

(Every character depicted in the story below is a consenting legal adult over the age of 18)

A/N: This is an entire chapter of nameless, faceless suits talking to one another over the equivalent of a zoom call. Curious to see if people like it lol.

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They gather quietly in a secure, digital space. Despite each of them having a camera on them, their faces are shrouded in darkness by design, obscuring their features from each other. Each of them uses a voice modulator designed to further keep their true identities a secret.

One might assume this was some group of villains meeting to discuss their dastardly plans... but one would be wrong. These were the men and women behind the Hero Public Safety Commission as well as other critical infrastructure in Japan. And they were collectively not in a very good mood.

“This is unacceptable.”

The words land hard as they break the silence, only to draw a scoff from someone else in the call.

“Which part, exactly? Because from where I’m sitting, there’s a lot of unacceptable things happening at the moment.”

The first voice comes back with a growl.

“All of it. But I’m clearly talking about this Shroud and his... Red Ring. Breaking into Tartarus was just the first step, like I told you all before. It was a threat as well as a promise... one directed right at those of us in this call.”

There's some minor shifting on several of the screens at that. Because they all know he's probably right. After all, the Tartarus Break-In wasn't just unprecedented... it simply didn't make much sense. Why go to all that trouble, why prove you can break into the most secure prison in the world... and only abscond with *one* inmate?

It wasn't like Shroud was limited either. He'd proven that much through the methods that he'd used to break out the former Pro Hero known as Lady Nagant. His actions had caused a riot in other parts of the prison, leading to the prisoners going rather crazy.

But instead of capitalizing on that to completely bust the prison open and forge an army from its inmates, he'd simply taken the one woman and left the rest to rot and ultimately be forced back into compliance slowly but surely.

Another voice, this time female and quite prim and proper, pipes up.

"... I stand by my previous assertions. The Tartarus Break-In was not as severe as some of you believe. Shroud would have done more damage if he could but causing as much mayhem as he did and then breaking out Nagant... those were his limits. Nothing else makes sense."

Before a full blown argument can start, another male voice speaks.

"Let's not rehash this again. We all have our opinions... but it is correct to say that the specific choice Shroud made was a message meant for us. Freeing and recruiting the killer of the last HPSC President wasn't just happenstance. There is a reason we meet like this now, after all, and it is in large part due to that woman."

Indeed, it wasn't like any of them wanted to skulk around in the dark like this. However, Lady Nagant proved that Pro Heroes were dangerous loose cannons that could not be trusted with the identities of certain high ranking officials.

Combine that with further incidents since her incarceration and these days the HPSC was much more secretive. By necessity of course. It wasn't like its leaders could do their jobs if they were always having to worry about being assassinated by some disgruntled Pro Hero who didn't like their orders.

And frankly, all of them were quite happy to have stuck with these sensible security precautions all this time, because while none of them had been designed with Lady Nagant specifically in mind... they would certainly work to hold her at bay now. Something that one of them voices after a moment of silence.

"In the end, even if Nagant's breakout was meant to be a threat to us... its altogether a toothless one. We are all anonymous now and so long as we stick to security protocols, none of us should have to worry about taking a sniper rifle round in our sleep."

Another uncomfortable amount of shuffling. While he's right, nobody there actually wants to consider dying in such a way, that's for sure.

"Setting aside Tartarus and Lady Nagant for the moment... this Shroud and his Red Ring cannot be allowed to become a long term problem. We've dealt with enough attempts at uniting and organizing villains in the past decade, I for one have no desire to see another come into being. We must find a way to nip this in the bud. Immediately."

“Hm, agreed. That is why we sent out briefings to all the relevant Pro Hero Agencies this morning, is it not? Everyone should know by now to take this seriously... with all of them working together, there shouldn't be anywhere for Shroud or his Red Ring to run and hide.”

Another voice grunts at that.

“Are they really running? Shroud seems to be unbelievably powerful based on everything we've gathered about him so far. We still haven't been able to fully place his Quirk. In fact... it's possible that Shroud is just a cover for an older threat, isn't it?”

That sends yet another ripple through everyone in the call. Nobody wanted to really think about it too hard... but then, they wouldn't be in the positions they were if they weren't capable of setting aside their wants and focusing on the bigger picture.

“... There's no evidence that *he* is even still alive. We can't be jumping at shadows now while a very real threat has manifested itself on our doorstep.”

“That's all well and good to say, but we need to know what we're dealing with. Shroud has so far shown himself to be a far greater threat than most villains these days. If he can break into Tartarus without suffering a scratch, if he can handle a Top Ten Pro Hero with ease without suffering a scratch... who's to say if anyone or anything we have could stop him?”

That brings about another silence, this one uneasy, for a moment. Before finally, one of the others scoffs.

“We're getting ahead of ourselves here, catastrophizing about worst case scenarios. It's been weeks since the Tartarus Break-In. It's been a day

since the Red Ring announced itself. Yes, this Shroud character is moving fast, but now that we've mobilized the Hero Agencies and our own people against him, we should at least wait and see what they can do. It's entirely possible that we're making a mountain out of a mole hill here and that Shroud and his ilk will be captured by next week."

Whether that's simple confidence or false bravado, nobody seems willing to call it out. Indeed, there's a general shifting of shadowy heads as most of the people in the call nod along with that optimistic outlook on things. Only time would tell them if Shroud was a greater threat than theorized, but it wasn't like they hadn't done everything they could already to cut him off before he became an even graver concern.

Another pause fills the air, before someone else clears their throat.

"Let's move this meeting along then, shall we? We've done what we can so far to stymie Shroud and the Red Ring. But what are we going to do about the Rabbit Hero?"

That draws immediate responses.

"Her defeat last night was unacceptable."

"This is what happens when someone like her is allowed too much independence."

"We can use this as an opportunity to finally collar her, I should think."

There's a pause at that last suggestion.

"... She would fight us tooth and nail on that front."

“Of course she would! That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t still aim to get her under control all the same! She may have mellowed out over the last decade, but her Lone Wolf attitude has always caused more harm than good and we all know it!”

They did not in fact ‘know it’, not really. If Mirko’s independent streak had caused more harm than good, then they would have acted more decisively long ago. However, it was nevertheless a sore point among the Hero Public Safety Commission that someone so far outside of their control was in the Top Ten of the Pro Hero Rankings.

Mirko represented an irritation within the Pro Hero Culture of their society... the unreliable type. The unaccountable variable. And the worst part was, an unfortunately large portion of the younger generations lapped it up. Mirko’s reputation as a delinquent in her youth had become all but public knowledge at this point and many young people liked to look up to her and consider her the example of someone who could rebel against ‘the system’ while still doing good for the general public.

The problem with that, of course, was that everyone in this call was part of said ‘system’ and knew full well that individuals like the Rabbit Hero who ‘rebelled’ but also did good... were few and far in between. The vast majority of the time, rebel and independent types caused more harm than good, adding to the general level of chaos that the HPSC existed to try and prevent.

Technically, Mirko had done more good than harm over the length of her career. However, it could be argued that her very existence as an independent in the Top Ten DID cause more harm than good... if one were to tilt their head and squint a lot.

“I do not know if one lost battle is truly enough for us to be able to take action against Mirko. Perhaps if any of the hostages had been killed... but there were no casualties and the property damage she specifically caused was quite minor.”

The group of shadowy figures mulls this over for a long moment before the one who initially brought the issue up grumbles.

“Fine. So we can’t move against her yet. But she’s on thin ice now, that’s for sure. Her next misstep, her next mistake... and we do everything in our power to fold her in and get her under the Commission’s thumb. It might be our only opportunity.”

That gets several more nods of agreement and murmurs of assent. Nobody wants someone like Mirko running around causing chaos anymore than they want an uncontrollable powerhouse like Shroud performing acts of mayhem all over the place.

“... And what about PDN?”

A ripple goes through everyone in the call at that. Nobody is happy to have *them* brought up.

“What about PDN? Have our efforts not borne fruit there? The Pro Hero Defense Network has been completely shunned by every other Hero Agency, and they know that they’re one step away from getting on our bad side as well. Last I checked, that Yaoyorozu woman will have to come crawling to us for help any time now, no?”

“No, in fact. It’s alright though that most of you missed it... Shroud’s break-in at Tartarus and then this introduction of the Red Ring

overshadowed the news. But PDN... is not in the dire straits we were hoping for.”

The voice speaking pauses for a moment to allow everyone else to pull up their monitors and begin searching for information. Silence reigns for a brief moment before a female voice lets out a squawk of disbelief.

“Excuse me?! The Phoenix Program was launched? Who greenlit this?!”

“... We did, months ago. Back when we believed they would never find the cash for it anyways because as far as we were aware, nobody would be foolish enough to invest into that sinking ship.”

“But then who is paying for it now? How the hell did PDN launch this when they’re already suffering a cash flow problem to begin with?”

“Unfortunately, we don’t know. It’s a private investor obviously, and someone who is going to great pains to remain hidden for the time being. We’ve reached out to any relevant parties but of course they’re all denying it.”

That draws a growl from someone else in the call.

“How dare they! They’re trying to hide this from us? From the HPSC? We should bring in Momo Yaoyorozu and have her questioned immediately!”

“... That’s the problem. We agreed to this, remember? They have prior approval from us. We can’t exactly go back on our word now... at least, not without good reason.”

While some on the call contemplate the idea of ‘good reason’, another voice pipes up.

“This roster... they have Endeavor’s daughter on here. And they’ve assigned Blonde Blazer to lead the team. Are they insane? Blonde Blazer was the only reason PDN hadn’t already gone under. She’s just barely outside of the Top Ten at this point...”

“That’s right... they’ve attached their prize racehorse to something that’s almost certainly bound to blow up in their faces. We don’t actually have to do anything here, do we? They’ll crash and burn on their own merits... and then maybe we can snag Blonde Blazer from the ashes and put her skills to use working for us instead.”

“... I wouldn’t be so sure. What if this works?”

An uncomfortable silence follows before someone finally scoffs.

“There’s no way it will work.”

“But what if it *does*?”

Another silence. Until finally...

“Well. We’ll just have to make sure it doesn’t.”

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A/N: Remember to Vote, leave a Like, and let me know what you think!