

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

A/N: Next steps.

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As Izuku watches Mandy hold Courtney, he has to admit... this conversation has gone about as well as it could have in the end. All that's left is to decide how they're going to proceed from here. Obviously, going all out against Shroud wasn't in the cards. But he knew full well that Courtney would want it anyways. Which meant they needed a bit of a balancing act.

"Our best bet might be to do nothing for now and let Shroud make the next move. He has yet to 'activate' either Courtney or Malevola... once he does so, we can react from there."

Mandy has a considering look on her face at that, but as anticipated, Courtney immediately pulls away from her, scowling.

"What?! No! We can't just ignore him. Who knows what he's getting up to?! He's Enemy Number One! We need to handle him right now before he and his organization can get any bigger!"

Izuku sighs, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Take a step back, Court. Try and assess the situation rationally and logically. Shroud is only the Hero Commission's Enemy Number One right now. So far all he's done is put dirt in their eye and steal things. Yes, he's a villain and yes he needs to be stopped, but if we rush into things he'll realize that you and Malevola have turned on him and act accordingly."

Courtney grimaces at that idea but doesn't let it stop her from arguing her case.

"He hasn't done anything particularly bad yet, but the Red Ring is still the largest criminal organization that Japan has seen crop up since the League of Villains.

And the fact that he inserted moles into the Phoenix Program like he did means his intentions are far reaching beyond simple theft and mundane criminality. We're the only ones who have any idea of how far he might go at this point!"

That was quite well spoken. Izuku almost wants to smile and nod in approval, because Courtney has managed to hit the nail right on the head. Instead, he frowns and makes a show of pondering her words. Which gives Mandy room to step in.

"... Perhaps there's a middle ground here that we can hit. Izuku is right, Courtney... we don't want to risk you or Malevola by making it obvious you've turned on Shroud. He needs to think that you're still on his side, which means we can't just throw all of the Phoenix Program's resources behind tackling Shroud and the Red Ring."

Then, Mandy looks to him, a little bit of fire in her eyes as if she's expecting him to disagree with her.

"But Courtney is also right, Izuku. If we just let Shroud do whatever he wants and only ever react to him, then we're just going to wind up being led around by the nose, just like what happened to Mirko. He's a mastermind-type... we can't afford to dance to his tune."

Courtney puffs up at that while Izuku just inclines his head, acknowledging the point. When he doesn't argue with her, Mandy looks caught off guard and visibly surprised for a moment... before gathering herself up and continuing on.

"So... what we'll do is form a 'Shroud Taskforce'. It'll be just those of us 'in the know'. So us three, plus Mei and Malevola. The five of us will investigate Shroud on our own and see what we can figure out about him. We'll try and get ahead of his plans while putting ourselves in the best position possible to take him or his cronies down if an opportunity presents itself."

Internally, Izuku is grinning. This was precisely what he'd intended to eventually 'land on' as a compromise to Courtney's desire to just go out guns blazing. But for Mandy to come up with it instead... well, that was even better. Courtney still

felt guilty for 'betraying' Mandy and taking Shroud's deal after all. She was much more inclined to go along with the plan and not make trouble now that it had come from her best friend.

"That... that could work. Yeah, that's a good idea!"

Indeed, Courtney looks rather enthused by the idea... before both she and Mandy look to him, waiting for his response. In the end, Izuku simply nods.

"You're right, both of you. Letting Shroud have the initiative would be a mistake. This taskforce sounds like the best way of making sure we stay one step ahead of him while also keeping Courtney and Malevola safe... and the rest of the Phoenix Program on task. We can't ignore our PR, after all. We need to be showing all of our naysayers that the Phoenix Program works. That has to remain one of our top priorities."

Mandy nods sharply, while Courtney offers a crooked grin.

"Well... if we're the ones to take down Shroud and disband the Red Ring, that should be a pretty huge PR boost, right?"

Chuckling, Izuku shakes his head.

"It would yes... but keep in mind what happened with Mirko. We have to do this right... and Mandy's plan has the best chance of working, in the long run."

Huffing, Courtney concedes the point.

"Yeah, fine. Just keep me in the loop."

From there, the meeting comes to a close. Everything goes precisely as Izuku had intended it to, though admittedly he does feel a bit like he's walking a tight rope here. Mandy had him dead to rights when she called him a 'mastermind-type', but something Izuku was quickly learning was that people could be... unforeseen variables in his plans. Some people could be expected to react as he anticipated them reacting, while others couldn't.

Malevola was the biggest unforeseen variable so far, forcing Izuku to move up a lot of his plans when she revealed things right in front of a hidden Courtney. That didn't mean all was lost though. Not by a long shot. It just meant... he needed to get a move on. Not just as Izuku Midoriya, Dispatcher for the Phoenix Program, but also as Shroud, leader of the Red Ring...

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"What's the plan tonight, boss man?"

Dressed as Shroud once more, Izuku looks to where Himiko Toga stands at the ready, a bloodthirsty expression on her face.

"The plan tonight calls for subtlety, Toga. There will be little bloodshed this evening so long as you obey my orders."

Grinning, Toga shrugs her shoulders.

"Sure, sure. You haven't led me astray yet! I can do a bit of skulking for the night. Heh, hey, how have things been going with that friend of mine, if you know what I mean?"

Izuku sighs. At least Toga had the good grace to not call out Ochaco by her name or her Pro Hero moniker of Uravity.

"She is well. I have not needed to activate her yet... for now, our focus is on other matters."

As they move in, everyone he's brought on this mission working carefully and professionally, Toga hums in thought at that. Only once they're inside the building does she break her silence again.

"Huh, I guess that makes sense. Honestly, kind of confusing that you cared so much about them in the first place really. Is it just that you want to have all your bases covered, or is there something else going on there?"

If he didn't know that Toga was just this curious sometimes, Izuku might have suspected she was working for someone else with how much she was trying to probe him for answers. But the truth was... there was no one else for Toga to work for at this point. She had survived numerous criminal organizations before joining the Red Ring, but each of them had been destroyed by Pro Heroes. In the end, she was like a cockroach... impossible to permanently take down.

“That’s not relevant to tonight’s mission, Toga.”

Taking the admonishment good-naturedly, Toga waves him off.

“Well... if you say so, boss man!”

They reach their destination shortly after that, ending the conversation either way. Izuku watches as his people easily pick the lock on the door, letting them into a file room... one located deep within the Hero Public Safety Commission's main headquarters.

That was where they were tonight. That was the Red Ring's primary mission on this fine evening. Of course, that didn't mean there weren't other groups of his criminal ne'er dowels throughout the city, getting up to no good. In fact, there were several.

Creating noise, generating mayhem, and in general being nuisances. That was what the majority of the Red Ring was doing tonight. Some of them would even be arrested and behind bars before the night was over... though only the ones Izuku wanted to be captured would be.

That was thanks to putting Kaina, aka Lady Nagant, on overwatch for that entire operation. The members of the Red Ring who had proven to be too volatile and... mismatched with Izuku's future designs for the organization had been placed in locations that would see them running up against bad matchups, Pro Heroes who would almost certainly take them down.

The others would manage things just fine with Kaina's help, and no doubt get away clean at the end of the day.

Tonight was, to put it simply, a masterclass in multitasking. It reminded Izuku of the old phrase 'killing two birds with one stone'. A secret purge of his ranks... combined with a secret infiltration of the enemy's headquarters.

The people Izuku has brought with him fan out through the file room, opening cabinets and looking for the evidence they've come to strip from this place. Izuku stands where he is with his arms crossed over his chest, Toga standing behind him with her fingers flexing and her body practically vibrating with a need to move.

Still, she manages to stay still. Funny, when he'd first recruited her, he'd expected Toga to be one of the ones he sacrificed to the Pro Heroes tonight. A villainess that he set up to be captured and shipped off to Tartarus at long last.

... But as he'd gotten to know her a little better, Izuku's plans had changed. Especially when Kaina herself had vouched for the blood drinker deserving a chance at potential redemption.

"I know this is a serious moment and all that shit and I'm supposed to read the room and shut up... but what exactly are we doing here, boss man? What am I doing here?"

Turning to regard her from behind his metal skull-like mask, Izuku grunts.

"We are gathering evidence that will expose the corruption at the heart of the Hero Commission, Toga."

As boxes and boxes are filled up and carted out of the room around them, Toga blinks slowly.

"Ooookay... still not quite sure why you needed me for this mission. You didn't even have me transform or anything to help you break in. And if there's nobody that needs killing..."

Izuku tilts his head to the side.

“You have long had trouble understanding humanity, haven’t you? You have struggled with seeing things through the eyes of the ‘normal’. You’ve been labeled a deviant, an abnormal, and a freak.”

Toga stiffens further and further as he speaks, until she’s staring at him with wide, unblinking eyes. Izuku... steps away from her for a moment, seemingly walking up to a filing cabinet at random.

It’s not random of course, though it has been untouched by everyone else moving around the room and pilfering its contents. That’s by design... Izuku has given them their assignments. He’s told them exactly what to take from which cabinets. All thanks to his spies on the inside of the Hero Commission.

Opening this particular cabinet up, he reaches a gloved hand inside and pulls forth a file. Then, he holds it out to Toga. She doesn’t immediately take it. Instead, scowling, she looks at him carefully.

“What is that?”

“Your file.”

Toga blinks... and then lets out a bark of laughter as she takes it from him.

“Oh? The Hero Commission been keeping tabs on me? This should be... cute.”

The hitch in her words comes from Toga actually opening up the file and reading its contents. At which point, her amused tone drops completely as her red eyes dart back and forth.

“What... what is this?”

“Like I said, that’s your file. Your civilian file, created by the Hero Commission after the Quirk Counselor your parents sent you to reported you to them.”

Toga begins to tremble, even as Izuku moves to her side, his modulated voice continuing on unabated.

“The truth is, Toga... you were never given a chance. Your Quirk Counselor didn’t want to help you find a way to fit in with society, he wanted to find a way to mold you into the perfect weapon for the Hero Commission... because that was what they tasked him with doing. And so you were taught to suppress yourself, to value control above all else, and to submit yourself to the proper authority.”

Slowly, he pulls the file from Toga’s hands and closes it back up before placing it behind his back so she’s forced to focus more on him and the present once more.

“You were not the first they tried to do this to, Toga. You weren’t the last either. You were, ultimately, one of their greatest failures... same as Lady Nagant.”

Toga’s head snaps to him at that. Much like Kaina has developed a soft spot for Toga since they recruited her, it’s obvious that Toga has in turn developed something right back. She especially seems enamored with his and Kaina’s relationship as Shroud and Nagant.

“They got much further along with her than they did with you. They turned her into a weapon. They used her to kill both villains and heroes alike, anyone who might disrupt their status quo. Until finally, she snapped and killed the President of the Hero Commission in his office, resulting in her altercation in Tartarus. You had a similar moment where you couldn’t take it anymore. Where the box they tried to fit you into failed to keep you contained. You escaped the life they intended for you... just as Nagant ultimately did, with enough time.”

After a long moment, Toga licks her lips and narrows her eyes.

“Why are you telling me this, Shroud?”

Not ‘boss man’ anymore. Heh, Izuku can tell that Toga is one wrong answer away from attacking him. She hates being vulnerable. She hates feeling exposed. And she’s definitely feeling both of those things right now.

“Simple, really. We’re going to take everything we gather here tonight along with the rest of the evidence we have... and we’re going to start a campaign of public opinion against the HPSC. We’re going to expose the Hero Commission for everything they’ve done, every horribly action they’ve taken.”

He pauses for a moment before continuing on.

“Lady Nagant has already consented to having her story shared in the coming information dumps. But I won’t let your file see the light of day... unless you consent as well.”

Again, this was only because Kaina had asked for this of him. She clearly saw something of herself in the younger woman. Now, the ball was in Toga’s court.

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