monster like you!"

Kagutsuchi's smile faltered for a fleeting instant, a subtle shift in his features, as if the designation had genuinely pricked him. His dark eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly, a flicker of something unreadable passing through them. Then, with another brush of his hand down his shirt, he composed himself, the enigmatic smile returning. "Monster, you say?" he mused, a low chuckle escaping him. "My dear Toshinori, I've been called plenty of things over the millennia. 'Monster' is hardly the most imaginative. Brush it off, Izuku-kun. You'll hear worse."

Izuku, still slumped in his chair, wished he could just disappear. The conversation was a whirlwind of terrifying implications, and the weight of it all pressed down on him. He brought his hand to his mouth, biting his lip hard, so hard that he tasted the metallic tang of blood.

Seeing this, Toshinori immediately moved from Kagutsuchi, his anger momentarily forgotten as his focus snapped back to his young successor. He knelt beside Izuku, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Young Midoriya, don't listen to him," Toshinori said, his voice softer now, filled with genuine warmth. "We'll figure something out. We always do. You don't have to carry this burden alone."

Kagutsuchi let out another sigh, a sound of almost theatrical exasperation. "You're free to do that, of course," he stated, his voice carrying an air of detached amusement. "But the attacks won't stop from now on. They will escalate. The other Lords will have heard about Luteus's rather... definitive demise by now, and they will act accordingly. Maybe not now, but eventually, they will. Which is precisely why Izuku-kun can only be ready. He must be."

Toshinori was just about to rip into him again, a fresh wave of fury building, when a sharp, insistent knock echoed on the door. Naomasa, his face even more tense than before, seemed to brace himself before he briskly opened it.

Standing in the doorway was a man covered in sleek, striking blue fur, his features distinctly cheetah-like—elongated muzzle, sharp amber eyes, and faintly twitching ears—but his posture was calm, almost scholarly. The crisp light-blue police uniform he wore was neatly pressed, his tie perfectly knotted, and a small station badge gleamed on his chest. He held a folder tucked neatly under one arm and a steaming mug of coffee in the other, the scent of fresh brew curling lazily into the sterile air.

Izuku froze, his body stiffening instinctively, heart thundering as his mind flashed back to Luteus—claws, blood, and the gnashing jaws of a predator. For a heartbeat, his vision tunneled, every muscle coiled for a fight. But then his eyes registered the uniform, the ID badge clipped to the man's chest, the calm professionalism in his movements. Not a Lord. Not a hunter. Just… a clerk. Relief surged through him, though it came laced with shame; his breath escaped in a quiet, shaky exhale. This was just a heteromorph officer doing his job. Nothing more.

Naomasa's eyes, which had widened in recognition, quickly narrowed. "Yasuda-kun?" he said, his voice edged with sharp disbelief. "What is it?"

The man—Haruto Yasuda, the diligent, quiet clerk from their own precinct—met his gaze with a calm, almost serene expression that sent a chill down Naomasa's spine.

"Detective Tsukauchi," Haruto replied evenly, inclining his head in a polite, practiced nod.

For a moment, no one moved. Izuku stiffened beside Toshinori, green eyes darting between the two men, while Toshinori's jaw tightened, suspicion darkening his features.

Then Haruto stepped forward.

His amber, predatory gaze swept across the room in a slow, measured arc—passing briefly over Izuku, lingering a fraction too long on Toshinori—before locking, unwavering, on Kagutsuchi.

And with quiet finality, he moved.

Each step was measured, deliberate; his posture held not deference, but a precise confidence that spoke of someone exactly where he belonged. Stopping before Kagutsuchi, Haruto extended the paper cup with both hands and bowed his head slightly.

"Kagutsuchi-sama," he said, voice soft yet carrying a weight that seemed to press the room inward. "Your coffee, as requested."

The honorific hit like a thunderclap.

Izuku's breath caught. Toshinori's eyes hardened, alarm sparking behind them. And Naomasa—his jaw tightened, the realization striking like a blow. The folder slipped from his grasp before he even registered it, hitting the floor with a muted thud, papers fanning out across the ground in silent punctuation to his shock.

Kagutsuchi did not move at first.

He regarded Haruto with the same unhurried calm one might give a loyal hound that had returned as expected. His crimson eyes flicked briefly to the coffee cup, then back to Haruto's bowed head, and for the faintest moment, amusement curved his lips.

"Punctual, as always," Kagutsuchi murmured, his tone smooth and unhurried, carrying an ease that felt all the more unnerving for how casual it was. He accepted the cup with one hand, his fingers brushing Haruto's only briefly before withdrawing.

A quiet hum followed as he took a sip, the motion deliberate, almost theatrical in its lack of urgency. Then his gaze swept lazily over the room, finally settling on Naomasa.

"Detective Tsukauchi," Kagutsuchi said, voice calm, almost conversational, as though they were seated in a café rather than standing in the thick of impending violence. "I do hope you're not too… disappointed in your colleague."

Haruto straightened at that, head lifting but expression unchanged, his eyes still forward—focused, unwavering, a soldier awaiting orders.

The silence that followed was unbearable.

Izuku felt his pulse hammering in his ears. Toshinori's fists had clenched at his sides, his knuckles white. And Naomasa—Naomasa didn't speak. Not yet. His jaw was locked, his stare cutting between Haruto and Kagutsuchi, the weight of betrayal sinking in deeper with every passing second.

Kagutsuchi's smirk deepened, and with the same fluid ease with which he had accepted the coffee, he stepped closer to Haruto.

"Ah, yes," he said, his tone light, almost indulgent, as if chiding himself for poor manners. "How terribly rude of me to keep you all in suspense."

With a slow, deliberate motion, Kagutsuchi draped his free arm around Haruto's shoulders, the gesture far too familiar to be mistaken for mere camaraderie. His grip was relaxed, but there was an undeniable weight to it—a silent claim of ownership.

"This," Kagutsuchi continued, his voice lowering to something velvety and dangerous, "is not Haruto Yasuda. That name was just… convenient." His crimson eyes flicked briefly to Naomasa, as though savoring the man's tightening expression before delivering the final blow.

"Allow me to introduce him properly."

He gave Haruto's shoulder a light, almost companionable squeeze, the kind one might give an old friend at a dinner party—except for the way his smirk curved, sharpening into something unmistakably predatory.

"This is Albus—one of my most loyal Lords."

The words sank in, cold and crushing, like a punch to the gut.

Izuku's breath caught, his eyes widening in horrified recognition of what that meant. Toshinori shifted, the muscles in his jaw tightening, every line of his body coiled and ready. And Naomasa—Naomasa's composure cracked just slightly, his fingers curling into fists at his sides as the weight of betrayal pressed down on him like lead.

Albus—Haruto no longer—remained perfectly still, his expression unchanged, though a flicker of something unreadable passed through his amber eyes as Kagutsuchi's arm rested on him. Not shame. Not regret. Something colder.

Naomasa didn't speak immediately. He stood perfectly still, his face a mask of professionalism, but the tightening of his jaw and the faint tremor in his clenched fists betrayed him. His sharp, calculating mind was already working—cataloging every interaction with "Haruto Yasuda," every offhand conversation, every file he had handled at the precinct.

When he finally spoke, his voice was calm. Too calm.

"…How long?"

The question cut through the room like a blade, directed squarely at Albus. Not at Kagutsuchi, not at Toshinori or Izuku—at the man he had once trusted to fetch paperwork and share quiet cups of late-night coffee after long shifts.

Albus met his stare with that same unnervingly serene expression, amber eyes unblinking.

"Long enough," he said simply, his tone devoid of mockery, but not of finality.

Naomasa's throat tightened, though he forced his features to remain impassive. Only his eyes betrayed him, dark and searching, as if trying to find any trace of the quiet, diligent clerk he had known. There was nothing.

Kagutsuchi's low chuckle broke the moment like glass.

"Don't look so grim, Inspector," he said, his arm still draped casually around Albus's shoulder. "If it makes you feel better, he played his role flawlessly. A true professional."

Naomasa's gaze didn't leave Albus, even as he answered Kagutsuchi in a voice like steel.

"Seems we were both professionals, then."

A brief silence followed, taut as a drawn wire. Izuku shifted uncomfortably, glancing between them, while Toshinori's eyes never left Kagutsuchi, his body tense as if expecting the situation to explode at any moment.

But Naomasa didn't move. He simply stared at Albus, as if committing this new truth—the real Albus, the Lord—to memory.

Then, Haruto—Albus—spoke.

"Detective Tsukauchi," Haruto said, his tone perfectly level, almost businesslike. His amber eyes, sharp and clear, locked onto Naomasa's wide, horrified gaze. "You should pick up your folder before it wrinkles the documents inside. You'll need them later."

The words were so… mundane. So impossibly normal, as if he were still the diligent police clerk he'd been just moments ago.

Naomasa didn't move. His breath was shallow, ragged, like he was staring at a stranger wearing Haruto Yasuda's face.

Haruto tilted his head slightly, almost in faint disapproval. "Detective, please. We still have to maintain appearances. People will notice if the documents are mishandled."

The quiet professionalism in his voice—utterly devoid of guilt, shame, or even pride—hit harder than any overt threat.

Toshinori's fists trembled at his sides, every muscle in his body taut with barely restrained rage. "You—" His voice cracked, and he stopped, words failing under the weight of sheer disbelief.

Haruto's expression didn't change, but he inclined his head toward Toshinori with the same polite acknowledgment he might have given any other officer in the station. "Toshinori-san," he greeted evenly, as though nothing about this situation were abnormal. "You seem distressed. Perhaps you should sit."

Izuku could barely breathe. His stomach churned, his pulse thundered in his ears, and yet Haruto spoke as though this were any other casual workplace conversation.

Kagutsuchi gave Haruto's shoulder an approving pat, his grin downright serpentine now. "You see why I like him? Efficient. Reliable. Unshakable."

For the first time since stepping into the room, Haruto's calm, professional mask faltered—not with shame, but with something far more jarring. A faint, almost imperceptible flush crept up his neck and into his cheeks. His amber eyes, usually unreadable, flicked away for a fraction of a second, betraying just the smallest hint of… pride.

"Y-You honor me, Kagutsuchi-sama," Haruto said, voice still smooth but carrying the slightest, rare tremor of emotion. His posture remained impeccable, but his ears—slightly tufted with his cheetah-like fur—twitched once, betraying his flustered reaction to the praise.

Kagutsuchi chuckled, clearly savoring the reaction. "Honor is earned, Albus, and you've earned it a dozen times over."

Haruto straightened further, his earlier composure now tinged with that quiet, almost boyish pride, as if Kagutsuchi's words meant more to him than any commendation the police force had ever given.

Naomasa noticed it, and the sight twisted his stomach into knots. He's proud of this… He's proud of serving him. The thought was like bile in his throat.

Toshinori's trembling fists clenched tighter at his sides, his voice breaking through the tense silence. "You… you're enjoying this, aren't you?!" he spat, his words directed at Kagutsuchi, but his horrified gaze locked on Haruto.

Haruto finally turned to Toshinori, his flush already fading, his expression once more settling into calm professionalism. "Enjoyment doesn't factor into it, Toshinori-san," he said evenly. "I have my duty. Kagutsuchi-sama has his Will. That's all that matters."

Kagutsuchi's grin widened at that, his arm tightening slightly around Haruto's shoulders like a proud mentor. "You hear that? That's loyalty. That's conviction. You heroes could learn a thing or two from my people."

Izuku stared at Haruto, unable to reconcile the two images—the polite, diligent police clerk, and the man standing proudly under Kagutsuchi's arm. The faint flush of pride still lingered on Haruto's cheeks, and somehow, that terrified him more than anything else.

Haruto adjusted the folder in his hand, his expression as unreadable as ever, before speaking. "I heard," he began evenly, "about Luteus' demise." His amber eyes, calm and analytical, flicked briefly to Kagutsuchi. "Is it true?"

Kagutsuchi's grin widened instantly, as if delighted to be the bearer of news. "Oh, very true," he said with almost theatrical emphasis, his arm still draped around Haruto's shoulders. With a casual tilt of his head, he pointed directly at Izuku. "An Agito killed him. That Agito, in fact."

Izuku stiffened at the gesture, his entire body locking up as Haruto's gaze finally settled on him. It was sharp but not overtly hostile—yet. But the sheer weight of that amber stare made Izuku's chest tighten, his pulse hammering in his ears. His mind screamed with primal instinct, every muscle urging him to run, to do something before this Lord decided to strike him down where he sat.

Haruto, his tone still maddeningly even, finally spoke, his eyes never leaving Izuku's face. "This is the kid who killed Luteus?"

"Mm-hmm," Kagutsuchi confirmed cheerfully, almost proud. "Impressive, isn't he?"

For a long, unbearable moment, Haruto said nothing. His amber eyes stayed locked on Izuku's, unblinking, calculating. The silence was oppressive, and Izuku felt his throat tighten, every second stretching like an eternity.

Then, Haruto's expression shifted—not to anger, not to rage, but something far stranger. His tufted cheetah-like ears slowly flattened against his head, and his eyes closed with a slow exhale. When he spoke, his voice held no fury, only quiet, almost mundane disappointment.

"Looks like my karaoke partner is gone," Haruto said simply.

The words landed like a hammer to Izuku's gut—not because they were a threat, but because of how utterly normal they sounded. There was no hatred, no malice, just the weary lament of a man who had lost a casual pastime companion.

Kagutsuchi barked out a laugh, clearly amused. "Oh, come now, Albus, you can always find another karaoke partner. Don't act like Luteus had that good of a singing voice."

Haruto opened his eyes again, the momentary flicker of emotion gone as quickly as it appeared. His calm professionalism snapped back into place as he replied, "That's true, but he knew all the old ballads without needing a lyrics sheet. Hard to replace someone like that."

Izuku's stomach twisted. The casual way Haruto spoke about the dead Lord—like he was just some coworker who'd been laid off—was somehow worse than if he had raged at him. It meant this wasn't personal. It meant Haruto could just as casually kill him, too, if Kagutsuchi asked.

Kagutsuchi gave Haruto a small pat on the back, his grin widening. "That'll be all for now, Albus. Go on and finish your shift; wouldn't want the precinct wondering where their favorite clerk vanished to, right?"

Haruto inclined his head slightly, the movement precise and respectful. "As you wish, Kagutsuchi-sama." His voice carried no sarcasm, no irritation—only quiet deference.

Turning toward the door, Haruto's amber eyes briefly swept over the room one last time. His gaze lingered on Tsukauchi for a fraction longer than necessary, unreadable as ever, before he gave a polite nod. "Detective Tsukauchi," he said formally, as though nothing unusual had just occurred—no bowing to a Lord, no quiet lament over a dead karaoke partner. Just a polite police clerk acknowledging a detective.

With that, Haruto stepped out, his movements smooth and professional, the door clicking softly shut behind him.

The room was left heavy with silence, the tension pressing down on everyone present. Izuku remained stiff in his chair, his eyes still glued to the door, his pulse hammering. Toshinori's hands were clenched into fists at his sides, his jaw tight as he glared at Kagutsuchi. Naomasa was frozen, his thoughts spinning wildly, still trying to reconcile what he'd just witnessed.

Kagutsuchi, on the other hand, looked completely at ease. He casually swirled the steaming mug in his hand, inhaling the aroma with an appreciative hum. Then, as if nothing at all had happened, he tilted his head toward Toshinori, his grin widening into something infuriatingly amused.

"Um, you were saying, Toshinori?" Kagutsuchi asked, his tone mild, almost polite, but carrying that insufferable lilt that made it clear he was enjoying every ounce of tension in the room.

Toshinori's hands trembled as he tried to hold himself back, his knuckles whitening with how tightly he clenched his fists. His voice, when it finally came, was a low, dangerous growl.

"You—" Toshinori started, his breath shaking. "You bastard! You have the gall to stand there, smiling, after—after flaunting your hold over our own police force? After admitting that one of yours has been hiding among us this whole time?!"

Kagutsuchi blinked once, his expression still maddeningly calm. "Oh, Toshinori," he said with mock sympathy, leaning back slightly in his chair. "You say that like infiltration is some novel idea. Please, don't act so naïve. Governments have been infiltrated since long before you were born. Did you really think the Will of Darkness wouldn't… adapt?"

"ADAPT?!" Toshinori roared, stepping forward, his towering frame shaking with rage. "You're talking about corrupting people who are supposed to uphold the law—who are supposed to protect others!"

Kagutsuchi raised a single finger, almost chidingly, like a teacher correcting a stubborn student. "Now, now, don't be so dramatic. No one is 'corrupted.' Albus chose his path long before you ever stepped onto yours. And, if it makes you feel any better, he's very good at his job. Filing reports, keeping things organized… I imagine he's far more efficient than most of your actual officers."

Toshinori's teeth ground audibly, his fury reaching a breaking point. "You—you think this is funny?! You're playing with people's lives, with Izuku's life, like this is some kind of game!"

Kagutsuchi finally set his coffee mug down with a soft clink, his smile shifting into something softer, almost pitying. "A game? No, Toshinori. This is just reality. Heroes, villains, angels, Lords—call it whatever you like. The board has always been set, and the pieces were moving long before you or I existed. If you find that upsetting…" His grin returned, sharp and wicked. "Well, maybe you're just not as suited for this as you pretend to be."

Toshinori took a half-step forward, his rage almost palpable, his entire frame coiled to strike despite every logical part of his mind screaming that this was exactly what Kagutsuchi wanted. Izuku, shrinking slightly in his chair, could only watch as Kagutsuchi's calm, unshaken gaze stayed locked on Toshinori, almost daring him to make a move.

Toshinori's chest rose and fell with heavy, furious breaths, his fingers curling into trembling fists. Every muscle in his towering frame tightened, his aura of restrained violence practically radiating through the room. He took a deliberate step forward, the floor creaking under the weight of his anger, his eyes locked on Kagutsuchi with a predator's intensity.

Kagutsuchi didn't move. He didn't even blink. He just tilted his head slightly, that same infuriating, calm smirk plastered across his face, as if Toshinori's rage was nothing more than amusing theater.

"Toshinori," Kagutsuchi drawled, his voice mockingly patient. "You really shouldn't. You know you won't like where this leads."

Something in Toshinori finally snapped. His fist tightened, his entire arm tensing, his body shifting into a stance that promised violence. His voice, low and raw with fury, rumbled like distant thunder.

"You think I won't—? You think I'm going to let you keep doing this—using people like pawns, treating him—" he gestured sharply to Izuku, whose wide eyes followed the exchange in terror— "like some kind of experiment?!"

He stepped closer, shoulders squared, his body radiating the explosive tension of a man about to attack.

But before Toshinori could take another step, a firm hand shot out and grabbed his arm.

"Toshi."

The word was quiet, but it cut through the heat of his anger like a blade. Toshinori stiffened, his wild eyes snapping to the source—Naomasa, who stood at his side, his grip firm but not aggressive, his expression calm but tight with quiet urgency.

"Toshi, don't," Naomasa said, his voice steady despite the storm in his own eyes. "That's exactly what he wants. You know it. If you swing now, you'll just be proving his point."

Toshinori's chest heaved, his trembling hands flexing as he fought to wrestle his fury under control. For a long, heavy moment, he didn't move, his eyes locked on Kagutsuchi, whose smug grin only widened, clearly savoring every second of the tension.

Naomasa's voice softened, low enough that only Toshinori could hear. "Don't give him that satisfaction."

Toshinori's jaw clenched so tightly it looked painful, but slowly—painfully—he straightened, forcing himself to take a single step back. His fists stayed clenched at his sides, but he didn't advance again.

Kagutsuchi, ever the provocateur, raised his mug and took another leisurely sip, his eyes glinting with amusement.

"Good boy," he said, voice dripping with false praise. "I was worried you'd ruin the coffee."

Toshinori's teeth ground audibly, but Naomasa's hand stayed firm on his arm, an anchor keeping him from doing something he couldn't take back.

Izuku sat frozen, every muscle in his body taut with dread. The air in the room felt suffocating, thick with the raw hostility radiating from Toshinori and the maddening calm of Kagutsuchi. His eyes darted from Toshinori's trembling fists to Kagutsuchi's relaxed, almost playful posture, and the contrast made his stomach twist violently.

This wasn't just a disagreement between heroes and villains. This was something else—something far older, deeper, and far more terrifying.

His heart pounded so hard it hurt, each beat a dull roar in his ears. He couldn't bring himself to move, couldn't even breathe properly. He felt small—insignificant—in the presence of Kagutsuchi's unshakable composure, as though the man existed on a completely different level of reality.

But what truly unnerved him wasn't Kagutsuchi's smugness, nor Toshinori's barely restrained fury. It was the horrifying realization dawning on him—

Kagutsuchi was in control. Completely.

Toshinori, the man Izuku had always viewed as unshakable, was standing on the edge of snapping, and Kagutsuchi wasn't even trying to stop him. He wanted this, was playing them all, and Izuku felt like a bug trapped between giants.

And then Kagutsuchi's eyes shifted.

Those burning, knowing eyes locked on him for just a moment, and it felt like being skewered. Izuku's breath hitched, his body stiffening. It was only for a fraction of a second, but he could feel it—Kagutsuchi was aware of him, in the same way a predator was aware of a mouse hiding in the grass.

Izuku's fingers dug into his own knees, his trembling worsening. His earlier terror at Haruto's presence, at the casual mention of Luteus' death, now mingled with a nauseating realization:

He had killed one of Kagutsuchi's own, and Kagutsuchi didn't seem angry about it.

That, somehow, made it worse.

Because if Kagutsuchi wasn't angry, it meant he didn't care. And if he didn't care, then what was Izuku to him?

A pawn?

A mistake?

Or something Kagutsuchi was simply biding his time for?

Izuku's breaths came in quick, shallow gasps, his knuckles turning white as he tried to keep himself from shaking too visibly.

The silence stretched, heavy and suffocating. Toshinori's fists remained tight at his sides, his chest rising and falling in sharp, deliberate breaths as he forced himself back from the brink. His blazing eyes stayed locked on Kagutsuchi, but his feet didn't move. Naomasa's hand was still firm on his arm, grounding him like a tether, and Toshinori clung to that anchor with every ounce of willpower he had left.

"Good," Naomasa murmured lowly, just for him. "Stay with me, Toshi. Don't let him win."

Toshinori swallowed hard, the sound harsh in the silence. His jaw flexed, his teeth grinding as if he might shatter them from sheer force, but he gave a single curt nod. Shoulders squared, arms locked, he held his ground—still furious, but no longer teetering on the edge of striking.

Kagutsuchi hadn't moved an inch. He remained standing, one hand resting loosely at his side, the other holding his coffee mug. His posture was loose, casual, but there was an unmistakable weight to him—as if even standing still, he filled the room with an oppressive presence. His lips curled into a faint smirk, sharp and knowing.

"There it is," Kagutsuchi said, voice smooth and cutting through the tension like a blade. "That famous hero self-control. Took you long enough, but better late than never."

Toshinori didn't answer, his silence as deliberate as his restraint. Kagutsuchi tilted his head slightly, as if studying him like a pinned insect.

And then, unexpectedly, a voice broke the silence.

"I… I think you're wrong."

All eyes turned toward Izuku. His hands were clenched into trembling fists on his knees, his face pale, but his gaze didn't waver. He was terrified—anyone could see it—but he forced himself to look at Kagutsuchi anyway.

"You talk like this is all some… some game to test people, to see who can keep their anger or who snaps first." His voice shook, but the words came faster now, stronger, as if they'd been building up for too long. "But that's not… that's not real strength. Toshinori's not weak for being angry. He's angry because he cares. Because people matter to him."

The room went very still. Toshinori's eyes widened slightly, Naomasa's grip tightened just once on his arm, but neither spoke.

Izuku swallowed hard, but he didn't stop.

"You can stand there all you want, acting like you're in control of everything. But… if all you do is push people, if all you care about is proving you're above them… then you're not strong. You're just alone."

For a moment, he seemed to realize what he had just done. His voice faltered, his shoulders tensed, but he held Kagutsuchi's gaze anyway, even if his whole body shook with fear.

Kagutsuchi's smirk lingered, but his eyes were sharp, focused entirely on Izuku.

"Alone, huh? You say that like it's some great revelation," he said, tone light, almost conversational, but there was an edge of condescension there, a subtle dismissal.

Izuku stiffened but didn't look away, his chest heaving as if he were forcing himself to hold his ground.

"Of course I'm alone," Kagutsuchi went on, shrugging lazily. "So are you. So is Naomasa. So is Toshinori. Every human being—hero, villain, saint, or monster—comes into this world alone, screaming for air, and they leave it the same way. That's life."

He tilted his head slightly, as if studying Izuku's expression like one might study a bug in a jar.

"You think that speech of yours matters to someone like me? That telling me I'm wrong is going to change anything?" His voice stayed calm, casual, but there was a finality to it. "I know exactly what I am. What this world is. And I accept it."

For a long, quiet second, Izuku didn't speak. His lips pressed into a thin line, his hands trembling against his knees. He wanted to argue—needed to—but the words caught in his throat, choked by a sudden, overwhelming wave of shame and a terrifying, dawning recognition.

Kagutsuchi took another slow sip of his coffee, as if the conversation was already over, his gaze slipping past Izuku without another thought.

"You should learn to do the same, kid," he added almost lazily, before glancing toward Toshinori as if nothing important had just been said.

Izuku's hands trembled against his knees, his teeth gritted, but instead of going silent, his voice cracked as he suddenly blurted out:

"Even if that's true—it doesn't have to stay that way! People… people can still choose not to be alone, no matter how the world starts!"

Kagutsuchi blinked at him once, his face unreadable, and for a heartbeat, Izuku almost thought he'd gotten through.

Then Kagutsuchi's lips curved into a small, amused smile.

"…Cute," he said simply, like he was humoring a child. He didn't even look at Izuku anymore as he turned slightly, taking another leisurely sip of his coffee.

"You'll figure it out one day. Or you won't. Either way, it doesn't change what you are—or what I am."

The words hit harder than any shout would have. Toshinori's fists clenched at his sides, his jaw tight, but Naomasa's grip stayed firm on his arm, keeping him rooted.

Izuku's throat tightened, his heart pounding with a mix of anger and shame. He had spoken up, had pushed back—but Kagutsuchi didn't care. Not because he was wrong, but because Kagutsuchi had already stopped believing long ago.

And somehow… that made it feel worse.

The silence that followed Kagutsuchi's dismissive words was thick, suffocating. Izuku felt a cold knot in his stomach, the shame of his outburst mingling with a profound sense of helplessness. Toshinori, his face a mask of barely contained fury, finally let out a long, ragged exhale, his shoulders slumping in a gesture of weary resignation. Naomasa, still holding Toshinori's arm, offered a silent, sympathetic squeeze. The detective's gaze, though still sharp, held a new depth of weariness, as if he too had reached the limits of what he could process tonight.

"Well," Kagutsuchi said, breaking the quiet with a cheerful clap of his hands, "that was productive. I'll be seeing myself out. Do try to keep the paperwork to a minimum, Detective. It's dreadfully dull."

With a final, infuriatingly casual wave, Kagutsuchi strolled towards the door. Naomasa watched him go, his hand still on Toshinori's arm, preventing any last-minute, ill-advised lunge. The "angel" paused at the threshold, turning back with a knowing smirk.

"Oh, and Izuku-kun," he added, his voice light, "do try to get some rest. You'll need it. The night is young, and the world is full of surprises."

Then, he was gone, the door clicking shut behind him, leaving the small interrogation room feeling suddenly emptier, yet still heavy with the lingering tension of his presence.

Toshinori finally pulled his arm free from Naomasa's grasp, running a hand through his hair. "That… that man is insufferable," he growled, his voice low and strained. He looked at Izuku, his expression softening with concern. "Young Midoriya, are you alright? You look… exhausted."

Izuku nodded weakly. "I'm okay, All Might. Just… a lot to take in." He pushed himself up from the chair, his muscles aching. "Are the others still here? Uraraka-san, Iida-kun, Yaoyorozu-san, Shoji-kun?"

Naomasa sighed, running a hand over his face. "No, Midoriya-kun. Their families picked them up a while ago. We got their statements and released them. They were quite shaken, as you can imagine."

Izuku's shoulders sagged slightly. He had hoped to see them, to perhaps offer some reassurance, or at least share the bewildering experience. But he understood. It had been a long, terrifying night for everyone.

"Oh," he mumbled, accepting the news. "Right. Of course."

Toshinori stepped forward, placing a comforting hand on Izuku's shoulder. "Come on, young man. Let's get you home. I'll drive."

Izuku looked up at his mentor, a wave of gratitude washing over him. The thought of navigating the public transport system in his current state was daunting. "Thank you, All Might," he said, his voice quiet. "I'd really appreciate that."

Naomasa gave them a weary nod. "I'll finish up here. Try to get some rest, you two. And Midoriya-kun… be careful." His eyes held a silent warning, a shared understanding of the precarious new reality they now faced.

Izuku nodded back, a grim determination setting in. He knew this was just the beginning. With Toshinori's hand on his back, guiding him, Izuku walked out of the interrogation room, leaving the sterile confines of the police station behind, and stepping into the quiet, pre-dawn streets, where the true weight of his new power, and the price that came with it, awaited him.

The station doors slid shut behind him with a soft click, but the sound felt deafening in Izuku's ears. The night air was cool, almost refreshing, but it did nothing to untangle the knot in his chest. He moved stiffly, almost mechanically, following Toshinori to the car.

They didn't speak when they got in. Toshinori started the engine, the low hum filling the silence between them. The city rolled past the window in slow, streaking blurs of light, but Izuku couldn't stop staring—not at the lights, but at the people.

A heteromorph with thick, scaly arms crossed the street under the glow of a streetlamp. A bus stop was crowded, a tall man with furred ears standing among the throng, chatting casually with a woman who looked fully human. A young heteromorph child tugged at his parent's sleeve, laughing, his small, clawed hands glinting under the light.

Izuku's stomach twisted violently.

That could be another Haruto.

He blinked, trying to shake the thought, but it lodged deeper. If Haruto could be one of Kagutsuchi's "angels" the whole time, what stopped anyone else? His mind latched onto Kagutsuchi's words, the casual cruelty of them:

"Of course he's mine. Of course he's one of my guys."

Izuku swallowed hard, his hands tightening against his knees. His breath came quicker, shallow and uneven. Any of them could be. Anyone. And we wouldn't know until it's too late.

Beside him, Toshinori kept his eyes on the road, his knuckles white on the steering wheel. He wasn't any calmer, Izuku realized. Toshinori's jaw was tight, his shoulders rigid, every bit of him screaming bottled fury.

The silence stretched, heavy and suffocating, until finally Izuku couldn't stand it anymore. His voice cracked when it finally came out.

"...How many more do you think there are?"

Toshinori glanced at him, startled, but Izuku kept staring out the window, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Haruto… he's not just some villain. He's not even a villain. He's… he's normal. He's been working with the police, with Naomasa. And all this time he was—he was Kagutsuchi's. If he's out there, then how many more are just—just walking around, smiling at us, acting like they're human when—"

His breath hitched, his hands trembling slightly now. He didn't finish the sentence. He didn't need to. The words hung between them like smoke.

Toshinori didn't answer right away. He exhaled slowly, his hands tightening on the wheel. When he finally spoke, his voice was low, grim.

"...Too many," he admitted, his tone like broken glass. "More than we'll ever want to believe. That's what makes him dangerous, Izuku. Kagutsuchi doesn't need armies, doesn't need open war. Just… pieces. People placed where they need to be. Haruto was proof of that."

Izuku bit his lip so hard he tasted blood.

The car was silent again for a long stretch, only the muted rumble of the engine filling the air.

Finally, Toshinori's voice broke it again, softer this time, almost apologetic.

"I'm sorry you had to see that. I wanted to protect you from—"

Izuku shook his head sharply, interrupting, his voice hoarse but firm.

"No. I… I needed to see it. I need to know what we're really up against."

Toshinori glanced at him again, and for a moment Izuku almost looked like someone else—someone older, harder.

And for the first time, Toshinori didn't try to tell him it would be okay. Because it wouldn't be.

The car continued on, the city lights passing in a blur, and Izuku kept staring out the window, watching the crowds. Every heteromorph he saw sent a fresh chill down his spine.

And for the first time, he truly understood how Kagutsuchi wanted him to feel—small, powerless, and utterly uncertain who he could trust.

The car ride ended in silence. Toshinori pulled up to the curb in front of Izuku's home, his knuckles white against the steering wheel. He hadn't said much since the station—just the occasional glance toward Izuku, as though debating whether to break the suffocating quiet. But neither of them had the strength to force words through the weight of what had been revealed.

"Get some rest, Young Midoriya," Toshinori finally said, his voice tight, more strained than comforting.

Izuku nodded mutely, his fingers clenching around the door handle before he stepped out. The evening air hit him like a cold wave, but it didn't clear his mind. His heart was still pounding, his thoughts spinning out of control as he shut the door and watched Toshinori's car pull away.

He stood there for a moment, staring down the street, before slowly turning toward his apartment building.

The walk felt wrong.

Every sound—the distant hum of traffic, the faint rustle of leaves—was too sharp, too loud. And every figure he passed on the sidewalk felt like a threat. His gaze flicked to a rabbit-eared woman walking her dog, to a man with reptilian scales leaning against a lamppost, to a pair of horned teens laughing as they crossed the street.

His mind whispered what if.

What if he's like Haruto? What if she's one of them? What if they're watching me right now, just like Haruto was?

He tightened his grip on his backpack straps, forcing his eyes forward, but it didn't help. He could feel his pulse in his ears, and every time someone's gaze briefly passed over him, his chest tightened.

Kagutsuchi's words echoed in his head, cold and unshakable:

"Every human being is only ever alone."

It wasn't just a taunt anymore—it felt like a curse. Because walking down that street, surrounded by strangers, Izuku had never felt more alone in his life.

He finally reached the door to his building, fumbling with his keys, his hands trembling despite his efforts to steady them. When the lock clicked open, he slipped inside quickly, shutting the door harder than he meant to.

The apartment was quiet. Safe.

But for the first time in his life, Izuku wasn't sure if "safe" meant anything anymore.

The envelope sat on the table like it weighed a ton. Izuku stared at it, his hands pressed flat against his knees, knuckles whitening. His mother sat across from him, her face bright with anxious hope.

"Izuku… aren't you going to open it?" Inko's voice was soft, encouraging, but there was an edge of worry she couldn't hide.

He forced a shaky smile and nodded. "Y-Yeah. Of course."

His fingers trembled as he picked it up, sliding a nail under the seal. Every tiny sound—the tearing of paper, the rustle of the folded letter—seemed deafening.

This was supposed to be exciting. A dream come true. The thing he had wanted his whole life.

But all he could think about as he unfolded the paper was Haruto's flat, unchanging expression… Kagutsuchi's calm voice telling him everyone is alone… and that cold, burning stare that made him feel like an insect.

The words on the letter blurred for a second before his eyes refocused.

"Congratulations, you have been accepted into U.A. High School's Hero Course."

He swallowed hard. His chest should've felt lighter, but it didn't. Instead, something tight coiled in his stomach. U.A.… It was supposed to be safe, the best school in the world. But that didn't mean anything now, did it?

What if there were others like Haruto there? What if there was another Lord hiding in plain sight?

His hands gripped the paper so tightly it crumpled slightly.

"Izuku?" His mother's voice pulled him out of his thoughts. She was smiling now, tears forming in her eyes. "You… you did it!"

He forced himself to meet her gaze, to smile back. It felt wrong, strained, but he didn't want her to worry. "Y-Yeah… I did."

But in his mind, the thought wouldn't stop repeating:

I'm walking straight into a crowd of strangers. Any one of them could be like Haruto. Any one of them could be… worse.

The paper trembled in his grip, and he quickly set it down, afraid his mother would notice how much he was shaking.

The acceptance letter had come with a small disc, and now it sat inside their old player, humming faintly as the screen flickered to life. The old player clicked, a whirring sound as the disc slid in, the screen flickering before stabilizing. Izuku sat cross-legged on the floor, staring straight ahead, while Inko perched nervously on the couch behind him, her hands twisting in her lap.

The static cleared, and there he was.

"All Might!" Inko gasped, her voice catching with relief and excitement, a desperate hope clinging to the familiar image.

But Izuku didn't smile. His chest tightened instead of lifting. The sight of All Might's trademark grin—once a symbol of absolute, unwavering safety—felt strangely distant now, like looking at a memory instead of the man himself. The vibrant colors of the video seemed muted, the booming voice a faint echo against the clamor in his own mind.

The video boomed to life.

"I AM HERE—ON A VIDEO!"

Inko let out a small, watery laugh at the dramatic introduction, her tension easing for the first time in days. But Izuku stayed silent, watching intently, shoulders stiff, his gaze unblinking, as if waiting for the screen to show something else, something wrong, something that would confirm his growing dread.

All Might began explaining the results: Izuku's rescue points, the heroism he had shown, the selflessness that U.A. valued above all else. He spoke of courage, of putting others before oneself, of the true spirit of a hero.

Normally, Izuku would've been crying by now, hands shaking with unadulterated joy, overwhelmed by the validation. But now, his mind whispered unbidden, a cold, insidious thought:

Luteus thought he must have been doing the right thing. Just…doing his job.

The thought crawled in like ice water, unshakable, tainting every word All Might spoke.

Then All Might's grin softened, his voice lowering to something earnest and warm, his eyes seeming to bore directly into Izuku's.

"Young Midoriya, welcome. From this day forward, you are officially part of U.A. High's Hero Course!"

Inko's hands flew to her mouth, tears spilling freely as she leaned forward, her body trembling with overwhelming emotion. "Izuku! You did it! You really did it!" Her voice was a choked sob of pure, unburdened happiness.

He nodded slowly, forcing a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes, a hollow ache in his chest.

"Y-Yeah… I did," he said, his voice cracking in a way Inko, through her own tears, mistook for happy emotion.

The screen faded to black with All Might's triumphant laugh, a sound that now seemed to mock the unsettling quiet that followed, leaving only the faint hum of the player filling the silence.

Inko slipped off the couch, wrapping her arms around him from behind, holding him tight. Her warmth pressed against him, a familiar, grounding presence, but his thoughts were far away, lost in a chilling labyrinth of doubt.

U.A.…

The word should've felt like a dream realized, a sanctuary, but instead, his stomach twisted, a cold, hard knot forming within him.

How many of them could be there too? Lords, hiding in plain sight. Haruto looked… normal. Anyone could be like him. Anyone.

His hands curled into his knees, gripping so tightly his knuckles whitened, digging crescent moons into his skin.

What if one's in my class? What if I'm training beside one? What if they already know who I am, what I've done? What if this isn't a school, but just another stage for Kagutsuchi's games?

He felt Inko's arms squeeze gently, her soft murmurs of congratulations a distant hum, but her presence couldn't reach the chill settling deeper in his chest, a cold that seeped into his very bones.

I'm not safe. Not anywhere. Not ever again.

The gates of U.A. loomed ahead, impossibly tall and gleaming under the morning sun. Around him, students buzzed with an almost frantic excitement, their laughter and eager whispers about quirks and heroes and futures echoing like a foreign language. They snapped photos, their faces alight with unburdened hope.

Izuku felt none of it.

His feet carried him forward automatically, each step heavy, deliberate, as if wading through thick mud. The pristine courtyard, a proud, unblemished symbol of heroism itself, felt unnervingly quiet to him, despite the cacophony of youthful chatter. Every corner, every shadowed recess, every seemingly harmless smile—all of it was a question mark. A possible threat. A hidden blade.

The thought, cold and relentless, wouldn't leave him. His eyes darted without his conscious will, a frantic, internal scan. He cataloged movements, quirks, postures, searching for what he now knew could be lurking beneath the surface. He hated himself for this new, insidious paranoia, but he couldn't stop. The world had changed.

A familiar, grating voice ripped through the noise, sharp as a whip.

"Deku."

Katsuki Bakugo strode past him, hands shoved deep into his pockets, a familiar, arrogant smirk tugging at his lips. "Don't get in my way, got it? You might've lucked out on the exam, but don't think you're on my level."

Normally, that word—Deku—would have stung like a fresh wound, or at the very least sparked a defensive flinch. But Izuku felt nothing. His gaze didn't even shift to meet Bakugo's glare; he just kept walking, his expression a carefully constructed mask, utterly unreadable.

Bakugo's frown deepened, annoyed by the profound lack of reaction, but he didn't bother pressing further. He merely muttered something under his breath, a low, frustrated growl, as he moved on, leaving Izuku to his silent vigil.

Inside the building, the hallways stretched, immaculate and polished to a blinding perfection that felt clinical, sterile. Students moved in vibrant, laughing groups, already forming early, easy friendships. Izuku walked alone, hands shoved into his pockets, his head bowed slightly, pointedly ignoring the curious, fleeting glances that followed him. He was a ghost in a bustling crowd.

The classroom door was open, a cheerful babble of voices spilling out into the hall.

Ochako Uraraka was there, bright and cheerful as she greeted a few classmates, her presence a beacon of unadulterated warmth. In another life—just weeks ago, a lifetime ago—he would've been instantly red-faced, stumbling over his words, awkwardly, overwhelmingly grateful to simply see her again.

Now? His eyes flicked to her for only a moment, assessing, cataloging, searching for any subtle tell, any hint of the insidious truth that could be hidden. His face remained neutral, a blank slate, and when her bright gaze swept the room and briefly landed on him, he simply offered a polite, distant nod. Then, he moved deliberately, taking a seat in the furthest corner, as far from everyone else as he could get.

He sat stiffly, back ramrod straight, hands folded tightly in his lap, almost as if he were bracing himself. His ears, once so attuned to every hero fact, every whispered secret, now tuned out the casual chatter of his new classmates. His mind, instead, replayed every terrifying encounter, every chilling possibility, a relentless, looping nightmare.

What if one of them is a Lord? What if they're already watching me? What if they know?

His stomach tightened, a cold, hard knot of dread. The thought of Kagutsuchi's knowing, predatory grin burned in the back of his mind, a constant, searing reminder of the game he was now forced to play.

The door slammed open suddenly, the sharp crack echoing through the room, making several students jump with a startled yelp. But Izuku didn't startle—his body only tensed, a barely perceptible flicker of readiness, his eyes snapping toward the noise before calming when he saw who it was.

Shota Aizawa, wrapped in his signature capture scarf and looking every bit as exhausted as he sounded, strode in, his voice a low, gravelly murmur. "Sit down. Quiet down. Orientation starts now."

The class immediately scrambled to obey, a flurry of chairs scraping and hushed apologies.

Izuku didn't move. He was already sitting, already silent, already watching.

Watching everyone.

The morning sun cast long shadows across U.A.'s training field, the air alive with murmurs and excited chatter from Class 1-A. Students fidgeted, tested their quirks in small bursts, and speculated loudly about how they'd impress their homeroom teacher.

Izuku stood slightly apart from the others, his hands shoved in his pockets, posture tense, eyes darting from face to face. Every twitch of a quirk, every shift in stance, every casual laugh was logged and cataloged by instinct. He could feel their energy, their enthusiasm—but none of it touched him. His attention was elsewhere, tracing movement patterns, noting who stood closest to who, who might react the fastest if something happened.

He hated it—this vigilance that never shut off—but he couldn't stop. It was a constant, low thrum beneath his skin, a new, unwelcome companion.

"Midoriya-san hasn't spoken to anyone since this morning," Ochako murmured from the far corner of the group, voice soft but concerned as her gaze flicked to him. She, Iida, Momo, and Shoji had gravitated to one another almost naturally, forming a quiet little huddle as they waited for their turns.

Her brow furrowed. "Do you think he's still… y'know… spooked? After that night?"

Iida pushed his glasses up, nodding gravely. "It would be irresponsible to assume otherwise. People who've experienced traumatic events often take far longer than a day to fully recover. His behavior is—while unfortunate—understandable."

Momo crossed her arms lightly, thoughtful, her dark eyes following Izuku's rigid posture. "He does appear… unusually guarded. But you're both right. The incident was hardly trivial. That said," she exhaled softly, "we should check on him. Even if he insists he's fine, it's important he knows he's not… alone." Her words were laced with genuine care, a stark contrast to the isolation Izuku felt.

Shoji, silent as always, inclined his head in quiet agreement, his tentacle-like appendages twitching faintly as his multiple eyes focused on Izuku, a silent observer of the boy's profound shift.

Ochako gave them a small, relieved smile. "Then we'll talk to him after this, yeah?" The promise was a small, fragile hope in the overwhelming new reality.

Their attention was pulled back as Aizawa, half-wrapped in his scarf and looking thoroughly unimpressed with their collective energy, droned lazily, "Next up. Midoriya."

Izuku moved when his name was called, deliberate and steady. He felt the weight of their eyes on him, some curious, some outright dismissive. Katsuki Bakugo, standing a few paces away, scoffed loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Let's see if you trip over your own damn feet this time, Deku." The taunt, once a searing brand, now felt like a distant, dull ache, barely registering against the deeper anxieties that consumed him.

Kirishima, standing beside Bakugo, gave a small laugh. "C'mon, man, he got into U.A. same as us. Bet he's got something good up his sleeve."

"Yeah, right," Bakugo growled, sparks snapping faintly at his palms. His usual explosive bluster felt almost quaint to Izuku now, a childish tantrum compared to the cosmic indifference he had witnessed.

Izuku didn't even glance at him. His gaze stayed fixed on the ball Aizawa held out. He took it silently, stepping into the circle, his face unreadable, a carefully constructed mask of composure.

"Do what you want with your quirk," Aizawa said flatly. "Just don't hold back."

Izuku nodded once, more to himself than to Aizawa. He let out a slow breath, rolling his shoulders as he stared down at the ball in his hand. Around him, the noise dimmed slightly, classmates leaning in with open curiosity, unaware of the true power he was about to unleash.

Then, deliberately, he raised his arm.

The familiar sensation of energy surged through him, focused, condensed—and in an instant, his arm shifted, plates of shimmering, metallic armor forming across his forearm and hand, fitting together like an organic machine. A low, resonant hum vibrated through him, a sound only he could truly feel. Murmurs broke out at once, a ripple of awe and surprise.

"Whoa, is that his quirk?!" Kaminari whispered loudly, his eyes wide.

"Armor quirk? Looks sick!" Kirishima grinned, his teeth flashing, genuinely impressed.

Bakugo's eyes widened slightly, then narrowed, his jaw tightening, a flicker of genuine shock in their depths before it was replaced by simmering, frustrated fury. "…Tch."

From the corner, Ochako's breath caught, her hands pressed together nervously, a mix of wonder and concern on her face. Iida adjusted his glasses, watching with hawk-like focus, while Momo and Shoji shared a brief glance before turning their attention back, their curiosity piqued.

Izuku shifted his weight, his armored arm cocking back, every movement precise, fluid, radiating a silent, formidable power that was entirely his to command.

Focus. Survive.

The ball left his hand in a blur of motion, a streak of green energy trailing behind it. A compressed sonic crack echoed across the field as the ball vanished from sight entirely, the trail of air where it had been shimmering faintly from the sheer force. The ground beneath their feet trembled.

A chorus of startled shouts erupted, a mix of disbelief and exhilaration.

"Wait—where'd it go?!"

"Did he just—holy crap—"

"THAT'S MANLY AS HELL!" Kirishima yelled, pumping a fist, his voice booming with admiration.

Ochako blinked rapidly, her mouth slightly agape, a stunned whisper escaping her lips. "He—he threw it that fast?!"

Bakugo stared, fists clenched so tightly sparks hissed against his palms, his face a mask of profound, seething annoyance. His lip curled in a snarl. "Damn nerd…" he muttered under his breath, but his usual smugness was gone, replaced by a raw, unadulterated frustration.

Aizawa, unbothered by the commotion, glanced at the device in his hand as if reading something utterly mundane. Finally, he lifted it lazily, voice as flat as ever, cutting through the stunned silence.

"1,243 meters per second. Good enough."

The class erupted again, loud with awe and disbelief, a wave of impressed murmurs washing over the field.

Izuku didn't react. His arm shifted back to normal, plates of armor fading into nothingness as he stepped calmly out of the circle, his expression neutral, his eyes already scanning the gathered crowd again. The fleeting impressed glances, the whispers of amazement, the burgeoning respect—they all washed over him like distant noise, inconsequential.

He wasn't here to impress them. He was here to survive. And to do that, he had to see everything. He had to know.

The muffled noise of Class 1-A's chatter drifted from the open field, but just around the corner, away from curious ears, two pro heroes stood in quiet conversation.

Shota Aizawa leaned casually against the wall, his scarf hanging loosely around his shoulders, his tired eyes half-lidded as always. Opposite him stood Toshinori Yagi—not the gaunt, skeletal figure most had grown accustomed to in recent years, but restored, broad-shouldered, and healthier than ever. His presence, even out of costume, carried the same commanding weight it had during his days as the Symbol of Peace.

"…So," Aizawa began, voice flat, a low rumble of observation, "that's the kid you're keeping an eye on."

Toshinori's usually easy smile was nowhere to be found, replaced by a tight line, a grim set to his lips as his gaze flicked toward the training grounds, where Izuku stood a little apart from the others. "You saw it too, didn't you? He's… different. Not just nervous—wary. Every movement, every glance… he's reading people like a pro, like he expects one of them to attack him at any second. It's not a hero's vigilance, Shota. It's a soldier's paranoia."

Aizawa gave a lazy blink, tilting his head, his voice a dry rasp. "You say that like it's a bad thing. You wanted a capable successor, right? That level of vigilance isn't something you teach in a classroom. Either you live through something that sharpens you, or you don't."

Toshinori frowned, his restored features making the expression seem sharper, more etched with concern than it had been in years. "This isn't just sharpened instincts, Shota. He looks… haunted. I've seen war veterans who weren't that tightly wound. A boy his age shouldn't carry that weight already. He's not a soldier. He's a child." The last words were a plea, a desperate wish for a reality that no longer existed.

Aizawa's response was as blunt as ever, cutting through the sentiment. "He does. Whether you like it or not, he's been through something that changed him. And pretending he's still the same bright-eyed kid you remember won't help him. It will only make him feel more alone."

Toshinori's jaw tightened, a muscle jumping in his cheek, but he didn't interrupt. Aizawa went on, his tone softening just slightly, a rare hint of empathy in his weary voice.

"He's not broken. If anything, I think he's holding himself together better than most adults would after whatever happened to him. And he's not shutting down—he's still trying. That's what matters. That's the core of a hero, even a fractured one."

The words lingered in the air for a long moment, heavy with unspoken understanding. Toshinori exhaled slowly, a deep, shuddering breath, his restored frame straightening as he crossed his arms. The weight of his own power, once a comfort, now felt like a stark reminder of his inability to shield Izuku from this new, terrifying world. "…Do you think he'll adjust? To… all of it?"

Aizawa shrugged, a slight shift of his tired shoulders. "Maybe. Eventually. He'll have to learn how to live with it first. How to carry it without letting it crush him. But… he hasn't given up. That's more than I can say for some of the pros I know who've seen far less."

That earned the faintest ghost of a smile from Toshinori, a fleeting, almost painful expression, but it didn't last long. His eyes hardened, a fierce, protective resolve creeping back into them. "…I just wish I could take that burden from him. He deserves to feel like a kid, not… this. Not a walking wound."

"Then do something about it," Aizawa replied plainly, pushing himself off the wall, his voice devoid of judgment, only pragmatic advice. "You're the only one he clearly trusts. If you're that worried, talk to him. Don't let him retreat into that shell he's building."

Toshinori's sharp blue eyes followed him as he started toward the training field, his scarf trailing behind him like a dark banner.

"Don't smother him," Aizawa added without looking back, his voice carrying on the wind. "But don't let him think he has to carry this alone either. That's how heroes break."

Left in silence, Toshinori looked toward the direction of Class 1-A, his expression unreadable, a complex mix of fear, anger, and burgeoning hope. His restored body felt strong, more powerful than it had in years, but in this moment, all of that strength felt like nothing compared to the weight pressing on his mind—the weight of Izuku's solitude.

Finally, he muttered under his breath, almost to himself, the words a silent prayer.

"…Hang in there, Young Midoriya. We'll figure this out. Together."

And then he followed after Aizawa, his resolve firming with each step, a new purpose etched onto his features.

The cafeteria was loud. Too loud.

The clatter of trays, the hum of conversation, the occasional burst of laughter—it all pressed against Izuku like an ocean of static. He sat alone at a table shoved into the farthest corner, his back to the wall, eyes downcast as he ate in slow, measured bites. His tray was neatly organized, his posture stiff, every muscle held in quiet tension as his gaze occasionally darted toward the exits, the windows, the moving crowd.

He hated how much it felt like a habit now. Like breathing.

His classmates clustered in lively groups across the cafeteria, some laughing, some already exchanging quirk-related bragging rights. But the table around Izuku remained empty, as if his silence had built an invisible barrier.

That was why the sound of approaching footsteps caught his attention immediately.

He looked up, his green eyes sharp for a fraction of a second before softening when he saw who it was. Ochako Uraraka, Momo Yaoyorozu, Tenya Iida, and Mezo Shoji approached, trays in hand. They moved carefully—deliberately so, as if trying not to spook him.

Ochako, who walked in front, gave him a hesitant smile. "Hey, um… mind if we sit here?"

Izuku blinked at them, his expression unreadable for a beat too long before he gave a short nod. "…Go ahead."

They set their trays down quietly, each taking a seat around the table—though not too close, giving him space as though it were an unspoken agreement. Ochako sat nearest, but even she kept a respectful distance.

For a moment, the only sound was the soft scrape of utensils against trays. Then Ochako, clearly trying to keep things casual, spoke up.

"So… how're you holding up?" she asked, her voice careful, almost tiptoeing around the question.

Izuku's hand paused over his food. His eyes flicked toward her, then back to his tray. "…I'm fine."

It wasn't convincing, but none of them called him out on it.

Iida cleared his throat, adjusting his glasses with a gloved hand. "Uraraka was just concerned," he said, his tone formal yet unusually gentle. "We all were. After what happened that night… it's only natural to be shaken. Anyone would be."

Shoji, sitting slightly apart, inclined his head in silent agreement, his six arms folded neatly.

Momo leaned forward slightly, her expression soft. "Iida's right. You've been quiet since this morning. We just wanted to check in, that's all. You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

Izuku's fork lingered halfway to his mouth, his gaze fixed on the tray. For a long moment, he didn't respond. Then, finally, he gave a small, almost imperceptible nod. "…I appreciate it."

Ochako smiled faintly, though her eyes betrayed her worry.

Silence settled again, but this time it wasn't as heavy. They didn't press him with more questions; instead, they simply ate with him, their quiet presence acting as an unspoken reassurance.

And for the first time that day, Izuku's shoulders eased—just slightly.

The cafeteria noise, once an oppressive weight, now receded to a dull hum, a distant, background drone. Izuku focused on the warmth of the tea cup in his hands, the faint steam rising, blurring his vision just enough to make the faces around him less distinct. He was still in his corner, but the table was no longer empty. Ochako, Iida, Momo, and Shoji were there, their presence a quiet anchor in the chaotic room.

He hadn't realized how much he'd been holding his breath until now, a slow, almost imperceptible release of tension that left him feeling strangely light-headed. They weren't pressing him, weren't demanding answers or explanations. They were just there.

It was a small thing, this shared silence, this unspoken understanding. But it was enough. It was more than he had allowed himself to hope for.

He took a slow sip of his tea, the warmth spreading through him, a counterpoint to the persistent chill in his bones. He still felt the weight of Kagutsuchi's words, the insidious paranoia that had begun to infest his mind, but for this moment, it was manageable. For this moment, the world didn't feel quite so alone.

Ochako, sensing the subtle shift in his demeanor, offered a small, genuine smile. "It's good to have you here, Midoriya-kun," she said softly, her voice a gentle ripple in the quiet space they had carved out.

Iida nodded, adjusting his glasses. "Indeed. Your presence, while… unconventional at times, is a valuable addition to Class 1-A." His usual stiff formality was tempered by a clear, heartfelt sincerity.

Momo's eyes, usually so sharp and analytical, held a warmth that was almost palpable. "We're a team, after all," she added, her voice quiet but firm. "And teams support each other."

Shoji, ever the silent observer, simply offered a slight, almost imperceptible nod, his multiple eyes conveying a depth of understanding that needed no words.

Izuku looked at each of them, a faint, almost fragile smile finally touching his lips. It wasn't the wide, unburdened grin of his pre-Agito self, but it was real. A tiny crack in the carefully constructed wall he had built around himself.

They don't know. Not really. They don't know about Kagutsuchi, or the Lords.

The thought was still there, a cold, sharp edge. But it was no longer the only thought. It was no longer suffocating him.

Because for the first time since Kagutsuchi had entered his life, Izuku felt a faint, fragile thread of connection. A tiny spark of warmth against the overwhelming cold.

He wasn't entirely alone. Not yet.

And as the cafeteria continued its loud, bustling rhythm around them, Izuku found himself taking another slow, deliberate breath, the weight on his shoulders easing just a little bit more. It was a long road ahead, fraught with dangers he couldn't even begin to comprehend. But for now, in this small, quiet corner, surrounded by these unsuspecting, genuinely kind faces, he felt a flicker of something he hadn't realized he'd lost: a fragile, tentative hope.

The bell for the end of the day rang, a sharp, insistent chime that echoed through the hallways, signaling freedom for most. For Izuku, it merely marked the end of one vigilance and the beginning of another. He packed his bag slowly, deliberately, his movements stiff, his mind already calculating the quickest, safest route home.

He was almost out the door when a voice stopped him.

"Midoriya-kun!"

He turned, his expression carefully neutral, to see Uraraka, Iida, and Yaoyorozu standing there. Shoji was a silent, watchful presence behind them.

Ochako's smile was bright, but her eyes held a familiar, lingering concern. "We were wondering if you wanted to walk home together? Or maybe grab some crepes?"

Izuku's first instinct was to refuse. To politely decline, to make an excuse about homework or needing to rest. To retreat into the perceived safety of his solitude, where he didn't have to worry about what they might see, or what might happen to them if they were too close to him. The paranoia was a cold, constant whisper: Don't put them in danger. Don't let them become targets.

But then he looked at their faces. Ochako's genuine warmth, Iida's earnest concern, Momo's quiet steadfastness. They were offering him something he hadn't realized he was starving for: a moment of normalcy. A moment of connection.

He thought of Kagutsuchi's words, the chilling pronouncement: "Every human being is only ever alone."

And then he thought of the fragile thread of hope he'd felt in the cafeteria, the tiny spark of warmth against the overwhelming cold.

He could choose to be alone. Or he could choose not to be.

It was a choice. A terrifying, exhilarating, utterly human choice.

His lips twitched, a faint, almost imperceptible smile. It was still strained, still fragile, but it was a smile nonetheless.

"Sure," he said, his voice a little hoarse, but clearer than it had been all day. "Crepes sound… good."

Ochako's smile widened, genuine relief flooding her features. "Awesome! There's this great place near the station…"

As they walked out of the classroom, the sounds of the bustling hallway no longer felt like a suffocating static. The laughter of other students, the casual chatter, the distant shouts—it all began to blend into a softer hum, a backdrop to the quiet conversation that slowly, tentatively, began to unfold around him.

He was still wary. The paranoia hadn't vanished, not entirely. His eyes still flicked to the crowds, still scanned for anything out of place. The knowledge of Kagutsuchi and the Lords was a heavy, ever-present weight.

But as Ochako began to excitedly describe the different crepe flavors, and Iida interjected with a stern lecture about balanced nutrition, and Momo offered a thoughtful suggestion about a new study method, Izuku found himself listening. Truly listening.

And for the first time in a long time, the world didn't feel quite so cold. He was still walking a dangerous path, but perhaps, just perhaps, he didn't have to walk it entirely alone. The fragile thread of connection began to strengthen, weaving itself into the fabric of his new, terrifying reality. It wasn't safety, not yet. But it was a start.

The aroma of sweet crepes mingled with the faint scent of exhaust fumes from the street, a strangely comforting blend. Izuku found himself laughing, a genuine, unforced sound, as Iida meticulously explained the nutritional benefits of fruit over chocolate, while Ochako playfully argued for the sheer joy of sugary indulgence. Momo, ever practical, suggested they could always balance it out with a healthy dinner. Shoji, though mostly silent, offered a rare, soft chuckle, his multiple arms subtly adjusting to carry a few extra napkins for the group.

For a few precious moments, the world felt… normal. The weight on Izuku's shoulders, the constant thrum of paranoia, the chilling echoes of Kagutsuchi's words – they all receded, replaced by the simple, grounding reality of shared laughter and mundane conversation. He ate his crepe slowly, savoring the warmth and sweetness, a stark contrast to the bitter taste of fear that had become so familiar.

But even as he felt this fragile sense of belonging, a part of him remained vigilant. His eyes, almost unconsciously, still flicked to the faces in the crowd, searching for any tell, any sign of the hidden threat. The man with the bird-like head sipping coffee at a nearby cafe. The woman with the serpentine eyes browsing a shop window. The quiet student with the unusual ear mutation walking past. Any of them could be a Lord. The thought was a relentless undertow, pulling at the edges of his newfound peace.

He tried to push it away, to focus on Ochako's animated description of a new hero costume design, or Iida's passionate monologue about proper pedestrian etiquette. He wanted to be fully present, to fully embrace this moment of ordinary friendship. But the knowledge was a cold, hard stone in his gut: this wasn't normal. It was a reprieve, a stolen moment, but not a permanent state.

As they finished their crepes and began to walk towards the station, the sun dipping lower, casting long, purple shadows across the city, the illusion began to fray. A distant siren wailed, sharp and urgent, cutting through the evening air. Izuku's head snapped up, his body tensing, every muscle coiling. He saw Ochako flinch, Iida's posture stiffen, their faces reflecting a common hero-in-training reaction: concern, readiness to help.

But for Izuku, it was more. It was a primal fear, a question that screamed in his mind: Is it them? Are they here?

He felt the familiar surge of energy, the instinct to transform, to prepare for a fight. His friends, oblivious to the deeper terror that gripped him, merely looked in the direction of the siren, their expressions shifting to concern for whatever innocent might be in trouble.

"Sounds like it's heading towards the downtown area," Iida observed, ever analytical. "Perhaps a villain attack?"

Ochako frowned. "I hope everyone's okay."

Izuku said nothing. His gaze scanned the rooftops, the alleyways, the shadows that were deepening with the fading light. He saw nothing, felt nothing unusual, but the knot in his stomach tightened anyway. The siren faded, becoming a faint, mournful cry in the distance, and his muscles slowly relaxed, but the vigilance remained.

He realized then that this was his new normal. The laughter, the camaraderie, the fleeting moments of peace – they would always be tinged with this underlying current of dread. He would always be watching, always be waiting.

As they reached the train station, the bustling crowd a dizzying swirl of faces, Izuku felt the fragile thread of connection stretch thin. He was grateful for their company, profoundly so. But he also knew, with a chilling certainty, that he couldn't truly share the full weight of his reality with them. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

He was an Agito, a warrior in a hidden war, and they were still just heroes-in-training, living in a world that hadn't yet been fully exposed to the true darkness lurking beneath its surface.

"Well, this is my stop," Ochako said, her smile still bright, though a hint of tiredness touched her eyes. "See you guys tomorrow!"

"Indeed! A productive day of learning and growth!" Iida chopped the air, ever enthusiastic.

Momo offered a graceful nod. "Take care, Midoriya-kun."

Izuku watched them go, a small, almost imperceptible sigh escaping him as they disappeared into the throng of commuters. He was alone again, truly alone, in the heart of the city. The warmth from the crepes had faded, replaced by the cool evening air, and the hum of the city no longer felt soft, but a cacophony of unknown possibilities.

He pulled out his phone, his thumb hovering over the contacts. He wanted to call All Might, to ask him… something. Anything. But what could he ask? How do I stop being afraid of everyone? How do I know who to trust? The questions felt too big, too overwhelming.

He lowered his phone, shoving it back into his pocket. He was still walking a dangerous path, and he was still, in the deepest sense, walking it alone. The fragile start he'd found was just that—a start. A tiny, vulnerable seed planted in hostile ground.

The real test, he knew, was not just in fighting the Lords. It was in learning how to live in a world where they existed, where anyone could be a hidden enemy, and where the very concept of safety had been irrevocably shattered. He took a deep breath, the cold night air filling his lungs, and stepped onto the train, heading home, back to the quiet apartment that now felt less like a sanctuary and more like a temporary hideout.

The days that followed blurred into a quiet rhythm, each one folding neatly into the next. Classes at U.A. were—thankfully—uneventful, a structured routine that offered a strange, almost deceptive sense of normalcy. Between the rigorous combat training, the intricate strategy lectures, and Aizawa's ever-watchful, world-weary gaze, Izuku found himself slipping, if only slightly, back into the familiar cadence of student life.

He still gravitated towards the edge of any group, still scanned every doorway and window with an almost obsessive vigilance, but there were moments—small, precious moments—where the crushing weight of paranoia eased, if only for a breath.

At lunch, Ochako had practically shoved an extra onigiri onto his tray, her grin sheepish but her eyes warm with genuine concern. "You look like you need this more than me, Midoriya-kun. Seriously, eat up!"

Iida, predictably, chided her about balanced nutritional habits, his hand chopping the air with characteristic earnestness, though his underlying concern for Izuku was clear. "You must maintain your caloric intake, Midoriya-kun! Your performance in training exercises has noticeably improved this week, which is highly commendable, but proper fuel is essential for sustained growth!"

Momo's conversations with him were quieter, more measured. She would occasionally ask his opinion on a design she was sketching for support gear, her tone thoughtful and respectful, as if inviting him into a small, intellectual circle of trust. Her questions were a gentle anchor, pulling him into the present.

Shoji, ever the silent observer, simply sat near him at lunch now, his presence a quiet, unwavering act of companionship more reassuring than any words could be. He didn't ask questions, didn't pry, simply existed in shared space, a solid, calming anchor.

By Friday evening, as the last bell echoed through the emptying halls, Izuku realized with a strange, almost guilt-ridden pang that he had actually laughed—a genuine, unforced sound—twice that week. Once, when Iida had somehow managed to scold himself for knocking over his own water bottle during lunch, his motor-like movements momentarily failing him. And again, when Ochako had dramatically mimicked All Might's classic pose, complete with a booming "I AM HERE!" only to nearly trip over her own feet in the process, dissolving into giggles.

These small, unexpected bursts of levity didn't erase the deep shadows under his thoughts, didn't banish the cold, insidious whispers of Kagutsuchi's words. But they dulled them. Slightly. Enough to remind him that even in this terrifying new reality, there were still pockets of warmth, still fragile threads of connection worth holding onto.

The cool morning air tasted faintly of damp earth and street dust as Izuku's sneakers pounded against the jogging path. His breath came in controlled exhales, his body moving with precise, almost mechanical rhythm. Jogging had become his ritual—not just for training, but for thinking.

The city was just waking up, bathed in soft gold sunlight, when he slowed near a bend in the park trail… and stopped.

Because leaning casually against a lamppost, dressed in an immaculate suit and exuding that familiar, almost unnatural stillness, was Kagutsuchi.

"Morning, Agito." Kagutsuchi's smile was a faint, knowing curve, as if this chance encounter were the most ordinary thing in the world.

Izuku's muscles tightened instantly, a familiar knot of tension forming in his gut. He didn't shift into a combat stance, didn't spark his power—but his eyes hardened, guarded, his posture coiled, ready to spring at a moment's notice.

Kagutsuchi raised an eyebrow at the silent hostility, a flicker of amusement in his dark eyes. "Relax. If I wanted to kill you, we wouldn't be having this conversation, would we?"

Izuku didn't respond at first, simply holding Kagutsuchi's gaze, his stare sharp and unblinking. Finally, he let out a low breath, the words edged with a dry, weary irritation that surprised even himself.

"...You've got a great sense of timing, you know that? Perfect way to ruin a morning jog."

For a split second, Kagutsuchi blinked, a genuine, almost childlike surprise crossing his features—then his smile widened, a low chuckle escaping him as he dramatically cupped a hand to his ear.

"Oh? Was that… a snarky comment?" His tone was playfully incredulous, like he'd just heard a dog recite poetry. "My, my. You making a joke at my expense? How uncharacteristic. Should I be honored by such a rare display of wit?"

Izuku narrowed his eyes, unamused, though the faintest, almost imperceptible twitch at the corner of his mouth betrayed the ghost of a smirk.

"Don't get used to it," he muttered, the words clipped.

Kagutsuchi chuckled softly, pushing off the lamppost with fluid, casual grace. "Fair enough. But I have to say, I was beginning to wonder if you were capable of anything other than brooding silence. It's almost… refreshing."

Izuku's expression remained hard, though there was a different weight to his silence now—less of the suffocating paranoia of last week, and more of a measured, deliberate caution, a newly forged resilience.

"Why are you here?" he asked finally, his voice flat.

Kagutsuchi's grin softened just slightly, his gaze turning serious for the briefest, unsettling moment. "Because, kid… even an Agito needs to breathe once in a while. And after the little episode at the station, I figured you could use the reminder that the world keeps turning, even for those who walk a different path."

Izuku's jaw tightened at the subtle jab, but he didn't answer, his gaze fixed on the distant city skyline.

The two of them stood there for a long, quiet moment, the morning air carrying only the distant sounds of chirping birds and the hum of city life just beyond the park's tranquil paths.

Finally, Kagutsuchi tilted his head toward the jogging trail, his smile returning, a hint of challenge in his eyes. "Well? Don't let me stop you. Or are you going to glare at me all morning, hoping I'll spontaneously combust?"

Izuku exhaled slowly, a faint shake of his head his only response. Without another word, he started jogging again, his sneakers finding their rhythm on the path. Kagutsuchi, with an infuriatingly relaxed stride that seemed to defy the very laws of physics, fell into step beside him, a silent, unsettling companion in the waking city.

The rhythmic thud of sneakers against asphalt filled the silence as Izuku kept his pace steady, his breath controlled. Beside him, Kagutsuchi jogged effortlessly, his immaculate suit somehow unruffled by the exertion. The Lord didn't even seem to be breaking a sweat, his posture as relaxed as if they were merely strolling through a park.

For several minutes, neither spoke. Kagutsuchi seemed content to just… be there, which only made Izuku more on edge.

Finally, Kagutsuchi broke the quiet, his tone casual—too casual, almost predatory in its nonchalance.

"So," he began, glancing at Izuku out of the corner of his eye, his dark gaze sharp, "you want to be a hero. Noble. Predictable. But why, exactly? What's the real reason you keep throwing yourself into all this?"

Izuku didn't answer immediately, his eyes narrowing slightly, a flicker of his newly acquired wariness in their depths.

"Why are you asking?" he said, his voice flat, a wall against intrusion.

Kagutsuchi just shrugged, his grin faintly amused, as if Izuku's caution were an entertaining parlor trick. "Curiosity. Humor me. What made you so obsessed with all this hero business? People don't cling to something like that without a reason—usually a messy one."

Izuku's pace slowed slightly, his expression hardening as he considered the question. He knew Kagutsuchi wasn't asking for small talk; the Lord was dissecting him, peeling back his motives just to see what vulnerabilities lay exposed.

After a long moment, Izuku spoke, his voice even but firm, a quiet conviction underpinning each word.

"Because… I can't stand the thought of people being hurt when I can do something to stop it. I don't care how dangerous it is, or how much it costs me—if I can save someone, I have to. That's what it means to be a hero."

Kagutsuchi stayed silent for a beat, his face unreadable, his dark eyes seeming to bore into Izuku's very soul. Then he let out a soft chuckle, a dry, dismissive sound that held no warmth.

"…That's it?" he asked, his tone dripping with mock disappointment, a theatrical sigh escaping him. "Really? That's your big, burning reason? 'I want to save people because it's the right thing to do'? You sound like a cheap knockoff of every idealist that's ever plastered their face on a recruitment poster."

Izuku's eyes narrowed, but he kept running, refusing to rise to the bait, his jaw tight with suppressed irritation.

Kagutsuchi grinned wider, a flash of predatory amusement in his eyes. "Honestly, kid, that answer's so generic I'm shocked it's not printed on a Hallmark card. 'Always do the right thing, no matter the cost!'—all you're missing is a sunset background and sparkly lettering."

Izuku exhaled sharply through his nose, biting back the instinct to snap at him, the urge to lash out a physical ache in his throat. "…You asked for my answer. I'm not going to dress it up just to impress you."

"Oh, don't get me wrong," Kagutsuchi said lightly, his voice a silken thread, keeping perfect pace with him. "It's cute. Predictable, but cute. But here's the thing—" His eyes glinted with something sharper now, a cold, piercing intelligence that stripped away all pretense, though his smile never wavered. "That kind of answer? It's easy to say when you're still breathing. But when the world starts taking things from you piece by piece, when doing the 'right thing' costs you everything you love… that's when we see if you really mean it."

Izuku didn't respond, his jaw tightening, his gaze fixed on the asphalt ahead, the rhythmic pounding of his feet the only steady thing in a suddenly unsettling world.

Kagutsuchi chuckled again, a low, satisfied sound, raising his hands in mock surrender. "Relax, Agito. Just making conversation. Don't let me ruin your morning jog with a little honesty."

But his words lingered in the air between them, heavier than either acknowledged, a chilling prophecy that settled deep in Izuku's bones, as they continued running side by side.

They ran for a while longer in silence, the only sound the steady rhythm of their footsteps and the faint hum of traffic in the distance. Izuku focused on his breathing, determined not to give Kagutsuchi the satisfaction of seeing him rattled.

But of course, the Lord wasn't done.

"You know," Kagutsuchi drawled after a beat, his tone deceptively casual, "I've seen a lot of people with that same answer you gave me. 'I just want to save people.' It's almost adorable how many truly believe it's their core motivation."

Izuku shot him a brief glare but said nothing.

Kagutsuchi smirked, undeterred. "The thing is, most of them are lying. Not to me, mind you. To themselves. They've just convinced themselves of a prettier truth."

Izuku's brows furrowed, his pace faltering slightly. "What are you getting at?"

Kagutsuchi glanced at him, his golden eyes glinting with a chilling amusement. "I'm saying… nobody does this—" he gestured loosely at Izuku, at his training, his self-sacrifice, the nascent power humming beneath his skin— "purely out of selflessness. You don't throw yourself into the fire over and over again just because you're nice. There's always something deeper, something raw, something you're desperately trying to prove. A gaping hole you're trying to fill."

Izuku's jaw tightened, a muscle jumping in his cheek. "You think you know me?" he ground out, his voice tight with suppressed fury.

"Oh, I don't think," Kagutsuchi said smoothly, his voice a silken blade. "I know. And I know you're not stupid enough to believe your own Hallmark speech. Not deep down. Not when the truth screams louder."

Izuku's breathing grew heavier—not from the running, but from the sudden, suffocating weight of Kagutsuchi's words. He tried to ignore him, tried to keep running, but Kagutsuchi's voice pressed in, relentless, like a surgeon's scalpel finding a hidden wound.

"You want to know my guess?" Kagutsuchi continued, as if he were just idly musing aloud, his gaze never leaving Izuku's face. "You didn't want to be a hero just to save people. You wanted to be seen. You wanted people to look at you and realize you mattered. That you weren't just another faceless nobody with no Quirk, no future, no…"

Kagutsuchi's grin widened slightly, sharp as a blade, and his voice dropped to a low, insidious whisper. "…no father around to give a damn. No one to acknowledge the worth of a Quirkless child in a world obsessed with power."

Izuku stumbled violently, his foot catching the pavement, sending a jolt of pain up his leg. He barely corrected himself, his body lurching, his chest seizing as a flash of something raw, agonizing, tore through his carefully constructed composure.

Kagutsuchi slowed to a stop, his smile softening, almost mockingly sympathetic, his eyes fixed on Izuku's tormented face. "Ah… did I hit the nerve? Let me guess. He left after your diagnosis, didn't he? Because, really, what use is a Quirkless son in this world? Heroes matter. Nobodies don't. And you, little Agito, were the ultimate nobody."

Izuku stopped running, skidding to a halt on the sidewalk, his fists clenched so tightly his knuckles were white, digging crescent moons into his palms. His breathing was ragged now, a strangled gasp, not from exertion but from the storm raging behind his eyes, a storm Kagutsuchi had deliberately unleashed.

"…Shut up." His voice was a raw, guttural growl, trembling—not with fear, but with a primal, unleashed anger.

Kagutsuchi stood a few feet away, still perfectly composed, his smile a thin, knowing line. "You can tell me to shut up all you want, Agito," he said lightly, his voice devoid of malice, which only made it more chilling. "But you know I'm right. It was the first thing I read the moment I laid eyes on you. Luteus must have seen it, too. You wanted to be a hero not just to save others, but to save yourself. To prove you weren't worthless. To prove to that man, to everyone, that you mattered. There's no shame in it—" his grin returned, sharp again, "—but at least be honest about it. To yourself, if no one else."

Izuku stared at him, his hands trembling, his eyes blazing with a thousand conflicting emotions—fury, shame, agonizing recognition. He wanted to deny it, to spit the words back in Kagutsuchi's face. But deep down, in the most vulnerable part of his soul, he couldn't.

Because it was true. Every brutal, unvarnished word.

Kagutsuchi, sensing the silence stretching between them, simply chuckled, raising his hands in mock surrender.

"Don't worry, kid. I'm not judging you. In fact, I respect it. It's a hell of a lot more honest than that cheesy 'I just want to save people' nonsense. But," he tilted his head, his eyes piercing, "you might want to figure out how much of your 'heroism' is really for them… and how much of it is just for you. Because the line, Agito, is far thinner than you think."

With that, he turned and started jogging again, not bothering to look back.

Izuku stood frozen for a moment, his heart pounding a frantic drum against his ribs. His fingers slowly unclenched as he took a shaky breath, trying to steady himself, the cold, hard truth of Kagutsuchi's words settling deep into his very bones.

Then, after a long, agonizing pause, he started running again, trailing behind Kagutsuchi—silent, but with his thoughts roaring louder than ever.

The park came into view, sunlight filtering through the canopy of trees, dappling the pavement with shifting patterns of gold and green. Izuku kept his pace steady, though his mind still churned with Kagutsuchi's words, each one echoing like a splinter lodged in his chest. The raw, exposed nerve of his true motivation throbbed with a dull ache.

He barely noticed when Kagutsuchi slowed slightly, his golden eyes flicking ahead, a subtle shift in his otherwise effortless stride.

"Well," the Lord drawled, that ever-present smirk tugging at his lips, "looks like you've got company."

Izuku followed his gaze—and nearly stumbled again, a fresh wave of mortification washing over him.

On the main path ahead, four familiar figures walked together in casual conversation, their voices a cheerful murmur carried on the breeze. Ochako, smiling brightly as she gestured animatedly, her laughter a clear bell; Iida, hands chopping through the air with typical, earnest enthusiasm; Momo, carrying herself with calm, refined poise, a thoughtful expression on her face; and Shoji, quietly attentive as always, his multiple arms subtly folded. They looked like the very picture of innocent, unburdened youth.

Ochako was the first to spot him. Her face lit up, and she raised a hand, waving with unbridled warmth.

"Izuku!" she called, jogging a few steps toward him, her smile wide and genuine.

He managed a weak wave in return, forcing his expression into something he hoped was neutral, though the sight of her sent a fresh pang of guilt through him. She had invited him to join them last night, and he had politely declined, citing his usual morning run. Now, of course, she could plainly see who he had chosen to run with instead—the very being who had just ripped open his deepest insecurities.

Ochako slowed as she reached them, her eyes flicking curiously to the man jogging effortlessly beside Izuku. Behind her, the others caught up, their chatter dying down, each of them eyeing Kagutsuchi with varying degrees of curiosity and mild confusion.

The Lord, naturally, looked entirely unbothered, his composure absolute, as if this were the most natural, expected thing in the world. He radiated an unsettling calm, a predator in a perfectly tailored suit.

"Ah, so these are your friends, Midoriya-kun?" Kagutsuchi said lightly, hands slipping into his pockets as he came to a stop. He offered them a disarmingly pleasant smile that somehow carried the same weight as a shark showing its teeth, a silent promise of danger beneath the charm. "You can call me Kagutsuchi."

For a beat, no one spoke. Not because of his name, which meant nothing to them, but because of what he was wearing—or rather, how incongruous it was.

Momo's brow arched ever so slightly, a flicker of polite bewilderment in her dark eyes. Ochako tilted her head, confusion plain on her face, her cheerful smile faltering. Even Iida's usual enthusiasm faltered for a second as his gaze swept over the man's attire, his eyes widening almost imperceptibly behind his glasses.

A formal suit.

A perfectly tailored, charcoal-gray suit, complete with a neatly pressed shirt and polished shoes—utterly pristine and unwrinkled, despite the fact that he had just been jogging in it, seemingly without a single bead of sweat or a stray hair. It was an impossible, almost ethereal perfection.

Ochako glanced at Izuku, her eyes wide, as if to silently ask, Why is he dressed like that for jogging? And why isn't he even sweating?!

Izuku caught the desperate, unspoken question in her gaze and felt a fresh wave of heat creep up his neck, a familiar flush of embarrassment and panic. He didn't have an answer. He couldn't even begin to explain.

Shoji was the one who finally broke the stunned silence, his voice calm but tinged with mild, genuine bafflement. His multiple eyes, usually so observant, seemed to be processing the sheer illogicality of the scene. "You… jog in a suit?"

Kagutsuchi looked down at himself as if only just realizing what he was wearing, a faint, amused quirk to his lips. Then he gave a small shrug, utterly nonchalant.

"Of course. Gotta be ready for anything that might call for a suit." His grin widened slightly, that glint of amusement sparking in his golden eyes. "Besides, I happen to think I look good in it."

There was a brief, awkward silence as the group processed that response. Ochako blinked slowly, her mouth slightly agape. Momo gave the faintest, most polite smile, a clear attempt to mask her confusion. And Iida—being Iida—cleared his throat, a stiff, almost mechanical sound, clearly unsure whether to comment on the utterly bizarre fashion choice or simply accept it as one of life's inexplicable, yet fascinating, mysteries.

Izuku, meanwhile, stared fixedly at the ground, wishing with every fiber of his being that the earth would simply open up and swallow him whole.

The group strolled along the park's main path, the summer air warm but pleasant, birds chirping faintly in the trees. Ochako and Momo walked side by side, their pace relaxed, while Iida occasionally gestured with his hands as he spoke, and Shoji carried a small bag of snacks slung over one shoulder.

Kagutsuchi had inserted himself into the group with almost disarming ease, walking just a step behind Momo and Iida, his hands tucked neatly into his trouser pockets. His suit still looked pristine despite the jog, and the faint smirk on his face suggested he was entirely aware of how out of place he looked among the casual weekend walkers.

Izuku trailed slightly behind them all, silent, his eyes sharp and watchful—not on his friends, but on Kagutsuchi. Every word, every subtle glance, he tracked with the same vigilance he used in combat training. His heart was still heavy from their earlier conversation, but now there was a sharper, more instinctive edge to his focus, as if he were waiting for Kagutsuchi to slip up.

Ochako, blissfully unaware of the silent tension, glanced over her shoulder at the suited man. "So, Kagutsuchi-san," she said, her tone curious but polite, "how do you know Izuku? Are you a trainer or something?"

Kagutsuchi's smile didn't waver. "You could call me that, I suppose. We run together, talk philosophy, break a sweat. Nothing too complicated."

"Philosophy?" Momo echoed, one brow lifting slightly. "What kind?"

"The kind that makes you question why you get up in the morning," Kagutsuchi said smoothly, his tone light, almost teasing.

Ochako blinked. "That sounds… intense."

"Life is intense," he replied simply, the corner of his mouth quirked upward. "No harm in being prepared for it."

Iida, who had been watching him with that cautious curiosity reserved for strangers, adjusted his glasses. "And where do you train, Kagutsuchi-san? Are you affiliated with a dojo, or…?"

"Ah, nothing so formal," Kagutsuchi said with an easy shrug. "I travel. Pick up things here and there. Call it… independent study."

Shoji tilted his head, one of his dupli-arms shifting slightly as if sensing Izuku's stiff posture behind them. "So you're not from around here."

"Not particularly." Kagutsuchi's gaze flicked briefly to Shoji, his golden eyes unreadable but calm. "Japan's just… a stop. I like the parks."

Ochako tilted her head, giving a small laugh. "You don't really talk much about yourself, do you?"

"Only boring people talk about themselves too much," Kagutsuchi said with a soft chuckle. "Besides, I'd rather hear about you all. You're friends of Izuku's. That alone makes you interesting."

Ochako flushed slightly at that, smiling. "Oh, well, we're just classmates. We hang out sometimes."

"Classmates who take morning walks together? That's closer than most classmates I've met," Kagutsuchi said, voice warm but carrying an almost imperceptible weight beneath the words. His eyes flicked very briefly back toward Izuku before returning to the group.

Iida didn't seem to catch the subtle tone. "Building camaraderie outside of school is important for future teamwork! It strengthens bonds and mutual understanding."

Kagutsuchi gave a small nod. "Wise words. You'll make a fine leader one day."

Iida straightened proudly at the compliment. Ochako and Momo exchanged small smiles, the conversation settling into easier rhythm, with Momo asking him about his travels (to which he gave vague but polite answers) and Ochako occasionally chiming in.

Through it all, Izuku said nothing.

He walked just behind them, his expression composed but his eyes locked on Kagutsuchi like a hawk. Every clipped, noncommittal answer only reminded him how carefully Kagutsuchi chose his words. He wasn't just being private—he was controlling the flow of information, steering the conversation with practiced ease.

And Kagutsuchi knew that Izuku knew.

At one point, Kagutsuchi glanced back at him, almost lazily, their eyes meeting for half a second. His smirk didn't change, but something about it shifted—subtle, almost imperceptible.

You're watching me. Good.

Izuku's jaw tightened, and he forced his gaze away, pretending to focus on the trees lining the path.

The group continued walking, laughter and light chatter filling the air, but for Izuku, the sound was distant. His friends' voices felt like a thin barrier between himself and the lingering weight of Kagutsuchi's earlier words, which still gnawed at the edges of his mind.

Kagutsuchi, ever composed, didn't press further. He just blended seamlessly into the group, answering when spoken to, asking polite questions of his own.

If the others noticed the silent battle playing out behind Izuku's green eyes, they didn't comment.

Izuku's steps faltered, a sudden, cold dread seizing him. The park's cheerful sounds—birds, distant laughter, shuffling footsteps—all seemed to recede, muffled by the frantic pounding of his own heart. His eyes darted, scanning every shadow, every casual passerby. The hairs on his neck prickled.

Not again… what is it this time?

He shifted his gaze, sweeping across the crowd, the benches, the winding path ahead. His friends continued their conversation with Kagutsuchi, utterly oblivious to the sudden shift in his demeanor.

Kagutsuchi, however, noticed. His smirk widened almost imperceptibly, though his eyes remained politely fixed on Momo as she asked another question about his travels. His voice was smooth, unbothered, as if nothing was amiss, but his presence now felt heavier to Izuku, charged with an unsettling anticipation, as if he were waiting for this very moment.

Izuku's muscles coiled. Is it Haruto? The thought flashed through his mind, sharp and cold. It has to be. He'd want revenge for Luteus. Damn it…

His eyes swept over the park again, more frantic this time. Families. Joggers. A street vendor packing up his cart. And then—

A man.

Tall, broad-shouldered, wearing a dark trenchcoat despite the summer warmth. He marched straight toward them, his pace too deliberate, his posture too rigid. His head was bowed, his face obscured by the coat's high collar.

Izuku's breath hitched. His instincts screamed a single, urgent command.

The man's pace quickened.

And that was all the confirmation Izuku needed.

Without a word, he bolted, his shoes scraping against the gravel as he veered sharply off the main path. He plunged into a narrower, tree-lined trail that twisted deeper into the park, away from the casual strollers.

"Midoriya?!" Ochako called after him, startled, but he didn't answer.

The man in the trenchcoat immediately broke into a sprint, his heavy footsteps thudding in relentless pursuit.

Leaves and branches whipped past as Izuku moved faster, intentionally weaving through the most remote parts of the park. His mind sharpened, already cycling through possible engagement strategies. I can't fight him here—too many civilians. I need to draw him out, get him somewhere isolated where—

The sound of heavy footsteps thudded closer behind him.

Then, in a single, fluid motion, the trenchcoat was ripped away.

Izuku caught a glimpse as it fluttered to the ground—the armored monstrosity from before now fully revealed, silver plates gleaming in the filtered sunlight, claws flexing as it lunged forward with inhuman speed. Its skull-like face twisted into a predatory grin.

"Just like I thought…" Izuku muttered, jaw tightening with grim resolve.

He darted deeper into the remote section of the park, away from his friends, his heart pounding with both adrenaline and a fierce, desperate determination.

Behind him, the creature let out a guttural, metallic growl, quickening its pace.

Izuku didn't hesitate. He needed to transform, and he needed to do it now. The armored monstrosity—another Lord, no doubt—was closing fast, its heavy footsteps shaking the earth. He couldn't risk his friends, couldn't risk this fight spilling into the populated areas of the park.

He skidded to a halt in a small clearing, surrounded by dense foliage, the sounds of the city now a distant hum. He spun around, facing his pursuer, his eyes blazing with a fierce resolve that pushed past the fear.

Not here. Not with them.

With a guttural roar, Izuku focused the surging energy within him. A golden aura flared around his body, brighter, more defined than ever before. The hum subsided, replaced by the rhythmic sound of his own steady breathing within the helmet. Standing before the charging Lord was not the terrified, scrawny boy, but a figure of imposing power: the Agito Ground Form.

The Lord, a hulking figure of silver armor and twisted metal, paused for a fraction of a second, its predatory grin faltering, a flicker of surprise in its dark, recessed eyes. It hadn't expected this. Then, with a snarl that vibrated with raw power, it lunged, its claws extended, aiming for Izuku's chest.

Izuku moved. Not with the clumsy, instinctual flailing of his first transformation, but with precision, a fluid grace that was entirely new. He sidestepped the attack, the Lord's claws tearing through the air where he had been, and countered with a swift, powerful kick to the creature's armored side. A sickening crunch echoed through the clearing, and the Lord staggered back, a pained, metallic shriek escaping its throat.

From the main path, a few hundred meters away, Ochako, Iida, Momo, and Shoji stood frozen, their earlier confusion replaced by wide-eyed shock. They had seen Izuku bolt, seen the trenchcoat-clad figure pursue him, and now, through a gap in the trees, they witnessed the impossible: Midoriya, encased in gleaming black armor, fighting a monstrous, silver-clad foe.

"Midoriya-kun… he… he transformed?!" Ochako whispered, her voice trembling with disbelief.

Iida's jaw was slack, his glasses askew. "Again?!"

Momo's hands flew to her mouth, her eyes wide with a mixture of awe and dawning horror. "Just… just like last time."

Shoji, ever observant, pointed a dupli-arm. "Look. Over there."

Their eyes followed his gaze to where Kagutsuchi stood, a short distance away from them, his hands still casually in his pockets. He wasn't moving, wasn't reacting with alarm or surprise. Instead, a faint, satisfied smile played on his lips, his dark eyes fixed on the battle unfolding in the clearing. He looked less like an observer, and more like a conductor, watching his orchestra perform.

Back in the clearing, Izuku pressed his attack. The Lord, recovering quickly, roared and swung a massive, clawed fist, aiming to crush him. Izuku ducked under the blow, the wind of the impact ruffling the leaves around him, and unleashed a rapid series of punches and kicks, each one landing with concussive force against the Lord's silver armor. Sparks flew, and the creature roared in frustration, its movements becoming more desperate, less precise.

The fight escalated, a whirlwind of black and silver, tearing through the tranquil park. Trees splintered, earth gouged, and the air crackled with raw energy. Izuku, now fully in control of his Agito form, pushed the Lord back, deeper into the untouched wilderness of the park, further away from his bewildered friends, and the watchful, knowing eyes of Kagutsuchi.

Izuku's breath came in ragged gasps, each movement precise and controlled despite the adrenaline surging through him. The Lord's massive claw slashed the air mere inches from his face, the sound of metal scraping against metal ringing sharp and loud in the quiet clearing. He dodged again, twisting his body with newfound agility born from training and sheer will.

I can't let it corner me. Not here.

The Lord growled, its silver armor cracking under Izuku's relentless blows, but it remained a terrifying presence—a stark reminder that he was far from invincible.

From the edge of the clearing, Kagutsuchi stepped forward, his calm voice cutting through the chaos like a knife. "So predictable," he murmured, almost disappointed. "Midoriya, you run and fight, but never question why they come."

Izuku's eyes snapped toward him, his helmet glinting with determination. "Because I have to fight," he growled. "Is that what you want me to say?!"

Kagutsuchi's smile deepened. "Ah, but sometimes the fight is just a distraction. A piece on a much larger board." He gestured casually toward the city beyond the park's edge. "You think this is just about survival, but it's about control—control of everything you don't yet understand."

Behind Kagutsuchi, the others watched in stunned silence, the weight of his words settling uneasily over them. Ochako's hand instinctively clenched into a fist. Momo's brow furrowed as she whispered, "What does he mean?"

Iida adjusted his glasses, eyes narrowing. "He's dangerous. We should—"

Before he could finish, the Lord charged again, a wave of metal claws aimed like thunderbolts.

Izuku's focus snapped back, the world narrowing to the rhythm of battle. His fist connected with the Lord's jaw, sending sparks flying and forcing the creature back another step. But in the back of his mind, Kagutsuchi's words echoed, deep and unsettling.

The Lord roared, a sound of pure, unadulterated fury and frustration. Its silver armor, already marred by Izuku's relentless assault, began to crack further, thin lines of green light appearing in the fissures. It lunged again, a desperate, wild attack, its movements less precise, more fueled by raw, animalistic rage.

Izuku met the charge head-on. He ducked under a sweeping claw, pivoted, and delivered a powerful uppercut that sent the Lord staggering back, its head snapping violently. Before it could recover, Izuku was on it, a whirlwind of black armor and golden accents. He unleashed a flurry of precise, devastating blows—a kick to the knee that buckled the creature's leg, a punch to the chest that sent another crack spiderwebbing across its plating, then a rapid succession of jabs to its exposed joints.

The Lord shrieked, a sound like grinding metal, and thrashed wildly, its massive form tearing through the undergrowth, splintering small trees. It tried to grab Izuku, its claws snapping shut on empty air as he danced around its attacks, his movements fluid and economical. He was no longer just reacting; he was anticipating, guiding the fight, pushing the monstrous being exactly where he wanted it.

From their vantage point, Izuku's friends watched in horrified awe. The sheer speed and power of Midoriya's transformed state were beyond anything they could have imagined.

"He's… he's incredible," Ochako whispered, a hand pressed to her mouth, her eyes wide. "But that thing… it's so strong!"

Iida, though visibly shaken, tried to analyze. "His movements are far more refined than before! He's… he's mastering it!"

Momo, however, looked grim. "But at what cost? This isn't a training exercise. That creature… it's trying to kill him." Her gaze flicked to Kagutsuchi, who remained perfectly still, a silent, knowing observer. "And Kagutsuchi-san… he's just watching."

Shoji's multiple eyes narrowed, focusing on the battle. "Midoriya seems to be pushing it back… towards the old quarry."

Indeed, Izuku was steadily driving the Lord deeper into a less frequented, overgrown section of the park, a forgotten corner where the land sloped sharply into a disused, rocky quarry. He needed space, and he needed to ensure no stray civilians would wander into the chaos.

The Lord, realizing its retreat, let out another furious roar, its body glowing brighter with the internal green energy. It slammed its fists into the ground, sending a shockwave of shattered earth and debris towards Izuku. He braced himself, the Agito armor absorbing most of the impact, but the force still knocked him back a few steps.

"You… will… fall!" the Lord snarled, its voice a guttural rasp, its skull-like face twisting into a mask of pure malice. It lunged, its entire body radiating a desperate, final surge of power, aiming to overwhelm Izuku with sheer brute force.

Izuku met its charge. His crimson eyes glowed brighter within his helmet. He planted his feet, his armored form radiating a golden aura that pulsed with immense power. He wouldn't just survive this; he would end it.

He waited until the last possible second, letting the Lord close the distance, its claws outstretched, its roar filling the air. Then, with a sudden, explosive burst of speed, Izuku ducked under the attack, spinning, and brought his armored leg up in a devastating, arcing kick.

It connected with the Lord's midsection with a sickening, metallic shriek that reverberated through the entire park. The green energy within the Lord's body flared violently, uncontrollably, as its silver armor shattered into countless fragments. A wave of pure force erupted from the impact point, sending the monstrous being flying backward, tumbling end over end.

The Lord crashed into the rocky wall of the quarry with a thunderous impact, the sound echoing like a cannon shot. For a moment, it lay there, twitching, its broken form glowing with an unstable, emerald light. Then, just like Luteus, it began to dissolve.

Green light pulsed from its shattered armor, swirling and coalescing before dissipating into a fine, shimmering dust that drifted away on the breeze, leaving nothing behind but a scorched mark on the quarry wall and the lingering scent of ozone.

The clearing fell silent, broken only by the distant sounds of the city and Izuku's heavy, ragged breathing. He stood in the center of the quarry, his Agito form still shimmering faintly, his chest heaving. The adrenaline began to recede, leaving him with a profound, bone-deep exhaustion.

From the main path, Ochako, Iida, Momo, and Shoji stood in stunned silence, their mouths agape, their eyes wide with a mixture of terror, awe, and utter bewilderment. The sheer, impossible spectacle they had just witnessed left them speechless.

Kagutsuchi, however, merely let out a soft, satisfied sigh. He took a single, unhurried step forward, his smile unwavering, his dark eyes fixed on the exhausted Agito in the quarry.

"There it is," he murmured, almost to himself. "Bravo."

Kagutsuchi's voice, calm and even, cut through the ringing silence in the quarry. He approached Izuku, his steps light, almost soundless, despite the loose gravel underfoot. Izuku, still in his Agito form, slowly turned to face him, his crimson eyes narrowed, his chest still heaving from the exertion of the fight. The golden aura around him flickered, a testament to his fading energy.

Kagutsuchi stopped a few feet away, his hands casually tucked into his pockets, his usual infuriating smirk playing on his lips. He surveyed Izuku, then the lingering dust where the Lord had been, as if admiring a work of art.

"Impressive, Agito," Kagutsuchi said, his voice devoid of any genuine praise, merely an observation. "You're learning. You're adapting. Just as I knew you would."

Izuku didn't respond immediately, his gaze fixed on the Lord, searching for any hint of emotion beyond that perpetual amusement. "Why did you ask me that?" he finally ground out, his voice a low growl through the helmet's voice modulator. "About why I want to be a hero. You already know."

Kagutsuchi's smirk widened, a flicker of something sharp and predatory in his dark eyes. "Oh, I know what you tell yourself, Izuku Midoriya. I know the pretty little lie you've spun for yourself, and for everyone else." He took another step closer, his voice dropping, becoming a silken, insidious whisper. "You want to be a hero to 'help people.' To 'save everyone.' Isn't that right?"

Izuku stiffened, his jaw tightening. "It is the truth. I want to help people. That's all."

Kagutsuchi's eyes flashed, and for the first time, his calm facade shattered. His voice, though still controlled, rose sharply, a sudden, unexpected bark that echoed off the quarry walls, devoid of all amusement. "THAT'S A RIDICULOUS LIE! A pathetic, sugar-coated fantasy you've concocted to dress up the ugly, festering truth inside you!"

Izuku recoiled, a jolt of shock running through him. He had never heard Kagutsuchi raise his voice, never seen that cold, detached amusement replaced by such raw, cutting intensity. The golden aura around him flared, then dimmed, as if mirroring his internal turmoil.

Kagutsuchi stepped even closer, his eyes blazing, his voice a furious, relentless whisper that felt like a physical assault. "You think people would like you any better if they found out the real reason you want to be a hero? The Quirkless Nobody no one would give the time of day? The pathetic, crying child who watched others soar while he crawled in the dirt, dreaming of a power he could never have?"

His words were a scalpel, tearing open old wounds Izuku had desperately tried to bury. He wanted to shout back, to deny it, but the words caught in his throat, choked by a sudden, overwhelming wave of shame and a terrifying, dawning recognition.

Kagutsuchi's grin returned, but it was a cruel, mocking twist of his lips, utterly devoid of warmth. "No, Midoriya. You didn't want to be a hero to help people. You wanted to be a hero to matter. To get the love and attention you thought you'd finally get. You wanted the world to look at you, the ultimate nobody, and apologize for every slight, every sneer, every moment they dismissed you."

He gestured vaguely back towards the main path, where Izuku's friends still stood, frozen in their shock. "Remember the praise after your little 'awakening'? The awe in their eyes? How hollow and empty it must have felt, knowing it wasn't for you, but for the power you wielded? How much you must have wanted to shout back at them, to scream about how terrible they all were to you, how they ignored you, how they made you feel worthless?"

Izuku's head snapped down, his helmeted face obscured, but his body trembled violently. The truth, brutal and unvarnished, slammed into him with the force of a physical blow. He had told himself, for so long, that his desire was pure, selfless. But Kagutsuchi's words, sharp and undeniable, were peeling back the layers of self-deception, exposing the raw, aching core of his deepest, most shameful desires.

"You didn't want to be a hero to help people, Izuku Midoriya," Kagutsuchi concluded, his voice dropping back to its usual calm, but now laced with a chilling finality. "You just wanted to be like everyone else."