Boku no Hero: ALTernative

Boku no Hero: ALTernative (BnHALT for short) is an expanded-universe, mid/sequel to the extremely-popular manga series Boku no Hero Academia/My Hero Academia, written and illustrated by mangaka Kohei Horikoshi of Shonen Jump.

BnHALT takes place a few months into the future at some point after the Meta Liberation Army Arc of the canon series. The main setting is a university campus in the state of Massachusetts within USA. Vincent Teshima, a naturalized citizen of the country, applies for enrollment into Vanevery University, one of five of the most prestigious tertiary institutions to groom and refine the country's Pro Heroes. The method for doing so, however, is of a much different nature than the Japanese's, naturally, and through following Vinnie's POV, this realm and how it came to be can be further explored.

BnHALT seeks to build up another section of BnHA's world, and elaborate on the darker, lesser-established sections of the new, Quirk-heavy world. All while still trying to replicate the colorful, vibrant visages and personalities that made its parent series such a thrilling story to tell.
In this world that we rightly call home, there is something that was once truly extraordinary to everyone that we have come to find aplenty in our daily lives without batting an eye, all in such a short amount of time. Quirks - the manifestation of supernatural abilities inherent in all groups, all demographics, of Earth’s populations. With Quirks, people can generate fire without flints or wood, travel great distances without artificial constructs, amalgamate opposite sources into a stable combination, and more... Though each and every single one of them has its own unique price.

As of today, there are roughly eighty percent of people in the world who can harness the powers of Quirks. While humanity as a whole has yet to find out just why we have these powers, they have nonetheless found no small amount of use for them. From conveniences of drawing necessities toward you and handling everyday work more easily, to getting an edge on sports that have integrated appropriate updates to the rules, the more diverse world has seemingly developed methods to become more simple as well. But multitudes of interpretations can be a dangerous entity, and simplicity in life can come from benevolence... Or malevolence. Pro Heroes, Quirk users who have aligned themselves with the continued liberty and security of others, do battle with the ages-old adversaries in the form of Villains, those that have devoted themselves to any and all selfish gains, in unprecedented varieties of ways.

But you already knew all of that, didn’t you? You’ve or had been reading and watching well on our little colleagues over in Japan, right? Well, what if I told you... That not everything, ahem, Quirky happens in the Land of the Rising Sun? *GASP* I know, right? Can you believe the first person to manifest a Quirk was actually Chinese? Of course, the Japanese may still have the best Pro Hero stories to tell this day, chock full of aesops, along with moments of awe, heartwarming, and tearjerking. But that doesn’t mean the rest of us shouldn’t at least try to give them a little competition.

This is our try. This is our latest try. This is the result of the massive efforts of many aspiring to grasp a hold of that glorious legacy. Straight from the heart... Of the United States of America.

-Boston, Massachusetts, USA-

Three suited individuals walk through the grey corridors of a state-of-the-art facility. They pass by a painted logo on the wall - a kite shield with a navy shell and white cross/gilding, covered on top by American Elm branches, and partially overlapped by a bay Morgan horse bust, looking furiously to the side and gritting its teeth with determination; the fiery mane implies it to be in the middle of a high-speed, high-intensity sprint towards its goal.

The three eventually make it to a private room with a round desk and a circular holographic projector at the center. When perspective finally shows the faces of all three of them, the first was revealed to be the only woman in the entourage, somewhat pale in tone and sporting green eyes... Shining through blond hair woven with porcupine-like quills at the end. One of two men wore a sky-blue complexion, extra-long, visible upper canines, and vertical lines channeling his entire forehead. The last person, hazel-haired and with blue irises, was... Decidedly normal in every way.
respect, if it wasn’t for his scarf covering the lower half of his face to actually be his elongated, prehensile monkey tail.

“Alright, gentlemen, settle down and let’s get started; we have many more applicants than ever before for ‘the Jewel of the Bay’.” The woman announced, setting down her stack of manilla folders, unfolding an alleged, necessary pair of specs, and sitting down, stamp in hand.

The blue man laughed. “Heh, you might actually need those glasses after we’re done with this pack.” He motions to the pile of folders. “And the next seven!” He added on.

The woman looked quite offended at the remark about her accessory, standing up and taking them off. “How dare! And what’s that to mean, eh? Not wanting to get in on this action? Not appreciative of the ones showing their love to our institute?” She countered.

“No, by all means, this could be onto something truly great. The issue is the fact that the higher-ups knew full well they were going to make this move, and we’re the ones paying the most for it.” He responded, slouching back in his spot. “Breaking a sweat for their new way to make a dime...” He brushed his chest.

“Good - you’re sweating. You might actually work hard this time around, like these students!” She crossed her arms deviously towards him.

“Now you’re the one making wild assertions!” He stands up too.

“You’re right, and you’re right, mates.” The last one commented. “And that’s no accident. Perhaps that’s a good thing, though; it could very well mean that the higher-ups know how capable and how dependable we are. Which means we should now get on with it.” He finally asserted.

Both sat down, deflated at the extinguished debacle.

The scarfed one pressed on a nearby remote, bringing up a young lady’s mugshot, which showed her to be blonde with two blue ahoges, and orange lines across her cheeks mimicking double football paint marks. This portrait was followed by several other photos (seemingly from various social media profiles) that were all put into stasis above the mahogany table. “First up: Miss Leena Foster, from San Fran. Quirk: Joints with Jets.”

“What, like Rayman?” The blue one noted.

“You could say that. Arms and legs can detach and attach on a whim; naturally this extends her limb-span, and she can pull her torso to her limbs rather than the other way around. But it requires conscious control; her limbs would fall to the ground if she doesn’t have them in mind. And though they are above-average in durability, enough to wreck stone with a punch, there’s always danger in getting them damaged.” The mature suit continued.

“Has a decent character on the web.” The lady replaced her brainy specs. “No small number of selfies, of high angles both up and down. Frequentcs arcades and bowling alleys too, favorite game is billiards. Four-year member of her high school’s yearbook club. All of it wrapped behind a Merit graduation with a 3.4 GPA.”

“Background check reveals she had a little DUI a few years back. Apparently, she drove from the trunk, with two sets of seats and two bodies in front of her, along with another pair of passengers. Quite the party animal; if she was more controlled.” The fanged suit steps back a bit. “And I was still in college, I’d be all over her. Anyways, her reason to want to be a Pro Hero? ‘To make something in her life matter’. Ironic in a way.”
“Be a consummate professional for once in your life.” The woman rolled her eyes.

“If we do bring her in for the Second Review and she passes, I’d recommend we’d put her in the intro-remedial departments at least for her first year. Teach her some humility on the road to a Pro Hero life. And then she’ll understand that everything actually does matter.” The man with the tail scarf acknowledged.

“We’ll keep an open mind for now.” The party chaser left off. “Next up is, Mister Kerr Frills, a Norwegian.” He looked to his first manilla folder’s contents.

The other man nodded, changing the interface once more to the subject of interest. “Quirk: Cnidarian Form. Basically harnesses the properties of cnidarians, most notable among them being jellyfish. Can live indefinitely in the water, the heart and brain are beyond attack reach, poison darts, extremely flexible. All well and good until a tentacle is ripped or chopped off, and overall speed drops. Also, if for any reason his concentration for keeping the form wavers, back into human form it is, and arms becoming human again while in the middle of being tentacles will not be a pretty sight.” He explained.

“3.75 GPA, was in drama club in an Oslo secondary ed. But not quite as in touch with the clouds as Miss Foster is. Only has an I-FB, hardly updated since June of four years ago. Strange, given that it was very active until that point.”

“His record is spotless, so he probably just doesn’t like the spotlight. This isn’t the place to go to stay out of sight on the road to the top, though.” Fangs remarked. “Reason: ‘Gain appreciation I have earned’. Ah, I see; the last post of his on I-FB before these ghost periods was a group posting about his time with a freshman-only football team winning the nationals. I reckon he didn’t do so stellar like the rest of his group.”

“In any case, that’s not fully what we’re looking for in the Pro Heroes we’re grooming for tomorrow.” Scarf acknowledged.

“Hey, maybe a few developing egos are what this place needs right now. We won’t have to doubt them giving their all at least. Accept.” The blond stamped the folder. “Now then, next one is... Oh, a Japanese one. Surprising.” She remarked.

“Wait, isn’t supposed to be the other way around? Pro Hero students here want to go there? What’s he doing here?” Fangs considered.

“We might find out by reading the profile.” Scarf answered.

The Blond focused her glasses again. “Mister Vincent Teshima.”

Scarf looked a lot more focused. “Oh, I got an early look at his profile. Sure to be one Hell of a wild card, that one.” He declared as he put up his holographic images above the table. “Quirk: Nitro Blast. Utilizes a level of Ionization that works exclusively with nitrogen gas particles, pretty much used for the generation of plasma for a wide variety of applications. The downsides are that nitrogen can really take a toll on the body overtime. Its field of effect is also one of the shortest in the close and mid-range Quirks, and there’s little stopping it from influencing the Quirks of others, be they friend or foe.”

“Yeah, I see what you mean. He’s somebody really special; resume shows a myriad of careers - Navy tour, paramedics training, various fields of engineering experience. Very active and preachy on social media, though not for his own benefit, so much as celebrating the stories of those around him. Makes no secret of his Lutheran Protestant and Pure Land Buddhist beliefs, and frequently
documents Logistical Unit activities. Probably learns of them through his parents, who are also LUs. And by LUs, I mean the LUs; they’re perhaps the most decorated operators currently active. Back to the man of the hour, he’s also a decorated finalist in the science fair with all of his experiments on electrical engineering, seconded by a 3.9 GPA.” The lady flipped through more of her folder’s pages.

“He’s been a Massachusetts native since he was eleven years old, and never got in trouble.” Fangs turned the page, with his eyes widening for a moment. “Well, no meaningful trouble anyhow; he has had run-ins with some patrols, due to bystander defiance when taking down run of the mill hoodlums in any street crimes he happens across” He corrected himself.

“Well a noble heart’s all well and good, but clearly you can’t use your Quirk whenever you want and expect to be a proper Pro Hero.” The woman took off her specs again.

“It doesn’t excuse a perceived authority problem, but he didn’t use his Quirk at any point during those write-ups.” Scarf corrected adamantly.

“Are you serious? You sure? Did they check the radars, CCTV... Any other scanners?” Fangs looked bewildered.

“Nitro Blast can disrupt, but cannot make itself discreet. He didn’t hide it; he just didn’t use it. And we know that his Quirk is NB, because he has been shown using it during secondary ed.” Scarf amended.

“Well then...” The woman was almost at a loss for words.

“His reason’s a conundrum, too.” Fangs took a closer look.

“Why?” She queried.

“He doesn’t want to be a Pro Hero.” He answered.

“Say that again?” She quickly pivoted her head at him.

“He doesn’t desire to be a Pro Hero, because there’s too many of them already. He instead wants to become a Paragon.” He added on.

All three of them sat in silence for a little while in response.

-Winchester, Massachusetts-

Inside the regional facility for Kana Systems, Vinnie could be found sitting in a first-floor laboratory, surrounded by walls of shelves of audiovisual and communications equipment and parts. And a fellow technician, sleeping away the hour. The whirring of the AC units meant to keep the various computer systems cool made a near-deafening amount of noise... Which was mitigated by his tactical headphones playing Christian Rock. He could be seen typing furiously onto his computer, apparently running some tests on sending data across dozens of modems connected to one system.

Abruptly, he is interrupted by an email from a colleague, detailing of the need for the task that was scheduled yesterday. Immediately, Vinnie closes his rugged, working laptop, taking some cables,
and a shiny-plastic bag filled with a chassis line card. He then proceeds up to another laboratory within the building, wading through storm of turbines, coils of RF cords, and bright lights to reach the system he was looking for. Hooking up his laptop, Vince ran some CLI commands that disconnected a switchbox and ten CMs from one of the line cards, permitting him to take said card out in time to replace it with the one he brought along. Some more typing and entering later got it to reconfigure connection fully.

But the job wasn’t done yet; Vinnie then looked on the top level behind the system and saw a standalone CM. He took it into his hands to an assessment table, hooking it up to his device and accessing the GUI to enable and disable several prime features, then waiting for the reboot to bring it to the rack containing its fellow brethren, putting it on power-control. He then ran several coaxial cables from the back of the chassis back to the modem. Finally inserting in as many ethernet cables as he could to hook it to the switchbox, he ensured it was up and running with another CLI check, and then left for a cubicle situated nearby. “You’re all set, Xing.” He knocked twice on the CLI check.

The owner of the desk with the placard housing the name “Lina Xing” shited her attention to Vinnie. “Ah, great! Thanks for the heads-up.” She remarked.

“Be sure to tell me how the test goes. It was not an easy solution to find.” He added on.

“To think some stuff is actually hard for you.” She joked, before returning her attention back to her dual-monitor desktop.

“Yeah...” He expressed before returning to the first-floor lab. Down there, the colleague has now awoken; her name tag flipped Vinnie’s way just as her twisted ox horns did too, revealing the name of “Inez Medina.”

“Ah, you’re back. Successful integration, I presume?” Inez asked.

“As successful as far as installation goes. It’s up to SE and SQA to find out if it actually works for their latest bug or not.” Vince responded.

“Come on, Vince, we both know that you have your opinions...” She slouched in her chair with a smug grin.

“I would say... It’s a bit of a dull fix. I kind of wanted to upgrade the CMTS myself. Take a better look at the code and the motherboard.” Vinnie sighed with capitulation.

“Dull, huh? Just another way of saying boring. Maybe you should have thought of that when you decided that the first Summer after your discharge would be spent like this.” The horned woman announced.

“Oh, but the work is not what’s dull, Inez.” Vince corrected her.

“Come again?” She requested confirmation.

“What’s dull is that you seem to think it is so.” He concluded.

The lady tilted her head, then laughed. “What’s that to mean?”

“This is one of those days in an age where Quirks are aplenty in this world we live in, right?” He started up again.

“That’s right...” She took a sip after reacting.
“And have we ever had less than a trillion pieces of technology around the world since more than a century ago?” He extended.

“Also true.”

“Then populations should be able to be in awe at both - equally.” He theorized.

“How liberal, Vincent. But how does an electrical engineer compete against an example like All Might?” She countered.

“Just be confident like him, Inez. Believe that what you do is cool and right. Anyone tell you otherwise, well…” He moves his finger above one switch. “Show them what it’s like without it.” He moves his hand back to a stray coffee on the table.

“Is that right?” She stroked the hair at her right side.

“It is for someone. Other than me.” Vincent smiled proudly towards her.

“Hmm.” Inez then looked to her smartphone. “In any case, your clock has run down. Go on, get out of here. Enjoy this sunny morning. I’m up now.” She politely shooed him away.

He proceeded to pack everything he needed to and scooched the chair back in position. “Just so you know, if I accidentally knock out the power again, you will get a proportionate pay for however long it takes me to bring it back up. Just so long as you don’t make it worse before I get there.” He pronounced.

“Oh my God, get out already, unkempt youth!” Inez finalized her assertion. After a brief snicker, he finally complied to her directions.

Within minutes involving a locker-trip and a sign-off, Vince eventually made it out of the grounds of the telecommunications building, one-strap backpack in tow. He first stretched out a bit, basking in the bright sunlight, hardly disturbed by the few clouds in the sky.

“What a glorious day.” He looked around to find a lively bustle of cars and pedestrians. He pulls out a pair of polarized sports glasses, slings the pack behind him, puts on a lone glove, his headset (which plays “I Want to Live” by Skillet) and begins running. He wall-cartwheels to get past a middle-age couple taking up a bulk of the sidewalk on the right of the road. “Morning, Mr. and Mrs. Duvalle!” He greeted loudly.

They wave at him as he continues outpacing them. “Morning, Vincent!” They responded.

When the young man eventually reaches an intersection where the greenlight was perpendicular to his path, Vince wall-ran across the building closest to the traffic lights, gaining a quick boost to the top. A little climb later allows him to grab the horizontal pole with his gloved hand. Immediately, the accessory glows blue, and suddenly Vince is propelled forward, sliding along the pipe with virtually no friction and going above the passing cars. He releases the pole when he almost hits the monitor, so that his hands then clutch the bottom of the projector. One quick swing allowed him to leap all the way to the far sidewalk with a four-point landing that swiftly brought him back to proper standing.

He continues his run, this time through a park, vaulting over three oncoming benches in various ways (one-handed reverse gyro, thief 360, and release rocket respectively). He eventually finds a bunch of young children playing European football in an open field. One performed a well-timed block with his knee to prevent the passing of the spherical black and white projectile, but the force of the blow makes it fly out of their playing area and towards a lone woman sitting at a tree stump
with their small Boston terrier.

“Lady, watch out!” The closest player throws out his hand that way.

She realizes much too late, only being able to see the ball coming her way.

But Vince saw it coming much earlier. He no-hand cartwheels in front of them, throwing his spread gloved hand in front of the black-white ball, stopping it dead in its tracks. Returning to an upright stance, he presents the ball to all. “Keep it within the paint, huh kids? It’ll make you better at the game as well.” He reminded.

“Yes, Mr. Teshima.” The closest one responded.

“I’m sorry, I got a little pent up.” The alleged instigator scratched the back of his head.

“That’s alright, just learn from it!” He 540 kicks the ball back towards them; two players with their hands out were necessary to bring the forceful launch to a stop. Vince then turns back to the woman and her pup. “Have a good day, Miss Leite.”

“Thanks for the help, V!” She too waves at him.

Vince continued his long run through the city square, minding his own while still keeping watch for any that he might accidentally stumble upon, including another couple from around the corner pushing a baby carriage, which he side-flips over. “My apologies!” He waved back.

“Don’t worry, Vinnie!” Both man and lady reassured.

The runner then noticed a pack of highschoolers crossing the street together and forming a large obstruction on his side of the sidewalk. Not wanting to slow down still, he takes to a three-step run-up on the brick wall, giving him clearance for a stylish flying-helix jump over all of them, landing with a safety tap that permits him to keep going.

“Vincent!”

For the first time, his name came before the action. As a result, he stops in his tracks, and sees his identifier before him. “Mickey?” He walked up to the middle-schooler, who had several bags of groceries in his hand. “What are you doing out of school? I told nothing can come from playing hooky.” He warned.

“I’m not!” He shook his papermade carryalls. “I got a little sick last night.”

Vinnie took a knee and looked into his eyes.

“Um, sir?” He noticed the peculiar behavior.

“No surprise. You’ve been playing that new Line of Fire title past midnight lately, haven’t you?” He pointed out.

“Ah- Well...” The younger one looked away.

“So you’re sick. But not to the point that you’re bedridden, so your mother tasks you with going out to get some groceries?” He illustrated.

“Exactly, sir.” Mickey concurred.

“Hey! Stop that kid!” A man in an apron yelled aloud.
“Oh come on!” Mickey groaned.

“What happened?” The older one asked after turning back.

“A misunderstanding!” Mickey insisted.

“Okay...” Vinnie then whispered into his ear, and then stood up to face the store owner. “What seems to be the issue, Mr. Gibbons?”

“Ah, Vinnie. It turns out once one of Thaddeus Middle’s students talks all about how he successfully left with a couple of chocolate bars from the store, suddenly all of them want to do it. This is the fourth time this month.

“That sounds very vexing, Gibbons. I’m sure to help steer them straight if you’ll let me at them. But I can assure you that Mickey here isn’t one of those kids. You can investigate the bags and his receipt again if you wish.” Vinnie stepped aside, much to Mickey’s gulping.

“Very well.” he aproned man obliged.

Vince and Mickey both shared sideways stares as the scanning persisted.

“Hm, those KR-UNCH bars aren’t in here.” Mr. Gibbons rose up, sighing exasperatedly. “It must’ve been that Clyde fellow from earlier in the day. Alright, my apologies, Mickey. Do send my regards to your mother.” He turned around and walked back towards his shop.

Mickey himself couldn’t help a sigh, albeit a more pleasant one. “Wooo, dodged a bullet.” He remarked.

“Yeah you did.” Vinnie turned towards him, brandishing a KR-UNCH bar.

The adolescent noticed it and went back behind his jacket’s tramp pocket, finding it empty. “When did you?”

“Wrong question, wrong questioner. Why did you?” He looked disappointed.

“Sweepstakes...” Mick admitted.

“And what’s to come when they realize the winning golden ticket was found inside an unscanned barcode?” He argued.

“Vince...” He groaned again.

“This is going back.” Vinnie rose up. “I’ll say Clyde dropped it while hanging out at the arcade. You will admit to your mother you did it, though, and if you don’t I’ll know when I meet with her during mass in two days.” He directed.

“Yes, Mr. Teshima.” Mickey nodded slowly.

“Good. Now stay out of trouble!” Vinnie beckoned with the candy bar before taking his detour back to the store. After making the trip, he continued on his own way.

Vince quickly checked his watch as he sprinted further. Now reaching the residential hills, Vince suddenly begins sliding with his gloved hand across the sidewalk, holding his head just above the concrete path. When he’s about to reach the asphalt, he then pushes off, performing a run-off that transitions into a double-backflip, landing perfectly on the road a foot away from the curb... All of that, to get over a mail truck that always stops there at this time. “Beat ya, Jake!” He grinned.
“You just wait, Vinnie; I got an amazing new revision to this route waiting to trump your ass.” The postman responded, sliding his door open before proceeding to toss a sort of disk over his vehicle. The device whirred before abruptly changing direction and latching itself onto the inside of a mailbox mounted on the closest house.

“Good luck with that; I still haven’t given my all.” Vince pats his chest and runs his way.

“See you soon.” He saluted.

Vince eventually reaches his destination - a two-floor residence in a rather quiet neighborhood still in the heart of suburban Winchester. At the same time, he could see two small boys standing underneath the tree in front of it, trying to think of ways to dislodge a drone from the branches it got stuck to. The young man runs up the oak, sticking his gloved hand to keep from falling back down, and then climb-leaps to the lowest hanging branch. After a little more traversal, he claims the mini-helicopter, and jumps to his roof, shooting-star pressing back down to ground level. “Here you are, little ones. Remember though: fly safely.”

“We understand, Mr. Teshima.” One of the kids accepts the vehicle.

“See ya!” He salutes away, now moving to the mailbox and reviewing the various message discs as he unlocks his front door and heads inside. One holographic from a certain device catches his eye, and he looks up with a grin, closing the door behind him.

-By sundown of the same day...-

A Lexus XF70 pulls into the driveway of the house, just as magenta and golden-brown engulfs most of the sky. A woman sharing Vince’s stark-silver irises, wearing business casual attire (complete with purple designer gloves), steps out from the vehicle and heads toward the front door (seemingly knowing the mailbox would be empty); her lab coat handing out of her purse reveals her given name - Akane. “I’m home, Vince!” She declared.

“Hi, mom.” Vince responded, seemingly less than enthusiastically as he ordinarily does, given her reaction to it.

Noticing something was up, she followed the source of the voice, finding that her son was working on a motherboard in a miniaturized graphical simulation. He was putting the finishing touches on soldering a CPU socket into the green frame. “What you got there, son?”

Vince did not break away from his virtual magnifier on the construction. “The third exercise on the hardest level of this engineering testing module.” He mentioned.

“I see that. Mind explaining why you’re on it?” His mother leans on the wall close to him, watching his handiwork carefully.

“Because I think I suck at it.” He answered again.

Akane tilted her head amusingly at the statement.

When he finishes “burning” the rectangular piece into place, he slides the lens away and flips a holographic switch, followed by pressing on various keys. However, his attempt produces no desired result, with one of the seven connected light bulbs still not lighting up. “Dang it.”
Akane pushed off from the sill, placing her hand on her son’s close shoulder with reassurance. “RealTexture turned on?” She asked him.

Vince summoned the settings menu with a hard left swipe, and then switched the desired option on, then nodded at her.

Akane pulled her right glove off of her hand and placed it spread out over the below motherboard. Her invisible force causes the electrical charge traveling through the circuits during the running simulation to reveal themselves, in the form of yellow paths. “There’s the problem. Connect those three integrated circuits with four terminal pins between each pair to give them equal current.” She pointed at one organization on the mobo.

Vince returns to debug state, corrects the issue, and reruns the testing phase, leading to a flawless result. He slouches in his chair, looking at Akane smugly. “Come on, mother. You didn’t need to use your Quirk to tell what was wrong here; you knew the moment you came in the room.” He acknowledged.

“Perhaps, but it did make it easier to explain.” Akane refocused, replacing the glove on her right hand. “So, any reason why you’ve turned to microelectronics again? It’s most definitely not work necessary for your telecommunications engineering gig.” She smiled back.

He sighed. “Well, something came in the mail today, and I hoped to get refreshed in something more fitting for it.” He slid his hand along the table to retrieve the same message disk that he had singled out earlier.

Akane accepts the mail and finds that the now-imprinted seal showcased Vanevery University’s logo right below the jewel. “Could it be?” She asked him.

Vince did not answer this new query, merely eyeing the device to encourage her to look into it and find out for herself.

She reads the log of the message further, eventually putting one of her covered hands to her mouth with awe. “Miraculous...” Akane hugs Vince deeply. “Son, wait until your father comes home and reads this as well.” She proclaimed.

-An hour later...-

After Vince’s father Raidon, who shared the same sharpness in their gaze, returned home, he too got to take a look at the letter. They took a supper to collect their thoughts, so that they would continue to sit down at the wooden table to discuss the matters further.

“You did good, son. Approved for the Second Review.” His father complimented.

“I wonder if things would change if Vanevery had a few years under its belt as a public institution before I sent my resume to them.” Vince crossed his arms.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Vinnie. You hold oodles of volunteer and work experience all over the American spectrum. Let’s not forget to mention a wonderful recommendation letter from your last homeroom teacher, Mr. Welles, in high school.” Akane assured her son.

“Do you have any idea what Vanevery’s next inspection would entail, dad?” Vince questioned his
father.

“I imagine they’ll have an entrance assessment not unlike the schools back in Japan, like U.A. This is a university, though, so I reckon the stakes are higher, and the challenges are more varied.” Raidon postulated.

“I’m not afraid of that.” Vince smirked.

“Vinnie, undoubtedly you’ll have to fight. You’re not going to be afraid to let loose a bit too, right?” Akane brushed her covered hand through her child’s jet hair.

“Not if it’s just for show. Or to help someone else.” He answered.

“We’re serious, son. Consideration from Vanevery, even if this is their first time as a public university, is quite a significant achievement already. But that means their people really expect everyone to give it their all, else what’s the point? Make a statement, son. Show all the effort you’ve put into everything else, into combat as well. Can you do that?” The father reiterated to him.

This time, Vinnie took a second to respond. “Yes. I can.”

“Then the future will be in good hands.” The older one finished.

“I still got a week and some extra hours. Father, if I limit my sleep to just five, eight work hours, total eating time at most ninety minutes, and an hour for engineering practice, how much increase in training time for other things will I put in?” He questioned his father this time.

Raidon smiled at his son, then closed his eyes. His left hand suddenly went limp, but only for an instant; after that he flared them open once more. “Presuming you will adhere to that schedule, twenty-four point eight-seven-seven-two percent more.” He bounced back, indirectly making the gigantic calculation seem like utter smalltime.

“Not even twenty-five percent more?” Vinnie put his hand to his chin. “Maybe sleep should become four and a half.”

“Son...” Akane became caringly devious, more insistently holding onto Vinnie’s shoulder, as if in a punishingly dissuading motion. Raidon gave a smirk to his wife, which she giggled and copied. Vinnie saw the levity between his parents and couldn’t help smiling too.
Is This a Test?

Chapter Summary

Our pal Vinnie got his chance to show Vanevery University what he's made of! Excellent! But before they get to see that, what might Vanevery be made of, though?

-A week and a half later...-

This was it. The week of Vanevery’s Second Review. Out of almost thirty-thousand applicants for admission when the enrollment period began, only roughly four-thousand-two-hundred were picked for this next stage of assessment. To more easily regulate the higher flush of potential entries, the university has split the remaining pool by seven, taking on give-or-take six-hundred students per day. A follow-up email that Vince received after the physical, holographic letter revealed that he was on day three of seven - Tuesday. Until that time, the Winchester native redoubled his training and learning. Alongside his heavily calculative father and currents-attuned mother, and a wide assortment of privately-filmed videos on various forms of close-quarters combat, Vinnie was fully prepared for whatever the prestigious, elite institute had coming for him.

While riding the MBTA trains, Vince, clad in U.S. flag graphic track pants, combat boots, athletic tee, combat gloves, and his dog tag necklace, looked on his smartphone to pass the time. The top story on news website Wonders of the World was about a Villainous collusion causing no small amounts of arson, robbery, and certainly casualty in a small town called Veil in California. “Villains Titan, Tendency, and Ambiance, among others, have resurfaced after several years of inactivity, attacking the SoCal town and causing widespread panic and carnage, in an attempt to promote the belief that high-priority Villainy is still frightfully strong in America.” Hmph, our Pro-Heroes must be literally flying out of their office chairs right now to have a piece of that action. First unlawful act above petty thievery, drunken brawls, and unpaid speeding tickets in eight months? Not a chance that the incident will last longer than an hour, unless our Pro Heroes haven’t been staying in shape... He puts the phone down and looks outside the reinforced window, grinning all the while. Of course, you won’t hear complaints from me about the lack of any serious crime lately...

After another ten minutes, the train reaches the destination where the Second Review begins... In Worcester Common, nearly forty-five miles away from the main campus grounds?

Vinnie finally gets off the commuter rail line at Union Station. From there he went westward, and walks onto the scene a quarter-mile later - a massive, circular pavement right before Worcester’s City Hall. Yep, this is most definitely the place. Just ninety minutes early. Rather interesting we’re so far separated from their main grounds, but if I can’t believe that a First-Rate Five university knows what it’s doing, then what can I possibly believe in? He moves to the railing to lean on it, waiting and keeping an active eye on his surroundings.

These included one unusually interesting sight which consisted of a teenager using his Vertex Trail to make three tennis balls that he launched into the air to play tricks on his pet Irish Setter. After the fourth failed attempt at jumping up to bite down on one of the green projectiles, along with further goading by its owner’s taunts, the dog finally thought to ambush the playful saboteur instead, charging at him and pushing him down with its front legs. While down, the pointer then
caught one of the falling balls and rushed up to its supine human; the latter of which held no ill will, lovingly embracing his charge with glee, having just as much fun as it was. Vinnie himself couldn’t help but smile.

“Hey! You!” A strong voice shouted out.

Vince looked up from his phone, realizing that the caller was trying to identify him. As she jogged closer towards him, he paid attention to her dirty-blonde hair (put into a military-friendly braid that shook slightly every time she took a step), light brown eyes, a beauty mark above her left eyebrow, and navy-white Larque training gear.

Once she was within proper conversation distance, she bowed down a bit, held out an index finger, and proceeded to breathe deeply. “Sorry about this.” She muttered between inhale and exhale to catch her share her oxygen.

“It’s no issue.” Vinnie reassuringly smiled.

Once her stamina returned to her, she stood upright to face Vince again. “Okay! I’m guessing, from that, rather nice training gear that you have on, that you too are here for the Second Review of Vanevery University?” She queried.

Vince could decipher a slight French accent from her voice. “Indeed, I am.” He confirmed enthusiastically.

“Awesome! I didn’t go to the wrong place then, thank God!” She made two fists with excitement. “Oh, and thank you too. May I ask your name?” She added on.

“Of course. Vincent Teshima. Pleasure’s all mine.” He offered his hand for a proper greeting handshake.

Hayley flared up upon hearing the surname. “Ah, I wouldn’t have guessed you were Japanese off the bat.” She accepted the gesture.

“Yeah, I suppose we are a bit of a minority in America. And you are?” Vinnie remarked while they mutually let go before it got awkward.

“Hayley Celestin. My pleasure.” She answered back. “You always early to the party like this, or did you think you were going to get lost easily if the time was closer, like myself?”

Vince shook his head with a grin. “I wouldn’t get lost here. I’ve lived in this state for more than a decade. I just like to be incredibly punctual.” He asserted.

“Aha! I ought to stick around you, then. Presuming Vanevery likes me enough.” She scratched the back of her head.

“I’m sure they will. They’d be really ignorant to think otherwise.” He complimented.

“What brings you to that idea?” Hayley sounded slightly flattered.

“You have the stance and tone of a woman confident in her own abilities, and purposefully hiding it. Why is that?” Vince questioned.

Hayley scoffed, pointing at Vince with flair. “Hey, you think you can charm your way into hearing my plans and my abilities so easily?” She inquired back.
Vince shared the smile, but closed his eyes to hide his surprise at the response. “Can’t knock a guy for trying.” He muttered.

“You want to find out? You better stick close and take a look.” Hayley winked. “For now, I’ll be behind that tree, internally figuring everything out.”

“I won’t attempt to pressure you any further then.” He crossed his arms, further leaning onto the railing again.

Hayley looked back one more time while leaving with a beam. “Good luck.” She added a wave, and then continued to fancily stroll her way.

Vince looked around, finding only one or two more who could potentially also be Second Review participants. This could be a vibrant selection of students for Vanevery to run through, if all of them are like Hayley. But also a tough one to stand out as a result. Well, all I can do is try my best. Vince cogitated, taking out his phone again.

Within the next eighty minutes, many, many colorful personas began showing up in the Commons as well. An assortment of animalistic heads and hands were mobile, tails from reptiles and mammals lined the floor alongside shoes, and even some pairs of antennae or high-pricked ears rose above some craniums. Oh, and there were many mundane-enough humans as well. All of them, including Vince, went to the white tarps to take a spot inside the Oval (which was cleared out for a few minutes to lay down the placements).

“Number two-hundred-thirty-six, Mr. Teshima.” One of the desk operators handed him a square note with the numeral, smiling at him all the while.

“Thank you, ma’am.” He accepted the parchment and headed back for the horizons of the Oval, waiting for the right time to get to his arranged destination.

But the bustle from the roughly six-hundred within Worcester Commons was not unanimously positive and competitive. At least, not at the end of the prelude.

“Hey! What the fuck!”

“Ow! Son of a bitch!”

Vince, hearing the yells of profanity before the boisterous sounds of brawl encouragement, jumps up on the railing, seeing the person-made circle separating the brawling high-school graduates from everyone else.

“You dirty North Valley-”

“It was time somebody got you off your high Valleyard horse!”

Vince jumped back down and slithered through the crowd until he was right at the circumference of the circle, and witness a dark-redhead haymaker the white, knocking him to the ground. “You two! Stop!” He ordered, rail-flip vaulting over the shoulders of the one in front of him so that he could stand between the two footballer-sized teens/young adults, and managing to push them both to far sides of the circle.

Though most of the same, unrelated people who cheered on the fight became silent following this new development, alleged cliques belonging to either of the two instigators orchestrated their own sets of jeers over the conclusion without sheer decisiveness. Hayley could be seen watching this on top of another part of the guardrail, though she had to contend with a couple of unhappy
people after she accidentally fell over and smacked two on their upper backs.

“What’s this about, huh? School rivalry? Is that it?” Vince asked the both of them.

“Not only! This guy drilled with me a damn needle!” The white-haired one replied.

“I sure as Hell didn’t! You’re the one who shocked me!” The redhead shouted in turn.

“Why you-” The white one held up a fist and dashed towards him again.

“Why you!” The latter repeated to spite him, also copying the charge.

But in that instant, Vince saw something(s) that made him have a realization. Immediately he got in their way again, holding open hands to both of their faces. “Stop it, I said!” He demanded more insistently.

They both stopped just before they ran into the palms.

“What happened before contact? Were you guys crowded together? Both of you received no small amount of nudges and bumps, right?” Vince inquired.

“Well naturally; look how many people are here!” The red mane acknowledged.

“Of course.” He told him. Then he swiftly turned to the white. “And why are you carrying chest pads?” He points to the backpack behind him, with one zipper partially open to reveal the curled cords of the tool.

“No, you fucking oaf! My Quirk softens or accelerates the impacts of central organs and systems. If I target the wrong person, I don’t want them dying from my mistake!” He notes.

“What about you? Why the acupuncture needles, and why are they hanging behind your ribcage?” Vince confronted the redhead then, gesturing to the notable red handles.

“My Quirk generates gravitons on low-kg objects. I put them under my arms so I can easily equip them when necessary, like this!” He proceeds to whip them out incredibly quickly, just as he said he could.

“My ass! That’s how you stabbed me in the back!” The former retorted violently.

“My bad, how about I hit your eye this time?” The latter returned equally, brandishing the needle in his right hand in such a manner.

“Enough! You guys backed into each other before you both started the scuffle, yes!?” Vince queried one last time.

“They both recalled.

“Then it was an accident. The stars lined up, and you both just suffered nuisances. That is no cause for violence. Now, if it’s brand loyalty, if it is a matter of determining whether the Trojan Warrior or the Grizzly Bear is superior, then let’s let Vanevery’s numbers spell it out for all of us, huh?” Vince had them consider.

The red and white hair both looked at Vince, then each other, and nodded.
“Good. So let’s shake on it, enjoy these last few minutes before we take on what Vanevery has for us. Lord knows, we all need to save our energy for just that.” Vince gestured at the middle ground in front of him, where the two instigators were intending to meet hands.

But just as they made contact, familiar trouble struck again.

“Ow! He did it again! A needle in his sleeve!” The white quickly retreated his hand.

“Says you! You must have a shocking-gum stick stuck behind your palm! Goddamnit!!” The red massaged his own limb too.

Just like that, the two were at it again, despite Vince’s peaceful protests. The latter tried getting in the way again, but then the redhead utilized his Graviton Gift on his dog tags, forcing him by his neck away for the time being.

“Get out of my way.” A new, also feminine, voice dictated, shoving some people aside, and revealing herself - a rather short young woman in green and white (with some orange accents) fitness gear, distinct from her back-pigtailed deep burgundy hair - stomped into the circle. “You there! Hold onto the whitey! I’ll pull these guys apart myself!” She ordered Vinnie.

Vince accepted, performing a standing switch to get behind the whitehair and hold him back by his waist, while she tore the other redhead away by pulling on his collar with one hand. The other hand, she used to give him a shiner-worthy right hook, which also knocks him down.

“Get back now!” She orders Vince again. Once he does, She then gestures upward with a talon grip, which causes pillars made out of crystal to rise, breaking through the concrete pavement and trapping the man in a makeshift prison. She makes a similar restraint for the other guy once he gets up, immobilizing him as well.

“Thanks for the help.” Vince walks up to her, offering a handshake.

She merely looks his way with a smug smile, and low-fiving the palm instead. Vinnie left his hand open for a bit in awkwardness before retracting it. “I appreciate that you tried to do something before I got here. But I don’t think Our God’s good graces are what these silly fools deserve.” She quipped.

“Say that to my face, you teensy bitch!” The whitehair yelled.

She aggressively stared his way. “Gladly, feckin’ eejit!”

“Hold on.” Vince called for silence. He then walks over to a part of the circle, finding a small item on the ground. He glimpses over to the male redhead. “Sir, this came out of your mouth.” He holds it close to his eyes so that he could discern it.

“Must have been a tooth. I know I saw that fly out of him when I gave him that shiner-worthy puck.” The lady grinned, shaking her right hand.

“Nah, my tongue feels all of my teeth.” The subject inspected.

“Really now? Must be losing the hardness of my knuckles. Geez, going soft feels awful!” She remarked, with some singsong preoccupation.

“Your right, this isn’t a tooth, though it is colored white and shaped kind of like one.” Vince stated, still observing the strange object. The female redhead came up to also view it.
“Oh right! That’s my monitor!” The other guy identified.

Vince and the woman looked at him with confusion. “Monitor?”

“Right! Wait, you guys didn’t get a monitor? It’s supposed to allow the techies in Vanevery’s control room keep track of our vitals.” He briefly exposited.

They shook their head. “Everybody else, did you get these monitors?” Vinnie looked to the crowd for collective answers.

All of the bystanders looked between each other, with the critical consensus unanimously claiming “[N]o, they didn’t get it”.

“Well, I got one of those monitors.” The whitehair asserted, moving his tongue on it to ensure it was still there.

“Show us.” The lady walked up to him, holding out her hand.

The man’s antipathy returned. “No way.” He spat.

“Fork it over!” She yelled. She then moved her clawed hand up further, causing the already-raised pillar to creep higher, pinching his chin. From there, she clamped on his cheeks, forcing him to spit out the monitor, which she caught. She then brought it close to Vince. “Nobody but them got these. What’s that say?” She asked him.

“Hold it there.” Vinnie instructs this time. She complies, and when he moves his white node until it makes contact, both of them feel a sting until they pull them away. “The monitors are reacting to each other.” Vinnie takes out a karambit and cuts through the node. “What good is a vital monitor if there’s no transmitter in it? Nobody’s receiving the information without that.” He reacted after observing the no-show of said technology.

The lady gets close to see it as well. She points to a square piece within the structure. “What’s that part there? It’s the only one like it.” She asks.

“That’s a biosensor. That’s what would find the information. But there would be several of them, because making a multisensor for a device of this size would not be too strong given our processors right now.” Vince explained. “So this inspects one, and only one of our systems. But which one?” He wondered.

“Oh that answer is clear. As any sunny day can attest to be.” She asserted, gripping her node hard in one hand and patting his shoulder, while his hand was still holding the dissected one. They both felt another bout of pain at the direct areas. “It doesn’t matter where we touch; if we make any contact at all, it elicits a reaction. While we hold it, it must be taking in and giving out response data from every neuron in our bodies, changing them accordingly until it doesn’t need to. There’s no shortage of artificial compositions of proteins and lipids that could create a channel for that transmission.” The lass declared.

“Ah, that’s smart.” Vince took a beat. “But it means Vanevery’s admission team did this.” He put two and two together.

“Obviously as well. My question is, ‘how’d they know they’d come in contact?’ There’s six-hundred of us. Even if they made certain they’d come on the same day, that’s no guarantee thatn they’d meet directly.” The woman stomped her node into dust.

“Unless...” Vince points to the tents, formed thirty minutes ago.
“Right!” She points at him, then over to the two, still imprisoned instigators. “You two - placement numbers right now!”

“257/258.” They both stated, looking to each other upon finding out they were to be placed side-to-side in the Common.

“Of course you guys bumped into each other, then.” Vinnie deadpanned, tossing the cut-apart node away.

“Well, that’s the who, what, when, where, and how.” She noted.

“All we’re missing is why.” He looked at her.

But before they could wonder or investigate any further, a cleared line was being made to the circle within the Oval. Two suited people were walking said runway down to them - one blond woman leading the charge, and a blue-skinned one in tow.

“Misters Jeffrey Lane and Paulie Dexter, for your incredibly non-heroic actions presented here today, Vanevery University has decided to reject your admissions at this time.” The woman asserted nonchalantly.

“What!? You’ve got to be kidding!” The redhead yelled aloud.

“Yeah! You tricked us! You made us fight!” The white mane seconded.

She held up her hand, looking a little ticked. “Silence! We didn’t make you come to blows; you both decided to do all of that yourselves! We wanted to see if you had the will not to. But neither of you tried to resolve your differences peacefully.” She countered.

“This ain’t right!” The white yelled back.

“Tell me, Mr. Dexter; if a villain planted one of our fancy little nodes onto you and a stranger and then bumped that person into you, causing the same reaction, are you going to immediately punch their lights out?” The suit suggested.

“How was I to know, then?” Paulie inquired.

“You’re not going to try and find out? Not only are you aggressive, but not investigative? That does not paint an image of a Pro Hero for everybody to look up to!” She answered. “Revoked! Both of you! And that’s final.” She stated with certainty.

“Damnit!” Jeff cursed.

The woman then looked sternly at Vince and the young lady. “Which one of you formed those crystal pillars?” She gestured to them.

The deep-red-purple-head held her right hand with some worry, but ultimately came forward. “I-I did, ma’am.” She admitted.

“May I ask for your name?” The other lady extended.

“Jane Hanaway.” She identified herself.

The blond woman then gave a slight beam. “What’s with the nervousness? Were you afraid of using your Quirk on non-protected grounds?” She implied.
“W-well...” Jane eyed the ground.

“Relax. We know you did it to keep the peace. You are exempt.” The suit mandated.

Jane sighed relievingly. “Thank you, ma’am.”

“No issue, just free them.” She then looked at Vince. “And you are?”

“Vincent Teshima.” He answered.

“Of course you are.” The woman stated, then looking at the monitor he discarded. She stared at him again, making Vinnie reel back slightly, as if he might’ve made a mistake in investigating too thoroughly. But instead, she finally leaves. “The rest of you, all five-hundred-ninety-eight of you, are six minutes off from the most difficult job interview you will ever undertake... Good luck on the Second Review.” She announced, beckoning her companion to follow her exit trajectory.

Jane dares not look away from the suits, throwing a clawed hand down, causing the crystal pillars imprisoning Jeff and Paul to fall back down.

Whistles could then be heard; Vanever security came to safely escort the rejected off the Commons. A city labor pair also came, using their Quirks to restore the ground as a result of Jane’s pillar damage.

As the civil discord died down, everyone shook off the drama, and were getting into their coordinated placements, awaiting the preliminary convocation.

“Well, it seems the scariest moment really is always just before you start. Agreed?” Jane looked over to Vinnie and quipped.

Vince returned his smile and looked over to her as well. “Stephen King?”

“Good catch. Big fan of his novels.” She crossed her arms approvingly.

“I loved reading Shawshank.” Vinnie concurred.

“Indeed.” Jane refocused. “You’re pretty handy with that wacky technology, moreso than most Pro Heroes ordinarily are.” She literally pointed out.

“Well, I did have a telecommunications engineering Summer job. I doubt I was anything really special, though.” Vince explained.

“And I was busy waiting tables at one breakfast diner.” She smiled.

“How about you, though? You seem to know the humanoid body, and what it can produce or give off pretty well.” Vinnie acknowledged.

“Ah, unlike yours, that’s actually nothing. Really focused on my anatomy studies during HS. Would think to be a doctor once I’m done helping save the world and all that.” The deep-redhead exposited.

“Keep to that fallback. It’s an impressive ambition. I wish I could do more than Paramedics and first aid, myself.” Vince looked intrigued.

“Hm, if you say so, I will.” She tilted her head in approval.

“I appreciate that. But, why would you trust my word so easily?” He seemed pleasantly curious
with the accepted encouragement.

“Not showing what your Quirk was this whole time? Familiar with what only Logistical Units would really know? Respect my knowledge more than my Quirk? Clearly, you’re someone who believes anyone can do something miraculous even when they are surrounded by people of many different spectrums. And that’s... Not a bad thing.” Jane elaborated.

“I’m glad you think so.” Vince was very honored by her words.

“Of course, I know you have a Quirk. And when you use it, I’ll be there to see it.” She winks at him before departing for her spot in the Oval.

Vince grinned, heading over to his own placement.

Five minutes later, everyone had found their positions and stopped their banter once a podium was set up in front of Worcester City Hall. The two suits that were seen rejecting the brawlers from earlier flanked the oak platform.

Though everyone could tell no one walked to the microphoned stump, another suited woman - tall, hazel-haired, fair-skinned, and branded at the forehead with a Norwegian Viking mark, stood up from behind it one instant later!

“Where’d she come from!?” A feminine, stray voice cried out.

The speaker pulled out one index card from her chest pocket and moved the malleable amplifier closer to her. “Good morning, one and all Vanever student-hopefuls! How are all of you this fine morning?” She announced.

They all looked between each other, murmuring and giving a so-so reception to the query.

“Well, we hope it only gets better!” The lady clears her throat. “‘Who am I?’ you may ask? A fair inquiry, for this institution had recently faced a change of administration on the road to this upcoming academic year. I am, at least for this coming pair of semesters, Vanever University’s Headmaster, Nina Dysart!” She distinguished herself.

A lot of the participants could be heard gasping or gossiping about the revelation.

Well, looks like my hours spent reading up about Jarl Krogh have gone moot. Vince looked on, slightly agitated. But unless this college only found another unrelated Scandinavian...

“Now, I’m sure you all feel honored to have been approved for our Second Review of your potential. But rest assured, the honor is all ours for you to have arrived here!” She holds up two fists of excitement.

Finally, the crowd seemed much more enthusiastic.

“That’s more like it! So, before we truly begin the Second Review, let’s run some statistics, shall we? You all know very well that you are among roughly four-thousand-two-hundred applicants for this upcoming school year. Too many to invoke our usual secondary assessment for admission on one day, so we had split up this pool into six-hundred students to appraise, on each day of the week. And with this being the third of seven, you know that twelve-hundred have already tested their mettle so far. May I... Inform you, on how they all did?” She teasingly questioned them all.

A pleasant crowd turned into a curious one.
“Hahah, I thought so! So, let’s begin.” Headmaster Nina cleared her throat. “As of right now, Vanevery has hosted the Second Review Week for roughly Fifty-seven hours; more specifically, three-thousand-four-hundred-twenty-two minutes, and adding in five more seconds, to say this sentence. And in that time frame, well, here are all the students that, unfortunately, did not meet our standards.” She motioned to one of her staff (the blue-skinned suit), who planted a holographic projector onto the ground to her left. Whirring on, the device then showed, in opaque blue luminescence, mugshots of all of the rejected participants. The first one read “Jeffrey Lane”, much to everyone’s surprise. After a few seconds, it moved onto “Paulie Dexter”, without as much shock as first time.

But then, the projector’s transition between shots went like fireworks; thirty stock photos were shown per second. And as the seconds ran on, so too did everyone’s smiles.

We always knew such a high amount of people don’t reach these Ivy League-types, but seeing all of them right in front of us... Vince thought, as he sifted through the footage and found at least three of his fellow graduates from Winchester on the list. Jeez...

“Oh-!”

Vince looked towards the exclamation; despite it being amidst a sea of similar murmurs, he could easily correlate it to a certain someone. He found it to be from Hayley, who was covering her mouth. She obviously saw someone she knew who was given the boot as well.

After a little more than twenty-nine seconds, the projector stops on the last face, showing it for a second before dissipating into nondescript blue light.

“If any of you were keeping track or realized the variables, then you would or will know that the number of applicants that flashed before you was eight-hundred-seventy-two, which is accurate as of eight minutes ago. That means that only three-hundred-thirty have cinched admission so far... And five-hundred-ninety-eight still have a chance in the next fifteen hours.” The Headmaster, whether she was trying or not, seemed very venomous.

The feeling filled the air around each of the potential students; some even began backing away from the stage with how forthcoming (say “brutal”) the Headmaster portrayed herself.

Said Headmaster prepared to go on, pivoting away from the projector flanking her... Even though it continued to show more pictures. Not other applicants, however; instead, they were treated to found-footage graphic depictions of dead civilians lying on the ground, beneath cackling Villains, lots of fragmented infrastructure, and the less-than-absolutely-confident Pro Heroes confronting it all. “Now that we’re past those, pfft, pointless formalities, let’s get down to the nitty and gritty. You all enrolled into this one of Top 5 Hero Universities in our country, most likely to become one with one of five major divisions - Combative, Defensive, Supportive, Rescue, or Logistical.” Her words coincided well with the selection of documentation images, though the latter did not idealize the occupations at all.

The upsetting recordings forced Vince to close his eyes for a few moments out of horror.

“That takes guts, don’t get me wrong. But many of you all are rather young folk, who will find that your opinions over matters can change, meh, with the drop of a coin.” She pulls out a quarter and lets it fall out of her hand, hitting the stage. “So, before we conduct the Second Review for Day Three, let me ask all of you, straight and in-person.” She pulled the microphone out of the podium, allowing her to step out from behind it and show her entire person to the crowd. “Do you want to be a Pro Hero?” She questioned slowly.
Everyone anticipated the query, but the delivery still pierced everyone’s skulls. But nobody had the time to do anything but process it.

“Ooop, going too long! Silly me, you all should be on the testing grounds now!” She slapped her knee and laughed for a few seconds before refocusing. “Well, time to get you all there! Oh right, I should tell you where you will be going so we can tell how you’d do! Your destination... Is Veil, California.” She flatly announced.

Vince’s eyes widened, as did many others’.

One of the security at the event proceeded to clap his hands together, open-book style. Suddenly, the outside thirds of the Oval stirred to life, coming out of the ground and forcing those standing on them to slide down towards the middle... And make the middle more compact to accommodate all of the participants. Vince and Jane, from opposite sides, join their potential peers and colleagues, including Hayley.

Nina then formed a rectangle with her thumbs and index fingers and moved the opening close to her right eye. From her point-of-view, she could see each and every one of the astonished men and women. “Nothing like putting you in the middle of what you’ll be dealing with, hm?” She stated before blinking and crushing the gap made by her hands. When she reopened them, everyone within the Oval had disappeared. The same person who uprooted the pavements gestured so that they returned to where they once were. “Good luck to all of you.” She quietly said to no one, without any of the quippiness from before.
Genesis of the Initiation

Chapter Summary

The Headmaster of Vanevery established something very clear in the previous section - the second review of the application process to enter this particular Festival of Five university was not going to be anything like the other assessments the Pro Hero Hopefuls have ever faced before... Is it a sign of things to come? No, not just the immediate things...

In an otherwise quiet town called Veil, bedlam was afoot. Bodies were hunched over in shock and pain, lying on the ground unconscious (or dead), or flying through the skies; either because they were sent that way or they naturally worked that little Quirky way. As the Villainous onslaught continues, no Pro Hero seems to be in sight, which is a true rarity when it comes to how the United States-contracted personnel often handle the nation’s elevated crime. And a tragedy, for all of the helpless citizens and ineffective police population continue to be ragdolled around by them.

“This is sure to mark our triumphant return!” Tendency, after hooking five cops at once with so much impact that they are sent flying into brick building walls, arrogantly asserted.

“And it will no doubt bring all of you upstarts up America’s Most Wanted - the only list that would ever matter for guys and gals like us!” Titan added on, looking over to the three Villains in tow, firing fireballs, ice javelins, and rockets along with her metal spikes. “Yeah! No one is going to fucking stop us!” She boasted further, this time working with her underlings to level a bank building. When it finally came crashing down, all those responsible let out a yell.

But celebrations were certainly not unanimous for all making their debuts here.

 Abruptly, an xy-plane above a large stretch of asphalt summons almost six-hundred men and women onto the scene. Those unprepared for the levitation fell on their faces and posteriors once the teleportation completed, like Hayley. Those that adapted or anticipated the fall resisted such a demeaning fate, such as Vince and Jane, who took up a Safety Tap and Three-Point landing respectively.

All of the Second Review participants got to see that Vanevery’s Headmaster was not lying to them when she asserted that they would be brought in the middle of the chaos.

“Shit, she’s crazy!” One student in the middle of the mushed, rough circle announced.

“This is awful!” Another hollered, gawking at the hazes and fires.

“Take us back! This is too much!” A guy yelled.

Says who? Vince thought to himself, instead rushing out of the swarm to get further into the fray, looking for any distressed souls in need of extrication.

“Ain’t he always the damn standout!” Jane could be heard expressing her surprise (or lack thereof) over seeing him take the first lead, with some other determined ones following or matching. She takes charge over the ones still hesitating. “Hey! Why all the gawking? This is our
test! Wanna be Pro Heroes? Then act like ‘em! Show these Villains who’s boss!” She yelled to
them, before rallying the first-responders. It seems her inspiration was key for the rest to begin
following suit, including Hayley, who watched the bulk go on ahead before doing the same.

Two Villains run out of a take-out restaurant, having turned the kitchen into a makeshift bomb -
confirmed by the detonation seconds later.

“Ah, that was awesome!” The one with some sort of lizard’s tail gave a few excited leaps
announced after the detonation.

“What will we set fire to next?” The other, equipped with sunglasses, looked around at the other
stores on the large street. His concentration breaks, however, when he hears the sounds of many
clamoring from around the corner. “What the Hell’s that?” He inquired.

His partner didn’t need to answer, for the legion of aspiring Pro Heroes coming towards them
answered it for him. “Holy shit!” The tailed one said regardless. They both tried to run off from the
mob, but a SR participant manifested two psychic boomerangs from her hands and threw them at
the backs of the duo, causing them to fall over. While most of the legion moved forward, a splinter
faction of roughly thirty continued to apprehend the dastardly duo, rescue the staggering citizens,
and scan the still-standing buildings for any other hiding unfortunates.

Vince could be seen dousing a large wad of gauze with some disinfectant from a first-aid bottle,
in front of an innocent, whose necktie has now been reconfigured into a makeshift cleave gag.
“Sharp inhale.” The younger one instructed, before revealing a bullethole on the right side of his
patient’s chest, and rammed the cloth into it.

The man let out a muffled scream, biting down badly on his accessory.

“That’s going to stop bleeding, but you’re going to need to replace it the second you get out. And
then for the next few days until it closes.” Vince checked his phone’s screen, with the top section
revealing no bars. “Damn, no signal. And with the transformers toppled, no landlines.” He looked
back towards the suit. “You been here long?” Vinnie questioned.

“As long as any other ten-year resident.” He answered, straining while pulling down the
accessory from his maw.

“What sort of cell system does the city use?” Vince questioned again.

“Junction boxes on top of each building have a subsection that provides residential service. But
without power, there’s no point in accessing them.” The citizen explained.

“Can they work an isolated power supply?” He asked further.

“I believe so...” The interrogated squinted his eyes.

“Then don’t worry about that. You just sit tight inside this convenience store. I’ll get to the top
and call for extraction.” He patted the suit on his clavicle and ran further up the building, finding
the box on the roof. He opens it up, to find the extra-layer signal amplifier. It was without
electricity as the man had described, but after Vince smacks the hub with his hand, it strangely
began whirring with activity once again. Vince connected his smartphone to the machine, restoring
his bars and makes the call for 911.

“911, what is your emergency?” A receptionist greeted and asked.

“City under attack! Where’s the backup? Rescue choppers?” He bounced back.
“Alright sir, help is on the way. Where would you like them placed?” The desk operator inquired.

“I don’t know this place. Just trace this call and find out that way.” Vinnie suggested.

“Sir, your call is placed on a military-grade encryption. It will take some time to find your cell’s location using your recommendation.” She answered.

“That’s strange, my phone is a regular mod, not from the Navy. Why’s it so secure?” Vince refocused. “Whatever it takes to find it, do it. My aimless wandering will only take longer to bring help.” Vince responded.

“Very well, sir. Please hold.” She went into music mode.

Oh no. Just because I might eventually know where helis will be placed, doesn’t mean everyone else will! Maybe attach some speakers- No, that’s not deep enough. Damn, if only an Amplifier-quirk user was wandering around! Vince thought.

As it turns out, a bass boom could be heard at ground level just as Vinnie stopped thinking. A small group of SR participants began scoping these premises, with one of them sending a Villain flying with a huge audio blast.

“Nice one, Nick!” His cohort bumped bottom-fists with the acouticist.

“Of course it was nice; know who you’re talking to?” Nick pumped a fist afterwards.

“Well, Dedham Nine does call you DJ Siren.” A second slapped his back playfully.

In unison for the act, Nick proceeded to air-disk-scratch while the others boogied for a brief amount of time.

“Hey! You guys!” He announced to them.

The three young students looked up to find Vincent, and immediately took a defensive set of stances towards him.

“Who are you? Friend or foe?” One asked.

“Friend. Vincent Teshima, if you must know. I’m trying to contact emergency services.” Vince justified.

“Don’t bother; lines are down.” The second next to Nick acknowledged, though all three were lowering their stances in assurance.

“I restored one line. Calls already on hold. I just need an announcer for when they can triangulate our location and send rescue choppers there.” Vinnie gestured back behind him.

“You can do that?” Nick inquired.

“Yeah, I can.” He confirmed.

The trio continued to look at him without a response for a little while. Inexplicably, Nick then turned to one of his colleagues with a sort of bewilderment, though it was quickly extinguished and they all gazed back at the roof. “Okay. How can we help?” Nick queried.

“I told you; I need a speaker user. You have cord accommodations somewhere, right? USB-G?”
Vince inquired.

Nick looked to the side before answering, by rolling up his sleeve and revealing the port on his right shoulder.

“Excellent! Then you can use your Bass-Boom to announce it to the other participants so that they know where to bring citizens and apprehended Villains! You two can keep him safe while he waits for the location confirmation! Come on up here!” Vince motioned to them.

The three complied, with Vince quickly hooking up Nick to his phone and box. Nick gave a quick shiver at the sudden rush of electricity going through him.

“I’m sorry you’ll have to hang back like this, but I’m sure that if Vanevery University is in fact keeping a careful eye, you’re going to get serious Hero points. I’ll go bust some Villain heads and save some victims in your stead.” Vince bowed in respect and went for the edge.

“Hold on, we might need to communicate with you if the Villains get wise and put the heat on us.” One of Nick’s friends warned.

“Got a spare phone?” Vince turned back and suggested.

“Better.” He moves to him and pokes his index finger into his left ear.

Vince feels a sort of injection and instinctively flicks his hand away. “Ow! What was that?” He interrogated, almost irritatingly.

“Part of my Quirk - Microtransmission. The tip of my distal phalanxes can fire off really small audio receivers. I can use them to monitor sonographic activity in the vicinity (and I know which ones I’m listening to as the one I focus on will be emitting a glowing-red silhouette in my eyes), but ones from my index allows others to hear the same way. They basically work by only producing waves that travel through your meatus, so only you will hear it, though I’ll hear everything including you. Can be an issue if I focus on it when you’re about to play headset music.” He rubs his own left ear. “Anyways, Nick, Jake, and myself - Mel - all have one. If we need to speak to you personally, the keyword is ‘oversell’. If you need to speak to one of us, the keyword is ‘Jobber’.” Mel instructed.

“Wrestling smarks, are we?” Vince grinned; even deeper when he saw their smug smiles in response, and then jumped off the roof. After rolling through his landing and continued onward, he immediately thought of something, and held his ear. “Jobber.” He stated.

“Need us already? What is it?” Mel asked.

“This isn’t permanent, right?” Vince questioned.

“Nah, the bud organically disintegrates after roughly eight hours. Worry not for any thoughts of stalking. Into girls anyway.” Mel explained.

“Thanks for the info.” Vince releases his ear.

“Mel, I must ask again, is that how we were able to overhear the activities in last semester’s Beta sorority at BU?” Nick’s voice asked.

“Alright Nick, you got me. But they are at fault for taking your backpack by mistake during that fitness rally. I put that there in case real thieves tried to take it!” Mel defended.
“Hold on, you got to hear girl talk from BU?” Jake sounded astonished.

_Oh brother._ Vince closed his eyes in concentration, eventually finding out how to clear focus away from the transmitter and channel it towards his next activity.

Which wasn’t a big problem, as the activity was closing in on him too.

Vinnie was heading for a T-section on the street, going for the left, until he saw a pair of SR participants coming from the right, charging across his view.

“Get her!” One of them boasted, charging in with a collapsible spear.

Five times quicker than them, though, a flurry of small projectiles flew from the left, with several of them pelting the duo, lodging themselves into their foreheads. The impact lifts their feet off the ground, sending them crashing onto the floor back-first.

Vince’s eyes widened at the attack, and immediately rolls behind a cab on the sidewalk, just in time to avoid contact with the perpetrator; a woman of steel-plated complexion, with the very same needles in between the fingers of her hands. Vinnie takes a quick glimpse through the vehicle’s cracked windows. Titan! He bows down back quietly.

“Stupid kids, pretending they could be Pro Heroes...” The Villainess claimed, egotistically standing over them before looking down Vince’s street.

She propels titanium needles at various forces and sizes at her enemies. To top it off, her body is completely covered by a generation of those needles highly-pressured into a flexible layer of armor; no way anybody can hurt her externally... When Vince hears her begin tossing around debris in search of other victims away from his own hiding pile, he thinks it safe to look back up to think of a diversion or escape.

His mistake, for then Titan, without looking back, whips her right hand behind her, causing a Titanium Needle to manifest and fly out at Armor-Piercing velocity. Given the surprise and relatively short distance, the most Vince could have done was suffer a grazing along the side of his skull (and possibly lose the top of his ear), rather than his right eye.

“Ugh, fucking rusty with backshots...” Titan commented.

Vince indeed reacted a tenth of a second too late, but miraculously, the needle flew past his right, trimming some of his hair above his ear, and then sticking itself to the brick wall behind him. With his cover blown, Vince proceeds to sprint away into a side alley on the street.

“Get back here!” The Villainess violently turns around and fires more needles at him until he fully disappears around the perceived corner. She charges into the section all the same.

Meanwhile, within another section of the town of Veil, a trio of aspiring Pro Heroes were roaming about, saving every citizen they can find, protecting each other and the enlarging group all the while. It consisted of Hayley, a purple-haired woman who could produce sentient clones of herself using the iron in her body, and a man with volcanic veins, who can generate/consume JP8 jet fuel from his epidermis, which he ordinarily uses for flying and direct-contact explosive blows. Since forming their little team, the number of rescues has multiplied, from five pedestrians to ten, and then from ten to twenty.

“Ned, give us a little blowtorch, huh?” All six duplicates of the cloning lady (including herself) simultaneously requested.
“Coming right up.” Ned proceeded to take a knee before a set of metal basement doors, snapping his fingers to produce a pointed blue flame on the tips of his right index and middle fingers, and directs down the vertical middle of a tipped over car.

The trio is in the middle of saving at least their thirtieth, who have decided to hide themselves from the chaos by moving to the cellar of a liquor store. However, some of the Villains had destroyed the ground-level section, and a vehicle by chance has turned over on top of the doors they went through, trapping them in there.

“Got it!” Ned acknowledged, as he saw the two halves give and fall over on their respective sides away from each other.

“Very good. Reina?” Hayley turned to the six.

“Our turn. Heave!” Three Reinas on each side turned the two parts of the car away from the cellar doors. Once they were removed, two of them proceeded to pull back the metal sheets. “Hi! You’re safe now! Come on out!” They waved at the couple down below.

With some help from the other four, the duo returned to ground level. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.” Reina, having returned all of her clones back into herself, grinned.

Ned then brought himself close to Hayley’s ear. “You know, helping these people is all well and good, but we can’t keep lugging them around with us or they’ll be too tough to keep safe.” He cautioned.

“You’re right. But without extraction points, emergency vehicles, stuff like that, we can’t get them out of here.” Hayley shook her head.

“I can. Two at time. To the edge of this burg, have them hide in an abandoned gas station until help arrives. It should only take me ninety seconds to two minutes to and from.”

“You can think you can slip under the radar?” Reina also entered the conversation. “Wouldn’t want flying Villains chasing after you and discovering the hostage depot.”

“I reckon I can. Just gotta hover low.” Ned nodded.

“Hold on though - two ain’t good enough; the most unfortunate among them have to wait about twenty minutes for rescue? Where will they stay out of sight?” Reina stated.

“Well...” Ned looked discouraged.

Hayley took a closer look at the cellar. She noticed something and pointed. “Hey! Look at all those fishnets.” She noted.

“Yeah, Veil sits about four miles from the McCloud River - great fishing spot. What about it?” Ned shrugged at the revelation.

“Ned, you blockhead! How about carrying half, or even all of them at once, inside a large roll of that?” Reina reiterated.

“That’ll work!” He then went to some of the thirty-one. “Alright, all of you. I’m going to take you out of this hub, where we can arrange for emergency services. I can carry pretty much all of you inside of a net that the ladies are pulling out of the cellar. Does that sound good?”
The rescues all murmur in agreement.

Within a few minutes, the three SR participants were successful in forming a double-layered net bag, fit to carry the evacuees.

“Don’t come back unless you know they are safe back there, okay?” Reina reminded.

“Don’t worry.” Ned cupped all four corners of the net in his two hands. “You all settled in?” He requested confirmation. When they all agreed, he proceeded to take flight, jet fuel being consumed underneath his soles and out of the town. “Good luck, ladies!” He announced before fully departing from their view.

“Help us!”

The remaining duo looked towards the source of the new voice. A brief trek through a secluded alleyway later, they had found it. Up on a three-storey roof (which Reina gave herself a three-person boost to observe), a mother and her two children were constantly ducking in safety from a Villain firing circular sound pulses at them, such that the upper arc would fly above them if they crouched. The true fear, however, came from the lower semicircle, for when that collided with the building itself, the affected bricks were perfectly indented more and more. In just a few more blasts, the corner of the building will topple towards the street... And the parent and children will go with it.

“Hahaha! Now what will you do?” The Villain arrogantly inquire, firing another circular pulse of sound.

The latest attack caused both to cup their ears. “Shoot, it’s a Sound Semblance! Special sound pulses formed in geometric shapes. Though it’s at its most devastating on the outline of those shapes, the areas outside of them still reverberate painful soundwaves. The family up there is alright because they are within the circles he’s firing.” Reina, now back to herself, noted.

“They won’t be alright for long; the section they’re on is going to collapse from all of those soon!” Hayley countered.

“I can go up there and save them, one in the arms of each of my clones. But not if he keeps firing blasts where I’m going!” Reina then took up some pieces of gravel. “Here, Radar Lady, throw these at him, and then hide in the cellar we opened earlier when he chases after you. That’ll buy me time to evacuate those people!”

“Radar Lad-” Oh right, I told her that was my Quirk. Hayley accepts the makeshift stones reluctantly as she watches Reina take another corner at another building.

“Please, somebody help!” The same mature voice, linked to the mother, repeated.

“Nobody’s coming, woman!” The Villain countered, firing yet another.

Hayley covered her ears once more, but recovered quick enough to locate Reina, who peeked around one store’s corner, giving the former the okay to begin distracting. Hayley clenched deeply on the rubble and was prepared to throw, but then she hesitated.

The slight wait had allowed the Villain to fire off another pulse, and the piece of the building began jerking down, though several rebars kept it from falling completely.

Hayley saw the cost of her falter, and then saw Reina, who motioned her to hurry up. The former gazed back at the fractured stone in her hand. No, I can’t do this... She thought before letting it fall
to the floor.

The Villain’s hands went up once more.

*Not if-*!

His palm was almost fully stretched out in front of him.

*I must do this!*

Hayley stepped out of her cover, with floating mirrors seemingly coming out of her clavicles. As two of them floated in front of her, she then made a horizontal peace sign with her right hand. Both outstretched fingers produced laser beams that seamlessly bounced off the reflective panels, concentrating back into a more powerful bolt that pelted the Villain in the head.

“Ggk-!” The Villain grunted, even being knocked over.

Reina looked incredibly surprised by the Quirk being witnessed.

Hayley retreated behind the building so that it would take more than two corner-cuttings to find her. However, her mirror panels allowed her to see the threat still.

The Villain eventually got back up and violently whipped around in search of his attacker. “Where are you!?” He roared.

Seconds afterwards, Hayley fired off another bolt, with it again bouncing off the surface and hitting the Villain on the back.

“Show yourself!” He volatilely demanded.

This time, Hayley turned to the other corner, using two panels this time to fire off another laser bolt, with it now about to hit the Villain on the side of the head, though the latter blocked the projectile with his hand just in time.

“Get over here!!” The Villain finally lost patience and ran towards the alley where the attack came from. Hayley heard his violent footsteps and began fleeing the other way.

With the blackguard now gone, Reina had the freedom to scale the building’s more sound (unfortunate wording notwithstanding) walls to reach the family. “Hi! I’m here to get you three out of here.” Reina then produced three other clones of herself. However, the added weight shifted the balance of the deck again, and prompted them to take the family into all but one of their arms, and jumped to the safety of another roof close by. Hayley, what was that?

“Excuse me, everybody! SR-600, everybody there listening in?” An atmospheric tone resounded across Veil.

“What was that?” The woman practically bearhugging her children worriedly queried.

“I don’t know. But I don’t think it sounds like a bad guy.” One of Reina’s clones opined.

“I seriously hope you are listening. For I got news for you. And everybody that is in need of a rescue...” The echoing statement yelled.

Concurrently, Vince was continuing to flee Titan, making use of cat leaps, precision jumps on rails, and other parkour techniques to keep himself ahead of the Villain, who broke all of the obstacles in her path instead. Vince eventually found an apartment complex, which he grinned at as
he ran in.

“Hahah! Stupid fool! No way you can hide from me in there!” The Villainess exclaimed, breaking through the last steel fence in her way and seeing Vince head in there, firing another metal spike at him, which he ducks under, so the projectile lodges into the doorframe.

Vince runs through the floor, eventually hitting a dead end in the corridor, and running back, only to run into Titan, who fires another two spikes. Vince manages to dodge them in time, so that they puncture the brick wall instead. Vince then cuts a right up the staircase on one end, prompting Titan to follow. Again, he hits a dead end and must evade another small flurry of projectiles before he goes higher up. And higher, and higher.

Until he reaches the roof, running to the edge next to a power system, and seeing a close ceiling roughly thirty-five feet below. A little too high; might break my tibia. He cogitated, then turning back to find that Titan has completed the stairs as well. She fires two packs this time; the first time Vince escapes danger, but his hand is finally impaled into the system.

“DURGH!” Vince’s other hand immediately went to the spike in an attempt to pull it out, in vain as Titan slowly approached.

“No more running, insolent child. This ends now.” The Villainess asserted.

Vince, breathing deeply, gritted his teeth. “You’re right. It does end now.” He admitted.

“Hm, glad we do agree on something. But it doesn’t make you any less dumb.” Titan pried a dagger out of herself and readied to stab Vince through the forehead.

“Hold on! One thing first!” Vince held out his other hand in protest.

Titan humored the request, moving the tip of her spike to her other hand’s index.

“Why did you come back, hm? Didn’t you understand a bit about your mortality, despite your lethality? The clique you worked with, the Primordials. You went quiet just after that team disbanded. I wonder why? Was it because they all perished that day, except for you?” Vince fired a set of questions at the lady.

“Shut up, kid! You don’t know me!” Titan threw the same quill at his left side, nearly piercing his ear in intimidation.

“You did understand that day; how costly the life you lived could be. Why you’d never show up on an American radar again, especially now that the Pro Heroes these days are very game. So why now?” Vince continued.

“I said shut up!” The Villainess came close again, a needle touching Vinnie’s forehead.

“I’m offering you a second chance, Titan. The same one Fate seemed to hand you all that time ago. Prove you’re better than this, and even Villains can learn lessons. Nobody else here that’s alive has seen you - it’s the perfect chance to leave.” Vince beseeched.

Titan tilted her head at Vince with slight implication at accepting the offer. But then she took her hand to the impaling spike and twisting it, causing further palm pain for Vince. She laughed as she walked away a bit to monologue. “Hahah! This is what a Hero tells me, as he’s staring down Death itself!? How can you say such things without dying of humiliation?”

Vince stops wincing at the pain as she continued.
Titan turns back to him. “You’re a strange one, man. Brave for talking about my history, but cowardly for bargaining my safety for your life. Well guess what, boy - I’m feeling plenty safe as it is.” She asserted.

“Then why do you keep throwing the needles at my head?” Vince bounced back.

“Pardon?” The Villainess now seemed genuinely perplexed.

“Wait, don’t tell me. I think I know the answer.” Vince held up an index in reprieve. “Your best weapons are weaknesses! Someone can hurt you if they attack them the same certain ways they employ to hurt you! You fire the projectiles at our heads so that we never get that chance to exploit it!” He revealed.

“Yeah right. Even if that was true, how could you, a Quirkless, damage titanium? And even if you could damage that one, harming one would merely feel like a broken nail to me.” Titan cockily addressed, gesturing to the palm spike.

“Oh, I don’t doubt your pain tolerance, Titan. Such a Villain like yourself shouldn’t cry at anything short of a love tap. But how about thirty?” Vinnie suggested.

“‘Thirty’?” Then, the Villainess realized that he meant the spikes she fired off within the apartment complex.

“Titanium does not stand on its own well against very hot nitrogen. Look at that; the air - 78% nitrogen. It just needs a reaction to become purely on its own. And just what did you stick me with, and is behind me right now?” Vince asked one more question.

Titan’s eyes widened while her pupils shrunk; the emergency power system was behind Vinnie. And every wall she struck in an attempt to headshot him beforehand involved the camouflaged energy-monitor panels.

Vince gave a quick smile. “I gave you a chance.” He declared.

Immediately, the power system sent electrical waves, which began burning the metal, and causing excruciating pain to the bone within, causing Titan to fall on her side, clutching herself writhing. Despite being in the electric epicenter, Vince showed no discomfort, save for freeing himself from the box, and then jumping off the side of the roof where he saw the lower platform.

It was too high, as Vince had believed earlier, so he resorted to a karambit knife spun into his undamaged hand, digging its blade into the close wall to slow his descent until he could rolling land on the roof. Eventually, Titan’s screams drew to a close.

Vince unscrewed an emergency small bottle of vodka (from his parents’ personal stache), and used it as an intermediate disinfectant for his newly-inflicted wound, wincing again all the while before wrapping it in some spare bandages in his belt bag. What a test, this has been so far... Vince pondered.

“Oversell!” Mel could be heard.

Vince turned to his left ear. “Mel? What’s up?” He identified and queried.

“Emergency services is just a minute or two away from finding an evacuation spot. In the meantime, we saw a huge smoke and fire going on in the city’s south section. You think you can take a look? Could be tons of people in trouble.” He answered.
“Alright, I’ll see what I can do.” Vince finished up the brief conversation, climbing further up the building he was on to locate the presumed fire and begins running towards it.
The climax of the Second Review in Veil, California is upon us. Vinnie, Hayley, and Jane are in the middle of some very high stakes, same as their peers, and there's no certainty that as Hero hopefuls, they will succeed. But they are too far in to give up now, and the only direction left is forward.

At the aforementioned fire itself, it is revealed that the affected building was a gymnasium for the local public high school, once filled to the brim with people there for a pep rally before the sudden crisis began. Students and faculty as well as ordinary people (relatively, of course) thought that there would be safety in there once it became truly awry, but instead found the flames when one Incendiary Villain set it alight on a whim. Parts of said building’s ceiling and frame came down in response, rendering some of the regular exits inaccessible.

One inferno became especially violent at one of the corners of the stadium, due to several strings of flags and commemorative banners being focused there, which looked to spread to the polished-wood bleachers and wall cushions, had it not been for some timely oxygen starvation. This came at the hand of Jane, who used her Crystal Pillars to imprison the fires in a similar vein to how she restrained two enrolling dropouts earlier. She also revealed that though the Pillars needed to rise completely vertically out from the underground first, she could then fire off subsections from other directions as well, evident when she then created a lid by having one semicircle form horizontal branches meeting with the other side. “The lot of the fire’s contained, Paxton and Gonzales!” She confirmed, turning back to two others in her pack.

“Right!” They both acknowledged, rushing forward to an immobilized group of cheerleaders. The Brit’s movements brought a light hemisphere with him, known as Cleansing Hub, which was devoid of smoke and disintegrated ash within it, which revitalized the people from their hours inhaling haze. The Mexican, an Invoke-Intangible user, laid a hand on each of their shoulders, which made them (yes, along with their clothing), translucent, and they were able to rise up from being trapped underneath a fallen basketball hoop.

“Avoid the fires, fellow ladies. Your ethereal forms will feel enhanced temperatures under simulation of direct conduction. Hall exit is safe; we got through there, just go for that and wait for us to extract you.” The Latino girl cautioned.

“Thank you, misses and sir.” The four in all students showed gratitude before running to the safety point, prudently avoiding the torrents.

Jane looked around. “I think that was all of them. Let’s get out of here before all of this comes down on us.” She then made a megaphone with her hand. “Lang! We’re getting out now! Did you get those three you found free?”

“Oh, yeah I did.” A fourth, Heroic voice announced.

“Then get over here with them!” Gonzales requested.
“No problem.” The distant four arrived within view... With one holding a rail-pistol to Lang’s head, and the other two flanking behind him.

Jane, Paxton, and Gonzales’ eyes all widened.

“We’ve been noticing you’ve been giving those people some ability to quite literally walk out of here. We want that ability.” One of the hoodlums stated.

“And we’ll get it. Or your little friend here dies.” The gunman pushed the firearm’s barrel deeper into Lang’s cranium.

“Let him go!” Paxton, gripping onto his own pistol, demanded back at them. Gonzales had some of her throwing knives ready.

“You’re in no position to make requests!” The last of the outlaws countered.

Jane’s open hands began forming slowly into a claw to utilize her Crystal Pillars.

“Ah ah ah!” One of them noticed. “We know what you can do as well! Raise that hand, all spread out, nice and slowly, bitch!”

Shit... Jane complied.

“Other bitch, come and touch us.” The right flank added on.

“Just a touch?” Gonzales requested confirmation.

“Oh we’d like more, but here’s not-”

The three SR participants opposite them beamed lightly.

Lang’s ransomer suddenly collapsed, revealing a bloody hole in his torso.

“What the-!” One of the other two exclaimed.

Lang revealed his trick - Back-Elbow Blades. A purely straight, jagged bone impaled the primary hoodlum, but then Lang protruded a more paddle-batlike weapon and smashed it into the face of one on his left. He completed his spinning motion, aiming back elbow at the last one standing and firing the board at him at airsoft speeds, knocking him down and out too.

“Man, Reverse-Baraka, that shit’s bloody cool.” Paxton complimented with an inverted fighting game reference.

Lang coughed a bit, after inhaling more smoke than he intended to. “Now we can get out of here?” He considered.

“Of course!” They all asserted.

All four of them ran to the hallway exit, with Jane being the one to shut the doors and begin barricading it with her Crystal Pillars in order to prevent the travel of the fires. As the structures crept up, however, she took a small glimpse through the windows and saw the trio beginning to rise back up, helping each other all the same.

“Alright great! You all, fit to get out of here even more?” Gonzales spoke to the evacuated, who nodded.
“Then let’s go!” The other two said, before noticing that Jane still stood close to the doors. “Jane? What’s up?”

Jane looked back at them, then quickly back at her Pillars. There’s no way out but here... They’re Villains, right? They tried to kill Lang! But-! Jane’s eyes flared, forcing the crystals to collapse back down and busts open the doors again.

“Jane! What are you doing!?” Lang called out to her.

The three Villains only had the chance to see her coming at them; the next second, all three were booted to the blackened ground. Jane then formed small crystal mounds at their hands and then kicked at the stumps, leaving superstone restraints on them. “Come on, you pieces of shit! Not even you disgraces deserve to die so horribly, according to that Almighty Guy in the Sky!” She explained herself, before hoisting all of them onto her left shoulder and charged back behind the exit doors. When she finally made it back, Lang and Paxton shut the gym doors again. Jane dropped the men beside her and replaced the crystal pillar reinforcements.

“Well, that was something...” Gonzales scratched the back of her head.

“Let’s put that behind us, and get out of here.” Jane shook her own head.

“Um...” One of the earlier rescues muttered.

“What is it, miss?” Jane notices the cheerleader raising her hand. Her burned hand, which led to the former going to place some bottled water (which was still cold due to being iced before she arrived in Worcester) on top of it, followed by Ibuprofen and antibiotic-laced gauze rollings.

“Do we even know that there’s somewhere safe out there? Safer than here?” She spoke between her wincing at the treatment.

“Huh. I certainly don’t hear chaos outside, but that could just be the better Villains cleaning house, just as much chance as the rest of us helping out.” Paxton looked up, focusing his senses on the distant stimuli.

“Well how do we find out without risking the chance of being vaporized or something? These Villains are being led by some pretty top brass, mob boss-type crap, who’d see a window peek coming.” Lang reinterpreted the query.

The group all stood silent for a bit, and could hear frantic footsteps.

“Someone’s coming!” Gonzales stated, brandishing her first throwing knife again.

“Get ready, you three. Everyone else behind us, and be silent!” Jane ordered, coming to the front, preparing for whatever was around the other hall.

The footsteps resounded more and more in approach, until they finally stopped dead at the right and final corner before being visible in the corridor.

“We know you’re there!” Paxton yelled.

“You’re SR-600?” The other entity questioned.

“SR-600? What’s that?” The other three were puzzled.

“Vincent?” Jane recognized the voice.
Vinnie finally looked around the wall curiously, seeing the many other souls. “Jane?” He identified back.

“Settle down everybody - he’s cool.” Jane gestured down and moved closer to him, while everyone else breathed a sigh of relief. “What the Hell you doing here?” She interrogated.

Vince stepped out from the shadows. “I saw the fires here; I expected there to be some trouble for the people inside.” He sighed pleasantly. “I suppose I’m a little late to the party.”

Jane laughed. “Yeah, I think we have a good handle here.” She refocused. “You coming in here though, did you notice any baddies out there?”

“Nah. No souls in sight.” He shrugged.

“Alright, so it is safe to get you guys out of here!” Gonzales fistpumped.

“Jobber.” Vince randomly declared.

“What?” Lang, along with everyone else, looked bewildered at him.

“Did Emergency Services finally track us down?” Vinnie was looking away from everyone else, allegedly asking the wall like a madman.

“Hellyeah they did! Choppers inbound in seven minutes.” Mel announced.

“Seven...” Vince then looked to his watch, setting a timer for four.

“Vincent, who are you talking to?” Jane walked up to him again with befuddlement.

Vince refocused on her. “Oh! Sorry, I have someone on this Quirk-based communications system. I jury-rigged a signal amplifier connected to my phone to call for evacuation personnel, and some students have been guarding it. Rescue helicopters will be here in less than seven minutes from now, according to them.” He explained to them.

“How can you do that?” Gonzales wondered.

“Skills, madam.” He looked past Jane to respond.

“Where will they be setting down?” Jane extended her inquiry set.

“Whoa, what Celt Angel’s voice do I hear?” Mel sounded more energized than normal.

“A friend’s.” Vince looked to his transmitter ear again.

“Why can’t I hear him, but he can supposedly hear me?” Jane tilted her head.

“Oh, my Quirk is a curse. Okay listen Vince, can you pinch on your inner ear to take your transmission out and give it to-” Mel was interrupted.

“Out of the question.” Vincent professionally refused.

“Aw come on! I’d do it for you!” Mel spitefully rebuked.

Vinnie then looked at Jane. “The communications system uses only direct vibration waves within my ear canal, so only I can hear whoever’s speaking.” He explicated.
“Ah, pulsating the deep, internal sections of the ear canal and directing it towards the stapes and drums, rendering it mute everywhere else. A very well formulated Quirk if we’re going for unhackable discretion.” Jane comprehended.

“She knows her stuff too? Oh man, I am so sold!” Mel continued his swooning.

“Enough, Mel. Where will they be setting down?” Vinnie broke his concentration.

“Oh, uh, Nick, where will it be again? Aha! Okay thanks. Vincent, helis drop in the intersection between Rykes Ave and Jules Street.”

“Gotcha.” Vince focused on Jane again. “Rykes and Jules; the cross between them.”

“Hahah, looks like you all have an escape now!” Gonzales relieved the many evacuees, who indeed seemed thrilled.

“Everyone else in the Second Review received the announcement outside, so we should be good to go and join the flock.” Vince extended.

“No use waiting then!” Paxton proposed.

Slowly, the entire team of participants and their evacuees filed out of the school. Lang noticed a pamphlet station right outside the principal’s office on the way there, which housed a “Welcome to Veil!” fold, complete with a street map, allowing them relatively easy directions to the fated intersection.

“Okay, we should be a block away from the extraction by now.” Lang pointed.

“If there is a crowd there, they are being really quiet. They’re probably making all the fortifications they need to to make sure the Villains don’t ruin it.” Gonzales considered.

“That would be ideal, wouldn’t it?” Jane grinned back at them.

“As is our jobs.” Vince beamed as well, secondhand leading the trek onwards.

“Oversell!” Mel frantically screamed.

Vince took to his ear again. “Mel?”

“Something big and loud is coming towards the extraction point!” He answered.

Before he could be asked to elaborate, the threat revealed itself.

“EEEEEEEEEEE~!” Hayley ran their way, mirrors following closely behind.

“Hayley?” Vince put a name to the voice of this oncomer.

“Another lady?! How many girlish friends you have in this SR alone, Vinnie?” Mel sounded more ticked than usual.

“HI VINCENT! RUN NOW!” Hayley hollered, running past them and cutting a hard left.

The team immediately took to the seclusions of shady alleys and corridors on their street, lugging the rescuees with them and vying for their silence.

“You can run, but you can’t hide!” The Villain with Sound Semblance continued chasing after
her, dodging every so often the laser bolts coming her way and firing off some shapely sound blasts at her as well.

“OW! Why the Hell did I think I should keep focusing on your transmitter!?” Mel said before cutting the communications.

Everyone had to smother their ears due to the close proximity, but only audibly reacted once the Villain left their lines of sight.

“Jesus, now who was that?” Lang uncovered his ears.

Vince continued to look on. “Ambiance. Villain from the crime syndicate Double-A. Pretty much an evil version of Japan’s Present Mic.” He explained. All of them heard the distant sounds of helicopter blades closing in on Veil. “Go on ahead to the extraction, Jane and all of you. I’m not letting Hayley deal with that threat alone.” He propositioned.

“Hey, she’s going to need more than a Quirk-reluctant engineer to get the job done on that grand piece of work! I’m coming with!” Jane countered.

Vince turned back insistently. “Appreciated, but you cannot do that. You’re needed elsewhere.” He argued.

But Jane was ignoring all of it, as she turns back to her team. “Gonzales, Paxton, Lang, choose among the three of you to be the new leader, and lead those poor people to the site. We’ll catch up with you later.” She directed.

Paxton and the rest nodded, then turned to Vinnie. “You know mate, you really ought to know better than to argue against her. Just ten minutes with her, that was the first thing we really learned about Jane.” They then took to the rescuees and continued onwards.

Jane came parallel with Vince. “Come on, Slowpoke McGee, we got a lady to save!” She then ran ahead after Hayley and Ambiance.

Vince hesitated still for some time but eventually joined her.

“No escape!” Ambiance hurled, in addition to another sound blast; this time it was trapezoidal, directed at an abandoned sedan, causing it to fly into Hayley’s way. She collides with it enough to take her off her feet. As she falls down, she fires another ricocheting ray at him, which he dodges with ease.

Realizing she’s in trouble, Hayley begins retreating in a crab walk away from Ambiance.

“Someone really ought to have told you that shooting lasers at people is not nice.” Ambiance continued to creep up on her.

“Someone really ought to have told you that killing a mother and her children is not nice!” Hayley sneered back.

“Touche. That’s how you say it, right? Oh, it doesn’t matter; just die.” Ambiance held out his hand toward the French woman, who cowed anticipating the pain... Which was promptly encased in Crystal. “What the-!?!” Ambiance tried pulling his hand out, but then he hears things behind him, which were the perpetrator Jane and Vince. They both deliver a bicycle knee and spinning backfist respectively to Ambiance’s face as they move past him towards Hayley, helping her back up to her feet.
“Up and at ‘em, Beautiful Belle. We still got some work to do!” Jane instructed to Hayley, with all three of them standing in confrontation to Ambiance.

“How foolhardy of you two.” Ambiance spat out a small wad of blood and then emitted a sound blast at a wavelength that caused the crystal on his hand to shatter.

“Oh, good. My Quirk’s being counterbalanced.” Jane briefly glimpses at Vince, who had dual karambits at icepick grip. “I don’t suppose you still want to hide your Quirk, right?”

“Vincent! You’ve kept it a secret still? Even I had to give that up, as you can see!” Hayley seemed a little ticked, gesturing at her floating mirrors.

“Look, I’m clearly sympathetic to that cause, but you running into your limit cannot be my fault.” Vince cracked a beam.

“I concur.” Jane shared the smirk.

“Ugh! You’re impossible!” Hayley was about ready to pop a vein.

“Okay, not the time. I’m sorry.” Vince refocused on the Villain.

“I’ll show you impossible!” The Villain proceeded to launch three circular audio blasts at them. Jane reacted by summoning Crystal Pillars so that they all were propelled above the attacks, landing on the roof of a two-floor liquor store. The Pillars that replaced them also cracked at the impact of the booms.

“Hayley, keep us covered with your bankshots!” Vince instructed, jumping off the store’s edge and skidding down a water drain back to ground level.

“Where are you going!?” Jane interrogated looking over the lip Vince departed from.

“Suck on this!” Ambiance exclaimed again, firing another audio blast aimed at Jane’s exposed head, forcing her to duck behind the roof’s corner with Hayley.

Vince’s safe descent down to the street did not go unnoticed by Ambiance, who then fired a blast at the apex of the corridor entrance he landed in. Vince was able to roll onto the street to safely avoid the perimeter of the square shape, but the external soundwaves still gave his mind a rocking when he returned upright behind an abandoned, standalone truck.

“You can’t imagine that will handle much better than a building wall, can you?” Ambiance taunted, firing off a pentagon blast at the enlarged vehicle.

But before it can reach the metal chassis, three large Crystal Pillars rise up in front of it, blocking the force of the audio, at the expense of its own integrity, immediately toppling like cut trees after the attack’s duration.

Ambiance groaned in frustration as he looked back up and saw Jane diving in towards him. He launched a small, circular Sound pulse at her. However, two of Hayley’s Reflective lasers outpaced Jane and traveled through unabated past the blast and stunning the Villain, forcing him to look away, and not notice Jane compact herself as much as possible and twirl through the epicenter of the pulse and three-point landing in front of him.

Jane’s next action was to raise up a wall of Crystals behind Ambiance and then deliver another bicycle knee, sandwiching his face into it. Ambiance was barely fazed and set up a large haymaker. Jane, with Tyson’s infamous Peek-a-Boo stance, spin-ducks under and delivers a
spinning hook kick to the face, once again pushing him back into the prisms. She then pulls back from another punch and forces an arm of the Crystal Pillars towards her, causing it to jab into the back of his neck. Thrust forward this time, Jane fires a reverse elbow, squishing the nose once more for the unfortunate Villain of a victim.

Jane delivers a front shin kick, making Ambiance bow, and she then pulls another branch out, this time hitting the back of the kidney, so that the Villain then straightens up, into a hook punch. Now more angered than ever, Ambiance clutches the ground and fires a sound pulse into it, which creates a local tremor that shatters all of the Pillars and sends Jane flying. She is caught in a mid-air Princess carry, however, by Vince. They then land some ways down the street, where he proceeds to put her down onto her feet.

“Thanks, Vince.” Jane dusts herself off.

“Don’t mention it. When I say ‘there!’, form a Pillar one meter ahead, just to the left of me. Then make one two meters ahead of that, but on my right. Okay?” Vince instructed.

“You’re heading out in front again?” Jane pulled on his arm.

“Of course. I’m being a Hero, after all.” He answered back, before sprinting ahead.

Ambiance discovers him and fires a triangle blast and an octagon blast above it.

“There!” Vince yells out just before he begins his jump, two feet away from the first pulse, fingers in his canals.

Jane complies, erecting the planned Pillars. Vince leaps up to the side of the first one and bounces off, flying above the triangle. After the walljump, he then condenses into a helix cannonball that snugly fits through the inner area of the octagonal volley.

Ambiance is surprised by the evasions and propels another square boom, which shatters the Crystal Pillar that was on Vince’s right.

But that was what he wanted, for it toppled inward, and gave small cover from the blast that Vince dove into. Grabbing a larger slab as he got very close, Vince then somersault-slammed the brick into Ambiance’s forehead.

Even that wasn’t enough to take him down, however, as he looked back with a stream of crimson down his face, and goes for a knee lift to Vince’s ribcage. The latter counters by hooking underneath the attacking leg, and then grasping Ambiance surprisingly by the throat, and diving down, driving the Villain onto the ground with a textbook thrust spinebuster. Vince was quick to hook one arm underneath his full mount and the other’s wrist pinned above him, leaving his right hand to pummel Ambiance’s exposed face. The latter ate three significant blows before pivoting his wrist towards Vince’s face, hoping for a point-blank attack. Vince countered this by leaving the full mount and turning over for a triangle choke (forcing the arm to pivot the other way), while trapping the other arm in a chickenwing stretch (the hand subsequently cannot spin towards Vince without blasting himself as well).

Ambiance cuts the knot by firing behind him instead, and the blast breaks the submission, sending both hurling away from each other. Vince lands in a barrel roll close to an upside-down coupe. He throws a foot out after his last pivot, kicking the vehicle to stop the motion, which was fortunate as his right eye would’ve become a kebab through a protruded jagged metal piece from the vehicle otherwise.
“Hoooh! Close one!” Jane remarked, pulling Vince away from the wreckage.

“I’m not interrupting anything, am I?” Hayley impatiently interrogated, as she fired more laser bolts at the rising Ambiance.

“This guy just doesn’t know when to quit!” Jane gritted her teeth.

Vince continued looking on as he cleaned himself up, noticing that when Ambiance once dodged a laser, the bolt proceeded to hit a crystal slab behind him, which bounced it across the ground.

“Jane, did you tell Hayley that your prisms could also reflect lasers?”

“I proposed the idea, but she said there would be some loss of impact reflecting off of them anyways.” Jane replied.

“What if she keeps them bouncing off of each other? In a perpetual polygram?” Vinnie then suggested.

“That... I didn’t ask her about.” Jane looked perplexed.

“Go and speak to her! If she says it’ll work, have her fire two, and only two, bolts towards Ambiance as confirmation. I’ll keep Ambiance busy!” Vinnie ran back towards the Villain, who noticed him after whacking aside the latest volley (Hayley stopped when Jane appeared to her from another Pillar Leap).

Ambiance pivots himself towards Vinnie and fires a triple blast of a circle and two squares, making it impossible to leap through all inner areas.

But Vince isn’t thinking to go through. Just like last time, he spin-sidesteps the linear attack. This time, he was able to keep his karambits equipped as his military-grade soundproof headphones now protected his ears. I was hoping to keep these buds a secret, but Ambiance is really stepping it up now - there’s no choice left! He thought.

Ambiance sees his trick and goes for a more forceful delivery, and fires a heptagon. Vince dive-rolls through that, seeing him escape damage, but his left bulb flips off, leaving the eardrum exposed to the final resound. Vinnie doesn’t even flinch as he gets back onto his feet, flicking the bud back on top of his lobe. He also rises with an uppercut slash of his reverse karambit blade, which Ambiance pulls his upper body back from. His lower body, particularly his front left foot, remained where it was, allowing Vince to get low, hooking his legs around Ambiance’s ankle, and prying forward - a drop toe hold that puts the Villain on his face.

Vince’s shoulder during the low-angle motion ends up running itself into some sharper pieces of Crystal fragments on the ground. His winces at the punctures prevent him from capitalizing on the maneuver. I need to get back to wearing jackets! He cursed himself. Vinnie then saw that during his reactions, Ambiance turned over his body and aimed both of his palms angrily at the former.

But then, Hayley delivered, firing two bolts at Ambiance: one at the top hand, making him flinch, and the next at the side of his head.

“Thanks, Hayley!” Vince rises back up, using an arm-ripcord motion to put Ambiance back on his face. He then traps the latter’s arms in another set of chickenwings, but this time using his leg, and making them point only at his own back, so that the third option like last time is not present.

“Now light him up!” He ordered.

“Coming your way!” Hayley angled one of her Optical Mirrors so that when she fired a laser at it, it bounced at a perfect angle towards a fallen Crystal slab, and ricochets onto another flawlessly.
And another, and another... Until it perpetuated around ten stones. After countless cycles in one second, Jane had produced another mound as a road indent to disturb the placement of one in front of the duo, leading to the laser hitting Ambiance straight in the face with enhanced force; burning smoke emitted from him, in fact!

Hayley and Jane continued to sync their actions well with all the other reflective surfaces along the ground to continue wearing down Ambiance, while Vince front-flipped off of him, his part of the job over.

After a minute of nonstop assault, Ambiance stopped reacting to each attack.

“Did we kill him?” Hayley yelled aloud.

“Doubt it. Just passed out most likely.” Vinnie hollered back.

“This was a Double-A Villain? Maybe he was retired for too long.” Jane managed a small fit of laughter. “But you know, thank you for helping us fight him. Doubt I could beat ‘im on my own.” She backtracked.

“Yeah. Any- I mean, you’re welcome.” Hayley offered a knuckle, down low, which Jane noticed a second later, which she slowly hit back. The latter then formed a series of Crystal steps, allowing them to descend down to where Vinnie was. “Still nothing, huh?” She tilted her head.

“Well, what can I say? I didn’t find it fit just yet.” Vince returned his karambits behind him in specialized dual holsters across the waist.

“I almost want to jump off a high bridge just so I can see you save me with your Quirk somehow.” Hayley’s popped vein began growing.

“Come on, I don’t think I’m worth that much faith, Hayley.” The Japanese man attempted to defuse the quick escalation.

“Oversell!” Mel announced.

“Yeah, Mel?” Vince gazed away.

“‘Mel’?” Hayley looked confused.

“Communications buddy. Special Quirk allows only him to hear what he has to say.” Jane explained to her. “Huh, nice to be on the other end of clueless once in a while.” She perked up, turning to Vince with a leaning hip. “All thanks to you, smartass.” She remarked.

“You at the extraction point? It seems all of the Villains have retreated, including Tendency. You know, that telekinetic-field guy?” Mel inquired.

“I know the one. So it’s safe to reach the choppers?” Vince looked to the sky.

“Yeah. We’re on our way now. We’ll be at the Northern outskirts so we can give you back your phone. Do take your time and find others in need of rescue though, the pilots and operators say they’re leaving in about half an hour.” Mel exposted.

“We’ll see if we can find any more in need. Thanks for the help.” Vince nodded.

“Good luck, man.” Mel returned to radio silence.

“What did Mel say, Vincent?” Jane asked.
“Evacuation concludes in roughly thirty minutes. We ought to use most of that to see if we can’t find any more people who require the help.” Vinnie reiterated.

“Aw, we just took out their de-facto leader! Do we really have to play cleanup?” Hayley’s hair ended up forming several ahoges in reaction.

“Very heroic mindset, Hayley.” Jane held her hip judgingly.

“Hey, girl, you don’t know what me and my crew been through today.” Hayley crossed her arms, pouting.

“I think I have an idea; the same thing we all have been going through.” Jane quipped.

“Need you be so flippant? Okay, I’m sorry alright?” Hayley settled down.

Vince let the banter continue for a bit, until he began noticing Ambiance, burned as he was, slowly rising back up. “Ladies, get back!” He went between the two and the Villain, pushing them out of the way, while also charing up something in his right hand.

Ambiance, once he got onto two struggling feet, he threw out a focused palm towards Vince’s back. And though he did manage to fire an audio shape, the latter had completed his spinning and launched a projectile of his own - a horizontal, bluish-purple wave that moved at supersonic speed. Ambiance was forced onto his back, finally fully KO’ed, while his final blast was blocked by the quickly-conceived, quickly-risen wall of pillars brought before Vinnie as Jane was pushed back.

Vince breathed deeply after delivering the coup de grace, gawking at Ambiance from the around the right side of the obstruction for a little while to ensure that the Double-A Villain was staying down this time.

Jane and Hayley were both bewildered.

“Vincent, what was that?” Jane finally came around to asking.

He turned around, calming down. “My Quirk.” He answered.

“Um, Vincent. You’re bleeding from the nose.” Hayley pointed out.

“Don’t worry about it. Let’s just get out of here.” Vince wiped the trail away and proceeded onwards, with them following closely behind.
The Second Review is coming to a close. But where will the situation go from here, according to the participants, the university personnel, and the Headmaster herself?

And thus ends the prologue arc! Arc 1 will begin on DA in just a week! If you'd like to only read it here, then it will be imported in 3-4 weeks later! xD

After dealing with Ambiance, the trio made a small scan through Veil’s downtown, and found two people in need of assistance. Vinnie and Jane both fireman’s carry them all the way to the extraction point, with Hayley guarding their backs and flanks. They eventually make it without incident, finding tons of more citizens, but less than six-hundred SR participants near the standby choppers.

All three were silent as they continued on with readying to depart. Vinnie reclaimed his phone from Nick and his buddies and went with Jane to the medical ward, helping with first aid while she gave more professional medical attention. Hayley helped bring around supplies for other leading students in the meantime.

“Hayley!”

The French Laser Artist, holding a stack of plastic boxes, looked back to find two familiar faces coming towards her. “Ned! Reina!” She put the supplies down to greet them.

“Man, you look like shit, Hay.” Reina smirked, spitting on her hand and wiping some grime off of the other lady’s tracksuit. She then multiplied into several and started doing the same all over Hayley’s body.

“Hey! Stop that!” She wrestles herself free of all of them and then focuses on Ned. “What are you doing back? What happened to the people you evacuated?”

“They got exactly that; evacuated. There’s something else I need to tell you about that, though. You see, Veil-” Ned was about to explain, but then a truly jarring scene caught the eyes of everybody in the site. Vince and Jane, on the other side of the area, dilated in response.

Hundreds of bodies were being wheeled in on enlarged storage trucks, stopping directly in front of the choppers. SR participants and citizens aplenty were within, but even the realization that some Villains were mixed in them too did not do much to lift up their spirits aplenty.

“Good God...” Jane almost covered her mouth with her Nitrile medical hands, though she had enough sense to prevent contamination and instead opt for her tricep.
“...” Vince continued wrapping gauze as he saw emergency officials come out of the vehicles’ driving positions and reach for the lever to open the trunk, allowing multiple corpses to fall out from it onto the floor.

“Uh, should they be doing that? I mean, I know the families might like their bodies back for burials and such, but that seemed especially harsh and unthoughtful.” Jane looked back to Vinnie while relocating one’s shoulder.

“You’re right. It does seem so...” Vince replied. “...Needlessly unscrupulous.” *But chances are high that when you describe something as needless without having the benefits of hindsight,* well... He thought to himself.

In the middle of the line of growing piles, Vanevery University Headmaster Dysart arrived on the scene, in the same way everyone else debuted in Veil. “Salutations and great evening, each and everyone of you!” She greeted all that were still kicking.

A bunch of the participants looked up, finding a golden-orange sky with dark-brown or purple clouds. Most did not realize that so much time had passed while they were busy surviving and helping others with surviving.

“I am happy to announce to all of you, that your assessment time during Second Review Week has officially passed! You will have to wait until the conclusion of this week to receive your final grade, which will determine whether or not you will be enrolled into Vanevery University.” Nina continued.

“You fucking kidding me, woman!?” A stray voice vehemently bellowed.

Everyone grew silent and focused on the angry SR participant.

The howler loudly stepped forward to confront the Headmaster. “You’re a demented ass lady to think we’d want your endorsement and entry into your wack-job of a university! Sending us into the middle of a crime scene with no professional backup! Hell, now that I said it, how’d you know there would be a serious crime for you to whisk us onto for your fucked-up test!?” He vehemently wondered.

Vince’s eyes flickered and picked his head up, which Jane noticed. *A very good question!*

“You brought together - colluded with all of these Villains just so you could ‘assess’ us!? You’re goddamn insane! So many people, innocent civilians, fellow admittees who had no idea what they were getting into, dead! And for what!? I don’t need, or WANT, the guilt of stepping over their dead bodies to get past your gate at the entrance! COUNT. ME. OUT!” He finished his tangent, breathing heavily afterwards.

The Headmaster proceeded to simulate wiping angry spit from off of herself. “Are you quite done, Mr. Marvin Leone?” Dysart responded flatly.

Leone silently nodded vigorously.

“And are you certain that you mean it that you won’t accept your entry?” She extended. “Should it be accepted at all, of course.”

“Yes. Certainly.” He reacted.

“Then that means no matter what we say or do next will influence that ironclad decision, right?” Nina gave a hint of a smirk.
Leone, despite his anger, felt a coldness within him for a second.

The drivers in emergency uniforms proceeded to disrobe from them, revealing jumpsuits with the Vaneyvery logo and mascot branded onto them.

Everyone was bewildered at the sudden development.

Headmaster Dysart then made a hand signal. “Look towards the south side.” She pointed that way for those disoriented or without the sense of direction.

When they complied, they saw something they didn’t before.

“T-That’s Boston over there!” One of them observed.

That’s kinda what I wanted to tell ya, Hayley. I accidentally flew too far to see if there was anything beyond the plains. Flew beyond their Weather Hub instead. Ned bumped his elbow on her side to catch her attention for a moment.

“Right. Not Veil. Those Villains you’ve been facing? Ones Pro Hero agencies have had under deep cover; some have been there for decades, like Ambiance and Titan! Tendency, tell them!”

Headmaster Dysart gestured to an alley.

“All true.” The former opponent, stepping out from the shadows, commented.

“Oh, that’s right! The worst part - the dead bodies. Well, unfortunately Mr. Leone, you’re incorrect about that. Show them, Miss Kimsey!” Dysart continued on.

The suited lady with golden quills in her hair now identified, she proceeded to press a sort of black remote onto one of the corpses for a few seconds. After letting go, the fallen woman immediately perks up with surprise.

“Oh my God, No!!” She exclaimed once regaining consciousness. She soon realized where she was... Or lack of realization thereof. “Wait, where am I? Nico, are you around here!?” She backtracked.

“If you are referring to Nicoletta Vinter, Miss Wilma Hendricks, then she is over at the medical ward over there.” Headmaster Dysart revealed to the revived.

The rest of the Vanevery jumpers did the same with a miscellaneous set of others, who were restored all the same. Some took to breathing new life a little better than others and Wilma, while some reacted a little more badly.

“How are you doing that?” Another stray voice.

“I’m responsible.” Another suit with a Monkey-tail scarf showed up. “My Quirk, Instant Replay, is a play on the famous Quirk Rewind. I cannot force your corporeal forms to go back to a time I never knew of like that one can, but I am more versatile for it. All of you were bugged by my Quirk, containing a copy of yourself from just before you were sent here. The remotes my associates hold are completing the shift. I could do it myself from distances, but... That gets confusing with this many in number.” The man explained. “The numbered pads you all stepped onto while the Headmaster addressed you contained the adhesive bug that latched onto your persons, so you too would be safe if the situation became fatally dire.”

Many took to looking at their soles, seeing a small drilling on them.
“Even people crushed by debris or exploded can and will be restored with this ability. We just need to find the remains. The only problem is dead cells don’t comply after a few minutes, so we had to move fast.” Headmaster Dysart revealed. “So as you can see, we made this whole thing up. Even the articles written and posted on all of your favorite Pro Hero forum sites were manufactured. This whole incident was a test to see what all of you would do in a legitimate Villain situation. All of you needed to be convinced that this was genuine, or else we would not get your genuine response.” She explained.

*That’s why the tracing was so difficult for the authorities; this island is on a superpowered firewall sphere grid.* Vince thought to himself.

“Sorry mates.” A lot of the patients, revealed to be actors, apologized. One who was recently patched up by Jane got struck by Kimsey’s remote removed the handiwork, exposing a perfectly-closed injury, as if it was never there.

“I kinda didn’t want that pound back...” Said patient lamented. Kimsey struck him on the shoulder angrily in response.

“So, Mister Leone...” The Headmaster came close to the rager. “I’m sorry you have rejected our proposal. I am certain you can be a great Pro Hero one day... If you can get over the fact that the world does not revolve around you. Nor does it for any one of us, on that matter.” She patted him on the clavicle before confronting the rest of the participants. “All of you, as I’ve mentioned, that concludes your time in the Second Review. We will give you a ride back to the mainland, unless those of you that can teleport, swim or fly would prefer that method. And you will await our assessment grade of your performances by the end of the week.” She finally bowed, along with all of the other Vanevery personnel. “We thank you for your participation.” She concluded.

Vince gave a huge sigh. “What a time to be alive...”

All of the SR participants (after the others were revived and given the same spheal), were brought back to central Boston, where they were able to make it back home on their own.

By the time Vince made it back to his hometown of Winchester on the commuter rail, it was half an hour into nighttime.

“Winchester!”

Vinnie came down the staircase on the locomotive to exit. “Have a good evening.” He muttered before stepping off and onto the platform. The crewman tipped his cap in response.

Vinnie then descended down the staircase to ground level, where he was surprised by the audience there.

“WELCOME BACK!!” Almost the entire bedroom community of the town’s residents bellowed once they saw him from around the corner.

Vincent mustered the strength to form a smile as he tried wading through the crowd.

“What was it like, champ?” An older gentleman, with a 5-8 parting complementing his anglerfish antennae, close to Vinnie’s right ear inquired.

“Different, totally.” The young man answered back.

“You know if you already made it in?” A cotton-candy-haired woman in her late twenties questioned next.
“Not yet.” He responded back.

“You thrash any big baddies?” An adolescent with corgi whiskers came up to him.

Vinnie stopped in his tracks this time, growing his grin as he patted the top of the kid’s head. “You bet, Mick.” He then turned his attention to everyone else. “I know you’re all aching for details, and they will come. In time. Alright?”

Most nodded and let him pass. But before he truly left their conversational bubble.

“You got this, V!” The leader of a trio of skaters from the far side raised his board; the other two yelled in agreement, followed by everyone else.

*What a town... Winchester never ceases to amaze.* Vinnie gave a thumbs up, giving the crowd’s spirits a new all-time high and proceeded on his way.

While the trip to reach the train station was no short trip, it certainly felt like a longer walk than usual from the station to the residence as well.

Vinnie unlocked the door and cleaned his shoes on the way in. “I’m home.” He drearily announced while taking them off.

“Congratulations!” His parents slid into view from the surrounding corners, party streamer cannons and fun-whistles in hand.

“!!” Vince was taken aback, holding out his palm towards them, while his other hand made grip marks on the solid oak of the door behind him.

Immediately, the duo’s celebratory moods died down, deeply concerned about their son.

“Vinnie, what’s wrong?” Akane asked first.

Vince calmed down and attempted to get closer. “I-” He realizes that his hand is trapped inside the door, resulting in him whipping it out, revealing the damage on the stopper. “I’ll pay for that. But aside, I had a rough time in the Second Review.” He explained.

“Oh dear. What happened?” Raidon questioned further.

“The Headmaster wasn’t what anyone expected to be. I knew she wasn’t going to be all sunshine and daisies, but this assessment was so harsh. So especially so.” He stated finally within a foot from them.

Akane immediately embraced her son, brushing down the back of his mane slowly with her gloved right hand. “Well, son. However badly it affected you, it seems it was well worth it.” She remarked.

Vince looked up at his mother. “What do you mean? Also, why were you so festive when I came back? Moreso than the rest of the town?” He inquired.

“Son, you got in!” Raidon showed a holographic image, with the transponder revealing itself to have been sent just ten minutes after the Second Review was adjourned.

Vince hesitated, triple-taking between his parents and the message before taking it into his hand. “No way... They said they weren’t sending these until after Saturday.” He reiterated.

“Is that right? Maybe they didn’t have to think twice about you. I saw that device fly into our
mailbox as I was about to unlock the door.” Akane reminisced.

“Vanevery University awaits…” Vince looked aside in stunning wondrance coupled with a hint of satisfaction, turning the projector off.

“Well, it wasn’t the only one we received today.” Raidon revealed another mailing holographic. “It’s definitely from Vanevery too. But the biometrics to unlock it are only for you, Vincent.” He tossed it to his son, who caught it.

“Why would that be?” He wondered.

“Maybe a personal recording from the Headmaster himself? Oh, herself, as you’ve indicated. Go listen to it in your room, then you can come down and we’ll have supper while hearing about your tidings today.” Akane patted her son again, before gesturing upstairs.

“Okay.” Vince nodded, making his way up there. When he closed the door behind him, he took a deep breath and then pressed on the jewel, giving a thumbprint, which quickly followed with a retinal scan. After accepting the inputs, the device immediately anchors to the floor, out of Vince’s grip, and plays a holographic.

“Hello, Vincent Teshima.” Headmaster Dysart’s figure and likeness manifested from the strong blue lights of its projector.

Vince took a seat on his bed to watch the recording further.

“I’m sure you’ve found that you have been accepted into Vanevery University. Congratulations on that, by the way! We have been keeping a close watch on all of the participants, mind you. But nobody in our HR, admission team, and so on had wider eyes at an application than yours. Devout Roman Catholic, a reliable native of Eastern Mass who volunteers at food shelters, tour groups, and a frequent donator to St. Anne’s. You have a great way with electronics and mechanical engineering, no doubt due to being raised maternally by a former female leading expert in Electrical, and have even taken a tour in the U.S. Navy and Marines as a hospital corpsman of the Sans-Powers Division, amped up by being a qualified paramedic under the great tutelage of your top biomedical engineer of a father.”

“…” Vince looked down for a bit, before back at the holographic Headmaster.

“Never one to appreciate violence when it’s for keeps, you’ve nevertheless learned Krav Maga and Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, and have often thrown yourself into the fray to eliminate such squabbles in and around your hometown, police response be damned. Let’s include a few more scattered jobs you’ve held during your HS days, and your most-recent telecommunications gig, and this is a very diverse resume, Vincent. But the true appeal is what we’ve been noticing while you were performing in our Second Review.” The Headmaster paced back and forth, as wide as the projectors allowed.

Vincent looked on attentively.

“All of the skills you’ve amassed served you well throughout our little test, designed to see what one can do when they are in the middle of what they’ll be confronting. We were certain we made you give up a passive ability of your Nitro Blast Quirk, but we were still afraid we’d go out without seeing you really take that power into full display. We were glad, then, when we told Ambiance to get up one more time to threaten you and misses Jane Hanaway and Hayley Celestin, that you didn’t hesitate to save them. Heh, how many times did I say ‘we were’ for all that time?” She briefly interrupted herself.
Vince looked ready to say something, but he knew it wouldn’t go anywhere, as a recording couldn’t react to such stimuli.

“I cannot, in good conscience, say I understand what you’ve experienced, but I can understand what’s going through your mind because of it. The gist is this: You don’t want to be defined by your Quirk.” The Headmaster cleared her throat. “You don’t mind letting this recording play a little longer, right?” She asked rhetorically before continuing. “When I was a young girl, there were more handouts coming my way than I could ever take, and it was enveloping my view of the sky. There were also huge expectations. Majorly huge expectations. There was too much of them. Of both. So I became what the formals would call a ‘defector from decadence’. Of course, between you and me, we can just call that a ‘wealthy teen rebel’.” She laughed. “Anytime I heard anything about my ancestors, I would say ‘screw that; I’m all me.’ I wanted to get strong, so I moved out of my parents’ house after graduation and spent a decade just exploring the world, doing good whenever and wherever I could. That time eventually allowed me to find a new perspective. People love a new Pro Hero in this world, no doubt about that. I had thought that the people back home, all that they were loving was what was already within me. But in reality, everyone was so excited for what would become of me, because they knew a venerable face was coming. A Pro Hero from a lineage that everyone trusted and could rely on, that’s the whole package; that’s why they smothered me. And that’s when I realized, there’s not a point of despising what came before.”

Vince blinked a lot in thought.

“I think you’re realizing who I really am, aren’t you?” Nina coyishly posed towards the front of the transmission while propositioning.

Vince mouthed the name.

“That’s right. My real name is Elina Krogh. I dropped my old people’s name during high school to give myself my own start, without any initial influences from there on out. I think, since you certainly weren’t born here, that you’ve definitely done something similar. And you’re going down a similar road, though I think, since you still live with your parents lovingly, it isn’t all like that. The point coming from me is this: Give your new self the restart it needs. But don’t be ashamed of your old self. You may think that you are weaker at your job by crutching on your gift, but conversely you might find that you are better at your job because of it. And when it comes to saving everybody, you would choose better, right?” The Headmaster then happily tilted her head and close her eyes. “Well, that was my tirade! Like I said, you found out that you’ve been accepted. I sure hope you’ll be coming back to our campus! Whether you do or not, always remember that True Valiance [is] in [your] Quintessence... Teheh, our new little motto, which you’ll see at the centerpiece of our campus gate! Okay, bye!” Dysart finally waved, and the transmission ended, with the projector turning off.

Vince then held out an open hand, watching as it began producing blue plasma in his hand. He dissipated it all once he clenched a fist, and gazing into the space in front of him.

A few minutes later, Vince appeared for supper with his parents.

“So the whole thing was one large simulation, with every base covered in order to ensure that everyone was convinced the entire, stressful situation was legitimate.” Raidon proceeded to take a sip of his evening tea. His left hand went limp for an instant before forming a clenched fist again. “The probabilities of a direct participant smelling a rat would’ve been negligible.”

“Can’t say they cut any corners making this all authentic. Vanevery’s work ethic is very befitting that of a Festival of Five University.” Akane held her chin in thought.
“The Headmaster is quite truly a piece of work if your description is anything to go by, son.” Raidon continued on, looking at him.

“It takes one to know one, father. If you don’t mind me saying.” Vince grinned, which led to his parents also making a quick laugh as well.

“So, son. You can only expect it to be even murkier and crazier from this point forward. Have you decided on accepting the acceptance letter or not?” Vince’s mother put her hand on top of her son’s with assurance.

“I think that there most certainly will be something to learn from taking the offer. There is no doubt that I and many others have found limits that we never thought we had, shaky assessment specifications notwithstanding. If people keep experiencing stuff like that, I can only imagine what those Pro Heroes can do after. For right now, anyway.” Vince confirmed.

“Well son. Good luck this upcoming Fall semester.” His father reacted.

“Let’s eat out tomorrow to really celebrate the occasion, son.” Akane suggested.

“Well, I won’t say no to that.” Vince smiled again.

-A few days later...

Sunday had arrived, and most of the rest who participated in the week-long Second Review got their own acceptance/rejection letters. This included Hayley, who was reading the contents of her folded document on a Boston hotel’s high balcony. She looked more than a little flabbergasted at the acceptance, gazing away towards the nightlife down below. She then takes to a phone originally positioned at her nightstand, calling up an unknown recipient. It is well implied that she was informing the person about her admission into Vanevery, but what the client tells back to her starts to slowly lessen her smile. She hangs up with an obvious sense of conflict, as if all of her confidence was thrown out the window, and she was not fit for this opportunity.

Meanwhile, over in New York’s suburban Queens, Jane is keeping her four younger siblings in check while taking in the mail from the wall-mounted box. While the second-youngest of them piggybacks her and the youngest and second-eldest capture her legs, Jane powers through using her two upper limbs to read Vanevery’s contents. Her eyes widen in response to seeing the magic eight-letter word (“ACCEPTED”), just as her parents’ cars began wheeling into the driveway.
With the Second Review behind and the Enrollment Period over, it is time for this new, trailblazing year at Vanevery University to begin. Vincent Teshima is set to make his move into the main dormitory buildings on campus, and meet his roommate... Along with the rest of the students. But will that go over well at all?

-Beginning of the second week of September...-

The cars and trains were busier than usual in the capital of Massachusetts today, as multiple colleges and universities were opening up to accept their incoming and returning students. There were landing platforms for those that flew through the skies, a rented-out section of the harbor for those who preferred to swim, and a teleportation-redirection matrix point for those who were going to be extra cheeky and try to see the center of the campus early.

Vince entered conventionally, with himself and all of the belongings he planned on bringing to dorm inside the of his commercial vehicle, a navy-blue Chevrolet Silverado pickup truck with a carbon grille. His parents, not wanting to miss his move-in, were in tow within a Lexus RX. They reach the end of the line when they pull into the former Keeter Park, which was the centerpiece of Vanevery University’s campus.

The midsize crossover SUV stops within the parking lot of the campus, as Vince begins unloading, hooking his one-shoulder backpack behind him, a laundry basket, and one more duffel bag alongside him. “Thanks for coming along, mother and father. It certainly feels great with you two here.” He bowed.

“Again, good luck out there, son.” Raidon took off his glasses.

“And have some fun too! We love you!” Akane peeked most of her upper body out of her window and over the top of the car to announce.

They finally departed by brandishing a hand gesture forming a “T” across their hearts and go their separate ways. Vince took another look back to watch the vehicle disappear through a passageway underneath a highway bridge, and with one last smile, he proceeded onwards. He entrusted his own transport to a valet personnel, perhaps for the first time of many.

After a few minutes and some time to look at the map posts, Vinnie was able to find one of the three large buildings used to house all of the students of the university - Graden Halls. Vinnie’s dormitory slip claimed he was in the second building, which he entered accordingly. One security check-in with his recently-acquired student ID badge later, and Vinnie was on his way to the fifth floor, room seventeen.

As he traveled down the corridor, some new thoughts came through his mind. *Hm, Hero Universities these days do not try to assume gender, so now dormitories are no longer locked between strictly male and female sides, or rooms for that matter. I could be in the same dorm with a woman. Okay Vince, deep breaths. You have lived with women in the military barracks before. This won’t be any different. Just be on your best behavior...* Vince complied to his own directions
until he was just a step away from the door. He then entered his keycard again and turned the knob.

Unsurprisingly, there was going to be a surprise over what was on the other side of the door. The thing was, it wasn’t quite the surprise he was thinking of, one way or the other.

Immediately, Vince was taken aback by a sudden heat wave that flowed into the halls. He shook it off and came into the room to see its cause.

His roommate heard the threshold open and looked past the right corner closing in on the entrance. “Oh! Hello there!” He waved.

“Hello.” Vince nodded to him. The accent, facial structure, and complexion gave Vince the impression that he was of Korean ethnicity.

The roommate stepped out from behind the wall... Revealing he was wearing only swimming shorts. “So you’re my roommate?” He requested confirmation

“It sure seems like it.” Vince put down his belongings. “Vincent Teshima. Call me Vince. Or Vinnie.” He greeted himself, offering a hand.


After releasing hands, Vincent fanned himself when he started feeling a new level of high heat, eventually requiring to go shirtless himself, leaving only his sports watch and dog tag necklace adorning his upper body, while still wearing jeans down below. “Don’t mind if I do.” He suggested post-change.

“No issue for me.” Choi stated.

“So, why is the temperature so high in here?” Vince looked around.

“Oh, yes. Okay, so my Quirk is Cold-Hard Rain; my blood circulates at a certain temperature called the triple point.” Choi explained.

“The temperature where the three main states of matter occur in the same instance, a little above regular water’s freezing point.” Vince elaborated.

“Ah, you know your thermodynamics?” Choi looked surprised.

“I’ve dabbled in electronics engineering.” Vince nodded.

“That’s good! That’s exactly my little problem. I think... Come here a second.” Choi gestured him towards the heater panel within a hallway to their two rooms. “I was only hoping I could manage the heater in my room to accommodate my lower body temp, but when the dial wasn’t truly complying to the readings they were giving off, I tried forcing it down further. But woe is me, I pushed too hard, and now the panel malfunctioned, leading to the heat hitting near-maximum all over this dorm!” He elaborated. “I was thinking to notify the RAs, but they’d most definitely know I was responsible for sabotaging the equipment, and no doubt those fees they would incur me with... Especially on the first day...”

“I see. Let me take a look at it.” Vince pried out the dashboard to see the wiring. He pointed back towards the corridor they traveled down. “Stephen, could you go back and look into the right side pocket of my duffel bag? It contains a smaller bag full of my electrician tools.”
“Coming right up!” Choi clapped and pointed before going. He got back a few seconds later with the pack. “Here you are.”

“Open it up and hold it next to me.” Vince ordered, holding all of the wires in one hand while claiming a unique pair of tweezers and needle-nose pliers into his mouth, before taking a multimeter with the other.

“What got you so invested in this stuff? Are you a Logistical Unit?” Choi questioned.

“Eye wonce whas goin to bee sho. But nah, Ihmm currentlee ehnrolled with an Offensivve phocus.” Vince responded, as best he could anyway with the utensils firmly between his gritted teeth.

“You’re still practicing it even after locking that in? Color me surprised. Pro Heroes of the other genres don’t usually learn about stuff like this.” Choi remarked, finding no difficulty with the slurred speech patterns.

“What can eye say? Old habitz die harrd.” Vinnie replied, while putting down the multimeter so that he could then take the pliers. He could now reposition the tweezers in his maw to a more manageable position to converse “Alright, here on in, total concentration, so leave the smalltalk to a minimum for now.” He suggested politely.

“Of course, of course.” Choi bowed while keeping the rest of the toolkit steady.

A few minutes and two different solving methods later, Vince successfully restarted the heater panel and restored the original temperatures for all of the rooms. “Gotcha!” He exclaimed as the multimeter indicated resolution.

“Ah, can feel it cooling down already.” Stephen looked up in wondrance.

“Before you do something rash with the controls again, Choi, do tell me first yeah?” Vince tightened the interface back into the wall with precision screwdrivers, good as new.

“Oh definitely. How about I help you get everything set up as gratitude?” Choi suggested.

“Nah, I can do that myself.” Vince assured him.

“Alright, then I still owe you somehow.” The latter looked deflated.

“Don’t worry about it, alright?” Vince grinned, before going back for his belongings and moving them into the lone room. He proceeded to unpack, starting with his backpack, with the deepest, largest pocket housing his toughbook laptop, a five-subject notebook, and a picture frame, depicting his parents back in Japan. He took a seat on his study chair while taking an extended look at it, until something disrupted that.

A doorbell rung in the distance, alarming them both.

“Oh dear. You think they could’ve already known about it?” The Korean considered.

“Wouldn’t be surprised. Hero schools have the strongest of securities, not just to keep the pesky out, but to know what we do too.” Vinnie shrugged.

“Shit... Well, I’ll face the music if I must.” Steve psyched himself up.

They followed the resounding noise, leading to them heading back there to open the door and
finding it was their RA.

“Hey, you... Two.” The RA excitedly waved, before breaking off when he saw the two of them, shirtless, and the room still rather warm. “Was I interrupting something?”

Choi realized what he meant and choked up. “Oh, nothing major. Just us playing chicken with the heater.” He conjured.

“I so won.” Vince grinned at the RA, which frustrated Choi slightly.

“Okay. Well, I’m Thomas Clements, or Tom for short.” He pointed at his name tag. “I am the RA for the floors four through twelve in this building - if you guys didn’t get the memo, that means I am in charge of the students just arriving, and that means that I oversee all of the new public students, such as yourselves! The only one with the same managing rank is our co-RA on the other spectrum, Sasha Knight.” Clements added on.

“Alright good to know. Anything else?” Vincent asked. There was also the slightest hint of an increase in smirking upon hearing the latest sentence, though since he was already grinning, there was no notice of it.

“I’m glad you asked. There will be a mandatory initiation meeting for all new students tomorrow evening after all of your classes. Do be ready to attend that!” Clements continued.

“We’ll be sure to show up.” Vinnie nodded, which Choi seconded.

“Okay! Have a great semester!” The RA concluded, closing the door for them.

The two roommates proceeded to look at each other, shirtless and all.

“Just so you know, I don’t roll that way. But I have no problems with it if you do.” Stephen worriedly asserted, hasty to spurt it out after taking a beat on the RA’s earlier thoughts.

“It’s okay. I’m straight too.” Vinnie crossed his arms.

“Oh, okay.” They then took a beat. “By the way, nice cursive script tattoos.”

Vince turned around to show his back; across his shoulders housed a Biblical book and line number, while his left side was a full scripture. “Ah, you mean these?”

“Yeah. What are the both of them?” Choi took a closer look.

“My back says Philippians 4:8. That line reads, ‘Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things’. And my side reads ‘Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense’, which is from Proverbs 19:11. And you can probably tell here around my left forearm are a pair of angel wings. God’s made me quite a fortunate soul, so I’ve been trying to pay back in some way like I do here.” Vince explained.

“Aha.” Stephen took a second, allowing them both to anxiously stare around. “We should put on our shirts again, hm?” He returned with the quip.

“Yeah, I think that would be wise.” Vince scratched the back of his head along with forming a nervous grin.
An hour later, everything was set up for the both of them in their dormitory, and the temperature eventually returned to just above room breakpoint.

“Alright, now that we’ve gotten acquainted with our identities, I think we should be more acquainted personally, and there’s nothing I usually find better at doing that than with a good spar, Stephen. After that, we can chat things up at the dining hall. What say you?” Vinnie offered a brief attempt of an itenary to him.

“I ain’t got any better ideas today.” Choi grinned.

“Then get in your gym gear and let’s go.” Vince stated, beaming.

Within ten minutes, the duo was off to the recreation center, where their gyms were.

“Let’s keep it clean, and fast. Just four minutes long, and if we don’t have a winner by then, it’ll just be a draw, yeah?” Vinnie confirmed.

“Fine by me.” Choi agreed.

“Alright. Looks like the simulation software allows us to create augmented simulation scenarios so that we can perform training, missions, and battles in various environments, such as if we were in the middle of a urban warzone or the jungle. Want to do that, or should we just keep it standard?” Vinnie asked.

“That sounds pretty neat. Very neat, actually. But let’s be basic. I’m sure we’ll be seeing what those have to offer soon anyways.” Choi politely refused.

“Very well.” Vince edited on the aerial dashboard. The final task had him throw the holographic panel up towards the ceiling. When he did, a timer enlarged, flanked by the two of them as they looked on their student IDs.

“Oh man, I don’t want everyone to see that unflattering pic!” Stephen looked legitimately concerned, sandwiching his face with anxiety.

“I guess we better get our true battle pics uploaded soon.” Vinne remarked. “Get ready.” He finished speaking, getting into a Detroit boxing stance; hands forming a loose cross in front of his chest, with his left hand brandishing a practice karambit.

“Already am.” Choi, who fancied himself a short admiral’s sword, claimed as he whipped the blade into stance, pointing diagonally down.


Immediately, Vince sprinted forward, karambit in icepick grip in front of him, while Stephen remained where he was. Vinnie immediately sidestepped in the way that would make him face the latter’s back and threw his first knife stroke, which was easily deflected by Steve.

Choi immediately followed with an overhead sword strike, forcing Vinnie to sidestep, and then hop to avoid a low sweeping slash. The latter landed into the grip of the former’s free arm, allowing Choi to throw a close leg behind Vince and trip him over. Though not a part of Vince’s main plan, he nevertheless capitalized on it, hooking Choi’s leg in a sidelock while rolling back to his feet. This tripped Choi in turn, who couldn’t focus in time for his intended downward sword lunge on Vince while he was on the ground. Now supine himself, Vince immediately neutralized the weapon advantage by putting a sneaker on Choi’s wrist. His other leg’s knee stayed on Stephen’s chest, keeping him pinned temporarily for some karambit-assisted punches straight to
the cheeks.

Eventually, Choi wriggled free and could fit his free arm underneath the modified mount, performing a bridge and pushing Vinnie off of him (who rolled over in response). Vinnie tried to return to the fray quickly again, but had to abort and pull back from a wild, horizontal slash delivered from a rising Stephen.

The two circled around before Vinnie feinted another step forward, and Choi resorted to a kesa-giri cut as a ward-off. Completing the motion without hitting a target made Choi overswing, and Vinnie capitalized on it, coming in with a punching swing of his karambit. Stephen could only tilt his head out of the way, but still suffered a slit across his cheekbone. And then his torso took a roundhouse kick as Vinnie continued to approach, forcing the bow in response. Vince threw him down to a seated position on the ground with a snapmare, and followed up with a snap kick to the spine. Choi winces at the impact as he slowly falls back supine.

Choi immediately handsprung behind him to keep the gap sufficient between him and Vince, as he now knows that he cannot compete in the close-range field. He switches sword stance so that the blade now pointed at his foe in a dueling-sabre style. Vince stepped in to be within three feet of the tip. He immediately throws a spinning hook kick, swinging the ball of his foot at the flat end of the close blade. The metal-reinforced soles of the sneaker made a faint clanging sound upon impact, and took it away from his core.

Knowing he wouldn’t have time to return the blade within his centerline, Choi resorted to a high roundhouse kick to put Vinnie down. The latter saw it coming a mile away and blocked it, throwing it back down and making Choi bow forward. Stephen hastily threw an overhead wrist spinning slash to dissuade capitalization, but side-rolling to flank Choi worked in avoiding that move entirely. Vince fell into a Schoolboy roll-up, pulling Stephen down with him and forcing a back-roll. When Stephen returned to his knees, Vince was on top of him, grasping the former’s wrists and pulling back for a mighty knee smash to the chin. Stephen slumped back down to let the joint fly above him; Vinnie was forced to let go of the wrists as a result, lest his other leg trips on their conjoined arms.

At this point, Choi knew he was going to lose... Unless he began resorting to something else. This time, when Vince came close, he immediately felt a strange sensation emanating from Stephen and backed away abruptly so that he could assess it further.

Vince looked at his right arm, which was the closest to Choi before the retreat, noticing the slight whitening on the blade of the forearm. “Your Quirk, huh?” He inquired at the Korean.

“Yep. Cold-Hard Rain. I can manifest the storm and invisible sublayer in order to produce freezing rain, so long as I can make at least a five-foot gap between the two in the air above me.” Choi formed a fist, and the rain started pouring down on top of him, though none of his body and his hair (or even his clothing!) absorbed any of the cold liquid; the entire supply of droplets merely slid down his form to the ground and made ice upon contact.

“Let’s see if that’s going to save you or not.” Vince grinned, confidently brandishing his karambit once more. He runs in, rolling out of the way of Choi’s linear rain volley and finds the latter still not at all drenched by the aforementioned downpour. Finding his chance, he lunges in, only to see quick icing envelop the practice dagger’s blade from just one drop. Immediately Vinnie retreats once more, with the understanding that his hand could’ve been next.

“Once I have engulfed the area with a dark nimbus and sublayer, I can stop and summon the frigid rain for any linear trajectory at a maximum 90 mph. Now you’re fast; I can see that. But you
can’t outrun this.” Stephen commented, almost as a taunt for the first time.

“If I cannot outpace it, then I’ll just have to take it.” Vince claimed, before clapping his hands together; his form immediately takes a slight bluish glow. After enveloping himself, Vinnie continued to rush forward. This time, when Stephen launched another stream of vertical rain at him, Vinnie didn’t try to dodge; the nitrogen layer on top of his body evaporated the Cold-Hard Rain before it could touch him!

Stephen naturally took more surprise to this, hesitating until just at the moment he had to limbo underneath a charging horizontal strike Vinnie had planned. Vinnie immediately redirected and prepared a free-arm clothesline to the back of Choi’s head as he was rising back upright, planting him face-first. Vince immediately went right back into the full mount, knocking the admiral’s sword out of Choi’s grip and delivering clubbing elbow strikes. Stephen was able to escape however when he realized the amount of vapor being produced due to Vinnie’s evaporation, and increased the droplet-per-second count. While they still didn’t affect Vinnie physically, the fog became very disruptive to his vision, and it stunned him enough so that Stephen could throw a large hook punch that pushed Vince off of him.

With one minute left, Stephen slid to his blade, reclaiming it, and then continued to unleash a huge torrent of rain on Vince, making more and more mist. Believing he could get in another major shot, Stephen rushed in with a frozen horizontal backhand slash. But Vince’s military instincts took over, and he crouched underneath the swing. He then delivered a low roundhouse kick to the torso, which definitely stung Stephen, but in more ways then one.

Stephen stepped back this time to assess the damage; small traces of evaporation on his stomach could be seen. “What th-?” He looked over at the rising Vince.

“You know by now I can control Nitrogen. But you probably don’t know that I can only do stuff with it if they are charged. Compliments to my Ionizer mother.” Vinnie noted. “Good thing I can determine that with the particles in the air, but bad for you, since moisture is quite the conductor.” He added on.

Stephen widened his eyes, realizing that Nitro Blast is everything short of a hard counter to his Cold-Hard Rain. Still, he was giving everything he had, as he closed the fray for one last clash. Vince met him in the middle, going for a punching cut of his karambit, which Stephen rolled through. As his local storm followed him, the rain fell on top of Vince again and created the obscuring mist. Vince then hook and roundhouse kicked in the air, leaving sorts of nitrogen trails above him. This caused the frigid rain to touch the marks before his body, and so the evaporation fog was forming above his view.

Stephen then revealed his next trick, which showed that he could shift the direction of the rain, which was now firing at an angle where more than forty percent of it was touching Vince. The latter instinctively made a wall of kick trails to block the precipitation again, but this still obscured his view enough such that Stephen could charge in, ducking underneath the trail and deliver a rising stab pointed at Vinnie’s chin.

Vince side-stepped it and snap kicked at his shin, hoping to put Stephen on his face again. When it only caused him to move off-balance, Vince proceeded with a left reverse elbow strike to the back of the head, completing the drop. Vince then slid his foot on the blade, disarming Stephen again and moving the sword away from his reach. He got into the back full mount, disallowing Stephen from rising to his feet; he tried to by hooking his arm around Vince’s left leg as it was situated on his waist, but all that got him was a twist-out wringer into a hammerlock, ending with the hand stuck behind him and sill in the back-mount. Vinnie then delivered a 12-6 elbow to the
clavicle, and hoped to end it with a downwards karambit lunge.

But then...

“Time over!” The automated announcer alerted.

Both deactivated their Quirks. Vince stepped off of Stephen and helped him up.

“You’re an animal, Vincent. You’ve had some formal training from some federal force - I can tell.” Stephen said as he accepted the hand-lift.

“You are correct in a way. You certainly have quite a bit of your Quirk down too. Made it difficult for me even though I had the advantage otherwise.” Vince complimented back.

“Yeah well, a minute more, I don’t think I would’ve lasted.” Stephen acknowledged. They then noticed that outside the practice arena, they could see that a crowd had amassed, watching their contest, either with impressment, or lack thereof. In the far back, A certain blonde-haired French mistress could be noticed... If it weren’t for the several extra-large gymnasts mostly in front of her view. Besides, the more notable observers happened to be obvious upperclassmen, who showed variable feelings towards the new freshmen.

“We drew a crowd it seems, Stephen.” Vince deadpanned.

“I guess we should get used to it. If we really want to get into the Festival of Five.” Stephen scratched the back of his head.

“Yeah, you’re right, many eyes on us and all. Well, let’s head to that dining hall, yeah?” Vince goaded, which Choi nodded to, who also gestured to accept the training equipment so that he could put them away.

A few minutes later, the duo reached the dining hall in the residential portion of the campus. They picked out a spot and spent roughly a minute filling up their platters with certified four-star culinary dishes. The next few minutes were spent between enjoying their meals and chatting up about several miscellaneous topics.

“Ah, I never thought to do that - evaporating my rain by my own volition, and control the mists by controlling the flow of Cold-Hard Rain to further weaponize it?” Choi reiterated, holding onto his half-eaten hot dog with one hand while the other expressed himself.

“Yeah. I’m sure if you did that while I made that half box around myself, I would’ve been in far more trouble.” Vince nodded.

“Is that so? Well I should keep that in mind.” Choi refocused. “Did the Navy make you learn to weaponize atmospherics like that really well?” He proposed.

“Not quite. I was in the Navy, and contracted with the Marines too, but as a Medical Corpsman, because of my paramedics expertise. They made me learn some basic weapons training and other various topics, but the specialty was to that end.” Vince answered.

“I’d say you learned more than just a bit of basic CQC.” Choi remarked, taking a sip of his cola soda. “So, paramedics? On top of Electronics Engineering?”

“What can I say? My parents are talented, and they made sure I learned a thing or two from them. Probably even a third, which I would be lucky to receive.” Vince beamed.
“Soldier, engineer, medic. You’ve done it all, or the equivalent with an irrelevant difference. So why did you come here?” Stephen asked. “Let’s not forget to mention, you’ve told me over your bowl of stir fry, that you were born in Japan, that country with the best Hero schools in the world.” Choi asked.

“That may be true, but I first want to note that my move to America’s institution wasn’t really my choice. But even then, when I look back at their system now, I must say I like it like this way more. I believe the transition to Pro Hero from just graduating high school is far too short; the mind is still developing, surprising as it is. Pro Hero work needs a seasoned, hardened mindset to handle the extremities of all situations, be them glamorous or horrific. I mean, do you think mere teenagers would stomach what we saw just before being sent into the Second Review?” Vince had Stephen consider.

“Oh man, don’t remind me of that...” Stephen had to look away, taking a sip from his cup.

“Exactly. So that, on top of our usual flair for diversity and wealth of means for accumulating experience, I chose an American institution to foster my Pro Hero dreams.” Vince finished explaining. “How about you?” He countered.

“Who, me? Ah, I don’t quite have the crazy philosophies involved like you do. It’s just that it’s recently become a big problem in South Korea to become a Pro Hero. Schools keep shutting down there for... Well, whatever myriad of reasons. There’s been a large emigration of students like me coming to Japan, China, and America to continue our development. When I moved here during the Summer before Vanevery planned to go public, I felt as though the stage was set just for me to enter into such an elite university.” Steve then turned slightly solemn. “I hope it all pans out well, because my lone parents really had to scratch out a lot to make this work; unlike some more of the fortunate, they had to stick around there during the move. So, once I become a good Pro Hero, I’ll be able to make it up to them.” Stephen divulged to Vinnie.

“That’s fair, Steve. It also means you have something to fight for, so you’re always striving to become better. I’ve no doubt you’re going to get there.” Vince stated.

“Heh, you really think so?” Choi asked, with a grin.

“Yeah. I really do.” Vinnie noticed that his cup now had nothing but ice. “I’m on empty; going to refill. You want something?” He shook his container.

“Still got some soda left. Thanks for asking though.” Choi lifted up his own.

“Okay. I’ll be right back then.” Vinnie nodded before departing. It was a purposeful stride to the lemon-water fountain, which was perfectly vacant.

Well, perfectly vacant, up until...

“Whoa-uup!” One student, with maroon-brown Princeton hair and a vintage varsity jacket, rushed to get his cup underneath the lever-action spigot first. “Too slow, little guy.”

Vinnie merely smiled and closed his eyes to it, and awaited his turn. But just as the man in front finished up and the former was getting closer to do the same, one of the man’s colleagues pushed into the front as well to get his fill.

This time Vince took a stand. “Hey come on, man. I was in line first.” He tapped on the second one’s right shoulder.

“Whoa!” The second one immediately stopped what he was doing and looked weirdly at Vinnie.
“Don’t be so aggressive, man!” He feigned aggression.

“Hey what the Hell this is about, huh little guy?” Immediately, another four students joined the two in a semicircle confronting Vince.

Unintimidated, Vince continued to make his point. “I apologize for making contact with you, sir. But my assertion stands: I was in line after this gentleman here.”

“Ah, it doesn't work that way, buddy. We get to determine the order of users of public instruments such as that one you’re going for.” One of them declared.

“Come again?” Vince requested confirmation, quizzically tilting his head.

“Oh for God’s- The East Asians are even dumber than we’ve thought, everyone.” They all began roaring in laughter.

Vince hardly took offense to the remark, instead paying attention to the latest man’s turn towards his cohorts, and noticing the patch on the close arm. It read, “The Vanevery Vested”. Immediately, Vinnie gave a small sigh in understanding.

But someone who didn’t get it was Stephen, who looked back when he noticed that Vinnie was taking his time getting his drink. Upon noticing the six students standing against his roommate, he immediately power-walked out of his chair towards him. “Hey, Vince. What’s this about?” He asked him.

Before Vince himself could answer, another of the varsity-clad students stepped up. “Ah, another one of those slit-eyes. We just need examples from two other continents and we’d have the centerpiece for why this semester is going to be full of shit.” One claimed.

“Wow, uncalled for!” The Korean remarked.

“Phew, as is your face!” One other, with a luxurious green mane, made an attempt at a smarter counter.

“Well at least mine seemingly didn’t fall into a full pile of shit when I got out of bed today! What crawled up your asses and died, huh?!” Steve swiftly responded.

The sheer amount of fighting words made them all stumble for a bit. Finally after a two-second wait, one of the two ladies thought to speak. “Ever thought, dumbasses, that you’re all the answer to that?” She muttered.

“I sincerely hope you didn’t hurt yourself trying to come up with a reply.” Vinnie noted.

“Hey hey hey hey hey!!” The supposed leader stepped up, coming between The Japanese and her. “What makes you think you can speak like that to her, huh?” He asserts his point with a decisive point to his chest... At least he hoped it would be.

“My goodness.” Vinnie looked at the outstretched appendage for a second, before gazing at the Vested’s general. “The King of this humble abode graces me with physical contact! Oh, but I fear for what my filth would do to his unsullied hands. Especially if he touches my corporeal form out of turn again.” He subtly threatened. Steve couldn’t help snickering at the pseudo-grandiose claim.

Again, all remained without an effective response for more than a couple seconds, including the leader. “Pitiful thing that you know you have filth; ever heard of a shower? A pool even? Or do you have to be so close inside the baths, that it counts as plebeian foreplay?” The team’s presumed
second theorized in time.

“Why you-!” Choi was setting up for a punch.

“Hold it, Steve!” Vince, expression turning from playful to horror, immediately took to catching the wrist before it could get close to any of them, gesturing to the fact that there were many other sets of eyes on the lot of them.

The six Vested laughed. “Give them some credit: they can be pretty funny at their expense.” They smugly claimed as they left the scene, much to Choi’s antipathy.

Vince let go of his wrist and confronted him face to face. “I’m sorry I had to stop you, Steve. But we cannot do that here. Vanevery has already taken a lot of flak for going public so suddenly, and the last thing the college needs is an incident involving them, which includes us. Not only could we be in trouble, we might just ruin it for everyone else who tried so hard to get here. You don’t want that, do you?” He explained.

Stephen gritted his teeth. “No...” He took two deep breaths. “Who even are they, anyhow?” He interrogated as their backs began to disappear around a corner.

“Judging by their patch name of ‘The Vanevery Vested’, they are a clique of students probably a year or two senior to ours. They most likely came into this college out of generations of privilege, support, and funding, back when that was the make-or-break criteria to get in. Now that it’s public and having scholarships and/or varied backgrounds makes admission more possible, they became very sour, and are chastising the new arrivals at each and every turn.” Vince theorized.

“That’s fucked up. What have they got to be so mad about? They’re paying just as much as any of us now, and the amounts they did pay before have been returned; I read as much on some of those college news sites.” Choi considered.

“Right. But that doesn’t take away the idea that our rights to be here should have been given to others very much more like them.” Vince countered.

“Bullshit. I’m just as worthy as the next man. Or lady.” Choi cursed.

“Right. And we’re going to prove that. But in due time. And not like this, where misinterpretation is paramount. Alright?” Vinnie assured his roommate.

“Alright.” Stephen nodded, afterwards returning to their table to finish off their meal.
As all of the new, Public Freshmen get used to the amazing campus and its routines. As they go through that whole rigamarole, though, it would be good and nice of them to also get to know each other and the faculty just a bit more, which is exactly what'll happen here and now.

The next morning arrived on Vanevery University’s campus. But before dawn at six had even happened, Vinnie was already up, practicing more of his parkour and freerunning across the residential areas of the campus. This included a gate vault, easily transitioning himself from an elevated balcony to the lower sidewalk area, and a double kong to pass through two railings in his path. It is completed by a multistage climb up the Theatre of War Stadium for Vanvery, requiring Vince to perform plenty of cat leaps, wall-runs, a couple of wallspins, and bar swings.

The final obstacle for Vinnie was to run up a steep imitation of the warped wall; the large letter “r” of “War”, as the entire phrase faced Boston Harbor (and most of the rest of the campus). Vince gave himself a bouncing start with a few deep breaths, and flawlessly completed the maneuver in one motion. After some hanging hesitation out of celebration, he finally pulled himself up to be on the upper arch of the letter, taking a rest on it, watching the sun rise above the urban horizon alongside the Morgan War Horse busts flanking the words.

After a few deep breaths, Vince took a look at the forearm-length glove on his left hand, which revealed an elastic tablet interface and watch. The HUD revealed to him that he has traveled just short of sixteen miles in all vectors across forty-five minutes, including vertical distance compensation. Man, I’ve been slacking around somewhere... Vince acknowledged, disappointed by the gains today. He rises back up, soaking in the radiance hitting the stadium, before he... Leaps right off the entire, sixty-meter-tall arena?

Then, Vince’s hands and feet glowed blue and his descent was safely slowing down, until he reaches a tall light pole. Upon contact, he activates his right-handed glove once more, revealing it to be the same glove he used to help parkour through his Winchester residential town. He continues sliding down until he finds a safe point to fall into a three-point landing, rising to his two feet without issue.

“Vinnie!”

As he was dusting himself off, Vince looked over to his right towards the source of the voice, beaming when he noticed who identified him. “Jane!” Vince acknowledged, noticing her and her companion jogging towards him. “You do morning runs too?”

“You bet! Need to keep more active than the ones trying to kill ya, naturally.” Jane looked up from where he had descended down from. “I don’t quite think I can measure up to that though. Not without my pillars, anyway.” She remarked.

“Yeah, well, I wouldn’t try it if I couldn’t find a fast and safe way down either.” Vinnie then looks over to her jogging partner. “Mind introducing me to this woman you have in tow?” He asked about her partner; a short East-Asian woman with golden eyes and a shoulder-length black mane.
that had white ends, and a long, stiff ponytail that resembled a blue magpie’s... Tail.

Jane refocused worriedly. “Oh right! Yu-Ling, this is Vincent Teshima. Vinnie, this lass is Yu-
Ling Kuan, my roommate. Hm hm, I wouldn’t have minded to have a guy pal in the suite, but there
ain’t another woman like Yu-Ling. I know that for a fact.” She asserted.

Vince looked a little perplexed by the context inherent in Jane’s words.

“Allow me to explain; Jane knows that so well because we’ve been good friends for quite a while.”
Yu-Ling clarified.

“Since middle school. Grew up in Queens together, we did.” Jane slung her arm altruistically
across the latest speaker.

“Indeed. Far back when we first met, I didn’t know English too well, so the other kids often made
fun of me. Jane would try to stand in their way, but she took quite a bunch more hits than she’d
anticipated. When I showed her that I knew some martial arts from back home, I taught her a few
forms so that she could handle the troubles better. It seems that helped bolster my confidence to be
around others too... And for Jane’s insistence on pursuing medical knowledge, so that she could
patch up the consequences of the hot-blooded nature she knows there is in her younger siblings...
As well as herself.” Yu-Ling noted.

“That’s a great story. I’m noticing though, the crispness, the clarity of your accent. It couldn’t
possibly be from formerly Formosa, could it?” Vince pointed.

“You some wizard? You are right, though; she’s Taiwanese.” Jane confirmed.

“Nah, I’m no wiz. Just a lucky guess.” Vinnie assured.

Yu-Ling giggled. “I wish I could dissect your dialect to a particular portion of Japan.”

“Then would it be bad to say outright that I’m originally from Chiba Prefecture?” Vinnie gave that
information away.

All three of them shared an instantly brief fit of laughter.

“So, are you done with your jog? I won’t say no to you joining us, if Jane would let you.” Yu-Ling
looked to her with insistence.

Jane hesitated for a moment. “I won’t say no either.”

“Well, I can close out eighteen miles with you two before I got to head back. I also agreed to be my
roommate’s alarm clock for today.” Vince smiled.

“Then let’s make it another great few miles.” Jane beamed back. They all continued their run. “By
the way, that RA for the Freshmen on the female side - Sasha, said that it would enhance our
Initiation experience if we started forming a group of up to twelve while we are in Intro. You
wouldn’t happen to be cool with teaming with me and Yu-Ling, yeah?” Jane suggested while they
were parallel in stride.

“No arguments from me. I’d imagine my roommate would love some company too. What floor
you on?” Vinnie bounced back.

“Eight.” Jane replied.
“We’re on five. How about you wait on our floor’s common room for us before we all proceed down?” Vince proposed.

“Sounds grand.” Jane nodded.

Once the jog reached the Graden Halls dormitory buildings during the lap, Vince went his separate way from the girls. Vince realized that he actually had only a minute left before he had to remind Stephen to wake up, and with the stairs and elevator proving to be too slow for that objective, Vince then took to the skies; the same blue hue on his limbs that was there for his previous battles now helped him ascend. For ten seconds, Vince rose the four storeys necessary, up to the exact window of his room. He was able to stay on the sheer surface by employing the adhesive glove he had used to traverse Winchester before. Now he was sneaking his way in and finally crossing through the two doorways necessary to encounter the supine Choi. “Stephen, time to wake up. Freshman Introduction is just an hour off!”

“Ugh, just a minute.” Stephen groaned, turning completely away from the door.

“Uh uh, get up. You told me to make you do so. Now.” Vince produced a remote from his track pants’ back pocket and pressed on the central key. The result was a sort of shock-pen prank, only this one was enlarged to be across the entire mattress, and it gave the fourfold sensation all across Stephen’s body.

“YEOWCH!” Choi comically sprang up from his fetal position, aggressively looking at Vinnie after a beat. “When did you get that working? Wait a second, why do you even have that?” He desperately sought answers.

“I asked you after we got back to the dorm and you requested that I help strictly wake you up that I could implement an unharmful buzzer on your bed to enhance that objective. You said yes, so while you were in the shower, I jury-rigged the parts of a shock pen from the gift shop, enhanced and spread the charge across a flat conducting pad, and placed it directly underneath your mattress sheets, using the cloth to insulate just enough to keep it safe.” Vinnie truthfully announced.

“I said yes out of disbelief from the statement!” Choi threw his hands out in protest.

“Say what you will, you did agree, and as you can tell, it is working. And like I said, it is harmless. I think you don’t have anything to worry about.” Vinnie crossed his arms.

Choi gritted his teeth. “Alright, smart guy. You win this round. Now get out, I’ll be getting ready.” He directed, which Vinnie complied to.

After twenty minutes, Vinnie and Stephen were out of their dormitory door and heading towards the extra-large classroom in Olson Hall; the main building for the Logistical Units.

Vince and Stephen take their spots in one of the middle rows on the far right section of the auditorium. When the former took a quick look around, he could identify Jane, Yu-Ling, and Hayley within the mixture of other Freshmen far away.

But of far greater concern was the presence of roughly fifteen professors across the perimeter of the room. Three of them stood at the bottom center.

One of them, a woman with red panda ears and tail proceeded to form a literal microphone with her right hand. “Attention!” She spoke into it. Although it was mute directly, the speakers laden all around the area heard it as if she had yelled the word. She again practically whispered words into the person-made device, though the phrase “Sorry about that, we’ve just done this enough to know
such a rowdy folk happy to be in Vanevery for the first time would not be controlled without such a central voice,” came out in such a normal tone. “Now, give a hand to the professor about to take the floor, Doctor D.M. Kindrick.” She finished up.

The Kindrick in question was a man holding a receiver this time, with short green hair and glasses with several extra lenses lifted to the side of the frame. “Hello, all of you students of Vanevery University, Class of 2078. As you know very well, I am Dr. Kindrick, General Head of the Logistics Division of this esteemed institution. Right to my left is Professor Julia Raptis, Head Lecturer of Support. In the top corner right is Professor Benjamin Oxford, Head of Rescue. The two in the middle staircase on the far left are Professors Lily Kien and Andrade Roser, Heads of Defense and Offense, respectively.” He identified, before working a forearm-mounted device that controlled the large holographic on the far wall.

The students were all given a moment to observe each of the Division directors, who waved when they were revealed to the audience.

“For the sake of convenience in efficiency, Heroics across the world has been divided into aptly-named Divisions, where members of specific Divisions specialize in a select field of tasks, while remaining proficient in a number of others, or all - if said ones are diligent enough. Most of you are very familiar with the Offense Division, where designated Pro Heroes are well-versed in taking the fight to Villains, whether in search-and-destroy or escort operations. If criminals think to try the same on us, we leave the fort-holding to the Defense Division, adept at countering any infiltration measure the dastardly dare employ. Support Heroes are always on no-mans-land alongside their Offense and Defense siblings, providing aid to additional plans of attack and clearing paths so their colleagues can keep their minds on primary objectives. Rescue Pro Heroes are groomed to enhance the effectiveness of emergency service personnel, extracting citizens in the line of fire and other wounded Heroes, and, depending on the lean of Medical minor, provide first-aid or full-on professional physical attention. Finally, Logistical Heroes-”

“The geeks!” One arrogant voice in the crowd uttered.

A bunch of students within the room couldn’t help coughing out a few laughs.

Vinnie obviously wasn’t one of them, merely looking around with curiosity. Steve bit his lip, regretting that he was almost ready to crack at that.

“Thank you for your remark, mister Tunney.” The current mic operator then paused, allowing it to sink in knowing who gave the stray interruption before continuing. “As I was saying, Logistical Pro Heroes, like myself, are masters of remote tactics and dominate the transphysical layout of the world, while monitoring the successes and well-beings of Pro Heroes that are actively on the front lines.” Kindrick continued.

The same commenter and his pack bursted with another scoff, perhaps in response to the resolute grandeur of the job description. This time, some of the students that weren’t joining in were feeling very uneasy. Vince, as with any others that detected them could probably infer they were the, perhaps thankfully, rare parts of the class.

Kindrick, as with everything else that came his way before, seemed indifferent to the disturbance. “I’m sure this may seem like a humorous presentation for some, but every professional around you, including the Headmaster...” He gestured to the study table behind him.

Abruptly, Headmaster Dysart rose up from behind the reinforced cherry-wood, and waved to everyone. Despite her ever-cheerful demeanor, everyone immediately made excessive sweat marks trail down the back of their heads. After the Second Review that they endured, however, it was
incredibly difficult to blame them.

Kindrick went on. “… Can certify that they wouldn’t be as successful as they are if it weren’t for the direction and organization of Logistical Units - May not have even been alive now to tell of it if so. In fact, there is at least one student in here that belongs to a pair of LUs with over thirty years-plus of experience between them in their craft. Those decades were spent kickstarting careers of exceptional Pro Heroes we see out there today, in Japan, China, and America of course - three-hundred-twenty of them and counting, to be more specific. People like WildSoul, Luke Caine, and B. Marrow, to name a few.” He reasoned with them, followed by giving the tiniest of smirks.

Everyone was speechless.

“Now remember the names of the head professors, such as mine own, for we will begin forming the classes and time schedules with you all after this Introduction. For now, however, I will shift the announcements board to the Headmaster. If you will, Nina.” Kindrick hands the central microphone to the suited young lady.

“Thank you, D.” She happily accepts the amplifier. “Now that you know a little more of what you’re getting into- Oh! But not how we plan to make you all better at it. Mhmhm~.” Nina gleefully closed her eyes with deviance written across her face, much to everyone else’s chagrin. “Anyways, we shall now talk about what you all have anticipated hearing about since you came here. Our take on the American land’s concept of... The Battlegrounds!” She threw up her hands to hype up the crowd.

Even they couldn’t help to roar with excitement over that topic.

-Oh, right. I should probably explain what the Battlegrounds are, huh?-

_I’m sure you thought that my friendly little battle with Stephen was just to pass time, huh? Well think again, everybody!_

_In America, our crime rate is, on the whole, not as devastatingly spectacular as, say, Japan’s. We don’t really frequently get a Stain, an Overhaul, or an All For One (Thank God!), or a Tomura Shigaraki. Instead, Pro Heroes are usually either sent to discreetly follow beat cops for petty robberies and brawls (which we have a lot of, so it can become tedious really fast!), or overseas to work with foreign clientele, like when they tackled their internships. How do we become efficient and effective Pro Heroes, then? We fight each other!_

_No, really! All secondary and tertiary schooling in the United States features a national element that unites them. Not only does it allow many young people to vent out their frustrations in a controlled environment, but stylized competition proves to keep our aspiring student body at the top of their game. Middle and High School keep it simple, with elimination or points-systems, but upon reaching College, the lavish events become a lot more intricate, adding special scenarios, pairing systems, personalized entrances to hype up the audience, and more!_

_None, however, hold a candle to the Festival of Five, so aptly named because the top five higher-education institutes for aspiring Pro Heroes in the country are the only communities participating in the tourny. California’s Ace Paragon Institute, Florida’s Cynosure College, Philadelphia’s Lysandre University, Washington’s Harrison Exeter Academy, and Massachusetts’ Vanhever University, send waves of their Pro-Hero hopefuls biannually to a set of independent fields in Kansas, where they duke it out for brand supremacy._

_Aside from the battles, there are also other sporting events, making the FoF more of an Olympic-style venue than just a mere fighting championship. Needless to say, this festival is very well-
broadcasted across the country as well as internationally, and can be a crucial factor for networking and developing peer relationships once graduates begin getting out on the field.

-So now you know!-

“Alright, alright, settle down!” Nina pressed on a keyboard at the desk, changing holographics.

“Now, for our Battlegrounds, every student must participate in at least one contest per week of the academic semester in order to be considered for participation in the Winter and/or Summer Festival of Five. But participation isn’t enough; students will be able to apply for contests through the random-match generator, or by issuing/accepting direct challenges from other students. For this reason, and the fact that no student would be facing every other possible participant, we grade your records through a classic Win-Loss-Tie-OT_Loss system. Wins are great - get a lot of them! Losses? Ooh, avoid those. Ties can occur if the standard match time of ten minutes is reached, and they count for a .75 win. However, participants have three Extension cards, where using one after a match will add five minutes to the clock in the pursuit of a decisive result. If both throw out a card, Overtime is guaranteed. If one does not want to throw a card, or has none, then a coin flip will determine the match’s status. Keep in mind that if you did not throw an available card but was still coin-flipped into Overtime, then you will not lose that card. Winning in overtime will net a regular win, but a loss will count as a .25 win.” Nina asserted as the figures in the holographics depicted.

“Matches with gimmicks and virtual environments will be considered exhibitions or spars and won’t be counted towards participant records, which also means you still need a standard match if you haven’t done one that week. You will be placed in finalization for participation in the FoF if you avoid losing three times throughout the semester (Though there are exceptional cases that can be handed out - better be very plus ultra, huh? Hehe). But after that, we shall consider the star power of the ones you’ve bested, how dominant the victories were, the veracity and variety of your technique, and limitless other variables to consider your placement in the singles tourney. So don’t bore us; remember, Pro Heroes have to excite populations to keep their faith!” She added on.

Everyone remained very attentive and focused on the instruction.

“For those of you who want to show your pretty little faces on the camera ASAP, we broadcast the Theatre of War Stadium’s contests every Saturday, from ten A.M. to six P.M., so plan your matches accordingly! And one more thing: Before any and all of your matches with other students, you must perform the VanEvery Salute & Shake (trademarked!) before the contest. It is done as follows:” Headmaster Dysart gestures to Kindrick, where they both walk up to each other, forming a V with their right index and pinkie fingers outstretched (thumb parallel with the index) and across their chest while doing so. When they are close enough, they proceed to bump the back of their fists and forearms with the same hand. “This is a staple across all of the major Hero Schools and combat tourneys, though all have their own chest-salute. Always show your brand loyalty with it. Am I clear?”

The crowd all approve.

“Excellent. Now then, Introduction is over. Time for your specialized education! Head on out of this study hall, and you’ll find professors lined up to classify the lot of you. Go on!” The Headmaster shooed them away, which they complied to.

“These professors and Headmaster, they can either match or counter strict deadpan with the best of them, can’t they?” Stephen looked impressed.

“Indeed. But you can’t expect the best to be teaching us out of a book everyone’s seen before.” Vinnie smiled at him before they both got up out of their seats and toward the exit.

When they did arrive there, so many have already beaten them at forming large packs around the
aforementioned instructors. They could reach the horizons before finding that further movement would result in differing paths for the both of them.

“Well, Vinnie, this is where we must part ways until the evening. I’ve enrolled in Defense. Cold-Hard Rain is well-expected to stop our enemies advancing at our gates dead, so that’s where I plan to put it.” Choi noted, offering his hand for a shake this time.

“Respecting your duties. I like that.” Vinnie accepted the offer.

“I reckon you’re gonna break it big time in Offense, if your fight against me was anything to go by.” Stephen questioned after they released.

“Yeah. You give ‘em Hell where you’re going too.” Vinnie confirmed.

“That’s great. Just, don’t feel restrained like you were when you fought me, huh? I can surmise the other guys, larger and tougher, can take that good punch.” Stephen suggested.

“Don’t worry about me. See you soon.” Vince saluted.

Stephen looked back with a smile and made for the Defense professors.

Before Vince went any further towards the group for Offense, he made sure to observe a certain presence in the display before them. Hmph, no surprise... Number of professors and other specialists per Division is proportional to the number of students enrolled in the field. With that in mind, one professor for a class of Logistical Heroes, numbering just about twenty. Even the second lowest, Defense, has four more professionals than that. Meanwhile here’s Offense, with over three-hundred students crowding around twenty-two professors. I thought me going into Offense would be a mistake. Then, Vince’s maw formed a small grin. But maybe my parents really did have it right all along. Finally, he proceeded towards the large mass for combatives.

Vince and about sixteen others formed a personal class following the professor named Daniel Spier as they left for the Offense College classrooms in Peuter Hall.

Spier proceeded to write up his name in opaque letters on the holographic whiteboard. “Hello, makeshift class. As you know by the tag, I am Daniel F. Spier. For those of you who do deep web search, you may know me best as Fragmenter, the Lob-Lash Hero. My Quirk, Concussive Cutter, grants me the ability to manifest spherical bombs within the epidermis of my hands, which enlarge to the dimensions of a regular baseball when I summon them out of my body. All of them have a trigger time of three seconds after they become fully sized, wherein they can explode with a force of one kilogram of semtex. Their true power, however, lies in the fact that additional energy waves propel out of their explosions with slashing potential to perfectly strike through concrete. And while they cannot stick to surfaces, the projectiles can accelerate their explosion time by coming in contact with anything substantial after leaving my hand, such as being thrown into a wall, or a Villain tries to bat it away.” He introduced himself, while the other holographic flanking him showed motion pictures depicting his previous activities as the aforementioned Hero.

Vince and the rest of the crowd were quite interested, to say the least.

Spier then turned off the holographic projectors. “Most of you, with high school graduation as a recent memory, will remember that your teachers back then had you specialize very much on what your Quirk needed most, and helped you create many of your special moves. We will not be doing that; by this point, your poise with your powers shall only need true experience to be refined, which you can only receive by facing opponents of equal or greater sense than you of what they can accomplish with their strengths. We will not help you discover new special moves, though you are
welcome to keep finding them; we will only help you become more inventive and effective with them. Every university, let alone Vanevery’s, has expectations of those coming into them, and this is what we expect from you - only freshmen, and yet just a few steps from the door starting your career as Pro Heroes. It’s a heavy responsibility on you all... But an awesome one.” Spier paused for a moment, before asking one more thing. “Are we being unfair?”

The students in the classroom all shook their heads in refusal.

“Very good. For today, no combat training will commence, we shall only establish what sort of training that will entail, which we will do at the end. For now, we will move on to regular-subject education, which will take up most of your time here, though two thirty-minute breaks will be in order.” Spier took one of the colored textbooks from the master table behind him and opened it up. “We will begin with some mathematics. Specifically, calculus.”

More than half of the crowd groaned, while producing their textbooks.

Hours of ordinary education followed, moving on from pure mathematics to physics, and then to general history and English. Finally, when dusk was closely approaching, Spier called it a day, and left the students off with the scheduling for practical exercises.

“Alright...” The professor closed up his textbook and checked his watch. “It looks like this will be the end of instruction for today. I did promise you all that I would be briefly explaining our training itinerary for throughout the semester. Training will occur every day, with Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays going between 11 A.M. to 2 P.M., where the times before and after are reserved for regular ed and participation in the Battlegrounds. Tuesdays and Thursdays are shorter, with 11 A.M. to 1:30 P.M., and the weekends are reserved for one-on-ones with me by appointments that can last up to an hour. Vanevery focuses on making you as well-versed in your Division as possible, so, especially for you first-years, we will include all ranges of combat, and intermediate-level training and higher on some self-defense weapons seen today. Appointment training will be scheduled by you, so be sure you’re not wasting your time exploring things you already know, or believe you know, well enough. Am I clear?” Spier noted.

The students, as they are packing up, nodded in agreement.

“Very good. Take off, then. See you all tomorrow.” The professor motioned to the door. Everyone funneled out accordingly.

Vinnie strolled his way back to his dorm at Graden Halls. Upon opening the door, he realized that Stephen had already returned before him and was making some supper in their personal kitchen.

“Aha! Hey Vinnie!” Choi made a quick hand raise before proceeding on his handiwork.

“Steve.” Vinnie tossed his one-strap backpack onto the nearby couch. “What you making back there?” He stepped closer.

“Guksu noodles. Japchae specifically.” Choi answered, sprinkling some mugwort into the skillet before continuing to stir it.

“Oh, Korean cuisine.” Vince confirmed.

“You’ve had it before?” Stephen looked up at him.

“Part of my tour across East Asia featured the seas surrounding the peninsula. The ship captain liked to award the men and ladies with authentic dishes.” Vinnie clarified.
“Hmph, I’ve probably got nothing special for you, then.” Choi continued stir-frying.

“If you made a sample for myself, I’ll tell you. Honestly, I’m a pretty easy guy when it comes to food.” Vince beamed.

“Alright, I’ll serve you a dish.” Stephen smiled back.

And so, the duo had their fill of fried noodles with a few hours before it became fully-fledged nighttime and the Initiation Night, as conducted by freshmen RAs Clements and Knight, was about to begin.

Vinnie and Stephen both walked out of their dorm, with the former clad only in a pair of jeans, a graphic tee, and a windbreaker. Stephen was much more maturely clad, busting out a smoke-silver suit. “You’re going to be the bell of the ball, if there is one, Steve.” He commented.

“Well, Clements never said whether we should dress up or down.” Choi defended the pulling of his dark-blue necktie.

“Alright, Tommy Ford. Before we head down, I did arrange to meet with some people so that we could attend Initiation together. I also did tell them that you would be glad to go with them. That would be a correct assumption, yeah?” Vince asked.

“Of course. The more the merrier, as they say. So long as they aren’t as stuck-up as those upperclassmen we confronted.” Stephen nodded.

“Good. They should be at our common room.” Vinnie led the way. A couple dozen seconds later, the duo met up with another.

Jane stopped leaning on the back of a leather sofa upon recognizing who she and Yu-Ling were waiting on. “Vinnie, great to see you again.” She happily announced. She was clad in a short-sleeved navy tunic with a side buckle, over black leather accents over white leggings, and high-heeled, rhinestone-embellished sneakers.

“Indeed. Good evening to you, Vince.” Yu-Ling bowed. Her attire presented a more festive mood, complete with a one-shoulder pop-idol T-shirt, ragged denim shorts, multiple bracelets on her arms, anklets, and combat boots.

“Whoa! Vinnie, these are the pals you had in mind?” Choi was surprised.

Vince looked legitimately perplexed. “Indeed they are. There an issue on that?”

“Oh no no. Just that you already know a pair of fine ladies, and it’s only been the first day.” Stephen now seemed to transition towards envious.

“Heh, Jane and I had a little more than a day honestly. Second Review team-up and whatnot.” Choi corrected the notion.

“Day one is still going, Mister...” Yu-Ling delightfully but insistently gazed towards Vinnie with some motioning gestures, interested to know his roommate’s name.


“Glad to meet you, Mister Choi. If you want a lady friend made on day one, I’m open to being that one.” Yu-Ling bowed. “Support major myself, and Jane’s in Defense.
Choi pulled on his collar rather hastily. “Why, very generous of you.”

“Interesting to find how small the world can become when a university just begins getting public, huh? A semester back, I doubt this school would’ve seen a Taiwanese, a Korean, and a Japanese mingling.” Yu-Ling refocused and acknowledged.

“An interesting observation, Miss Yu-Ling. A very intriguing one, even.” Vinnie pointed.

“Exquisite, I’d say!” Choi extended, before having the two of them come together in a big ol’ Pacific embrace, which they agreed to.

“I’m feeling the coldness of my ethnic land here, while I see a trio of East Asians coming together all grandlike...” Jane hugged her own triceps in an attempt to “gain warmth”.

“We have open arms, Jane.” Vinnie and Yu-Ling both let her in.

“Ah, this really is grand.” She stated as she was sandwiched into the middle.

After the festivities were through, the four continued down to ground level.
Vince, Stephen, Jane, and Yu-Ling descended down a central spiral staircase to the Graden Halls No. 2 lobby and entrance.

“So, Yu-Ling. That’s a beautiful name, by the way.” Stephen remarked.

“Oh, thank you.” Yu-Ling appreciated the feedback.

“It mean anything in particular? We know those Oriental types, deep stuff in anything they put their mind to.” Stephen asked, looking back.

“My parents really put it together for the sake of rolling off the tongue, but I think they appreciated the preciousness of its message when I searched it up as well. ‘Yu’ means delightful, and ‘Ling’ means spirit.” She replied.

“Well, you really do embody that ideal if I have an opinion that matters.” Stephen asserted, almost entrancingly.

“You’re so kind, Stephen.” Yu-Ling again showed much gratitude. “Your name is similarly strapping to speak aloud too, I’ll have you know.”


“Looks like our roommates are really taking a liking to each other, aren’t they?” Jane, leading the charge, said quietly to Vinnie the runner-up.

“You think they’re expecting us to play the wing-people?” Vinnie grinned.

“Oh, those scenarios never work out, so if they are, they best cut it out.” Jane laughed. Vinnie
couldn’t help a snicker either.

Eventually, the four got out of the building and joined the outskirts of a five-hundred strong audience, awaiting the RAs to make the announcement to proceed.

“So, I forgot to mention to you, Vince, that while you made two lady friends, I too have made some acquaintances. During another visit to the dining hall no less!” Choi stated.

“That’s good to hear, Stephen. Are they nearby?” Vinnie asked.

Stephen took a second to scope the horizon of heads before answering. “Of course they are. Right there!” He pointed. “Ralph! Sanya! Over here!”

Two notable figures looked towards the source of the calling voice. The man looked Central or Western European, with very dark-grey hair and notable patches of fur going from his cheeks to his neck. The woman was identifiably Russian, with fading-blonde curls and sunflower-colored eyes, but otherwise without any other immediately distinguishing traits.

Choi grew with excitement as they approached. “Hey, you two!”


“I see you made some new company here.” The man started, proceeding to perform quick special handshake with the Korean.

“Ha! Well, gotta spread the love somehow.” Choi grinned before refocusing. “Ralph, Sanya, these happen to be my roommate Vince, and his two new friends Jane and Yu-Ling.” He introduced.

“Greetings.” Vince tipped a metaphysical cap.

“Yo!” Jane waved.

“Pleasure is ours.” Yu-Ling bowed.

“Ooh, they’re friendly.” Ralph complimented.

“I heard that we’re going to be on boats, fit for groups between seven and eleven. Want to join us and form a group on one of them?” Yu-Ling gazed between the new duo.

“I don’t see why not.” Sanya beamed.

“We could make do with at least one more, then. Anybody know anyone else that’s not already locked to another faction?” Vinnie looked amongst the coalition.

Everyone murmured unfavorably to the inquiry.

“Oh! Vince, what about Hayley?” Jane suggested.

“Haven’t seen her since the Second Review. Probably already lost in a group within the crowd.” Vince countered, before taking a beat. “Or... She’s hanging out on the sidelines, like she did before the Second Review. The furthest of the sidelines.” Vince looked around the entrance area of the middle Graden Hills building once more, eventually finding who he was looking for, leaning on the adjacent walls to the door. “Hayley Celestin.”

“Wha-!!” Hayley looked towards him with utterly frantic surprise. “Oh, Vince?”
Vince called over Jane and the rest. “Found her!”

Jane walked up first. “Still the troubled loner in need of some finding?”

Hayley once more stood up to Jane’s taunts. “Not this time! Nah, I was just waiting for two people I’ve gotten together with to show up around here. Play a little prank on them, like you two did with me!” She bounced back.

Choi cavalierly scoped around. “Where are your two acquaintances?”

“Well…” Hayley similarly took to examining her surroundings. In a little more time that it took for her inquirer to discover, she did eventually locate and identify a pair. “Them!” She gestured at them before dashing towards their backs. “He-hey, fellows!” She pounced onto their backs, throwing her arms across their far shoulders and peeking her head in between theirs.

“Oh! Hello, Hayley.” The woman, revealed to be yet another East Asian, turned to face her at point-blank. She boasted high cheekbones, royally-curled lavender hair, and... Folded-down, raccoon-like ears near the top of her head.

Vinnie looked pleasantly surprised to find another Japanese in Vanevery University, judging by her undeniably Kyushu accent.

“Man, where the Hell were you?” The other one, either of African or Haitian descent, and boasting a dark-brown buzz cut (with wind outline styling), and teal eyes, spoke.

“Waiting on all of you! I told you to meet up relatively close to that tree in the front of the second building!” Hayley reminded.

“Dear, we’re not more than twenty steps away. That’s relatively close if you ask me.” The Japanese woman bounced back.

“Argh. Impossible…” Hayley looked ticked once more. She then looked behind her, realizing that the other six were still there. “Right. All of you - Vinnie, Jane, er- Stephen, Yu-Ling, Ralph, and... Sanya! These two are Hinata Alcott and Michael Winters.” She introduced to the rest.

-Hm, I can only wonder sometimes how else people unveil their friends to fellow friends on the daily. This could get pretty difficult or tedious sooner or later.-

“Greetings.” The other six bowed.

“Pleasure’s all ours.” Hinata rose up, synced with Michael.

Jane rose back up. “So how did you come to befriend Hayley?”

“Ha. Really, she came to us, brought us together. It’s likely she was just desperate to begin making a-” Michael was interrupted.

“Oh, that’s enough about that!” Hayley lightly bashed an elbow into Michael’s side. “So, now you know. What brings you here?” She asked Vinnie and Jane.

“Well, the two of us did have you in mind when we were building up this here group of ours.” Jane put her hand to her hip.

“Ah, so you were hoping to recruit me? Now who’s the lonely one, eh?” Hayley confidently spoke, certain that she has finally one-upped the duo’s teasing.
Vinnie elected not to speak, instead only slightly turning his head to the crew. Stephen leered similarly to him, and they both shared smug smiles.

“Oh bollocks, I suppose you’re right - you’ve got some grand company. I’m sure the three of you can use that extra boat space later on real well. We’ll be off, leave ya to it.” Jane started walking the other way.

Hayley’s forehead vein was going to pop. “Low blow.”

“No disrespect, Hinata-san and Michael.” Vinnie assured them.

“None taken.” Hinata close her eyes, tilted her head and beamed.

“Okay, enough. Since you guys are so reliant on me, I’ll be glad to join your crew. Under the condition that you guys are into it.” Hayley looked back towards her duo.

“No drama here.” Mike held out his hands.

“Welcome aboard!” Stephen announced.

The now nine-strong party were able to chat for another minute before the Initiation Event was to proceed.

“Attention, all freshmen!” Clements, standing from a throw-podium and yelling from a megaphone, called out to everybody.

“And women!” Sasha, the other RA, added on, with an amplifier of her own. Everyone turned to face the two.

Vinnie once more found a smile on his face when he took notice of the female RA.

“Welcome to the Initiation Event! Every student who enters Vanevery University goes through this hosted ceremony. Now, I know what you all have got in the back of your minds.” Clements began.

“We know because we had thought so when we were where you all stood before!” Sasha once again backed up.

“‘Oh God, what could that nightmarish headmaster have planned for us, hidden under the guise of a celebration to our admission?’” Clements iterated.

“Yeah, just so you know, Headmaster Dysart was not the first to dupe you all like she did; the adept skill to do so is almost a part of the application process to be one for Vanevery!” The female Resident Advisor remarked.

“Relax - This event has no involvement with any of the professional staff and faculty of this esteemed institution. All support and preparation is done by us and the other RAs.” Clements gestured down in an effort to comfort the crowd. “Admit it; a good bunch of you skipped a heartbeat or two, didn’t you?” He comically asked.

Of the nine, three (Hayley, Hinata, and Stephen) had an obvious expression of relief, in spite of any objections they would have vehemently made in denial.

“So, what is going to happen? Well, we will begin with a confirmation of what we may have told a few of you earlier before - A several-minute boat ride, ala Hogwarts, down the glorious
“Charles River near our campus, into the beautiful Boston Harbor. From there, we will continue sailing.” Clements started up.

“Without sails.” Sasha quickly blurted out.

“Yes, without sails, until we reach the Second Review Island.” Clements continued.

Now everyone was forming beads of sweat on the backs of their heads.

“No no, we’re not putting up another testing regime. Or even a training session. We just set up a nice little camp there; lots of tents, grills, food on the grills, drinks, campfires, you name it. The group you formed on the boat you rode on will correspond to a certain campfire; you’ll know which when your operator/sailor identifies it for you. You all will sit around said campfire, and discuss, jumpstarting the networking for all you desperately solo folk.” Clements finished.

“A good hint: telling what you did during your part of the Second Review tends to be a great topic.” Sasha noted. Vinnie continued to pay extra-close attention to that order.

“That’s it! That’s all there is to it! Now, how about we start marching towards the riverside, and lets get sailing, everybody!” Clements ordered.

And so they did. Within a few minutes, everyone was at the specialized docks and swarming into each of the roughly eighty mid-sized barges. When they were all confirmed to have been settled in, the formation proceeded down the river.

Stephen looked over the edge of the dinghy. “Wow, this water is almost perfectly clear.”

“No disrespect, Stephen, but is your South Korea still dealing with pollution issues?” Yu-Ling curiously walked up to and asked him.

“None taken. It has become better, but it ain’t on this level. Not by a longshot.” He turned back to answer, before looking at the aquatic body once more.

“I wouldn’t be surprised. Once a country has a Pro Hero like Adamale, it’s not right for that country to continue having impure H2O.” Yu-Ling continued on.

“Adamale? That’s a name I haven’t heard in ages.” Michael looked towards them.

“One of the original Pro Heroes; second one in America.” Ralph identified.

“Yeah, and that’s why during his downtime, Adamale helped to design an inexpensive, mass-purification system that could be applied to all of the nation’s waters, not just to increase our supply, but kickstart another process to restoring the beauty of our surroundings despite our ever-persisting urbanization.” Vinnie explained.

“That’s pretty cool of him.” Sanya complimented.

“Yeah. People living in NYC a century ago wouldn’t dare imagine that they could eventually drink out of the Hudson. And yet Yu-Ling and I have cupped our hands for sips every time we walked home from middle school.” Jane compressed Yu-Ling’s shoulders.

“How does it work?” Hinata crossed her arms in curiosity.

“Nanomachines dumped into all bodies of water that break down and transport said hazardous waste upon it breaking the surface to a warp-gate placed inside a sub-lithosphere reinforced waste
pit. Now for all of you who are probably horrified to think that we’ve inevitably been drinking these same particles, don’t worry; they are programmed to replicate themselves within the water at a cyclical rate (like our cells!). And it’s been encouraged to do so, as these particles would happily help us get rid of stomach bugs before being disintegrated by our stomach acids days later.” Vinnie extended.

“You seem to know quite a deal about all of this, Vincent.” Sanya tilted her head at him.

“Yeah - you’re an electronics engineer, not civil.” Stephen was also confused.

“Because I believe that anything and everything can be interesting. And once I find something that interests me, I’ll stop at nothing to find out more about it.” Vince beamed.

“Heh. A respectable ambition.” Ralph crossed his arms with satisfaction.

That’s so Vinnie... Jane looked away, smiling.

The barge ride down river and towards the delta continued on for another few minutes, with folks marveling at Boston’s skyscrapers and park scenes creating a background with a fresh mix of silhouettes and U-LED lights. It had then reached the harbor, where a fleet of other barges nearby proceeded to fire a set of pyrotechnics, briefly illuminating the skies above the water, creating yet another breathtaking reflection upon its surface.

“All these grand displays for us?” Hinata looked up at the flares.

“Yeah, several boat companies pitched in to form their conventional fireworks show; all we did was help coordinate their movements.” One TA on the mobile boat noted.

“Some strangers taking time out of their way for this? That’s rather admirable.” Sanya clasped her hands together.

Vinnie leaned on the sill of the barge’s edge, lost in a thought. People love a new Pro Hero in this world, no doubt about that, Headmaster Dysart spoke. A Pro Hero... [T]hat everyone could trust and rely on, that’s the whole package. She continued. Boston has a lot of faith in Vanever students. Just for being here, there’s the idea that we are all dependable by leagues, so they’re showing their appreciation. Vince also crossed his arms and grinned, joining his group in marveling the sights.

The last few fireworks helped for the various barges to locate the Second Review Island near the center of Boston Harbor, revealing to everyone its location. They continued drifting towards the destination, hitting shore on some docks on its east side.

“Our campfire is this way - follow me.” The TA noted to the nine of them, with all behind him in tow.

“Hey mate,” Stephen walked up to stroll parallel to him. “Those RAs, Clements and Knight, all of this really was just them, for sure? I can all but imagine at least one of us having a heart attack if Headmaster Dysart had any hand in this.” He asked the official.

“Worried for yourself there, Steve?” Vinnie smirked. Jane and the rest of the guys couldn’t help but utter a quick scoff or two, much to Choi’s brief ire.

The unidentified RA turned to everyone like a man possessed. “Do not doubt Sasha’s word for a second.” He solemnly stated.
The nine stood erect with sudden preoccupation.

One blink later from the guide and he looked back to normal. “Moving on...”

The group turned to looking at each other as they continued following.

_Students and faculty alike all have their amounts of atypicality, hm?_ Sanya whispered.

Nevertheless, the nine found their camping spot around a perfectly-arranged campfire for the evening, rather close to the coastline facing the downtown skyscrapers. After receiving their refreshments in the form of multiple dishes off the grill (or salads for the vegetarian kind) and waters, energy drinks, or sodas, they came together to, as the RAs had intended, discuss.

“Wow, so that’s where your experience in trauma care came from.” Jane pointed out before taking a sip from a BEAST energy drink can.

“Indeed. Though they can be devastating, they are nowhere near your level, even now.” Vince remarked, holding up his Navy Hospital Corpsman dog tags. It could be seen that there are advanced U-LED display screens on each one, alternating between displaying his mugshot and vitals. The lower engravings also revealed that his rating is Private, First Class. He put them away soon afterward. “And I really have my father, a biomedical engineer, for teaching me all that I know about the commonalities in the human body.” He noted.

“Do you still plan to keep going with the Navy after you’re done here?” Stephen asked.

“Who knows? I’ve already served for three years. Certainly, there are things I’ll miss if I want to move from Leave to Discharge. But can’t really juggle Pro Hero and soldiers at once, you get me?” Vince bounced back.

“Three years. I presume after graduation from high school, right?” Michael suggested, gesturing with his half-eaten cheeseburger.

“Yeah. Straight out. But that’s something to marvel about American institution, right? Not many other places you will be able to see people graduate not within twenty-one and twenty-three years old.” Vince asserted.

“As an early thirties person myself, I cannot even begin to agree more.” Hinata smiled so brightly, she once more closed her eyes to compensate.

“Whoa, ‘early thirties’!?” Stephen rosed up from his wooden stump spot.

“Yes. That an issue?” Hinata turned to him.

“Oh no! No no. Just thought you were in your mid-twenties at the most! You’ve been aging really well!” He backtracked.

“Why thank you. Honestly, the reason that may be the case is because I’m still cared for very well. Were it just me, I would be quite the slob.” She downplayed the compliment.

“Ah don’t be saying that hogwash, little lass. You’re very much beautiful at any angle there is, under the sun or night.” Jane assured her. Now Hinata began blushing deeply.

“How about you, Jane? What’s your secret to remaining proper-looking, despite school hectics and caring for your, as you call it, ‘devil-siblings’?” Ralph questioned.
“Hey, only I can call them devils.” Jane refocused. “But to answer your question, it’s all a matter of showing you’ve got the iron fist; not your parents. Kids inherently believe that our old people have the final say - I know because I was the same way until my teens, so that’s why your younger siblings don’t always follow your words. Show them otherwise, and they will cave. At least until you have to remind them again, which is a variable time. Until then, you have all the time you need to do whatever else is your fancy, such as taking care of yourself.” She answered.

“Ah ah ah!” Yu-Ling raised an index finger.

“What’s up, Yu-Ling?” Vinnie queried.

“Jane, aren’t you leaving a certain detail in the beginning out?” She confidently stared at her. For the first time, Jane actually looked flustered. She then turned to everyone else. “When Jane here became more and more of a latchkey child because the old folks had to work more post-noon hours, she was also relegated to afternoon parenting. The first week of this, she really let herself go. It took my insistence for her to reveal the issue, and a few weeks of instruction to finally get her capable of taking care of everyone.” Yu-Ling extended.

“Grr. Imploring to reveal, more like.” Jane pouted.

“Perhaps. But anything to prevent the kids from drinking cola rather than milk mix.” Her roommate and longtime friend shook her head before biting into a hamburger. Everyone save for her and Jane threw a miniature fit of laughter at the end of the duel.

Ralph focused up. “Hmm, so we all got to speak of ourselves a little more tonight... Except for you, Hayley.” The German looked over to her.

Hayley stopped midway through her own fit. “What you talking about? I told you I frequented neon nightclubs in my youth!” She was quick to counter.

“Oh yeah! Jane, you remember that one time we both bought plane tickets back to my ethnic homeland?” Yu-Ling inquired.

“Indeed I do. Taiwan loves its share of nightlife too. You showed yourself to be quite the ballroom dancer too; I recall that vividly.” Jane replied.

“Ahahah, I wouldn’t say I’m any good, but I certainly do love to groove.” The other New-Yorker affirmed.

Hayley looked more than a little relieved.

“I have another revelation; there was the intent for us to speak all about what we did on this very island, especially within the confines of the city over there.” Vince took a moment to point towards the silhouettes of many man-made constructs in the distance. “And I think we could pretty much skip it all if we continued our untraveled path. But honestly, I think we all are curious about how each and every one of us is standing here and now, victorious as we inevitably were. Why don’t we go straight to it, then?” Vinnie suggested.

“I have no qualms.” Hinata looked between everyone else.

“Who wants to go first?” Hayley asked around.

Vinnie, Jane, and Hayley all went first, telling their group of how they met through fighting Ambiance, along with some of their own individual adventures during the Second Review, including the gymnasium extraction and fighting another few Villains.
“You actually tried fighting a Double-A Villain without using your Quirk?” Michael couldn’t help a few snickers while and after speaking.

“I have my reasons.” Vince tried to demote the matter.

“Hey, I fought him when he was mostly subduing his Quirk earlier; he can hang with the best of them.” Stephen punched his shoulder.

“Now that, I don’t know.” Vince refocused. “So what’s your story, Steve? How’d you get in?” The roommate inquired.

“Heh, a fantastic question!” Stephen refastened his necktie before speaking again. “Now me and a fellow acquaintance were on SR Island - they were referring to it as The Bronx, wouldn’t you know.” He remarked.

“Pff, no way they could fool a pair of NY gals that display was The Bronx, especially if we were on the island during that test, right Yu-Ling?” Jane slung an arm across her childhood friend’s shoulders.

“Absolutely not.” Yu-Ling grinned back.

“Ahem, my story?” Stephen refocused. “So, one of our crowning achievements was that we had to save an entire apartment complex full of hostages after a Dynamite Villain incited a massive fire. Now, my Cold-Hard Rain would naturally be able to put out fires, even big ones, but they can’t go through walls, glorious as they are. Luckily this is where my teammate came in; he had Layout, which allowed him to recognize and mildly alter the architecture of the building. So he folded out the windows, positioned gutters, and raised ledges so that I could drop an entire cloud’s worth of precipitation. And the crowd rejoiced; drenched and freezing, but also alive and happy. Hero points were well-amassed that day, and when the event concluded, it was almost a cinch I was getting in. Not sure where my ally went. But I’m sure he’s going to do well anywhere too. Oh yeah- People began finding out about the illusion when one noticed my cloud was phasing in some capacity when I was raising it higher to contend with one flying Villain. Not as resourceful or intuitive, I suppose, as how you three found out, but yeah.” Choi concluded.

“A great story, Stephen.” Yu-Ling complimented.

“You think so? That gratitude is incredibly splendid. And well-appreciated, if I’m allowed to say so.” The Korean reacted.

“Indeed. Myself, I relegated to the rather menial duty of escorting the displaced, and protecting them using my Panels, in a fictional representation of Denver. There was one moment too, when I was in one of those large rescue parties, alongside a Gearbox Quirk user. At one point, a set of Villains ambushed us, though their direct attack was a setup to another dastardly one toppling the top half of a building onto the lot of us. We all owe our lives to that Gearbox person, who used the leverage in his cogs in order to return the section to an upright stance. All I did was make sure that the fragmented pieces of the toppled section did not fall off in the meantime. To do so, I manifested my repulse panels parallel, and in close proximity to the building, acting as a secondary arm as the whole infrastructure was vertically straightened. Outside of that, our group, according to the Headmaster at the conclusion of the Second Review, noted we had extracted the most pedestrians out of anyone, which probably constituted a high sway for enrollment here.” Yu-Ling explained.

“I think you’re undermining all that you’ve done, little missy. No doubt you and a lot of others would have your time cut short if you didn’t intervene like that.” Ralph noted.
“I don’t know about that, we also had a Cenotapher user; he could’ve supported the fallen structure just as easily by reinforcing the bottom into a rigid pseudo-mausoleum.” Yu-Ling downplayed further.

“Perhaps, but you probably had to keep that Gearbox person safe while retaining the panels, right? No way a Cenotapher could’ve done that too.” Hinata responded.

“Perhaps as well…” The Taiwanese lady was beginning to consider more credit.

“Hinata, good of you to speak up. I’m sure you have quite the story, too?” Jane bowed her head towards her.

“Well, unlike Yu-Ling, I was very purely the help. With my Degree Anchor, I made sure my colleagues remained unaffected by the extreme temperatures, such as when some of us developed heat stroke, or to freeze up some water bottles we salvaged. Oh- in Tallahassee, believe it or not. Michael knows all about the rest.” She delegated the other half of the story.

“Indeed I do. She was very good at making places cool enough for me to come in and douse burning buildings with my Ashen Fealty. We also came up with a rather nasty trick for the less-effective Villains by obscuring all of their view in a small area by using my grey haze, and then Hinata uses her Degree Anchor to spike the temperature of their bloodstream, making it boil their insides and incapacitating them, so it wasn’t all help.” He nodded.

“That sounds so practical, yet devious at the same time.” Hayley sounded marginally impressed by the description.

“I suppose that leaves only myself and Ralph. We were in Selma, and with me being a Centeraxis user and Ralph an Aggregation user, we operated as trappers. We set up choke points within the alleys and small streets of the Second Review Island and permitted passage to the participants and who they brought with them, while using our Quirks to pin down the Villains that chased after them. Word got around of our skills, so when a central hub for protecting the public was established, we were notified to help fortify the place. Our leadership in that regard left us rather isolated still from the troupe, but perhaps led to our good word for enrollment, same as the morals you all have exhibited.” Sanya relayed.

“I’m noticing that none of you mentioned how exactly the Review ended for all of you. You know, how Vinnie mentioned that he was able to hotwire an emergency call for transports. How’d you know the test was over without that?” Jane wondered.

“Well, actually, none of us in the Tallahassee SR actually found out we were being duped. I certainly don’t have your know-how for electronics, Vincent, so I didn’t try to do that. I guess we can imagine that no one did, in fact. The Headmaster eventually just reverberated a powerful voice telling us to rendezvous somewhere, as if she was God.” Hinata shook her head.

“Ditto for myself. I did, however, notice a peculiarity that I could not decipher until the answer was thrown at my feet; at one point I called for a Singularity that siphoned the nearby clouds so that a SolRad user wouldn’t be bothered by them, but some clouds bent into a vertex rather than twirled; a dead giveaway now that I think about it.” Ralph mentioned.

“Yu-Ling? What about you?” Jane turned to her best friend.

She gave a quick smile. “You know that in addition to my MA training, I also learned dance. And believe me, I can tell when the ball of my foot takes a foreign drilling, however weak it feels. And when they did that before the Headmaster even blinked the lot of us onto Denver, something
was up. But ultimately, I too didn’t put two and two together.” Yu-Ling explained.

“All our words, at some point, return to the Headmaster before long. Who can honestly say that the most intriguing thing about their school is the one in charge of it?” Michael scratched the sticker off of his glass bottle.

“You know, I’m starting to think I’ve had enough surprises out of this campus to last four lifetimes now.” Hayley slouched back and crossed her arms. “Please, don’t bring up that mystery again. Or any, for that matter.” She asked them all to settle down.

“You wandered into the wrong profession to be asking mysteries to rear their ugly heads away from you, Hayley.” Jane grinned, with everyone else chuckling.

Hayley couldn’t help a groaning sigh as she clutched her forehead.

“Hey! Come on!”

The raised stray voice alerted the nine as they all looked towards its source. There, they found one group of seven, with their campfire being tampered with, and their food being thrown sand onto, by another faction.

“What’s all you guys’ problems?” The yeller’s cohort interrogated.

“Look at you underclassmen, sitting proudly in spots you only earned through what the outside calls diversity.” One of the instigators asserted.

“Quite... Literally underclassed.” Another of the punks reiterated.

Choi took a closer look at them. “Vinnie...” He vehemently called.

“Yeah, I know, Steve.” Vinnie replied.

“What? What do you guys know about that?” Sanya queried.

“We had a run-in with these folks on the first day of the semester.” Vince answered.

“Vinnie went to get a drink in the dining hall. Those entitled pricks cut right before him, and made a sideways line that ensured he would be waiting a good while for it.” Choi described.

“Gosh, that’s awful of them.” Yu-Ling reacted.

“Damn right it is. It’s why I didn’t really want to go to this place initially - snobby preps. Can make well-do without them.” Jane crossed her arms aggressively.

“Can we do something about it now, Vince?” Stephen was getting angrier by the second.

“Now that it’s not just us, totally.” Vinnie nodded.

“I’m coming with; let’s teach ‘em some humility.” Jane pounded a fist.

“Oh, we’re not skipping on that action. Come on, all of you.” Michael rose up, goading the rest to do the same. Immediately, the party walked up to the seven infiltrating upperclassmen in a tight, arrowhead formation.

One of them noticed their impending arrival, of which Vince recognized as the grassy-green buzzcut that first cut him. “Hey, look who’s also here!” He identified him too.
His closest ally, a curly lavender-hair, 6’3” tall man, was the first to respond. “Ah, it’s the East-Asian who did his best to stand his ground before the lot of us.” He then turned his attention towards Stephen. “And his likewise, hotheaded colleague.”

“Forget those two though, look at the rest. Token world lottery we got here. Just seem to be missing... Antarcticans.” A woman in the team announced.

“What’s the chip on all of your shoulders, the Vanevery Vested? We’re just here to enjoy the Initiation Ceremony.” Vince questioned. “And honestly, your taunts seem to be hurting you more than it does us.” He further remarked.

“Huh, we were right to peg you as the dumb one, after you didn’t step down earlier!” An ombre-colored mane in the back countered.

“You ought to know that during the years we came in here, back when it was the glorious private era, only a hundred came through. We worked way harder to get in than any of you.” The first of the girls exposited.

“That’s a bullshit assessment; what makes you think it isn’t because the rest of your SR peers just wasn’t up to snuff?” Jane angrily uttered.

“Shut up, immigrant Scottish bitch!” The light-purple retorted.

“You’re talking to a New Yorke - and obviously fightin’ Irish, thank you very much - native, asshole! Perhaps you’ve had too many elderberries for the year?” Jane tried rushing in, but Yu-Ling properly held her back. “Or maybe your dad had as much just before he ploughed your mum about two decades ago!” She theorized.

“An unlikely assertion by the way, little miss!” He yelled back, before calming himself with the intervention of his presumed leader.

“The bottomline is, you all are the bottomline, undeserving of being in Vanevery University.” The green-haired one stated.

“Oh, we’re the bottomline? What about you guys? Hasn’t Vanevery been in trouble during the Festival of Five for the last three years? You sophomores haven’t exactly been shuffling the deck in your favor either!” Ralph noted.

“We’re the best they’ve seen in the last half-decade, no question.” Another woman, with ultramarine locks, stated. She took a bit to take in the gravitas of the statement, however.

“This semester can do better.” Michael bounced back.

“Stop lying to yourselves! We’d wipe the floor against any and all of you. We’d do it in a heartbeat too, if it meant that you’d all be put in your places.” The green-haired one finalized.

Vinnie, who has yet to try to speak up or over them, could feel several drops of spit being thrown his way in the meantime. He merely closed his eyes and slowly wiped them away. “Do you want to bet on that?” He softly announced.

The leader began forming a smirk. “Heh, what’d you say?” He interrogated.

“I expected the Vested to be great listeners, seeing as how you all quipped my earlier request for clarification. But I will repeat my statement regardless: Do. You. Want. To bet on that?” Vinnie finally looked up. With a grin.
“You? Want to fight us? Got a deathwish?” The leader once again spoke with arrogance.

“No. I just don’t like bullies. If you’re so confident that we’re not what Vanevery needs right now, then why don’t you prove it?” Vinnie grinned.

“You won’t be beating shit, you little cocky...” The newest responder looked around for a second to think. “...Fuck! Not against any of us, let alone against our prez!” The Vested’s second completed his bounce-back.

“Alright, let’s change the bracket; why don’t all of you prove it? You seven against seven of us. If we win, the lot of you leave our entire Class alone.” Vince reformed.

“What do we get if we win?” The ombre interrogated.

“Your plan was to sweep all of us, right? Well you certainly will try to do that... Against us on live television.” Vince commented.

“Ah, this Saturday we’re fighting in the Battlegrounds...” The leader nodded. “Very well - it’s on. Who we dealing with?” He threw his hands out proudly.

“Naturally, I’m in.” Vinnie stepped closer to him. “Who is it before me?”

“Andrew Price. Remember the name... Bitch.” He identified himself.

Though he didn’t let it show, Vince’s head did sprout one bead of sweat upon hearing it.

“I can’t wait to wipe the grime off my boots. All of your collective grime.” Stephen joined his roommate.

“Me too - their stoned, shit-eating grins off their face for me though.” Jane reiterated.

“One would be forgiven to think that this enlightened day and age would be leagues above such scandalous lines by now.” Sanya stepped forth.

“That’s one of the few things I don’t smile at, Sanya.” Yu-Ling, wearing a determined but subdued scowl, explained her participation.

“Yeah, I’m going to fight these guys and girls to prove not all caucasians are inherent assholes.” Hayley joined the others.

“Me too. Needless to say some manners need to be taught to these hooligans who revel in brandishing silver suppositories.” Ralph was the last to proceed.

“Ready for 0-1s, all of you?” One of the women taunted after they all had their fill of announcements... And then some.

“In you wildest dreams.” Vince smiled.

The seven of them remained in a linear confrontation as the night’s minute drew on.
Arc 1: Realization of Preparation

Chapter Summary

With the Freshmen's matches set in stone against seven upperclassmen at Vanevery, the students must train up and study up for the big day. But with no assurance that anyone beyond them can be trusted with privacy on the campus, when and where might they be able to do just that?

The day after the Initiation Ceremony (making it Tuesday), all nine of the students that formed a group last night are seen going about their usual day at Vanevery University, biding their time through classes, course-ordained training and whatnot.

Once the hours were up, they were all happy to reunite in front of the recreation center and begin seriously training on their upcoming debut to the college Battlegrounds against the Vested... Until they found out that the private training rooms have been overbooked!

“Wait, what do you mean they’re entirely occupied?” Stephen, hoisting a large cylindrical duffel bag on his left shoulder, requested confirmation.

“That’s exactly how it is on the tin, sir. All of the private rooms are already in use, and cannot be filled by anyone else.” The official noted.

“How long before they’re vacant again?” Yu-Ling asked.

“Sunday afternoon.” The man rechecked his computer.

“That long?” Jane spoke aloud their collective surprise.

“Ma’am, I can tell you’re a bit new here; usually, students are only allowed to book up to half a day in each of our private training rooms. However, when you’re a student who has increasing seniority, former participation in the Festival of Five, or especially both, you have higher priority to the booths.” The desk operator elaborated.

“That’s unfortunate...” Vince sighed aside.

“Why’s that, Vinnie?” Sanya asked.

“Andrew Price placed 10th in the last Festival of Five. I double-checked the tourney results after first hearing the name again because I knew it sounded familiar.” He noted.

“Hm, it’s funny you say that name, sir. Because he checks out on almost all of them.” The official noted as he again looked at his monitor.

“That’s a surprise for us. Come on everybody, we’re not training here.” Jane hoisted her bag and led their collective out of the office.

“Not that we can do anything about this, but where will be training then?” Yu-Ling asked.

“Yeah, we can’t do anything except warm-ups or fitness in the public area; there’s a good
chance the Vested have supportive spies there hoping to find some juicy information on us.” Vince figured.

“Damn. I was going to suggest the nearby park, but students can frequent there too.” Ralph cursed himself.

“We’re going to have to do more than just stay in shape. Hmm...” Jane put her hand to her chin, deep in thought.

For the next few hours, the nine were venturing around, hoping to find another area where they could prepare for the Theatre of War... But nothing proved satisfactory, either due to lack of facilities or lack of privacy.

Eventually, night fell on Boston, and the nine freshmen and women could not fit in any meaningful training tonight, instead resorting to looking into their opponents, from the second floor common room of the middle Graden Halls building. Footage of Theatre of War and the Festival of Five Battlegrounds was being presented on the large U-LED screen, which was connected via HDMI 5.2 to Vince’s rugged laptop.

“Little Andy’s Spark Spawn, as the tourney HUD likes to indicate, allows him to form shiny specks from the friction of his hands that he can then choose to detonate into a concussive light fragmentation whenever he wishes, or maintain their burning effect instead. They are powerful enough to pierce all but pitch darkness, though it will suffer impact penalties, so he’s primarily a daytime Hero, and even then, his attacks can be situational because of the problem of moving shadows. But that hardly seems to slow him down, for some odd reason.” Jane noted. “Vince, how does your Nitro Blast compare to this?”

“Plasma often has higher mass than flint particles, so my projectile speed is slower, though I have a faster startup. And his sparks, like all others, are produced rather unpredictably, and can carpet a greater range than any blast I can make.” Vince analyzes.

“How much of a carpet? We both know you’re fast in other aspects too.” Stephen reiterated.

“I think you’re overestimating my skills there...” Vinnie countered.

“This Rayne Radley is the only other one in the Vested who participated in a previous Festival of Five, though everyone else in the party ain’t nothing to scoff at either.” Hayley pointed out, moving to the next available video file. It showcased the woman, revealed to be the same one with ultramarine hair from last night, manipulating a series of perfectly geometric-shaped containment fields to deal with her opponents. “Seems to be able to project force-fields that only the strongest in physical or elemental can break through, and that’s not accounting for equal reaction force to the invader.”

“She doesn’t seem to be able to manifest them without firing a beam that eventually enlarges to form a cage, and the distance is roughly proportionate to the final size.” Yu-Ling made an observation.

“I was noticing that too. Let’s see...” Hayley proceeds to copy the video footage onto two holographic projectors nearby and began making some calculations, using on-board 3D-programmed tools. “In fact, there seems to be the exact same formula that correlates the draw distance to the drawing. Rayne never seems to take any shorter than three feet to make a cage large enough for an under-six-foot person, which is probably the minimum distance. Her ability to continue doing this beyond that draw suggests there is a range.” She explained.
“Got here on a mathematics scholarship, have we, Hayley?” Jane looked curiously at her.

Hayley blushed, standing upright. “Something like that. My ability to bounce my lasers off my floating mirrors well requires a whole lot of spatial calculations.” She refocused. “Anyways, I doubt it’s anything uncommon. This guy here, Scott Rhodes, does a similar ability. He probably has it down better.” She noted, switching to the next Vanevery member; he had the buzz-cut blonde hair in the group.

“I doubt it. Missing many shots that you wouldn’t. See that? That’s what happens when you take the mundane for granted.” Vinnie adjusted the video to reveal.

“Jericho has a rather intriguing Quirk - a back that can produce a backpack that can shoot tons of missiles? Frickin’ what? I almost wish I had that!” Michael noted, taking the helm of the controls and scrolls to their next opponent.

“Playing up to Vinnie’s idea surprisingly, I’m more shocked by what Paladin Puma can do. Everything the American Mountain Lion can do, basically, such as jumping ten feet in the air from lying down, and always landing on his hands.” Hinata noted.

“At least Hall lands; this guy, Evander Cook, doesn’t have to.” Hayley swiped forward to reveal the next profile. “His entire modus operandi revolves around making as many tornadoes that he can, along with being one himself. He can generate vortexes of up to F4 damage (according to the Fujita Scale), but can only have it so that the funnel points up, as with all storms. This limits him to very close-range combat, though he’s shown to propel tornadoes short-range that have various upward arcs while dissipating.” She revealed.

“Hm, then finally there’s Pauline, or Luster as everyone calls her. She has a form of special-type ferrokinesis, exclusively for aluminum-brass alloys. Sounds rather tame, until you realize that combatically, she uses this to form hundreds of thin metallic whips. Though the metal can be susceptible to excess heat or cold, strumming them to form harmful, local soundwaves can provide the range advantage without costing her her weapons.” Vinnie noted, as they all watched the footage.

“Um, excuse me- No, I mean, hi there, all of you!” One new voice beckoned.

The nine all look back, finding that the caller was their RA, Thomas Clements!

“Forgive, I- Er, I heard about the fiasco you nine got involved with last night. I just wanted to say that nobody in the university had set them up to be there, nor were they condoning their actions. Vanevery really wants to take care of their own on the whole, and I just hope you all know that.” The male advisor reminded insistently.

“I don’t think anybody here blames you or the other bay-shirted officials there.” Jane put her hand to her hip.

“That so?” Clements breathed a great sigh. “That’s amazing to hear.” He then refocused. “Hm, I know it’s still about four days away, but I think your time would be best spent really training for the upcoming Saturday set, right? Studying up, you could do just as well during your class time, yeah?” He suggested.

“We would love to be hitting iron... Or each other even, right about now.” Yu-Ling reiterated. “But our advantage comes from the Vested not knowing anything about any of us, while we can actually look into them. We cannot afford to lose that element of surprise, especially against two former FoF participants.” She elaborated.
“And all of the private training booths at the rec centers have been booked. Zero bonus points for correctly guessing by whom on the first try.” Michael commented.

“I see... That is a big conundrum. I suppose you spent the rest of the lit day looking for a secluded spot?” Clements questioned.

“Indeed. But there’s always the possibility of being spied on.” Vinnie answered.

Abruptly, Thomas began looking a little more conflicted... Once more. “Then-” He cleared his throat. “Then I- Mmh, I really shouldn’t be telling you this.” He was gesturing so excessively to convince the others of how significant what he was getting across was.

“If you’re going to be in big trouble, save it, Clements. The lot of us signed up to this idea so we could save many others just that.” Jane stated.

“That may be, but if it means you all could be better prepared, then I’d say it’s worth risking my neck. After all, that is what an RA should do for the students they’re governing.” The resident advisor bounced back.

“Then what are your words of wisdom?” Sanya asked.

“There is a place where you can still train without any prying eyes. It’s a spot that the professors and faculty personally attend. Not just any student knows about it, let alone get to see it.” Clements started explaining.

“How do you know, then?” Ralph wondered.

“I was miraculously allowed to shadow a peer of mine who was invited... It was radical.” Clements refocused. “Anyways, the facilities are really effective, and it’s even more secluded than the private booths. There’s only one catch, though.” He cautioned.

“What is it?” Hinata inquired.

“Well, we aren’t invited, so we’re not supposed to be there. If we want to work at their gym, you have to do it during the hours they won’t be there. My peer was able to find a trend so that they could repeatedly go to it - 12:30 A.M. to 4:30 A.M.” Clements declared.

The nine are bewildered by the allotment.

“Let’s say we agree. Show us where it is.” Hayley nodded.

Clements showed the slightest hint of a smile. “Alright, follow me, one and all.”

When the clock struck past midnight, the nine freshmen tailed their resident advisor as they walked through the campus back to the teaching halls. Going into the Defense Division building and proceeding down into the basement, Clements then opens a reinforced metal door labeled “Lab Testing Room”, which led to a corridor to a second, less-impressive door. Clements proceeded to flash a special keycard, and the second door opened to an elevator, taking them all down further.

“Hm, no wonder no one knows this exists. In the heart of a rather limited Division, behind a corner nobody cuts, and behind two major signs of faculty-only specifications.” Vinnie analyzed prudently.

“You expect more, though, from a university being led by that remarkably-deceptive Headmaster.” Jane suggested.
“Rightfully so. But it was enacted a few decades ago that while the Headmaster can be as diabolical as he or she likes to her students while being within the effective sink-or-swim curve, the faculty ought to be exempt, so that their minds could be best put into helping said students.” Clements elaborated.

“Well, I guess they are looking out for us in the end, huh?” Mike postulated, giving a quick laugh immediately afterwards.

There was a silence for the rest of the elevator ride... For five seconds before the floor ding and announcement.

One S-shaped corridor later, and Clements opened up one final threshold, which revealed the training facilities at long last. Everyone, Clements included, was flabbergasted by seeing the dimensions of the gym.

“You know, I came here about half a dozen times and I’m still blown away...” The RA remarked to the others.

“This is the lavish facility?” Hayley looked around rather anxiously.

The faculty’s center was hardly impressive, boasting just three battle simulators, a small recuperation room, and a regular armed-forces grade weapon wall. Perhaps its only accomplishment was how large it was.

“Hey, I said it was effective, not nice.” Clements formed a grin.

“Even the loosely involved of the administration is capable of such dastardly deception? Oh dear...” Hinata held her mouths in an open palm.

“While the students of Vanevery, er, from the last years enjoyed various luxuries of training, the professors of the university did not boast such fanciness in their biography, save for the Headmasters, though even them shunned handouts in favor of finding out how everyone else became so effective without those. As such, the facility is how you see it; stripped of any unnecessary conveniences, just like how the Top Five Worldwide trained.”

“Of course...” Sanya flatly remarked.

“It’ll do, Clements. You best get outta here; if anyone catches us and asks how we know about this place, we’re not ratting you out.” Jane confirmed.

“I appreciate the concern. I would also like to mention that there is an emergency staircase straight out of this place too, if you take too long. Certainly beats going back up on the only elevator.” Clements noted.

“Sure would be useful. Thanks.” Vince nodded.

“Alright. Happy training.” The resident advisor signed off, departing up the way he came.

And so, the nine continued to train well through the rest of the night, and when they found that dawn was rapidly approaching, they hightailed it back to their dorms. Vince, Steve, Jane and Yu-Ling, being roommates, had no issue sneaking back in, though the rest had a little more difficulty not waking the peers in their rooms.

-Yes, I know you guys might be thinking this is not the most perfect plan, with us having to keep quite the secret and costing ourselves a hefty amount of shuteye. But really, isn’t that the case for...
any and all colleges, where all-nighters are commonly the name of the game? I’d say this is an efficient use of our time.-

This did not stop them from having classes on the same day less than four hours later though. Many of them were only just passing through that time, finding any opportunity they could to close their eyes for more than a blink. The end of the day couldn’t come fast enough.

But it did finally.

“Alright, looks like that’s the end of the final hour. Make sure to keep up on your game theory, for our first test in about two weeks will cover a good deal on that.” Professor Spier reminded his class.

“Yessir.” They mostly acknowledged before packing everything up and departing from the classroom. As seemed usual, Vinnie was one of the last to leave, and was coming up on the exit, until his teacher intervened.

“Hold on, Mr. Teshima. I’d like a word with you. In private.” The professor held out his hand in front of him as he was about to cross the exit threshold.

“Sure thing.” Vinnie steps out of the linear path, allowing the rest to depart. Though he was hiding it, Vinnie was having a high concern over what this might just be about, whether they’ve been discovered already or not. When all but the two have left, the professor closes the door for further privacy. “What’s up, Professor Spier?” He asked.

“Vincent, you need to realize that when you come on as the most energetic and enthusiastic student in the classroom back when the course first started, it becomes obvious to the lecturer when you’re not at that high level on any given day. Especially when that was only two days ago.” Spier explained. “Your technique a lot less refined, and tone much more relaxed. What happened, Vinnie?” He interrogated him back.

“You noticed?” Vinnie sighed. “I’ve been training late at night. You’ve heard about the seven students in my year going on to challenge some of the upperclassmen?” He elaborated.

“You’re one of them?” Spier looked intrigued.

“Indeed.” Vince answered.

“Hm, then I can see why you’d be a little more tired than usual. I guess I’m supposed to let this pass, as you’ll be needing all the instruction that you can get. But don’t make that a habit, Vinnie. Especially when in the latter days before the event, because baggy eyes are not going to do you any favors.” Professor Spier warned.

“I understand. Thank you for the advice. Is that all?”

“One more thing: Where are you training by the way? I saw that the challenged has taken up all of the private booths in the rec center.” He informed.

“We took up a place off-campus. I used a favor with a private gym owner deep in Boston to allow us all to train there.” Vinnie bluffed.

“I see... Very well. Everything’s cool then. Go ahead.” The instructor dismissed.

Vince bowed. “Thank you, professor.” He then leaves.
“...” Spier sat back at his lecturing chair, gearing his two hands’ fingers together in front of him to concentrate on his thoughts.

As he was power-walking away, Vinnie pulled out his smartphone, seeing the group conversation message page of everyone beginning to gather in order to study up further on their opponents before proceeding to training. He gave a grin before putting the device away and continuing on his way.

The days went on, and the nine continued to train for the upcoming Saturday appearance. Stephen could be seen learning new moves for his admiral’s sword alongside Yu-Ling (who practiced dao swordplay as a part of her martial arts training). Jane was practicing her Branching technique with her Crystal Pillars, hoping to gain greater accuracy with them by attempting to hit Hayley’s floating mobile mirrors. Ralph was working on his Aggregation Quirk with Michael, by more specifically choosing amassing points that suck in the latter’s scatter ash efficiently. Despite the late operating hours and immediate transition to other stressful matters, the students continue to make it through the classes that come after.

But two days later, while the nine were studying once more in the second floor Graden Halls dormitory building...

“So we will take the cosine of that...” Hayley gestures to a general part of the screen depicting a team simulator battle video while typing onto the calculator. “And that’s the distance we’ll need to know.” She tosses the device with the result to Yu-Ling, sitting nearby Vinnie, who was operating the HDMI-linked television.

“Hayley, this is brilliant!” Sanya complimented.

“No no no, this is just the byproduct of some good instruction. Anything less would have been a disservice to them.” The Frenchwoman waved aside.

“Who? Certainly no high school teacher taught you to work fractions like that.” Mike theorized.

Hayley sighed. “My older sister.”

“Your sister?” Ralph turned to her.

“Yes, she attended the Marquette Cram School for Applied Mathematics.”

“Oh yeah, the Marquette Family. The ones responsible for kickstarting the next overhaul of mathematical approaches in these generations.” Vinnie slouched back.

“Math is math, though. Why change it?” The Korean questioned.

“Everything can be more efficient, Steve. Reinterpreting numbers is vital to being able to program new equipment and calculate new dimensions that can contend with the huge rise in power of today’s Quirks.” Jane explained.

“That right there, is mundane made awesome. The fact that we can look at something incredibly cool, and find a way to give it a practical application that the other 20% can use, and it still finds a way to turn a lot of heads. Not to mention, despite popular opinion, humanity can, and does, learn from their gifts. Incredible.” Vinnie filibustered.

“Ah, you guys are here; good!” Clements appeared from an adjoining corridor.

The nine freshmen look towards him.
“Of course we are right here; you informed us all to be here this afternoon.” Jane reminded as he put a hand to her hip.

“Yes, well, it’s Thursday. Just two days from all of your debuts in the Theatre of War.” The Resident Advisor notified.

“Yeah. We all... Know that?” Michael asserted.

“And yet the Battlegrounds Portal doesn’t have your combat credentials at all!” He showed the website on his mobile phone.

“‘Combat credentials’?” Hinata was rendered curious by the phrase.

“A right. Student Heroes that move onto the Battlegrounds are supposed to assign certain things about how they enter the ring.” Jane’s mind flickered.

-Yeah, I should explain this too, hm?- When the United States of America first conceived the idea of the Battlegrounds to train their Pro Heroes in the pleasant absence of serious crime, people didn’t really think of what they could do to make the cyclical combat less tedious, unwarlike, or anything to celebrate about. Many a social attackers wanted to rib it as glorified street-fighting all because they could. Whatever! This all changed when we went back into history and saw how humanity made combat interesting - Boxing, Pro Wrestling, MMA, you name it. It seemed as though if you really want to enthuse both crowd and participant, the latter must have an appealing entrance and a unique gimmick, hyping up both themselves and everyone else. It may seem rather pointless in the grand scheme, but staging your own Battlegrounds entry holds a lot of weight as it eases the refining stage that most other Pro Heroes take to finding out what persona of Pro Hero they would want to be. Not sure if your Lord of Death Explosions character is what you really want to be? Then maybe give it a shot in a controlled environment. If it didn’t work out, fine! Just tell the techies what you want to change about it. As people found out Student Heroes were coming up with and developing their persona, they became more interested in the product, leading to the episodic nature of all tertiary educations’ Battlegrounds on television... And such high attendance rates for the grandest of these events like the Festival of Five. The entrance also gives way to students bolstering their own confidence and psyching themselves up for combating the dangers that they will eventually face in the real world. For you other Hero hopefuls out there, you cannot tell me you didn’t practice an entrance onto the scene using your home’s living room, right?

“Oh yeah! Hinata, you probably don’t know about this because you’ve been focusing more on Rescue and Support Division duties, and as such haven’t been to your school’s Battlegrounds.” Yu-Ling noted.

“So you dragged us out here to tell us we need to tell you what we wanted to come out to when we first make it onto the Theatre of War?” Vinnie reiterated to Thomas.

“No, I dragged you all out here to tell you that you need to fill out these forms and hand them back to me so that they can order anything that they need to and have it all ready when you debut. Don’t want to go in with little else but a self-made costume, right?” The RA bounced back, before handing them the forms. “I’ll give the lot of you your privacy, so you can think up whatever personas you’d like to adorn, though I suppose the lot of you already have an idea. Good day; knock on the security door on the first floor when you’re ready to hand them all in.” He departed.

“He always looks flustered at least once in every conversation we have with him, doesn’t he?”
Sanya acknowledged.

“I’ve been hearing around; it seems as though his partner in crime, Sasha Knight, tends to really tease him a lot when no eyes are on them.” Stephen noted.

Vinnie leaned back on the couch he was sitting on in response to the identification.

“Our attention should perhaps be paid elsewhere, gentlemen and ladies. This seems to be a crucial prerequisite that we will have to accomplish before we move forward with our rivalry.” Ralph informed, pointing at the envelope of forms in Jane’s hands.

“Well, it won’t take long for me. I already know what I want to do.” Yu-Ling slid out a form for herself, starting with writing her name on it.

“Oh yeah? What is it?” Hayley wondered aloud, taking a parchment herself.

“If it’s anything like high school, it would be the nightclub gimmick, right?” Jane smiled at her childhood friend.

“You know me so well.” Yu-Ling beamed back, before continuing to write on the paper.

“Oh yeah. You did say you were very much in tune with your ethnic homeland’s nightlife.” Hinata lifted a finger.

“Indeed. Backlights and neon galore. Illuminate and Enlighten, with the most altruistic demeanor possible, as a proper partygoer should be.” Yu-Ling concluded. “How about you, Jane? Still want to keep the U2 hardcore punk fan gimmick?” She asked her back.

“Keep the more dramatic music I reckon, but change the direct subject. Maybe cosplay as warrior women from folk and literature.” Jane put her hand to her chin.

“Did you foreign folk get into this kind of thing a lot back home?” Michael asked Stephen, Sanya, Ralph, and Hinata.

“Not particularly, no. But it does sound fun to devise. For instance, since mine revolves around creating controlled black holes, I think being an overlord of spatial elements sounds fitting, and pleasantly otherworldly for the audience.” Ralph answered first.

“I don’t really plan on going into the Battlegrounds, but this does sound useful in determining our personas when we do actually go out there...” Hinata seconded.

Stephen scratched the back of his head. “This is news to me. Hm, what could work for me? I suppose something like a force of nature, since my Hero name is Monsoon... But coming in in a breakaway suit is too good to pass up too!” He paced back and forth.

“I’m not sure if this idea is any good, but I do indeed have one now that I’m prompted. It’s something I’ve been developing for a good long time now.” Sanya enthusiastically began writing on the form to prove her point.

“Hayley, plan to go as a paranoid Napoleon, the way you’ve been lately?” Jane taunted as she handed the thick paper to her.

“As a matter of fact, absolutely not! I was thinking nightclub scene, same as Yu-Ling though, so maybe I’ll go for something that combines it with a sinister undertone...” Hayley looked up to the air in ponderance of that self-suggestion.
“That hesitation ain’t really helping your case.” Jane laughed before refocusing. “Vinnie? You already know what you’re coming out as?” Jane turned to him, noticing that he had yet to comment on the matter like everyone else.

“Indeed. I know that exactly.” Vince nodded, looking at his own form.

From there, the seven freshmen making their debuts finalized their Entrance forms and handed them over to the registrar. With the minor setback out of the way, they continued training and training. Vinnie was seen doing decline push-ups and a parkour run to keep in top form. Yu-Ling also comes to him for a sporting spar of Krav Maga-BJJ versus Wing Chun-Jeet Kune Do. The two also made sure to get the others up to speed on their CQC, so that all bases would be covered sufficiently. All the while Hayley had set up a random-maze simulation generator to test how far and how varied she could swiftly form reflected laser paths. Sanya could be seen with Michael this time, seeing if she could rotate all of his ash (using a currently unknown force) around herself. Having had his fill of swordplay, Stephen redoubled his efforts into tracking his medium-sized Raincloud to ensure he could keep the precipitation literally on top of his enemy. The target? An advanced AI drone in the range aisle.

Once more on Friday, Vinnie made the same climb he did on Monday, up the Theatre of War Stadium, and basking in the dawning sunlight. He also took a quick glimpse into the inside of the arena itself, and then made an energetic Cross that dissolved towards the sky. Looking towards the academic Halls of Vanevery University, Vince placed a Bluetooth 20 earpiece on his right lobe and started a call.

When the ringing ended, a voice answered.

“Vincent, son?” Akane greeted.

“Hi mother. Father’s still at the LUHQ (Logistical Unit HeadQuarters) clinic, yeah?” Vince responded back.

“Yeah. I’m almost off for work myself. To what do I owe this honor? I would doubt you want me to send something to Raidon; you would’ve messaged him instead.” She reasoned.

“Mother, I’m going to debut in the Battlegrounds tomorrow afternoon. I would like for you and father to be able to see it.” Vinnie requested.

“Wow, your start at Vanevery? Of course I’ll be seeing it on livestream, son. I’m sure it’ll be playing all over the clinic’s screens and holograms too, so your father should be able to constantly view it too. You have my assurance, son.” Akane sounded thrilled.

“Thank you, mother.” Vinnie was about to hang up, but then remembered something. “As a matter of fact, thank you for everything... Inductor.” He reiterated.

Akane covered her mouth with how happy she was with Vince’s appreciation. “Of course... N2END.” She replied, before they both hung up.
Arc 1: Debut to the Battlefield

Chapter Summary

Vanevery University has begun their first livestream coverage of their Battlegrounds, and the seven matches set up by the Vested and the seven Freshmen have filled up its card. It's high time to find out which group's determination runs deeper.

It was finally Saturday of the first week; the premiere of this year’s Fall season of the university’s prized streaming event: “Vanevery Battlegrounds: Best Kept Secrets”. Though it was still just the break of dawn, there were mile-long lines of people starting from the ticket stands to the other side of the adjacent street to the massive parking lots, hoping to be some of the 105,000 possible in attendance. Meanwhile within said parking lots, you can find those that have already gotten their redeemables and are instead steakouting (in some cases, literally!), awaiting the speed-gates to open for them this afternoon.

The fourteen students that will be debuting during the streaming day for this semester were to show up at the stadium early to shoot promotional and bumper images for the big screen before their matches begin. Vanevery faculty have decided to keep the existence of the team feud amongst them a secret to promote a more independent promotion that would benefit everyone more in their primarily singles runs, though the Freshmen and the Vested themselves were sure to be keeping track of their allies’ wins accordingly.

With the formalities out of the way, the groups could finalize on their preparation. Stephen was witnessed cleaning his admiral’s blade, while Vinnie was refining his karambits on a pocket whetstone with some honing oil. Jane was close by, lacing up her pair of malachite-green Jack Purcell’s. Yu-Ling was in the lavatories, looking into the mirror as she tied up her bottom corner strands into ox-horns (while her magpie ponytail remained as it usually is).

When Vince finished polishing his curved knives, he stashed them back into their holsters, connected to a tactical webbing belt. He then turned to something else within the duffel bag right next to him - It’s not immediately known what it is, but one decently-long look at it is enough for Vinnie to expunge any more doubts and worries he has for the big moment.

And alas, it was finally time.

Every screen and speaker tuned in to the BattleGrounds Sports Network (BGSN) got to hear the theme for the Theatre of War Stadium for this week: “Never Surrender” by Indiana-based alternative-metal band Fight Like Sin.

“Alright, Needs, next step is to tie the copper wires together and put a plastic bud on it. Then we can move on to the rest of the junction box, which will need similar treatment for its 240 circuit and 15 amp.” Akane instructed, watching some live action from a logistics hub. She seemed to be training a new protege for this LUHQ.

“Oh dear...” The assistant behind the body cam stated as he finished twirling the copper together before turning his attention to the EE hub.

“Don’t be a baby. Pro Heroes out on the field have to really rely on you. People rely on saviors, and
saviors rely on you.” Akane reminded him, before noticing that one of her monitors began showing the “Best Kept Secrets” stream. Remembering the promise she made to her son, she puts more focus towards it. “Needs, tell me when you got all of that, plus the entire setup of hotwires. Then I’ll walk you through the rest of the procedure.” She ordered, minimizing the live camera window in favor of enlarging the live stream to two full windows.

“Yes, ma’am.” Needs acknowledged.

Alright, Vinnie. Show everyone why you’re here, and why you’re anything but normal. Akane thought, biting on the tip of her writing utensil.

Now back in the heart of the Greater Boston Area, everything was coming together. Patrons were finding their spots and the initial shows were underway, commented on by a cornering panel of international commentators, though all of them naturally spoke of similar matters to the English team present:

“Welcome, loyal viewers from across the grandest of spectrums, to the esteemed Vanevery Battlegrounds! I’m Jerry Blofeld, your blow-by-blow commentator for this day, joined by retired Pro Hero Camron ‘The Third Law’ Gere, color commentator extraordinaire. Where you’ve been since the end of last semester, Gere? Stopping neighborhood car crashes?” The first commentator greeted his co-host.

“Hello to you too, Blofeld; nice to be here! Anyways, I’ve infringed on a few potentially harmful reaction forces here or there; I don’t need to tell you how hard it is to really stay in one place, even with two kids back home. Why else do you think I renewed my contract to be here?” The other announcer replied with a cracking-up grin.

“Sorry about not giving you a proper ‘hey’; I’m just too excited to be back, same as you! Now, have you seen today’s card? Seven matchups live for all of you, and amidst the fourteen competitors total, we’ve got several Vanevery beloved from last semester, including two Festival of Five Singles Bracket participants!” Blofeld doubled back.

“Oh I have seen the lineup for this afternoon, and I could barely be any happier. Get this, ladies and gentlemen: We have Rayne Radley back in the house! Put her stats on those screens, techies!” He then remained silent for a second.

Those watching the event from a television or holographic projector saw the stream be enveloped by an informative display. Those within the Theatre of War that were also interested resorted to the grand LEDs above the Arena or at the Northern point. They depicted Rayne in a waist-up battle pose on the left side, flanked by her established Pro Hero name of “Birdcage” and cumulative win-loss record in the American Battlegrounds (24-6; 12-3 on both previous semesters, and then ‘Nominated’ for both the first and the second regarding the FoF stats). Her Quirk, Binding Box, is also established below that, along with a special stat called D:H, with the adjacent value of 85:15.

“Rayne, one of only a handful of freshmen and women that was able to participate in the Singles League of the Festival of Five for Vanevery University, and though she didn’t really get far in either semester conclusion, she certainly showed that she belonged in the spotlight.” Gere continued to hype up the sophomore.

“No kidding; her Binding Box is as dazzling as it is deceptive, and that’s what makes it very effective. Many an unsuspecting opponent has run straight into her birdcages and saw themselves flown out of the ring just afterwards.” Blofeld extended.

“Indeed, Camron. Radley boasts a high, quick ring-out count; now not many put too much pride in
themselves with victories like those, but that’s only because they can’t hurl their enemies out of the Arena in less than thirty seconds, 75% of the time! That’s also why she has one of the highest Damage:Hit-take ratios in the game; per match, she almost always has a one or two hits to none due to how easy it is for her!” Third Law continued.

“She mentioned in an interview over the Summer that she is ready to lead Vanevery University into a grand new phase of victory, and this season is key to proving it.” Blofeld mentioned. “There’s another though, who thinks he has the skill and confidence to do the same, and that is Andrew Price!” He identified, before the latter’s stats also showed up.

The screen revealed that Price’s Pro Hero name is ScatterSpark, befitting his Quirk Sparks Spawn. On the W-L tab, he boasted the less-impressive 22-9 (9-6 first semester, 13-2 second, 0-1 for the FoF visit), Finals placement notwithstanding.

“Price is back with a vengeance! After not finding the most solid of starts during his freshman Fall, he really proved he is a hot commodity by rallying up a month later and wrecking the competition. His first and only FoF visit so far was a dark horse run, all the way to placing in the top ten; almost unheard of for any first-year of any of the Big Five universities! What’s more, Price is the second of only three Vanevery students to be in the previous FOF quarterfinals in the past four years, and he’s riding quite the coattails of momentum. His opponent tonight better be on their A-game, all aspects, all the way through to even have a shot of victory.” Gere described.

“Lest the Sparks fly and they get burned by the intense friction. Now let’s not forget about all the other participants; they all have potency in them, and it’s just a matter of if they know how to deliver it. Now we’ll be right back, and when we do, we will be announcing and witnessing the first match today. Stay tuned, everybody!” Blofeld asserted.

“You don’t wanna miss a sec!” Third Law finished off.

The nine new freshmen and women were in the backstage of Theatre of War, watching the stream from a locker-room screen.

“Pressure’s really on...” Hinata, one of the fellows in the deep back, commented.

“So what happens now?” Stephen questioned.

“I think Clements mentioned that we are supposed to be getting the first randomized results right about now.” Jane mentioned.

Abruptly, there was a set of knocks on the locker room sill. “First match has been fixed.” The interjector announced.

“Who’s out first?” Ralph inquired aloud, echoing the thoughts of the rest as they all looked the informant’s way.

“Sanya Orlov.”

Everyone looked towards their fellow Russian.

Sanya gulped at her identification. “Okay...” She slowly rose up and walked towards the exit, hesitating just before crossing the threshold, and looking back with a more confident beam. “Witness me today, lads and ladettes.” She announced.

“Bet on it!” Yu-Ling responded, thumbing up the demand.
Finally, Sanya proceeded past the corner.

“Not too much fanfare being had for guys and gals like us, huh?” Mike held his hips.

“Let’s just say not just the upperclassmen are disappointed about the decision to go public...” Jane responded.

Vinnie rose up from his spot on the bleachers and took the front and center of the rest of the group. “Then let’s subvert their expectations. That commentary team talked something big about how much some of the Vested showed how they belong. Can’t we do the same?”

The rest of the freshmen and women nodded in agreement.

“We’ll be cheering for you guys. Can only hope many others follow in our stead.” Hinata rose up to stand with him, joined by Mike. As Rescue Heroes who did not stake any direct claim to the feud, they were heading their way to the audience platforms instead, performing their curriculum-ordained jobs as monitors for the actively-working personnel.

Roughly a minute later, the live streaming had continued, complete with a bird’s eye view of the Theatre of War’s interior. The weekly theme then slowly muted, before a new theme took its place - “Ascension Fear (Position Music)” by Michael Maas. The ribbon and stage U-LEDs switched from the looping ToW logo to a rail segment moving through the openings of multiple cogs and gears.

When the first beat completes a drop, pure steam emits from five machines stationed underneath the stage. When the mist reaches maximum possible coverage, Sanya finally appears through the center spout, attentively viewing the setting before her.

“Ah, there she is! Ladies and gentlemen, give a warm welcome to one of Vanevery University’s newest freshmen in town, Sanya Orlov. Perhaps best known by her Hero name, Hardtop!” Blofeld introduces her to the audience.

Sanya gives a quick scan of the one-hundred-thousand-plus crowd before reaching behind her with her right and finding three gears (two spurs and an internal, if anyone was interested), proceeding to bounce them off her tricep and then willing them to rotate around the joined fingers of her open hand. After another scanning glare, she proceeds down the ramp towards the Battlegrounds Arena.

“Sanya’s one of many in an influx of foreign Hero students after Vanevery University had ushered in quite the shakeup in administration, and moving towards grounds now well-traveled by their national counterparts.” Blofeld moved on.

“Oh yeah. According to her data sheet, she is of Russian descent; quite a long way from home. But it looks like she’s really taken towards these new crowds, and judging by the reaction, the crowds seem to like her a fair bit too.” Gere included.

“We’re not going to make secrets of how we know that frequenters of Vanevery’s Battlegrounds program don’t know how to feel about the many new students entering the campus, but let us just say that like all of the students that were accepted into this institution thanks to the Second Review, earned their place here. And despite the faculty change, SR Island remains as it is. Which means all of the students that got in have a way with becoming Pero Heroes that sparks a fire in the administration like before.” Blofeld explained.

Sanya eventually stopped the gears and threw her arm through their openings when they all aligned, turning them into makeshift bracelets. By this point, she was just about to step foot onto
the first few panels of the square Arena, and purposefully strides onto the raised platform, giving one last survey around the audience as her theme and stage effects die down.

“Translation everybody - Sanya, like the others, has what it takes to make it here. But the big question is ‘does she have what it takes to defeat a more experienced opponent?’ I, among many, am eager to find out.” Third Law considered.

Sanya, like everyone else, looks back towards the stage when a foreign sound emerged. Four comet fireworks, two at a time, flew out from the stage diagonally upwards, making whistling sounds while doing so, and mimicking the light patterns of projectile flares, illuminating the artificially darkened Arena. When they finished their course, the new theme popped up in their place - “The Hot Wind Blowing ~ Instrumental” by Jamie Christopherson. Moments later, a man with caramel blonde hair popped up, clad in gear very akin to... That of the equipment in a certain fictional WWII naval girls anime.

“Introducing your opponent tonight, Sanya Orlov, this is Jericho Feldman! Aka, Battleship!” Third Law yelled aloud.

Psychically after that identification, Jericho proceeded to reveal a backpack behind him, fitted with multiple missile ports. He then fired some towards the open sky, much like the flares from before. Their succeeding explosions apparently activated the lights, which pivoted across the audience like targeting beacons.

“Jericho may not have the big resume his cohorts Rayne and Andrew have, but he definitely made some mark during the past two semesters, racking up two impressive nine win seasons. His Quirk, Pack-of-Salvo, is incredibly effective in keeping the distance on his opponents, and so long as he doesn’t set them off too fast, he doesn’t run out of the ability to carpet bomb easily.” Gere continued on.

“Due to the concussive nature of his missile blasts, Jericho has a pretty high ringout rate in the group, a la Rayne, and if his opponent allows him to perform the Carpet, there’s little they can do to avoid getting hit at all. The good news is for them, Jericho must fire the rockets completely parallel to the silos before he can change their guidance systems, which means they can be disrupted or infringed momentarily. But very few have been able to pull this off skillfully and consistently.” Blofeld noted, as Jericho walked down the ramp and up the steps to the Raised Platform, confronting Sanya.

“Now for any and all who are not clear on the rules, we’re about to break ‘em down for you.” Gere tapped a writing utensil twice on the commentary table to make his point. “So, for regular singles competition, we have a regular circulation time of twelve minutes. Participants must win by four methods: force your opponent into a ring-out, knockout, tapout, or bow-out! Now in the case that time runs out, both will be given a draw. If they both call for a Slip, the match may continue on for another eight minutes, risking the win or loss over it. Each participant in our Battlegrounds gets three Slips per semester. If only one competitor agrees to do so, then a coin will be flipped to determine the fate of the contest (and if an extension happens, then the refuser does not lose his own Slip).” Gere concluded the introduction.

The stadium theatrics died down and both Sanya and Jericho unequipped their entrance accessories, allowing caddies in the area to take them out of the hub bubble surrounding them.

“Now for everyone’s favorite holographic ref in New England, Tommy Phillips.”

The referee in question appeared from the projector positioned above the Arena, giving a quick wave to the fans before looking towards the participants flanking him. “Jericho are you ready?” He
asked him.

The Vested man nodded with pride.

Phillips then gazed towards Sanya. “Sanya, are you ready?” He repeated to her.

“Yes.” Sanya too affirmed.

The blue-shaded official then swung his hands together. “Come together; bump arms.” He ordered the two of them.

The duo agreed again, raising their respective right forearms to form the Vanevery V across their chest and swinging them so that the blades of the limb matched. During that time, Jericho could see that Sanya’s hand was already cut and was sprinkling blood before the contest even began. They then return to their separate sides of the Battlegrounds Arena.

After looking into their eyes for the last time, he then made a vertical chop in front of them. “Fight!” He exclaimed.

Jericho burst out of the gates as soon as they opened, firing six missiles straight up towards the sky. Sanya watched as a second later, they redirected and soared towards her.

“!!” The Russian immediately dashed to her right, making a distance of three meters from the epicenter of the closest blast. The concussive winds that succeeded it, however, still very much affected her, blasting with the force equal to the inside-level gusts from tornadoes.

“Jericho delivers the first blow of the contest, testing his opponent with a six-shot Line Volley!” Gere identified the maneuver.

“Can’t run forever! Oop-! Unless you go off the field I suppose!” Jericho taunted, firing a salvo of three this time that redirected into a zig-zag formation. Sanya could predict the sequential arrival of the explosives and flanked them accordingly... But then she sees Jericho get on all-fours, with his missile ports now focused on her. He fires the next three, with a much higher velocity than the previous.

“The Tight Peril! A corridor of concussion pinching Jericho’s opponent as linear shots fly their way! No more sidesteps; what can Sanya do to avoid these missiles?” Blofeld informs.

Sanya hardly had an answer, hopping over two of the projectiles, and ultimately guarding from the blast of the third. She is sent several meters away, and slid to a stop just another few meters away from the edge; something she realized by swiftly looking back with widened eyes.

“That’s it! Stand still and take it! Make it easy!” Battleship further jested, and firing yet another cluster of bombs. Hardtop looked up from her crossguard to witness them.

This time, the projectiles returned to their previous, seemingly normal speed. Sanya showed no issue avoiding them, until she found that they were making a long arc vertically up before coming back down and towards her.

“Heat Seeking Howitzer! One major part underlooked by Jericho’s all-around Quirk; the man can see through the fission that his missiles can make, and he can integrate a sort of sensor that racks the specific body heat that is quite different to the heat of his explosions, using that to provide their trajectory. It’s a rude awakening, getting hit by those.” Third Law exposted.

“Ah ah! Eyes on me!” Jericho got on all fours again and fired two more missiles; these ones had
the high speed from the Tight Peril scenario.

Sanya this time could avoid these ones too with a high jump. But the two volleys colliding with each other right underneath propelled her even higher and she was forced to dodge three standard missiles on the way back down. Upon landing on the ground, she collapsed to one knee, clearly in pain, if her disheveled, damaged attire wasn’t already an indication. The already-open wound on her hand had seemed to worsen as well.

The rest of the Vested’s members, save for Andrew, were also growing arrogant smiles as they watched from backstage.

“Jericho’s in the driver’s seat for sure!” A member with a darker complexion and dark hair with black horizontal stripes commented.

“That little Russian is being subject to worse devastation than anything the Czar Bomba could’ve ever made, surely.” Rayne quipped.

“It’s only a matter of time now...” A man with a Canadian accent, and side-hair shavings of their aborigines, concluded.

Andrew remained attentive as he continued watching. He couldn’t help but feel as though he was smelling a rat of some sort.

The only other woman than Rayne, who had several ring piercings on both of her ears, noticed his vigilance. “Andrew? What’s up?” She questioned, puzzled by his vacant expressions.

“God willingly, it’s nothing.” The de-facto leader answered back.

Meanwhile in one of the other locker rooms, the other, decided six of the nine freshmen were also watching the stream, with some level of cringe on their faces.

“She’s not doing anything to prevent all of that!” Ralph noted.

“It couldn’t just be that she’s seeing the extent of what Jericho can do, could it?” Yu-Ling postulated aloud to the rest.

“Not too much you can see with all of that haze and debris going everywhere.” Hayley corrected, pointing at the screen.

“What more can she be waiting for then? Sanya, pull it together now!” Stephen ordered... Or attempted to anyway, through the plasma screen.

“Goddamn, still really dense aren’t you Mr. Choi? We’ve gone over this before.” Jane held her right hip and looked at him.

“What? What’s been gone over?” Stephen turned her way.

“She’s waiting for the right moment to strike. The longer this goes on, Jericho is becoming more confident that victory is assured. He believes Sanya to just be incredibly persistent, perhaps- eh, for the lack of a better noun, a cockroach, and is pushing to use the rest of his expanded moveset in order to finally eliminate her. And when he has little left to work with...” Vinnie explained, interrupting all of them.

“Ohhh...” Choi realized.
Another two times, Sanya has been sent flying from an assortment of her opponent’s explosives. The strategy to exhaust his ammunition seems ever less likely.

“You know, it seems as though the new line of freshmen going through the halls of Vanevery are much more... Unflappable than people assumed they’d expect. Sanya has yet to throw a returning strike; not even a counter, while Feldman is carpeting the vicinity with devastating blasts. No TKO call is possible for Ref Phillips as Sanya’s very responsive, but maybe he should step in anyways.” Blofeld assessed.

“Yeah I agree. And it’s not so much a good look for Jericho and the rest of the upperclassmen, dealing with their underclassmen with such brutal behaviors.” Gere declared.

Sanya slid in a three-point stance after recovering yet again from another salvo ambush.

“Alright, let’s end this.” Jericho threw out his hands in a spread eagle formation.

“Oh, it looks like Battleship is going for Broadside! The eight missiles in one horizontal line; the cumulative blast radius encompasses a complete width of the squared circle. Jericho uses this to almost always ensure a ring-out victory!” Gere noted.

Eight explosives flew out from the subject’s pack, flying into formation to blanket Sanya’s diminishing section of the Battlegrounds. The latter picked up a heavy head to see the silhouettes in front of the high sun.

“Is this how and where it ends?!” Blofeld theorizes, rising out of his seat to take a closer look at the event.

Several of the six of her peers back in the locker room couldn’t help rising up from their bleachers in sheer anxiety from what was about to happen.

Sanya’s deep breaths persisted in frequency and intensity as they drew closer.

“Money moment, everybody!” Rayne pointed out in anticipation.

And then the missiles crashed into the nearby ground... Only not as close as Jericho and the fans would’ve hoped. The projectiles exploded into the ring-out area instead, enough so that they only gave a small blast of wind tapping Sanya’s back.

The former was perplexed into a paralyzed state, much like everyone else.

“What the-!?!” Third Law exclaimed.

“Ladies and gentlemen, Battleship... Has apparently missed the mark. Terribly so, in fact!” Blofeld observed.

The Russian picked up her head again (away from her slightly raised right hand that had a unique claw pattern; her bloodied left hand meanwhile was clenched in a fist and kept near her waist), and Kubrick-stared at Jericho with an atypical smirk.

The glare suddenly struck Jericho with lightning. Immediately he went for a larger barrage in a desperate attempt to eliminate Sanya quickly. But The latter merely needs to form a new fist with her bloody hand, make a waving point at the projectiles, and then flick aside her, causing them to fall instead into the ring-out area southwest of her. This even happens when Jericho gets onto his hands for the faster missiles.
Even after twelve more propulsions, Jericho keeps trying. But then...

“!!” Battleship realized that he had expended his sixty-missile limit every three minutes. He then looks at Sanya, realizing that she is retaining an orbital missile around herself. When she makes a fist with her arcing hand at the right time, it then begins flying linearly back towards him. Jericho reveals that he is not impervious to his own blasts, as he does his best to sidestep the attack, finding himself being blown a bit by the vicious aftereffect himself. Sanya then dashes in, perhaps to initiate close-range combat.

“Oh, and there’s the way that Battleship has often lost in the majority of his defeated competitions. Enemies manage to close the distance on the poor lad, who’s so used to long-range combat.” Blofeld made a caution to the crowd.

When she drew within arm distance, Jericho flailed a right haymaker... Which was easily ducked under by Sanya. She wrapped her own right around his waist, grasping Battleship’s left wrist. She then pulls on it, causing Jericho to spin out and face Sanya... And her raised boot, clapping his cheek with a resounding impact. Hardtop’s Systema roots come through too, still keeping the wrist for a debilitating wrist-clutch shoulder and elbow lock that puts him involuntarily onto his knees.

After his latest cry of pain, Jericho rolls forward, eliminating the pressure on his arm. He then twists back for another clothesline, but is crouched under again. Despite his understanding not to show his back again and keeping himself from spinning due to his missed strike, Sanya forces the revolution anyway, pushing on his side to reveal the behind. She once more catches the wrist in front of him, but then takes the other, delivering a straightjacket German suplex that drives Battleship onto his neck.

“Wow! Modified, bridging German! When’s the last time you’ve seen that in one of these competitions, Blofeld?” Third Law marked out.

“I’m not going to lie, if that’s what you’re looking for, Gere! Indeed, it is a true rarity to witness these days!” Blofeld sounded impressed too.

Jericho rolled back into a prone stance and tried getting up immediately, but as he was in a sprawl, Sanya turned over as well and dove with a pointed 12-6 elbow that smacked his face and again put him down.

Hardtop then pitched him back to a standing stance, possibly to set up a new combination, but Battleship wriggled free and pushed her away, making space for a front kick... That was well-telegraphed.

“Amateur move.” Sanya one-lined, as she then brought her left hand and made a flicking motion with her fingers. This resulted in some blood flying onto Jericho’s chest. She then pushed back down his foot and threw her own kick - a dropkick, to be exact. Jericho was repelled a good distance away, and he rolled back into a three-point stance for a somewhat fast recovery.

Jericho looked back and found that his pack has fully reloaded. And given the distance, he was ready to take back the lead, firing RC control missiles this time, with the intent that even if they are influenced by whatever her Quirk’s abilities are, they wouldn’t be disturbed enough such that one would still reach his target. He was right in a way, as Sanya didn’t try to go for them... But the bad news is, she could still avoid them, mystically floating to her right at just the exact moment one would land on the immediate ground. She’d continue to swiftly flank the rest in this same manner.

“She did not show any signs of moving that fast, let alone hover, at all earlier on in the contest! How’s she doing that now!?” The darker-skinned Vested member hollered.
“Oh, I get it now...” Rayne had a realization.

“Enlighten us; what’s wrong?” The other lady requested elaboration.

“Her blood. It’s an axis point! Notice her movements have an arc to them - like a circle! You know how the Earth is spherical, and it rotates? It’s like that for her! That’s also how she was keeping Jericho’s missiles from hitting her; her bloody hand is the axis from which she causes them to rotate on, missing her entirely.” The woman explained. “And after that flick, there’s at least a drop right on Jericho’s body, and she’s using that to make herself rotate, flanking those new missiles.” The aquamarine-haired lady pointed out to her cohorts.

After the last dodge, Sanya once more closed the fray. She looks to a fragment of the Battlegrounds on the ground, and once more uses her hand as a Centeraxis, rotating the slab straight into Jericho’s face.

With him now reeling and stunned, Jericho could not see that he was wandering backwards very closely to the edge of the Arena. Sanya smells blood (other than hers, of course), and dashes in for one more dropkick. Jericho is finally propelled off the square and his form falls squarely into the ring-out area.

Referee Tommy Phillips returns to a visible form. “Winner! Sanya Orlov!” He motions towards the Russian. The crowd, despite an initial inlay of shock, roared in response, drowning out the return of Sanya’s “Ascension Fear” theme.

“What an upset we have witnessed, ladies and gentlemen! The newcomer Sanya Orlov mounted an impressive comeback, taking Jericho to CQC school and giving him the ring-out switcharoo! What a way to start off The Best Kept Secrets entertainment tonight.” Gere shouted.

The freshmen within the locker room rejoiced very jubilantly, as did Hinata and Michael, who were within the crowd. The Vested meanwhile, looked on with surprise mixed with mild contempt at how much they had been underestimating who they were dealing with.

Meanwhile, the Headmaster looked at a personal stream from the privacy of her main office, paying attention to what else the new blood have in store to show to the Vanevery public.
Sanya gave the Freshmen an initial lead over the Vested, along with no small amount of surprise. Now it’s on the rest of her team to keep the momentum going and win the feud.

After everyone was given an opportunity to settle down after Sanya’s huge upset victory against Vested member Jericho, a Theatre of War caddie crew arrived to clean up the debris caused by the first contest. During that time, Theatre of War officials came to both locker rooms backstage to identify the next participants. Who did they call out? They were...

The live streaming returned to yet another bird’s eye view of the open stadium. The logos for the venue on the stage screens and ribbons transitioned into panels of mirrors masterfully recreating the audience and architecture before it. At the same time, “DiVINe MaDNEss re;DUX” by Phyrnna plays across the Arena, and the mirrors all crack when the more instruments come into play.

Hayley, clad in a reflective pearl long robe, appeared on the stage, gripping onto an oversized king chess piece. The cameras of the stream zoomed in close to reveal that the crown of said object had the seal of the Count of Monte Cristo engraved onto it. Hayley held it close to her head like a Bond pistol before the crowd, which preceded her advance down the ramp.

“Here’s another foreign import for Vanevery, ladies and gentlemen, give a warm welcome to Hayley Celestin!” Gere announced.

“More well-known in her hometown of Marseille, and in Portland, Maine where she has lived for the past five years, Hayley has taken the moniker of Lemirage, and I’m sure these mirror cameras on the U-LED screens are meant to showcase the level of misdirection, or redirection rather, that she can be capable of.” Blofeld explained.

As she descended down the ramp, Hayley put the crown of the chess piece into her mouth so that her hands were free to pull her hair out from behind her robe.

“There’s certainly no small amount of flair in Hayley as she briskly strides into combat today. Between the clockwork master in Sanya and the goddess of mirrors in our current newcomer, the first batch of public freshmen that Vanevery University is receiving have some... Special sense of style.” Third Law continued to show impressment at the coalition.

“Back in her highschool of Northborder, she showcased much latent skill as a team competitor moreso than through her singles career. Her team has gone across New England and won all four Division One seasons. And she’s certainly no leech either, as Hayley’s elimination points outpaces that of her colleagues’ by a pretty fair margin.” Blofeld ran down the details of his material.

“She’s probably going to be right at home with our team division going into the Festival of Five, but doing well in a singles match, especially your first, is usually what it takes to impress even the captains of that group, so Hayley’s still got to step up big time for this upcoming contest this afternoon.” Gere noted.
Hayley stepped up to the raised square circle, kissing the chess piece before tossing it out towards the crowd, disrobing and handing it to an oncoming caddie. Her music and mirror screens died down just in time to introduce the next Vested foe.

By that point, the screens depicted an assortment of cyclones all pointed at a particular source. Their visualizations seemingly manifested into actual gale-force winds being projected around the stage. “Calm of the Storm” by Hollow Point Heroes played. All the cyclones amass into one large amalgamation and eventually dissipates, revealing Hayley’s opponent.

“Ladies and gentlemen, returning for a third season, Evander Cook! Aka, AeroGyro!” Blofeld warmly welcomed.

Cook, after waving to all corners of the crowd, then formed a fist with his right, and slammed it into the ground, causing several smaller tornadoes to form close to him and flank out across the width of the stage. When the theatrics ended, he rose back upright and began walking down the ramp briskly.

“AeroGyro is another promising talent straight from the heart of Vanevery University. Like Battleship, he’s taken some time to get going in the Battlegrounds, but he can take as much as he dishes out by the end of his two previous seasons; at 8-7 and 10-5 apiece, Evan found himself in the tag division during both visits to FoF, and alongside Andrew in the first season, they made the most paired assist and eliminations of any other groups. So really, this is indeed an initiation test for Hayley. You wanna wear the colors with the best? Then you gotta beat some of the best.” Gere considered.

“I’m sure that’s exactly what Hayley plans on doing here this afternoon, and the chance to do so is almost upon her.” Blofeld responded.

Cook continued to wave towards the crowd before noticing the proximity of the Arena, and stopped for a moment, gazing at the raised platform determinedly. He then gave a quick jog that transitioned into a front handspring... Balancing on two small Cyclones, that proceeded to propel him a great vertical distance; enough to permit him three somersaults and a rolling landing onto the Battlegrounds, before Hayley herself. He in fact gives her a quick stare too before pandering to the crowd one last time and his music ends.

Tom Phillips the holographic referee spawned once again, to brief the match to the two competitors, asking if they all were ready for combat. He then ordered them both to bump right forearms (per Vanevery custom) and to retake their respective sides. Finally, he gave both of them a final scan, moving between Hayley, who was priming the orbital mirrors floating above her back and shoulders, and Evan, and finally...

“Fight!” The official chopped down the middle for the two of them, and then dissipated as quickly as he had appeared.

Hayley was the first to take the lead, flicking a laser bolt out of her right fingers and into an adjacent mirror, causing it to bounce towards Evan, who moved his head minimally out of the way to avoid. He then rebuked with a projectile of his own; a hand-sized tornado that grew as it went a further distance until it was half of Hayley’s height. The strange upwards arc made Hayley stumble back enough until it soon flew towards the clouds, having missed its target.

Hayley tried for an improvised Mozambique Drill this time, firing two longer laser bolts from her hands into two hanging mirrors, ricocheting them towards Evan’s chest. Lemirage then did a quick spin, changing her rhythm of fire before unleashing an eyeballed, undisturbed headshot. AeroGyro used a small cyclone as a boost for his cartwheel away from the three shots. Hayley spun the same
direction, likely to refocus another shot, given that one mirror advanced further than her, and she threw her left hand at it.

Evan reasonably believes that it will be an angled shot at his immediate location, and believes that he could evade that shot too if he retains his current sideways motion. But as he does a succeeding backdash, his left shoulder takes a focused beam. He looks over to Lemirage once his momentum dies down; it turns out that Hayley had fired a laser from her other arm’s elbow, and made a hard angle with another mirror that ultimately traveled in the same direction as her opponent, harming him.

“You know, she told us she had great spatial sense, but to think that she can pull off such a perfect shot like that, given the circumstances...” Stephen’s eyes flickered like an old movie filter trying to make more sense of that moment.

“Well you do recall that time when she calculated Rayne’s cage distances? She’s probably done that hundreds of times before; quantifying angles like that must’ve become second nature for her now.” Jane explained.

“Moreo than that. To flawlessly pull off such a technique, the endpoint and vertex responsible for the angling attacks must be significantly ideal as well. And Hayley has told us that while her mirrors can passively orbit around her head, for them to move anywhere else requires concentration. Which means she is performing three sets of tough calculations at once; setting up the initial angle from the source, setting up the position of her bouncing surface, and then the angle of bounce. Incredibly impressive.” Vinnie analyzed.

“Man if someone told me I had to do such math for my Quirk, I’d go frickin’ nuts.” Monsoon winced at the observation.

Evan dusted the affected section off and returned into the fray, low roundhouse kicking a tornado out of his shoe with a longer arc than before. Hayley, having fully turned back to face her foe, realized it was going to cover more horizontal ground and was forced to flank it. One mirror remains in its position, unaffected by the rogue winds, and Lemirage fires a laser beam (with her foot while falling back) at it, so that AeroGyro has to evade himself.

The initial standoff and deadlock has Hayley realize that Evan is just as comfortable at this long range as she is. Despite its big risk, she attempts to eliminate that advantage by bringing it into the close fray by charging in, covering her advance with multiple beams bouncing off from her multiple mirrors. Evan comprehends the situation quickly and attempts to keep her back, summoning larger tornados by once more kicking along the ground linearly. Although the motion was slower than last time, the output was notably larger, summoning a man-sized twister that no longer has a vertical lean and skates along the ground in a straight path.

“Hayley wants it up close and personal, and Evan’s doing something about it!” Third Law observed.

“We don’t see AeroGyro fight at close-range often; he’s got a wild hook, but distance control is his thing, so he better keep Hayley away.” Blofeld further commented.

Hayley side-dashed away from it easily enough, but had to pivot away from a follow-up triple-shot. Now within meters, AeroGyro tried another low kick; one that saw him perform a tried and true roundhouse motion, but the ball of his foot hitting the ground instead of his toes. This created a tornado with a boomerang trajectory, with it eventually returning towards Lemirage, who recognized the path right in time and sidestepped toward it to avoid.
Now within five feet, Hayley psychically willed one of her mirrors at Evan, who did not anticipate the attack and got smacked in the cheek, spinning him sideways and stunning him so that the former could get within arm span. AeroGyro seemed to sense the compression of the air around him, indicating her close proximity, and wildly swung at face level in an attempt to swat Lemirage away, but she had anticipated this and ducked underneath the attack. This allowed her to set up a double-leg takedown, falling into the full mount and dual pistol-fragging laser bolts at his face. She managed two clean shots before Evan managed to put up a guard to dull the next six, and then punching her off of him.

AeroGyro quickly gets to his feet and attempts to make the distance again, but Lemirage once more invoked a mirror toward him, this time in a hook arc that hit his already affected left side of the head. He stumbled back towards Hayley, who then fired two simultaneous laser beams that were reflected to form a pincer at his torso. The mirror in front of him that was placed to assist in that strike then viciously flew back, smacking the face once more, but also turning it so that he was starting to face Hayley again. She changed that once more with a flying high knee to the other cheek, again making him recoil away.

“Hah, I taught her that! Even the violets got a thorn somewhere when you search hard enough!” Jane celebrated, pointing out the latest attack from Hayley.

“And I made it so that she always landed that without a stumble afterward. You didn’t give her the sense of balance, Jane.” Yu-Ling pointed out, with coy written all over her face.

“…” Jane bit her tongue.

Hayley was going to set up another corner-posted laser strike, but Evan finally recovered and pulled off a failsafe, stomping onto the ground and summoning a local tornado with him at the epicenter, which sends the former flying away. Lemirage picked her head up and rose to her feet to find Evan looking a little more determined than moments ago; it is likely that close range infiltration is no longer an option.

Upon making that conclusion, Hayley opted to invest in a mid-range game. And mid-range she did, when she conducted all but one of her mirrors to take the skies above her. She stretched out her fingers in front of herself and then fired many up at them, only for them to ricochet in droves downward at Evan. He did not anticipate the onslaught and performed several more evasive maneuvers, including sliding along the ground while balancing on the inside of a cyclone. But he couldn’t avoid them all, as he gets pelted across his upper torso and arms.

The pressure following him everywhere he goes, it gets to the point that Evan is pushed to the edge, and one last deflect makes him tip over the raised platform for a ring-out victory. But just before he falls head-first, his hands go first and make a handspring boost on two mini-twisters; the same as when he used them to jump into the Arena. Hayley is too surprised by the event to react momentarily. He then returns to his feet on top of them, and then shooting star presses back to the Arena, using the forward backflip motion to kick the cyclones with him. He then compounds their force with two new, bigger vortexes summoned through a double palm-raise into the largest, strongest tornadoes yet.

Still unable to react, Hayley gets sucked in and repulsed, flying out of the ring, but managing to also evade certain elimination as she landed on her mirror panels, which mustered enough strength to glide her back to the raised platform and step off.

“Wow! Both Evan and Hayley use the technicalities of their Quirks to stay in this contest!” Third Law exclaimed. “Oh, but it seems there was a price to doing that for the lady.” He squinted his eyes, noticing the makeshift footholds.
Hayley knew that fact too; the mirrors have shattered from the impact of being used as landing pads.

“Ooof, tough break for Hayley. Literally.” Yu-Ling pointed out. “They repair passively, right?” She asked, putting her hand to her chin.

“Yeah, but it’s a long mend. Basically Hayley now has to make due with just three mirrors.” Vinnie explained. “Though she can still use them as blunt weapons, but I think AeroGyro has now learned a counter for that.”

Indeed Evan had a plan against it, for when Hayley shook off her loss, she proceeded to try and replicate her pressure fire, which the former would not let happen again. He raced towards her on a cyclone as fast as he could, while also firing a quick trifecta of mini-gusts to distract her. At least, that’s what Hayley thought, as she took a step back and her whole body faced perpendicularly to him, avoiding the rising strikes. She then kicked a laser behind her while still looking at him, expecting it to bounce back at him... Except it only went further and further into the air!

“Wow, ladies and gentlemen! It appears that AeroGyro has targeted Lemirage’s mirrors more than herself, and the blasts had put the optical surfaces off-balance! Hayley did not anticipate the disturbance and now her accuracy is off!” Third Law elaborated.

Hayley noticed the error too, but could not focus on it as Evan was still making a quick advance. Instinctively, she then went with her two cracked mirrors, attempting them as enhanced-range melee. Evan countered by throwing one bladed hand forward, which spawned a tornado... In reverse!? The striking point of the storm now resembling a drill, it nevertheless sucked in the mirrors and had them orbit it until sending them down, embedding them into the Arena. This served as the final nail in the coffin for Hayley as Evan, having amassed a good deal of speed, sprung off of the windy transport and put all of his weight behind a flying Cobra Punch; Hayley was totally faked out by the feinting front kick that preluded the strike and blocked too low, getting a fistful on her cheek. The impact sends her out of the squared circle.


“Wow, Evan flipped this around like it was a pancake he had tossed a thousand times before!” Third Law analogized.

“You know, I think he was playing the same game Sanya was doing in the previous battle; I think he always knew he could get out of that scenario, he was just waiting to see how far he could take it.” Blofeld pointed out.

“Hey, there’s hardly any shame in that; turnabout is fair play. And let’s note too, the freshmen making their debuts most definitely know more about what their upperclassmen can do rather than the other way around.” Gere rationalized.

“Well you make a good point, Gere. Regardless, congratulations to Evan - an impressive re-debut for this season, and I’m sure there’s more to be found from this boy moving forward. Stay tuned, ladies and gentlemen, we have a lot more coming to you loyal viewers tonight!”

The rest of the participating freshmen back in the locker room looked on at the screen with less than pleased expressions.

“Hayley had the right idea going, she just didn’t quit while ahead. We gotta keep from repeating that mistake.” Jane instructed.
“Let’s make sure she isn’t too beat up about that when she comes back here.” Sanya urged, water bottle in hand.

A familiar knock was at the entrance to the facility.

“Come in.” Vinnie responded.

Minutes later, the next theme kicked in: both the surround speakers and screens depicted heavy rainfall, before a lightning bolt sounded off, and then “In My Sight” by NOVADOX plays. The phenomenon and tech involved in making the famed 2010s Rain Rooms engulfed the stage and ramp with illusory rain.

Soon enough, the cause reveals himself, standing amongst the deluge, despite not getting wet at all from it. He was clad in a full white suit and fedora; the attire completed by a unique cane. As he reaches the edge of the stage before the ramp, he spins his crutch, revealing it to actually be a secretly-sheathed admiral’s sword. He drives the tip of the blade into the ground, so that both hands were free to rip off the formal ensemble and frisbee the hat away.

“Amidst the flood, ladies and gentlemen, is Stephen Choi, also known as Monsoon!” Blofeld introduced to the large audience.

“Whoa, how is our FX team doing that? That is Spec FX, right?” Third Law asked.

“Yes, Gere. The prototypes were presented in the Barbican and Los Angeles in the span of six years.” His partner commentator revealed.

“Oh...” Gere looked dumbfounded.

“Anyways, Choi is from Daegu, South Korea. The good ol’ Goryeo, as Marco Polo once referred to, is another one of those titans of Pro Hero startups, alongside US, literally, and China and Japan. However, recently the country has been dealing with an abrupt closing of their tertiary Pro Hero schools with no small amount of discord and turmoil going on. In the meantime, this leads to many HS graduates traveling overseas, sometimes bringing their whole families with them to the other PH titans.” Blofeld noted, as Choi walked down the ramp with classy swagger.

“No shade thrown at anyone going where they think they should, but I think Monsoon definitely played his cards right; no place better than Vanevery. Anyways, Choi has found a calling as the primary Defense Hero for a lot of the cooperative Hero activities, as his Quirk of Cold-Hard Rain acts as quite the speed bump in limiting enemy advances. This Arena before him will start the story of whether or not he can do this in a more developed league.” Gere asserted.

Choi reaches the steps leading to the raised platform, and the sliding rain room following him dissipates. He gazes at the open air above it before proceeding up them, before pointing his admiral’s sword at it in a commanding manner and proceeding.

“It takes two to tango, though Gere. For all we know, Monsoon could be doing battle with one of his hard-counters. Alright, let’s see who it is.” Blofeld gestured.

Stephen’s theme eventually died down, and replaced by “Brothers in Arms” by Junkie XL. The stage, ramp, and ribbon U-LEDs all showcased technicolor light beams traveling down set paths. With the general lighting dimmed out, this ended up creating a sort of halogen lamp effect that ominously illuminated the Theatre of War.

It didn’t take long for Stephen’s opponent to show up following that, as he walked onto the stage and most of the beams diverted to connect endpoints with him at the epicenter.
“Oh my, boys and girls! Scott Rhodes, (The) Lux Storm!” Third Law identified.

Rhodes gestured “it’s over” with his hands, which caused the surrounding lights to return, while his own effects were enhanced to maintain their colorful allure.

“(The) Lux Storm’s Quirk, Transistor Re-Bolt, functions very similarly to Lemirage from just a few moments, ladies and gents. That being, many laser beams, and the ability to indefinitely bend their trajectories into zig-zagging patterns. He can fire many more at once than her, and he doesn’t need to use reflective devices to do it either!” Gere continued on.

“But there are catches, namely Rhodes cannot fire them from almost any part of his body; only his hands and their appendages. He cannot hold any one string of light for more than four seconds either, and the more the lasers bend during said strings, the less powerful they become, which is the opposite of Hayley’s power-up.” Blofeld noted.

“Hasn’t really impeded him much in the least. He finished his debut year with a trip to FoF in the Honorable Mention battle royal and was one of the final four in the contest, scoring the most assisted eliminations in the contest thanks to the immense flanking potential of his Quirk.” Gere stated.

Soon enough, (The) Lux Storm reaches the small stair steps before the raised fighting platform. He then throws a hand into the air, producing a stream of laser that hits the floating stage U-LED ornament above, resulting in a flux of other assorted lighting patterns emanating from it as if it was a French rave. When the lighting returned to normal, he stepped up to the Arena with pride.

“Let’s see if the new year for Rhodes begins with a flicker or a shimmer, shall we?” Third Law wondered aloud.

The referee rematerialized onto the raised platform. He assured both competitors of their preparation, had them bump forearms, and finally sent them back to their sides of the Battlegrounds. A few moments later...

“Fight!” He chopped down the middle, then vanished from the sight of the naked eye.

Choi wasted no time summoning a small cloud of sub-zero generating rain, hoping to freeze up Rhodes’ upper limbs early. *If I can just get the hands!* He thinks to himself as he points his admiral’s blade towards his opponent, willing the storm to begin its downpour in that direction. The ground it covers in order to reach the latter formed a thin layer of black ice (though since the Arena grounds are granite-colored, perhaps the more-apt name is “gray ice”) along the floor of the raised platform.

The Lux Storm does not find the impending rain as much of an issue, and sidesteps its linear trajectory. Then, in a surprise twist, he rushes forward.

“Whoa, what’s this?” Blofeld looked utterly bewildered.

“Rhodes is advancing! He’s going to play at the net!” Gere explained with tennis terminology.

“Just like you, Hayley.” Yu-Ling pointed out, looking over to her subject, who only looked on with perplexion.

“Can’t expect Rhodes to have better CQC than Steve, though. He doesn’t know what he’s getting into.” Jane sounded off confidently.

“Yeah; let’s not forget to mention Choi can envelop himself in a rain shield that freezes everyone
else. He’s got this.” Ralph asserted.

The thing is, Rhodes has had every chance to have found out all of that. Which is why it is surprising at all that he is the one closing the fray. He’s got something up his sleeve. Vinnie thought to himself, obviously conflicted by the situation.

The Lux Storm outpaced the returning precipitation en route to initiating the first scuffle, complete with a flying side kick. Choi sidesteps the attack in turn and checks it with an uppercutting slash that will meet Rhodes as he descends. At least initially anyway, as the latter fires a quick beam that bats the admiral’s blade away from his body. Now with two feet touching the ground, (The) Lux Storm pointed with his far hand’s fingers the opposite way from Steve, with a red laser bending over his head and across his shoulders, eventually making contact with the flat side of Steve’s sword, which was raised to his lower face just in time. He didn’t leave unscathed, however, as Rhodes completed the double-tap with the assistance of a standing side kick this time before a closer-hand propulsion.

Stephen quickly brushed away any lingering pain. He then continued to will his storming cloud towards (The) Lux Storm, letting its precipitation run through him to get to its target. But it once more doesn’t arrive fast enough, as Rhodes performed exactly what he had feared; firing three beams through the rain. The lasers ultimately burned right through the rain that was meant to freeze upon impact with something.

“With just one exchange, Rhodes is proving he can give as good as he gets up close!” Third Law asserted.

Faced with that reality, Steve pivots his body again to avoid the trio. Time to bust out the bigger guns. Steve’s free hand close to his hip then made a two-tally with his fingers; suddenly the cloud floating above Stephen rose.

“It appears that Monsoon’s rain cloud is moving higher into the air?” Blofeld followed the nimbus with his eyes as it elevated.

But that wasn’t the only surprise.

“Is it also traveling faster, or is that just me?” Gere pointed out.

(The) Lux Storm noticed it too, as he had to make a little more effort to stay out of the freezing-liquid weather.

“Steve’s pulling out Second Gear.” Ralph grinned.

“How’s that work, by the way? It’s impressive, but it’s thrown me for a loop every time I’ve seen it.” Yu-Ling wondered aloud.

“Atmospheric physics, Yu-Ling.” Hayley answered. “Winds are stronger the higher you travel up our atmosphere; gives the clouds more of a push. You can equate it to why planes experience turbulence at high altitudes while we normally don’t on the ground.”

“You’re right Hayley. But there is a cost to this alteration.” Vinnie made a point. “More distance for the droplets to, well drop, means more exposure to room temperature. They’re not making as cold of an impact once they hit something, which is why Stephen uses this variant more to create a nuisance than as a stymie.”

“What kind of nuisance?” Hayley looked his way.
Steve once more blocks a flurry of laser strikes with his admiral’s sword, stumbling on the last redirection and showing discouragement that even at a greater velocity, his tracking rain-cloud cannot catch his opponent.

Rhodes believes getting closer once more can seal the deal, and so he advances... Only to slip and nearly fall off his two feet. The passive accumulation of rainfall from this form has merged with the grey ice, compromising the ground even more. With his attention divided, Monsoon dashes in with a backhanded discus slash cutting into the midsection (To note, thanks to advanced law-enforcement R&D, professional simulation weapons like the one Steve employs can deplete a subject’s stamina or safely reproduce real-life wounds rather than draw blood or bruises). Rhodes feels the affected area as he takes a step, looking up for a frame to see Steve winding up a wheel overhead slash.

Not allowing another strike, (The) Lux Storm takes several quick steps to the right. He then throws his hands behind him while arching his head forward a bit. All ten of his fingers produced illuminated red streams that overlapped his back and once more ended up somewhere on Choi, as he couldn’t position his blade right.

“Things are not looking good for Monsoon, gentlemen and ladies.” Blofeld pointed out.

“Yeah he mixed things up a bit but he’s going to have to do a lot more to shuffle the deck. Rhodes has called out his poker face and has his number.” Gere stated.

*Still have one more idea!* Steve then backflipped to create a good amount of distance between himself and his opponent and made three with his left hand’s fingers. The still far-elevated, faster cloud started amassing now as well.

“Whoa, look at the nimbus up there!” Gere gazed to the sky.

“It is growing larger, everyone!” Blofeld followed the stare.

Within the backstage locker room, Vinnie gave a noticeable chin-up when he saw his roommate initiate stage three.

“Let me guess, you know this too?” Ralph observed his reaction.

“Steve gave me the gist. He’s performing a variation of downdraft; normally this causes warm, humid air to rise up from the ground, which causes the cooler air, normally floating ice particles, to liquify just enough before meeting with Stephen’s own rain-cloud, where they return to the liquid-ice state necessary to emit Cold-Hard Rain. The extra mass results in greater volume, resulting in a larger cloud.” Vinnie explained.

“That’s really cool.” Sanya put a finger to her lower lip.

“Again though, there’s a catch. A denser cloud means it travels at a regular speed despite the higher elevation. And while the Cold, Hard temperature is restored to First Gear levels, Stephen cannot hold the downdraft for long due to constantly high air pressure; his longest record was two minutes.” Vince continued.

And with the enhanced area, there is now an increased amount of downpour. Now ten meters of the raised platform was now being laden with impact-ice.

Realizing that his ways to escape turning into a popsicle have reduced from a handful to just finger-counting (excluding the thumb), Rhodes has to finish this in as close of a flash as possible. The closest he could do that was through clapping his hands high above his head, and then spinning
them vigorously. Ten new laser beams sprouted from his fingers, going some ways up before moving parallel to the ground, creating a sort of umbrella that shielded him from the rain for some time.

With a brief moment of opportunity, Rhodes then launched a palm of extra-strength laser at Monsoon. Its impact was too great this time for Choi, and he flew off the raised platform.

“Winner: (The) Lux Storm!” Referee Philips returned to the Arena.

“Oh, and it looks like Monsoon just couldn’t whip out his trump card in time.” Third Law noted, before giving a quick pen-tap to (The) Lux Storm’s theme turning back on.

Once more, both locker rooms had polarizing receptions to the result.
More of the first week of Best Kept Secrets' card goes down tonight. With four matches left and Vinnie and Andrew set for the end, this means Jane, Yu-Ling, and Ralph are stepping out, into the light of the Theatre of War.

“Welcome back to the Theatre of War, ladies and gentlemen! After another little intermission, we are back to present to you the latest in our afternoon card.” Blofeld announced, before the stadium experienced new theatrical elements. Atmospheric silence followed as another panning shot of the stadium was shown to the streaming audience.

Said theatrical elements involved a glowing pulsar that was growing in volume on the main screen, while various streams of cosmic bits were homing in on it, to the tune of “A Moment of Falling” by Position Music. When it reached its maximum size, a reverse-reverb exploding noise emitted and the neutron star collapsed, expanding into a vibrant nebula. On the stage itself, another purplish-black sphere manifested, but swiped out rather than shrinking this time, revealing Ralph within.

“Say hello to Ralph Voight, everybody! Or, as he’s known in Germany, Solo-G!” Third Law identified, as the former slowly walked with an (illustrated) passing meteor storm down the ramp. “Solo-G’s Quirk, Aggregation, is one of those powers where everyone always goes, ‘How does it work?’ even after hearing it the first time.” He continued onward.

“That is because of its necessity to utilize the laws of gravity, Gere?” Blofeld attempted to quip with the utmost subtlety. “Anyways, Aggregation involves making a microscopic point with a high gravitational pull; so much so that it temporarily overpowers the Earth’s own field. This gravitational field is able to attract inanimate cells not nailed down to reinforced steel and titanium, and compact them into a highly pressurized core. Depending on how long he holds a Solo-G point, there’s an added bonus; the potential energy inherent in the atoms and molecules desperate to return to a more regular arrangement can cause a kinetic detonation at the epicenter. The longer held, the greater the explosion.” He extended.

“This unusual ability has its fair share of drawbacks, though. To make a point, Ralph has to perform one; gotta suck if the hands or fingers are broken. Not to mention to cancel a Solo-G, he must make a fist, and as a certain movie involving a purple alien and a gauntlet has shown us, that’s often easier said than done once people find out they shouldn’t allow it... But it’s likely Ralph knows how to keep his palms free from manipulation too. We will see.” Third Law fell back into the gorilla position.

Ralph paid little notice of the raised platform like the competitors before, instead immediately climbing up the collapsible staircase onto it. One quick double hand-raise later, followed by a ground slam, and all celestial U-LEDs shut down, while the aerial stage ornament dictated the lights in another imploding star pattern above the Arena, ending the theme with an explosion as well.

“Much gravitas in the eyes of the guy of gravity, clearly. Well, let’s see his opponent.” Gere finished Ralph’s introduction before looking back towards the stage.
“Raise Your Weapon (KLOUD cover)” by Deadmau5 erupted from the surrounding loudspeakers as thin metal wires formed arcane patterns of spider-webs across the ribbons, stage, mainscreen, and ramp. The lights briefly died out, leaving the stage illuminated only by the purple evening sky. Vigilant, attentive ones could notice that the top of the entrance side of the Theatre of War produced a silhouette resembling another person. Said subject proceeded to bungee dive onto the stage... Using metal wire? Regardless, after making a safety-tap landing onto the entrance platform, the effects reignited.

“Ah, so this is Solo-G’s opponent this evening. Ladies and gentlemen, Pauline Baressi, or by her Heroine name, Gleam Streak!” Blofeld announced.

Pauline (or as her TV sideplate noted, going by “Pauli”) retracted all of the present cables back onto her arms in the form of many, variously-sized bracelets. She then strode with authority down the ramp.

“Look at that strut; it is clear Pauli is full of confidence debuting in the Arena this semester and this year.” Third Law commented.

“Baressi harnesses the power of Brass Birch; all permutations of brass, an alloy of copper and zinc for your information, are able to be reconstructed from their prior design into whip-like cables that can suit a variety of purposes. And yes, you may be thinking that it can be rather inconvenient looking for sources of brass, but do keep in mind that some of the better doorknobs, an assortment of musical instruments and the zippers on our jeans utilize this metal in some capacity.” Blofeld explained.

“But while she does have a supply almost everywhere she goes, Pauli is still using brass. That means their specifications remain constant - that also means that her weapons melt at a rather low temperature point, and can be pretty malleable, unless Pauli merges some aluminum with her reserves. But on the brightside, magnets don’t work on most of their alloys, so opponents will have a more difficult time disrupting her control over it.” Gere added on.

“It will be interesting, however, to see if Gleam Streak can find a way to get past the gravitational effects of Solo-G, though. An intriguing challenge indeed for the veteran.” Blofeld concluded, as everyone watched Baressi take a quick gaze at the raised platform (and her opponent) before propelling two brass wires at the centerpiece floating above and using it to Titan-launch herself into the squared circle. Her theme ended soon afterwards.

Referee Phillips arrives in due time, wasting none to call the two combatants close, reminding them of the rules and having them bump forearms as per Vanevery tradition before ordering them back to their sides of the Arena. He then chops the middle area before them. “Fight!” He yelled, dissipating soon after.

Pauli wastes no time, taking the first step and sweeping her right hand across her left forearm; the bracelets adorning the latter limb began following the former, and reshaped themselves into the thin cables witnessed earlier. Within five meters, Gleam Streak proceeded to whip her arm back and then reel forward, flinging five sharp strands Ralph’s way.

Ralph did his best in sidestepping the mostly-vertical set of slashes, but he still suffers a lash to his close cheek. He gives it a quick feel, smudging the small pool of blood below the wound and on his hand. The wires’ inherent shine from being made of brass alloys makes it very difficult to observe given the right angle and surrounding illuminance.

Seeing that her opponent is very susceptible to her basic attacks, she continues the onslaught, aerialing to right flank Ralph, while waving her hands (her left now taking up the brass reserves on
her right wrist) in a way that the wires fly like a swarm towards Solo-G. The latter counters this assault by pointing towards the ground and somersaulting over it; the result being that the trajectory of all of the cables redirect to be sucked into the pressurized core, avoiding Ralph entirely.

Gleam Streak immediately retracts most of her brass the moment she sees the core form, knowing full well that she could have been sucked into the singularity if she did not. The hesitation allows Ralph a moment to cancel the current black hole and point at another a few meters behind Pauli. She makes the mistake of looking back, granting precious moments to take the fray up close, and chop-blocking her right shin. Gleam Streak rolls around on the ground for a bit over her injured leg, before summoning three cables into her right hand and vertically slamming them towards the ground. Ralph rolls to the side to dodge the strikes entirely, whose impact leaves a set of small craters on the Arena floor.

Pauli gets back onto her feet again soon after, having slapped the shin to regain circulation. She then pries loose one of the rings on her upper left arm off and throws it towards Ralph like a chakram. Again Ralph avoids the obvious attack, but still feels something physically consequential; this time towards his back. When he inspects the injury, it is revealed that the ringed bracelet had transformed into a spinning wire in midair, having done so so that its endpoint made its mark on him as it continued to fly away.

“Whoa, ladies and gentlemen! Gleam Streak has already gone for her (Revolving) Razor Lines!” Third Law pointed out, with Blofeld adjusting the position of his glasses to enhance his view of the situation.

Pauli prepares two more and throws them at Ralph, with them now becoming Razor Lines immediately. Ralph gets only a moment to notice their glimmer in the sunlight to choose the right place to dodge to, and he seizes it, avoiding all damage and letting the projectiles fly harmlessly out of the Arena (hitting the forcefield enacted by professor Remy Zandig, aka Palisade). Pauli makes use of his divided concentration, forming springs out of her brass powerful enough to propel her into a position flanking Ralph.

Gleam Streak only lets her opponent turn his head when she dive-rolls into a two-meter fray. From there, both of her forearms each reshape their reserves into three thick wires that she proceeds to spin vertically like propellers. Ralph takes three major gashes at his shoulders and cranium before he falls onto his back and makes a pointed black hole towards the sky, causing most of the wires that were raised to that level prior to attacking Solo-G to be sucked in. Pauli worriedly looks up at the pseudo-event horizon, not noticing Ralph recovering from his trauma and pivoting along the ground so that his outstretched left arm swept her right leg into his grasp.

A forced lift-up later, and Pauli falls over onto her back, while Ralph uses his circular momentum to get into a three-point stance, putting his weight onto the former’s limb so that she curls up into a ball. Ralph throws two punches from the pseudo-mounted position straight at her face, which both connect and sandwich her head into the floor. Gleam Streak gets out of the predicament by whacking with her far hand towards Ralph’s own forehead, bringing two wires with it; Ralph was forced to break the hold to avoid damage.

But releasing was all a part of the plan, as Solo-G continues to barrel roll away while Gleam Streak rises back to her feat where she was supine... Not realizing that there was a concentrated black hole right behind her. Ralph had made the point while performing the leg-trap switcharoo from earlier. Just as she does turn to gaze at it, Ralph closes his hand, causing the cosmic void to collapse and produce a kinetic explosion. Pauli is sent flying towards Ralph, who catches her with a flying double-leg takedown, bypassing her attempts to dissuade him with a horizontal wire cut and
bringing her down back-first in a spinebuster motion.

“Whoa, a Hero move with a wrestling slam! Solo-G is sucking in quite a lot of moves from many talents, ladies and gentlemen!” Third Law observed.

But Solo-G wasn’t finished, as he rolls through the crash landing and uses the centripetal motion to launch her into the air, where another black hole was amassing air particles since Ralph got back to his feet about ten seconds earlier. Just under a meter away from its proximity (which steals most of her brass), the detonation again sends Pauli flying, this time all the way out of the Arena and into the ring-out grounds.

Referee Phillips arrived in the center, right on time as usual. “Winner! Solo-G!” He gestured over to the German competitor.

“Ralph wins with almost dominating fashion!” Blofeld rose out of his chair, matching the surprising reactions of his fellow color commentator.

Ralph eases up upon hearing his theme, walking off the stage to Pauli, who was still helping herself back to her feet again. “Good fight. No hard feelings?” He asked, also offering a hand up as well.

Pauli hesitated before accepting the assistance. “No harm. Enjoy the spotlight, though; I’m going to take it back before long.” She asserted and slowly walked away.

Ralph nodded as she left and looked to the audience with the same relative indifference.

“Alright, so we’re back in the game: 2-2!” Stephen pumped himself up.

“We’re doing it; we’re really doing it.” Yu-Ling brought her right hand close to her lower lip with the same joy as everyone else.

“Of course we’re gonna do it, Yu-Ling!” Jane hooked her arm across her best friend’s shoulders. “You and me, we’re gonna kill it out there!”

“I certainly hope so. You too, Vinnie. We’re the last line.” The Taiwanese ethnic declared.

“Pick your chin up, Yu-Ling. You’re totally going to own it.” Vinnie smiled.

“Excuse me, students. We have the next match-up.” A Theatre of War official knocked on the corner of the door. Everyone paid close attention for the next name.

Once the competition grounds have been confirmed tidied up once more, the next theatrical set started up. This saw tightly-barred steel sliding doors colliding with each other and manifesting a link-chain lock wrapping around the ends of both. A young lady walks across the U-LED-induced grimy concrete floor, clad in formal women’s police officer uniform.

“Aha, should’ve guessed that when our executives are running out of choices, they’re sending out someone they know can flare up a crowd that has reached an inevitable burnout. Ladies and gentlemen, Rayne Radley. Aka, Birdcage!” Gere introduced to everyone.

Birdcage, who was spinning one of the rings of handcuffs along her right index finger, lets it revolve off of said appendage, and right into the trappings of a binding box that she has created further than it. Releasing the restraint, she then proceeds down the ramp.

“Radley is one of two competitors in our entertainment tonight who has reached the top fifteen seed
at the singles competition of the Festival of Five. She is quite a tricky opponent to pin down, because chances are high that she will pin you down first!” Third Law continued.

“That’s right, comrade. Radley’s Quirk, Binding Box, deals with creating prismatic or spherical cells made of energy. What energy, you may ask? Internal, ambient energy - the kind of energy lying around all of us. She specifically targets the energy that all particles produce due to their motion within a structure, and uses it to make them all fall in line to form a rigid, temporary construct that traps those within.”

“Birdcage can house all but the strongest users who apply enough wear-and-tear on the surrounding barriers for as long as she needs to. Distance and size are directly proportional too - the greater the distance where the center is formed to where Rayne herself is, the larger she can make the cage.” Third Law briefly iterated.

“The object(s) that move along with the binding box must have been completely enveloped by the initial construction; things that are partially trapped have a chance to leave, though they could be tricked into walking deeper into the box. This also means that nothing hinders projectiles flying into the box; this makes Rayne a perfect support in making offensive allies deal with a smaller target, while opponents have less area to dodge.” Blofeld went on. “Of course, there are limitations, mostly accounting for the size-distance relationship. Also, if the light path emanating from Rayne’s hand gets disturbed before completion of the binding box, the process fails.” He explained further.

“It was with this in mind that Rayne made top ten back in her high school at Miami, and got herself one of the top spots in the most recent Festival of Five, doing Vanevery quite proud. We’ll be sure to see the same here tonight as well.” Gere finished.

Throughout the explanation, Birdcage had finally reached the end of the ramp and stood just a few steps from the Arena floor. Producing a set of digital jail cells that spin along their own axis and revolving around the squared circle, she gestures them to fly out of the Theatre of War’s atrium. She finally scaled the stairs and gave a few eleventh-hour poses to the crowd before taking off articles of the sentinel uniform and tossing them towards parts of the crowd, revealing her tournament attire.

“So who’s her opponent?” Blofeld looked back towards the stage.

“New Fast Shake I X I X 2K19” by DJ Leonard plays after a brief reprieve from the previous entrance. The U-LEDs of the stage, ramp, and ribbons turned into a vibrant rainbow spectrum. Beam lights protruding from the stage itself emitted a similar rainbow as they pivoted across the hundred-thousand strong crowd.

The beat dies down for a bit, as a slim figure high-stepped onto the flickering set. She stopped at the center and briefly put her hands behind her before the beat returned with a 1-2-3-4 chant that saw her then alternate hands reach for the sky. After several iterations, she snap-kicked the air before her and skipped onwards, hands behind her to the tune of Chinese EDM.

“Oh boy, ladies and gents; it looks like we’re taking Quirk combat back to its roots! This is Yu-Ling Kuan, aka- er, Qian-shui-nushi!” Third Law struggled with the formalities for the first time today.

“You’ll need to say her Hero name a bit more quickly next time, Gere. Anyways, Qianshuinushi is a combination of all the Chinese phonetics that produce the meaning, ‘Miss Repulse’. A very fitting moniker, as her Quirk is Repulse Panel; our atmosphere, aside from the predominant nitrogen and oxygen, is composed significantly by argon. Argon is a noble gas, which doesn’t react
with, or form compounds with anything else, thereby rejecting elements that give it electrons as well as trying to be given them. This makes them perfect for keeping most forms of matter from a selected spot.” Blofeld continued.

“Yu-Ling can hook all those variants of argon together to form her repulse panels, which automatically make things that come in contact with them to fly back the way they came. She makes great use of these constructs to fuel and develop new combination opportunities in tandem with her excellent Chinese martial arts expertise, further enhanced if she wants to by placing said panels right at her point of strike.” Gere announced.

“Miss Repulse does have her fair share of considerations: her body is the only thing impervious to the ricocheting effect, though her panels can be tricked by Sense-SO lined clothing, which allows all fabrics to be attuned to a certain print; that way she doesn’t unintentionally bounce just because her loose zipper pants touch ‘em. But that also means her allies as well as enemies are not immune to the effects. And, as we’ll see here, energy is not matter, so certain projectiles, such as the binding box beams can bypass the barriers. Finally, there is a smaller range from which Yu-Ling can reliably construct a panel; about ten meters away. However, she can push the panel into position rather than beam it into place, removing the disturbance limitation that Birdcage deals with.” Blofeld exposited.

Yu-Ling made it to just before the raised platform, like with all other competitors. She scanned the lightly illuminated crowd and then at the Arena itself, taking a knee and brushing the lower grounds with her right hand. Finishing that, Qianshuinushi briskly climbed the steps, again gesturing to hype up the crowd. She senses the final beat drop of her theme (which will conclude it), during which she transitions to again falling to a three-point stance at the right moment; the lights return to normal as well.

Referee Phillips rematerialized out of blue holographic light to call both ladies towards the center of the Arena.

Yu-Ling performed a traditional Chinese bow, with her right fist overlapped with her left hand as she bent, before performing the Vanevery Challenge Bump. “Good luck, Rayne.”

“You’ll be the one who needs it.” Rayne bounced back after completing the action. They both then proceeded back to their ends of the Arena.

“Fight!” Phillips yelled out, disappearing soon after.

Rayne hesitated, anticipating Yu-Ling to go first. But she didn’t. In fact, she remained rigid in her modified Wing-Chun stance (modeled much like Chung Tin-Chi’s default pose). The first few seconds, actually, were relatively motionless, as a perplexed Birdcage faked both sideways directions in an attempt to make Qianshuinushi move, but she still refused to budge, only regaining the centerline if Rayne did commit to moving more than a step from her original position and testing her peripherals.

“It appears as though Yu-Ling is allowing Rayne the first move. Not certain how wise that might be, but the latter doesn’t yet know what to make of it.” Blofeld observed.

Ticked by the commentator remark and finding Yu-Ling to blame for it, Rayne finally jumps the gun and delivers the first blow; her two first fingers laminate and point towards the latter, generating an energy beam coming straight towards her. *She’s not in motion, and given this distance for the size of the binding box I can make, there’s no way she can outrun its dimensions!* She thought with a smirk.
But then her opponent did outpace it, propelling herself forward so that only her bird-ponytail’s tip was still within the box’s confines.

What the-!? Birdcage was surprised by the development. How!?

In Yu-Ling’s own version of mindscape, the answer was revealed: she quickly threw her far palm back, producing a close repulse panel behind her. Yu-Ling then pulled out a blunt, rounded metal rod from the small of her back and rammed it into the panel, allowing it and herself to be pushed forward.

The sudden escape froze Rayne up for a few seconds, allowing Yu-Ling to swiftly advance on her. Within ten meters, Birdcage recovered and instinctively fired another binding box at her opponent. Again, however, Qianshuinushi avoided the entirety of the attack with a quick, spinning leap to the left side, continuing on her path in the meantime... A path which was rapidly shrinking in a brief time.

Hardly dealing with someone who can outsmart her beams so easily, Birdcage anxiously fired another, this time a little lower and at the center. Yu-Ling saw it coming, and produced a panel to her right this time, and also raised slightly higher. She used it as a wall to run across, avoiding the beam and the box it created. Traversing the argon construct finally got her within a meter of her opponent, wherein Yu-Ling struck with a somersault axe kick to the crown. Rayne, who has had limited close combat experience in the past, has no counter to this proximity but to move back and her cheek is met with the strike, sending her crashing to the ground.

Yu-Ling lands on her feet like a cat, and skips in with a ground blade kick that transitions into a back snap kick. Rayne’s instincts chose well in how to avoid the combination by barrel rolling away from the attack, rising back to her feet after the latest revolution.

Birdcage continued to try and make some distance between her and Yu-Ling by backpedaling further until she felt comfortable firing another beam. But then, so suddenly, she hit a panel and was repulsed back towards Yu-Ling.

“Hm, it seems as though Yu-Ling can decide when the panel becomes active, allowing her to phase them through stuff until she needs them!” Gere noted.

With her target coming towards her, Qianshuinushi used the returning momentum to deliver an extra-powerful high-angle roundhouse kick to the bridge of Birdcage’s nose, who lacked the sense to block high and instead eat most of the shin, again falling on her back. This time Yu-Ling does not take her eyes away from Rayne and instead pivots around her opponent rather than attack again, anticipating any way Rayne would quickly attempt to rise back to her feet and stay right on top of it.

Realizing she cannot escape another close fray, Rayne tries beating her to the punch by literally throwing one as she rises up to two points - a right swing for Yu-Ling’s chin. The latter sees it coming a mile away, thrusting her right palm straight at her opponent’s chin long before the hook can land. Said arm goes limp, but Qianshuinushi is not done, taking the limb and using it to perform a hip toss that makes Birdcage land on her posterior. She has no time to ache about the tailbone either, as Yu-Ling follows with a penalty kick right to the exposed spine, which makes Rayne writhe in pain instead.

Yu-Ling loads an axe kick to the chest, which Rayne notices and puts out her hands to block the ankle right on time, pushing it away. She also sees an instep sweep kick incoming and hops over it, but doesn’t expect a barrel-roll sweep, which puts her back on her face. On all fours, she is easy pickings for Yu-Ling stealing one arm, stepping over the torso, and rolling over into a cross
Rayne screams in pain as her elbow is outstretched, and only manages to get out when she fires off an energy beam with her undamaged hand towards Qianshuinushi’s face, which she lies back to avoid, albeit briefly letting go of the hold. Rayne again tries getting out as fast as she can, but Yu-Ling keeps her grapevine (leg criss-cross) of Rayne’s arm firm, preventing such an escape, though allowing the former to get up to her feet. When she does do so, Yu-Ling then takes the wrist with her right and then slides through Birdcage’s legs before standing back up, forming the pumphandle hold. From there, all Yu-Ling had to do was pull up, which causes Rayne to involuntarily somersault yet again, landing on the bad back. Because there was no such thing as overkill, Yu-Ling also prepared a panel low and parallel to the ground that she tossed Rayne into causing her to bounce a good two meters before landing on solid ground.

The former repositions while pointing at the back of Rayne’s head (who has once more gotten on all fours to get back to her feet), which she strikes with a falling 720 kick. Surely a full impact would’ve earned a KO victory, but nobody gets to know; Rayne covered the affected area with her forearm at just the right time.

“Unbelievable, ladies and gentlemen! Birdcage can’t seem to get anything going! Yu-Ling has really studied down on her strengths and weaknesses. I fear the end may be near for the veteran.” Blofeld rose out of his seat to get a closer look.

“Looks like Yu-Ling’s got this.” Hayley considered.

“Wooh, so badass, yet graceful at the same time. Being that much of a combination ought to be illegal everywhere.” Steve spoke with a hint of enamor.

“Have we found your type, Mr. Choi?” Ralph made a blunt quip.

Stephen quickly straightened up. “I, um, Well there’s nothing against Yu-Ling for me, but it would take more than a bunch of flashy, powerful moves to attract me.” He defended his manhood... Rather questionably.

_He’s not winning that fight, is he?_ Vinnie looked to Jane.

_Yeah, like a Dublin chiseler seeing his upperclassman crush._ She responded.

_Ugh, this is intolerable! Alright, think Rayne! How do you deal with this?!_ Rayne cogitated as she was still face-down. Suddenly something popped into her mind. She rose up to her feet... And suddenly spasmed, bringing her to her knees and clutching her back. “DRGH!” She exclaimed as she fell.

Yu-Ling’s focused, determined demeanor throughout the fight loosened as she developed legitimate concerns over the status of her opponent. “Oh my gosh! Rayne, are you okay?”

Referee Phillips appeared prematurely to the match’s conclusion to observe Birdcage.

Yu-Ling held her mouth as she came closer. “I’m really sorry, Rayne. I shouldn’t have done that arm-trap slam.” She announced.

Rayne remained where she was, still holding her back, though there was something just a bit off with how she was reacting.

“Oh no. No no, not fine. Not good, not good! Yu-Ling, don’t fall for it!” Jane rose out of her spot on the bleachers.
The rest of the freshmen and women frantically looked to their colleague and then back at the display before them.

“Are you well? Please tell me what I can do.” Qianshuinushi hovered just above Birdcage, laying a hand on her shoulder with reassurance.

Just as planned.

Immediately, Rayne pushed Yu-Ling out some meters away - enough space for when she dives back and fires a beam, constructing her first successful binding box of the match. The jump away brings her to one edge of the Arena, which she realizes, and she swiftly throws Yu-Ling over and dropping her out of the squared ring.

“Winner! Birdcage!” The striped official raised his hands.

“A wounded gazelle turns out to be a cheetah in disguise. Rayne played smart to get the win against her most difficult opponent as of late.” Gere asserted.

“I will admit that it takes a lot of quick thinking to pull this off, but certainly I feel some majesty for a FoF singles participant is lost with this display of victory.” Blofeld inferred.

“I don’t know if we’re allowed to judge, Blofeld - she is something we’re not. In any case, the result’s gonna stand, Rayne’s the winner!” Third Law responded.

Yu-Ling was just as shocked as most of the others in the audience, with a hint of hurt. Still, she got to her feet, dusted herself off, and gave a bow to Rayne before departing, allowing the latter to bask in her theme.

“…” Everyone in the freshman locker room was speechless… For a little while.

“Those dirty little bastards, stooping so low to abuse Yu-Ling’s infinite kindness. No lick of shame in them, is there?” Jane remained very ticked at how her best friend has been treated.

“Excuse m-” The ToW official knocked on the door, only finding enough time to mutter one and a half words promptly afterwards.

“We know who’s next. I’m coming.” The other New York resident declared, power-walking towards the exit. Her peers seemed the slightest bit uneasy by the situation.

A period of time later, the Arena was set for its next competitors.

“Red Like Roses ~ Prelude” by Amanda Lee plays through all speakers; a somber, young voice of a lady setting the mood with a fast-forward of the days at the Cliffs of Moher and Trinity College, among others. After the final phrase of “gold”, the tune dies, and everything turns black for a moment as the screens then show an establishing shot of Dunscaith Castle. When a new beat begins (“The Enemy You Need” by Blameshift), the entire picture turns to all shades of purple stencil, of which burns away and reveals a more fantastical version of the kingdom, underneath a twilight moon.

As the theme reaches its chorus, crystal pillars erupt from the center stage, which then fold out to reveal Jane, wearing a familiar pop-cult depiction of the warrior maiden that once resided in the famed dominion being depicted behind her.

“I see that we are busting out the archives of the campus library at this moment. Coming out as Scathach, ladies and gents, this is Jane Hanaway, better known as GemaKnight!” Blofeld observed
Jane pulled down the face cover and headdress, scanning the audience swiftly before tossing them aside, and ramming her replica Gae Bolg spear onto the stage and proceeding. She further stripped out of the cosplay gear, revealing her true working costume to be a long-sleeved climawarm half-zipped sports jacket and tactical leggings, above her Jack Purcell’s.

“GemaKnight hails from Queens, much like her best friend Yu-Ling was raised in. With the Fighting Irish in her blood, Jane felt the best offense was an amazing defense. She often employed crowding techniques in her group contests with her high school’s Relay matches, often being the anchor or penultimate member to clear out the final contestants. Jane’s also been known to have the fisticuffs to complement her breakneck style too, and boasts a sizable number of knockout victories that force the referee to back her out of a helpless pummel. Dear word.” Gere acknowledged.

“She looks to be all business tonight, Gere. Jane’s walking with an intense desire for victory here. Now for those who know their Irish and Scottish mythos, you will know that she picked her patron mascot well tonight; Scathach is an immortal godslayer - you don’t get better choices for icons than that.” Blofeld commented.

“Now about her strengths - Crystal Pillar Architect. By creating a claw with her hands and lifting up or down, she can manipulate the minerals underneath the Earth to protrude out in the form of translucent stalagmites. These constructs serve a variety of purposes, from sudden attacks below the belt, to defense, to temporary confinement.” Third Law explained.

“And in case opponents get too wise to vertical attacks, Jane can channel the crystals in already-raised pillars so that they fire at angles out of the sides - though that means they must come out of the ground first to do so.” Blofeld added on. “Because they are made of crystal, these pillars are excellent conductors as well as absorbers, and can repel or take in almost all forms of electricity coming at them. But certain wavelengths of sound and energy can crack and even shatter them. She might have to be mindful of this when confronting her opponent here tonight.” The blow-by-blow commentator considered.

Jane didn’t so much as flinch by the time she made it to the steps up to the raised platform, merely scraping her soles clean on the ground and then quickly climbing the set.

GemaKnight’s theme and visuals died down, replaced at the beginning by a series of mountain lion mewls. Seconds later, a whole legion of pumas responded back, creating a chaotic orchestra of their roars amidst the woodlands setting. In the ensuing silence, one such animal shows up before the camera depicting the area, of which its starkly-colored eyes then produce a name. “Lion Heart” by Atom Music Audio plays on the loudspeakers.

“It’s time for some regality, everybody. Out comes Frederick Hall, or as we better know him as, Paladin Puma!” Third Law introduced.

It took a little while before most of the people inside of the Theatre of War could find Hall, who was carefully using the lights of the foliage to conceal himself, like a feline predator would. He only was shown when the time of day for the setting changed rapidly, of which he then stood up, straightening his cape and bearing some short claws of what appears to be an alloy of magnesium and nickel. He saunters down the stage and ramp with the necessary mysticism that a beastly divine knight should have.

“Paladin Puma, in case you couldn’t tell, has Cloning Cougar - everything any Puma can do, Hall can replicate. This includes an insane level of upper and lower-body strength, running at up to 50 mph for quick sprints, great biting potential, retractable alloyed claws, and acute instincts. Hall is
perhaps the most well-versed in close-combat amongst the community of students testing our Freshmen here tonight, and that’s no small feat given all of that we’ve seen here today.” Blofeld analyzed.

“Yeah, indeed. Hall’s got impressive speed, and with an inherent sense of 4D, he’s got the mobility too. Everything’s pretty much a jungle gym for him. I’m not certain exactly how Jane plans on keeping track of him, much less pin him down.” Gere remarked.

 Paladin Puma reaches the stairs and climbs up them like his namesake big cat, and praises the sun (which, in this case, was a set of five bright beams) after the trek.

“There certainly is a charisma in the king’s convoy tonight. Surely, that amount of swagger can achieve victory here tonight, right ladies and gents?” Blofeld advocated.

Puma disrobed his cape and removed the sharp fake teeth, as he loosened his shoulder muscles while confronting a stoic, scowling Jane.

Referee Phillips gestured with his left hand to return the lights and quiet in the arena. He made sure both man and woman were prepared for the ensuing match, then called them in to touch forearms (which they complied to) before getting back to their sides of the squared circle. “Fight!” He chopped downwards before dissipating into thin air.

Jane, in her European Peek-A-Boo Boxing stance, picked her head up slightly upon seeing...
Nothing!

“Whoa, am I seeing that right?” Steve stood up to better concentrate on the screen.

“No lie - he disappeared!” Ralph rhetorically answered.

Vinnie, Hayley, and the rest silently continued their shocked gawk at the U-LED screen.

“Starting off with the camouflage early, I see! Well I suppose it ain’t broke, so he might as well use what doesn’t need fixing.” Gere noted. “One of the many talents of the American cougar - the ability to hide in plain sight. Can Jane’s pillars stand up to that?”

It’s jarring when it happens in person... But it isn’t anything I cannot handle! Jane’s eyes returned to fury as she maintained her guard, actively scanning her surroundings to see if she couldn’t discover him in the vicinity. She then clawed her hands, trembling for a moment, and then raising them up. This prompted over a dozen meter-wide crystal pillars to form in the squared circle, surrounding her in a symmetrical scatterplot.

“Whoa! A sudden swarm of stalagmites! Jane’s answer to this new development!” Blofeld lifted up his specs.

“Impressive perhaps, but high objects are hardly obstacles for a leaper-climber like Fred! If anything, it’s likely GemaKnight just made it a little harder on herself!” Third Law theorized.

Jane continued to pivot around, attempting to see any disturbance in the loose rocks and slabs uprooted by her pillars. One such shift in the stones alerted Jane, who quickly turned its way, but finding nothing from that direction approaching. Prudently, she then takes a hand-sized slab into her right, anticipating the next disruption.

Eventually, it came in the form of another shift in the other dislodged rocks, which Jane then threw towards, with it only hitting a distant pillar. She wouldn’t have more than an instant to be discouraged, unfortunately, as she then recoils forward in response to a slash to her back.
“GGKH!” She grunts behind her gritted teeth, feeling her center waist and discovering two gashes of considerable depth.

Once she was done reacting, Jane then saw a cement projectile fly her way in kind, which she blocks by summoning a smaller pillar to get in the way. But the efforts to nullify this stray attack divides Jane’s attention, as she only notices a split second later the glimmer of sharp metal about to cut at her eyes. She tilts her head right in time to defend those vital organs, and instead draws gashes on her cheeks instead, which still draws her pained ire.

GemaKnight attempts to recoup the loss with a pillar raise right underneath the area before her, hoping it would send Paladin Puma flying, but something tells her she didn’t make the mark. Precognition becomes hindsight, as she then feels her shoulder being clutched and compressed, causing five more small lashes as she forcibly pulls it away. An attempt at a push kick then gets her a couple quick swipes at her exposed shin and calf.

“Jane’s taking a lot of damage, and anything she does, Frederick seems able to counter!” Blofeld inferred.

“Indeed; Paladin Puma was pretty much made to counter these stone-wall types. Luck of the match-up draw just wasn’t in GemaKnight’s favor today.” Third Law spoke back.

Paladin Puma himself backflipped to latch onto the side of one crystal pillar, gazing at the writhing Jane with savagery. How’s that big mouth of yours now, huh?! He thought to himself, spin-jumping to the next nearby stalagmite and flicking a pebble at another to cause another distraction, waiting for her to turn towards it to strike again. She inevitably does so, enlarging his grin as he nosedived back into the sneaky fray.

But another smile formed on another face at that moment too.

GemaKnight threw her left hand outward, perpendicular to her facing, causing the earlier pillar used to block a rock to produce a punching arm, and fly right into Fred’s hand, after he used it to block the sudden strike. “I know how to counter your stealthy shit now, so-called king!” She turned back to announce confidently.

Paladin Puma, undeterred from what he believes to be a chance hit, leaps back to another pillar to set up another opportunity... But then he is sent towards another pillar when the section he rested on becomes a horizontal limb as well! Thankfully for him, he manages to pull himself over and on top of the arm before it could squish him into the wall.

Jane then fired off another arm from the other pillar, above the previous one so that it smacks Fred in the cheek and sends him crashing back towards the ground. He would have collided with it too, had it not been for a new crystal tower being raised to meet him roughly halfway. Like a big cat would, however, he does manage to land on all fours on top of it rather than with his back. He attempts to use his intense speed to get the drop on Jane, knowing he can outpace the constructs without giving himself away... But not Jane herself, it seems, when she sidesteps the charge, allowing his form to fly by her.

Hayley grinned significantly at the display.

Jane then lifted her close knee so that it rammed right into Fred’s chest. He manages to get his forearms in enough to nullify most of the impact, but this was only the transitory strike; Jane had intended to follow up with a back gi-toss that converted his forward momentum into centripetal force, letting go after one full revolution. She made a claw with one of her hands before doing so, causing another pillar to form up where she was going to throw him, causing Hall to slam his face
right into it.

“Fred thought that he was so safe with the fact that he could be as quiet as he wanted to be in his surroundings. But he neglected how that’d feel if every obstruction near him can absorb any and all sounds. Sure, he’d himself be silent... But he’d be the only thing there that was being silent.” The French lady confidently proclaimed.

“So that’s how she’s locating him... It’s like an inverse-radar!” Hinata held her chin.

Jane quickly followed up the wall slam with a charging elbow smash to the back of Hall’s head, hoping to sandwich between it and a hard place. The latter sees it coming right in the nick of time and shifts it out of the way. His counterattack could not be formed, however, as Jane had already formed another claw and pushed the opposite way, causing an arm from the latest-made pillar and jabbing into his ribcage, pushing him too far for the attack.

Hall rubbed his torso for an instant then returned a mad gaze at Jane, intending for a wild haymaker claw swipe. Too wild, unfortunately for him, as it took too long for the curved motion of his strike to come back around, buying Jane the ample time for a powerful left jab to his exposed face. She succeeds it with a right uppercut, breaking through Hall’s reforming guard, and then a high left roundhouse for his cheek. Hall evades the lower-limb attack, seeing her back vulnerable for retribution. Again, he was too late; Jane’s clawed right hand pulled past herself, and summoned a second pillar arm, flying just over her crouched form and targeting Fred’s plexus; his lunging fingers run right into it, making an uncomfortable crunching noise.

“Huge second wind coming from Jane here!” Third Law leaned forward from the announce table. “Kickboxing technique for days!”

Jane turns around and rises up from one side of the horizontal pole, finding that Frederick was fixing his jammed hand into a fist. Seeing her turn back to a standing position, he charges past to try and clothesline her. GemaKnight answers by limboing back underneath the pole and ending up on the other side. She then tries to sweep Paladin Puma’s legs from underneath, but he hops over the arcing insweep. Her third arm doesn’t manage an aerial headshot as he bows his cranium, accurately predicting such a follow-up attempt.

Hall rejects fighting Jane with a crystal between them and wall runs across the crystal trunk to vault over after Jane, who do-si-does with him instead, sliding underneath the arm and ending up on the other side, and stomping on Fred’s leading foot when he tries to do the same. This stunned him enough for Jane to speed vault into a full mount on top of Fred, tapping both of his arms to his side. Upon landing on the ground, GemaKnight then delivered that horizontal elbow smash she was looking for earlier, and with a clawed left hand, she then frontflipped off of Paladin Puma, with a crystal pillar rising out from under him.

This gave Jane extra lifting potential as she kept a hold of his collar on both sides, going for a spike facebuster on top of a newly-spawned crystal stump. Hall reels back from it, clutching his ribs once more, unable to react to a bicycle knee smash to the cheek that again pushed him back. Jane saw what was right behind him and summoned one more limb from the latest pillar. Said arm strikes from down low and makes its mark on his shin, tripping him up and lining up his head on the pole... And Jane’s instep, as she ran along it and loaded a punt kick. The final strike sends Hall off of the raised platform and into the ringout area below.

“Winner! GemaKnight!” Referee Philips revealed himself and motioned towards Jane, just as her theme came back on for a victory tune.

Jane herself massaged her muscles that were directly affected by the gashes, which she also applied
pressure to, in order to stop any remaining bleeding. When she felt remedied enough, she brought down any of the remaining pillars and waved to the crowd, while also ironically bumping her chest at the supine Fred, who couldn’t help licking his swelling-up lips. He sat up with frustration over his loss, making it clear to the New York native.

“We’re all tied up now.” Ralph acknowledged, still watching the screen.

“And then there was one.” Yu-Ling appeared from behind Vinnie, caressing his clavicles while looking over him.

“No pressure, huh all of you? Eh, no matter. Here I go.” He assured himself.
The finale of Best Kept Secrets occurs; with the series tied three apiece, it is up to Vinnie and Andrew to end the night with a W for their respective teams. The only question is who wants it more?

By this point, it has become evening at Vanevery University’s Theatre of War Stadium. And between a couple intermissions and a devoted lunch-break that gifted them a cumulative two hours hiatus from the constant action, the one-hundred-thousand-plus audience were treated to six matches that have served as a taste for what the loyal fanbase can expect from the regime-overhauled school moving forward.

And now, there’s only one contest left tonight.

“Wow, the time really does fly when you’re seeing action like this. Hardly any better ways to spend a Saturday afternoon.” Third Law proclaimed once he got the cue from the cameraman that the program was back after commercial.

“I'm surprised you still have a voice left, Gere.” Blofeld looked to his partner in crime before turning back towards the Raised Platform and entrance stage. “Anyways, everyone, here we are at the main event for this evening. We talked a lot about him at the beginning of today, and it takes until now to finally see him in action, in the main event tonight, we have newcomer Vincent Teshima, taking on the latest FoF quarterfinalist for Vanevery University, Andrew Price.” He responded.

“Yeah, and hey, you know I can keep things up so long as something is coming my way to begin with. That is why I’m Third Law, after all!” Gere returned his attention to the lenses this time. “And while we’re not certain of what his foe is capable of, there is quite the tendency from Andrew that brings out the best from whomever he faces. He’s just that good.” He remarked. “With just a little bit of luck, we can all but assure you that we’re going to be in for an immediate four-star classic. At the very minimum!” He concluded.

“Now that the cleanup crew have tidied up any lingering messes from all of the previous contests, the two remaining competitors have been rung up and now it’s on them to bask in the light.” Blofeld indirectly prompted them.

Half a dozen seconds later, the stadium’s relative silence over the default jumbotron and ribbons were suddenly reverted. To the tune of “UK Strong” CFO$, all U-LED screens transitioned to show a plethora of sparklers falling into the ground and landing perfectly so that they protruded. Abruptly, they all were set alight, causing limitless embers to fly in all directions, engulfing the screens. Eventually, a number of the sparks die down until they form the letters that spell out “ScatterSpark”.

At that point, the whole stadium is illuminated normally, albeit with a yellow-orange tint, and the screen that was once mostly dark has been partially replaced by spinner pyrotechnics that run the gamut of the visible light spectrum as they continue to flicker intensively. The man of the hour shows up soon afterwards, dressed up in his finest black-pinstripe Victorian getup, complete even
with a cane, though unlike Steve’s it was clear there wasn’t going to be a hidden sword inside of the frame.

“The pride of the Sophomores for this year of Vanervery has arrived, everyone! Andrew Price, or as he’s better known on the BGNN, ScatterSpark!” Third Law identified.

Andrew proceeded down the stage and ramp, tipping his top hat to both sides of the audience as he passed by and twirling his cane across his hand.

“Channeling a Moriarty chic, it looks like here tonight. Classy. Nevertheless, Andrew’s quirk, Sparks Spawn, needs no introduction - the user’s skin on their hands are flints in all but name, and can utilize friction between them to form sparks that can be propelled like throwing daggers or chakrams. Except hotter and briefly ignited, of course.” Blofeld described.

ScatterSpark eventually makes it to the flight of stairs just before the Raised Platform. He kicked his soles up to keep his feet tucked into his boots before stepping up and pointing at all of the audience with his cane. Moments later, he discards it, along with his top hat, with a separate set of aside frisbee tosses.

“Price looks to be at an all-time high in the confidence department.” Blofeld added on as he laid witness to Andrew twirling his wrists and bowing forward before starfishing, producing a layered shotgun blast of sparks flying upwards.

“And when one is as good as him, why wouldn’t one be?” Third Law responded, seeing the aerial jumbotron above him produce its own sparks (which were just budding pyrotechnics which lacked the raw luminescence compared to ScatterSpark’s).

Andrew’s theatrics eventually died down to return to the default animations, before swiftly segwaying to the next set of graphics. The ribbons of the stadium turned into an audio equalizer, while the jumbotron and stage U-LED screens were converted into an ENV Afterburner GUI - a program used to monitor GPU hardware statistics. The whole audience looked on in anticipation, as they then witnessed some of the slider controls being shifted right, causing both the measured voltage and frequency magnitudes to amplify significantly. This was illustrated through the rapid increase in the number as well as a set of filling circumferential gauges and the ribbon equalizer turning red.

The screen remained locked on the depiction of the program boasting maximum settings before it zooms out, revealing it to have been only a part of an azure rainmeter core. Said core then sprouts a comment towards the top of the screen, reading, “Now playing: MOST AWESOME PLAYLIST”. “The Bomb Dot Com V2.0” by Sleeping With Sirens plays just afterward on the loudspeakers. After which, it then summons another pop-up window that takes center stage as the sphere’s surroundings are overwhelmed by blue plasma. Its comment states, rather simply, “N2END”.

Vinnie himself appears on cue, from the flank of the stage and operating a utility ATV. A ramp to the side of the raised set allowed him to clear the ledge and drive right to the entrance center. Depending on what the audience and cameras were focusing on first, they got to see either Vinnie’s raised hand in the Vanervery “V” gesture, or his face, which was partially covered by a heavily-modified rave-DJ facecover.

“Wow! If I didn’t know any better, Andrew’s opponent tonight is throwing everything out to the floor to try and upstage the grandeur of his own entrance!” Gere suggested.

Vinnie powered down his vehicle, dismounting it, and faced the crowd, only with two salutes raised above his head this time. Nodding at the generally positive pop he was getting, he let his
hands hang and strutted down the ramp.

“Vincent Teshima is before the camera, ladies and gentlemen. And in our main event, he is the final Freshman for this week to be shown to audiences worldwide. Yes, the last name does not lie; Vinnie is bonafide Japanese, but has found a fostering of further Hero education to be more fruitful here than anywhere else.” Blofeld gave a brief introduction.

“No surprise; don’t get much better than Vanevery!” Gere reacted. “Anyways, as N2END, Vinnie has the quirk of Nitro Blast - charged nitrogen particles, or nitrogen plasma, are his forte. His internal systems allow him to convert any and all sources of nitrogen surrounding him into his own personal, super-hot, and super-electrified matter to serve a variety of purposes. His favorite application, owing to his Navy training, happens to be in CQC, where his physical attacks get that extra supernatural oomph to them.” He exposited.

“But Nitro Blast has its drawbacks. Because plasma is a phase of matter, and therefore matter, rather than energy, there is a mass and weight to it, and so it travels at a slower rate than most other energy attacks like laser bolts you’d see. Plasma attacks, particularly arcs and beams, also require consistently effective control, which limits its range as the dissociation between the wielder and further-away nitrogen particles become weaker and weaker; even the strongest, most experienced wielders of Ion-related Quirks cannot snipe past fifteen urban city blocks.” Blofeld cautioned the audience.

Vinnie arrived just before the steps. By that point he had been hyping up the crowd and loosening his arm muscles, but now that he was in front of the raised platform, his expression changed dramatically. He slowly pulled down the facecover, continuing to gawk at the Arena.

“If I’m looking at that mask right, I do say it bears a very strong resemblance to the various masks worn by ONEinNEON. Though now that I’m reading out that Pro Hero’s name aloud, and seeing N2END, I can probably see why.” Blofeld remarked.

“ONEinNEON isn’t a bad role model, Vinnie, but if you really wanted a badass to look up to who was prominent from the Grit-of-Light generation, you need not look any further.” Gere slouched into a gorilla position on his commentator chair before straightening back up.

Finally, N2END then fell into his knees one at a time, dusting off his thighs with one sweeping stroke of his right hand and then performing a traditional Japanese bow, with his forehead lingering on the floor for at least four seconds.

“As is customary for pretty much all Japanese Battlegrounds competitors, be they at primary school, university, or in pro leagues, Vinnie is giving us a textbook Arena bow. I for one, must say it’s nice to see traditions like these remaining alive and well today.” Blofeld asserted.

Vinnie willed himself upright, screaming skyward while his hanging hands formed additional Vanevery salutes. Pyrotechnics that simulated blue lightning bolt waves that traveled down the edges of the ramp towards the center came as if on cue to the motions. He then got back to proper standing and trekked up the staircase, confronting Andrew, who remained mostly unimpressed by the display. Breaking away for a moment, he then unequipped his U-LED light-up mask and left it just outside of the squared circle, and took off his dog tag necklace. He kissed the two cartouches before tucking them into his shorts back-right pocket, which was promptly zipped up. His stage effects subsided soon after too, while Vinnie put a mouthguard with Japanese graphics on.

Referee Philips arrived on scene, gesturing the two competitors to get close. When they were within a meter of each other, he started up. “Alright. Price, Teshima, this is the main event of the evening. Let’s make the founders of the sport proud, hm? Give this great Boston crowd a good
show to cap off the night. I expect good technique - not necessarily clean, but that would be appreciated. If I pull you back, comply immediately, because the match is over. If you fall out, both of you should cease, because it’s over that way too. You want to capitulate, raise both hands open, kneel, and look down. All clear?” He double-took between the combatants, who both nodded. “Okay; salute and get to your corners.” He ordered.

Vinnie and Andrew both formed the V across their chests, but while Vinnie laid out his forearm, Andrew thought for a moment about it. He ultimately conceded a slight bump of his back phalanges rather than the full wrist-to-elbow before turning away. N2END was less than satisfied with the development, but he retracted it and backed up. When he reached the sufficient distance, he gave a quick bow before getting into his relaxed swarmer boxing stance. Andrew meanwhile turned around with both of his open hands kept close to his left waist.

The striped official gazed into both of their eyes one last time before chopping down and yelling, “Fight!” to start up the contest.

Immediately, Andrew starts, with his right hand dragging across his left, creating a sizable number of embers on the palm, which were propelled forward once his arcing stroke finished. The weaponized friction projectiles met Vinnie halfway due to his charge-in. The latter sees the shotgun volley coming thankfully, and uses a back-juke spin to avoid it. Andrew was hardly fazed by the quick reaction, retracting his other arm for further swipes, sending more and more sparks at his opponent.

Vinnie’s inherent speed continues to just win out, with him rolling to flank two in sequence and then sliding just underneath another blast to get up close to Andrew. N2END rose back up with a low roundhouse kick, hoping to cripple ScatterSpark’s leading shin or knee. But the latter shows great precognition and pulls it back. It was a split-second evasion, but something about it still surprised the former.

Still, he did not relent, then going for a skipping thrust kick, which did make its mark this time. The plasma-infused impact only seemed to frustrate Andrew more than hurt him, however. The push distance looked for the moment to work in the latter’s favor as he then tried for another spark blast. Vinnie again spins away from it and closes in with a quick one-two. Andrew is able to juke them both, but looks surprised by Vinnie’s sudden side-shuffle to his new flank, granting the latter the low right roundhouse he was looking for. The attack slightly wobbled him, leaving him vulnerable for another strike in the form of a left hook to his face that, in ScatterSpark’s perspective, came pretty much from out of nowhere.

The latest love tap throws Andrew for a loop, taking a few limp steps to stay standing. He quickly recovers though and gives a safety roll to further the gap from his swarming opponent. Vinnie clearly knows what’s coming - not just more blunderbuss-style spark blasts, but the geometric blasts as well. Line-shots, cylinders, spirals... Just pay attention to his hand gestures, and know what’s coming. Vinnie psyched himself up, seeing the next shell-shot flying at him.

As ScatterSpark loaded up the next shot, N2END concentrated deeply on the right hand as he continued to rush ahead. But in the moments following the chafing to full extension of the arm... Not one iota of adjustment of the digits themselves. This perplexed Vinnie in the succeeding seconds, rendering him susceptible to the attack, which turned out to be a vertical line volley. His reflexes still permitted him to sidestep the brunt of it, though suffering some burns on his left arm’s jacket, which he pats out.

“I saw the confusion.” Andrew pointed with his left. “You thought I needed to make those silly shapes?” He spoke arrogantly. “Sure, they help me make the picture, but if I can keep someone
like you from catching any signs, all the better!” He added on.

_Huh... A whole year spent keeping the extent of your Quirk a secret... So you aren’t a dime-a-dozen patrician prizefighter after all. Then again, I’ve been thinking that from the start..._ Vinnie’s business expression returned before long, just as ScatterSpark began lobbing even more of his crowd-controlling attacks.

“Back to back, the sparks flow! What’s coming next? Only ScatterSpark knows!” Gere singsonged the ensuing moments.

N2END naturally was having a much more difficult time avoiding these new strings as he tried to return pursuit, falling behind once Andrew begins introducing new projectile trajectories in the form of cylinders, spirals, and rakes, and Ys, on top of the two shapes from before. After roughly a dozen isolated peltings, Vinnie’s hooded leather jacket has become tattered by the accumulated cinders, and is forced to discard it.

Andrew noticed the disrobing, finding that the only thing covering any of Vinnie’s upper body now was his graphic tee. “Oh good. Just what you need; pure exposure to my attacks.” He clapped his hands, which also produced sparks for show.

“As fun as that may sound, I’m afraid I’m going to have to disappoint.” Vinnie reacted, before snapping his fingers. Suddenly, nitrogen plasma immediately surrounding his clothes and skin glowed, forming an almost-distortive membrane around his form.

ScatterSpark’s chin pitched up, clearly surprised by this development, bringing his right hand back to his open left palm in ready. When N2END rushed forward again, his opponent launched another set of volleys. But after enforcing a scenario where the former made the latter dodge right into another blast, it did not faze him in the least. “What?”

Vinnie came in way too fast after enduring the shell, causing Andrew to create an x-guard above his bowed head. That was fine for the former, however, as he was aiming for the back shin of his opponent, subtly loading a punt kick.

But then he missed.

Vince feels his leg extend too high up without impacting anything and quickly pivots to face Andrew in his usual stance. In truth, he didn’t miss, but rather Andrew had moved out of the way at just the exact moment.

“Surprised again?” ScatterSpark slowly revealed another smile as he brought down his cross guard.

“Bartitsu. The self-defense-based martial art of unbalancing your foes.” Vinnie identified.

“That’s right. The unarmed combat sport of the entitled, too. And many in my family forsook it overtime, but I always saw it had its uses. Particularly for those who think we wouldn’t be so trained in it.” He remarked, proudly as ever.

_Which means none of the moves my friends were free to employ will be of use here..._ Vinnie gritted his teeth behind shut lips. Still he charged in, throwing out an outwards block to keep Andrew’s arm from lining up with his centerline; the blast flies past his left. Andrew remained undeterred from the miss, instead retracting his firing arm and grabbing Vinnie’s forearm as he did so, pulling on it to ruin the latter’s equilibrium.

With his opponent involuntarily lunging forward, ScatterSpark tried for the lariat to the chin. But N2END fell too far forward in reaction, causing his head to float underneath the attack. Not all of
his body followed, however, as his right arm extended behind it, so that it could catch the passing wrist of the striking arm. Posturing up and bringing down the hand to his side completed an unorthodox method of a submission-style arm wringer.

Andrew feels his shoulder and tricep muscles flex and falls to his knees in response. This didn't last for long however, as he then rolled forward to relieve the tension. Vinnie anticipated this and brought a knee at the inner elbow of the still-held arm, keeping his foe from immediately rising back up. Once again having lost control of his general movements, Vinnie forced him to sit up with a foot to his nape, which translated into a one-handed collar choke with a knee to the spine for added leverage. The arm still in wrist control was moved behind him so that the hand touched his other shoulder blade, and was stuck in the pulling choke, adding to the compression.

“Whoa, everybody, tables have been turned! Or flipped, rather!” Third Law commented.

“A short-arm lariat gets countered into an arm wringer. N2END also keeps ScatterSpark from doing the traditional escape method, turning it into a submission. Will we have our first TO victory of the first Battlegrounds week?” Blofeld elaborated.

Not having a purely technical answer for this one, he tries a couple mini ScatterShots aimed upwards with his free hand (done by flicking his palm with the same fingers connected to them), but finding nothing. Out of options, he then resorts to pulling something from the inside seam of his pants waistline. Whatever it was, ScatterSpark then rammed it up and over his head; it forced Vinnie back, releasing the hold.

Vinnie got to see real quickly what it was, especially after Andrew gave it a swift whip to the side, causing it to become longer and make a locking noise - a telescopic baton. “Of course. Because what Bartitsu practitioner wouldn’t be complete without a stick, especially a cane, to fight with?” He considered.

Andrew shook his head a bit. Not out of frustration, if his expressions meant anything; it seemed to originate more out of thought. “For a dumbass, you catch on quick.” He finally responded, lifting the baton up to his head. He also let out a faint sigh.

Showing little regard to the weapon, Vinnie tries for the frontal assault again, but an overhead whack happens that dissuades him from moving too far ahead. His backing up provided Andrew the space to perform another full ScatterShot in line form, holding the baton in the loop between his index and thumb, while sliding the rest of his fingers across his left hand for the sparks. Vinnie rolls to the side to go underneath the attack.

Further swipes prevent Vinnie from getting in close, forcing him to strafe from further crowd control by Andrew. One ill-fated exchange has Andrew counter the wrist twist countered into a short-arm straight with the other hand, followed by wrestling his weapon hand free to coast N2END’s right eyebrow, drawing blood.

“OH, he’s cut!” Third Law noticed on the vitals-specification screen, seeing a 3D-mapping of the gash on Vinnie’s wire frame. Hinata and Michael looked on their own devices with worry.

“Can’t afford to be acting foolishly, Vince...” Jane shook her head.

“How’d he start bleeding so fast? That baton doesn’t have edges.” Ralph commented.

“Lucky strike; Vinnie’s still got this.” Steve answered with a handwave.

That statement’s a toss-up right now. The lass from New York leered towards the Korean.
Vinnie finally decides to target the weapon rather than the wielder, goading another strike by stepping up close enough for his opponent to throw another slashing motion. He initially looks to be targeting the wrist again, which the latter had been able to counter before but then he switches ways and grabs the striking end of the baton, twisting it away from him and trapping the fist in his armpit. The rolling motion of Vinnie’s arm, followed by the hip pivot created a compression too great for Andrew to keep a hold of the baton. Vinnie pays him back for the pommel smash with a forehand slap with said weapon, forcing Andrew reeling back from the stinging pain, while Vinnie tosses the stick off of the raised platform.

Andrew didn’t get any time to recover, quickly finding himself again caught by the wrist. He threw a few sweeps and a mini-Shot to try and break free, but Vinnie evaded them all to transition into a standing waki-gatame. Andrew cringes through the pain to get his other hand over his back to aim at his foe. Seeing it coming, Vinnie then throws his close hand to the side of Andrew’s now-unprotected neck, compressing the pressure point on the right side of it. Immediately, the Brit’s muscles stiffen and he cannot maintain his standing posture, falling over with Vinnie still beside him.

“Oooo, going for the neck!” Third Law observed.

“Oof, looks like N2END has a thing for the Touch of Death! Employing some Dim Mak knowledge here!” Blofeld made a quip, albeit a niche one, of his own.

Once Andrew hit the floor, Vinnie used the arm he still controlled to turn him over onto his back. Now supine, Vinnie floated over into a tight full mount that barely gave Andrew’s limbs any shoulder movement. Without said mobility, he couldn’t competently block any of the next three elbow smashes. Andrew’s attempt at a bridge was impractical as well, due to how tightly Vinnie positioned himself on his chest; any attempts would’ve likely crushed his sternum before Vinnie’s weight was overpowered. Without options once more and beginning to breathe a little heavily, Andrew again had to resort to a trick beyond skill - he laid his right hand on Vinnie’s left thigh and pulled down, causing a spread of sparks to be formed, piercing both Vinnie’s Plasmic Overshield and his shorts.

N2END realized the burning sensation at his side, and stood up to gain a safe distance for putting it out. So it’s not just between his hands do those sparks form. Vinnie thought, now that the small fires had subsided.

Andrew spins back to his feet and rubs one hand (with implicitly non-sparky tendencies), finding a cut caused by the joint’s peak digging deeper than the previous strikes. Witnessing his own crimson drew him into a frenzy, and at least temporarily forego any of his arrogant tendencies as he Kubrick stares a hole in Vinnie. Dropping his arrogant visage for a more-focused expression, he then started dragging his fingers up his own palms, accumulating a great amount of sparks while attempting to trip Vinnie every time he came close. While this didn’t work too well, Vinnie still couldn’t get a very good shot until two dozen seconds later.

“Andrew’s catching on to Vinnie’s movements!” Blofeld stated.

“Give props to ScatterSpark; having any idea of how a trained soldier fights while in the middle of conflict with one is a tall order!” Gere acknowledged.

But moments later, Vinnie loaded up a side kick, which turned out to be a feint, for he then brought it back down with an arch, catching Andrew’s sweeping leg, keeping him from backing out of his next blow - a right hook to the cheek.

Andrew spun out to the ground from the impact... But by that point, his hands were basically
flashlight strobes. He then threw them up into the air, creating a 9-bang flash effect that Vinnie never saw coming.

N2END fortunately caught his eyes a half-second later, but by that point, two of the nine flashes struck him and for a little while they burned. By the time they recovered, Andrew had rallied up and got behind him, locking him into a rear naked choke, with bodyscissors for extra control over the submission!

“Oooh, turnabout is fair play!” Third Law noticed.

Vinnie couldn’t thread his hand into the tight loop around his throat to ease the pressure being applied, no doubt due to Andrew’s skill at Bartitsu. Finding no option in time, he began dropping down to one knee.

“N2END’s fading. We might see a TO victory here!” Blofeld commented.

Andrew’s smile returned, as he then broke the bodyscissors of his legs to literally stand over Vinnie. The latter wanted that, however, as he then took one of those legs and pulled up past his waist, causing Andrew to break the hold. Still maintaining ankle control, Vinnie then twisted back to face the supine Andrew, causing his own legs to helix around it, and form a heel hook.

“Overconfidence killed the cat; N2END with an amazing reversal!” Blofeld updated.

ScatterSpark screamed in pain as he tried to straighten out his leg to resist the twisting movement of his lower limb. When that was proving futile, he resorted to dragging his hand across Vinnie’s calf, burning through some sections of his combat boots and forcing a relinquish.

With them both standing again, Vinnie gets back in close, sideways blocking Andrew’s next mini ScatterShot, and trying for the military press. But the latter wanted this in turn, with his extended hand turning back around into the block and dragging along it, burning Vinnie anew. This also opened the former up to a toe stomp on his leading foot, further leaving him vulnerable for a new move from ScatterSpark - a north-south double palm strike loaded with friction particles, with enough impact on his right chest to send him flying across the Arena.

“HM Hadouken! HM Hadouken! Andrew’s hit it!” Third Law identified the move.

“Not too many recover from that move easily! N2END’s in major trouble, and we might be seeing a ringout!” Blofeld stood up once more.

Akane and Raidon, at their own offices, gasped and winced respectively in response to the landing of the powerful strike on their son. Winchester’s Commons screening produced a number of audible reactions of groan as well. Vinnie’s fellow Freshmen backstage and in the bleachers weren’t taking that so well either.

Miraculously, Vinnie recovered in midair and used his Nitro-Thrusters to slow himself down and bring him back onto the Raised Platform. His safety tap-landing was overpowered by his own injuries, however, as he collapsed onto his knee upon doing so. His whole front told that story, basically - blood now not only came from his scalp, nose, and eyebrow, the concussive blow to his chest made a sizable reddening there too, and coughed up some blood.

“Somehow, Vincent is still in this! You can hear the surprise from this audience behind us and the other commentators - it is, for a lack of a more fitting word, electric!” Gere looked behind and around himself.

“N2END, if you want to concede defeat, the offer always stands.” Referee Philips appears to the
side of the hunched-over Vinnie, reminding him of the opt-out option.

Andrew brushed off any dust and other grime from his chest and arms while arrogantly staring down his bloodied-up foe from afar.

Vinnie also assessed the trail of crimson going down the right side of his face, while also checking his nose to make sure it wasn’t the same severity.

“Vinnie’s playing this wrong. He’s not made for drawn-out contests.” Jane continued to frown and shake her head disapprovingly.

“Why? How do you know?” Sanya looked to her for clarification.

“When we sparred during training, it only took one of my punches to break the skin of his chin. It wasn’t even my best cross - he blocked it a sizable way too. That’s when I found out the main drawback of Vinnie’s Quirk, with it being a plasma reactor and all.” Jane explained.

“Plasma reactor?” Yu-Ling repeated.

“Charged nitrogen is plasma. And it runs through him just as blood does in his circulatory system. It’s primarily what allows him to create more plasma with his surroundings - provide or take away the electrons that nitrogen supplies contain. But because nitrogen keeps funneling in such a cycle, it’s giving him a perpetual case of uremia. Known symptoms: progressive weakness, high BP, and metabolic acidosis. All of which give him a below-average constitution.” Her best friend elaborated solemnly. “Vinnie can dish it out, no question. But he can’t take it.” She spoke in layman’s terms.

“Not good...” Steve bit on his right thumb as he watched with preoccupation.

“We need an answer, Little Vinnie!” Andrew taunted, gesturing in standoffish fashion. He seemed more than a little excited at the notion of a forced surrender, if his heavy breathing, obviously involuntary, was anything to go by.

N2END then scraped away the freshest drip from his lower lip before finally responding. “No dice, ref. I’m in until the bitter end.” He reacted.

Referee Philips nodded slowly with acceptance. “Very well. Do something or I put a stop and it’s a TKO victory.” The official complied with the wish, dissipating once more.

“Andrew, before we begin again, I really do need to tell you something.” Vinnie wiped off more blood from the side of his head using his shirt.

Like a proud king would, ScatterSpark held out his hands, reflecting his openness for what Vinnie had to say.

“If you couldn’t already tell, I’m hiding something. Some special something.” Vincent honestly confessed. “A... Heh, a special something that is the pathway to many powers others may consider disturbing.” He added with a smirk, which was not lost on Andrew.

“Anyone thought they’d be hearing some Star Wars jargon?” Third Law looked to Blofeld and cracked up; the latter joined in a way.

“But I realize that is a big disrespect to you, who just recently gave a lot of himself to me. So, let me make you an offer. A sadistic offer, if we’re really playing Pro Hero and Villain right now: if you don’t start taking me seriously for the rest of the contest, then I will have no choice but to get
serious as well. So I highly suggest... You finish this now, while I’m not doing anything.” N2END proposed to his opponent for the evening.

Andrew seemed slightly swayed by the statement... With disgusted disbelief, like much of the audience surrounding him. He then threw a vertically-linear ScatterShot Vinnie’s way, who sidestepped with ease.

“Very well. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” Vinnie then moved a wad of his hair, drenched by his own blood, away so that it wouldn’t impede his eyesight.

“Take your best,” Andrew had to huff for some reason. “-shot, p-punk!” He yelled back, bouncing into preparation.

Well, to quote Sans... “Here goes nothing.” Vinnie slowly turned back, seeing Andrew again and sighing. From there, he ran forward, just like he has several times before in this contest. And just like he has answered every previous attempt, Andrew hurled more volleys of various shapes, which Vinnie either evaded or blocked by utilizing his Plasmic Overshield again. But this time, it’s actually going to be something. Vinnie finished his earlier thought.

Andrew then tried a new trick - instead of throwing his hand forward, he made a curving motion, causing the sparks to follow a boomerang arc towards its target. Vinnie’s plasma then focused further on his legs, granting him additional speed and overtaking the final meeting point of the sparks, surprising ScatterSpark.

Nevertheless, Andrew didn’t look too alarmed, believing it to be the final rush of a drastically-weakened opponent, who could not match his strength at this point. When N2END closed the fray to a mere meter, Andrew again tried to open him up with a foot stomp for another HM Hadouken. But for whatever reason, his prediction of the next position of the former’s leading instep was very off, striking nothing but the Raised Platform!

Desperately, Andrew switched tactics to his mini ScatterShots to dissuade the advance. Vinnie avoids it entirely with a railflip vault over the former’s shoulders; Andrew hardly realized it, as if his opponent had practically disappeared. Now behind him, Vinnie looked to be preparing a counterattack.

“You know, I think I may be seeing some truth in Vinnie’s words; Andrew’s looking more than a little sluggish.” Third Law observed.

“Yeah, he seems to be having a hard time conserving energy, and Vinnie’s speed causing him to switch tactics really shows how slow he’s becoming.” Blofeld further analyzed.

ScatterSpark was anything but hopeless, as he had prepared for the event that N2END would end up behind him, and throws out a mini ScatterShot that way. But again his peripherals fail him, as he hits nothing but air at face-level and Vinnie had slid on one knee and spun 180 to meet Andrew back at his front.

Once more, ScatterSpark had a backup, in the form of his other hand straightening out and readying to fire off friction particles. But rather than knock the limb aside this time, Vinnie merely caught it and sidestepped himself out of the way. ScatterSpark naturally took to his Bartitsu expertise to throw another straight with his free hand, but N2END let go of the other wrist and caught that approaching one instead. Before the former could do anything else, the latter transitioned central grip to his palm and metacarpals, while his fingers separated Andrew’s into a V. The latter was confused as to these movements, and hesitated further under the belief that any further struggling he did, like before was going to be met with submission punishment. As such,
the megaseconds later remained undisturbed for Vinnie; Andrew’s mistake, for Vinnie completed the forced digit separation and then... Separated them further!

“AHHHHH!!” Andrew’s stance was immediately compromised, as he fell over and barrel-rolled away, holding his targeted hand in excruciating pain. Vinnie, for his part, looked to be silently laughing so hard that he bowed forward, while still keeping an eye on his opponent.

Suddenly, the entire audience in attendance’s eyes widened in response to what they’ve just witnessed. It even took the commentators a moment to audibly react.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I-I think N2END has just snapped the fingers belonging to the left hand of ScatterSpark!” Blofeld actively paid attention to the alternate camera feed to get a better look upon replays.

“Well, the shock of seeing that certainly gives coffee a run for its money! Without breaking the internal alarm clock either!” Third Law jested.

On the Vested’s side of the locker room, the other six upperclassmen had agape mouths.

“Damn!!” Jane expressed the freshmen’s collective surprise as well. Yu-Ling even made sure to keep her fists tightly clenched and held up to her chest.

Once Vinnie finished his cracking up, he slowly trekked to Andrew, still fetal in agony, though he was beginning to get back up on his knees and hands. He sensed Vinnie was approaching and rolled away, getting his good hand to ready the next volley, and wisely keeping it relatively close to himself this time.

A line and square shot came N2END’s way, which he flanked by rolling, followed immediately by sliding, out of the way. ScatterSpark got back to his feet fully and threw more and more sparks. But after the sixth stroke, his sparks lost range and impact considerably. “What’s,” He coughed. “-Going on?”

“Short of breath, are we? You happen to check your ozone content these days?” Vinnie grinned from afar.

Andrew was puzzled by the query until he realized what Vinnie had done.

“Guys, Andrew is in deep trouble!” Blofeld emphasized.

“He’s got no stamina! What brought this on?!” Gere looked worried.

“I see!” Hayley rose out of her seat with an epiphany. “Vinnie’s using the electrical current in his nitrogen plasma to convert oxygen molecules inside and close to Andrew’s respiratory system into ozone. Ozone is poisonous for us; inhaling acute moments during quick intervals cause chest pains and wheezing! That’s why he’s been sighing and breathing heavily overtime!” She explained.

“So Vinnie had a card up his sleeve, after all! Two cards, in fact!” Steve pumped his fist.

Andrew collapsed briefly on all-fours once more, coughing in an attempt to regain oxygen. Vinnie was then given free reign to come forward at his own pace. His approaching presence was not lost on the former, however, as ScatterSpark postured up and aimed another possible volley with his good hand. But by that point N2END was too close, and he caught the outstretched fingers, bringing the two middle ones together and twisting them over the other, and then pulling back, causing them to pop out of their knuckle sockets. This naturally brought ScatterSpark a whole new surge of teeth-pulling pain.
“Oh, that sight is not something you’re better prepared to see the second time!” Gere noted.

Adding further insult to the injury, Vinnie starts stretching the rest of Andrew’s upper body a bit, putting both arms in an omoplata/Fujiwara armbar combination to strain the shoulders, elbows, and chest all at the same time. This also left Andrew open for several hammer-fists with Vinnie’s remaining free hand to the head. Eventually, he releases the hold and pulls Andrew back to a seated position. Leaning over Andrew’s shoulder from behind, Vinnie gave him a firsthand lesson on small-joint compliance, much to his horrified chagrin, as he clutches the former’s right hand and pulled the front two fingers back, while prying the thumb towards them, putting tension on the thenar webspace between them. Another scream was warranted by the action.

Hayley covered her mouth at the brutality.

Andrew finally battles through his pain to deliver one last leg touch with his free hand, burning the other calf of Vinnie and forcing a release. Andrew then spins out of the seated position for a quick mini ScatterShot pointed at Vinnie’s face; it was thankfully blocked, but not entirely, as the most spread of the friction particles still scraped him in the ear. But that doesn’t deter him much, as he then takes the blocked hand and applies the Greco-Roman clawhold on Andrew’s knuckles. The latter could not wiggle his palm and fingers to get sparks because the additional Ozone-R effect done by Vinnie’s own hand destroyed the oxidation necessary for the embers to be set alight, and now his other hand was tucked into his elbow joint and trapped too.

Pressing down on the metacarpal joints had Andrew crying again, backing away when Vinnie stepped forward. Intending to discourage this, Vinnie then took a deeper step ahead, so that his hip went behind Andrew’s. Now all Andrew could do to lessen the pain was limbo back, until the top of his head touched the ground. All during this time Vinnie held the leverage advantage in the claw, allowing him to bend back the wrist and fingers so far that they lay flat on the ground.

N2END taunted ScatterSpark with a stuck-out tongue in front of a devious smile, indicating the sadism of his next action much to the victim’s mortification. The former ended the torturous anticipation with a stomp to the digits while they were still in position, which made the latter’s nigh-perfect bridge crumple from the loss of foundation.

“Opt out!” Vinnie repeatedly yelled at Andrew’s face as the latter was tossing and turning in pain anew, sometimes alternating between that and a knee drop to one set of fingers. He then backed away so the official can give ScatterSpark the same choice.

“ScatterSpark, do you concede defeat?” Referee Philips appeared again and inquired.

The questioner rolled back to a three-point stance while clutching his digits. “Vinnie come on over, so you can hear it too.” He insisted.

Vinnie looked aside judgingly before capitulating.

“Don’t fall for it, Vinnie!” Steve hollered.

“Oh, he ain’t.” Ralph crossed his arms.

Andrew felt Vinnie was close enough and tried a push, getting enough distance for a paw-version of the HM Hadouken. But Vinnie, having seen this trick with Yu-Ling and Rayne earlier, knew to spin-out of the impact, ending up behind Andrew in no time flat. He then delivered a hook kick from underneath Andrew’s raised armpit, causing the ball of his foot to strike his temple, nearly knocking all of his lights out.
Coming up with a new fantastic idea, Vinnie turns the now-kneeling Andrew over and lays him supine. He took the left arm so that its wrist was stuck in the popliteal area of his right leg, then seized the right wrist so that it laminated the right ankle. He then put Andrew’s left leg over the final wrist, turned the entire structure over, and then used a bungee cord from his utility belt to hook Andrew’s shoe mouth with his belt - a modified, real-life version of the infamous Paradise Lock. “PARAGON LOCK!!” Vinnie fell to his knees with open arms in front of the incapacitated Andrew, identifying the move.

ScatterSpark actually couldn’t get out of this; the more he struggled with either his arms and-or legs, the tighter it got. And the high-tension bungee cord prevented him from turning over to ease the pressure. “Hey! Get me out!!” He yelled.

Gere couldn’t help a laugh. “Ladies and gentlemen, I didn’t think I was going to see someone making another into a human knot today, but this Quirky World never stops surprising you!” He acknowledged. Blofeld almost couldn’t help another fit of laughter himself, as was the rest of the one-hundred-thousand-plus in attendance.

Vinnie rose to his feet to address the audience briefly, though never taking his eyes off of Andrew in the meantime. “What’d you say, ScatterBrain?” He joked.

“LET ME FREE!” He reiterated.

“You wanna be free?!” Vinnie bowed toward him before posturing up for the fans. “Should I let him out?” He asked them all.

A resounding “Yeah!” could be heard from them.

“One more time: Should I let him out?!” He asked again.

The unanimous approval chant recurred.

“Okay!” He gave the gesture and then backpedaled a bit while creating a field-goal post with his indexes and thumbs - zeroing in on Andrew’s crown! He then charged forward with a plasma punt to the head; sure enough, this actually did get him free, as the cord unhooked from the sudden jerking of his back, and the turning motion from the impact liberated his joints. Vinnie looked to the skies ahead, trying to see the metaphorical ball he struck out of the stadium.

“And three extra points for the Vanevery Bays!” Gere, seemingly won over, exclaimed.

“Is that the KO victory right there?” Blofeld bobbed his head for a better view.

Referee Philips appeared again to assess the conscious status of Andrew. Rather surprisingly, Andrew sprang back to life, pissed as ever over the embarrassment that was the Paragon Lock, and accumulated many sparks onto his right hand, angrily charging at Vinnie with it. His opponent remained calm, though, countering the charging lunge with a rolling cross armbreaker. Rather than break the elbow or dislocate the shoulder, though, Vinnie went for the exposed fingers one last time, delivering a couple kicks to the chin for stuns, and then separated the digits into a W, before pulling back the index finger towards his own body. This time, the pain was too great for Andrew to bear, and he, unsurprisingly, tapped onto Vinnie’s calf with his other hand. Referee Philips caught the motion and raised his hands calling for the bell.

“There’s the tap! That’s it!!” Blofeld pointed out.

“WOW!” Gere exclaimed.
N2END releases the hold and got to his knees in a bow on the Arena floor. ScatterSpark meanwhile rolled away and off the Raised Platform while Vinnie’s theme music played.

“Winner: N2END!!” Philips announced.

Exuberant over his victory, Vinnie rose up with double Vanever signs and bowed to all sides of the audience, who were still a mixed bag of appreciation and boos.

“Well, Gere, I think we can safely say that this season of Vanever Battlegrounds is going to be an interesting one!” Blofeld suggested.

“Yes, I’d say so too, Blofeld. I must say, many of these Freshman certainly surprised me, mostly in a good way. And I do think there’s an energy and drive in them that I feel has been a bit lacking in comparison to our contemporaries. This might very well be what we need, even if we don’t know it just yet.” Third Law concurred.

“Vincent Teshima, winner by tapout here tonight. Everyone better make sure to keep this guy under watch. An amazing effort here tonight, battled through a decent whooping, and can sure as Hell give one. Many moves are almost impossible to see coming, and let’s not forget to mention we’ve only seen possibly a fraction of his abilities with Nitro Blast. Just what is this kid capable of? Stay tuned, ladies and gentlemen.” Blofeld spoke his farewells to the crowd.

Vinnie stood on the platform to see Andrew looking up at him with animosity. Whether out of courtesy for the sport or condescension as payback, he bowed at him, and then returned his attention to the audience. Andrew merely shook his head and walked towards the back.

“We did it! We beat the Vested!” Steve in the back announced.

The other five in the locker room rose with celebration.

*To think...* Jane looked at the screen still.

*We still don’t know what’s your deal, Vincent Teshima.* Hayley completed the wondrance.

Vinnie eventually descended from the Raised Platform and pandered to the crowd one last time before going to the back himself. *Yeah... This wasn’t a mistake after all.* He smiled.

Winchester, needless to say, was in awe, while Vinnie’s parents slouched back approvingly from their screens.

But there was one more interested in the activities yet.

*Very interesting, Mr. Teshima.* Nina, hands behind her back, looked on from a private booth. *Keep it up; this adventure’s only getting started.*
Chapter Summary

The Freshmen we have been following thus far have successfully pulled a narrow victory in their initial feud with the Vested. And they are seeking a great way to jubilantly unwind after all the hard work.

Surely nothing else bad is going to happen in their immediate future, will it?

With the conclusion of Saturday’s live tapings of “Vanevery Battlegrounds: Best Kept Secrets”, everyone began flowing out of the Theatre of War Stadium in droves.

The seven Freshmen, like all other participants, left the venue through a back exit, donning their best relaxed casualwear to settle into their first reprieve from combat.

“Stop fiddling with that cut, Vinnie. That bandage’s effectiveness will only get worse with such stress.” Jane slapped down the former’s hand.

“Yeah. I’m sorry.” He apologized, retracting his hand.

“You probably should’ve told us you don’t handle a punch the same way we do, Vinnie. It’s impractical to make those kinds of needless sacrifices for the sake of entertainment value.” Sanya looked over his shoulder.

“You all had to deal with your own issues. How am I supposed to, in good conscience, add to them?” The veteran argued.

“We’re partners in crime, Vincent. Confidants - treat us like one, like we do for you.” Yu-Ling elbowed his torso.

Vinnie hung his head with a compliant grin and nod.

“Alright everyone, let’s keep it cool. It worked out for him anyways. All we need to know is that he ain’t doing it again.” Steve requested a settling down.

“Heart attack averted.” Hayley smiled in response.

Vinnie smiled again alongside his teammates, before sensing something occurring behind most of them. When they turned around, they saw their foes similarly leaving through a back exit, and staring back at them. Though they were at a distance, the Freshmen could tell there was a lingering tension and frustration in the Vested’s gazes. This was especially true for Andrew, who wouldn’t stop staring daggers at Vinnie, perhaps in response to the buddy tape keeping his fractured fingers together after their contest. Before long, the Vested break stare first, continuing to depart the scene. The seven continued to look at them for a little longer.

“That was amazing, you guys!”

Vinnie, Jane and the rest then turned to face the source of the sudden exclamation.
It was revealed to be coming from Mike, trailed closely behind by Hinata, who came out through the spectator’s exits and trailed around the Arena to rendezvous with them.

“Heh, you really thought so?” Jane grinned.

“Significantly entertaining.” Hinata, in reverse arm-fold stance, agreed.

“Surely with this display, we put the new blood in Vanevery on the map.” Steve fistpumped enthusiastically.

“Well, you certainly impressed the fellow Freshmen! Look at the News Network and Social Media!” Mike pulled out his phone and showed his screen.

“New Era of Vanevery University Starts With a Fast and Furious Display By Incoming First-Years.” Yu-Ling read one of the online article headlines.

“3000 IQ play by Sanya “Hardtop” Orlov here!” Ralph, with Sanya looking over his shoulder, narrated a post by an online patron, which depicted Sanya waiting until Armada foolishly ran down the last of his initial salvo’s loaded deployment before striking back at close-quarters big time.

“That Jane might just have the brutalist strikes in the business right now.” Steve’s screen detailed, along with a GIF that he played, which depicted Jane’s full-mounted elbow smash and punt kick to end the contest. “Damn, I agree - Paladin Puma is going to be feeling that one for the next month at least.” He concurred.

“Heheh, I try when the recipient’s some silver-spooled snob.” The other of the Queens Ladies pounded her fist.

“~-JetChetSprinter, somehow this is worse than being burned second-degree for me. Do you agree?” Vinnie acted out, along with also playing the accompanying clip of himself prying back Andrew’s index finger while pulling the thumb on the same hand the other way, while the latter screams in pain. “At least one would agree, ~OneTimeKing.” He rhetorically answered.

“Whoa, hey!” Hayley perked up as well. “Our community on AlwaysONE is blowing up about a campus party going on in and around Graden Hills. Looks like, if we didn’t make an impression on the superiors elsewhere, we certainly did for the rest of the first-year students here.” She revealed her phone’s screen to everyone, which showed thirty-second clips from various personnel with the dormitories in question in the background.

Steve’s shifting lip movements showed his growing satisfaction. “It’s just the start... Just the start.” He finally concieved.

“We made it happen. We may as well celebrate it with the rest of them, right?” Yu-Ling slung her arms over Steve and Hayley’s shoulders.

“I think I’ll like the sound of that.” Michael agreed.

“Any objections?” Vinnie put away his device and looked around. When nobody expressed such a stance, he clasped his hands with decisiveness and led the way back to the dormitories, where they then saw the large crowd.

One partygoer amongst the masses noticed their arrival and made it known. “Hey guys and gals, look! It’s them!!” He pointed out. A majority of the swarm was quick to gravitate towards them, forming a circle.
“Upperclassman were still ribbing the lot of us even after we got some wins against their kind, but many of you shut up some of their top prides! For that we’re incredibly grateful!” One bat-winged folk spoke up amongst the rest of the chatter.

“Glad we could help in some way.” Ralph pulled on his collar.

“Odds were against you, but you all still had a chance to rock! And you opened it up for us to shine too.” Another, with vermillion eyes voiced his opinion.

“Now, that might be a stretch; don’t sell yourself short.” Yu-Ling responded.

“You all wouldn’t be adverse to a night painting the campus, would you?” The first exaltor recommended.

“Yeah! It’s the first Saturday night of our college tenure! Let’s make the campus our Mecca for one day!” The second added on.

“Hell, that’s a pitch to go nuts if I ever heard one!” Mike shrugged affirmingly.

And so the nine joined in the collective gaiety, which spread from the entire block housing Graden’s three buildings to the ninth floor of the middle.

“Okay, now!” One patron with spiral elephant tusks sprouting from just below his nose announced to everyone, clicking on the stop button of his stopwatch.

Immediately, Sanya, Ralph, and four others stopped holding down each of their payloads hidden underneath a set of jury-rigged, heavily-insulated metal pots and ran back to parallel standing with the announcer.

“Jared!” Said leader then turned his attention to another.

The identified individual, who happened to have a full, frosty goatee, readied up in response. After a deep breath, he ran in time to all of the kitchen appliances blasting up, revealing their contents to be highly-stoked fires anticipating the moment to break out.

Once they did, they promptly rose up to the approaching Jared, who ran his arms through them to make infernal sleeves. He then popped all of the joints of said limbs to that the fire turned into a fold-out and telescopic ruler respectively. The rigidity then gave way to whips, which Jared then whisked backwards to form flame rings. With them now in this shape, he proceeded to perform a series of intricate tricks before the audience, ranging from juggling the variously-sized, cumbersome hoops to sinking and jumping through them at instantaneously awkward angles and entwining them into atypical shapes.

“Impressive!” The stage director started the applause from the crowd.

Sanya double-took between the spectacle and Ralph. “This, all of it. Pretty surprising, isn’t it?” She declared after looking away from him for the third time.

“Surprising? Yeah, I guess so.” Ralph continued clapping.

Sanya’s smirk grew. “We’re not talking about the same thing are we?” She asked further.

“We’re not... Talking about this display?” Ralph now gazed at her.

“No, we already know this is a show.” Sanya answered back. “I find it surprising how just in a
little while, we’re not in our old world anymore; it’s been replaced by this more, eheh, Quirky one.” She attempted to clarify.

“What do you mean?” Ralph still displayed difficulty comprehending.

“I remember my great-grandparents and their parents talking all about how they were back when they first went to college. Going to Europe and the Americas to further foster their education and all that. And every campus had different sets of rules, for sure, but one of the constants amongst them all was no pyrotechnics; too loud, too flammable, too dangerous for the crowded school streets.” She reminisced with some sense of nostalgia.

Ralph concentrated hard on her words, then eyed Jared’s movements with more lucidity. “Ah, I see now...” He replied.

“Yeah. Just a couple years after my great-grandfather got his Master’s, the first Quirk existed. By the time my old man’s old man came to being almost two decades later, that rule about no variable fires on college grounds had been lifted; it was too hard to enforce because by that point so many individuals had incendiary Quirks. So college security just had to compromise and build stronger suppression systems and personnel regulation instead.” She concluded.

Ralph nodded lightly. “I know a bit of a story like that. We Germans love football, if you couldn’t tell. Tough for coaches to tell their players to not use Super Form strength, Boomerang Arc trajectory curving, and Jell-O-Lite to render yourself basically un-tacklable.” He was now the one to hesitate. “Yeah. How quickly the world evolves when we do the same is surprising. We’re not even talking about how many times television and holographic displays have advanced in the past four decades.” He stated.

“Don’t be too ashamed it didn’t come to your mind already - it only arrived for me a day after hearing the story of Adamale and using his Quirk to purify America’s water. It makes sense of the nation’s lack of concern for cleaning; they learn from their gifts and apply them, the same as everyone else.” The Russian asserted.

“As it should be. Not that that’s a bad thing. It is just good to know where it comes from.” The German smiled at that, which she copied as they continued to marvel at Jared’s routine.

Elsewhere, Stephen and Mike trekked the third-floor commons, and discovered that a large group had crowded themselves around the primary television. Said U-LED screen showed that some of the congregation were playing Bash: Terminal through the newly unveiled DShock-Aerial-Interface controls.

“Holy shit! Love this game!” Mike exclaimed, looking over the back.

Steve peered over another shoulder. “Eh, you may enjoy it, but I’m a legend at it.” He taunted, looking on at the action.

Mike comically turned his attention to him. “Is that a challenge?” He playfully requested confirmation on the statement’s subtext.

“Depends. Are you going to accept either way?” The Korean peered back.

“It’s on. Let’s hop into the queue.” Mike prompted with a neck turn.

Steve happily complied with that request. As they made their way, he turned behind him. “Yu-Ling, you big on Bash: Te-” But then he noticed that said young Taiwanese lady was nowhere to be found. “What? Where’d she go?” He looked around rapidly.
“She mentioned she saw a console version of DDR to me and couldn’t pass up an opportunity to groove to DJ Shimamura’s ‘Lunatic Tears’.” Mike spoke.

“Oh... Well that’s good for her. Sure thing.” He remarked.

“You’re totally into her, huh?” The South-African turned to face him.

Stephen’s mouth alternated between agape and shut, attempting to find the words for the next set of sentences he would utter next, but they continued to escape him until he had to relent. “Yes, I enjoy her company.” Steve then clutched Mike’s clavicle. “Don’t tell her anything about it, though; it’s too early to really tell if it’s real, and I don’t want to creep her out.” He asserted.

“Hey, I doubt she’d ask me about you, but okay. It’s pretty charming, but don’t force it, man. Nobody would want to see that.” Michael prioritized back.

“Understood. And agreed.” Steve nodded. “Oh, looks like the line’s moving up...”

In the meantime on the eighth floor of the middle Graden Halls building, Vinnie had found himself pulled into a group conversation alongside some other upperclassmen, who had some special comments regarding the Japanese export’s fighting style.

“You had the element of surprise on your side when you broke Andrew’s fingers, Vinnie. If he knew that they would be a target, he would’ve never let you close to them digits.” One sophomore, with pink frosted tips on his buzz cut, taunted Vince at one corner of the floor.

“Is that right?” Vinnie spoke after taking a sip of his soda and smiled. “I can get it even if you see it coming. But you won’t be able to get me even when I can’t.” He boasted back.

“Alright, put your money where your mouth is. Hold them out and let’s see if you’re right.” He put down his beer bottle and gestured.

“If you insist.” Vinnie popped his neck, putting down his cup and showed his hand, faced down and digits relaxed (but still naturally laminated). His eyes were closed completely, but his competitor remained wary, no doubt due to the unwavering smile on his face.

The other finally mustered the courage to throw both hands in, using his middle two fingers to set-up the V-break that Vinnie used to snap Andrew’s digits for the first time. But the second N2END felt contact, he immediately exploded in movement, using his middle finger to separate the invading index finger from the rest and pressing down on the exposed interphalangeal, hyperextending the joint and drawing excruciating pain, forcing the heckler to release the rest of the fingers he claimed earlier. Vinnie smells blood and presses down further, before transitioning to a full-on grab of the entire finger and pulling back towards the forearm, further inducing a screaming reaction and eventually the tapout, which was when Vinnie let go and opened his eyes again.

The one waved and massaged his affected hand incessantly. “Okay, so breaking a finger or two does take some doing.” He admitted.

“Indeed; it’s good that you realize that this isn’t just a gambit - it’s an art.” Vinnie clapped his shoulder twice, then showed him his hand. “When you start the small-joint attack, you need to either be safe or fast. By safe, I mean it’s often best to keep your own fingers together, by chopping or lunging your open hand into position. The laminated hand makes it less-likely someone can separate them and do what you do back at them. But it’s never impossible to break, especially when you deal with people who are good at it.” Vinnie points back at himself. “And by fast, I
mean you do a small attack first, like I did to counter your attempt, before moving into the laminated hand pull. I will not deny that this does naturally require some precognition of enemy movements and luck; mess up the anticipation and you leave yourself open instead. But intuition and speed is just as quintessential.” He instructed him.

“To think there’s this much thought about how to break small joints.” Another spectator commented while observing the would-be attacker’s own damage.

“Heh, as a soldier, you never take anything for granted in combat. Everything either becomes a weapon, or something to be attacked by a weapon.” Vinnie rubbed his dog tags.

Jane could be seen in the back area of Graden Heights, utilizing her Crystal Pillar Architect quirk to produce a pseudo-mirror maze using the reflective properties of rainbow quartz. “Good luck, for all your sakes!” She announced, standing triumphantly on a raised pillar overlooking the labyrinth. With her eyes close to the action, she could see if any participants were cheating, such as using brute strength to break through much of the walls, or using flying or climbing abilities to peer over the horizon. In those cases, she either made up new walls, made them taller in response to fliers/climbers, exposing the cheaters by raising the ground from underneath them, or gave them a good horizontal pillar punch to the waist. And while said clouts were nothing short of tough love, said forceful attempts to reach the finish line caused shards and other sorts of unintentional damage to run rampant.

Having had enough of the needless injuries, Jane called off the event and instead opened up a little clinic to treat the injuries.

One of the patrons, boasting fish gills from his chin to sides of her neck, and marginally pearlescent koi scales on her torso, looked more than a little worried when Jane was taping a thick load of tongue-depressors together. “Are you sure it’s not going to hurt too much?” She requested further affirmation, perhaps in regards to the relocation of her popped shoulder.

Jane turns around with a smirk, having finished preparing the instrument. “Not nearly as much as the surgery that would come for sleeping on this, pansy. Now open up.” She ordered, placing the popsicle sticks across her maw like a cleave gag. She then clutched the patient’s wrist and tricep. “One. Two.” She then pulled out and back, shifting the humerus head back into the intended socket. “Three.” She finished.

The woman screamed in pain through the sticks, feeling the affected, nearby section after Jane lets go. “Yuu shure?” She managed to snark seconds later, pulling the depressors out right afterwards.

“Very sure. Now let’s do something about those muscles before they swell.” Jane confirmed, getting a set of compression bandages.

One Freshman who happened to be around to assist her in handing over the equipment looked on with a bit of amusement.

“Lose something grand over here, chancer?” Jane queried, fastening the gauze firmly.

“You’ve made no secret about how much you don’t like ‘them snobs’ since you arrived here, but when they got just as hurt as everyone else, you gave them the right treatment too.” He noted his observations.

“What’s your big point?” Jane gave him a look back.

“Just means we know you’re actually a nice lady.” The assistant concluded.
“That’s very true. But it also means you’re not getting to any bases tonight. Now actually help for once, why don’t you?” The Pre-Med finished. His words still did make her see the revelation too, forcing her to shake her head however.

Speaking of food-for-thought conversations, however, Vinnie was in the middle of one of his own, as he had transitioned to the third floor.

“You’re quite the person to call me forthright when you willingly allowed Clements to know all about the Professors’ Private Training Grounds.” Vinnie now spoke to a lone other partygoer, who chose to remain anonymous with a large, cloth cowl. “Yes, it’s always been a pleasant surprise to have heard your name continually pop up in a positive light so much. Why’s that so bad? Everyone here has pretty much heard of you.” He argued, taking a sip from his drink. “Very well, I’ll keep it down further, but only because you asked nicely. And yes, I know you don’t really get a choice about your tone.” His cryptic conversation with the person concludes, signed off by a mutual knuckle-touch and an exit by the clearly Japanese one.

Hinata, who has been enjoying the festivities by patrolling and observing from afar, notices Vince’s approach from the secluded, inconspicuous corner. “Who was that, Vincent? Perhaps a new flame has come your way? More than a little impressed by your display of heart at the Battlegrounds?” She stepped towards him, shaking her plastic cup nonchalantly.

Vinnie laughed for a little while. “I’m a little too busy for stuff like that, I’m afraid.” He asserted honestly. “And besides, that was just a former classmate of mine.”

“Are you certain of that?” Hinata tilted her head quizzically.

“Yeah. I only want to throw my heart out to the one. And only when I’m ready for it, which I’m definitely not.” He asserted.

“I can respect that. But beware of your perceptions on that matter, Vince.” The older Japanese student cautioned.

“What do you mean?” The younger questioned.

Hinata gave Vince another smile. “I’m saying there’s nothing wrong with knowing exactly what you want out of life.” She then turned squarely his way and came close to ensure that he could hear the next statement. “But you have to be very certain of what that is. Most don’t when they believe they have it all locked down. Just keep that in mind.” She clapped his cheek twice and proceeded on her way, much to Vinnie’s continued perplexion.

Towards the end of the evening, talks and pastimes continued to change for the students, particularly for the main freshmen. Steve’s reputation as an adept chef, particularly for his native cuisine, got around and he soon found himself on the other side of a communal kitchen making some for a considerable line of hungry patrons. Jane more or less continued her duties as a medic, though her clientele soon changed from the incidentally-injured from the pitfalls of the maze to in-general patients who had a little too much fun from the alcohol and other recreations they had. Vinnie, no stranger to dealing with individuals soon facing bad hangovers, brewed up some home remedies with the makeshift open bar that was one pair’s dormitories and sold the product to all interested. Sanya, Ralph, and Hinata helped him restock when demand began to skyrocket. As the festivities began dying down, Yu-Ling, Hayley, and Mike all did their best to begin containing the remaining partygoers while also reporting on the damages to hand to their RAs. By the time it all concluded, it was 3 A.M., and high time they all got their Saturday’s rest.

-The next day...-
The sounds of powerful knocking alerted Vinnie, who found himself in his bedroom come the morning. The room was extra-warm again, though not to the degree of last time. When the repeated tappings on the teak and mahogany door persisted, he rose up and walked through the corridors.

“Steve.” He called out, rubbing both of his eyelids before looking at the heat-control. *No way it’s just seventy-eight in here. General control must be acting up. Might have to report that damage too, if Yu-Ling hadn’t already.* He finally reached the living room and kitchen. “Steve.” He spoke again, before opening his eyes further and seeing his roommate sleeping on the couch, one leg over the back support. The television was still on, but showing nothing but the “no output screen” at this point. Vinnie gave a quick yawn before taking an empty soda can and tossing it at his supine form.

“How huh! Wha-hey!” Steve stirred awake after the aluminum projectile hit him in the stomach. He rose up to sit properly on the couch, blinking like an old-timey projector to restore his focus.

“Vinnie? What’s going on?” He questioned. “And why’s it so hot in here?” He stretched out his collar in reaction.

“Many knocks on our door. And a damaged cooling system. Come on.” He beckoned. Steadily but surely, they got to their side of the threshold. Before Vinnie proceeded to open it, he noticed Steve had a little cheese stain on the left side of his shirt and tried wiping it away.

“Ah, okay, stop it. Stoppit!” Steve angrily whispered while wrestling his roommate’s hand away. “I’ll deal with it later.” He tidied everything else about himself up slightly.

Vinnie shrugged with a grin before finally opening the door.

“Clements?” Steve identified, giving sound to his and Vince’s curiosity. His eyes grew wider as he quickly scanned the surroundings behind the RA, consisting of several of the campus’ security guards.

“You two gentlemen, I apologize for the sudden interjection, and how intimidating this might appear. But follow me, please.” Clements solemnly motioned for them.

Vinnie and Steve both glimpse at each other with some preoccupation for the cryptic implications before complying. They reach the Commons, where a whole lot of familiar faces were present, clad in their own pajamas and lounge clothes.

“Vincent. Stephen.” Yu-Ling jumped off from her seated position on the outside back of one of the common’s couches upon their arrival. Her one-two of identification alerted the rest, including Jane as she straightened up from the far wall, and the rest of the destined Freshmen, excluding Hinata.

“Alright, and then there was one.” Sasha, waiting alongside them, acknowledged.

“What’s this about, Sasha? We did our due diligence to tidy up the mess. Sure, it got a little loud for the non-partiers, but it’s not like someone got thrashed. Unless you count inside the Battlegrounds. Heheh.” Jane queried.

“Everyone, let’s just get down to the second.” She ordered, leading the way towards the Northern staircase. She also gave the imperative knocks on Hinata’s door, who was, alongside her two roommates, just as surprised at the sudden interjection as the rest were.

Elaboration would come soon enough for them all, however, as they are all taken outside of the middle building and then over to its Western walls. On the walls of the last few storeys, something was literally emblazoned into their minds.

“Whoa...” Steve remained flabbergasted.
“‘Just watch us make Vanevery ours!’” Mike read it aloud.

“What is that about?” Hayley squinted her eyes at the graffiti.

“You tell us, Miss Celestin. You and-or any of your partners in crime.” The campus police Lieutenant bounced back. His chest tag established his surname as “Boone”.

“Wait, you think we are responsible for this?” Ralph, along with the rest of them, turned to the leading officer.

“That party was all about the lot of you, right?” He reminded them.

“But we didn’t start that party, sir.” Hinata refuted.

“Get used to it. Pro Heroes get followings. Some harmless, some helpful. And of course, some harmful. You guys are extra-accountable on this front too, for not doing anything to contain the festivities once you were all aware of its occurrence.” Sasha crossed her arms.

“Damn, that’s a big hammer to bring down...” Sanya sighed aside.

“Let’s also bring up your reports again on the damage and say that it is ironclad - that would mean this can only be attributed to you. So is there another way you all can confirm that this wasn’t any of you?” The acting head of security gestured for their response.

“You want a de-motive, Chief? How about ‘what kind of lame taunt is that?’” Jane stepped forward. “If it were me or any of these pals, we’d write something much more worthy of graffiti, such as ‘Puss up, hobblin’ snobs.’”

Vinnie and Hinata were about to stir up in response to the unintentionally inflammatory insult, but Yu-Ling stops their crazy head-turning with a grasp of their close wrists.

“Let me get my spectrometer.” Vinnie urged. Minutes later when he got back, he hooked up a hologram projector to make the observations visible to everyone and pointed the lens at the crimesite. “Look at that; no significant blue or violet wavelengths visible near the marks, which would be there for at least a week from such serious usage of my Quirk. What’s more, the nitrogen molecules in the air hadn’t been converted into anything. Ergo, my nitrogen plasma couldn’t have done this, then.” He asserted.

After a few seconds, the Lieutenant shrugged. “Very well. How about you?” He turned again towards Hayley.

“My lasers don’t burn at a temperature significant enough to chip brick.” She argued.
“We didn’t see that in the Battlegrounds, but that doesn’t mean you’re not secretly capable of it.” The second spoke back.

“Also, I couldn’t have done this either, if I was always with Yu-Ling playing Home-DDR.” Hayley deviated.

“I can second that account. As I am Yu-Ling, of course.” The lady in question reinforced.

“As far as you know, Miss Kuan. For all we know though, you were high and-or drunk beyond comprehension.” The second retorted.

Yu-Ling took a step back at the response. “I am underage... And it’s not like most drugs nowadays make enjoyment more difficult or anything...” She muttered, lightly emphasizing the “am” of the sentence.

“We’ll have none of that cheek, ma’am. Did you really have your eye on her the whole time?” He pressed further.

“I swear!” She backed up again. Pleading insistence had overwhelmed her tone.

“We’re going to need at least a third account. Even a fourth to confirm that. Anyone else you trust who’s been following along?” He demanded to know.

“Um, well...” Yu-Ling was finding it harder to continue against the mounting pressure coming from the campus police sergeant.

“Lay off these gals, alright? You’re giving them a bad dose of low self-esteem.” Jane aggressively stepped in between the opposing sides.

“That isn’t your concern, Miss Hanaway.” The Lieutenant gazed her way.

“Alright, alright, stop. We’re not going to reach any conclusion with this.” Sasha waved at the situation intending to defuse it.

“Let’s not forget to mention, this is easy to get rid of. Two days, tops of atomic reconstruction from the materials engineering branch’s Manifolder device, and it’ll almost be like it was never there. As Miss Hanaway has mentioned, it’s not like someone got really hurt, or, God forbid, a true piece of art is ruined. Let’s get them off the hook.” Clements patted the would-be Chief on the closer shoulder.

The campus police thought for a moment before relenting with a collective sigh. “Very well. But don’t let us catch you nearby anymore stunts like these, you hear Freshmen?” The Lieutenant pointed and warned.

“We understand.” They all more or less asserted in unison. Vinnie, Yu-Ling, and Hinata gave their own bows along with the statement.

The group waited until the campus police left their far view, along with Sasha, who joined them to write off the situation.

Steve returned his gaze towards the arson at that point. “Who do they think they are, accusing us of this?” He asked under his breath.

“You already know you’re allegedly accountable.” Clements turned to face him.
“What a hot load of dung for them to say we’re directly responsible, though.” Jane crossed her arms with frustration.

“Their claim that it could only be one of us has some weight, though. Again, we had ironclad reports.” Yu-Ling considered.

“Then that means this all happened when we all turned a blind eye. Beyond the night of prime activity.” Hinata put her right hand to her chin.

“Leave it for now, everyone. If you snoop around and more misfortunes happen, it’s going to look worse for you all.” The male RA advised.

“But we have our names to clear, Clements!” Steve insisted.

“Nobody is blaming you for this, so there’s nothing to clear. Just drop it and realize how good you’re getting right now.” The resident advisor instructed.

“Let’s have some faith, everyone. We should let it pass for now.” Vinnie concurred.

“Before that, though, what does the CCTV have to say? Surely the campus has some special stuff to detect criminal activity.

“I get it, Jane. Not too much trust in authority and all that. But let me tell you it did take a bit before they began to blame you and your friends. And that included looking into the security footage. Given that it has come to this, you shouldn’t be surprised that there is no distinct footage of the culprit at large.” Clements argued.

“So not even the most advanced countermeasures can elucidate petty mysteries like these?” Jane paced with anger.

“Remember, Quirks made our tech better first; not the other way around. We believed that was unanimously glorious. Now we realize, it isn’t quite one-to-one.” Vinnie responded.

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