

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

A/N: Fighting Mirko.

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Despite strong words about 'kicking his ass', Mirko's first foot is dodged as Shroud pulls back. Her leg muscles bulge expressively even as she hits the concrete with her heel... and it's the concrete that gives way to the strike. Meanwhile, Shroud dodges away with relative swiftness, showing a speed that makes Mirko's eyes narrow.

He's fast... but the important thing is that she got him away from the prone security guards, that gun of his no longer pointed in their direction. Instead, of course, it's pointed almost lazily in hers. She doesn't bother trying to dodge or flee... no, rather, instead she leaps in again, continuing to close the distance between them. Hard for him to shoot her with that gun of his if she's always threatening to piledrive him into the concrete!

A mastermind type like Shroud wasn't usually built for close-quarters combat like what she excelled at anyways. The likelihood of him being able to go toe to toe with a brawler like her seemed relatively low. He would almost certainly have to pull all sorts of tricks out if he wanted to keep her occupied long enough for his people to get away.

Meanwhile, Mirko knows all she needs is one good hit to win this fight. If she can just land a single full powered kick, he'll be down for the count, maybe even dead. And while heroes were technically supposed to avoid fatalities, he'd been the one to threaten unarmed, defenseless men first... so she wasn't as inclined to hold back against him.

Only, the more she chases after him, the more of an irritating opponent he turns out to be. She's at least able to keep him from using the gun of course, pushing it off to the side with a sweeping kick any time he turns it in her direction. He has

pretty insane trigger discipline, because every time she redirects the barrel, he stops himself from firing, not a single shot going off in the brightly lit warehouse.

But beyond keeping him from firing at her, beyond harrying him to the point that he can't even aim at her for longer than half a second, Mirko... isn't able to push the fight forward. The more she speeds up, the more he seems to match her pace. And the longer things go on, the angrier and more frustrated she gets.

Her temper has always been a bit of an issue for her. It was part of the reason she was something of a delinquent when she was younger. Becoming a Pro Hero had been meant to be an outlet for that anger, a way for her to burn off her temper before it could explode out from under her.

It didn't always work that way though. Sometimes, even as Mirko the Rabbit Hero, her temper got the better of her. However, that was back when she was just starting out, blazing to the top of the Hero Rankings. She got in a lot more trouble back then, but that was almost ten years ago.

These days, Mirko liked to consider herself a bit more... hm, measured? Definitely more mellow, she was pretty sure. She still liked to get in fights, she still went out looking for trouble under the guise of patrols, but she didn't let the villains get to her like she had back in the day.

Or at least, that's what she liked to think. There was always exceptions that proved the rule and this was rapidly becoming an apparent one. Shroud was... he was running circles around her; Mirko eventually came to realize. He was playing with her.

Figuring that out is paradoxically both akin to a bucket of ice water down her back AND a furnace lighting in her chest. He was playing games?! People were at fucking risk, this criminal scum had just robbed a warehouse, and he was messing around?!

ENOUGH!

With a roar, Mirko's muscles all contract as one before bulging out. She leaps towards Shroud, faster than ever before, and whips her foot at his head hard enough to knock it off. She doesn't care whether she kills him anymore. He was going to pay for-!

S-SMACK!

It takes her a second to realize what's actually happened. Her foot... hasn't made contact with Shroud's head. Instead, his gloved hand had snapped up and grabbed onto her leg, stopping her momentum in its tracks somehow. All of that power, all of her strength had been put into that one kick... and he'd just completely and effortlessly no-sold it like it was nothing.

The gun comes up in Shroud's other hand, pointed unerringly at Mirko's face... and she simply doesn't have time to react. Her eyes barely even start to widen as he squeezes the trigger and-

"Bang."

There's a 'clicking' noise as no bullet comes out of the gun. Because the gun is empty... it never had any bullets except for the very first one in it to begin with. Shroud's tone, meanwhile, as he mimics the noise of a bullet being fired, is downright amused... mocking even.

He squeezes her leg hard enough to make her feel it, hard enough that he probably could have crushed the bone into dust if he wanted to... and then he lets her go, just like that.

Mirko hops back, heart pounding in her chest, eyes wide, bulging, and blood shot, teeth grinding against one another. She keeps herself between Shroud and the prone security guards instinctively, but in that moment she knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that Shroud wasn't just playing with her, he was *toying* with her.

From the very start... she'd convinced herself that he was a mastermind type just because he was in charge. Just because he wore that metal skull mask and

a trenchcoat and gave out orders that his subordinates followed without hesitation.

But the truth was... under all of that was no mastermind. No, he was just as strong as she was... stronger even. This villain right here was a powerhouse through and through, personally dangerous on top of the villainous organization he clearly had backing him up.

“Who... who the fuck are you.”

Guys like him didn't just grow on trees. Where had he come from? Was he another more notable villain, just with a new paint job? She knew how he'd recruited Nagant, everyone knew that, but how the fuck had he gotten the likes of Toga on his side? And who else had he recruited as well?

“The name's Shroud. It's been a pleasure sparring with you, Mirko.”

Mirko bristles at that. Sparring with her?! This fucker...

“Though I imagine you already knew who I am. Perhaps you were more interested in my organization. We are the Red Ring... and we have come to excise the rot from the heart of Japan.”

... What? Mirko can't help but feel a bit of tonal whiplash. The guy had just robbed a warehouse. How the fuck was he going to 'excise the rot' by committing crimes of all things?

But before she can ask that, Shroud's head suddenly tilts to the side... and he nods. Not to her, but to some other unseen speaker.

“It would seem our time here is at an end, Mirko. I appreciate your cooperation.”

Mirko stiffens at that, her nostrils flaring and her hands curling into fists at her sides.

“Fuck! I haven't cooperated with you! The fuck are you talking about?”

Shroud just chuckles and gestures with his empty gun to the prone security guards behind her.

“It would have been much more difficult for me if you’d called my bluff and chased after the convoy. I might have had to actually hurt you to slow you down.”

Oh... oh this bastard... he was never going to hurt the hostages. No, of course not... after all, he wanted witnesses, didn’t he? Tartarus was the private showing... this was his and his organization’s public debut. And Mirko had just played right into his hands.

The Rabbit Hero sees red. Forgetting the obvious gulf in power between them and how easily he’d manhandled her even when she was pushing herself past her limits, Mirko lunges forward again, intending on wrapping her hands around the bastard’s neck and strangling the life out of him.

But of course, before she makes it even halfway to him, there’s a swirling portal of purple that appears behind Shroud. And as her hands close around where his neck had been, he’s already stepped back through it, the purple portal snapping shut behind him a moment later.

Mirko gets nothing but air as she stumbles to a stop in the middle of the warehouse. Shroud is gone... and so are his people and everything they just stole. It’s just her, the emptied warehouse and the prone security guards... who, when she looks over, have all woken up and are staring right at her.

Fuck. How much had they seen? In the end, it didn’t matter. She pretty much had to call this in, no matter how little she wanted to. Not just because she’d get caught hiding it if she didn’t, but also because people had to know. This Shroud fucker and his Red Ring... they weren’t pushovers like some of the other attempts at villain organizations over the past decade.

No, Shroud was dangerous and if he had the likes of Nagant and Toga working for him, the Red Ring was as well. Which meant she had to tell the appropriate

people. Had to get everyone up to speed... had to sit through who fucking knew how many meetings and goddamn interrogations over the coming days.

Mirko's ears droop as she covers her face with a hand and groans into her palm.

She'd gone out looking for trouble so she technically had no right to complain. Still, this time around... trouble had most definitely found her.

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"You hear about the Red Ring?"

"The who?"

"C'mon now, it was all over the morning news! You're seriously telling me you missed it?"

"Mm, I prefer to sleep in. Besides, the news is depressing a lot of the time..."

As Prism and Malevola talk rather loudly, Izuku can't help but overhear them as he nurses his morning cup of coffee. Last night had been a long night... though of course, he's not really feeling it. His Quirks make it so he could burn the candle at both ends for weeks on end and not be any weaker for it. Sleep was... largely extraneous at this point.

Still, Izuku Midoriya is just a normal Quirkless man with not a single special quality to his name, so he still plays it up a bit. Fortunately he'd had ten years of practice. Long, sleepless nights hunting down All Might's killer had given him permanent bags under his eyes and falling into the slouch of someone operating on a sleep deficit was easy enough. Muscle memory and all that.

Making his way over to Blonde Blazer's side, Izuku stands there quietly as he watches the other members of the Phoenix Program assemble in front of them for the morning briefing. Blonde Blazer has her lips drawn into a thin line and her arms crossed over her chest, making it clear she has bad news. He can already guess what it is, of course.

“Good morning, everyone! Before we get started with our first shift, I just wanted to give you all an update that I received from the Hero Commission in the early hours of the morning. According to a report directly from the No. 6 Pro Hero Mirko, we have a new villain organization on our hands called the Red Ring.”

That gets some attention, some shifting of feet, but no big reactions from anyone. Until Blonde Blazer continues on a moment later, of course.

“The Red Ring is led by a new villain in Japan named ‘Shroud’. The Hero Commission is still looking into who this villain is and where he came from, whether he might be another villain using a new identity or what.”

As soon as the name ‘Shroud’ passes through Blazer’s lips, there’s a muted reaction from every member of the Phoenix Program. After all, they had no clue what the Red Ring was, because Izuku as Shroud had never told them the name of his organization.

However, they all knew who Shroud was. After all, Shroud was the one who recruited them all. Fortunately for the lot of them, they’re all too focused on restraining their own reactions to notice how everyone else is reacting the exact same way to the name Shroud. And Blazer is too focused on delivering the news to notice them all being weird too.

“Shroud and the Red Ring hit a warehouse last night. They emptied the place out. Mirko arrived on scene and had a brief altercation with Shroud in which he distracted her and kept her occupied to allow his people to escape. By the time anyone else knew something was going on, it was already over.”

“Wait, pause.”

Invisigal even goes so far as to hold up her hands in a T section to signal a timeout.

“What do you mean by ‘over’? Did Mirko win? Was this Shroud guy already taken down or something?”

Izuku hides his own amusement at the naked hope in Courtney's voice. Alas, it's a hope that dies a quick death as Blazer shakes her head.

"No. Mirko lost. There were minimal injuries and no casualties, thankfully... the only loss was in theft instead of lives and the only damage was property damage. However, Mirko still couldn't beat Shroud on her own. He escaped through a portal and remains at large, as do all the members of the Red Ring."

Taking a deep breath, Blazer continues on.

"It is the opinion of the Hero Commission that the Red Ring needs to be hunted down and stopped before they can grow too much bigger. Villains of all types will flock to the Red Ring's banner if its allowed to fester, as we've seen happen with other organizations in the past. Our parent organization, PDN, agrees with this so going forward we will be prioritizing Red Ring calls over other calls, so long as neither are emergency calls."

Hm... interesting. It sounded to Izuku like the Hero Commission had strong-armed Momo into going along with that. But... he wasn't going to raise much of a fuss. After all, the Red Ring was always going to wind up being the Phoenix Program's priority at the end of the day. Once all of the other Hero Agencies and the vaunted Hero Commission failed to take it down, it would be the Phoenix Program who ultimately came out on top.

At least, that was the plan anyways. They would see how much of it survived contact with the enemy...

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