



NEXUS CODE

A BNHA - CYBERPUNK_FANZINE



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FOREWORD

TO EVERYONE INVOLVED IN THIS AMAZING PROJECT.

IT HAS BEEN A LONG TIME SINCE THIS ZINE HAS BEEN CREATED, AND WE THE MODS COULD NOT THANK YOU ENOUGH FOR THE SUPPORT GIVEN BY EVERYONE. IT IS ALSO THANKS TO THE HARD WORK FROM DIFFERENT KINDS OF ARTISTS AND WRITERS COLLABORATING TO HELP MAKE THIS ZINE WHAT IT IS NOW, AND FOR THAT WE ARE GRATEFUL. WE HOPE YOU CAN SEE HOW MUCH DEDICATION HAS BEEN GIVEN IN THIS PROJECT.

WITHOUT FURTHER ADO, WE HOPE YOU ENJOY.

- ASY, TAKU, EVE, UKIE

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BLACK LOTUS

» BY BLUEBERRYTREE

STAGE ONE – BUD

Katsuki is nearly finished polishing his gun when he receives Todoroki's comm.

Red letters blink insistently at the corner of his vision, and he scowls before giving the gun one last buff and tossing the rag down on the worktable. *Todoroki has the worst fucking timing*, Katsuki decides, and grabs his jacket.

The streets of outer Sector Nineteen have a tired tension that puts Katsuki on edge. Battered neon lights flicker half-heartedly in windows that extend upwards as far as the eye can see, dirty glass paneling the enormous sleep pod structures and entertainment towers that line the streets like giant metal behemoths. They dwarf the relatively sparse scattering of pedestrians and cyberpods below—at this hour and in this sector of the city, most of the population is still asleep.

The entrance to the warehouse, his destination for tonight, is hidden in a noodle shop high up in central Sector Eighteen. Architects had designed the city to resemble a traditional circular clock, though the reference is lost on most of the city's population. Watches and clocks have long since fallen out of favor, and the only reason the city hasn't been redesigned is the convenient sector system. Each of the city's twenty-eight sectors are numbered clockwise, starting with the Inner Circle's four, then the Central Strip's eight, and finally the Outer Ring's sixteen sectors, a system that proved efficient for politicians and citizens alike.

Katsuki winds his way north along the tall curve of metal fencing separating the Outer Ring from the Central Strip. He passes the Sector Eighteen checkpoint and makes a beeline for the floating hover-stairs. His boots make loud clomping noises up the disjointed metal steps that he doesn't attempt to quiet, and the bustle of the streets below fade to a dull hum as he ascends.

Neon pink light spills out of the bar on level six, and several tipsy patrons, still laughing raucously, stagger out with it. Katsuki catches a whiff of the scent on their clothes—they reek of alcohol and something distinctly burnt. He grimaces, and quickens his pace. *Fucking Todoroki, making me do this shit.*

The hover-stairs bob back into place as Katsuki's weight leaves them,

and he picks his way through the crowd of tables and chairs strewn haphazardly around the noodle shop. It isn't late enough for the hard-eyed nighttime crowd yet, and there are still a few exhausted blue-collar workers slurping broth from their bowls.

The shop owner nods wordlessly and waves him into the mostly empty kitchen. He heads for the rear of the building—the door to the warehouse is hidden at the back of a supply closet, which in turn is sandwiched between the grimy restroom and the delivery entrance. Despite its location, the warehouse door opens on silent hinges, and Katsuki slips into the darkness beyond.

The windows in the warehouse were painted over years ago, before the Lotus had gotten their hands on the building and claimed it for more violent purposes. The last sliver of light blinks out as Katsuki shuts the door behind him, and he switches fully to infrared vision. Metal railings shine blue and green, flickering and returning to black for a few seconds before his retinal display stabilizes and his vision settles.

A hulking mass of red-orange muscle is waiting for him on the catwalk—Shouji. His additional metal limbs loom behind him in shades of green; neither of the two augmented pairs are in use, but their presence alone is threatening enough. Katsuki ignores the involuntary shiver that prickles down his spine and instead opts to greet Shouji with a curt nod.

"Who's it today?"

"An Inner Circle guy, one of Endeavor's assistants," Shouji replies. "Normal procedure, per the boss's direction." His voice is deep and unexpectedly quiet, hardly stirring the heavy feeling of abandonment that blankets the air around them. Katsuki nods in acknowledgement. Endeavor's assistant is tied to a support beam, unconscious. He doesn't stir at their approach, even as Katsuki's boots clang loudly against the metal grille underfoot. Shouji takes a position along the wall behind him—Katsuki switches to partial-infrared, and his figure melts into the shadows.

Katsuki paces a languid circle around the concrete pillar. The taste of contempt is acidic on his tongue, and the sound of heavy boots against metal echoes in the empty warehouse, eerie and unsettling. It's the only noise in the vast building; the loudness of it is jarring, discordant, unnatural in the long-settled stillness.

Katsuki drops into a lazy crouch in front of the still-unconscious assistant. He grips the man's jaw, tilts his head back and forth—the

nitroglycerin routers in his arms provide a faint orange illumination, too weak to be of use normally but just barely enough now—and his retinal scanner begins assessing the man's modifications. Blocky red letters run across the bottom of Katsuki's line of sight: *disabled tracker chip, various neural enhancements*. Katsuki blinks them away before igniting two sudden explosions under the assistant's nose.

He comes to with a gasp and a jerk of his head. Katsuki leans back on his heels and watches as the Inner Circle citizen's eyes adjust to his surroundings, first registering Shouji's hulking form against the wall, then flickering to the gleam of the giant drills attached to his back. They land on Katsuki last, and he watches the assistant swallow nervously, exhale an involuntary gasp of breath through his mouth. Katsuki smirks, and lets the silence hang between them until the air is sparking with tension.

Inner Circle scum, Katsuki thinks.

The pressure shatters with a hoarse croak, a terrified plea.

"Who are you?"

Something sharp and edged with cruelty glimmers inside Katsuki. He leans forward, smug hunger oozing from his pores, and bares his teeth. "You don't need to know that. You don't need to know anything besides the fact that you're going to die. You're going to die slowly, and painfully... unless."

Endeavor's assistant swallows and wets his lips. "Unless?"

"Unless you tell me everything you know about Endeavor's family." Shouji is a silent threat at his back, and Katsuki watches the visible struggle play out on the official's face.

"I'm waiting, shithead," Katsuki reminds him. Disgust curls his lip, and he lets a touch of impatience creep into his tone. Interrogation isn't particularly fun for him—too much damn psychoanalysis all the time. It's exhausting, really. He doesn't know how Shouji does it so often. The assistant's shoulders curve inwards on themselves, and the information bursts out in a torrent of words, hesitant at first and then picking up speed. Privately, Katsuki marvels at how easy it was. "Two missing sons and one hospitalized wife?" Katsuki repeats slowly. He opens a new comm to Todoroki, and the words transcribe themselves into blinking red text.

"Yes."

"Were they augmented?"

"Yes. One breathed fire, blue fire, and the other had arm modifications. Fire on the left and ice on the right. Had a lot of flaws, though, the first one. Kept burning skin, melting it. He was declared defective, a waste of time and tech," the Inner Circle official stammers.

The details begin transcribing into his comm to Todoroki before Katsuki connects the dots. *Fire on the left and ice on the right...* He narrows his eyes, suspicion rising hot and fast in his chest.

Katsuki stands abruptly.

"I'm done here, Shouji," he says, voice hardening.

"He's all yours."

Endeavor's underling flinches at the sound of his voice. Katsuki sees the fear that wells in his eyes at the sight of Shouji's looming figure, the shudder that wracks his body as a pair of glinting knives on Shouji's second pair of limbs swing out and lock into place. Vicious, dark satisfaction races up Katsuki's spine, and he turns away before he can be tempted to stay.

He has more important bastards to interrogate.

Katsuki switches back to full-infrared and leaves the support pillar behind, boots clomping loudly on the blue-green catwalk. He closes the warehouse entrance door behind him with a snap and, ignoring the scream it cuts off, sets out for the Lotus's headquarters.

Somewhere in the darkness behind him, Shouji begins his interrogation—and somewhere in a room ahead of him, Todoroki Shouto begins to wait.

*

STAGE TWO – BLOOM

Katsuki storms into Todoroki's quarters with all the cold rage of an ally betrayed. Todoroki is typing on one of his holo-screens, back facing Katsuki and his black jacket draped over the seat. It's embroidered, delicate silver thread tracing the petals of a blooming lotus flower on the back—unusual for an Outer Ring lowlife. It looks too expensive, too high-class, infinitely more suited to a privileged Inner Circle escort than the leader of a massive underground rebellion, but Todoroki

makes it work somehow.

Somehow, Bakugou spits internally. More like born and raised as coddled Inner Circle swine, playing fucking pretend with our lives. Todoroki rotates the chair around to face him. The expression on his face is cool, inscrutable, no different from normal. Katsuki finds it inexplicably infuriating.

"You have two seconds to start explaining yourself," Katsuki snarls, "before I explode your fucking head off."

Todoroki blinks at him, slow and measured and so calmly Katsuki can barely see straight. "You're going to have to be more specific than that, Bakugou."

Katsuki lets out a wordless, animalistic noise. He's across the room in an instant, a sparking hand fisted in the front of Todoroki's shirt and teeth bared in his face. "You know exactly I'm fucking talking about, half 'n half, don't even try to deny it. Son of Endeavor, huh? Fucking trash."

Todoroki lets out a small, resigned breath. "I won't deny it, don't worry. The evidence is obvious enough," he says, glancing at his arms. "I'm curious, though—who told you?"

"The Inner Circle shitstain you sent me to interrogate earlier. Can't even cover your goddamn past up right, you useless fuckbag. What were you planning on doing, playing around out here and crying home to Daddy when your plots go south?" Katsuki releases his hold on Todoroki and stands up, disgust bleeding through every word.

"I should've known you were lying all along. It's in your blood, isn't it?" He spits derisively on the floor of Todoroki's room, palms lighting tiny explosions by his sides, before stalking out the door. The door falls shut behind him with a *click* that echoes down the hall, the damning sound of bitter finality.

*

STAGE THREE – WILT

Katsuki's anger carries him halfway across the city.

He's still seething, head spinning with rage, and his feet follow the Outer Ring's circular curve until he passes through the northernmost sector of the city and the streets begin bending southwest.

Though several hours have passed, Todoroki still hasn't sent any comms. Part of Katsuki appreciates the space, but another, smaller part of him is reluctantly unsettled. He'll wind up walking a full circumference of the city before he's contacted again, but it's not as if Todoroki will go as far as to threaten him—he's much too valuable to the Lotus movement.

Although, Katsuki thinks contemptuously, who knows if Todoroki actually cares about the rebellion, or if he ever did at all.

He turns down another alleyway. There's a chance he overreacted, he admits to himself. A small chance, but a chance nonetheless. As far as he can remember, Todoroki has never displayed the characteristic Inner Circle vapidness, nor given any indication to suggest that he saw the Lotus as anything less than of the utmost importance. He's killed for the Lotus, shot down his own people before disconnecting them in sewage tunnels deep underground.

Katsuki stops, frustrated.

He's seen Todoroki disconnect Inner Circle soldiers, seen him cut augmentation wires and leave bruises on desperate politicians. Katsuki can visualize Todoroki's brusque nod towards Shouji before he turns his back and saunters away, making a wry remark to Katsuki about wanting soba or a nap.

Todoroki had all the reason to hide his lineage from the rest of the Lotus, Katsuki realizes. They'd never have joined the rebellion if they'd known. A movement led by the son of the city's most influential politician would have been stamped to dust by the Outer Ring before a single weapon could be stolen.

Katsuki scowls. Fine, so maybe he overreacted—but it doesn't mean he isn't irritated at Todoroki. This entire situation could've been prevented if the bastard had the decency to just *tell* him.

A fleeting movement in the dimness ahead catches Katsuki's eye. He shifts into a defensive stance, senses on alert, and activates his partial-infrared vision.

Sleep node towers press in on both sides of the narrow alleyway, and Katsuki realizes the disadvantage of the position he's trapped himself in. He has nowhere to go but up, and while he trusts the strength of his explosions, he's still acutely aware of the unfavorable conditions.

A red-and-orange figure steps forward from the end of the alley. Their

arms are raised in deference, and Katsuki notes the cool turquoise of their ears and fingers before registering their face.

"For the Lotus," the figure calls, still moving forward, and Katsuki lets some of the tension in his body dissipate. He lowers his hands to his sides.

"The fuck are you doing out here, Earjacks?" he says brusquely. Jirou hesitates.

"Sorry about this, Bakugou," she responds, and there are sudden arms grabbing him from behind. Katsuki opens his mouth to protest, to bite and claw and explode his way free, but a wad of pungent-smelling cloth is shoved in his face. He inhales by accident, and his vision starts going unstable at the edges, fragmenting into glitching infrared that splits the alleyway to jagged pieces.

"It's for the best."

*

Katsuki jolts awake an indeterminate amount of time later. His sight splinters and restructures with the first few blinks, normal to infrared to normal again. He takes inventory of the rest of his body while his retinal display stabilizes. He's collected a couple scrapes and bruises, but—his arms are a deadweight by his sides, hanging limply unresponsive to his efforts to move them. He risks a glance downward—instead of glowing orange, the nitroglycerin routers are a dull grey.

"What the fuck," Katsuki rasps, "is this."

Todoroki looks at him dispassionately from the mouth of the tunnel. Jirou is nowhere in sight, but the grip of an arm around his neck assures him of Shouji's presence.

Faint light from the main tunnel haloes Todoroki in cool blue, dyes the white half of his hair the colour of steel. Katsuki's able to make out the etching carved into the tunnel's concrete wall: a lotus flower, blooming petals spread.

"Are you disconnecting me?"

"Yes," Todoroki says simply.

"Why? 'Cause I found out about your dirty little secret, *Todoroki*?"

Something dangerous flashes across Todoroki's expression before he can school it back under control. "You've become a liability to the Lotus, and are no longer useful. We found disconnection preferable to releasing you unchecked into the Outer Ring."

Katsuki swallows back his shock. He had known the truth somewhere in the back of his mind, but had chosen to disbelieve it even as he'd awakened to find himself in the disconnection tunnel. Hearing the words said aloud, cold and calculating, is nothing short of stunning; years of working with Todoroki, building the Lotus up from the slums of the Outer Ring and growing into a real, legitimate threat to the Inner Circle politicians—

Wasted.

All wasted.

Katsuki had allowed himself to be fooled by Todoroki, trusted him and unwittingly given him the space to weave an intricate spiderweb of plots—and look what Katsuki has to show for it now. Arms rendered to no more useful than hunks of metal, held defenseless in front of a disposal tunnel and about to be disconnected. Betrayal, accompanied by resentment and the bitter tang of failure, rises in his throat.

What could have been different, had he looked at Todoroki with less trust? Would he have been able to tear through the delicate threads of Todoroki's schemes, outed him before he could regain his footing?

Katsuki drags his eyes up to meet cool grey and blue ones. His tongue is heavy in his mouth, and Katsuki clenches his jaw, anger sparking a sudden blaze in his chest. He won't lower himself to begging for mercy at the feet of an Inner Circle bastard.

"Have a pleasant disconnection," Todoroki says, and turns to leave. The *click* of his boots echoing through the tunnel is damning, damning—

Shouji pulls him backwards into the tunnel's dark, gaping maw, cutting his thoughts off and sending them spiraling into oblivion.

The last thing Katsuki sees is the silver thread of an embroidered lotus, retreating into the light.

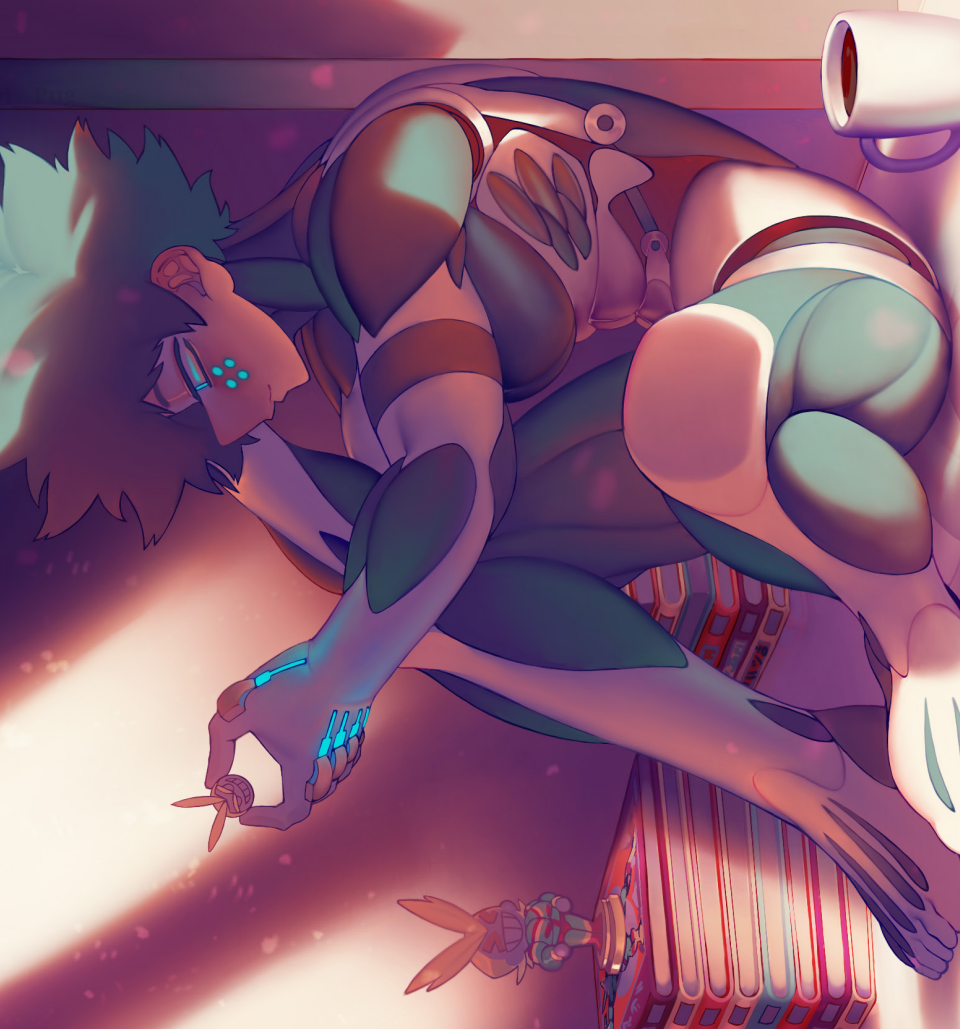
black lo·tus /'blak lōdəs/

noun

A fictional flower associated with
power, rebellion,
and death.











HUMANITY

» BY CRZA

Todoroki Shouto was born into a family doomed to fall apart before it even began.

In a society where technology advances faster than the mentality of those using it, some things are bound to break. Rich people began to turn to enhancements to make up for their own shortcomings, and those who couldn't afford it, still tried. The black market evolved from drugs, weapons and organs to all three in one, cybernetic enhancements thrusting the underworld leagues ahead and forcing authorities to respond in kind.

Shouto's father was at the head of Tokyo's efforts to stop the rebel scum from continuing to plague the underbelly of modern society, as he so eloquently put it. The thing is, depending on which side of the fight one may find themselves on, the bigger picture can look very different. To Todoroki Enji, anyone who falls outside of the upper echelons of society belongs six feet under whichever patch of dirt someone may be lucky enough to find underneath the tons of metal and concrete.

Shouto's mother, on the other hand, didn't quite see it that way. Despite the fact that Rei was the eldest daughter of the mogul responsible for the astronomical growth of the most prestigious human enhancement company on the market, she had the misfortune of falling for someone they didn't approve of. The man was one of the leaders of a small faction dedicated to helping disabled kids get the enhancements they needed to have a better life. In her family's eyes, he was a thief and a terrorist, and once they found her in his arms, they made sure to put a bullet in his brain and a chain around her ankle; literally for one, figuratively for the other.

The one who pulled the trigger was offered her hand in marriage, and though Rei would never accept it, she had no choice but to go along with it.

Despite it all, she did love her children. So, it stood to reason that it would slowly chip away at her when Enji drove the eldest to run away from home to be a part of the rebellion he was hell-bent on crushing. It was to be expected that seeing her daughter work herself ragged trying to appease Enji's bad temper or her other son grow bitter and filled with anger with each passing day would break her heart. And when Shouto was born and Enji stole him away from her arms before he was even done feeding for the first time because he

saw more of him in the baby boy than in any of the others, it was bound to continue to tear her apart from the inside.

Enji started improving upon his youngest son from a tender age. She couldn't help but think of it as him taking away everything he found not to be up to standard, taking away what made him who he was. Or at least, Shouto thinks that must be the case, considering how she found him to be unsightly, too much like his father in the fire of his hair, the ice of his eye, the tech that slowly replaced the flesh she had helped nurture for as long as she carried him.

Much like her, he really had no choice but to go along with everything his father put him through, so, surely, he can't blame her for what she did. Even as he has to stare at the circuitry surrounding his cybernetic left eye, glowing beneath the scarred tissue like veins and giving the eye itself an eerie tinge to the glacial azure that had once coloured his iris, he could never blame her for it.

"Shouto." His father's voice calls from the hall outside his bathroom, demanding that he leave the comfortable discomfort of his oldest memories and add more to the repertoire of horrors recorded into the chip that stores his newest for his own purposes.

Anything Shouto sees will eventually make it to his father's hands, anything he does is examined under his scrutiny. His disobedience is to be met with agonisingly debilitating headaches with just the click of a button. But despite the punishment, it still doesn't change the fact that Shouto continues to go out and hunt the very people he knows his mother had once loved. He counts it as a blessing that at the very least she isn't around to see him do it.

Human enhancement could fix just about anything nowadays, but if the mind is affected, there isn't much one can do but resort to the old arts of psychotherapy. Sadly, broken minds have no place in a society of apparent perfection, and Enji's apparently perfect family has no place for the broken parts that make it up.

With a heavy sigh, Shouto pushes away from the mirror, flexing the muscles of his right hand and testing the joints of his left, cursing at the grind he feels as he does. Without a single hint of concern, his father throws a maintenance kit at him, grunting at him to hurry up and get ready to move out if he doesn't want to regret it.

"Don't expect those pests to wait for you to come and exterminate them. You let their spy slip from between your fingers, it's your responsibility to catch them before they move to another base." He

warns, projecting the map from his wrist to check the latest location pins.

Shouto doesn't get a word of warning before the city's landscape flashes before his eye, earning himself a pang of pain when he puts too much pressure into the sensory circuits. According to his father, pain is necessary for progress and success, and opting out of it with enhancements is cowardice. Of course, it's easy to have such a stance when he is the one inflicting the pain more often than not.

Grimacing, Shouto blinks the map into the corner of his field of vision, zooming in on his elbow joint for the finer work.

"Are you done?"

Shouto shoots his father an icy glare, huffing out a displeased breath as he closes the access panel rather than grace him with any sort of answer. Luckily, his legs seem to be working just fine. He throws his blaster over his shoulder, shoving two smaller guns into the holsters at his hips and checking his thigh for the dagger. Satisfied—or as close to it as he gets, these days—he pulls on his boots and shoves past Enji into the street, making sure to hit his shoulder as he does.

"Tantrums don't suit you, boy."

"Tantrums, justified anger, I doubt you would know the difference anyway." Shouto spits, scanning his surroundings for the fastest route to the rebels' base.

An overwhelming pounding of his head brings him to his knees all of a sudden and Shouto chokes on a cry. As soon as it all disappears seconds later, he gasps for breath, his right eye blurring with a rush of tears he has no way of stopping.

"Do I need to remind you that I have been kind enough to turn a blind eye to your mother's misdeeds for your sake? If you keep this up, I will have to rid you of her poison once and for all."

A stuttering breath hisses past his teeth as Shouto pushes himself to his feet, staring down at the ground and biting on the inside of his cheek. "I spoke out of turn."

For a few heartbeats, the only response he gets is a low hum. "Time is ticking."

That night, Shouto adds another two lives to a list of nameless faces

and one more nightmare to his file of twisted memories. Shouto sees the blood on his hands long after he has washed it all away, hears the screams and the crying ringing in his ears in the dark of night when there should be nothing more than silence. This life, if he can even call it that, is one that tears him apart at the seams, in a more literal sense than he would care to admit. For each injury he may think would offer him the sweet respite of having it all come to an end only adds another piece to his growing gallery of shiny new parts.

How much of him is left anymore? Is he even alive? What is he doing, exactly? Keeping the peace, his father tells him.

Sure, there are actual criminals in some of the rebels' dwellings; murderers that rip out arms, legs, still beating cybernetic hearts from warm chests. But among the actual scum also lie the unfortunate ones that got handed the short end of the stick at birth. Shouto tells himself that he does what he can to target the evil ones. Though, really, who is he to decide who fits into that category to begin with?

In all honesty, he does it for his mother and his siblings' wellbeing. As long as Shouto is the perfect soldier in Enji's eyes, they are provided for. But is it worth losing a piece of himself each time, wondering if the next will be the one that finally rids him of his humanity once and for all?

Sitting on the side of a bridge with his feet dangling over the edge, Shouto watches the darkened waters of the polluted river rush beneath. He runs his trembling hands through his hair, trying not to think too hard about how the left can't feel the softness of his locks. His left eye is on the fritz, still waiting for him to walk all the way to the mechanic's office after one of the rebels got a solid punch on him at his latest assignment. If he's lucky, his father won't be able to tell he deliberately avoided maintenance on his arm that night in hopes he would have a good excuse to let them get away with the prosthetics they stole.

Shouto lets out a heavy sigh, standing up to finally return to headquarters.

A strangled shout draws his attention down to the riverbank, a flash of light colouring the murky water for a split second, and Shouto hesitates. His father will be looking for him if he doesn't return soon. And he can expect punishment for his failure already, who knows what else if he stays away longer than he should.

Another cry sounds soon after, an awful lot like a plea for help.

Against his better judgement, Shouto runs down to find the source, thanking whatever higher power may still be looking down on this wretched world that his recording devices are shot.

When he arrives at the scene, Shouto stops dead in his tracks at the sight of what looks like a young man lying on the dirty floor under the bridge. His entire body is covered in green sparks that flash from beneath cracks on his skin, and Shouto quickly realises this isn't a human he is looking at. Glowing green eyes meet his, and thin lips spread into a relieved smile. But that can't be right... Robots aren't supposed to show relief.

"Thank goodness! I um... accidentally short-circuited a generator and it messed my motor circuits... Could you roll me over and press my reboot button? It's at the base of my neck."

Shouto stares for a moment, mouth hanging open until the robot seems to notice something about him and alarm twists his features in a way that should be absolutely impossible for one.

"You're—you're part of—please don't disable me—"

Stunned, Shouto follows his line of sight, spotting the armed forces' insignia on his jacket and shamefully covering it with his left hand.

"I won't." The robot once again appears to deflate, the panic ebbing away into gratitude. This is uncanny. "What are you..." Shouto whispers without thinking.

"Illegal, that's what." He laughs, taking Shouto aback yet again. "Sorry, this is probably not the time for jokes. Could you—"

Breaking out of his momentary trance, Shouto crouches down beside him and flips him over, finding the button underneath the mess of green curls that feels awfully fluffy when it brushes against the back of his fingers. All circuits seem to shut down the moment he presses it, a few long seconds passing before his eyes regain their glow and his limbs twitch slightly. Slowly, the robot sits up, rubbing at the back of his neck and sighing.

"Thank you." He breathes, shoulders slumping, and Shouto is so caught up in trying to make sense of the sincerity in his tone that he startles when he turns to him once again, smiling widely and *genuinely*. "I'm Midoriya Izuku. And you are?"

"Why do you care? Do you even care?"

"Of course. I'd like to know who I'm thanking for not doing their job in dismantling me." He giggles.

"You act so... human."

"Well, that's because I am. In a sense."

"But you're A.I."

"I guess. And?" Midoriya tilts his head, brow furrowing in confusion. "It's not the parts that make up someone's body that say if they're human or not, you know? I mean, look at you. You've got a fair bit of enhancements."

"I never asked for this."

"Hmm, I never asked to be made either, but I'm happy I was!" Midoriya smiles again, his eyes glowing in such a way that Shouto can see faint spots over his cheeks that almost look like freckles. "But anyway, in spite of those enhancements, you're still human, aren't you?"

At that, Shouto flinches, diverting his gaze elsewhere as he bites on the inside of his cheek. "I'm not sure anymore."

"Why do you say that? It's pretty clear to me."

"How so?" Shouto asks in an attempt to humour him.

"You helped me." Midoriya says simply.

"I fail to see your point."

"Well, in my understanding, compassion is a very human trait, for one. So is regret. You seem to carry it with you. And longing too. You have something that all humans do. I've heard some people call it a soul, I guess."

Shouto swallows thickly, the countless lives that met their untimely end by his hand flashing before his eyes. "I don't know how much more mine can take."

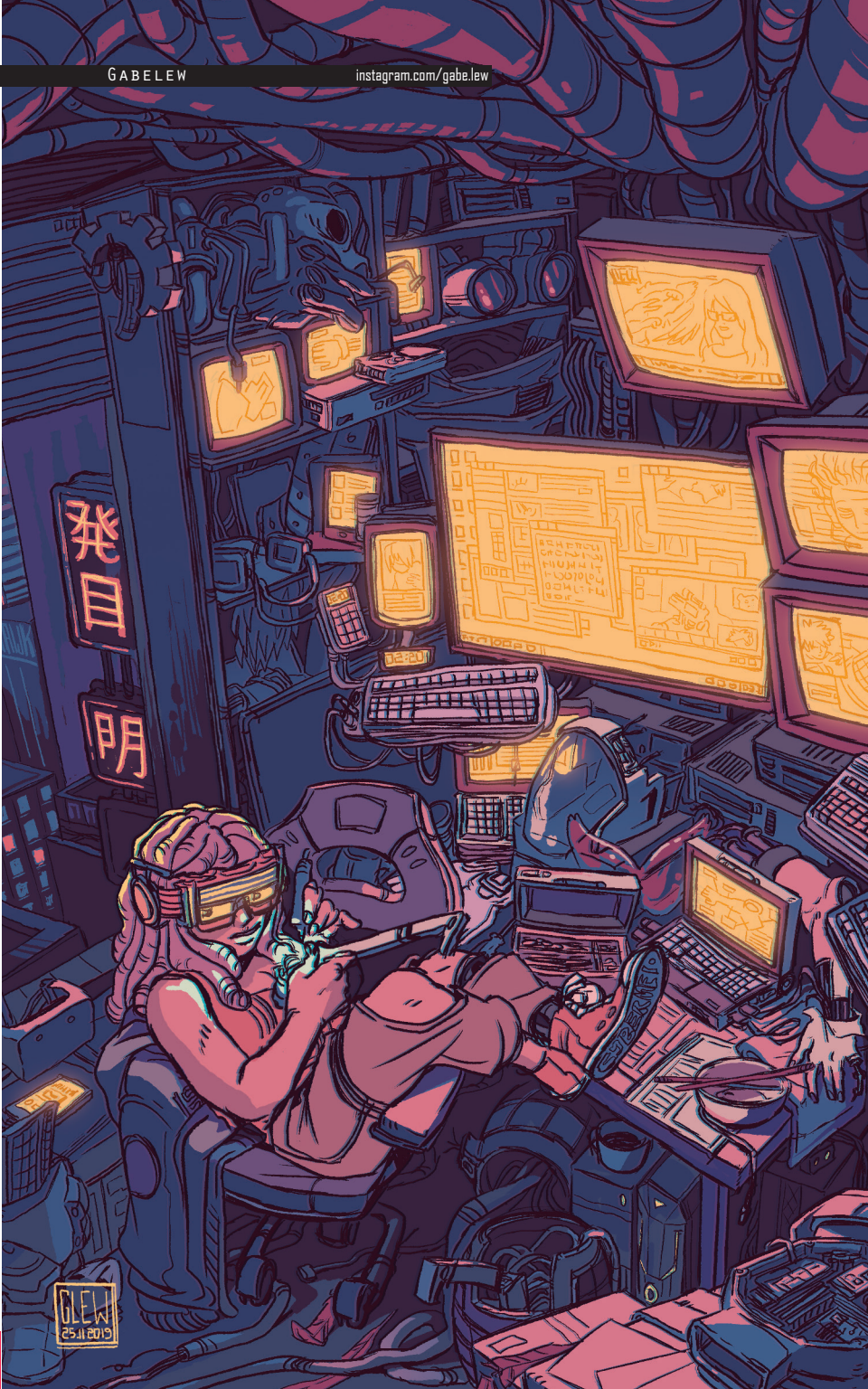
"Doubt. That's human too." Midoriya tells him, finally pushing himself to his feet. "If you are scared that you're losing your humanity, that means you still have it."

Breath hitching, Shouto holds on to those words like the lifeline that they are, standing up as well. Midoriya dusts himself off, offering him one last smile before thanking him again and turning his back to him. He picks up the fried generator, holding it under his arm and pausing to look over his shoulder when Shouto calls for him.

“Shouto.” Midoriya hums inquisitively at that, blinking at him. “My name.”

Grinning, the robot turns around again. “I’ll see you around, Shouto.” As he disappears from view, Shouto finds himself hoping there’s some truth to that statement.









HEROTECH

ヒーロー

テック

KEIGO TAKAMI

『HAWKS』

HEROTECH LAUNCHES ITS NEWEST
PROTOTYPE IN NANOBOT
TECHNOLOGY: INTERVIEW WITH
HEROTECH REPRESENTATIVE
AND MODEL KEIGO TAKAMI,
THE HERO RANKED #3

RUMI USAGIYAMA

『MIRUKO』

FORM AND FUNCTION:

MIRUKO, THE HERO
RANKED #5, DISCUSSES
IMPACT ABSORPTION
TECHNOLOGY AND ITS
APPLICATIONS IN
COMBAT

DEGREES OF FREEDOM

» BY BLUESKIDDOO

Beneath him, the undercity glows.

Hawks stares through his fingers, down through the rusted metal grate of the catwalk he's landed on, crouched like a wounded animal. Not a totally inappropriate comparison. He grunts as he rocks back onto the balls of his feet, one hand clutching his shoulder. Blood oozes between his fingers, staining his gloves. Dammit. The gash goes deeper than he thought.

The undercity writhes beneath him, a twisted nexus of catwalks and platforms and long drops. Not that he has to worry about that too much. His wings flutter behind him, stretching experimentally as the glowing red nanobots flex and scramble, searching for damage. Top of the line, he can still hear his handler rattling on. Cutting edge. Like nothing the world has seen before.

Well, the world has seen plenty of it now. His own face stares back at him from a poster plastered on the wall, discolored and moldering from the semi-permanent damp. HEROTECH, it proclaims in a bold font, over his grinning mug. Someone has taken a marker and scratched x's over his eyes. Hawks snorts. Cute.

The world is still adjusting to its heroes, the undercity especially. A marriage of law enforcement and technology, according to the HeroTech PR person, keeping the streets safe in new and innovative ways. Most days Hawks feels more like a celebrity, and he thinks his handler might agree. Considering the number of press junkets on his calendar, she must.

His wings flex again, restless.

*

The table is cold underneath him, pressed against his chest, making it hard to breathe. It's hard to do anything, even with his palms pressed against the icy table, trying to push himself up. His muscles are made from razor wire, cutting him to pieces every time they tense. Hawks gasps, his forehead pressed against the table.

He opens his eyes.

And he screams.

Hawks scrambles backwards, like he could escape from the assault of information on his senses. The table gleams bright under the stark fluorescent lights and the walls glow blinding white. He can see the cracks in the paint, the scuffs on the floor, the omnipresent shimmer of the buzzing lights. He tips backwards off the table, and his wings flare to catch him. They catch a table instead, tipping it over and spraying steel medical equipment in every direction.

His wings—

He twists around, turning in circles like a dog chasing his own tail, trying to get a good look at them. He catches his reflection in the glass observation window. They glow red--brighter than the lights, brighter than anything he's ever seen before. A thousand, a million, an unknowable number of nanobots in a constant state of motion. Glowing, shifting, buzzing. He prods the edge of his own thoughts, and the wings respond. They rise up behind him like an angel.

"Red?" Hawks says, his voice cracked from disuse. He doesn't know how long he was out while his body recovered from the modifications. They said it would be a while, when they put him under.

The intercom, hidden in some invisible corner, crackles to life. "Well," the voice says. "Do you like them?"

Hawks exhales. His optical implants are already starting to adjust to his neural patterns, zooming out to a more practical scope. His wings already move like they've always been a part of him, shifting and flexing like they have a mind of their own.

He grins. This is everything HeroTech promised him. This is more. "Depends," he says. "When do I get to try them out?"

*

"You must be lost."

Hawks jumps, his wings flaring on instinct. They cast a neon glow in the gloom of the undercity, their edges sharp enough to cut. The metal implants hum where they meet his back.

A figure slouches out of the shadows and Hawks takes a subtle step back. He knows that face. It's hard to mistake it.

Codename: Dabi.

Real name: Unknown.

Most things are unknown about Dabi, except for his involvement in the Cybernetic Liberation Front. Hawks has read his file backwards and forwards, but the reality still strikes him. He's never seen modifications like that.

Meaning modifications so gruesome, so shoddy, like they were done in a back alley body shop. Maybe they were. Ropey scar tissue marks the seams where cybernetics meet human skin, in the dip of his shirt collar and the backs of his hands. Hawks catches a flash of dark metal through the tears in his coat. Blue fire writhes inside of it, like a tiger, captured but not tamed.

Dabi's eyes shift downwards, finding the blood beneath Hawk's hand. His lips twist in an ugly smile. "You are lost," he says. He paces languidly, each footstep making the metal grating beneath them creak. Hawks has to turn his head to keep him in sight. "How did you fall so low, broken little bird?"

"Who says I fell?" Hawks says, his wings spreading behind him. The nanotechnology buzzes eagerly, a murmur. "Maybe I'm exactly where I want to be." He shifts his grip on his wounded arm and winces. Dabi laughs.

*

Hawks laughs. "The techies are going to kill you."

"I'd like to see them try." Miruko grins savagely over her knee. Only she could contort that way and still look comfortable, her leg twisted up and propped on the breakroom table so she can get at one of the access panels on the thigh. "If they fixed the girls up right to begin with, I wouldn't need to mess with them." She shrugs.

True enough. On the outside, Miruko's cybernetics are nothing short of a technological marvel. White steel and yellow light, long rabbit-like toes and heels that he's seen crack concrete. HeroTech's finest, which still means they need to be serviced almost weekly by the techs down at HQ. Wear and tear, they say. Just part of the job.

"What am I going to do, void the warranty?" Miruko snorts. "They should be lecturing you about drinking that garbage if they're so concerned."

Hawks hides his smile behind the lip of his coffee can. "Hey, I have a

mission brief in an hour. I need all the caffeine I can get," he says. And if his personal trainer doesn't see him then no harm, no foul. "Some big secretive thing."

"You? Secretive anything?" She grins up at him through the white curtain of her hair, a screw held between her teeth. "You're gonna need a lot more caffeine than that."

*

"Come with me, hero," Dabi says, jerking his head. "I know someone who can patch that up."

Hawks hesitates, and Dabi looks back. He raises his eyebrows. "Unless you'd rather bleed?"

Hawks stands, his wings flickering and then shrinking. He folds them, twin strips of light that are warm against his back.

The metal catwalk groans under the weight of their footsteps like it's always a breath away from collapsing, but Hawks suspects that a lot of things in the undercity are that way. Dabi himself is a knot of metal and scar tissue slouching ahead of him, held together by grit and bad intentions.

The catwalks are a lattice over the undercity, crossing over and under one another and spanning big open pockets within the cluttered and rotting infrastructure. Hawks' wings shrink closer as their path takes them over one of them, careful to hide their red glow as he looks over the side of the railing.

A tent city sprawls beneath them, built from rotten canvas and corrugated metal. A place like this lends credence to the word semi-permanent, its roots dug deep into the metal but ready to disappear at a moments notice. Children run between the makeshift stalls and lean-tos, laughing while their parents scrub at dirty scrap to sell in the middlecity above them.

"You don't look surprised," Dabi says. He's stopped to watch him.

Hawks looks up sharply. His enhanced eyes see too much - every scar, every scratch, every child with missing fingers, eaten by factory machines and negligence. "I'm not just the overcity darling you think I am," he says, adjusting his grip on his injured arm. "Everyone has a past."

"And not everyone has a future." Below them, two children spit like angry cats as they brawl over a piece of scrap. "Makes it worse, don't you think? Sitting pretty up there when you know exactly what's below your feet."

Hawks shoulders his way past him, ignoring the way Dabi snorts.

*

"I'm sorry," he says. He can't stop saying it. He's sorry for his dirty hands and scuffed palms, for his snotty nose and the tears in his eyes as he sits in the back of the police van, his hands bound in front of him by glowing red mag-cuffs. He looks like every undercity urchin that's ever snuck up to the overcity to see the lights.

"I only wanted to see it," he keeps saying. The overcity is half-myth where he's from, a place made from clean metal and bright lights. He didn't expect the bus, barreling forward on its magnetic track, toward the woman crossing the road. He didn't even think. He just threw himself forward, tackling her to the ground like she was another undercity boy holding a choice piece of scrap.

And now here she is, looming over him like one of the overcity skyscrapers, her sharp suit torn where she hit the ground. He winces.

"Sorry for what? For saving my life?" She scolds him, and he winces again, ducking his head. But her fingers find his chin, tilting it back upwards, and when he looks, she's smiling. A razor-thin smile, as sharp as the look in her eyes. He's seen that look before. It's the moment you find a piece of clean metal in a heap of scrap and you know that you're going to eat well for a week.

"How would you like to be a hero?" She asks, and he takes her hand.

*

Hawks feels the crowd before he sees it. The vibration rumbles through the catwalk, making the sensitive nanobots in his wings twitch.

"What is this?" He demands, rounding on Dabi, but Dabi only smiles like an oil slick, dark and mercurial.

"Just a party," he says. "C'mon."

It's like stepping through a veil between one world and the next. The catwalk opens up into a tall auditorium, lit by the floodlights that stripe the space with gold and black, light and shadow. Hawks winces at the sudden change, shielding his eyes, and then but he's suddenly surrounded by people jostling him from every side. He doesn't know where Dabi's gone. All he knows is the press of sweaty bodies and the whirl-click of his eyes as they struggle to catch up with their environment.

"Dabi?" His voice is lost in the roar of the crowd as someone walks across the stage. Hawks spares one more glance around before he does what he does best.

He goes up. Not with his wings--too recognizable here--but there are plenty of stairways. He crouches on the empty catwalk, finally alone, hidden in a pocket of shadow. Blood trickles down his arm from the exertion on his wound. Annoying. Hawks flexes his hand and red nanobots rise to the surface of his wound like a glowing stripe of blood. In seconds they've pieced his skin back together. He's done with that role. He's gotten exactly what he wanted.

Shigaraki Tomura, standing on the stage, draped in a tattered coat with a matted fur ruff. His people stand behind him like they stepped right out of the photographs attached to their files. Hawks knows them almost better than he knows himself. Spinner, his skin rippling with a thousand cybernetic scales, half of them rusted. ReDestro, sitting in a hovering chair that seems grafted to his body, yelling so loud about liberation and truth that he spits. And behind Shigaraki, lurking like a mountain, is Gigantomachia, his eyes burning yellow. There are so many modifications piled on top of his shoulders that he looks more machine than man. There's none of the slick, HeroTech modifications here. Everything is a little older, a little shabbier, a little closer to falling apart.

Hawks reaches back and touches his wings. A sliver of the nanobot mass breaks off at his command and becomes a glowing red dart nestled against his palm. This should be easy. They promised this would be easy.

*

"I didn't take this job to kill people," he says, his hands curled into tight fists under the desk. They're in an unused office, but it feels more like an interrogation room.

"You didn't just take the job," the HeroTech suit reminds him pointedly and Hawks' wings twitch restlessly. They never fail to remind him just

how much they own him, and not just the nanobots and cybernetic wiring.

"This isn't about you, Hawks," his commanding officer says, her eyes steely and unreadable. "This is about the greater good."

The Greater Good. The words are familiar. They're under all the HeroTech advertisements, all the posters bearing his face.

"Assure me, Hawks," his commanding officer says, "that when the time comes to kill Shigaraki Tomura, you won't hesitate."

*

He promised he wouldn't hesitate.

"You are lost, aren't you?"

Hawks whirls around, the nanobot feather gripped so tight it bites into his hand. They rush to heel it again. Dabi's eyes clock the movement. He knows. Maybe he's always known this was a set up to get close enough to Shigaraki to take the final shot. Maybe that's why he's here, smirking like a cat with the mouse between its claws.

"You're just a tool in their hands," Dabi mocks, his hands in his pockets and his shoulders slouched as he approaches. Still, blue fire flickers through his dark metal cybernetics. "And you don't even know it."

"They saved me from the undercity," Hawks snaps, "so that I can save others." The greater good.

"Were you really saved?" Dabi raises his eyebrows. "Face it, Hawks. You were always just one bad day from being one of us."

He raises his arm and Hawks tenses, but he's not attacking. He's pulling back the ragged sleeve of his coat, revealing his forearm. A knot of red scar tissue gives way to black metal at his elbow. The metal is dirty and scuffed, the paint all but worth off, but Hawks can still read what it once said, the words stretched from Dabi's elbow to wrist like a brand.

HEROTECH.

Dabi's smile stretches as the realization dawns in Hawks' eyes. Everyone on the stage below has cybernetic modifications, the same

way he does, the way Miruko does, the way any hero does. And only one company works with cybernetics. The law ensures it.

"It took them a few tries to get it right," Dabi says darkly, his smile twisting his scarred face into something from a nightmare, flickering in the light burning beneath his skin. "But practice makes perfect."









セロパス
2F

CHERRY
BOMB

love
passion

POST
NO
HATE

MIRIN

WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON, BOYS?

» **BY MARKOVIA**

The protests start at eighteen-hundred hours on an idle Wednesday. They don't come out of nowhere, there's been tension brewing on the horizon for weeks, months, years perhaps. The sun shutters in the roof are sliding shut already, cutting off the UnderCity from the upper realm. The mechanisms whirr and creak as they turn and crank chains that move flat pieces of iron across the openings to the surface. Beneath the giant awning, vast crowds amass outside the gates to the UpperCity, crowds with picket-boards and loud-speakers and chants ringing-

'HOW MANY CHILDREN WILL DIE UNDER YOUR WATCH?'

'ABOLISH THE POINTS SYSTEM! FUCK THE RANKS!'

'UPPERCITY SCUM WILL DIE!'

Shinsou wanders through the masses with his hood up, a mask covering his face. It's not like he needs it, it's so dark due to protestors shooting out the streetlights and the bonfires hastily lit hardly shed a lot of light. He shouts as loudly as the rest of the crowd, he raises his fist just as high in the air, even if his heart isn't in it. He's just come to look, that's what he tells himself. He's not come to fight, just to observe. So what if he's been affected by his rebellious, dead parents' point score, so what if he's always had silent sympathies with the dissidents, so what if he's been directly affected the corrupt workings of the UpperCity government and felt sick to his stomach?

He scratches beneath the right side of his jaw, just below his ear. The point-chip can be felt through the skin, racking up his social standing wirelessly and relaying that information back to UpperCity Central. The chips are installed when a person's final baby tooth has been spat from their mouths, placed just beneath the gum in a way that will allow the natural tooth to grow over it. From that point on the points are counted, totted, totalled. What have you done wrong, what have you done right, how educated are you, do you speak out against the people you shouldn't?

Is your quirk worth investing in?

Are you fit, healthy, good-looking?

Do you have money?

Adhere, follow the UpperCity's guidance and maybe, just maybe, you'll make something of yourself. Maybe one day the gates out of the slums will open and you can ascend to something better.

Shinsou swears those gates haven't opened since the day he was born.

There's so many sorts here - old, young, families with children at their sides and loud, proud students at the front with the most vibrant flags. There's a few lower level villains, some he recognises from the news. Even a few disgruntled heroes. Presumably they won't be heroes for much longer, not if they're out in support of the people from the city below. He stops a little way off from the gates, watching the hecklers at the front shove their shoulders against the metal. It won't help. Those are sturdy, well-made things, they won't be easily busted.

A man in the crowd next to him taps him on the shoulder and offers Shinsou a beer from the mangled box tucked under his arm. He's wearing a bandana around his face with the rebellion flag emblazoned on the front. It's a brave move, even here. There could be spies watching. There could be cameras.

"Have one of these, your voice will wear out otherwise," the masked man says cheerfully. Shinsou accepts it with a nod and cracks it open. He barely hears it over the roar of the crowd. Someone starts blasting music from a speaker somewhere closer to the building. It's more like a party than a rebellion. "So, you reckon we'll make any headway today?"

"I doubt it," Shinsou replies, taking a swig of beer. He glances at the UpperCity gates in the distance, far over the heads of the crowd and the pickets, not really knowing what to say. "Tomorrow, perhaps."

The masked man grins and knocks his own can of beer against Shinsou's. When he leans closer to speak, Shinsou is overwhelmed by the stench of ash and weed. "I think it'll turn violent by tomorrow. Look at 'em all - they're gagging for a fight."

Shinsou turns his head and hears the screams, feels the shove of people all around him. The crowd are pulsing, the tension is drawing thin, about to snap, he can feel it. "Y'think?"

"Fuck yeah, man! Those fuckheads in their ivory towers got it comin'. Can't you feel it?" the man laughs, gesturing wide with his arms. His hoodie slips down to his elbows and reveals augmentation, two steely forearms attached to flesh and blood hands. Thin lines of dull blue

run along the metalwork, glowing softly in the dim of the evening. Augmentation isn't allowed without a license - one he highly doubts this man has. It's an instant point-docker, one so severe that it would keep a person below ground for the rest of their life. A firework goes up and illuminates the sharp glint of the man's wide eyes in a violent red. "It feels like there's something brewing! If not tomorrow then definitely soon."

"Soon," Shinsou repeats. "I guess I might as well stick around."

It's just at that moment that a garbage can explodes near the front of the crowd, bursting under the pressure of some unknown quirk. The crowd cheers and there's a sudden barrage of power from the people. Objects are hurled at the gates, water pipes burst from beneath the ground, the music ramps up so heavy that the beat can be felt through the floor. A plume of blue fire rockets up into the air above the mob to applause. The man next to him laughs, hoots in riotous glee, eyes burning as bright as the flames coming from his hand. Shinsou looks up at the fire in awe, watching the flames curl into the sky.

"Fuck the UpperCity scum!" the man screams, voice fierce despite the way his arms appear to be smoking under the weight of his own quirk. "Down with the gates! Out, out, fucking out!"

The crowd echoes his chant, they get louder and wilder and it seems the whole street is ablaze with fury. Shinsou clenches a fist at his side at raises it into the air, toward the gorgeous spiral of blue. The man beside him pulls down his mask, revealing the entirety of his fucked-up face to make his words clearer and to send Shinsou a manic grin. There's real intent in his words, in his expression, this is a man with conviction and fire behind his eyes. He's unsure what has him yelling along with the masked man but he keeps repeating his words, over and over, until his voice is sore. He feels a little less lost in the madness than he did before.

-

The man's name is Dabi, he learns this later that night. It's three hundred hours and there's no sign of daylight breaking. When the riot breaks out into full blown chaos and Shinsou's drunk enough beer to kill a small mammal, Dabi drags him away from the crowd. 'It's gonna get real violent soon, I can smell it', he says. Shinsou lets himself be led away by this strange man, this probable criminal, all the way back to the shithole that Dabi calls his apartment. It's a mess of wires

and frazzled plug sockets, peppered here and there with newspaper clippings and empty beer cans. A good deal of augmentation gear lays discarded or broken on the floor. Shinsou notices a few small docking stations charging a number functional pieces - a couple of arms, a leg, what looks like a jaw. He glances over at Dabi as he shrugs off his hoodie and looks over the thick, dark scars marring the lower half of his face. Perhaps he intends to replace that part of his body with machinery as well. Shinsou shudders to think of the supplantation process.

With a sigh, Shinsou collapses onto the futon and lays back, resting his arms behind his head. He's smoked too much, everything is running at half the speed it usually does, but Dabi doesn't seem to be in any mood to stop. The night is young and the city is on the verge of collapse - why the fuck not indulge in excess tonight? There might not be anything left outside this shitty little studio in the morning. Dabi's going on and on about something that he doesn't bother listening to until the moment he flops down onto the futon next to him. There's another joint between his lips, which he lights off the side of his wrist. The metal flares blue for a moment, then dwindles and cools to pretty silver.

"I'm just sayin', they've had it fuckin' coming for years, man," Dabi rambles, before inhaling. Smoke pools out of his mouth and lingers in the air for just a second, then he sucks it back up his nose. "Fuckin' shitbags, right? Overpaid, self-righteous shitbags."

"Mm, shitbags."

Dabi clicks his tongue and passes the joint to Shinsou, who takes it wordlessly and places it between his lips. "It always had to end, y'know? I never thought I'd live to see it happenin' though. S'fucking brilliant. You think?"

Shinsou hums and lets the smoke filter through his nose. It tastes vile in the back of his throat but the way it sits heavy on his head is pleasant, so he takes another hit. "Yeah."

The augmented man gets to his feet and traipses across the junk-covered floor to one of the docking stations near the fireplace. He starts unscrewing his hand at the wrist and tugs it free from the rest of the augmentation to set in one of the sockets. It continues twitching, fingers wiggling rhythmically back and forth even as Dabi moves away from it. He catches Shinsou's surprised look as he moves back to the futon and chuckles wheezily under his breath. "It's silicone. Better heat resistance, plus it looks a bit nicer than metal."

Comes in handy when I'm takin' a gal home," Dabi winks, holding his remaining hand out. He flexes it in front of Shinsou's bewildered face. "This one's real though."

"Why did you choose to get all this?" Shinsou asks, gesturing to Dabi's body. "Ain't you worried about gettin' points deducted?"

Dabi laughs and the sound crackles around his smoke-tainted lungs. He taps on the top of his metal forearm and holds Shinsou's gaze as a wicked grin stretches across his face. "This shit is more than worth the trouble. I can use my quirk without trouble now. No burns, no nothin'. UpperCity government don't believe in augs for everyone 'cos they're afraid equal power will upset the status quo. S'why they keep their point system ticking away, ever in their favour. It's bullshit, basically. Why wouldn't you wanna help people? Improve their lives and shit. Ain't no good reason, ain't none at all. That's what the damn rebellion is all about, stopping this fucked up segregation of 'good' versus 'evil', 'rich' versus 'poor'. Shit ain't that simple. Life is a lot more grey than that."

Shinsou listens to the rebel's monologue with interest, noting how it aligns with a lot of his internal thoughts over the past few months. He hums under his breath and lifts the joint for another puff. "How'd you stop them from finding you though. Don't some people go to jail for illegal enhancement?"

"Sure do. But they're just the one's too dumb to fuck the system properly," Dabi laughs, sitting up to shuffle to Shinsou on his knees. "You know where the point chip is, right?"

"Beneath the last tooth that fell outta your mouth, right?"

"Right," the rebel nods, beckoning Shinsou closer. "Well, lookie here."

He hooks a finger into the corner of his mouth and tugs it down, revealing the line of his teeth. His breath reeks and his gums are red, slightly swollen from disease or chemical abuse. There, in the back of his mouth, is a gaping hole where one of his molars should be. It looks sore, half-healed, and deep enough that Shinsou quickly comes to realise what it is Dabi is showing him. He furrows his brows and leans closer, nose wrinkling at the smell of Dabi's stale breath.

"You ripped your chip out?"

"Mhm," Dabi answers, releasing his mouth. He licks his bottom lip and lays back flat against the bed, mechanical arms stretching above his

head. "Ain't no fucker gonna keep tabs on me."

Shinsou grimaces at the thought of doing such a thing. It must've hurt, to wrench one's own tooth out and dig through gum tissue, through nerves and blood vessels into bone. The chip is implanted deep, it would be far from an easy task to remove it.

"How?" Shinsou asks, raising a brow. "How did you get it out?"

Dabi places a finger in his mouth and wiggles it about in the cavity, chuckling under his breath. He pulls it free with a pop. "Yanked the tooth out with a pair of pliers. Then a friend got a knife and a pair of tweezers. Crazy bitch sure had some fun with that." He sits up and crosses his legs, elbows coming to rest on his knees so he can lean his cheek against one of his fists. A sly grin rises on his lips. "Why? You just curious? Or thinkin' of joining the rebellion?"

The two men stare at one another in silence as Shinsou mulls over the question. To join the rebellion would be to leave his former life behind. It would mean abandoning his shitty nine to five job and leaving his overpriced residence to find somewhere secret and safe. Neither of those things sound particularly bad. It's not like he has any family to worry about, there's no-one that would be affected by his choice. Only himself. Swapping comfort for a purpose in life, for some direction - well that sounds like a fair deal.

"You wanna be a free man?" Dabi asks, resting his handless wrist against Shinsou's shoulder. "You wanna show the fucking scum upstairs that equality is something worth dyin' for?"

Shinsou presses his tongue against the premolar just after his canine. It is the tooth that fell out last, the one that wiggled free of his gum three days after his parents were silenced at the front of an angry mob attempted to pass the gates to the UpperCity. He remembers it well. The chip was implanted only a week later.

He releases a breath through his nose and lifts the joint back to his lips, smiling.

"You got any pliers?"

Dabi's grin widens.









FRAGILE, SOFT MACHINES

» BY CHROME

You come as fragile, soft machines / and you're bound to fast, you're bound to grieve.

"The Crow", Dessa

It didn't matter how many times he did it. Every time Bakugou Katsuki plugged into a server, the first few seconds felt like he was drowning.

His lungs seized. He gasped in a breath. The oxygen came, as it always did, the autonomic process taking over as his mind and body separated. Mind and body separated--a good thing. A good thing, because it meant that the corpse lying on the floor in the room where Katsuki's body breathed on its own wasn't Deku.

It meant that somewhere in this matrix, Deku lived, even though his body was slumped on the floor, still half-leaning against the servers, brains spilling out onto the concrete. Even though he hadn't been quite quick enough on the draw, hadn't realized what was happening until the man's hand was tightening on the trigger.

"You fucker," he'd snarled, pistol out and leveled but Deku's brains were on the floor and he couldn't fix that no matter how many of them he shot.

"He was doing it! He was doing exactly what you said!"

"He should have done it faster,"

the man said. "Finish the job."

I don't do that, he almost said. He almost pulled the trigger, took all of them down, bang-bang-bang. But then what would be left? They wouldn't get paid, of course, and there would be no they, just Deku lying there, still among the other bodies, and Katsuki still here and breathing with blood on his hands and nothing else left.

So Katsuki had plugged in, not allowing his hands to shake, because in a minute they wouldn't be his hands. In a minute there would be a body, leaning against a server, feet away from the corpse of his childhood-best-and-only friend, and there would be Katsuki in the blinking whirring planes of a world where that corpse still lived. In a minute, Katsuki would have a shot at getting Deku back.

He'd do worse things for Deku than drown.

In a minute, he broke the surface, separated from his physical form. Old-but-still-there instinct made him want to plug in his preferred visual interface immediately, but he held back and reached out instead, fumbling through to find the edge of Deku's own interface and snapping it into place. This wasn't Katsuki's strong suit, and if he hadn't known Deku the way that he did, it would have been impossible to find.

He looked up into Deku's visual world and the pit of his stomach dropped out. It was their old neighborhood. He'd known Deku was sentimental, but this was just fucked.

Musutafu was just as he remembered it, if it had been totally silent and empty. No birds chirped. No bicycles whizzed by. No voices carried over walls. There wasn't even the sound of distant cars or a whisper of wind.

He fought the urge to shudder and won. Instead, he broke into a jog down the deserted street, making a beeline towards the first place he thought Izuku might be. The beauty of travel through a server--even a server with an interface as tactile as Deku's--was that it was instantaneous, if you were willing to let go of your physical form a little. Katsuki, whose hold over his avatar was weak enough anyway that his expression sometimes flickered blank, that the image of his eyes sometimes stared past what he was actually looking at, had no problem with that.

He resolidified in the yard outside their old middle school. If something had held Deku up in the server--and it must have, since he'd taken too long, since they'd shot him for taking too long--and the server looked like Musutafu, then it must have lived here.

The yard was deserted, too. He headed for the staircase, taking the steps two at a time. The metal of them echoed, and Katsuki wasn't sure if that was a result of the interface or his own memory filling in the blanks. He crashed through the door into the hallway and flung open the door to the old classroom with enough force that it crashed into the opposite wall.

He felt a rush of satisfaction when he saw Deku standing there, along with a little bit of confused *deja-vu*, because it was adult Deku, Deku-as-he-was-this-morning in a stupid t-shirt and a comic book hero jacket. Good. He wasn't sure he could have handled even the image of middle school Deku. He resisted the urge to check this Deku's skull

for fractures, to see if the brains were spilling out the back.

It took him maybe five seconds of staring to get through the relief and mixed emotions and creeping sense that yep, this was going to add to his list of nightmares and once he had, he realized that Deku had flinched back from him, scrambling behind a desk.

"What the fuck!" Katsuki snapped. "It's me."

"You?"

"Yeah, who else," Katsuki said. "They--Deku, what the fuck happened, I couldn't get them to--they shot you!"

"I felt that," Deku said, distractedly, eyes going from Katsuki to the door that had fallen shut behind him. "I'm sorry. I got held up. The security was much stronger than I expected...I got in but I can't get back out, not through it..."

"Where is it?" Katsuki demanded. As though in answer to his question, the door was thrown up again, and--

--and Katsuki was staring at himself in the doorway.

"You think I wouldn't find you?" the security system wearing Katsuki's face demanded.

"What the fuck, Deku?" Katsuki's voice broke even as it rose in volume.

"I can explain!" Deku laughed, but there was no humor in it, just pure nerves. "The interface makes things familiar, right? The better I know a place the easier it is to figure out what it does, where things are and what they mean. The security system just--it just became something familiar."

The aforementioned security system lunged at them. Katsuki snarled and pulled out his gun, firing at himself. The bullets pushed the figure back, but it produced no blood.

"And the thing that wants to kill you is me?"

"No!" Deku scrambled back, hand clamping down on Katsuki's shoulder to pull him back with him. "It's--you know, I was standing on the playground and I ran into it and went, oh, that's scary and it just--"

"The only scary thing you could come up with was ME?" Katsuki howled, unloading bullets into the thing. Now that he was taking a better look, it wasn't that much like him. Sure, it looked like him, but it didn't move like him--it moved like an algorithm had taught it how walking was supposed to work. Its expression of malice was more fluid than anything Katsuki could project on an avatar, but it sometimes clipped through objects because in some ways, it and the room were the same.

Unlike Katsuki and Deku, the interlopers it was hunting.

"That isn't going to work!" Deku said, even as Katsuki continued to fire. "He's way more sophisticated than a basic code like that...it wouldn't disable him anyway but he's actually able to learn from it so every time you hit him, it slows him down less..."

"Then make me a better weapon!" Katsuki snapped, cutting off the rambling. "Make me something that can kill it!" He emphasized the it, because Deku had said he.

"Right! Just--one second--" Deku was fumbling behind him. He'd let go, so Katsuki could take a step forward and put himself between the security system-cum-evil alter ego and Deku. He fired again, and again, but Deku was right. Every bullet seemed to phase the thing less. Even worse, it was learning not only from the code--it seemed to be learning from Katsuki, because every step it took was a little more graceful, a little more like a real street samurai rather than a digital rendering.

"We don't have a second," Katsuki said, reaching back. To his relief, Deku placed the handle of a gun in his palm. He gripped it. "What's it do?"

"Two shots," Deku said, blissfully skipping the technical information for the instructions. "You need them both."

"Got it," Katsuki said, and in one fluid motion jerked it forward and fired.

The shot embedded in the face of the system. It warped and glitched, losing shape; Katsuki waited for it to resolidify to fire again, afraid that he'd miss in the blurring and waste the second bullet, but that was a mistake. The system never resolidified--instead it dissolved into pixels and blurred through the wall.

"Don't let it get away!" Deku's voice rose in alarm. "If it has too long--it'll figure out how to beat this--"

Katsuki let out a noise that might have been a primal shout of frustration or might have been the words 'shit' and 'fuck' at the same time as he bolted after it. He crashed through the door of the classroom without opening it. It was bad practice; someone like Deku religiously maintained the rules of the interface because if you broke them too often they become entirely useless to you, the whole thing dripping back into uninterpretable code.

But, fuck it. They were doomed to be uninterpretable code if Katsuki didn't end this, right now.

Where would it go? Where would Katsuki go, if Katsuki was this thing? If he was whatever blurring of security system and Deku's image of Katsuki had created his enemy?

He went to the roof. He took the stairs, sort of, but the actual journey was lost on him. The second he emerged onto the roof, it fired, and he struggled to recontextualize the pain of the bullet through his shoulder as what it actually was, the errant firing of uninjured nerves as the system convinced his brain he was under attack.

One shot. He could do this. Up the stairs behind him, he heard Deku, running. The sound of his steps echoed. "Be careful, Kacchan!"

"Shh," he hissed, as though it was possible to hide. That thing was a part of this world and they were not. It had an inherent advantage, which Deku obviously knew. He fell quiet, stepping up beside Katsuki. He felt so real, his form solid, even his breath against Katsuki's shoulder. Deku really was good at this.

"Between the eyes, if you can," Deku whispered.

"Of course I can," Katsuki said, with more bravado than he actually felt. He waited. Waited. What did it sound like, the footsteps on the concrete of that roof? Barely anything at all, except in the fall, when the leaves fell and--

--crunch.

It was all Katsuki needed for a position. He lunged out and fired. The bullet cut straight through the thing's face, but instead of its brains spilling out the back of its head the way Deku's had, it simply dissolved, bits and bytes falling to nothing, thudding into sparks of color and then falling into the dead leaves.

"Did you put those there?" Deku said, of the leaves. "I'd forgotten it

used to look like that..."

Katsuki shrugged. "Is it dead?"

Deku mumbled something as he checked, looking past Katsuki at something he couldn't see. "Yes. Yes! You got it, Kacchan."

"Thank fuck," he muttered. "Let's go, Deku." He turned and headed for the door. He was three steps down the stairs before he realized that Deku wasn't following.

"Deku?"

"You don't need to go anywhere to leave, Kacchan," Deku smiled at him. "Security system's down. You can leave from here. Tell them the data's all accessible now. They just have to plug in and pull it."

"Sure, fine," Katsuki said. "Let's go, then." He held out a hand.

Deku didn't move to take it.

"Come on, Deku. It's dead. Job's done. We've got to get out of here."

"There's nowhere for me to go," Deku said, shaking his head. "My body...I felt it go."

"Trust me," Katsuki said. "I saw. I've got it. Here." He tried to grab Deku's arm, but Deku pulled back.

"Kacchan..." Izuku said.

"Are you still scared of me?" Katsuki demanded, suddenly.

Izuku stared at him, then started to shake his head frantically. "That's not--that's not it at all, Kacchan, I promise."

"Cause that thing was about to kill you, and you stuck my face on it," Katsuki said, guardedly. "So--I was a piece of shit, okay, when we were kids. So you tell me right now--"

"I'm not scared of you," Izuku said, and then he lunged forward and hugged him. It was an odd sensation within a matrix. Izuku was as comfortable in the digital as the real, but Katsuki's form didn't feel quite his. Still, the sentiment was clear. "You came in after me. I knew you would. And you did a good job! I know you hate this stuff..." he trailed off.

"Thank you for trying."

Katsuki let Deku hug him for a second, then pushed him back. "So then do you trust me?"

"I--yes," Izuku said, "Of course I trust you, Kacchan. But it's--if I'm dead--"

"Do you trust me?" Katsuki repeated. He held out a hand.

Izuku looked at him for a long moment. "Yes." And he took it.

Katsuki gripped his hand tight and took a step back, backwards through the code, out of the matrix and into the real world. It felt like drowning, except he never broke the surface--never tried to break the surface. Instead he pushed Izuku upwards, shoving his first friend, his best friend, in the direction of the light above, and he let go and sunk into the nothingness of deeper waters.

Izuku blinked and sucked in a breath, a real one. His body felt strange and alien. He curled his fingers slowly and stretched his arms out. Even the ache of them was unfamiliar--his usual pain was almost comfortable by now, living in the often-broken bone, but this was a different sort, the ache of exertion that dwelled instead in the muscle.

He opened his eyes and scanned the room. His vision was off, too, though he couldn't pinpoint why. He checked the room--there was the man that had hired them, sinister and still. Beside him stood his bodyguards, and then there was the exit from the basement up into the street behind them, lined by rows and rows of servers half-obscured by the rising fog of dry ice. It was just as he'd left it--but then his gaze fell immediately beside him and he locked up, standing frozen and staring at his own corpse.

"Did you do it?" the man asked.

Izuku couldn't speak for a moment.

"Come on, Deku, play the fucking game. Come on."

"Y-yeah," Izuku managed. The alarm of seeing the interior of his own brain was only shattered by the near-equal alarm of hearing Kacchan's low voice when he spoke. "Wide open. It's--you can plug

right in. One sec. I'll set it up for you." He curbed the desire to talk more--it wasn't Kacchan's way, and the more he said the more wrong it sounded.

"Good. Let him do the talking."

"Good," the man said, at almost the same time. "Pity your friend couldn't do it quicker."

Izuku felt the rise of rage and grief that usually precipitated tears, but none came. Kacchan's body's instinct was apparently not to sob. Clear-eyed, he typed quickly into the console, lining up the codes he wanted. The same voice in his head whispered, *"Come on, Deku, you've got this. Trust me."*

"It's all ready," he said, holding out a hand.

"Ask for the money first, idiot."

"About payment..."

The man leaned over the console, examining it, as one of the bodyguards produced a data chip. "I'll pull the files and make sure it's all there. Then it's all yours," he said.

Izuku wordlessly held out the cord.

The man plugged in, and Izuku watched his face go slack and his eyes vacant. He blinked, and blinked, and then his eyes hung open dull and lifeless as he ran straight into the electric fence that Izuku had thrown back up behind him.

Time to go. Before they realize. You got this?

"Better if it's you," he murmured, and he felt a strange creeping sensation, as though another set of hands had doubled with his own. It was uncanny and he had to squash the urge to fight it instead of letting go.

Kacchan reached down and took the gun from his/Deku's waistband, firing a perfect line of shots into the line of bodyguards, every bullet sinking through the head or the chest. Even while the bodies were still falling, they wove their way through the servers. Izuku/Katsuki paused only long enough to snatch the data chip from the floor before running up the steps towards the door, one-two legs at a time, echoing, resonating, inextricable, inexorably towards the surface.





DIAMONDS AND LEATHER

» BY KAWAYLS

Kaminari shivers with cold.

Huh, he thinks as he presses his back to a high wall of a dark alley, I almost forgot how it feels.

"You mean, to be cold?"

Yup.

"Don't come whining to me cause your ass is freezing off." He can imagine the mocking grin on the face of his interlocutor, while trying to draw the outlines in his mind. Denki is almost sure he knows what his interlocutor looks like, from that one stolen glance he had from the picture book. Pale, sharp face; thin lips and mischievous, violet eyes.

A tiny Aizawa turns on in his head and scolds him to concentrate.

Right. One thing at a time, the way his mentor demands. Otherwise, the blond can't focus.

"My face is prettier than that," scoffs the voice in his head.

Your face is dead. Kaminari peers, eyes glowing eerily under the long shadows of the night. The street is almost empty: just a few emos galloping on their edgy hoverboards; or bikers, showing off their noen, flying monsters that roar and disturb the night. He saw a Nomu rolling down the street, the new best seller of Japan's institute for AI among men. Some weird shaped box with round eyes for lonely people.

Denki loses track of time after the second hour. He has been stuck here for a while. It doesn't really matter, after all he's going to be here until his target appears.

But he's bored. Waiting is the worst part in assassination.

"Someone's coming."

Kaminari glances to the side, hearing heavy shuffling. Can you see who is it?

"Wait..." There's a soft buzz above his head as the supposedly hidden

camera angles so that it views the whole street. The first thing Denki did when he came here was to break the wall and find the camera - so that his helpful assistant can hack into it and cover up trajectories that are out of Denki's reach.

The blond may be a half machine, but he still has only two eyes. Which is kinda dumb, because I could use a third eye at my nape. It's creepy as fuck but sounds useful.

"Shit, it's him."

There's a burst of adrenaline that washes over his metallic body when he darts. Feet kissing the pounding ground, a smirk finds its way up his lips as he shoves his arm forward and lets his silver fingers stretch to five different directions; presenting a hollow cranny in the middle of his palm. There's a charging sound that whistles, pressure of the air drops - and then a quick, potent laser is shot, sparkling with electricity.

The boom echoes in the place as it hits a car behind his target. Denki's eyes widen at the sight of the stuttering machine, and at the figure flipping in the air; landing a few inches away. He doesn't waste time staring at his attacker and already leaps to a different alley, his legs stomping heavily on the dirty ground.

"Hey- stop right there!" demands the teen in a squeak; feet charging and he blasts.

It turns into a chase in a matter of seconds.

To say that the peaceful night time is slightly disturbed is an understatement. Noise disperses in waves of tsunami from the gashed bins under the weight of the half cyborg bouncing on them; said boy blazes after a man wearing a black hoodie. It is loud enough to wake the dead. The lasars Denki shoots every few seconds in an attempt to neutralize the target aren't contributing either.

God. Fucking. Dammit.

"You're not smart."

Kaminari activates the jets build into his Biolimbs. It makes a woosh sound and pitches the blond forward. He wriggles in the air, closes one eye, focusing on the escaping figure. A red point of aim flashing in his right, fake eye; red components lay a targeting reticule over the amplified image.

First of all, mean. The electricity crackles and sparks in circles around his arm, dancing and jumping while gathering force. Secondly, if you ain't helping - don't interfere!

Electricity bursts out like a hunk of pure, compressed energy. It washes the street in a strong luminance, devouring the power of any electrical object on its way.

The explosion is earth shaking.

Denki lands on his feet, casually shaking his head. There's no way he missed, right? The range of the attack is immense. Something's burning and chemicals reek from far away. Pacing to the destroyed vicinity of the street, his eyes scan the damaged area. Rough. Glancing at his arm, he notices a stream of smoke seeping from the slots in his bionic limb.

"Um," mulls his assistant, "It's rather you fried the fuck outta him; or he fled."

Denki plops on his butt, shoulders slumping, face drops. He takes one long moment to digest the ripped alley in front of him. Something sparkles in front of his eyes, and then, a conduit tube bursts. Green liquid leaks to the street, followed by pungent smell of some gas (Hydrogen? Helium? Depending where the tube ends) pervasives rapidly, tss-ing and pshh-ing expressively.

It tickles his nostrils and he coughs, waves rapidly with his arm, pushing his mask up to his nose. Dying from a toxic gas isn't his preferred way to end his life. Especially not when he fails, miserably, to complete his mission.

Say sike right now.

Aizawa, a middle-aged, tired man, sighs heavily and runs his hand through messy dreads of black hair.

"Kaminari," he speaks in a restrained voice. "What's the only thing I told you not to do?"

"To not damage the surroundings while I chase my targets."

"And what did you do?"

Denki huffs. "Blew up an entire alley."

"You're a delightful disaster."

Fighting the urge to snarl at the mock, the blond keeps a straight face. Aizawa observes him for a solid minute, that feels like an eternity. The teen squirms uncomfortably in his place. The gaze pushes him down with gravity, though, he didn't mind being swallowed by the ground. Dissolve into the mess of cables their tiny world is built on sounds tempting.

"You had one job," growls Aizawa. The dim luminance of the neon screens around them is the only light source to reach his face; making him look more tired than he actually is.

Kaminari swallows down a lump of nerves. If it was possible, his palms would be sweating. Instead, he puffs shakily, trying to ignore his dry mouth. "I'm sorry," he mumbles dumbly.

"I know you are," says the man. He shifts in his place and leans forward, fingers tangling into one another. "That's not the issue."

Kaminari notices that he has the latest version of BQS-M23, and can't help but gawk. It's the latest upgrade (if he remembers correctly: 4.156PF version) of biochemical organs, limbs, cells - it's the closest thing to human skin, something that's rarely seen these days. He finds himself jealous, despite possessing the old model: The BQS-M22.

He's going to get an upgrade to the last version, if he can catch that hacker.

"Then what?" Kaminari whispers.

Aizawa isn't answering right away. His eyes trail up and down the teen in front of him, and then he speaks - but it's not what Kaminari wants to hear.

"How are the Biolimbs? Can you sense temperature?"

"Yeah."

"That's good," nods the man, eyes unfocused. "How's your assistant?"

It takes a moment to the question to settle in.

"I'm honored, he's asking for my well being," snorts said assistant, "Tell

him I'm good. As much as a talking brain can be."

You're a nasty bitch. "He says he's good."

"Excellent. His body is approximately stable, so get down to business. Don't do anything stupid."

Kaminari flaps his hair snobbery. "Since when do I do stupid things?"

"Don't make me answer that."

"I'm going to Dive," the voice announces in determination.

Kaminari tilts his head, the sky is dark. Indigo, clogged clouds hiding behind turbid fog. The lights of the city flash and it's blinding - he accidentally steps into something wet. It stinks, so he wrinkles his nose in dissatisfaction and steps aside, shaking off his leg. Excuse you?

The growl is slightly too dramatic, but he lets it slip. "I need to track his Core ID. I get that you like to act like an idiot but we really need to find him. So, I'm going to Dive," a short pause. "You know what a Dive is, right?"

The sound emitting from Kaminari's throat can't be described otherwise than a cackle. Absolutely not!

"Lord, help me."

Too late for that, dontcha think? When there's no response, Kaminari assumes that his assistant proceeded to Dive. Stopping in his place in the middle of the street, the blond waits patiently. Time flows slowly.

Suddenly something vibrates in his head. "Holy shit," the voice is shaking in keenness, "Kaminari! I- it's 6G!"

Um, congrats?

"Found him!!!" the yell is enough to explode his eardrums and his body stirs. "District seven, turn from alley twenty-nine. But hurry up, U.A is under a cyber attack! Fuck-"

Not wasting anymore time, Kaminari activates his jets and bursts. His body whistles in the air, letting the fire shoot him up like a potent bullet. He sees the alley and recognizes the poor district. What's

happening?! Kaminari shoves his arm forward, in his eyesight appears an already wrecked building.

One more ruined wall won't change anything.

Exploding it to rubble, the blond slides in. The room he falls into is smaller than expected, but he can deal with it. "Stop in your!- ...no one's here?"

"He's in the next room, in a weird wanna-be lab. I see him- holy shit Kaminari, you're short."

Wha?!-

"I can see you!" cries out, "I'm right above your head!"

There's no one else. Dude, did you hit your head? But before anyone of them manages to say another word - something cracks. Kaminari stiffness, and then darts forward, crushing his half-cyborg body into another wall. It crumbles like carton and he finds himself in a dark room, with blue neon lights as dull luminance.

Not that he needs it: his fake eye flashes in bright gold, like a small light bulb planted in his face.

There's a small computer that is almost absolutely covered by a slouching figure of a man; who turns sharply. Their eyes meet and for the first time, he can see the face of his target. God, he's hideous. Breath stuck in his throat, eyes take in the rest of the room.

A pod, with blue bubbles dancing around a human. His fake eye spys green lasers drawing like a 3D printer Biolimbs and attaching to the body.

"He stole information for U.A by hacking their system. I accidentally Dived into his net, so now I'm in the room as part of it. Regardless - fight!"

No need to say twice! Electricity bursts out of his arm, aiming the hacker. The man dodges, hitting a red button as he's doing so. "Surrender!" demands Kaminari. Something is buzzing in the background but doesn't pay attention, firing the urgent man.

"Watch out!"

Kaminari turns sharply, just in time to dodge a sudden flame shot his

way. Almost stumbling on his feet, he notices that the pod cracks open. Inside there's a wobbling figure; blue eyes glowing in the darkness.

"Took you long enough," the voice is hoarse.

"Had some difficulties," for the first time, his target speaks. "Welcome back, Dabi."

"Save this shit for later, Shigaraki." Dabi drags himself out, rocking on his heels unsteadily. His neck cracks, the sound makes Kaminari's stomach twist, "Who's the blonde?"

The hacker growls, "Doesn't matter, show some gratitude and get fucking rid of him."

What the-

"Attack them while they're not looking, I'll try to set up a bomb!"

Kaminari panics, what bomb?! No answer. Instead, the computer he almost exploded to shudders flicks on. There are lines written at the speed of light behind his enemies' backs, when it hits him like a track. His assistant got a hold of the hacker's net, which means they're in control.

"Hey kid," blue flames crackle in Dabi's palms. "Last words?"

Kaminari shifts his weight, wrecking his mind around the situation. If he darts at them now, there's a possibility they'll notice the not-suspicious typing on the computer. But he has to bring them down.

Perhaps they're grown up men, but Dabi doesn't know how the Bio-limbs work. Which means - Denki has the advantage.

"The BQS-M ain't suits you," he snickers.

Electricity illuminates the room in white, while blue flames explode in his face. It's hot but he ignores it, twisting his body. He slams a leg into Dabi's ribs, making the man stumble back - but a potent fist of fire hits his stomach and sends flying. Hitting the floor, the blond spits saliva and leaps forward again, this time roaring as he shoves an electrical sphere into Dabi's Core.

Solely, Dabi's unharmed. Kaminari drops his body on top of him, slamming a fist to his jaw. Yanking him aggressively, Denki manages to cup

Dabi's head and electrificate him.

"Asshole!" Kaminari cries, head hitting the floor.

"Shit, there are two!"

"Fuck-"

Denki's heart drops to the pit of his stomach. Dabi throws himself on him and both are collapsing into the wall. Kaminari arches his back, metallic taste of blood fills his mouth. Slamming a hard palm on Dabi's head, he sends another wave of fatal electricity, feeling that the man was trying to burn down his torso.

What happened?!

A scream. Terrified, desperate shriek that tears through him like shards of glass. Pulse quickening, heart like a drum. It gets louder, like an unleashed, agitated demon. Blood drains from Denki's face when he realizes who's screaming.

He's not the one, but the impact is enough to make the world flip a full circle.

"What have you done?!" he wails in rage. His body is moving on its own - electrical shield emits and wraps its mighty claws around Dabi. Denki sees the currents flashing like lightning, striking the enemy, potently galloping to the Core - and destroys it.

"Dabi!" cries out Shigaraki.

Kaminari sees red. Half aware of his movements, he blasts another scintillating laser; that cuts the air like a sharp arrow of grief and hits the other man's chest.

There's no chance his Core survived it.

Buddy, answer me! He begs, jets bursting with fire. He flies out of the building, slicing the air with his body. It's so fast, that the U.A institute appears in his sight in a moment. The teen doesn't bother - boldly goes for the burst-through-the-window tactic. Hitting the wall, the jets shut off. He dashes down the hall.

"Kaminari!" his fuzzy mind recognizes Aizawa's voice, but the rest of him ignores it.

There's an assembly of doctors. Machines are beeping and screeching,

dingling in his ears like bells. His body is tired, shaking. Something's rising up his throat.

Denki can't breathe.

"Bring the defibrillator!"

"Check up the Core!!!"

"The brain suffered the hit. He's in the Dive, disconnect and reboot the system!"

And Kaminari is standing there, watching the turmoil of limbs running in circles around a lanky body of a still doll, chest barely moving, paler than snow. Something wet trickles down his left cheek; legs giving out.

"Shinsou...!"









WHAT ARE HEROES MADE OF

» BY LILITH

Mina had only just entered the building, but she was already getting super bad vibes. "Why did it have to be an abandoned hospital? This whole thing is creepy as heck!" She hissed through her teeth, slumping against a wall.

"Cheer up, it's for a good cause!" Nejire sang, waving her chunky spiraling gloves as she gestured down the hall. "Once we bust these guys, the heroes will take them away, the hostages will be freed, we can keep the Quirk tech they've been stockpiling, and everyone can go home safe and sound."

"Except for the villains, of course," Kendou added. She fidgeted with the metal bands around each wrist, unconsciously enlarging and shrinking her hands as she talked. "They'll be locked away for a long time."

"Still creepy!" A mouse skittered past and Mina yelped, yanking her foot away. "Eugh." She checked the Quirk band on her glove reflexively, making sure all the lights were lit up pink. When she flexed her wrist, she could faintly feel the metal roots in the tech planting themselves in her flesh, sending nanobots through her bloodstream and making her body create her signature acid. Other vigilantes complained about the roots, but Mina found them reassuring (even if they did accidentally tint her skin pink—Mei had promised a version that wouldn't do that, but it was apparently a long time in the making.)

Footsteps sounded in the corridor and all three girls leapt into fighting stances, only to relax when they saw who it was.

"Ochako! Tsuyu!" Nejire cheered, waving at the two girls. "So, what's waiting for us?"

"There's not much in the individual rooms except for some workspaces," Ochako reported. "I pinged Mei so she could analyze the junk in there, but she says it's nothing she can use."

"Their actual hideout is in a big office area they've cleared out," Tsuyu said, decamouflaging completely as she stepped down from the wall. "The hostages are still okay for the most part, but they're guarded."

"There's 15 guards in total, all armed to the teeth." Ochako puffed up her chest, scrunching her face into a tough expression. "Real

hardened badasses. They won't be too fun to fight."

"As long as it's possible to fight them, that won't be a problem," Nejire said in a cheery tone. "Plan A will still work, then?" Ochako nodded in response. "Then what are we waiting for? Let's go!"

The girls spread out, each heading to a different entry point. Well, most of them did—Mina and Kendou got stretches of wall to break through. They made eye contact down the hallway, Kendou raising a super-sized thumbs up with a grin. Mina giggled as her earpiece crackled to life.

"Pink, Battle Fist, you ready?" Nejire asked.

"Yup!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Then we go in three... two... one!" The 5 vigilantes burst into the room, and chaos erupted.

Mina fought like it was breathing, ducking and weaving to land well-placed blows to specific anatomy. In the end, all their armor was just metal, and a good splat of acid could still decay it. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Ochako and Tsuyu working together to take out a group as Kendou evacuated the hostages to a safer area. Suddenly, a blip on her visor attracted her attention.

"Hero coming in!" Momo's voice sounded, followed by the sound of cracking concrete. The room stilled for a second as a man unfolded in front of them, weapons raised.

"You have the right to r—" Edgeshot stopped in his tracks, taking in the scene before him. "...I should've known you'd be here."

"Thanks for your help!" Nejire called, waving goodbye as she and the other vigilantes began to leave.

"Yeah, yeah. Scram before someone a little more upstanding comes by, kids," Edgeshot replied. While his words were harsh, the soft undertone to his voice betrayed a fondness for them. A loud beep emitted from his headpiece, and his eyes widened. "Wavy, get out of—"

The ceiling crumbled to dust right in front of Nejire's feet, sending her scrambling backwards. In the rising cloud of smoke stood Ryukyu's signature dragon mecha, tail lashing back and forth. "Stand down,

vigilantes. Do not use your Quirk tech or we will be forced to react in kind."

"Ryukyu-san?" Ochako's voice wavered as she looked up at the imposing hunk of steel. Mina felt her hands shaking too. "What's going on?"

"Cooperating with vigilantes is against Musutafu law. You have been warned. Surrender now or we will not hesitate to use force to apprehend you." Even through the speakers of the mecha, Ryukyu's voice sounded stilted-forced, somehow.

"Ryukyu-san, please!" Nejire stepped forwards, ignoring the hand Kendou stretched out to stop her. "Just let us go. If this is some sort of prank, it's not fu-" Her voice was cut off as the mech lashed out, so fast that Mina barely reacted before Nejire's body went flying past her head. As she hit the ground, one distinctive sound rang out-the sound of a Quirk gauntlet shattering to pieces.

Then all hell broke loose.

Mina shivered in the empty alleyway, her jacket suddenly feeling inadequate against Musutafu's piercing cold. "When is Jir- Jack coming? I thought she'd be here by now."

"She's en route," Momo's voice spoke in her ear, startling her. "Hang tight, Pink. She just picked up Battle Fist and you're next."

"Ok, thanks!" Mina chirped, hunching her shoulders further in. After Ryukyu had turned on them, the team had scattered, ending up on all sides of the warehouse district. "What happened?" she muttered to herself, nervously twisting her hands. Ryukyu was one of the Heroes very firmly on their side, even striking up a friendship with some of the vigilantes in UA. Maybe the Hero association had finally come down on her...Mina shuddered thinking about it.

Or maybe that was just the shivers. Jesus, it was freezing out here.

She was snapped out of her thoughts by the familiar sound of an engine. As she ran towards the exit of the alleyway, a nondescript white van rolled by with its door open. Praying to every deity she knew that her timing was right, she kicked off the sidewalk and landed safely in Kendou's waiting hands.

"You ok?" Kendou asked, setting her down gently and closing the door.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Mina replied, sitting down and grabbing the blanket on the seat next to her. "Thanks for coming to pick us up, Jirou!"

"No problem," the girl driving the van answered, turning around in her seat to face the chamber behind her.

"How are the others?" Mina curled more tightly into the blanket, her fingers pulling harshly at the plush fabric.

"They're okay. They ended up near a UA hideout, and used the tunnels to get back. Nejire got beat up pretty bad," Jirou said, facing forward again. Her voice was unreadable, but the way her hands gripped the steering wheel betrayed her nervousness. "So what happened out there? Itsuka wanted to wait for you before we talked about it properly."

"I...I can't really say, it all happened so fast." Mina was lost for words, still trying to process everything that had happened. A solid, sturdy arm looped around her shoulders, anchoring her to the rattling interior of the van.

"Edgeshot helped us wrap the mission up, and he seemed the same as ever. Everything was fine until Ryukyu got there. She wasn't the way we all know her, Kyouka, she was—" Kendou paused, her silence echoing Mina's own inability to process what had happened. "Jeez, I can't even explain it."

"It was her voice, but it was like it wasn't her speaking. All she said was the same script as, like, those police drones when they catch you vandalizing or something," Mina said, fiddling with her hands in an attempt to vent some of her unease. "Maybe everything she's done for us finally caught up to her or something and the Hero Association made her stick to the script, I don't know. Edgeshot took the fall for me and Kendou, but that's the only reason we made it out."

"...huh." Jirou stayed silent, lost for words. The air was filled again with rattling metal and unspoken doubts.

Three pairs of footsteps sounded in the empty hall, stopping at the imposing metal door. Jirou tapped out a passcode on a hidden keyboard, prompting a tiny camera to scan their retinas. A loud ka-chunk sounded, and the door slowly swung open. Instead of the usual guard bot on the other side, though, the girls were greeted with a familiar tangle of purple hair.

"Shinsou! Nice to see you again, it's been forever," Kendou beamed,

high-fiving him.

"Heh, sorry for disappearing. They needed me on another mission—" Shinsou tapped the glowing metal apparatus implanted in his throat. "—so I went."

"Why are you on guard duty, though? Where's the bot?" Mina asked, tilting her head.

"Mei recalled all of them. They're starting to run low on energy, and Momo's having trouble printing the parts from Nejire's blueprint."

"If Momo and Mei are having trouble, things aren't looking good for UA." Kendou mumbled, biting her thumb. "What are we supposed to do?"

"That's probably what you're gonna figure out in the debriefing room," Shinsou shrugged, pointing down the hall. "Good luck, guys."

"Thanks," Jirou called, leading the other two further into UA headquarters. "We're gonna need it."

As soon as Mina stepped into the conference room, she was hit by something never saw coming.

"Mina!! I'm so glad you're okay," Tooru squealed, latched firmly around the other girl's torso with no signs of letting go any time soon.

"We all are," Momo said from her seat at the head of the table. "Take a seat, girls. We have much to discuss."

Ochako and Tsuyu were next through the door, bringing good news about Nejire's recovery—she was pretty hurt, but with enough time and rest, she'd be fine. Mina's shoulders slumped in relief. Finally, Mei wandered around the bend and into the room, tinkering with something as she rambled on about Nejire's Quirk.

"Thank you for coming, everyone!" Momo interjected, cutting through the chatter that had started to fill the air. "As you know, these four just got back from another interrupted mission."

"Hey, we tried our best!" Mina called, making Momo shift uncomfortably.

"Yes, you did! And you rescued those hostages, which was our prime

goal during the mission. I did not mean to imply otherwise. However..." she coughed into her fist, never breaking her perfect posture. "We were counting on that mission to bring back new tech to upgrade our current bioenhancements. Without it, Hatsume-san will have considerably more trouble repairing Nejire after... what happened."

"More trouble? It'll be almost impossible! Especially since you can't make the parts I need," Mei exclaimed, tossing her screwdriver in the air. It landed dangerously close to Kendou, making the other girl flinch.

"And I apologize for that, Hatsume-san. In addition, some of our longest-running allies are turning on us, which is something none of us could have predicted. However, we have one last chance to turn it around."

"And what would that be?" Jirou asked, twirling a jack around one finger.

"Thank you for asking!" Momo chirped, a gleam in her eye. "Quirk-tech's annual masquerade ball."

Mina barely recognized herself when Tooru stepped back. The invisible girl had applied a heavy coat of makeup to her face, leaving her looking like any regular citizen (with a purple afro and twisting white horns, of course). Momo had decided there was no use in trying to hide her horns, so she'd created custom covers for them. Mina was still bumping the new covers against most things in her path, but she'd get used to it eventually. Completing her new look was a set of chunky jewelry, a glittering purple dress, and a delicate mask that covered her face and distinctive eyes.

"I look so strange," she whispered to herself, waving to her reflection. It was hard to align the girl in the mirror with the body she inhabited.

"That means I did a good job!" Tooru chirped, walking back into the room in her server's uniform. "Momo says it's showtime. You ready?"

"As I'll ever be."

The plan was complex, as were all of Momo's battle plans—hundreds of threads crossing to create a tapestry that either ended in success or disaster.

Preferably success.

Mina's job, as far as she could tell, was to act like a distraction. At certain times and places she would talk to the right people, hold up the right guards, and make sure people flowed according to plan. "What do I do when I'm not doing that?" she'd asked on the ride there, hands tangled in purple fringe as she checked her bracelet's lights over and over again.

"Fundraise, have fun, steal things," Momo had replied. "Same thing you do at all the other events we go to."

"We don't go to other events."

"Then just have fun and watch your exits."

Mina laughed at Senator Ishimaru's joke, not really hearing it as her eyes scanned the room. The plan was working smoothly, but she couldn't help but feel like she was missing something. Even with the "charity" donations she'd scored, she still wanted to do more. Unexpectedly, her eyes caught on a familiar figure and she gasped.

"Is something the matter, Kagasaki-san?" The senator jokingly waved his hand to get her attention, brow furrowed at whatever might have distracted her.

"Um, I have to visit the ladies room. It was a pleasure talking to you!" Before he could retort, Mina waved goodbye, allowing herself to get swept through the crowd in the flow of gems and silk. The person she'd seen before finally came back into view, and this time, it was unmistakable—Ryukyu had arrived.

She didn't seem keen to hang around, though, if her quick duck into a side hallway was any indication. Mina found her feet tracing Ryukyu's path, progressing further down the endless corridors and stairs into the heart of Quirktech HQ. The chatter of the party quieted as the whirr of machinery grew louder, drowning out the sound of Mina's heels on concrete.

"What are you doing?" Kendou's voice sounded in her ear. "You're supposed to be helping out with the plan, remember?"

"Something's going on with Ryukyu, and I want to know what. The plan won't fall apart just because I'm taking a little detour," Mina whispered, ducking into a small alcove so her voice would be muffled. Ahead, Ryukyu disappeared around a bend in the hallway.

"Mina, I don't like this. Maybe you should go back," Kendou said, voice

slightly strained.

"It'll be fine, Itsuka."

"Mina, do—" The voice shut off with a click as she turned off her ear-piece. Kendou would have her ass for that, but that was a problem for another time. Hurrying forwards, Mina peeked around the corner to see an empty hallway and a thick steel door with MAINTENANCE spelled out in bright yellow letters. The keypad next to the door seemed simple, but upon further inspection, the code-breaking device Mei had built into her earrings determined it was trapped. "What kind of maintenance hallway has a trapped keypad?" Mina muttered, letting Mei's tech work around the code. Sure, she could probably melt through the door in a minute, but she didn't want to risk some guard finding her. A loud, high-pitched beep sounded, followed by the click of a lock giving way. The door swung open, and Mina stepped into the mouth of the beast.

It was dark and musty, with barely any light to speak of. Creaks and groans from unknown sources started to fill the spaces between Mina's footsteps, making her jump. "Ugh, it's so creepy...Where did she go?" she grumbled, walking just a little bit faster. As the tunnel started to curve, she saw a faint blue light at the end. Slowing down, she winced as she took off her shoes. It wouldn't do to be caught this close to something good.

She padded forwards slower than before, grimacing whenever she stepped in a puddle of mystery liquid. The light got closer and closer until she reached the end of the tunnel, stepping onto a catwalk that overlooked—

Mina gasped. Below her was the biggest lab she had ever seen, easily stretching to the size of a city block. One half was filled with computer and lab workstations, full of the robotic materials she'd come here for. The other half, however...

Row after row of massive blue-green tanks filled the underground chamber. A small figure floated in each one, dark against the soft glow of whatever they were suspended in. As she slowly descended into the heart of the area, she could start to make out individuals.

There was Nova, the Starbound Hero, who'd been caught in a factory explosion and miraculously recovered. As Mina watched pipes pump god-knows-what into every point on his body, his recovery didn't seem so miraculous anymore. He wasn't the only one who'd recovered, either—Mina's eyes caught on the distinctive silhouette of

Gang Orca, floating in his own tank. Her feet hit the ground, and she began to wander the endless pods, entranced by the glow surrounding her on every side.

In the last pod on the row, Ryukyu hung suspended in the same teal goop as the rest of the heroes. Her signature dress was gone, revealing what had been hidden under it. A metal framework intercrossed with countless wires and tubes replaced most of her body, fake skin peeled back to show small bots picking at the machinery underneath. Even though Mina couldn't see what was in her head, the glowing power sign inscribed on her forehead could only mean one thing.

"This...this isn't you," Mina whispered, pressing a hand against the glass. Her head spun with unspoken questions. Was the real Ryukyu still alive? Was this why she'd acted so strange the last time they'd met? She looked around, hoping nobody was nearby to see her. The others would need to know about this, but some unseen force kept her rooted to the spot, staring up at the lifeless metal skeleton that had once been her friend. She leaned forwards, resting her head on the glass. "Ryukyu? I know you can't hear me. I know you're just a hunk of metal, and-" her voice cracked as a tear dripped down her face and onto the cold concrete below. "I don't know how you got this way. But Ochako and Tsuyu miss you. Nejire, too, even if you did hit her. I'm gonna make sure we find out what happened to you." Mina took one last shaky breath. "I promise."

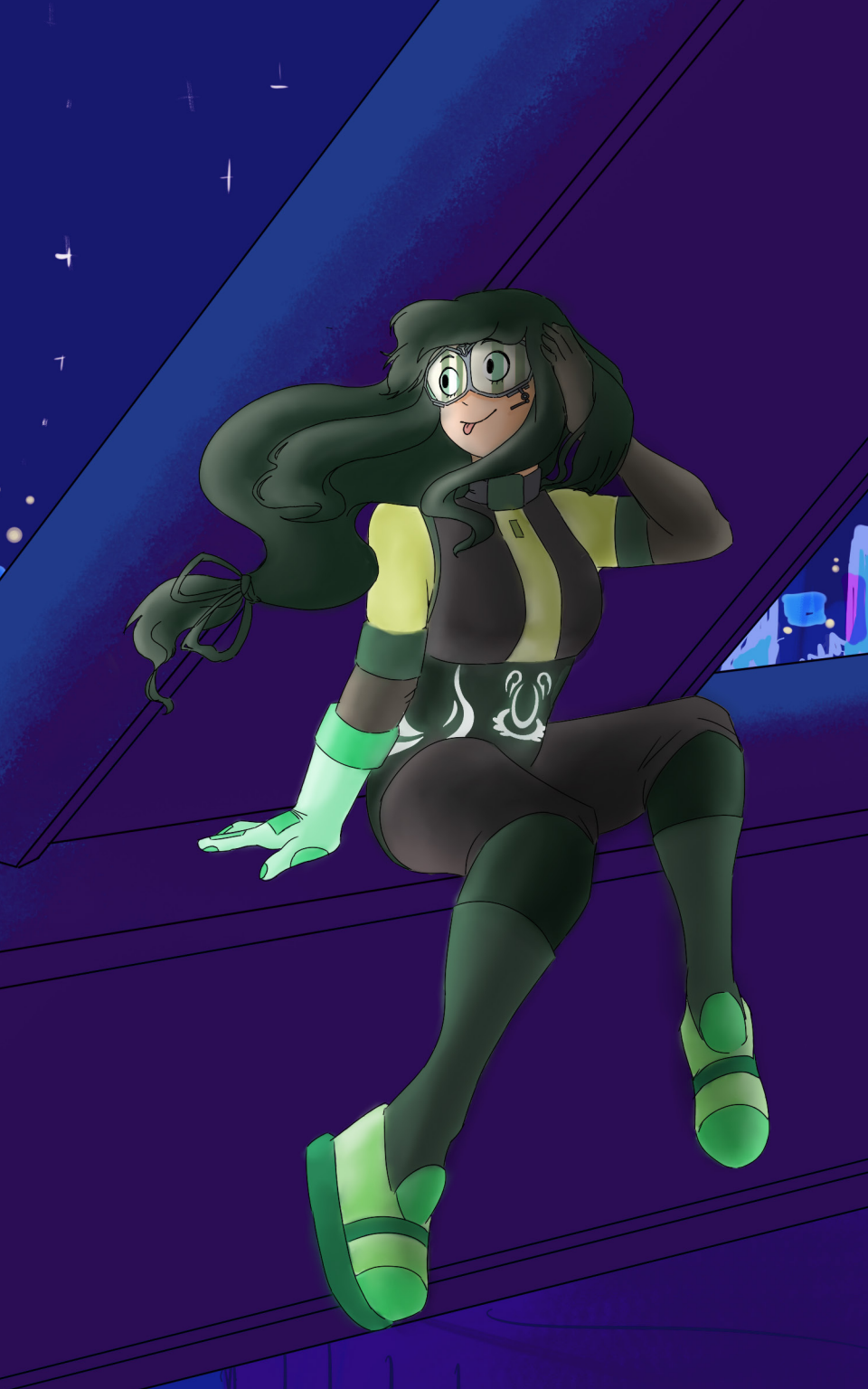
Her whispering was halted by a loud thud on the other side of the glass.

Ryukyu had floated down to her position, one cold metal hand pressed against the glass on the other side of the tank. Her eyes were open now, the irises glowing the same damn blue-green as the rest of this lab. The Hero's head tilted.

"Mi...na?"







PLAN B

» BY Ψυχή

The echo of the sirens' whirl resonates with the pounding of rain. Against the beguiling glow of the city, engorging dark puddles corner the shadows to the slums. Old buildings — once glorious pillars in their own right long made paltry by comparison — wilt in the unending storm, offering scant, flimsy defense to those scurrying beneath. The might of progress will invariably prevail and wash away the darkness of this world.

Fukidashi had once written something to that effect — a usual propaganda piece as part of his endeavors towards working in law enforcement — how could he have truly understood what those words meant until facing them as he was now...?

Peeking around the corner for surveillance drones, once a blanket of safety, hoping they wouldn't appear and threaten his life?

That he'd find in that moment his own safety fell short of his concern for others whom it would have been his duty to capture?

He flinches back behind cover as a siren looms closer; he spies the whirring nanomachine monstrosity as he does, ever-shifting form approaching down the alley. Most of his implants were down from what he could only surmise was mandate for runaways lest he be capable of using them or his Quirk to combat his pursuers, leaving him with the empty deprivation of his base five senses against technology. He sees the crimson light growing in the old potholes like pools of blood, and he has his approximation of 'shutting his eyes' as it bleeds through the blackness.

The tenuous moment passes as the arm of the law continues by.

With palpable relief that he tries not to express, Fukidashi slides back into the darkness that he once thought his enemy. Inch by inch he makes deliberate motions through rubble back inside where he might cling to a modicum of greater security. Where the two fugitives had gone afoul of the law was beyond him, but...

The unspoken query gave him strange comfort, even as he recognized the foolishness of perpetuating his ignorance; that perhaps it was all some grand misconception. These women who saved his life, and now helped him in his own absconding, couldn't be the vile miscreants he'd been drilled to detain.

Shiozaki Ibara is kneeled in prayer before a platform when he returns, amidst the clutter and quiet of a defunct performance hall of sorts. Despite her ragged robes and worn-down appearance the image it brings to mind is one of serenity amidst chaos, and the clarity with which it strikes him only befuddles and intrigues him. He takes a step forward, when—

“She’s almost done; just give her another moment.”

Had he not already come to some measure of acceptance of Setsuna Tōkage — Shiozaki’s ever-present companion since they’d all met and everything went to hell — the levitating mouth would have sent Fukidashi into the air with loud cursing. At the penitent young woman’s side, the body sans parts of her head leaned against a wall holding its palm up as a ‘slice’ of its scalp flew from his pocket back to rejoin the rest. The scale-designed body suit has held up better than her friend’s mere fabrics, but there were clear lines of use criss-crossing it that gave it a threadbare facade.

Reasonable as it was, he couldn’t ignore the sticky feeling of being distrusted, in spite of the bright future he’d slain in protecting them. They’d surely gone a long time without someone to really rely on beyond one another — perhaps someone else had done much the same as he had, only to turn their back on them in the end... His own discomfort at the open Quirk usage for something trivial like this despite their circumstances only cemented that possibility.

“How safe is this place?” Fukidashi mouths, knowing his ‘face’ would spell out his inquiry such that he needn’t speak up. The improvements to the visual capacity and clarity of his words remained slow but functional implants, a small blessing amidst the misfortune. “A stage like this would have multiple exits, no?”

Setsuna’s mouth smiles. “This used to be the Sky Egg — the top of a giant tower — only way in was the elevator up. Obviously it fell some time ago, but as far as we could tell there’s no openings from whatever happened.” The orifice makes a wistful sigh. “My folks used to mention performances they’d watch here, before...”

Something about the way she trailed off felt unusual, but he nods all the same.

“We’re not alone.”

The stark declaration is like ice against Fukidashi’s spine as Shiozaki utters it, standing up from her prayer with green eyes fixed upon the

dome above. Setsuna's body falls apart into numerous hovering fragments ready for action, and despite himself, a low growl vibrates in his own throat as he readies his Quirk. In the best-case it could still be a functional asset, but supportive biotechnology had been so versatile that standing without that crutch could be dangerous, or worse...

As much as his instinct is to form up with them, he holds himself still: one of her eyes still trained upon him reaffirms that this intrusion could break any trust he might have gained — a bad development for them all, but one he understood.

Is this it? Will I have thrown away everything only to be left alone in this darkness?

The sound of a hatch opening rings out, which draws a look of confusion from both of the women and a mutter from the detached mouth. "A regular entrance...? But—"

"Hello down there~!" The jubilant tone cuts through the air as a figure descends from on high with but a slightly louder clack of heel on stone. The tall woman, scantily clad in black, smiles and waves rapidly enough to displace their pink hair done up in vertical twintails. "Glad to see you lost the initial pursuit force!"

From behind her steps a shorter, orange-haired woman in a chinese dress of sorts. She lets out a sigh as she looks to the former. "We don't have that much time, Pop — they'll send demolition next, otherwise."

Patting her on the shoulder, the brightness in 'Pop's' visage dims for a moment. "I know I know... Gotta make that good first entrance though." With a wink and a broader grin, she suddenly leaps back up to the ceiling as swiftly as they'd come down. The trio glances at one another in confusion, not really processing the circumstances even as their intruder walks forward.

"Fukidashi Manga," she says, freezing him on the spot as she points to him with a gloved — no, an enhanced hand before shifting between them. "Setsuna Tōkage. Shiozaki Ibara. You can call me Daiken. You probably don't know me, but we've been trying to catch up to you two ladies since you came up on their radar. I'm here to get you three out of here."

Daiken...? Shaking his 'head', Fukidashi steps forward. "From 'demolition'? You, alone?"

She shakes her head. "My associate is drawing their attention so they won't go that far. You picked a great hiding spot — we're not far from where I need to lead you, but we need to move fast."

At his side, Setsuna reconstitutes and leans in. "And where are we going exactly, Miss Daiken?"

"Sorry, there's too great a chance for prying eyes and ears." As she continues, she places an open palm onto the concrete that flashes with light underneath. "I'll give a full explanation when we get there, but for now I need you to trust that I'm your ally — we are your allies."

The two met each other's gaze, but Shiozaki steps between them before they can speak. "She speaks the truth."

"You sure?" her friend asks, receiving a nod in response that seems to loosen her up as she looks back at him. "Good enough for me. What are we waiting for?"

As if there's that much of a choice...? Pulling his hand across his unique complexion as he drew breath, he turns his back to the darkness. "Lead the way."

A small smile briefly flashes across Daiken's face. "Right!" Suddenly her hand expands to four times its size and grips the floor, pulling free a perfect square to reveal footing below. "Going down...?"

Following Daiken was incredibly dizzying for Fukidashi as they delved through a myriad of underground ruins, much older than anything he could remember having seen in his life. There was a small solace in the confidence of Setsuna and Shiozaki, having their Quirks active despite his discomfort as they went to observe the surroundings for traps or ambushes, but the silent darkness ate at him all the same. Plenty of tales had been told about the criminal underbelly lurking in the refuse of everything the world had left behind that the government never truly shot down, and the circles of those entering law enforcement heard much more gruesome ones. Even if it was all an elaborate hoax, these kinds of murmurs don't fade from the mind so simply as one enters the unknown regardless of their foundation.

Nevertheless, after some time his new companions withdrew their various extended limbs as their guide raised a hand to halt there in the basement of an imploded parking garage structure. With deliberate steps she positions herself and raps a super-sized knuckle against one of the broken columns in a rhythmic pattern that the

'faceless' man didn't recognize. Like clockwork, though, part of the concrete floor slides away to reveal a metal plate that she gestures them onto. A brief moment later, the platform begins a surprisingly quiet descent down into the earth, eliciting looks of surprise from the trio as they are engulfed in darkness followed by the glow of dim lights.

Daiken gives another small smile. "Like I said, I'll explain when we actually arrive — even this far in, it's not guaranteed to be safe. I guess technically nowhere is, all things considered, but if our destination isn't at least decent then there was no point to any of this to begin with."

"Any of..." Fukidashi's instinctive question tapers off and he nods back, his compatriots (for lack of a better word) matching it.

By comparison the lift-ride is swift, ending with four worn metal walls and little else to the naked eye. Crossing her arms parallel to the floor as one hand enlarges again, she places her uneven palms against one corner's surfaces. A beep answers, and one of the other walls open to a surprisingly clean spiral staircase leading further down. At the bottom of a number of flights she halts at a nondescript wall and is greeted with another beep, the panel opening into a short, brightly lit hallway that she leads them down before turning around.

"This." With that statement she suddenly grins brightly and flings open the door, leaping forward with aplomb. "I'm back! I brought the new guys~!"

The three refugees step into the dimmer space to find a fantastical sight in front of them. Despite being underground, the earth is practically overgrown with vibrant green grass. Hanging from the ceiling amongst angled light fixtures are signs noting the way to various facilities like 'Farm' and 'Workshop'. Even from here, the rustic-looking seats and tables appear like something from a century ago.

As they stood in awe, a number of people ran up to greet the arrivals — particularly Daiken and 'Pop' who became the center of a particularly large group hug.

Eventually, a rather plain older man with short black hair walks forward. "I take it you're all in need of an explanation. Please, come and sit with us. Can we get you anything? Food? Water?"

Fukidashi feels himself nod blankly as he follows the apparent leader

to a square stone slab with wood-carved stools around it. Setsuna and Shiozaki following suit: the former is as visibly stunned as he feels, while the latter retains her cool, mysterious demeanor. A white-haired woman with hunched features in a pristine kimono and mask gestures broadly. From another passage a metal tray of wooden bowls, cups, and spoons fly evenly to her awaiting hands to serve. The aroma of mushrooms fill their sinuses as the bowls of warm brown soup is set before each of them, before she departs with a courtsey. Their host begins to dig in and, in spite of the bizarre circumstance, they soon follow suit with accelerating speed as the meal overcame them.

"Glad it's to your liking," their dining company chuckles with a wry smile. "As much as we've worked to try and diversify our diet, mushrooms are destined to be a staple no matter what." His expression flattens as he leans back on his stool. "Take your time and eat slow — this might be a long and somewhat unpleasant tale to tell, and it'd be bad if you choked on your food."

"I am known as The Crawler. As you surely gathered," he gestures to the slowly dispersing embrace, "'Daiken' is also one of her codenames. She's the one mainly sent out to bring those seeking safety here, particularly to disable any implants you may have had tracing your location—"

The 'faceless' young man feels his head tightening — analogous to 'his eyes widening' — as Setsuna lets out a wordless exclamation of shock.

"Apologies for having it done preemptively, as much for your own safety and our own. Rest assured, we should be able to restore them in due time. Depending on what you choose to do with what I am to tell you, you may come to learn our real names in due time; I hope you understand or will come to know the importance of our attempts at secrecy."

The Crawler looks between each of them as he goes on. "You are each here because the society above has turned upon you for one reason or another. There is a reason for that fact, but more than anything I am here to offer you a way out. I cannot change what those above have deigned, but should you desire it I can offer you safety."

"Safety...?" Fukidashi leans in over his bowl. "Safety from what, the government hunting the destitute?"

"Not what. Who." All eyes turn to Shiozaki, hands clenched in prayer over her emptied bowl.

The Crawler's eyes narrow, but a devious smile joins it whilst her fellows pale. "Got it in One...!"

"Wh-what are you talking about, Ibara-san...?" Setsuna manages to stammer out. "All Might and the Heroes crushed him decades ago..."

Fukidashi grips his head, pieces of his days in training falling into place. "...what a farce... All lies and propaganda...?"

"Fukidashi-kun...? What do you...? You can't be—!"

"I'm afraid it's true," their host interjects. "With his advanced tech and numerous Quirks, he somehow managed to take control of everything... All For One controls everyone."

The silence is stifling; only now do the trio notice that the rest of the people have all left, leaving them to sit upon the dark revelation.

"These comrades here with me are working to find a way to take him down. I could always use more hands on deck — we're about 20 right now. Or, we can simply protect you amongst other refuges of ours. The choice is yours, and not one to be made lightly; after all, we're embarking on the insane."

"Then..." Fukidashi turns to him, hands still loosely clasped at the edges of his 'face'. "Then why?"

Standing up from the table, The Crawler offers a wistful smile.

"Someone has to stand up when the world is utterly devoid of justice, just as the first Vigilantes did all those years ago. The A-Team is down for the count, but there ought to be a Plan B, no?"









A CONNECTION BETWEEN US

» BY ERAMIA

"...gh...okay, it should be working now.

"Ahem. Recorder log number...one, I suppose. On this recorder, technically speaking.

"I have successfully relocated my base to this...swamp place. I regret that I can't give a name to my location other than 'swamp place.' It probably had a real name sometime long ago, but there's not a chance that anyone from this era remembers it now. But that's not important.

"The folding laboratory set up without a hitch! I decided to splurge on the heavy-duty version, just in case. I thought the metal would be clunky and noisy, but it's way better than what they used centuries ago. Just as easy as setting up a lemonade stand...also from centuries ago. Don't see many of those anymore!

"Speaking of things nobody sees anymore, nobody will be seeing me anymore! Yanno, because of the swamp. In the middle of nowhere.

"I think I made a good decision in moving my laboratory for this particular project. Can't risk having my credits removed...posthumously...after my sudden and untimely death at the hands of my lab partner who I trusted...

"Yup! Better to work alone! Ahahahaha!

"Ahem. I've been trying to improve the reaction time of the jets in the power boots to accommodate for pressure changes in the insole of the shoe. If this works, the user of the power armor could perform roundhouse kicks while hovering mid-air without losing balance. Just imagine: the common fighter elevated with improved mobility! It'll be...

"Wait a minute. My security cameras are alerting me of movement outside. Probably just a frog or something...but I can't risk it. Mei, signing off! Buh-bye!"

Mei grabbed a large wrench with a blunt, heavy head that felt more like a hammer than a tool of precision. Meanwhile, her mind was whirring. She was already running through a list of notorious laboratories with a potential stake in her invention. The heft of the hammer brought her back to the moment. She checked the screen

for a clue.

The footage showed rippling, brown-green water. Gentle tides on a soft, muddy bank. The scene was still. Then it wasn't. The camera angle suddenly shot up to the sky and the screen went black. [OFFLINE] blinked in white letters.

Mei cursed under her breath.

"Sabotage," she mumbled. She scrambled for the door. Mei returned to the list in her mind. Which lab's MO would be to disrupt cameras and pursue deep wilderness exploration? Wait, did she just fall into a trap? No. No, the proverbial ball is in their court; they could have made a move on her little lab. Unless...

Unless the plan was to lure her out.

Of course. That would make so much sense. A single inventor, by herself, in the middle of the wilderness; mostly unarmed, a lab unmanned. Stupid Mei! You fell for it! You crawled right into their clutches!

A splash, like something shooting out of the water, rippled on the bank behind her.

It's too late, Mei.

No, she thought, I won't let them get their grubby hands on my work! Footfalls barely fell on the bank when Mei whipped around, swinging her wrench, a primal scream erupting from her gut, but she stopped mid-strike. She was face to face with her stalker: a girl, about her age it seemed. Dark, wet hair clung to her wide face and her body like swamp moss. She was caught crouching low the ground all frog-like. Bow-legged. One hand, with inhumanly long, broad fingers, held her steady. The other held a carved wooden spear above her head. Her eyes, black and round, were the size of the moon. They looked feral and scared.

"You need to leave."

Mei blinked. The girl wore a sleek black bodysuit with green markings. A sort of charged droning sound buzzed in her ears. Which lab has black and green? Think, Mei, think!

"I am speaking to you!" That crackling voice snapped her out of her thoughts. Mei brought up her wrench again.

"Who are you?" she demanded, "What lab are you with?"

The swamp girl squinted and blinked. "I said, you need to go!" Mei shook her wrench. "Answer me first!"

"No! Take your technology and get out of here!" the swamp girl cried. Her grip on the spear tightened; her fist began to shake. She put one knee on the ground to keep her balance, shoulders curling over. Even Mei could see that she had to clench her jaw shut to keep from crying out. "You're not welcome here." Her voice shook.

Mei slowly lowered her wrench, narrowing her eyes to analyze the girl further.

"Go! Can't you see what you're doing?!"

That's when it clicks. She sees the girl's body twitch, her skin rippling like the water on the bank behind her. Mostly centered around her joints too. That's when she notices the cybernetic implants and the muscles clumping up around them like knots of tumbleweeds. It looked painful. Her left side seemed weaker than her right, hence the knee. Why...?

Oh, I get it now, Mei realizes.

The closest implants are reacting to the lab. Could it be because of my set-up? But why?

"Hey..." Mei changed her tone as if coaxing an animal, "Hey, calm down now. Why don't you let me have a look at you?"

The swamp girl's body lunged forward with a savage holler and the droning rose until it distorted. Mei held up her wrench to block the attack, but she never felt a hit. Instead, on the ground in front of her, lay the swamp girl, still jerking in place like a dead roach, even despite being unconscious.

The droning noise was gone.

"...Hup! There we go.

"Okay, recorder log number two.

"As you can see behind me, I've encountered a genetically-modified spy-agent. I don't think she's with a laboratory. At least, she didn't state one when I asked her. For an agent, she's not that great with

protocol.

"Anyways, it doesn't matter, because as you can see, she's unconscious! Oh, wait, let me just...there! That's a better angle for the camera.

"I've never encountered a genetically modified agent this close! That's why I thought I should record while I can, I think she's mixed with a frog and...Um...Sorry, I'm just not used to all the twitching. Are they supposed to be moving that much? She's not even awake. It's like her body is moving of its own volition.

"That...That's really scary, actually, um...

"Maybe I'll just record some notes. Yup."

"I'll...update this recorder log at a later time. For now, I'm going to hold the subject down and get a closer look at the implants on her joints. "Mei, out."

For a moment, she is dazed. Her eyes gloss over, watching the girl struggle against her own body. Restful sleep was unattainable even for her, even as her own body demanded it, shutting down in protest. Sometimes machines will do that when their systems experience an error. Her face was contorted in a grimace. Machines never do that. Gingerly, Mei tried to hold down her knee. It still bumped and bounced under her weight but it was manageable. What made Mei most uncomfortable was feeling the muscles move, individually, like they were being electrocuted. Forcefully contracting all at different moments, like a marionette puppet with strings of different lengths. Worst of all, this living body felt stiff; as if rigor mortis was settling in too early, even though life hadn't moved out yet.

Mei suddenly remembered her voice recorder was still running, for her supposed "notes". But she was silent. For once, her mind was too. As if her brain short-circuited. There was only static.

"I can't do this," she decided. The mystery, the science behind it, no longer mattered.

She turned off the recorder and made a mental note to delete the recording later. Without really thinking, more like watching her body do the motions for her, she reached in her drawer for the scalpel. It was only as she held it over the agent's knee that she realized what she was about to do.

And it was truly rotten work, indeed.

When the deed was done, Mei stared into space. On the steely wall in front of her was a vague shadow of her reflection, much like a dream. At first she felt nothing, especially nothing. Then her body lurched and she ducked under her desk, barely making it to the trash chute on time. Her retching, amplified by the metal around her, echoed in her ears. It was almost enough to drown out the pounding of her heart.

After a few mouthfuls of bile, she turned on the chute incinerator to let her stomach know that it had its time but now they had to get back to work. Except the atmosphere in the lab felt dreadful and she didn't feel like moving and worst of all, it smelled like burning puke. Then suddenly the metal table rattled and Mei jumped, smacking her head on the underside of the desk.

She rose just in time to see the agent positioning herself into a frog-like crouch, but she had little control over her wobbly legs. Mei caught her as she fell from the table. Holding the girl now, she hoped this hug could serve as an apology. It didn't seem to, as the agent suddenly shoved against her grasp. She could feel her quick, panicked breathing as Mei lifted her up and helped her back onto the metal table.

"You want a pillow or a blanket or something?" Mei asked dully. The agent merely squinted. No response.

Mei nodded as if understanding the resentment she held. "I know," she mumbled.

Mei took the bloodied, white napkins with rectangular, silver chips: electro-neuromuscular implants. Only students in the medical technology course use them, Mei remembered. They mimicked the electrical signals neurons send to contract muscles. It was supposed to be a cruelty-free version of mind control, without having to "break" someone first.

Within range of the controller, they could be used to control bodies. Outside of the range, it's like a dog with a shock collar.

They were slick. She watched a drop of blood slide off the smooth surface of one as she lifted the tray. Its surface glinted at her. Holding back a gag, she dumped the contents into the trash chute. Across the room, Mei collapsed into her bunker and quietly cried until she fell asleep.

The next time the agent woke up, Mei was changing her bandages. She didn't panic this time. Instead, she watched her work.

"Hey," Mei muttered, "I'm sorry for using such primitive tools. I'm no doctor so I don't have access to anything that could regenerate flesh or fix your skin."

The agent blinked. She looked down and saw bandages wrapped around the various joints in her body. There was no droning. No shocks delivered by cybernetic implants to force her to move. There was throbbing and soreness, but best of all, she was free.

"I hope I didn't cause too much damage," the girl continued without looking up, "I was worried that if your implants were connected to your nerve endings, I could cause serious damage. It was a really impulsive decision; I know nothing about anatomy, I shouldn't have tried it." She tightened the bandage and sat back. "Can you still move your knees?" she asked quietly. As if she were afraid to know the answer.

Slowly, the swamp girl rotated her hips. She bent and straightened her knees. Seeing the results, the two almost seemed relieved. Mei nodded solemnly. "That's good," she said.

She rose from the chair by the metal table and sat in front of her monitors.

"Thank you," she heard over her shoulder.

Mei stared at a blank screen in a daze for a moment. Then she clicked open a tab and began to work.







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