Call Me Home

by aerynevenstar

Summary

In the wake of their recent failures, the Hero Association must find a way to boost the public's opinion or lose all future support and donations. Amai Mask decides to make use of Madame Shibabawa's apprentice, who possesses the power to absorb and project a person's most important memories, in a massive publicity stunt that will surely remind everyone how incredible and beautiful their heroes are.

Saitama is so done with this shit.

Notes

This fic was originally written as self-indulgent crack, but I have since been reliably informed that this story is “too emotional to be labeled as crack” and is a “bitch slap in the feels” so... uh. Beware?

(I regret nothing.)

Note on the timeline: this story mainly follows the ONE webcomic and diverges after chapter 108. At the time of writing this, Murata’s manga remake was still catching up; now it seems to be a different timeline entirely.
UPDATE: Now all chapters contain *fucking amazing beautiful fanart* drawn by BK/noni. Please go bombard them with lavish praise and adoration because they have put me into an early grave with their gifts of fucking national treasure.
"So you changed your parts again?"

"Yes."

Saitama hummed, taking another sip of tea, then casually glanced over the rim of the cup to eye his disciple. The cyborg perched at the other end of the small table, sitting rigidly on his knees as though awaiting an interrogation. He looked...odd. Saitama had gotten used to seeing Genos return from visits to his doctor in the same body he'd had on the day they'd met, a strange mix of black mesh, silver metal, and visible wiring. This time, the cyborg had returned with a silicone neck to match his narrow face, smaller metal shoulders with ventilation holes for steam to escape, and bulkier forearms that reminded the older hero of miniature rocket ships, with angular fins on each side. His golden hair was shorter too, drawing more attention to the wide amber eyes instead of covering them in long strands, and all the parts of his body that weren't hidden behind fabric seemed enclosed behind silicone, metal, or mesh. In short, he looked more humanoid and less like a machine.

*He looks older,* Saitama mused idly. *More mature, somehow.*

"Cool."

Letting out a soft breath, the cyborg relaxed minutely and shifted in place. "Sensei...please, may we spar again? I would like to test my new capabilities."

"Sure." Saitama shrugged, then gestured to his disciple's untouched cup of tea. "Oi, it's gonna get cold."

"Ah! Sorry, sensei."

They sipped their tea quietly, silence growing and filling the space between them with an awkwardness that hadn't been there since the early days when Genos had first moved in. Saitama blinked and stared at the mug in his hand, tracing the dark corners of a crack left behind by the destruction of their last apartment. Why did it feel like there was something missing in the empty space between them? Should he have asked about the new parts his disciple had been installed with? ...ehh, but then he would probably launch into some long-winded explanation with a bunch of science mumbo-jumbo and Saitama would have to-

"Sensei?"

"Ah." Broken from his reverie, Saitama lifted his eyes from the chipped ceramic and focused instead on the glinting amber of his disciple's intent gaze. "Hm?"

"Sensei," Genos repeated, then paused as if to gather his courage. Or maybe figure out how to summarize what he wanted to say. "I was wondering....even though you no longer need rent money since this apartment is free with your rise to A-rank, I had hoped...that is to say..."

Saitama scratched at a small itch on his neck, calmly waiting for the cyborg to get his point across. "Just spit it out, Genos."

The other hero twitched at his words, gaze sliding away to focus on the hands clenched in his lap. "Please, sensei...may I continue to live here with you?"
The bald man yawned widely, then stood up to take his empty cup into to the kitchen. "What are you talking about? Your futon's still here, isn't it?"

"I-"

Saitama carefully remained with his back turned to the other hero, busying his hands with washing the chipped mug while he listened for any other words to come from his (their) new living room.

*Stupid. I never used that money.*

"I see. Thank you, sensei."

"Hm? What for?" Saitama hummed absently, placing the mug in the drying rack and padding back into the living room.

There was a small, secretive little quirk to the edges of his disciple's mouth as he replied.

"Nothing. Sensei is very kind."

"Eh. Don't be creepy."

By unspoken agreement, they made their way back to the canyon they'd first sparred in several months ago. Saitama blinked in surprise at the weird tunnel through one of the tallest sides of the cliff, a smooth cylinder that stretched onward past the extent of his vision. He cocked his head in mild confusion (had it looked that way before?), but quickly forgot his musings as his disciple called his wayward attention back to their purpose.

Their spar turned out much the same as the first one, of course. Saitama's limitless power could not be bested by metal or fire no matter how much passion fueled it, but the duel definitely showcased his disciple's progress and continuing potential for growth. His new parts granted him an immense boost in speed, which had taken Saitama by surprise at first since he had been expecting the same level that Genos had previously shown. His momentary shock had very nearly afforded his disciple the first strike, which he dodged at the last second. If he'd still had hair, the fiery punch would have likely singed several strands right off his head.

"Ooohh!" he cooed appreciatively. "Nice one, Genos! You almost got me."

Rather than being pleased with this compliment, the words only seemed to irritate and fuel his disciple's desperation. The air around him simmered with heat as electricity crackled up the metal plates, coiling and twisting up his extended arms like an angry serpent. The bald hero stood still for a moment, watching the light show with eager interest. Genos was always a sight to behold in battle, a fluid dancer with limbs of fire and lightning.

They sparred for several long minutes, decimating the landscape around them without the slightest concern (whatever, no one lived out here anyway). Saitama never made any offensive moves, preferring instead to avoid each one of Genos' aggressive movements. The cyborg was extremely fast after all of Kuseno's new upgrades, reminding Saitama vaguely of his bout with that weird one-eyed alien. He flipped, jumped, ducked, side-stepped, and casually shimmied away from each punch and kick of the other hero's metal limbs, noting with approval that Genos had finally stopped dropping his guard so much and relying on sheer explosive firepower to attack his opponent. Instead, his disciple seemed to be emulating a similar fighting style to his own early hero days, back when he still had hair and tended to end each day with bruises and cuts oozing blood.
With a small smile, Saitama abruptly back-flipped over his disciple's head, reaching out to poke gently at one unblemished cheek. "Much better, Genos."

The cyborg swatted irritably at his hand, which had already moved as Saitama hopped away, chuckling softly at the teen's grumpy countenance. "Sensei!! Take me seriously!"

"I am. You've gotten close several times and I had to dodge a lot faster than before," the older man assured, still smiling absently. "It's making me hungry."

The cyborg huffed and half-heartedly tossed a blast of molten flame at his teacher, who leapt aside with a yelp and glared in response. The ground smoldered at his feet, flames creeping toward the edge of his crimson boots.

"Oi! Stop trying to burn my clothes off! I barely have any left after last week."

Genos choked a little. "S-sorry, sensei, that was not my intention."

The older man sighed tiredly. "Are we done yet? I'd like to get some food and hit a few sales to replace some things we lost in the apartment."

His disciple glowered darkly, eyes flashing bright gold. "Sensei! Fight me until I can no longer stan-"

_Idiot. You just got home after being in pieces, I'm not going to break you again._

Saitama lurched forward, zooming across the open ground while the cyborg was still shouting at his afterimage. He dug his feet into the ground in front of his affronted student, then reached up with both hands to clasp those broad metal shoulders. With a carefully gentle movement, he pulled the cyborg off his feet and then slammed him to the ground. The dirt broke apart beneath them and shot up into the air in a cloud of dust, leaving behind a small crater. Genos gazed up at him with wide eyes and windblown hair, gaping as his teacher promptly sat on him with a smirk.

"There," he leered, ignoring the way one eyebrow twitched with his irritation. "You're 'no longer standing'."

The cyborg stared.

Saitama huffed and flicked his student's forehead once more. "C'mon, let's go get some udon. My treat."

"O...okay."
When they returned to their new apartment, there was an official notice stuck to the door. Saitama ignored it entirely, making a beeline to the kitchen so he could put away their discounted groceries and then tote a bag of clothing to their balcony for later washing. Genos paused in the doorway long enough to retrieve the paper from the door, and then closed it behind him while toeing off his shoes to leave behind in the entryway.

"Sensei, this says that all heroes are required to attend an official Hero Association event two days from now."

"Hmm?"

Saitama was only barely paying attention to him, eyes fixed on the ground floor where that strange dog who followed him home was busy playing fetch with the weird hairy butterfly guy who had visited him. He blinked lazily, leaning against the edge of the balcony. **What was his name again...?**

"It seems to be some sort of PR event, with the intention of raising the Association's approval rating."

"Approval rating?"

The bald man turned slightly, brown eyes fixed over his shoulder to gaze at the cyborg.

Genos nodded and continued, "Yes. As I'm sure you are aware, sensei, the Association is currently
under heavy scrutiny right now. With the massive increase in monster attacks, population deaths, and city damage, people are relying more than ever on heroes to save them. But most of the heroes are struggling to handle the increased amount of demon and dragon level monsters. With Blast still unavailable, Bang leaving the Association, Darkshine refusing to fight, Tornado under scrutiny, etc, the public is losing faith in the Association and its main donators are more reluctant to invest. With this in-

"Dude."

The cyborg paused for a few moments, presumably to count words in his head. "People are losing faith in heroes, so Amai Mask is holding an event to influence public opinion."

Saitama scratched at his ear. "We have to be there?"

"Yes, sensei. In our hero outfits."

"Ugh. Oh well, at least it's not on a sale day."
Inertia

Chapter Summary

Genos gets to see just how much impact his sensei has upon the people surrounding them.

Even Tatsumaki...?

Chapter Notes

Dialogue and scenes will be taken from a combination of the webcomic by ONE, manga by Yusuke Murata, subtitled anime, dubbed anime, and various bits and pieces from bonus chapters, OVAs, and other official/confirmed OPM sources.

Fanart by noni (@balljointcyborg)

The Hero Association event was held at a massive stadium set up in much the same way as an opera theatre, with a large center stage and thousands of chairs extending out from it, arranged in a half-circle with multiple levels where the audience could still view the stage and the absolutely immense screen tethered above it. There were roped-off sections for each hero ranking, with B and C class double the size of the A section. S-class, naturally, was tiny in comparison.

Genos had never seen so many heroes gathered in one place. Literally every single A, B, and C rank hero had shown up, as well as the majority of the S class. Naturally, Blast's chair was empty, but Silver Fang's absence was felt all the more prominently by the group in comparison, judging from the glances cast its way every so often. Tatsumaki was reclining in a chair hovering off the floor, apparently annoyed and uncaring about her surroundings; however, Genos observed with curiosity that she too would periodically open her eyes and glance dully at the unoccupied chairs on either side of her.

She looked...very alone. It reminded Genos, oddly, of the look in Saitama's eyes every time he defeated an enemy in one strike.

"Oi. Aren't you both supposed to be sitting in a different section?"

Genos pretended not to hear Saitama's question, craning his head around to view the other heroes and cataloging each one within his internal database, referencing the Hero Registry whenever he saw someone he could not immediately identify.

"But I wanted to show you this new game I got," King rumbled quietly from Saitama's other side. The other A rank heroes were all staring in awe, jaws hanging open, as two of the most well-known heroes casually flanked an otherwise unknown rookie who had only hit A rank a few days prior.

Genos noted with alarm that many of the S class heroes were also glancing their way, eyes
lingering on his teacher. Metal Knight, in particular, had not taken his blood-red eyes off of the bald hero since they first walked in. Though the cyborg knew his teacher was completely invulnerable, he still found himself with proverbial hackles raised at all of the attention Saitama was suddenly attracting. The man in question was utterly oblivious, lazy eyes staring down at the game system held in King’s large hands as the otaku gestured enthusiastically and pointed out various parts of the game he liked best.

A sudden hush fell over the crowd of heroes as Amai Mask, accompanied by several prominent members of the Association, appeared suddenly on the stage from behind the large black curtains flanking each end. The blue-haired man approached the edge of the stage, eyes sweeping over the gathered heroes and lingering just a second too long on the bald man at Genos’ side.

The cyborg’s hands clenched tightly in his lap, joints creaking under the sudden pressure.

A light pressure nudged his arm, startling him and drawing his gaze to the man at his side. Saitama wasn't looking at him, eyes still focused absently on King's game, but his arm gently brushed against his metal bicep once more in a friendly, reassuring gesture.

Genos smiled softly and allowed himself to relax.

"Heroes," Amai Mask greeted, exuding such fake warmth and joy that Genos' lip involuntarily curled in disgust. "As you are well aware, the Association's approval rating has dropped significantly in the wake of recent disasters. In order to boost public opinion, we would like to remind the people of how much good heroes contribute to this world. The board has been deliberating on the best way to approach this for several weeks, considering all possible options to induce the public to-"

"Oi, Genos."

Startled, Genos turned his attention to the side. Saitama stared at him with half-lidded eyes. "This guy's putting me to sleep. Wake me if anything interesting happens."

"Wh- but, sensei-!"

Too late. His teacher was already leaning his head back, eyes closed and jaw slackening.

The cyborg sighed indulgently, eyeing his teacher's relaxed form and unconcerned expression with a rueful smile. On Saitama's other side, King was paying even less attention, his intimidating features lit up from below by the glow of his game system as his fingers moved swiftly over the buttons.

"-please welcome Madame Shibabawa's apprentice, Lady Kasumi."

Genos jolted upright in his seat, refocusing his attention to the center stage. A young woman was timidly approaching the prominent hero and model, her eyes nervously darting away from the large crowd of heroes gathered below. She looked frail, curling in on herself with a thick shawl as though terrified of the world around her. He wondered suddenly if she had been kept in the bowels of the Hero Association, secluded away from the rest of humanity's attention on purpose, like Madame Shibabawa.

"With her power," Amai continued, smiling widely at the crowd. "We will be showing the public the inner workings of heroism. You are all required to participate if called upon. If you refuse, your rank will be reset to the lowest level of class C and you will incur severe restrictions. I expect you all to behave as befitting of heroes in this situation."
The model's smile widened with a hint of pleasant cruelty. "Or, you will lose your employment entirely."

What?!

Muted gasps and discontented muttering spread amongst the crowd of heroes like wildfire, steadily rising in pitch. But the angry hisses and low conversations abruptly dropped off as every entrance to the stadium slammed open, hoards of oblivious citizens eagerly filing in.

"Ah, welcome everyone!" Amai called warmly, spreading his arms wide in greeting. "Please move to your seats in an orderly fashion. We will begin once everyone is situated."

*He planned this,* Genos realized, frowning darkly. *He wanted to make sure we had no time to ask questions or argue.*

Ah! I should wake sensei-

The cyborg turned immediately, hand already reaching out to jostle his teacher's shoulder, only to discover in baffled surprise that the man was already awake. Saitama's eyes were slightly sharper than normal, gazing lazily up at the stage with muted interest.

"Sensei?"

The bald hero hummed noncommittally, turning his head to rake his gaze across the hordes of people pouring into the stadium. His eyes moved back to the stage, where Amai Mask stood with his attention focused directly upon them, eyes glinting maliciously even as his smile never wavered. The blue-haired man's eyes flicked toward the S class section, and then back to their group.

"Hey. I think he wants you to move to the other section."

King grumbled under his breath, but obligingly stood. The game system was quickly stashed in one pocket so he could use both arms to lift his assigned chair and tote it forward into the S-class section. Genos remained stubbornly where he was, pretending to be engrossed in watching the people swiftly filling out the remaining seats in the building.

"Oi, Genos."

The cyborg sighed and batted at the offending hand poking him in the side. "Very well, sensei."

Genos deliberately placed his chair next to King, disrupting the orderly arrangement of chairs by ranking, and calmly sat down. King glanced at him curiously, then shrugged and diverted his eyes back to the game in his large hands. The cyborg stared at it as though utterly fascinated, avoiding the annoyed gaze he was certain the model was aiming at him from atop the stage.

Once the stadium had been completely filled out, Amai addressed the audience with a gentle wave of one hand. "Welcome, everyone! Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedules to join us."

Several female voices squealed loudly from the amassed crowd, desperately fawning over their idol. Amai winked at them, causing an even louder screech in response. Tatsumaki snorted audibly and obnoxiously yawned behind one petite hand, echoing the opinion of the other heroes gathered nearby.

"In light of the recent attacks and disasters that have befallen our nation, I and the other members
of the Hero Board wanted to offer the public an insight into our beloved heroes, to reassure you that we only employ the best. Thanks to Lady Kasumi-" and here he gestured to the tiny slip of a girl standing next to him. "We will be showing a once in a lifetime snapshot of each hero and how they came to be."

The cyborg blinked in surprise. How...?

"This lovely woman has a rare psychic ability that allows her to gather a person's most important memories and then project them, like a documentary."

There was a sharp breath from the large man beside Genos, and then a loud rumbling. Ah, this must be the fabled King engine. Is he annoyed by this blatant breach of our privacy?

Most of the gathered crowd was chattering excitedly, eager to learn more about their favorite heroes. The heroes, meanwhile, were all grumbling about the lack of warning or time to prepare themselves for the situation. Some, like Fubuki, looked absolutely horrified by the prospect of their lives being broadcast to the public; and furthermore, being essentially forced to comply if they wanted to retain the ranks and positions they had worked so hard to attain.

"Despicable," Genos hissed lowly, eyes flashing as his core heated and whirred faster in response to his rising fury. He did not want the world to see his nightmarish recollections of that day.

Amai continued, ignoring the noise level from the hero section directly below him. "You, our most beloved fans and supporters, will determine the order in which each hero is shown. If you look to your right, your seat should have a device attached to armrest where you can vote on-"

A sharp buzzing from within his pocket distracted Genos, drawing his attention downward. He retrieved his phone and peered in mild surprise at the text message displayed on its screen.

Saitama-sensei: calm down. Do wht u want

He glanced behind him once more, locking gazes with a pair of chocolate brown eyes staring neutrally at him.

Smiling, he typed a response as quickly as his bulky metal fingers would allow.

Me: Thank you, sensei. Do not worry about me.

Saitama-sensei: im not

He chuckled softly as the last pulsing edges of rage faded away into calm. His teacher was right, as always; there was no reason to get so worked up over this. He could comply and show the audience why they might be better off never knowing what happened to some of their beloved hero figures, or he could refuse and simply work his way back up to S class. In the end, nothing of true importance was really at stake here - he would still be able to follow his teacher, and he would still be able to acquire leads in pursuit of the mad cyborg. As long as he could continue to be a disciple to the strongest man who had ever lived, he would be content to-

He froze.

This....this is....!!

With a sharp inhale, Genos reconsidered the situation in a new light. If this woman's power would
show the world a person's most important life events, then surely it would show the times where he had witnessed Saitama's limitless power, right? At the very least, it would most assuredly show the time where his teacher had decimated that foul mosquito monster in one slap, thereby saving his life and changing the path he pursued. He could literally show the entire world the truth of his teacher's existence as a hero.

Oh, this would be **glorious**.

**Me:** I have decided what I will do, sensei. Thank you for your words of wisdom.

**Saitama-sensei:** wtf dude all i did was tell u to calm down

**Me:** It was more than enough.

**Saitama-sensei:** ugh whatevr

"Unfortunately Lady Kasumi's power only works once in a person's life," Amai Mask was *still* talking? "-and she has already used her power on me to prove the validity of her ability in a private meeting with the other board members, so I will sadly not be included in the voting."

Genos didn't need his analytics program to realize that this statement was a lie. *Bastard.* He rolled his eyes as the females in the crowd vocally lamented this statement and then refocused on his surroundings, putting the phone back in his left pocket. King was rigid next to him, narrowed eyes staring unblinking at the stage, the rumbling of his fast heartbeat even louder than before. Tatsumaki looked to be about three seconds away from a full-blown tantrum (was she really older than Saitama?), and Child Emperor was nibbling on a lollipop as always, thoroughly unconcerned with the world around him. Pig God had somehow manifested a bag of chips and was busy stuffing his face, while Atomic Samurai seemed to be meditating; or possibly sleeping like the bald hero in section A. The other S rank heroes seemed largely unconcerned with the situation.

"And the result of the first vote is...S-class hero, Watchdog Man!"

The event continued on with no certain end in sight, with heroes being called up to the stage one by one as the votes were submitted by the audience, the top 3 votes briefly flashing up on the screen each time a name was called. The hero would then kneel or sit in front of the tiny, fragile-looking psychic, and she would tentatively touch their head with shaking fingers. The other hand would point toward the large screen spanning the entire height and width of the room, and after a few moments of tense silence, it would then light up with scenes from the hero's life, complete with color and audio. Her power was complete, showing the memory through the person's eyes and broadcasting their innermost thoughts from that time as though the audience could see directly inside their heads. Some memories were vivid, as clear as a movie played in high definition quality, whilst some were blurred or frayed along the edges, as though only half-recalled.

The event was being live-streamed as well as filmed by several local news crews, but the voting was only tallied from those present in the building. The gathering of heroes had mostly relaxed as each hero's life was shown on stage and generally received pleasure and shouts of praise from the public; though Genos noticed with interest that Fubuki still appeared absolutely terrified.

Watchdog Man had been first, with a surprisingly dull and uneventful life of loving dogs so much that he wanted to become one, quickly followed by Atomic Samurai and Superalloy Darkshine, both of whom had pursued strength and attained it after a life of disciple, training, and meditation.
The cyborg found himself thinking of Saitama, who had only applied himself for three years before attaining his world-shattering power.

*Sensei is truly amazing.*

"And our next vote goes to...S class hero, King!"

The rumbling at Genos' side abruptly spiked, raising to a nearly deafening level of noise. The chair underneath the large man shook as he slowly clambered to his feet, and his narrow, dangerous eyes focused upon the stage.

Silence reigned.

"I...refuse."

The audience began muttering amongst themselves, obviously irritated that they would be denied the chance to see how "the strongest man" had come to be. Amai Mask's expression had darkened immediately upon this pronouncement, his eyes nearly glowing with fury even as his mouth curled with an elaborately kind smile.

"I see. You are aware that there will be consequences for your refusal?"

The rumbling intensified. "...yes."

One side of Amai's deliberate smile twitched, fracturing for a brief moment into pure rage. "Very well. Please join the Hero Board backstage after this event is over."

"Boooooo!" called the audience.

"We want to see King!" A few people shouted loudly above the boo's and catcalls.

"I do apologize, everyone. Please rest assured that this will be addressed accordingly." Amai Mask announced with a twisted smile that was just a shade away from becoming a full grimace. "In the meantime, we will continue with the hero that received the most amount of votes after King - Tornado of Terror!"

"Hmph!" Tatsumaki hovered herself up to the stage with a pretty scowl, tapping one foot in midair as the audience cheered. "Whatever. Let's get this over with."

The memories shown on the screen shortly thereafter resulted in a horrified silence from the audience. Even Genos, who no longer had a human stomach, felt vaguely nauseous at the thought of a child being imprisoned in solitary confinement for refusing to use her extraordinary ability. Despite Tornado's absurd attitude problem, he felt a tiny stirring of pity within him at the trauma she must have gone through before Blast, of all people, rescued her. His face was shrouded in shadow, so only his short dark hair and a general outline of his features was visible as he scolded the child for lying and advised her to not expect others to come save her all the time.

The scenes thereafter were short, only minor pieces of battles and roughly one or two lines of dialogue from various conversations, a brief snapshot of the esper being knocked out in the fight against Psychos; and then there was abruptly a raging battle of psychic powers shown on the screen, the short green-haired woman versus her taller and more elegant-looking younger sister, Fubuki. They exchanged cruel verbal barbs just as cutting as their powerful attacks, while absolutely decimating the corridor surrounding them. At one point, Genos thought he caught a brief glimpse of his teacher on the sidelines, rescuing bystanders whom had passed out from the barrage of energy. The two sisters' conversation was rather alarming, showcasing a disturbing and
controlling sort of possessiveness that Fubuki clearly railed against with all her might.

Shortly thereafter, the scene cut to a vision of the esper wobbling through the air, collapsing to her knees on the ground as blood dripped into her field of vision, presumably pouring from her head.

And then, suddenly, Saitama's voice emanated from the screen.

"You're practically falling over. Can you make it back by yourself?"

Genos shot upright in his chair, his eyes avidly fixed upon the large screen above them as the Tatsumaki on stage flinched upon realizing what was being shown to the audience. The screen's view shifted as the woman unsteadily clambered to her feet, showing a wide expanse of desert broken only by the roads extending out from the Hero Association's new stronghold. *What the..?! When did this happen?!*

"Oh, you...goddamn, stubborn jerk! What do you want?!"

"You're bleeding pretty bad. I was wondering if you were alright."

"Of course I'm alright!!!"

"Oh. Okay."

The audience was murmuring in surprise, low conversations of confusion as people wondered who was talking with the esper in the memory. The esper on the screen tottered forward a few paces, obviously weakened, and then stopped once more as the view shifted back to the ground underneath tiny feet.

"You're...kinda strong," Tatsumaki announced suddenly, followed immediately with a catty: "Well, if I was in perfect shape, I'd flatten you in 5 seconds."

"Yeah, sure."

"Do you normally hide your true strength? You're such an asshole."

"It's not like I try to hide it!!"

The audience's murmuring were getting louder now, discontented confusion as the crowd tried to figure out who the man was speaking with the esper in the memory. Genos turned his head slightly to gauge his teacher's reaction and found, to his eternal exasperation, that his teacher was somehow asleep once again.

"Sensei, honestly..."

A chuckle to Genos' right attracted his attention back to King.

"Well, that's Saitama for you. He could care less about this kind of thing."

Genos sighed in rueful agreement. "True."

The scene above was still progressing. The cyborg caught the tail end of his teacher asking the esper a deeply personal question, and raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"Then why are you a hero? Don't tell me it's for the income. I bet you wanted to connect with people by helping them. You seem bad at making friends, after all."
The image on the screen shifted as the esper turned in the memory, looking across an empty road at a bald man in ragged, torn-up clothing, without a single scratch or open wound despite the way his clothes appeared. The audience's murmurings increased in volume as some members of the crowd recognized Caped Baldy and realized that he was somehow, impossibly, the person being recognized for his strength by the most powerful esper in the world. Genos glanced over again and saw several A-rank heroes staring openly at his snoozing teacher, an odd mix of awe, jealousy, and disbelief.

Tatsumaki's voice rang out softly from the screen, clearly a thought from that time. (...what? How can he see through me so easily? No one...no one has ever...)

The field of vision narrowed as Tatsumaki's voice rang out in irritation. "Shut up!! Don't go jumping to-"

The feed on the screen abruptly shut off as Tatsumaki leapt to her feet, dislodging the hand on her head.

"That's enough," the short esper snapped, stamping a single foot as though she were a grumpy toddler. "I'm so done with this!"

The green-haired woman hovered back to her chair in the S-rank section, most of the eyes in the audience focused upon her as the people continued to mutter amongst themselves over what they had seen.

"Ah..." Amai Mask began quietly, then quickly recovered. "Time for the next vote, then. Please choose the hero you wish to learn more about."

The voting took much longer this time, as though the crowd couldn't decide which hero they wanted to learn about most. In the end, Fubuki was chosen. She made her way shakily up to the stage, a look of pale terror on her normally unaffected face. Her past was much the same as Genos had expected after witnessing the disturbing scenes from within Tornado's headspace, a childhood filled with feelings of isolation and unworthiness when compared with her overbearing, nearly abusive older sibling. Bullies assaulted her at school, but her sister assaulted her with faux kindness everywhere else, a constant source of inequality and derision. The child grew into an awkward woman who was both confident and also insecure, involved heavily in a psychic research foundation before it was ultimately dissolved, and finally the Blizzard Group was established as the stronghold of class B.

And then...Saitama, once again, crashing into her life and disrupting everything she'd previously known.

The scene opened with a view of hands hovering mid-air, wielding psychic power into a twister of ice and psychic energy.

(It's your own fault for trying to surpass me! I'm number one! Whenever anyone rivals me-)

"You're too hysterical for the top."

(-I crush them! ...wha-?!)

The image on the screen blurred as the esper whirled around in shock, eyes apparently widening as the bald hero suddenly appeared right in her personal space, one arm pulled back as if ready to deliver a single punch.

(Whoa! He's close?!)

"You won't last long. You don't understand heroes. The world is full of savage villains, and heroes face them...even alone, if necessary."

The bald man leaned even closer, a serious look on his face. The carefully neutral, blasé expression normally present on his features had morphed into a stern countenance with sharp lines, eyes narrowed dangerously as dark eyes flashed in annoyance.

"You gather underlings for strength, but someday you'll face an opponent so strong that they won't help."

(How dare you-!!)

The man's expression twisted into actual anger on-screen, surprising Genos, who had never before seen his teacher look so pissed.

"Factions? Preying on newbies? Securing your ranks? None of that matters!" the bald hero shouted angrily, eyebrows furrowing in his annoyance. "Don't dis heroes that way!!"

The majority of the B-rank section started boo'ing and grumbling angrily, affronted by the slight to their mistress. Oblivious as always, the Saitama seated in A-rank snoozed on with his mouth slightly ajar in relaxation. Genos found himself, irrationally, wanting to laugh. What a ridiculous situation they had landed themselves in.

"Shut up!! I won't hand over the position I worked so hard for!"

The fight escalated on the screen above them, with the esper trying to bury his teacher under a prison of stone; the bald hero promptly punched his way out of it, annoyance still clearly visible on his face. Fubuki rained down more stone and psychic energy upon him, deflected instantly by the man's raised arms, and then she launched herself at him with a massive box cutter, aiming directly at his face with tears building in the corners of her eyes, blurring the edges of the screen.

(I will prove my worth, you-!)

The brown eyes of the Saitama on the screen abruptly widened, darting to the left and right of the esper's face as the anger on his face was immediately replaced by shock.

A massive explosion shook the edges of the screen's visuals, the resulting *BOOM* thundering throughout the stadium. Out of the corner of one black sclera, Genos saw his teacher jolt awake at the sound, eyes wide and searching for the imminent threat as the audience collectively gasped in horror.

(What...what happened?...oww...)

Dust covered the screen, slowly dissipating and revealing the outline of Genos himself, staring in a different direction. "Did I get him that time? Ugh, he scampered back to sensei's apartment."

(Ah...is that the class S hero, Genos? What's he doing here?)

"Saitama-sensei, sorry for the dust."

The dirty clouds finally cleared away, revealing his teacher standing protectively in front of Blizzard of Hell. The scene flickered downward for a brief moment, showing deep furrows in the ground where he had bodily shielded her from the massive firestorm resulting from Genos' thoughtless, reckless battle. He chided himself mentally, even as Saitama's voice rang out from the screen once more.
"This is more than just dust!! I just saw Sonic, what's going on?"

The scene tilted back up slowly, the barest hint of eyelashes widening as the woman stared up at her unexpected savior.

(He...protected me? And....not even a scratch?! How strong is he?!?!)

The scene fizzled out in the middle of Saitama talking with Genos, replaced by the older hero's apartment roughly twenty minutes after Genos' spat with Sonic, with King entering the room and demanding the video game Saitama had swiped from him. Fubuki was apparently staring at the man once again.

(Why...is a class S hero hanging out with a class B hero...?)

King and Saitama continued to converse on the screen, the bald man sheepishly returning the former's game system with a broken button and scratching one cheek as he apologized.

(Maybe...I could be a part of this...?)

The scene ended quickly, followed by snippets of dialogue and brief flashes of her life later after this event, sometimes including Saitama, and King once again, and one time even Bang, as well as a brief moment of soul-shattering terror during her attempted face-off against Garou. There was a tiny blip of a visual showing Garou again, transformation broken at the feet of a bald man in a billowing white cape against an expanse of black, starless sky, and Fubuki reflecting to herself beside King: (How is he so powerful? Can I...can I learn to be that strong?)

Genos smirked triumphantly as the audience in the stadium began murmuring amongst themselves once more. He heard snatches of the various conversations thanks to his excellent hearing capacity, and was utterly delighted by the awe and intrigue the public was now showing toward his teacher. Nearly half of the crowd was staring down at the A-rank section, where the bald man was casually cleaning his ear with one pinky, attention focused down in his lap.
Yes! Finally! With this, sensei can at last gain the recognition he-

His phone buzzed, interrupting this train of thought. The cyborg retrieved it and peered fondly down at the screen.

**Saitama-sensei:** im bored when can we go home

**Me:** Sensei, this event was not scheduled with a specific end time. I believe this will last until the public is satisfied.
Saitama-sensei: dude

He chuckled softly to himself and began to type a response, only to be interrupted by another
received message.

Saitama-sensei: does king have an extra game i can use

Genos turned to the hero beside him, opening his mouth to diligently convey his teacher's question,
when suddenly he heard his hero name called from the front stage.

"-Demon Cyborg!

He froze, amber eyes jerking up to the large screen above their heads. The tallied percentage of the
votes shone starkly against a black background.

1. Demon Cyborg - 35%
2. Caped Baldy - 34%
3. Mumen Rider - 14%

Shit.
Saitama was beyond ready to go home.

They had been at this stupid event for an entire hour so far, longer than any other Association event they had previously been to; not even that ridiculous 'the world is in danger' meeting had lasted this long, thanks to the Domino of the Universe guy. Were they just supposed to stay here until it got dark outside? Later than that?

He slumped in his chair, dark eyes flicking up to the ridiculously huge screen above the stage where memory-Fubuki and King were staring at that weird kid from Bang's dojo who had thrown a colossal tantrum about the nature of heroes and villains. The bald man blinked lazily, wondering if the old geezer had managed to locate his wayward disciple and drag him back to the dojo yet for scolding.

Ehh...disciples can be so troublesome. I hope Genos never does something like that.

Oh!

Speaking of Genos, maybe his disciple would know how long they were stuck here?

He ignored the weirdos surrounding him (seriously, why the hell were they staring so much? Did they want to be his disciple too? Creepy...) and texted Genos on his H.A.-standard issue phone; thankfully given to him for free with his recent rise in ranking. He'd only had the stupid thing for a few days, but had already managed to obtain (read: watched as they were forcibly inserted into his phone) the contact numbers for Genos, Fubuki, King, Mumen Rider, Bang and, randomly, Tatsumaki. He still wasn't quite sure how that last one had gotten there, because he never saw anyone setting up the contact info - not even Fubuki. So strange.

Genos confirmed that they were stuck here until the end of time. He groaned softly under his breath, then remembered that the cyborg was seated next to King. Ooh...! Hopefully the guy would have a spare console he could borrow to occupy himself while this-

"Demon Cyborg!"

His fingers stilled on the keypad.

Wait. Doesn't that mean...
Saitama raised his head up to stare at the stage, watching as Genos slowly climbed the stairs and approached a terrified looking woman standing next to the blue-haired Sweet-something guy. His disciple paused, and then turned abruptly to approach the Sweet guy. He muttered something intelligible, causing the other hero's eyebrows to raise in unison, then he slowly nodded and extended a hand holding a spare microphone, one finger delicately flicking a switch on the side. Genos hesitated briefly, exhaled, and then lifted the device to his mouth.

"If there are any children still in the building...parents, please take them and leave. There are some...moments...from my earlier life, that will be very disturbing to watch."

Soft shuffling and childish voices of protest echoed through the suddenly silent building as mothers and fathers hastened to obey the request, and finally Genos nodded with a relieved "thank you" before returning the microphone and slowly approaching the tiny woman nearby. He spoke softly with her for a moment, noticeably causing the girl to relax, and then kneeled at her feet in his typical seiza position.

Well, shit.

He had been purposefully ignoring the screen from the beginning, not wanting to invade everyone's privacy (seriously, what the hell did it matter what was in everyone's past? Shouldn't it only matter that they were heroes now?) but this was a massive, intense temptation. He really, really wanted to know.

Dammit.

He huffed softly and shoved his phone back into one nearly-invisible yellow pocket, gnawing on one cheek and restlessly tapping one leg as the esper on stage gently placed a frail hand on synthetic blonde strands. There was a pause, a brief moment of silence as though the entire crowd was holding its breath, and then the screen came to life with a fuzzy memory that frayed at the edges.

*Weird. Why is it so blurry?*

The sound was distorted as though filtered through water, the memory barely visible. With a sudden jolt, Saitama realized that this was a scene from his student's pre-cyborg days, and that was likely the cause of the strained visuals since the younger hero (purposefully?) did not remember much from that time.

"Mom, look!" the sound sizzled and popped as though the signal were being disrupted by static. A blurry image of a young boy with blonde hair, green eyes, and a light dusting of barely-visible freckles filled the screen, holding a larger hand in his own small fist as they stood in front of a large reflective material - mirror? Metal? "-we match!"
A gentle hand rested on top of the blonde head, the lower half of a woman's jaw visible in a kind smile. "That's because we-"

The scene shifted abruptly, showing the same woman seated at a table, just finishing the last bite of food from her plate, with a much clearer image and audio. The field of vision darted below the table, focusing on hands that clenched as the owner inhaled nervously.

"Mom...Dad...I...I'm gay." The sound fizzled once more, the visual blurring for a split second before refocusing on his parents' surprised faces. Saitama's eyes darted away from the screen in time to see his disciple flinch in the present.

Shit. Why do they have to show this crap to the whole world?

The surprise apparent on the faces shown on-screen melted away instantly into kind, affectionate smiles.

"We already knew that, sweetheart," the woman giggled, her eyes crinkling at the corners with her wide smile. The background behind the two parents was blurry and formless, as though the exact
details of the way their house looked had disappeared entirely from Genos' thoughts over the years.

"What- but-!"

"Son," his father's face morphed into a strange mix of amusement and stern lines. "I can't say I'm not disappointed I won't have any grandkids, but...you're still our boy and we love you. Just don't give me any details, y'hear?"

"...dad..." the teen whispered weakly, tears welling in the corners of the screen and blurring everything.

Damn, this is so personal. Why the hell are they allowed to do this?

The beautiful woman on the screen moved forward, enveloping the boy in a tight hug. "Darling...we will always support you, no matter what."

She flicked his forehead lightly with one gentle hand before moving away to collect the remnants of their dinner from the table.

Saitama felt a chill travel down his spine, recalling the startled look on his disciple's face when he had done that exact same gesture after their first spar.

"And maybe someday you can find a nice, handsome man to cook your amazing recipes for."

"Mom!!!"

The woman lifted a hand to her mouth as she giggled openly at her teenage son's embarrassment, and then...

The dull, muted colors on the screen exploded.

More than one member of the audience cried out in shock and terror, jerking back against their seats as though the shimmering heat could touch them directly.

Heavy, labored breathing emanated from the screen, followed by an intense, piercing ringing. The brown, muted colors swirled and twisted, as though the eyes seeing them could only just barely focus. A trembling, shaking hand raised up into view, the audible breath from the memory hitching in pain as the bloodied limb showed mutilated skin and two missing fingers.

(Oh god...it hurts...everything hurts...what- what happened...)

Saitama hands curled into shaking fists on his lap.

(Mom? Dad? Where are you?....why does it hurt so much...?)

The labored breathing from the screen intensified as the teen used his remaining limbs to slowly, painfully crawl out from the wreckage of their home, slowly dragging himself forward with destroyed arms and pained whimpers. The colors and outlines twisted, formless and wavering, like the roaring fire that quickly began to consume it all. There was a brief view of the landscape, buildings decimated, fire climbing high above the trees and filling the sky.

And then, the firestorm parted, silver moonlight shining down on a metallic body in the distance, crimson eyes gleaming like tiny flames. A terrible crackling noise, a strange mix of laughter and static, echoed across the wreckage as the cyborg turned and stomped away. It didn't offer a single reason for the destruction and death it had rained upon their small world, just a cold stare into a
dying boy's eyes.

(...why....why us...oh god...)

The bald man gritted his teeth together so tightly they ached.

(...please...someone...it hurts...)

He closed his eyes, ignoring the way they burned.

(...please...)

"Oh my god!"

Saitama glanced up, seeing a blurred outline of an old man with a strange, bulky mass of silver hair. The edges of the vision darkened, slowly blackening around the edges as the dying teen gasped air into wet lungs.

"Hang on, my boy. You'll be okay. I can save you, but..."

"But?" the boy gasped, struggling to focus as his heartbeat pulsed loudly in the background.

"You'll be a cyborg. I will save as much of your body as I can, but you will need some mechanical parts. Are you okay with that?"

(I...I can live? I can...become strong?)

".........yes. Yes! Please, I-"

The screen went black.

Saitama numbly realized that he could hear sobbing in the distance, and remembered suddenly that he was in a building with thousands of other people. He quickly sought out the cyborg kneeling on the stage in front of them, reassuring himself that Genos was still alive and had made it out of that hellhole intact, if not exactly whole. His disciple was rigid, hard lines and unyielding metal, staring unblinking down at the floor beneath him.

This is so messed up.

A faint whirring noise emanated from the screen suddenly, tiny beeps as sound returned once more. The upper left part of the screen slowly filled with crisp yellow words and numbers.

[System startup initiated. Loading...]

[All subroutines functional.
Temperature: 40*C (optimal)
Power remaining: 100%
Thrusters: 100%
Fuel: 100%
Oil: 100%]

[Organic Functions: Optimal
Oxygen Supply: Optimal
Blood Supply: Optimal
Vision: Loading...]
A grey ceiling with a large, sterile light swam into view, the visual quality stark and blindingly vivid in comparison to the last blurred memory of Genos’ human existence.

The silence was deafening.

(What...what happened? Where am I?)

The scene shifted slightly as the newly reborn cyborg’s eyes moved slowly from side-to-side.

(I feel so weird...what are those words? What the hell...)

"Can you hear me?"

There was a sharp inhale, and then the scene tilted to focus on the doctor from before, every wrinkle and mark on the aged skin visible in startling HD clarity.

"...zzt. Yes."

The voice that answered the doctor was metallic, flat, and cold. Saitama had never thought of the other hero’s voice being anything but warm and full of life, and the difference was jarring to hear.

"I am Doctor Kuseno. You were nearly killed by a mad cyborg I have been hunting down for some time. You asked me to save you. What do you remember?"

There was a brief silence.

"Fire. Pain. Everything hurt."

The doctor grimaced in sympathy, his eyebrows furrowing. "I'm sorry, my boy. I did everything I could to save your organs, but the damage was too extensive. In the end I could only preserve your brain and some of your remaining blood. I had to replace everything else."

The image on the screen darkened briefly, as though the cyborg had taken a slow blink to process this information.

"Replace?"

"Yes. You are now a full cyborg, 98% mechanical. Your human body was mostly destroyed in the-"

"You made me like that THING?!!"

The sudden roar of fury was deafening, making several members of the audience jump or cry out in surprise.

"It was the only way to-"

"I DON'T CARE! I WOULD RATHER DIE THAN BE-"

And here the electronic words shut off abruptly, the new voice box struggling to keep up with an animalistic scream of raw grief and fury that it was never built for.

"Stop it," Saitama whispered quietly, glaring up at the infuriating blue-haired hero on the stage who was just letting this shit happen.
"I'm sorry," the doctor whispered brokenly on the screen, tears pouring down his wrinkled face. "I couldn't just let you die. Not when I had the power to save you."

Another scream of impotent rage and horror rent the silence like an explosion, and then abruptly died as the scene shifted to another moment in the lab.

The doctor worked quietly on something in the new cyborg's chest cavity, peering down as he made small adjustments with nimble fingers. "So...what's your name, boy?"

The field of vision darkened as the cyborg's eyes closed, electronic words and numbers emblazoned in the top left of the black screen, an eternal reminder of the teen's transformed body that he would never be able to escape from or ignore.

"I'm.........Genos."

"Genos?"

The eyes opened once more, focusing on the cold lines of the grey ceiling.

"Yes. Because I was born from genocide."

Saitama closed his eyes and swallowed past the hard lump in his throat. He hadn't thought it was possible for him to feel sorrow or grief anymore, but this day had proved him terribly, horribly wrong.

Fuck. So every time someone calls him that name, it just reminds him of what happened?

He resolved, then and there, to pester his disciple relentlessly until he gave a different name for Saitama to call him. A name that was clean of blood and fire and endless suffering.

The scene must have shifted again, because there were snippets of words and phrases that sped by like a freight train, never pausing on one memory long enough to get an idea of what was happening. Years apparently passed in the blink of an eye, until suddenly, the screen lit up with an empty cityscape and an immense black, writhing mass in mid-air.

(If she's been collecting blood from the whole town and beyond, then it may be more than a simple food source for her. I should end this as soon as possible.)

There was a rushing noise as one flamethrower began to charge up an attack, and then suddenly-

"Get back here, dammit!!"

The view shifted quickly, attention focusing on Saitama himself, chasing an impossibly swift mosquito with a can of bug spray. "I'm not done with you yet, ya little bastard!!"

(....who's this idiot?)

Saitama snorted with an unexpected snigger, which he quickly stifled behind one hand as the cyborg present on stage wilted in shame at the memory. He had gotten so used to the younger hero constantly showering praise upon him, it was hilarious (and oddly refreshing) to hear something completely different for once. While he chuckled, the scene progressed, with Genos warning the past-Saitama of the apparent danger, and the man in the memory blandly staring in confusion and muted surprise. A cloud of mosquitoes crashed down around them, swiftly dealt with by a massive firestorm from the cyborg on the screen.
And then the kid *monologued*.

He felt one edge of his mouth curl in amusement at the surprisingly naïve thoughts of his disciple, who had apparently given himself a mental pat on the back at the time for his foresight in scanning for any civilian lifeforms near the area before attacking.

(Wait, that guy was-!!)

The scene shifted as the cyborg searched for a corpse on the ground, found bare feet instead, and then swiftly raked up a rather naked Saitama (thankfully his more private parts were shielded from view by a convenient dust cloud. Phew!), who said casually, "Wow!! You're amazing. What was that? Talk about a bug zapper!"

(Wh- how did he-)

*Why is everyone cat-calling?* Saitama mused curiously, tilting his head in slight confusion as several members of the audience participated in a strange mixture of loud wolf-whistles, cheering, and boo'ing at the screen.

The naked vision of his muscular torso disappeared as the memory-Genos turned swiftly upon hearing that gross bug lady cackling in the air above their heads. The monster lurched forward, faster than the cyborg's internal optics could keep up, utterly wrecking his body in a matter of seconds. Frantic words zoomed across the upper quadrant of the visuals, appearing rapidly as though the kid's systems were having a panic attack.

**[WARNING! 80% of functions disrupted. Artificial limb connections lost. Organic functions endangered. Repair needed immediately!]**

"Hahaha! So fragile!! Next time I'll take your head!"

**[Core exposed. Situation analysis: retreat.]**

(I see! The more blood she absorbs, the stronger she becomes!)

The scene shifted oddly as Genos' torso fell backwards, gaze focused on the approaching monster that would be his doom.

(I underestimated her. I cannot win. I can only...self-destruct.)

**[Subroutine: SELF-DESTRUCT initiated. Override password confirmed. Charging...35%]**

(Forgive me...Doctor...)

**[Charging...64%]**

The intense blue glow of Genos' rapidly whirring core illuminated the muddled human/bug face nearly upon him, her expression lit with unholy glee and bloodlust-

-and then a human hand was suddenly shoved into the side of her face. The cyborg's optics jerked to the side just in time to see a nearby building covered in gore and blood, cracking audibly with the impact.

**[ERROR: System subroutines disrupted. Initiating reboot.]**

(What- what just-)
The teen’s gaze snapped back to the owner of the hand as he continued to fall through the air, focused on the man’s upper torso and face as he grinned blandly. "Bugs...suck."

(He took care of her in one strike?!) 

The cyborg's voice grunted as his remaining body crashed to the ground. His eyes focused on the ground underneath his jaw for a second, then lifted to stare up once more.

The sky was a wide expanse of curved blue, white clouds billowing outward in an obvious arc from the force of the man's godly slap.

(Holy- he split the sky?! Such power!!)

Saitama felt his eyebrows furrowing as the crowd around him chattered and shouted noisily. Did I really? Huh..... geez, everyone's so loud. Quiet down, people.

(I must- I NEED that strength!)

"WAIT!!"

The naked, bald man on the screen had turned to nonchalantly walk away, thoroughly unconcerned by his lack of clothing. At the cyborg's shout, he paused and turned his head back over one shoulder, staring neutrally while his butt was on full display for the crowd. "Hm?"

(I need him!!)

"My name is Genos! I am a lone cyborg for justice! Please, tell me your name!!"

"Huh?" The bald man stared in confusion at the rapid words thrown his way. "Uh...it's Saitama."

"Please, take me as your disciple!!"

"Oh...okay...?"

The man on the screen turned and took a step forward, then paused as though the words had finally hit his higher brain functions.

"Wait, what?"

Saitama's lips quirked up in amusement. He had been so confused then by the strange, intense guy that had barged into his life so insistently. What an interesting way to experience nostalgia.

But, sheesh...this crowd is so noisy. Why are they all talking so much? the hero pondered, turning to one side with the intention of asking one of the other heroes sitting next to him. He paused when he realized that the guy was staring at him, unblinking and open-mouthed. "Uhh...you okay, dude?"

Actually, now that he was facing away from the stage, he realized there were a lot of people staring at him. Feeling rather uncomfortable with so much attention suddenly fixed upon him, he instead turned back to the stage and slumped down in his seat. He glowered at the screen and tried to ignore the weight of thousands of eyes, a persistent itch at the nape of his neck. Ugh. This sucks.

The memories on the giant screen had still been progressing during his distraction, quickly sifting through he and Genos' various interactions in the early days of their...friendship? Student/teacher relationship? Roomies? All of the above, really.
He caught a few flashes of scenes he only just barely remembered (the two of them sitting in his old apartment, an outstretched metal hand exploding a tall building without warning, Saitama punching through a giant beetle with a horrified expression as he realized he'd been missing a massive sale day, them sitting side by side in front of his now-destroyed laptop while they browsed the Hero Association website, etc), along with various tiny snippets of dialogue ("Shorten this story to 20 words or less!" followed by "sorry, I'm not into dudes" and then a completely black screen as the words "you hung Genos up like modern art! Fight's on!" rang out in a muffled sort of way, as well as the fateful "Let's get registered! If you register with me, I'll make you my student!").

And then...

Ooh.

Saitama grinned slightly as a memory of their first spar appeared on the screen. Genos always looked so cool in battle; it was interesting just to watch him. His disciple had given everything he'd had, cursing his lack of speed as he tried to land a hit on the yellow-clad hero in front of him, constantly dodging and sliding out of the way before he could even get close. After several moments of cat and mouse, the scene paused on an empty crater in the cliffside.

(Have I been pursuing his afterimage this whole time?!) The screen filled with a cybernetic analytics program, rapidly calculating and analyzing the surrounding data as the cyborg's eyes swiftly searched the ground for his new teacher.

[Target: Lock on]

Saitama felt a smirk lifting one corner of his mouth as the teen finally located him on the screen with a triumphant "there!!" before bolting in front of his trajectory, arm cannons cocked and blazing an immense firestorm that covered the screen in hues of red and gold.

(I've got him this time! Now sensei will have to take me more seriously- what?!) The scene whirled to show an unharmed vision of Saitama, smiling playfully as he poked a gloved finger into one squishy cyborg cheek. "I win."

The bald man's face blurred as a mechanical arm shot out wildly in an uncoordinated strike filled with frustration and rage. Memory-Genos then proceeded to scold the other hero on the screen, who was staring neutrally with his arms crossed while being reminded of the rules for their first spar.

(Even Saitama-sensei cannot explain the secret to his incredible power.) Er. Yes I did, dude.

(This battle may give me some insight into it.) "Show me no mercy," the cyborg intoned lowly, cybernetically-enhanced vision glowing with an eerie golden hue, locked on to the unassuming man across the deserted ravine. Something changed minutely in the man's expression, a soft rustling as his red boots gently shifted-

"Those were the rules, sen-

-and then Saitama was suddenly right in front of the teen, expression sharp and dangerous in its seriousness. The blonde gasped softly in the memory, belatedly striking the shifting air, dispersing the afterimage of his teacher as he slowly turned around...
...and faced a crimson fist that shimmered and nearly glowed in the wake of its own raw power.

Saitama had never seen himself attack before.

It was kind of terrifying, to be honest. His eyes narrowed with killing intent, mouth turned down in a sharp frown, expression as alarmingly blank as his dead brown eyes, a gloved fist of pure death speeding toward the recipient...he grimaced. Geez...maybe I should've gone a little easier on the kid. I hope I didn't freak him out.

The fist on the screen halted abruptly, blowing a massive amount of displaced air past the cyborg's field of vision.

And then a gentle, friendly tap on his forehead, so horribly similar to the last touch the teen's mother had ever given him. Saitama felt something ugly and heavy squat down in his stomach.

"I'm starving! Time for lunch. Let's get some udon."

A long pause as the man on the screen goofily marched away, white cape billowing in the breeze, before the shell-shocked cyborg slowly replied, "...okay..."

(Unbelievable. I am fully prepared to do anything to get stronger....however...)

The cyborg slowly turned in the memory, field of vision expanding as his eyes widened at the sight of a massive crater in the ravine where there had previously been only rock and mountains. Even the sky above it was altered, clouds shoved to the side and exposing a swath of pure blue.

Oh, that really was me. Oops.

(...I cannot see myself ever approaching sensei's level of power. Not even close.)

The image swung around once more to focus upon the yellow-clad hero in the distance.

(He is on a different level.)

The bald man in the distance paused, turning to regard the stunned cyborg. "What's wrong? You don't like udon?"

"...n-no. Udon is fine."

(I want to follow this man...for the rest of my life.)

Saitama choked a little, struggling to maintain his normal unaffected expression. Geez, that was a little...excessive. He knew that Genos could be a bit overzealous, but that was really...

He pointedly ignored the snickering surrounding him in the A rank section as the other heroes snuck a peek at his bland expression.

(I will give this one shot...absolutely everything I have!!)

A colossal boom exploded from the screen, immediately regaining the attention of everyone in the room as fire shot up into the sky, colliding with a massive rock speeding toward the earth.

"It's no use! I can't destroy it!!" the cyborg lamented, frustration evident in every layer of his stuttering voice.
"No, but the meteor may be slowing..."

"Really?!"

The scene shifted to a quick glance of Bang, standing next to Genos while gazing up at their approaching doom with resigned eyes. "Nope, just my imagination."

"Damn you, old man!!"

(Will this place...be my grave?)

The firestorm ended, mechanical whirring and pulsing from the cyborg's core fading in a defeated hum as his power levels plummeted.

**Power levels approaching critical. Shutdown imminent.**

**Impact ETA: 9.998736 seconds**

"Only 9 seconds left......run, Mr. Bang..."

"Old man. Take care of Genos for me."

"Wha- who are you?!"

"Just a guy who's a hero. Evacuate, gramps."

The screen, which had been showing the tiled roof of the building they stood upon in the memory, slowly panned around to reveal a bald man in a yellow jumpsuit, crouching down with his head tilted. Light glinted off the top of his smooth head for a split second, and then the figure shot up into the air faster than a speeding bullet.

The cyborg gasped, eyes struggling to follow the path left by his rapidly ascending teacher. "Sensei??"

(Holy shit! He...he's really going to...?!)

Saitama's voice rang out faintly from the sky in an irritated roar. "You are not...gonna fall...on MY town!"

And the meteor *buckled* with the impact, utterly decimated in a single blow as shockwaves crackled through the rock like lightning.

"He shattered it?!!" Bang shouted, obviously awed. "Unbelievable!!"

(This man...this amazing, impossible man...!!)

*Geez...* Saitama slumped lower in his seat, feeling his cheeks beginning to ache with the effort of controlling his face. *Lay off, kid...I'm not all that great...*

The scene had already shifted once more, focusing on a scene of Saitama lounging on the floor of their old apartment, peering up at the cyborg in a blasé sort of confusion.

"The media always talks about threat levels like Demon and Tiger. Does that mean something?"

There was a brief moment of silence where the memory-cyborg stared at him in shock, allowing the audience time to laugh at the man's obliviousness.
"Yes. A hero would usually take that into consideration when deciding whether to go into action...but I guess you do not care about that."

"Of course not," the bald man on the screen pointed a finger directly at his audience, bland smile soft on neutral features. "Who's gonna fight if all the heroes run away?"

(....th- that's-!!)

The scenes began to speed by quickly, pausing for a brief moment on Saitama's back as he shouted at the mob: "I'm not a hero because I want your approval! I do it because I want to!!" followed swiftly by a close-up of his irritated face as Genos softly implored, "Let's go home, sensei..." and then another view of a white cape billowing in front of the cyborg as he stated firmly, "I have never met anyone as incredible as you, Saitama-sensei."

"What brought that on? You're creeping me out."

"Even if the public doesn't appreciate you...I will still follow you."

The Saitama on the screen stared blankly, then whirled around abruptly...but not before the barest hint of a smile curled his lips.

"You don't have to butter me up. Really."

Uggggghhh, thought Saitama, sliding down in his seat so only the top of his head and eyes were visible. Is this going to show our entire friendship? What the hell...

Had he really made that much of an impact on the teen's life?

His phone buzzed. He quickly peeked at the screen, thrilled with a distraction, only to find a text from Fubuki stating simply:

**Fubuki:** LOL you are such oblivious dorks.

Well, what the hell was that supposed to mean?

**Me:** shut up

Saitama glanced back at the screen in time to see the Deep Sea King annihilate and then mock his fallen disciple from the past, followed quickly by Mumen Rider arriving and trying to save him, only to be utterly wrecked in a single blow. And then there he was again, staring at Genos in- huh, I actually look pretty scared back then? I mean, I was kind of worried...

"H-Hey Genos! Are you alive?!

"S...sen- s- -sei..." was the slow, glitchy response.

The bald hero on the screen sighed, sagging in visible relief, before straightening and stating calmly. "Hang in there for a second..."

Lightning flashed behind him in the distance, casting his murderous expression in deep shadow.
"I'm gonna go kill this sea-freak."

The fishman then attempted to pummel him, proceeded to monologue when that failed, and then was beaten back with a single blow as usual. *Boooooooring.*

(Did- did sensei just punch away the rain?!)

_Woah, did I really? Huh. Cool._

The audience was back to murmuring noisily amongst themselves, steadily rising in pitch. He wasn't really sure what was up with them, really; it sounded like people were arguing over whether the memory they were watching now was true or if what they'd heard months ago was. He yawned. _Lame._

(Yes!!) the Genos from the memory exclaimed, clearly excited by the crowd from that time praising his teacher's efforts. (Now everyone will have to acknowledge sensei's power!)

Except that annoying little punk then started talking smack, dissing the heroes who had risked everything to save their ungrateful asses. Man, he was getting pissed again just from hearing that stupid guy one more time. As if beating a monster in a single blow was somehow better or more worthy of recognition than the poor guys who had nearly died trying to keep the ungrateful little shit from harm.

The Saitama on the screen, only the back of his bald head and his sodden cape visible to Genos' failing vision, started laughing. It was raucous and faltering, clearly forced to anyone with half a brain, and then he launched into his impromptu speech targeting himself as a lame thief who planned to steal the other heroes' credit. The Saitama in the present time sunk even lower in his seat with a groan, covering his face with one hand and peeking through his fingers in muted trepidation. _Great...this too?_

(Sensei...what are you doing?)

"Good thing I was late! I hardly did anything! But I beat it alone!"

(...no. Stop it. Don't- don't do this...)

"Hey, spread the word! Even if I just swooped in at the end, I finished it off! If you tell anyone I showed up last, I'll knock you one!"

(...why? Why are you doing this to yourself?)

"Tend to those other heroes," the Saitama on-screen sneered with an ugly, exaggeratedly triumphant smirk. "If they die, I can't use them anymore."

(...please. Please stop.)

"By comparison, the other heroes are truly heroic!" someone from the memory-crowd said earnestly. "If they hadn't weakened the monster, we'd be dead!"

(...no...why can't you all see?!)

"We should be deeply thankful to them!"

(Saitama-sensei...is this really alright?)

The cyborg's eyes focused upon the man standing nearby, once more turned away from the crowd.
Genos had apparently been at the perfect angle to see a small, gentle smile on the other hero's face as the crowd finally praised and appreciated the ones who had risked everything to save and protect them.

(If this is the path you choose to walk, I will not interfere.)

The cyborg shakily lifted his damaged torso off the ground, staring up at his teacher who suddenly realized with a simple pleasure: "Oh. The rain stopped."

(But if you turn the people against you, will you be able to function as a hero? This worries me.)

The cyborg's eyes lifted to the sky, focusing on the rainclouds that had been blown backward into the distance by the force of the other man's punch. (But if you are ever backed into a corner by this, sensei...I will be there-)

"Saitama-san."

Saitama jolted in his seat, looking up in surprise at the man standing by his chair. "Uh. Yo."

Mumen Rider stared at him for a moment, completely silent, and then his torso lurched forward into the most ridiculous full-bodied bow he could possibly manage while still remaining in a standing position.

"Umm- what are you doing?" the bald man inquired, trying to ignore the anxious churning of his stomach.

"Thank you!" Mumen exclaimed, much too loudly. The other heroes surrounding them gawked, staring openly at them with slack jaws and no shame whatsoever. "Thank you so much!"

"Uh. You're welcome?" he managed weakly in response. "Dude- get up. Stop that. You don't need to bow."

Mumen straightened, gave him a firm nod, and then abruptly marched away. Saitama watched him head back to the C rank section, thoroughly baffled. He pointedly ignored the sea of eyes that was still fucking staring at him.

"Ugh. That was weird."

As if in tandem with the future, the memory on the screen shifted to an extreme up-close and personal view of the floor of their old apartment.

"Sensei! Forgive me!!

"Dude. What the hell are you doing? Get up."

"I'm sorry! I am a failure as your disciple! I was unable to-"

"Genos. Get up."

The scene tilted as the kid finally looked up, warily eyeing the man across from him. The bald man glared at him with mild irritation, looking utterly bewildered. "Sensei. I will understand if you wish me to leave-"

"Dude. Seriously, what are you even talking about?"

"I was unable to defeat the Deep Sea King, which you naturally defeated with your incredible
power in one blow. But because of this, sensei had to destroy his reputation and now the public refuses to acknowledge your immense strength."

"Stop it."

The disciple clammed up immediately, eyes darting to the floor in shame. There was a moment of awkward, stilted silence, and then the other man heaved a weary sigh.

"Genos, listen up for a sec," Memory-Saitama stated flatly, voice low and nearly monotone. "Being strong...isn't really that great."

The cyborg slowly lifted his gaze and stared. "Sensei?"

The bald man in the memory regarded him with a lax expression, head framed by the open window behind him as the curtain lifted gently in the breeze. "Being able to defeat anything in a single blow isn't a measure of strength, Genos. The heroes that risked everything they had, that fought until their very last, the ones that almost died just to keep people from getting hurt - those are the strong ones. Those guys are real heroes."

"...s-sensei is so modest."

"It's not modesty, Genos." Memory-Saitama sighed again, his shoulders slumping under an invisible weight that no one else could bear. "Look...I don't feel anything anymore, okay? What I have isn't strength. When I punch a monster, I don't feel triumph or pride or anything; it's like swatting a bug. I do it without thinking, without feeling - no emotion goes into it."

(...no emotion? Is he...is he saying...)

Dead, lifeless eyes stared at the audience through the screen, unblinking and frighteningly dull in the soft lighting of their apartment. The man's expression was almost cruelly blank. "I don't feel anything anymore, Genos. That is the price of this 'strength' you want so much. Pain, pleasure, sadness, joy, fear, excitement - I don't really feel any of them anymore...I haven't for a long time. Years, maybe; I'm not really sure."

(...oh god.)

The empty brown eyes drifted slightly, peering at nothing but the formless air between them. "Sometimes I wonder if I'm even human anymore."

A strangled choking noise cracked through the silence, the edges of the screen filling with something dark and formless. The cyborg's breath hitched, a sort of electronic static spasmed his voice box, and the visage of past-Saitama's dead expression wavered.

"Dude, are you crying?"

Genos sobbed audibly in the memory. "S- Sen- I'm sorr- I-"

The flustered cyborg couldn't even force out more than two words as he bowed his head, field of vision narrowing in on drops of oil falling onto his own metal hands, which clenched and visibly shook.

(Oh god. Sensei is- How have I been so blind? How did I not see?)

"Geez, man. It's not that big a deal. Here, hold on, I'll get you a- is that-? Dude, you cry oil?!"
Ugggh. This is so weird. Saitama slid lower in his seat, partially blocking his own view of the screen thanks to the head of the hero sitting in front of him. He lifted a hand and raked it roughly over his face, feeling extremely uncomfortable with the entire world seeing this private moment from their past. Shit, now the whole world knew of his struggle with his numbed emotions. Not cool.

His phone buzzed insistently in his pocket. Before he could even twitch a hand toward it, it buzzed again. And then again, and again, and-

"Geez, alright already!" he grumbled under his breath, yanking the stupid thing out of one pocket and glaring at the screen. Holy- why so many?!

Several text messages appeared on the screen, quickly being replaced by new ones even as he tried to read the first ones he'd seen. As he thumbed open the messaging app, he caught the sounds of another deeply personal thought from the cyborg's memory and glanced up again, seeing a vague image of a coarse towel held in trembling metal fists, dark splotches of oil gradually soaking the material.

(I want to make him happy. I want to bring joy back to his life. This...this incredible, selfless man-)

There was another choked, electronically hitching sob as his teacher's distant voice chattered in the background reassuringly: "Don't worry about it, Genos, it's okay!"

(-who just gives and gives and gives until he has nothing left... I want to be there for him. I want to be the one he can turn to when life seems empty. Please...Saitama-sensei...let me bring back your happiness.)

...

Holy fuck.

That- that sounded almost...like...

The forgotten phone in his hand buzzed again, insistent and demanding his attention once more. Distracted, Saitama numbly opened up his messages and stared blankly at the words on the screen.

Fubuki: WTF

Mumen Rider: Saitama-san, I am so sorry to learn of your struggles. Please let me know if there is anything I can do for you!

Fubuki: Why the hell didn't you ever say something?

King: Let me know if u need to talk..

Fubuki: Hey!! You better not be ignoring me!

King: I know we just hang out but i consider u a friend. I want to help if i can.

Mumen Rider: I apologize if this is too forward of me, but I want you to know that you are not alone.
Fubuki: I will levitate your chair upside down if you don't reply in the next 20 seconds.

King: I like spending time with u

And finally, the most recent one:

Genos: I'm sorry.

Something churned noxiously in his gut, twisting and writhing so much he felt vaguely nauseous. Maybe those eggs he'd had at breakfast were going bad after all. He'd wondered about it this morning when he saw the expiration date, but had shrugged it off at the time and figured that cooking them would kill any possible bacteria. Maybe he should have paid more attention to-

His phone buzzed again in his slack hand.

Mumen Rider: You are human, Saitama-san.

Fuck.

His eyes hurt.

Quickly, he typed a short response to each of his acquaintances (friends..?). Because he just wasn't sure what the hell to say to Mumen and King, he sent a simple:

Me: thanks

And to the increasingly irate Fubuki, he typed a swift:

Me: calm down

To his disciple, well....

Me: its ok. not ur fault

He stared for a moment at the blank text field, then shifted up in his chair to catch a glimpse of the cyborg kneeling on the stage. Should he mention that really weird.......?

Nah. Best to leave that for tomorrow's Saitama.
Me: thanks tho

He rubbed the back of his neck for a moment, feeling inexplicably weary. He just wanted to go home and sleep for the rest of the day; maybe catch a rerun of some cheesy anime from his childhood while curled up in his warm futon. Maybe pretend this whole day was some weird, messed-up dream and get back to their usual routine. The weight of thousands of eyes staring at him was a constant presence, persistently crawling along the nape of his neck like tiny insects.

Someone texted him again (probably Fubuki) but he ignored the vibration of his phone, tiredly staring up at the large expanse of memories spanning above their heads instead. His eyes unfocused as the memories sped by, tiny moments of their days together in that little apartment; there was a brief image of himself telling Genos: "You can relax and be yourself, man. It's your home too!" shortly followed by the day they spent visiting a local festival, then some brief snippets of the ground-fight against the alien ship that Domino guy had been on, and then one scene that lingered on a dead-eyed Saitama as he stood listlessly outside the fallen ship, staring blankly at a green-haired midget, before visibly brightening when Genos called "sensei!!" across the field of rubble. The screen finally paused and solidified into focus once more in their tiny apartment, with the cyborg's gaze fixed upon a bundled lump in a futon.

(Sensei has seemed off since the alien attack...I wonder if there is anything I can do...?)

His cybernetic optics zoomed in to show a tiny glimpse of a smooth forehead and lazy eyes staring blindly out of the window. The man in the futon looked utterly defeated and lifeless, with no purpose or direction to speak of whatsoever.

"Sensei...?"

The futon was still.

(How do I reach him...?)

The scene tilted again, whirling across the hours of that day until, suddenly, a pillow shot at the screen. It landed with a soft 'whumph', hovered for a second, and then slid downward to reveal an annoyed-looking Saitama, still lounging in his futon. The Saitama in the memory then sat up, pin-striped pajamas wrinkled from prolonged use.

"Give it a rest, will ya?" the hero grumbled, rubbing one hand fiercely across his forehead.

"Did...did sensei just throw a pillow at me?"

Brown eyes darted upwards to stare neutrally at the cyborg, broken only by a sudden wide yawn.

"...yep."

(Am I finally getting through to him...?)

"Fight's on, sensei!"

Quick as a lightning strike, the cyborg threw himself to the floor, snatched up the pillow, and hurled it back at Saitama in an impressive arc. The man could have easily dodged, but instead stared in disbelief at his disciple and allowed the offending article to connect with his face.

The dead, blank expression in his eyes finally cleared, one end of his mouth curling into a fierce,
malicious smirk as he held up the poor lumpy pillow in one fist, climbing to his feet. His voice was low and dangerous as he taunted, "Bring it."

(YES!!)

Their battle was brutal. They limited themselves to the tiny apartment, doing their utmost to hamper their own strength to keep from breaking anything, but everything else was fair game.

Saitama felt some of his weariness recede, smiling involuntarily. That had been a really bad day, one of the worst since he'd gotten his power; he had struggled so hard with the grey world surrounding him then, unable to escape his own spiraling thoughts as they turned inwards and gnawed on his willpower to move, to go through another day, to exist. Genos had nagged him incessantly, refusing to give up or let him lay in the futon all day, and so he'd finally relented and sat up just to stop the unending attempts to rouse him; and, as per usual, the cyborg had brightened his life and shoved color back into the world around him. With a pillow fight, of all things.

He could hear the people surrounding him in the stadium laughing and giggling with their antics from the memory, and finally began to relax once more, allowing some of his tension to drain. This was fine. He could do this a little longer.

Oh geez, and these weren't even his own memories, were they? Saitama's eyes found their way back to the stage as he sat up a bit more, seeking out the kneeling form of his disciple. Genos's head had tilted back, watching the scene with a gentle, fond smile. Good. At least he's not freaked out anymore. Seeing that stuff with the cyborg must have been really hard-

"Prepare your grave, Genos!!"

He snorted at the words of his past self, gaze traveling upwards once more and watching as Genos skillfully ducked a (deliberately underpowered) swipe of the pillow by flattening himself backward, eyes fixed upon the ceiling with a tiny glimpse of Saitama's surprised and approving glance down at the teen.

"Not this time, sensei!"

Mechanical legs kicked upward, barely missing their target as the bald hero back-flipped and narrowly avoided careening into their TV. His smirk had expanded into a full-on leer, eyes narrowed dangerously as their silly duel continued, and then he took advantage of Genos scrambling to his feet by lunging forward when the cyborg was at his most unbalanced. The pillow smashed into Genos' face, and promptly exploded in a shower of buckwheat hulls and ragged strips of cotton fabric.

They both blinked, staring at each other in silent shock as white pieces of cloth fluttered in the air between them.

Saitama's face filled the screen, thoroughly blank once more. The corner of his lip trembled once, his nostrils flared slightly, and then his facade shattered entirely as he dissolved into helpless laughter. Brown eyes closed, overcome with mirth as he pointed a trembling finger at the cyborg's face and hair, which were covered with bits and pieces of their decimated, impromptu weapon.

"Y-Your face-!!" the bald man crowed, but was unable to continue as he doubled over from the force of his own laughter, clutching helplessly at his toned stomach.

(He's...laughing?) the cyborg's voice was hushed, filled with awe even in his own mind. It was clear from the shaken quality of his words that Genos was utterly overcome. (I've never seen him
The ever-present words at the top left of his cybernetic vision shifted immediately into a red [REC •] that blinked insistently in the corner as his gaze fixed upon the helplessly chortling man in front of him, devouring the sight with his unblinking eyes.

Saitama's eyes widened in disbelief. Geez, the kid had recorded that?

On the screen, the laughter finally died away into soft chuckles as his past self reached up to wipe at the corner of one eye. "Ahh~ that was hilarious."

Brown eyes lifted to stare at the cyborg with a tiny light shining earnestly in their depths, a spark of life that hadn't been there before. The amused grin on his lips smoothed into a fond, lopsided smile, utterly transforming his harsh and stern features into something soft, filled out with such kindness and affection that the Saitama of the present felt a distinct urge to hide. Had he really looked like that?

"Genos. I'm kinda bad at this, but..." the kind smile widened even further. "I'm glad you're here."

(Oh...wow...) the thought was faint, stunned. (He smiled.)

"Sensei..."

(....god...I love him so much. I want to see that smile every day.)

...

What.

A faint crack echoed distantly in his ears, like something made of metal and plastic snapping in
half. He almost didn't feel the shattered pieces of his phone crumbling into his lap as a numb sort of tingling spread throughout his limbs. The stadium was suddenly too quiet and too loud all at once, as if every set of lungs in the building were suddenly holding their breath; but at the same time there was a rushing in his ears, a tidal wave of sound that pulsed and throbbed; an ache that spread through the front of his chest, like the pressure of holding his breath too long back on the surface of the moon.

Everything hurt. The edges of his body suddenly seemed thin, too small to contain the fullness of the warmth spreading through his bones, warming a body that had felt eternally cold for decades. His sternum was throbbing, aching with the pressure of it, feeling like it might burst right out of his chest.

Huh. That must be his heart, right?

When was the last time he'd even heard his own heart beat?

Wait...

What was this feeling? This...this wild throbbing in his heart? This...rushing sensation that traveled through his veins like liquid fire, jolting life into long-deadened nerves?

He inhaled sharply through his mouth, air whistling and shuddering through his teeth. Fuck. Is this what happiness felt like? Was this joy? How did people live with this sensation every day? It was overwhelming, consuming, utterly painful in its intensity. He had never felt anything like it in his whole life, not since-

The screen had gone black and silent.

His eyes, finally regaining a sense of the colors surrounding them once more (and holy shit, had the world always been this bright?), blinked rapidly with the sudden light seeping in. Curiously, he felt a strange tickle traveling down one cheek. His heart thundering in his throat, suddenly loud and powerful after what felt like a lifetime of silence, he lifted one gloved hand to rub at the strange sensation. The fabric came away oddly wet, glistening in the light on his shaking fingers as he stared down at it in confusion.

Oh.

He was crying.
Sound began to return to him in increments as he stared at his glistening hand, loud cheering and
whistling echoing through the stadium and slowly drowning out the tidal wave of wordless noise in
his eardrums. His eyes slowly lifted from the red glove, tracing the grooves of his fingers, traveling
up the back of the chair in front of him, bypassing the faces that had turned to stare openly at him
as though this was a fucking soap opera, and finally careening up the side of the stage wall,
seeking out the cyborg there.

Genos was standing now, having apparently lurched out from under the esper's hand. He had
turned instinctively to face his teacher in the crowd, absolute terror reflected on his normally
passive face. As Saitama lifted his face to regard the other hero, the cyborg’s expression splintered;
first, confusion and shame seeped into the edges of his synthetic skin, and then a kind of hushed,
bewildered awe slowly took over, black and gold eyes widening in disbelief.

He didn’t know what to do. They were in a very public place, with the entire world bearing witness
to this incredibly personal moment of their lives, and Saitama’s head was blank. How was he
supposed to react to this? They were being filmed and live-streamed to the entire world, but his
chest ached and his lungs burned and his throat was sealed shut like someone had poured liquid
concrete inside; his heartbeat was resonating in every pore, and he just could not stop fucking crying.

If this was joy, he wasn't sure if he could handle much more of it. Everything ached.

It felt like pain. It felt like rebirth. It felt like the first rays of sunlight had dawned upon the beginnings of spring. It felt like his heart was going to explode right out of his chest and bleed obscenely all over the floor. It felt like one of his own punches had landed right in the middle of his stomach, leaving behind a crater that burned.

Genos...loved him?

Genos loved him?

No one loved him. That was a fact of life he had understood a long time ago - nearly two decades, in fact. There was the world and the people that lived in it, going about their everyday lives, and then there was Saitama, alone in an abandoned and forgotten city that even the monsters didn't want to live in. He had been alone long before he had moved away from society, had dwelt in the lonely silence and the grey void of apathy for endless years; and then Genos had crashed into his world like a flaming meteor, shoving color and sound and life back into the empty spaces inside him.

He had been lost from the very beginning.

"-aldy?"

A hand nudged his shoulder tentatively, almost reverently, jolting the bald man from his reverie and shattering his locked stare with the cyborg on the stage. He blinked and turned to face the hero beside him, feeling utterly bewildered and unable to string a single coherent thought together.

"It's...uh...you're up," the guy explained hesitantly, eyes skittering away from the twin streaks of wetness down the other hero's cheeks, clearly wishing he hadn't spoken at all. When Saitama stared at him blankly, he pointed a trembling finger up to the screen. Lost brown eyes followed the direction back to the giant screen above their heads, where a simple infographic informed them of the results for the audience's latest vote.

1. Caped Baldy - 99%
2. Mumen Rider - 1%
3. N/A

Fuck.

He stumbled to his feet, feeling suddenly weaker than his body had ever been, and slowly made his way toward the stage. His mind was utterly blank.

But his heart was full.

Maybe for the first time in his entire life.

Chapter End Notes

Pillow fight 110% inspired by this glorious collaboration on Tumblr.
No regrets.
Unleashed

Chapter Summary

Genos discovers a bit more than he bargained for in his sensei’s past.

Nothing could have prepared him for this.

No one could be prepared for this.

Chapter Notes

Noni (@balljointeyborg) has crafted some incredible art for this fic. You can click here to see everything she’s done.

(PS they are gorgeous I am in awe my tombstone shall read DEATH BY FANART)

Honestly I really just did not expect how much love and adoration you are all pouring out for this fic. I’m so humbled by you all. Thank you. ❤

For this chapter, you will need tissues. Lots and lots of tissues. And possibly ice cream. Or, y’know, a tombstone. (#sorrynotsorry)

Warning: if you are triggered by... basically anything at all, it is probably featured in this chapter. Trigger warnings listed in the notes at the end of the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Genos had always been aware of his many faults, for as long as he could remember.

He would worry them like a dog with a fresh bone, turning them over and over in idle thoughts until they became ingrained into his daily life, a constant reminder of his need to become stronger, faster, better than he had been before. One of the best things about becoming a cyborg was the constant capacity for improvement. Even if he felt as though he had reached a plateau from which he could not train himself beyond, technology was always advancing, striving, aiming for higher and higher goals. With every upgrade and switch of his mechanical parts, something was always inevitably improved; either his core processing unit would be faster and integrating more seamlessly with his organic brain, or his firepower would be that much hotter and more destructive, or his intricate structure would become more compact, able to achieve the same (or increased) results with less parts.

Despite this, Genos never felt as though he would ever be able to advance past his unfortunate penchant for being reckless; for jumping into situations without nearly enough thought or analysis.
Case in point:

Him, kneeling on an open stage, facing a giant screen that proclaimed to the entire fucking world how he was hopelessly in love with his teacher.

(...god...I love him so much. I want to see that smile every day.)

Oh god no, was the first thought that popped into his mind, traveling along firing synapses and sending a mild, phantom shiver through his synthetic spine. Oh no. No no no no no no-

The cyborg flinched away from the tiny hand on top of his head, flailing backward in an unusually clumsy movement of sheer panic. There wasn't a point to this, really; he knew the damage had already been done, had seen and heard the evidence with cybernetically enhanced senses, but this knowledge did not stop him from trying to escape the source of his exposed secret.

Why had he thought this was a great idea? He had been so focused on the glorious ideal of having his beloved teacher finally acknowledged by the world, he had never once stopped to consider that there were things he had been keeping purposefully hidden from the obtuse bald man he shared his life with on a daily basis.

But no amount of oblivious disinterest could possibly ignore this blatant confession, spelled out in pure HD quality on a screen the size of a monster, recorded and live-streamed and witnessed by countless throngs of people the entire world over. Even if some benevolent soul somewhere smiled down upon him and allowed for his teacher to be fast asleep during this awful catastrophe of a revelation, there was no way he wouldn't hear of it somehow from another source. Any one of the heroes in this room could mention it; reporters could accost them demanding interviews; innocent passersby on the street could drop it in an impromptu sentence.

This was it. He was finished.

Sensei was "not into dudes." This had been stated innocently enough during the first days of their strange friendship, but had been absorbed by his database for future playback in every excruciating syllable. His teacher would surely be unable to ignore this. Their camaraderie would be ruined. He would surely be kicked out of the man's apartment, carved out of his life as if he had never been-

Genos blinked and realized that he had been staring in horror at the black screen above his head for several moments, and closed his eyes to take a fortifying breath that shuddered on its way into his mechanical mouth.

This was the end.

He turned to face it head on, knowing that his abject terror was visible on every synthetic particle of his cheeks, evident in the widened black eyes and dilated golden pupils.

There would be no coming back from this.

Steeling himself with a pained swallow that his metal body did not actually need (an ingrained habit from his life as a human), he resignedly sought out the face of the bald hero he had fallen so hopelessly for. Would he be horrified, staring at the cyborg in betrayal? Disgust? Confusion? Or -god, this would be so much worse- what if he just stared blankly, unemotional and uncaring; as distant as a burning star in the night sky, completely and utterly unreachable?

At first, all he saw was the barest hint of a smooth head, surrounded by a sea of eyes that alternated between staring at his teacher or staring at the trembling cyborg alone on the wide stage. And then, ever so slowly, the head tilted upward, brown eyes traveling in an arc toward him at an
excruciating snail's pace that made his core whirl at a dizzying speed, trying to keep up with the rapid signals firing from his amygdala, struggling to regulate the intense level of fear shooting through synthetic nerves.

And, oh, it was so much worse than he had expected. He flinched in shame at the blank look on his teacher's face, wishing suddenly and strongly to send his core into overdrive and combust right on the spot. Just explode and leave a black scorch mark in the middle of the stage, escape those dark brown eyes that-

...shone?

Why were his eyes shining?

Momentarily distracted by his confusion, Genos activated his optical systems and zoomed in on that one face in the crowd, treasured above all others; despite the tiny voice clamoring in his brain and begging to just leave the stadium entirely, longing to escape back to their tiny, destroyed apartment in Z city, where he had always felt safe. As his enhanced zoom function narrowed in on the strangely glinting face of his teacher, Genos slowly felt his confusion morph into disbelief.

This...this wasn't possible.

Sensei is...crying?

Genos ignored the massive tidal wave of noise that continued assaulting his mechanical eardrums, eyes transfixed upon the incredible, impossible sight before him. Saitama was staring at him as though he'd never really seen him before, features immobile and expressionless...save for the translucent liquid trailing in silent rivers down each cheekbone. The dull, lazy eyes he had grown so used to seeing over their months together had shifted ever so slightly, gazing at him in a kind of lost, vulnerable sort of wonder.

The bald hero was a man whom he adored and respected above all others, even Doctor Kuseno who had loved him like a son and always treated him with gentle kindness. No matter what happened, his teacher was unflappable, a godlike statue unmoved by the chaos of the world around them no matter how dire the circumstance; an impenetrable fortress of raw power and limitless strength. Not even Garou, a man whom had descended into the depths of a monstrous existence the Hero Association had never before conceived of (and was woefully unprepared for), had been able to even mildly scratch the caped hero. He was untouchable, removed from this world; so ascended that even his human emotions had lost the will to fight against that law-defying, all-encompassing power.

And yet...here they were. Staring at each other across a crowded stadium that was entirely too loud, silent rocks in a maelstrom of cheering and raucous whistles, detached from the chaos in their own bubble of connection, his state-of-the-art database glitching under the strain of its own failing calculations - watching in utter disbelief as the strongest man in the universe wept.

One of the A-class heroes sitting beside Saitama reached out to gently touch him, startling the man and breaking their intense stare. Genos realized suddenly that Amai Mask was hissing "get off the stage, you fool!" at him in an undertone that the microphones wouldn't pick up, and wondered idly how long the other hero had been trying to get his attention. With stiff movements, the cyborg prompted a response out of heavy limbs that didn't seem to want to function in tandem with his neural commands. He forcefully lifted one metal foot, and then the other, gradually and slowly clomping across the surface of the stage in a very audible way. All the while, he kept one part of his optic view trained upon Saitama in concern, watching as the man stumbled to his feet in an uncommonly faltering way, swaying on the spot before squeezing through the throng of chairs to
the open aisle where he could make his way up to the stage.

They met on the stairs, eyes fixed upon each other as if they were the only two people in the room.

Genos swallowed once more, feeling a phantom sensation of sweat gather on palms that could not produce any. His teacher just stood there in the middle of the path, looking impossibly small and frail on the step below him. The man was slouched more than usual, looking oddly as though he were curling in on himself; was he in pain? He seemed to be favoring his chest for some reason, hands moving toward it and then falling again in an aborted movement; his brown eyes alternated between staring up at Genos' face or the new synthetic skin affixed to his neck.

He was probably going to regret this.

But-

"Sensei...?" he slowly lifted one hand, gently approaching the man with careful movements as though coaxing a wild animal out of a corner. "You...you're crying."

"Yeah." Saitama stared up at him with lost eyes, silent for a long moment. "I know."

Tentatively, the cyborg slowly laid the sensitive pads of his fingers on one pale cheekbone; when the hand wasn't immediately severed from the elbow down, he gently used his thumb to wipe the wetness from under those deep brown eyes. The man's eyelids fluttered shut, coating the top of his lashes in a soft layer of tears that glistened in the light like diamonds when his eyes opened once more.

*Beautiful*, he thought.

He had never seen Saitama look so utterly dismantled. He seemed so...vulnerable, somehow, as though a wayward breeze might be enough to send him tipping over a nameless edge. Genos
immediately activated his analytics program, monitoring the other man's vitals. His pulse, normally so constant and unchanging even in the face of the most terrifying monsters, was higher and more erratic than the cyborg had ever before observed; he could even see it without his scanners, thrumming noticeably in the crook of his neck between the collarbones, beating against the confines of his skin like a frightened hummingbird.

The throngs of people surrounding them were quiet now, hushed and watching openly. Genos could see thousands of eyes trained upon them in every direction, heroes and citizens alike craning their necks to get a better view.

They could all go fuck themselves, he decided. And fuck the cameras too.

There were about 361 questions he could ask in this moment, everything from 'why are you crying' to 'are you in pain' and 'did I hurt you' or 'are you disgusted with me' or maybe even 'why won't you say something!' but he eventually settled for a simple, "Are you okay?"

Saitama blinked slowly, dazed. "...I don't know."

He paused for a moment, absorbing this new information and running several different responses through his internal processor, trying to determine the best possible reply to this non-answer; when suddenly a new voice shouted in the distance: "Just get ON with it alrea-"

Behind Saitama's shoulder, Genos caught a glimpse of Fubuki making a sharp gesture with one wrist, and there was an abrupt clattering noise as the offender's chair uprooted and deposited them on the floor with a muffled curse. Muffled snickers rippled through the crowd like a wave, quickly shushed back into silence as the audience held its breath, waiting to see what the two heroes would do.

"But..." Saitama continued as though he hadn't heard a single thing, his tone and face expressionless. "I want to talk with you, when this is over."

Ah. Well, that sounded ominous.

Genos tried not to think of the worst possible scenarios that phrase could mean, even though his HUD promptly supplied him with an unfortunate amount of possibilities with equally horrible outcomes, and reluctantly lowered his hand from the other man's face. "...yes, sensei."

His eyes lowering to the floor, Genos veered slightly around the other hero and made to brush by him, hating every step. A light pressure made him pause, registering the faint touch on the back of his fingers in surprise.

"Thank you."

The whisper was soft, but so fervent and earnest that oil gathered at the corner of his optics. His beloved hero's voice wavered at the end of the last syllable, cracking under sudden emotional strain and hitching sharply on the last note. The sound made Genos smile reflexively, even as he blinked back dark, viscous tears.

God only knows what kind of ridiculously infatuated expression he just made in full view of the cameras.

Saitama was already moving on, softly padding up the stairs with footsteps as light as a cat. Genos inhaled deeply, hoping the extra oxygen would send calming signals up his synapses toward his frantic brain, and turned toward his chair while forcing his facial features to rearrange themselves into something far calmer than he felt. He sat down with a solemn nod to King and faced his head...
in the direction of the stage once more, just in time to see his teacher pause to regard the timid waif of a woman standing alone in the middle. The bald man stared at her for a moment as though he weren't sure what to do, then abruptly turned to affix his gaze upon Amai Mask while pointing a lazy finger at the esper girl.

"Psychic power doesn't usually work on me," he announced bluntly, seemingly uncaring of the drying wetness on his cheeks. His voice carried easily in the silent building despite the lack of any microphone. "You're not gonna take it out on her if she can't get my memories, are you?"

Amai Mask floundered for a brief moment, visibly unsettled, then smiled that same charming (fake) smile he was so popular for. "Of course not, why would I?"

Saitama stared at him without another word, extending the moment longer than was strictly polite, and then strode over to the esper. Genos watched his chest extend and then sag with a sharp sigh. Thanks to his powerful hearing, he was able to catch the softly muttered: "Do you have to touch my head?"

The woman visibly panicked, her mouth opening and closing like a fish as she flushed nervously. "Ah- I- that- well-"

Closing his eyes in resignation, the bald man plopped down on the ground in his usual slouched, cross-legged position. "Whatever. Get it over with."

The woman hesitated for a long moment, and then extended a trembling hand to lightly rest on the man's smooth cranium. There was a long and tense silence, in which the audience collectively held its breath and leaned forward in hushed anticipation, waiting for the screen to light up with memories.

Instead, the esper wilted after a few minutes, panting heavily as she turned to peer at Amai Mask in visible fear. "I...it's not..."

The blue-haired man's face twitched slightly, the soft grinding of his jaw visible only to those heroes closest to the stage. Before he could turn to address the audience, Tatsumaki suddenly vaulted above her chair and floated across to the other esper.

"Honestly, how incompetent are you? Hmph!" The green-haired menace lifted her nose in the air. "I guess it can't be helped; I'll lend you some of my power. Be grateful!"

The timid esper flinched visibly, shying away from the antagonistic hero; the aptly-named Tornado made a scoffing noise and reached out to touch the other woman's shoulder without warning. The sheer depth of energy poured into the woman then was so strong that Genos felt several of his screws rattle in their joints. An unearthly green light surrounded the two women, concentrated so strongly on the hand placed upon the hero's bald head that it was almost too bright to look at. The united espers shoved all they had at the seated man, and the cyborg watched in concern as Saitama twitched minutely upon impact.

Yet still, the screen remained utterly blank.

Genos tried to ignore the disappointment curdling within him. Even though he wasn't fond of his teacher being essentially mind-raped, he had desperately wanted to gain a glimpse into the thoughts of such an unfathomable, impossible man. There was even a minuscule chance that he would be able to discern the exact method his teacher had unknowingly used to gain his unlimited power, but...well, that hope died a swift death as the two espers sagged in unison on the stage. Tatsumaki's cheeks flushed in mixed anger and shame as the audience began to grumble
discontentedly, just as disappointed with the loss of their chance to truly see the world's strongest hero, hitherto unknown to the masses.

There was a soft chuckle picked up by his enhanced hearing, and then an elegantly dressed woman strode boldly up to the stage, walking with a confident stride as though she owned the stadium. Confused, Genos squinted at Fubuki's willowy form as she marched right up to Saitama and kneeled down in front of him; he noted with amusement that Amai Mask was trembling slightly in rage as his presence was ignored by every superhero gathering on the platform.

The black-haired esper smiled softly, almost tenderly, at Saitama. "You're a mess, y'know that?"

The heroes near Genos leaned forward, straining to hear the whispered conversation that normal human ears would be unable to detect at this distance. He had never been more thankful to be a cyborg than at this exact moment.

Saitama hummed questioningly, tilting his head to the side in puzzlement. Fubuki rolled her eyes at him, then gently used a pristine handkerchief to dry his eyes and cheeks with quick, deft movements, tilting his unresisting head in such a way as to hide her actions from the majority of the crowd.

"What are you doing?" Tatsumaki hissed at her younger sibling, furious that she was being ignored as well.

Fubuki continued to have eyes only for Saitama. "Hey. You wanna be in S class with Genos, right?"

The bald hero gazed at her silently, but she must have seen something in his eyes that was answer enough, for she continued: "If you want to stay at your current rank, you need to do this. Even though it's hard. Even though it sucks."

Saitama shrugged. "I can't force psychic power to work on me."

Fubuki's smile widened into a smirk, her painted lips curling with amusement. "No, but psychic power only works because of strong willpower overcoming another's. And you have the strongest will I've ever seen."

She leaned forward slightly, gazing at him with eyes of steel. "...you need to let go, Saitama. You need to want this."

For a long moment, there was just silence. Only faintly muttered conversations of discontent from the audience broke the quiet hush that had choked the stadium since the end of Genos' memories, while the majority of the remaining people stared in rapt attention at the heroes gathered on the stage.

And then, Saitama bowed his head and let out a long breath. His shoulders slumped, his eyes closed, and Genos' cybernetic analysis informed him promptly that the man's heart rate finally began to slow. He saw Lady Kasumi jolt suddenly as though an electric shock had gone through her slim frame, and then she hastily raised one hand while regaining a firmer grip on the bald head clasped in her other.

The screen finally lit up.

Gasps rippled across the crowd, all eyes careening upward to stare in mingled anticipation; Genos among them, just as eager to witness the life of the most amazing man he had ever known. On the stage, Tatsumaki harrumphed once more and drifted back to her seat, muttering grumpily under her
breath. Fubuki remained crouched in front of Saitama, with three fingertips gently resting on one knee, a persistent reminder to let go of whatever strong mental barriers his teacher had somehow managed to construct.

On the screen, a blurry image appeared of a beautiful woman with ebony hair cascading down in sleek waves across her shoulders. The woman smiled prettily, warm brown eyes crinkling at the corners with faint laugh lines.

"Ahhh, my dear Tama-chan," her voice was soft and kind, a gentle melody that wavered only slightly as Saitama struggled to keep himself open to the mental invasion. "How was school today?"

"Mom!" A boyish, impatient voice protested. Genos smiled widely at the sound; how young was his sensei in this memory? Six, perhaps? Seven? "That's not my name!"

"No?" The woman's voice lilted in pretend confusion, her lips quirking up in a sly grin as she tapped her bottom lip. "Are you sure? I could have sworn you were my Tamago-chan."

"I'm not an egg! Why d'you always call me that?"

She giggled sweetly, covering her mouth slightly with the back of one hand. "Why, your head was so smooth and so perfectly round when you were born. Without even the slightest bit of hair - I couldn't help but think of a tiny egg!"

The young Saitama groaned loudly, the screen's viewpoint tilting up towards the wooden ceiling as the boy rolled his eyes. "Mooooooom~! Enough already!"

The mother chuckled once more, an action mirrored by some of the women present in this future audience. Genos heard more than one person cooing with soft affection at the sweet, peaceful scene, and felt his smile widen. This must have been before his teacher began to lose all grasp of his emotions. What a wonderful memory.

"Well, alright then. Tell me, how was school?"

"It's fine." The boy paused for a moment, considering; his mother waited patiently with a knowing smile. "But...I don't like the other kids. They think I'm weird."

"And why is that?"

The scene darted downward to focus on tiny hands that fiddled with the blue strap of a school bag. "I dunno. The other boys're always saying how cute the girls are. I don't get it."

The smile on the mother's face was audible even though they couldn't see her expression. "Is that because you think the other boys are cute?"

"No." The response was immediate, colored with slight confusion. "I don't get that at all. People are just people. Who cares what they look like? A girl can be pretty but really mean. And a boy can be kinda funny-lookin' but super nice."

Genos sucked in a sharp breath. This was unexpected. Even at such a young age, his teacher had been so unintentionally wise; dropping wisdom in casual sentences like trees discarding their leaves in the fall.

"Ah, that's very true." His mother hummed. "Maybe someday you'll find just the right one, and then you'll feel differently."
The boy snorted softly, then peered up at his mother in a thoughtful silence. "But, how would I know if I've found them?"

A beautiful, lopsided (familiar, realized Genos) smile lit up her soft features. "Well, it's hard to say. It can be different for everyone. Some people fall deeply in love from the moment they meet, but for others it is a slow, gradual thing; a feeling that grows over time in bits and pieces, like those flowers we planted over by the willow last spring."

The child considered this for some time, then he confided seriously: "I like flowers. They're very pretty."

The laughter this comment sparked echoed both from the screen and from the surrounding people in the stadium, a gentle amusement from the bold, blunt statements of a child.

"But...how will I know?"

The boy's mother sighed a little, visibly struggling to find a way to thoroughly explain to the child's satisfaction. "Well..." she began slowly. "I suppose it's when you find someone that you feel you cannot live without. Someone who makes every day better just because they're there, just because you want to be with them and they want to be with you; someone you can trust, where you can tell them everything about you without being afraid, and they can do the same with you; someone you just want to be around, no matter what, even if you're just sitting in silence. And-"

Genos grinned a little self-consciously at these words and snuck a glance at his teacher on the stage. Saitama appeared more relaxed and at ease with the situation at last; the image and audio from the screen was coming through clearly now without even a hint of struggle. Fubuki's mouth was moving in gentle murmurs, softly reminding the hero to breathe deeply, relax, let the memories flow, don't listen, focus inward on letting himself go, and so on. An ugly, creeping bitterness stalked through wires and synthetic muscles as he watched; struggling to ignore the sting of jealousy, the cyborg turned his gaze back to his teacher's memories and tried to focus upon them instead. Saitama's mother had stopped explaining by now and seemed to be quietly making some tea across their little kitchen; the young boy was sitting at their dining table, watching silently in that same thoughtful way he retained even now.

"How did it happen with you and father?" the boy asked suddenly, innocent curiosity coloring his tone.

The woman froze; she looked up to smile at her son, but her eyes filled with an uneasy sorrow. There was no answer before the screen went dark once again.

Several flashes of memory swirled by immediately following this, tiny snippets of the child's life; Genos caught a fleeting scene of the young Saitama watching a children's anime on a small TV, thinking innocently: (I want to be a hero too!), followed by a few snatches of gentle laughter and peaceful times spent with his mother. The scenes were beautiful, filled with warmth and kindness no matter how dreary the weather outside was...but Genos couldn't help but feel a strange sense of foreboding as he watched. He had never heard his teacher talk about his family. There were no phone calls, no letters, no holiday plans; before Genos had forced his way into that tiny apartment in the abandoned sector of Z city, the man had lived alone and never had any visitors or gone on any trips.

Which prompted him to wonder...exactly what had happened to this beautiful, kind woman? Where was the father and why did none of these memories include him? Why had the boy's mother looked so strange when asked about her relationship?
It seemed as though he might receive his answer sooner than expected, as the scene changed once more and then lingered. The boy and his mother seemed to be folding clothes together on an open patio, gardening tools stacked temporarily against the side of the table they were working upon. The scene wavered strangely, blinking forward in time with a muffled sort of glitching sound, as though the boy had daydreamed the time away and only just now came back to himself, blinking in surprise at the finished pile of folded clothes on top of the table. The scene shifted to the side, focusing on the empty chair beside him.

(Hmm?)

The view tilted, narrowing in on the clouds above as they drifted slowly by. (...ah, I must have spaced out again...........it's so nice today.)

Genos smiled briefly, amused by the distracted quality of Saitama's thoughts. His teacher was truly different from other people, viewing the world around him with a gentle, quiet lilt to his inner voice that separated him from the bustle and chaos that ruled most lives. Where others would fill empty spaces with noise, Saitama instead faded into the quiet, absorbing it like a sponge and embracing silence like a dear friend.

(I should get these inside.) This thought came as the boy peered back down at the folded clothes on their patio table. In the distance, a woman's voice shouted intelligibly. (...I wonder what mom will make for dinner tonight...)

Thin arms reached out to grab the clothes, bundling them up carefully in a neat stack, and then the scene turned toward the house. Suddenly a man's voice joined the muffled shouting, and then a muted cry of pain rang out in the distance.

(Oh no.) The boy's voice sounded suddenly urgent, strained with worry. (Father must be home.)

Abandoning the pile of clothing carelessly onto the ground, the image on the screen bounced up and down as the child dashed toward the open door. Muffled cries and shouts echoed through the walls, clearly a domestic dispute even though the words were intelligible, becoming clearer with every hurried step the boy took. The young Saitama rounded a corner into the entryway of their small home just as a loud cracking sound split the shouting, skidding to a halt and gasping quietly at the sight before him. A man towered over the boy's mother who was curled up on the floor, one hand shakily grasping her cheek; clasped in the man's left hand was a briefcase that bulged with too many papers for it to properly close. The man appeared ill somehow, with wild eyes and gaunt cheeks that twitched as he panted heavily above the woman, his stance tilting to one side.

Genos closed his eyes for a moment in resignation, the core in his chest aching with phantom pain where his heart had once been. Not all families were as kind and special as his own had been.

But he had hoped...

"Father!" Saitama shouted, voice colored in shock. "What's going on?!"

The boy's mother whipped around in shock. "Tama-chan, go back outside!"

"No!" he shrieked, voice cracking. "I won't let him hurt you again!"

The boy's father twitched in a full-bodied shudder, his eyes glazing over in an almost feral way. "You-!"

He advanced forward, surging across the distance suddenly and without warning. "It's your fault!"
"Wh- wha...?" The boy stammered, edging backward away from the man.

"You're a mistake!! If it wasn't for you, I would still have-"

The image wavered with interference as a loud crunching noise ripped through the stunned silence of the audience. Genos' eyes widened and dropped immediately to the stage, watching as his teacher struggled to remain open to the psychic power coursing through his mind. His hands had clenched around the floorboards beneath him, wildly seeking some kind of anchor, his shoulders hunched up as his shaking fingers gouged furrows into the thick wood beneath him, as easily as a butcher knife hurled through a spiderweb. Fubuki lurched forward, clapping her hands around the bald man's ears and demanding his focus once more, blocking out the sound emanating from above them. Her eyes were wide, filled with sorrow as though she could somehow sense exactly where this memory would lead. Genos supposed that she too had reached the same conclusion as him - that the depression and apathy their friend struggled against had not come as a direct result of his powers, but rather had its roots in an earlier part of the man's life and he had simply ignored it, distantly oblivious as always.

The images on the screen marginally solidified, the memory having jolted forward once more. The irate father seemed to be bulging oddly now, his skin flushed red and surging from within as though a hot balloon had filled with too much air. The sight was unnerving, but far more disturbing was the placement of the man's arms and hands toward the bottom of the screen, harsh choking and gasping noises emanating from the boy's throat as the edges of his vision dimmed and wavered. Genos clenched shaking metal fists around his knees, ignoring the way his arms hummed with building fire or the way King was subtly leaning away from the heat.

If this man was still alive somehow, Genos would hunt him down.

A wild, high-pitched cry rang out, before something long and blunt collided with the man's face. Feminine hands darted forward to roughly yank the boy to his feet, and together the mother and child fled the house to their backyard while the strangely affected man flailed on the floor, the image bouncing as young Saitama stumbled while gasping air into his assaulted throat. This disturbing scene was so departed from what Genos had expected from his teacher's memories, he wasn't sure what to do; part of him wanted to shove his way back up to the stage and throw the esper's hand off, forcibly preventing anyone else from seeing this terrifying memory, and the other half of him wanted to simply gawk in horrified fascination. Beside him, King's pulse had shot through the roof, a loud and intense rumbling that was making other heroes and citizens glance toward him in alarm, but his eyes seemed to be locked on the image above their heads and was therefore oblivious to their stares.

From the screen erupted a gargled scream of pain and rage, and the field of view whipped around quickly enough to see the house explode from within, hurling the boy and his mother to their knees from the force. A misshapen lump crawled out of the rubble within moments, shambling toward them like- like a-

Monster?! Genos wondered incredulously, gasping aloud in shock. His HUD performed several quick calculations but continued to arrive at the same impossible conclusion. The first recorded and publicized monster attacks should have happened after his teacher was 10 years old; it was rumored through the internet and previous records that monsters had occurred before that day, but they had been so rare the public had mistaken them for hoaxes. But here his teacher was...maybe eight? Nine? And thrown right into the middle of a monster evolution during a time when there were no heroes or public forces mobilized to deal with such a thing. How had he even survived?!

The monster on the screen bore little resemblance to the boy's father, having erupted into a larger
body with red skin that bulged in odd places like giant pustules. His eyes were misshapen and narrowed, giant black orbs with no pupils or sclera, glowing with an insane feral light. The creature laughed and roared in the same breath, lurching forward and garnering screams from both the boy, the mother, and several members of the audience. The monster was clearly aiming at Saitama, but the boy's mother leapt forward and pushed him out of the way, aiming a garden hoe (of all things?!) at the creature threatening her child. Genos wondered briefly where she could have possibly procured such a ridiculous weapon, then remembered the tools that had been leaning against their small patio table from the beginning of the memory. The scene spun as the young Saitama rolled away due to the force of his mother's push, but then tiny hands scrabbled into view, pushing up and turning to see-

The audience gasped in horror, echoing the sharp intake of breath from the screen.

(Mo- ...no...!)

Genos ground his synthetic teeth together, struggling to maintain composure and not allow the oil gathering in his eyes to fall. The woman had successfully driven her makeshift weapon into the monster's face, but had in turn received a large claw directly through the lower half of her torso. There was no way she would survive such a blow more than a few minutes. Her fate was inevitable.

"MOM!!"

The scream was almost primal, cracking and splintering in the wake of raw grief. Stumbling forward, the boy rushed to his mother's side as blood gurgled out of her mouth, eyes glazed in pain as she slumped bonelessly over the claw lodged inside her. Her eyelids fluttered weakly, the hands clapping her weapon sliding limply away as her son continued screaming. The monster flailed slightly, attempting to move as it took its last struggling breaths around the tool lodged inside its head.

Overcome with terror and fury, the Saitama of the past lurched toward the overturned table near his fallen parents, wildly grabbing hold of the nearest object his tiny hands could hold - a small garden shovel. With a wavering, high-pitched roar, his tiny hands brought the metal down in an arc and drove it into the monster's face; once, twice, a third, fourth, fifth, unnaturally colored liquid spurting everywhere-

_Holy shit._

Never- never at any time had the cyborg imagined his teacher's past to contain such horror and tragedy. He always seemed so nonchalant, so at ease with himself and his place in the world; aside from occasional days of apathy or solemn reflection, Saitama was almost always calm and pleasant. He watched TV, read manga, enjoyed making stupid jokes and lame puns, would casually drop nuggets of wisdom and noble strength; never once had he guessed that blasé demeanor to conceal such grief. Or had the long years covered the wound and helped him to move on, scabbing over and healing in slow increments?

Or...could this be the herald of his teacher's impending struggle? The catalyst to those days where he stared blindly into thin air, his brown eyes glazing over with a dead fog?

On the screen, small hands shook on the handle of the shovel, slipping and faltering on the blood coating it like an obscene layer of paint. Shuddering sobs and gasps punctured the eerie silence, and those horribly, horribly tiny hands finally pulled away from the mangled face of the monster that had once been his father. Those violently shaking hands then tilted ever so slightly, the boy focusing on palms liberally doused in blood and gasping in a way that would surely turn into
hyperventilation within moments.

Genos lost the battle against the oil welling in his eyes, and gave up entirely; cyborg tears coursed hotly down his face, flowing openly and forever staining his pants. His ears told him that he was not alone, hitching breaths and quiet sobs echoing through the audience at his back.
The hands on the screen dropped abruptly, and memory-Saitama turned finally to see his mother. Her body was an absolute wreck, a macabre parody of what a human body should look like. There was no doubt that her spine was severed, nearly every organ below her heart obliterated in a single
"M-...mo-..." Saitama's cracking voice couldn't even finish the word, so he stumbled forward bonelessly to clutch at his mother's broken form. She gasped weakly at the surge of pain, eyes fluttering open to glance blearily in his general direction.

"Ah...Ta...ma...my baby..." her voice splintered around the words, the light in her eyes already fading. "...so sorry...sorry...I-"

"N- stop...don't-" Saitama couldn't even speak, tears welling in his eyes and blurring the pained grimace on his mother's face. "Please...!"

"I love you..." she murmured kindly, eyelids drooping as her voice slurred. "Be...happy...my....little....."

The woman's head lolled forward, features slackening as her pain eased at last.

"No," Saitama hiccuped weakly. He reached out with one tiny hand to caress her beautiful hair, touching lightly as though she might shatter under his fingertips. "No...you can't..."

The hand began to tremble violently once more. "You can't leave me....don't...don't go!"

She remained unresponsive. Her relaxed features were beautiful even now, contrasting disturbingly with the blood marring her mouth and dribbling down her chin.

"Please...?" The child's voice fractured shrilly. "You...you can call me egg all you want! I won't even complain!"

Sirens echoed in the distance.

"Please- please don't go..."

Quick, hitching breaths rang out from the screen, sharp and utterly horrifying in every way. And then the child made a terrible, heart-wrenching whimper of pain; his voice broke and shattered like the heart that Genos no longer possessed in his chest, but his core ached anyway in his metal frame, scalding like searing fire as oily tears burned down fake cheekbones and-

The broken, keening noise of an animal in pain fractured and then evolved into a primal wail of raw grief that shrieked through the stunned horror of the gathered citizens and heroes, going on and on on and on-

Abruptly silenced, the screen went black once more.

Genos gasped shuddering breaths of air into synthetic lungs, his optical implants screaming warnings at him for the heightened levels of distress transmitting from his brain. He ignored them, seeking out the crouched form of his beloved master on the stage and staring in disbelief, utterly overcome. He fervently thanked every deity that their culture had ever dreamed up for the existence of Fubuki, that golden woman who was blocking Saitama's view of the screen whilst simultaneously clamping his ears so tightly that no sound could possibly leak through. Her eyes were wide and unseeing, filled with large tears that spilled across her frozen face in glimmering paths across both cheeks. The cyborg had no doubts that most members of the audience probably looked the same at this exact moment.

Genos had never wanted to explode the screen above their heads more than he did right now. He wanted to go back in time, destroy the stadium before it could be set up for this hellspawn of an
idea, kidnap the poor esper forced to use her powers in such an invasive way and hide her where Amai Mask could never find her again, dismantle the cameras before they could record even a single millisecond of this memory that should have never seen the light of day. His stomach was fake, an empty chamber where food was incinerated into biofuel, but it seethed and writhed as if alive once more, filling him with a sense of intense nausea that was more mental than anything physical.

He wanted to weep. He wanted to throw up. He wanted to wake up from this horrible nightmare, because it couldn't possibly be reality. He wanted- yearned to go back to the stage, throw his arms around the man sitting there; hold him so tightly that every memory of that day was erased as if it had never been; never let him go, fill his life with all the love and joy that ended with that one terrible claw.

"Dear God..." choked King from beside him. Genos flinched in surprise, having forgotten the man was sitting next to him. He glanced to the side and stared at the tears staining the normally-stoic man's cheeks.

The screen lit up once more, slow and sluggish as if the esper's powers were somehow weakened. He peered at her sharply and realized she was barely holding on to her composure, struggling to keep her trembling hand steady on the smooth cranium in front of her. Kasumi had curled towards Saitama, as if she were only just barely holding herself back from hugging the bald man. Above their heads, the sounds of a bustling police station rang out and shattered the somber quiet of the stadium. The image solidified on small hands resting limply in a child's lap. Hushed conversations bounced around, policeman discussing the events from the previous memory in horrified murmurs.

"Poor woman-"

"Did you see that thing? What the hell-"

"Freak accident? Mutation?"

"-not trained for this shit, man!"

"Has the Chief reached the-"

(Shut up.)

The small, dead voice was startling after listening to the way Saitama's inner thoughts had previously been - content, peaceful, distracted. There was a dull, lifeless quality to his thoughts now, shrouding them in misery. The boy was apparently concentrating on ignoring the voices surrounding him, because the edges of his vision dulled into a grey void, drowning out color and audio so the voices seemed to be underwater; only garbled sound and formless murmurs remained.

It was kind of disturbing, if Genos were honest with himself. So much of his life for the past 4, nearly 5 years had been filled with an overabundance of information; cybernetic systems presenting him with all kinds of data and statistics from multiple sources at once. Most human brains couldn't handle such an extreme amount of information on a constant basis, but the cyborg preferred it now. To be so thoroughly cut off from visual and auditory senses would be a kind of mental death for him, a useless brain hanging inside a closed metal shell.

"-awa?..............-kawa Makoto-san?"

The grey edges seeped away from the screen, color and sound slowly crawling back into their usual place. Eyelids closed in a slow, dazed blink, and then the field of vision panned upwards to
stare at a young man dressed in a business suit. He held up a badge for a brief moment, the shape of it blurry as though Saitama (Makoto?) hadn't focused enough back then to remember what it looked like, and then the man forced a small smile onto his face as his hand dropped out of sight.

"Hi. My name is-" and here the audio glitched again, likely due to his teacher never paying attention to people's names for long enough to remember them past their first few meetings. "I'm from a special division of the government dedicated to tracking incidents like this, where people turn into...well, something else. At the moment we're just referring to them as monsters."

The man paused, as if expecting the child to respond in some way, then shifted awkwardly when he did not. "...well. Unfortunately this is the third one this year. We're containing it so far, but if the frequency keeps increasing then eventually the media will-"

"What do you want?" Saitama deadpanned.

*That's definitely sensei,* Genos mused fondly, grabbing the napkin handed to him by King so he could scrub his stained face. 20 words or less.

Blinking in surprise, something in the man's gaze shifted, a kind of hardened wariness and grudging respect as he realized that he was not dealing with a normal child. "I see. Straight to the point, then."

He handed an official-looking form to the boy, then stuck a hand into his pocket to retrieve a pen as well. "In order to keep these situations under wraps and not incite panic, we have to relocate the survivors. You are not allowed to tell anyone what happened, under any circumstances. Do you understand?"

"....yes."

"Good. As far as anyone is concerned, you and your family died in a freak house fire. There will be three names on the gravestone." The man pointed to the form in the child's hands. "So...I need you to pick a new name. Got it?"

The boy stared at him silently for a moment, then slowly lowered his gaze to the form in front of him. With slow, deliberate movements, he wrote SAITAMA on the line indicated for his given name, then handed the form back to the man.

Retrieving the paper, he squinted at it in bafflement. "Saitama? Like the prefecture before the mega cities were built? Er...mind if I ask why?"

"......it was her favorite place."

The man shifted uncomfortably, unable to meet the kid's eyes. "Ah...I see. Well then, Saitama... we've lined up a foster family for you if you want, or you can just go straight to an orphanage - it's up to you. When you're old enough, we can pay for you to have an apartment, so long as you're still enrolled in school. And-"

The memory fizzled into grey mist, jumping forward once more like a speeding train. Small phrases of dialogue and thoughts jumped out of the screen as the years passed in brief images, each of them a cruel glimpse into a life of misery after the tragedy of his youth. There were images of older children bullying him at an unnamed orphanage ("Freak!!"), asserting the hierarchical authority that Genos had only ever heard of in rumors; a few glimpses of adults whispering amongst themselves ("-kid's so creepy..." "-always has that dead look in his eyes-" "I wonder if that's why his parents left him here-"); solemn days of drifting through life, mourning for a loss
that he couldn't reveal to anyone. It hurt to watch his teacher's happy childhood dissolve so suddenly into abject, lonely sorrow.

And suddenly the child became a young teen, his thoughts and voice deeper as he grew through the beginning stages of puberty. Long black bangs were permanently visible at the top of the screen, shifting with the boy's every movement. Genos twitched as a sharp desire to see his teacher with a full head of hair coursed through him, sending a phantom shiver up his metallic spine. In the memory, Saitama was walking aimlessly around the back of a school building, wondering distractedly if he would have enough food to last until the next meager check from the underfunded monster response team arrived in the mail.

(I only have 600 yen left...I'll have to skip lunch tomorrow if I want to eat din-)

The idle thoughts paused as the pre-teen rounded a corner and came across four boys his age, lying prone on the ground. Saitama hummed thoughtfully, then approached the bodies in curiosity, his eyes glancing to one side at a bicycle that had been spray-painted with lewd doodles and words.

"Oi." The screen focused down on the kid lying slightly apart from the other three, an oversized helmet tilting off of his mousy brown hair. "You alive?"

The injured boy stirred with a pained groan, flailing one hand across the ground until he found a pair of large glasses, which he immediately plopped onto his face regardless of the crack running straight through one thick lens. He moved his hand away, looked up at his rescuer, and-

Genos stared. From behind him in the hero section, many rows away, there was an alarmed shout of disbelief from a certain bicyclist.

"WHAT?!"

What indeed.

On the screen, a young Mumen Rider gingerly picked himself up off the ground, favoring one of his injured ribs and trying not to move too fast. "Ah...thank you. I'm sorry to trouble you further, but...do you know where my bike might be?"

Memory-Saitama stared at him quietly for a moment, then casually lifted one finger to point at the defaced bicycle several paces away. The younger Mumen heaved a weary sigh upon seeing the graffiti, then shrugged it off and turned to go check on the other three boys he had attempted to rescue earlier. While he roused the others and helped them get to their feet, Saitama turned to gaze at the bike. His thoughts remained silent, even as he quietly approached the bike and began to rub the paint off with his undershirt, untucking it from his belt with nimble fingers. The boy cleaned in silence, the murmurs and exclamations of the other boys behind him growing fainter as they were presumably led away to the school's office or infirmary.

It was strange to witness such a quiet mind; Saitama didn't even seem to think about his sudden act of kindness, neither before nor during - it wasn't even a prompt from his logical self or inner conscience, but rather seemed to be an instinctual predisposition to selflessness. There was no conscious thought behind it whatsoever.

Genos reeled in awe. Sensei is truly one of a kind.

When it became clear that some of the more...creative graffiti would not be removed by mere friction, memory-Saitama shrugged out of his outer coat, removed the stained undershirt, then quickly buttoned his overcoat back up. He stood and made his way to the nearest sink, then came
back outside with a wet shirt and resumed cleaning.

(Hm.) The hand clutching the wet shirt paused, glancing over the bike's frame to make sure there was no further paint marring the surface. It was utterly spotless. (That's better.)

Saitama stood, patting the bike with a gentle brush of one hand, then casually walked away.

From several paces behind him, Genos heard a frantic, hushed whisper from Mumen Rider. "That was him?!"

Genos couldn't help but smile. Even more than a decade ago, his teacher was still so selfless and kind; always doing this sort of charity when no one else would be able to see or credit him for the deed, because he simply wanted to do it. Not for money or prestige, but because it was the right thing to do. Maybe now, the world would finally see how incredible this man truly was. Maybe now the death threats and cruel insults would stop arriving by mail. Maybe now all of the angry glares, cold shoulders, and whispered mockery would end at long last.

On the screen, the memories jumped forward to show an open textbook, while the boy's classmates chattered about the underclassmen who had been assaulted the previous day.

"Oi, Fubuki."

Blinking, Genos narrowed in on the faint murmur coming from the stage, watching as the black haired esper lowered her eyes back to the bald hero she was still shielding from the screen and any audio.

"I've got the hang of it now. Thanks."

Fubuki smirked at him, raising an eyebrow in her usual cocky way; the gesture didn't quite hide the uncertainty in her gaze or the drying wetness on her cheeks, however. Her hands lowered from the man's ears slowly, and she patted one knee with a careless sort of dismissal. "If you say so. Just don't come whining to me later if you find out you can't handle it after all."

The bald hero snorted lightly, choosing not to answer as he craned his neck upward to stare at his memories on the wide screen. It had jumped forward once again, focusing on a scene of a plain ceiling while the TV newscaster reported on the insurgence of monster attacks and how the frequency was growing. "...this is so weird."

Hesitating a few moments more, the esper eventually stood and dusted off her black dress before quickly heading back to her seat. She avoided anyone's eyes while surreptitiously wiping her own with a quick, deft movement. Behind her, the screen began to fill with a grey sort of fog, every visual detail of the surroundings blurring until only the bottom of a string was visible in any kind of clarity, stretching down from the ceiling fan. Even the sound from the TV was muffled into grey obscurity, sounding as though it were far away from the owner's ears. The reporter was still discussing a recent monster attack, but the exact words were now completely undecipherable.

(Stop it. Don't think about that day.)

The view shifted as memory-Saitama rolled onto his side, staring at a grey wall. With a sigh that seemed far too loud in comparison to the muted sounds of rain and television, the boy muttered: "...man...I'm tired."

Eyelids closed and filled the screen with black. When the screen filled with color again, it seemed to be a different day; possibly the next morning. The boy was being obviously bullied by his homeroom teacher, who seemed to be deliberately misinterpreting Saitama's sheepish apology for
forgetting his homework. The man appeared to take delight in browbeating the poor student, sneering statements such as "are you stupid?" and "you little punk!" and "I'll teach you how much of a loser you are!"

Saitama did not offer any further protests even after the man had finished, simply turning back to approach his desk amidst hushed whispers and mocking laughter from his fellow students. He quietly sat in his chair and then hunched over his desk, staring down at the grain of the wood while his hands clenched into shaking fists.

(...it doesn't matter. Just ignore it.)

Genos felt like crying again. Had his teacher experienced nothing good at all since losing his mother? Had he really gone through years of trying not to think or remember; alone, bullied, forgotten by the rest of the world? He thought of that tiny apartment they had shared together, a small decrepit building in an abandoned city, silent and devoid of all life; the cyborg wondered if perhaps he was the first person to really even interact with Saitama in more than a superficial way, if his forced insertion into the man's life had perhaps filled up the emptiness that had been there since childhood, and oil gathered in his eyes once more. At this rate, he would surely run out of fuel simply from his own emotions. With a fortifying breath, Genos exhaled and attempted to calm his swiftly whirring core.

The screen shifted through images quickly, briefly showing two older boys sneering at him, a quick glimpse of them stealing money and throwing punches before mocking him for his lack of funds, and then jolting forward as a strange piggy bank monster did the exact same thing to the thugs. As one of the boys lamented the loss of money for his little brother's lunches (That's why they were assaulting other students? Really?), the injured Saitama shoved himself up off the ground and took off after the monster in a hard sprint.

(Everything is so stupid!!) the inner voice of his teacher snarled, sudden rage replacing years of quiet misery. (First I forget my homework and then thugs beat me up...give me back my 200 yen! I'm sick of this!!)

Genos experienced momentary hope for the emotional state of his sensei's younger self, but that was immediately destroyed as the monster took the boy out in a single blow (and wasn't that a strange irony?). The memory lurched forward, pausing briefly on a moment of the homeroom teacher yelling at and mocking Saitama once more, refusing to believe his excuses, and then time jolted once more; the screen focused on a muddy street as the pre-teen trudged listlessly through the pouring rain, heedless of the mingled blood and water that poured down from his hair into his eyes.

(I just don't fit into society...I don't know how to live...) His inner voice was an endless well of hopeless torment and self-flagellation. Genos' torso ached with the sound. (I always end up losing...how can I keep going when I'm so weak?)

Dirty sneakers plodded onward through the storm, careless of any mud and staggering weakly with every step.

(I'm sorry, mom...I don't know how to be happy in this world.)

Genos sighed heavily. He leaned back in his seat, which groaned threateningly under the weight of his bulky metal frame, and resigned himself to watching a life of melancholy and desolation. He had suspected that his teacher's past was not necessarily a pleasant one, simply from the way the bald man purposefully avoided any discussion of such things, but...well, he had hoped to be proven wrong.
The screen glitched forward once again, this time peering down the side of a building at a deserted alleyway much too far below for any kind of comfort.

No...no way, he's not-?!

(It would be so easy...like falling asleep...) came the quiet thought, disturbingly empty of any emotion or inflection in the tone. (What would it matter, really?)

Muted gasps of alarm rippled through the gathered heroes and citizens behind Genos, echoing his sudden overwhelming panic. They were all utterly drawn in to his memories now, transfixed and unable to look away from the screen as though it were an intense movie. He knew, logically, that Saitama was perfectly alive and unharmed, not even a stone's throw from where he was seated, but the fear that coursed through his stiff limbs was undeniable and entirely too strong to ignore. He lurched halfway out of his seat in terror, then clutched at the sides of the chair in an attempt to hold himself back.

Sensei..!!

A muddy sneaker crept further across the edge of the roof, the pre-teen leaning forward just enough to cast a lingering glance at the ground so far below.

(I'm so tired...)

Another inch forward, the boy would surely be teetering precariously. At any moment, a strong gust of wind could throw him to his demise.

A single step-

A gentle, content sigh-

A hint of a lean and-

And-

A loud, feminine scream ripped through the silent encroaching grey void at the edges of the screen, gashing open the boy's concentration like an open wound. He lurched back from the edge, flailing momentarily with his arms shooting past the edges of his vision.

(What- what the hell?)

Another scream erupted once more, this time quickly stifled and muffled. The sound was immediately followed by a distinct crack that sounded horrifically familiar so soon after the boy's earlier memories, and a hushed male voice snarling, "Shut up, whore!!"

Memory-Saitama hurled himself immediately across the roof to the other side, peering over the edge and staring down at an obscene struggle far below his apartment building. In the dark alley, a man was clearly and obviously assaulting a woman, who appeared to be fighting a losing battle and was quickly overcome. Her muffled cries of terror and anguish were utterly chilling to Genos, who had never before seen such an act; neither in real life nor in any television or movies. His teacher had always avoided such things. (Could this memory be the reason why...?)

The audience at his back was getting louder now, protests from people that adamantly did not want to see such things, along with others who seemed to be urging the Saitama of the past to call the police or shout for help, as though forgetting they were seeing something from a past left far behind them.
In the memory, his teacher did neither. Instead, his eyes cast around in every direction, searching the surface of the roof in sudden urgency. His eyes paused and lurched back to focus on a cluster of abandoned beer bottles and cans littering the concrete some paces away, surrounded by discarded cigarette remnants. The boy immediately grabbed the bottles and stuffed them into his shirt, using it as a makeshift blanket to carry more than one or two at a time, then hurried back to the side of the building where the sounds of a struggle quickly grew more disturbing. Saitama leaned over the side for a third time, staring down for a moment as he aimed, then hurled one of the glass bottles with deadly accuracy. His trajectory was true, striking the man sharply on the back of his neck and eliciting a sharp wail of pain as the bottle shattered into his skin. The preteen did not waste even a single moment, quickly launching a second lethal strike; this time the blow struck the man's head hard enough that he toppled over upon impact as glass shards rained down around his fallen body. With the height and angle, Genos immediately surmised that the man had been knocked unconscious.

"Thank you! Thank you! Thank-"

"Hurry up and go home!" Saitama called down to her, exasperated.

The woman nodded frantically, scrambling out from under her assailant and stumbling from the alley, clutching her ripped clothes together. Saitama watched her amble down the sidewalk until she abruptly entered a store a few blocks away, likely intending to call the police or ask for help, then he glanced back down at the alley far below his feet.

With his eyes focused upon the unmoving man he'd knocked unconscious, the world suddenly seemed to brighten; colors and shapes seemed clearer somehow, more solid and real to the boy's eyes. A loud thumping reverberated from the screen, the sound of a proud and triumphant heartbeat.

(That...felt really good.)

His gaze lowered to his hand, where an empty bottle was still held tightly and primed for assault.

(I helped her....I...I was able to protect someone, just like- just like-) Fingers tightened around the bottle so intensely they began to shake with the force of it.

(Maybe...maybe this is how I can live? Maybe this is how I can keep going...by saving others the way you saved me?)

The boy stood there in silence for a long moment, then tilted his head up to the sky and breathed in deeply. His eyes lidded partially and he stared at the clouds drifting lazily by while slowly exhaling; and then, he chuckled lowly, apparently renewed.

(Yeah...just like a hero.)

Genos didn't even try to stop his smile.

And the memories surged onward, traversing the years quickly but pausing just long enough on scraps of memory to get an idea of what was happening - stopping a child from wandering in front of traffic, helping an old lady carry heavy grocery bags, tripping a purse snatcher as they attempted to run by, and many other swift flashes of Saitama learning how to live by helping others, finding
purpose in the satisfaction even though his actions weren't always appreciated. Genos was reminded suddenly of that same man, years later, shouting at a mob of angry onlookers that he wasn't a hero for them, but rather because he simply wanted to.

*Is this what he meant back then?* The cyborg lowered his gaze to the open stage, tracing the unbroken outline of the back of his teacher's bald head and remembering the way his cape had flared in the wind as he turned to stare at Genos in surprise. There had been a kind of tightly leashed storm in those brown eyes back then, a maelstrom of muted desperation and fury, but it had drained swiftly upon the cyborg softly imploring for them to go home. *Is being a hero more than just a hobby, despite what he says? Is it...is it because...*

The rapid shifting of memories on the screen slowed suddenly, years passed in barely a single minute with hardly any memory being important enough to show, and then suddenly the kaleidoscope of scenes lingered on a view of several thugs smirking and cracking their knuckles above a prone Saitama, leering down.

"Some hero," the apparent leader jeered. "Can't even save yourself. You're nothing."

Genos only had a brief moment to experience the righteous fury that bubbled up inside him at this comment, before the scene shifted and a large crab-humanoid monstrosity filled up the screen.

"What the hell is that?" the cyborg heard Child Emperor mutter from a few seats away. "Gross."

"Huuuuuhhh?! Shouldn't you be running away?" the strange crab-man chortled, staring down at his audience with a stretched grin of absent humor. The view blackened as Saitama apparently closed his eyes, the sound of a heavy sigh breaking the silence of the monster waiting for his reply. The beast laughed at him once again, leaning forward to peer down at the strange human. "Are you a new businessman already bored with the daily grind? Ha! I ate too much crab and turned into this - Crablante! I'm surprised you're not running. You got a death wish, is that it?"

Genos' mouth twisted with morbid humor. Of course his teacher wouldn't be rattled by this monster; he had seen something far more terrifying many years before.

Memory-Saitama paused for a brief moment, then deadpanned in his usual deep tone: "You're wrong about one thing. I'm not a businessman, I'm unemployed. And I'm looking for a job. I just had an interview and failed miserably. I don't care about anything right now. So I'm in no mood to run...just because *you're* here." 

Silence reigned after this pronouncement, the casual disinterest of his voice so all-encompassing that Genos nearly missed the fact that Saitama had not denied wanting to die. A chill traveled down the synthetic nerves of his metal spine and he sat up straighter, horror creeping in.

"Does sensei still feel that way...?"

"So. What happens now, Crablante?"

The vapid grin on the crab man's strange features widened into a disturbing serial killer smile with entirely too much teeth, a feral, hungry light showing in the eyeballs perched on red stalks above his wide mouth. Genos experienced a moment of fresh terror for the safety of his teacher, despite knowing that the man was obviously perfectly fine and unharmed; there was just something incredibly unsettling about this crab monster. He wondered if perhaps the man had been a murderer before transforming, since he seemed to enjoy the thought of killing with an almost perverse pleasure.

An enlarged claw reached out toward the screen, the lethal point mere centimeters away from the
eyes that had been there in the past. A frisson of nervous gasps and titters spread through the audience as people leaned back in their chairs, forgetting that the monster was long removed from their existence in this time. "Kukuku! Your eyes are lifeless, just like mine. From one set of lifeless eyes to another...I'll let you go this time."

The beast lumbered around Saitama in the memory, the view on the screen following his retreating form, and then the crab man paused. "Besides..."

He turned, that same hungry grin stretching his mouth below bloodshot eyes. "I'm hunting different prey right now."

The monster turned and stomped away again as he continued confiding in the strange human who hadn't feared him like so many others. Helpless chuckles escaped from several members of the populace gathered in the stadium, likely amused by the large white underwear covering the place where human legs merged into a red crab shell. "A big-chinned brat. And when I find him...I'm gonna rip his arms off!"

Memory-Saitama continued to watch the monster striding away, then calmly turned around and trudged off in the direction he'd been headed in originally. The memory glitched, surging forward to a different location of town, and then the field of view panned upwards in a slow and casual way, tilting to the side just at the right time to catch sight of a small black-haired boy with an absurdly large chin. Soft gasps rippled through the audience once more as the boy stared blankly back at the screen. Genos noted with interest that the board members from the Hero Association, seated on a far end of the stage, were stirring and exchanging meaningful looks with wide eyes. A few of them even grabbed their phones and began to type quick messages. Perhaps this child was important somehow?

"What're you lookin' at?" the boy demanded rudely, his expression melting away into a condescending glare.

(Th- the big-chinned brat! If he's caught, he's dead!)

The child continued messing about with a large soccer ball, content to ignore the weird man standing there just gazing at him silently.

"Hey, kid..." Saitama's voice seemed tentative, hesitating over the words. "Were you messing with a big crab monster?"

"Huh?" replied the boy, tilting his head to peer up at the adult once more. "He was sleeping in the park, so I drew nipples on him."

The memory-Saitama continued staring at the child, mentally arguing with himself whether to get involved or not, and then slowly began to turn away- right as the monster appeared once more. The view on the screen surged forward as the man swiftly rescued the boy, leaping away from the clawed strike while shouting internally: (What the hell am I doing?!) Ignoring his own struggles, Saitama instead focused on the endangered child, snapping at him to run and then yelling in disbelief when the (idiotic, thought Genos privately) boy resisted on account of his ball, of all things. And then-

"Hahahaha! You look like the villain in this anime I used to watch!"

Sensei... Genos groaned, wincing as the view on the screen tumbled dizzyingly from Saitama flying through the air on the receiving end of a fearsome jab from one large claw. Honestly, did the man...
truly have that much of a death wish that he would bait a monster without even a single superpower?

Or...perhaps one superpower, Genos amended thoughtfully as the man hurled a rock into the crab's head with absurd, inhuman accuracy. It was rather uncanny how his aim seemed to be so flawless, even at a young age from that earlier memory. Perhaps his teacher had always been predisposed to physical excellence, and simply hadn't been aware?

"Wait a second..." panted Memory-Saitama, blood trailing into one eye as he stumbled back toward the creature. "I can't watch you kill a kid; I'll have nightmares. And I remembered something else..."

At the bottom edge of the screen, a hand reached up to loosen his striped tie. "When I was a kid, I wanted to be a hero. Not some damn businessman...but a superhero who could send shameless villains like you flying with one punch!"

The man shrugged out of his suit jacket and tossed it into the air with a grunt. "I'm done looking for a job. Bring it on, crab!"

The audience cheered immediately, caught up in the energy of his words, but their joyous cries stifled quickly as the view of the monster and the scenery fractured and tilted as the fledgling hero reeled back from multiple strikes, blood flying from every impact.

"Some hero you are!" crowed the monster, unknowingly echoing the thugs from the previous memory. "You don't stand a chance!"

This was quite true, all things considered, but Genos watched in eager adoration on the edge of his chair as Saitama rallied at the words, dodging the claw and vaulting over the monster's head in an impressive display of physical fitness. There was a brief view of the man's hand expertly snagging one of the eye stalks with the tie he'd managed to slip off while executing his desperate jump, and then the audience was treated to a view of the ground below the fledgling hero's shoes. On the edge of the screen, two fists clung white-knuckled to the straining cloth of his suit tie, whilst a loud, horrific scream of agony split the silence - somehow not loud enough to cover the disturbingly wet squelching noises of the monster's innards ripping and tearing. The cyborg heard several people retching around the stadium behind him, but he had eyes only for the screen, biting down on the inside of his synthetic lips to suppress the wide grin threatening to break out on his face.

This was it. This was the moment his beloved sensei had taken those first steps down the path toward the white cape he donned so proudly. This was the moment that started Saitama's three-year training course to become the strongest man the world had ever seen.

He could hardly remain still in his seat, so great was his elated joy.

"Huh..." his teacher hummed absently from the stage, just barely audible even to his enhanced senses. "Has it really been almost four years, now? Man. Time flies, I guess."

From the screen, that same voice rang out proudly, a fiery strength just beginning to bloom from within. (This is it. I can do this. I will become a hero.)

Genos could no longer suppress the delighted grin overtaking his jaw, watching with incandescent joy as the screen whirled through the days of his teacher's training, only pausing long enough to gain brief glimpses of long hours spent doing the exact same workout he had been told from the beginning of their odd friendship: 100 push-ups, 100 sit-ups, 100 squats, and a 10 km run every
He witnessed the times that his teacher would sweat agonizingly in the heat of summer, staring blearily up at the ceiling desperate for a reprieve he would not allow himself; and the times in winter where his sensei huddled, alone, under threadbare blankets trying to remember what warmth felt like; and the times in between, filled with acts of kindness toward others, desperate fights against strong enemies that drew more blood from Saitama than he could repay with the wounds he clumsily gave them, and even the rare moments of villagers thanking him in the only way they could - gifts of candy, clothes mending, whatever food they could spare for a man that did not spend his days at any job. His teacher was dedicated, relentless, and unyielding, even when spitting blood onto the concrete in between shuddering push-ups, even when seeing the growing pile of hair gathering on his pillow as it fell out during the night.

Surely this ridiculous workout could not truly be the source of his universe-defying power?

Only the audience's disbelieving murmurs and a pained groan from the screen answered his plea, as the Saitama of the past curled in on himself and groaned weakly, then shoved determinedly to his feet and began his run for the day. It was evident that he should not have been on his feet at all, as his agonized, labored gasping filled everyone's ears. There was no thought behind it whatsoever, not even a complaint of pain, and there was not an ounce of hesitation in his stride as he leapt to a small child's rescue and saved him (and his tiny dog) from a speeding car. But as the man turned to walk away, he grunted in surprise as another wave of pain came over him, and the screen tilted downwards to focus on the cement beneath the memory-Saitama's feet as he curled in on himself once more.

(That pain again...I'm feeling it more frequently. Have I pushed myself too hard?)

Obviously, Genos thought with fond exasperation for his ridiculous teacher. Perhaps the man's true superpower was his impossible ability to survive no matter what awful things happened to his body or the world around him.

The scene was interrupted by a rather loud and obnoxious humanoid monster, and Saitama immediately launched himself forward, one hand already raised in a fist, before groaning and fumbling the strike enough that he was overtaken by the creature's fearsome punch. The world surged by as the hero's body was hurled straight through a truck and into a wall with the deafening sound of glass, plaster, and concrete shattering around them all.

"How the hell did he even survive that?" muttered Child Emperor lowly, staring in bafflement up at the screen and startling Genos from his obsessed reverie. He blinked in surprise at the blinking red light in the corner of his optic view - he hadn't even realized he'd been recording. "How long have I...?"

(My body...!) groaned his teacher's thoughts from the screen, distracting him once more. (I can't...no! This is no time for whining! My limits...I must- I must surpass my limits!!)

After one last attack from the monster - which would have easily shattered every bone in a normal human's body, the man in the memory sagged bonelessly to the ground in a daze, staring at a single tooth lying next to him.

(Huh. So much for that cavity...)

Memory-Saitama vaulted immediately to his feet, apparently feeling no ill effects anymore whatsoever. The screen's view crinkled at the corners as the hero presumably grinned at the monster, before he surged forward and dropped the creature in a heap of blood and torn skin from a
single punch. And then he absently carried on with his daily run, whistling with renewed cheer.

The memories picked up speed again, flitting through unending days of the same routine, but Genos simply sat where he was and gaped at it without truly seeing it.

Was that it?

This whole time, the source of his master's strength was actually his unyielding dedication? His incessant, unbreakable willpower, driving him to break his own limits and simply ignore what the human body was supposed to be capable of? He had once told the leader of the House of Evolution that the true power of human beings was the ability to change themselves on their own, but...

What, then, could Genos possibly do to match that strength? When he himself had willingly given up his human form and allowed himself to become a walking, talking hunk of metal alloys and twisted screws?

If Saitama was right (and his master was always right), then there would forever be a limit that he could not overcome. A barrier that technology and metal could never go beyond, forcing him onto a plateau of stagnation and mental decay as his brain aged but his body remained, unchanging and immortal but unable to function as the last human parts of him withered away.

An unbreakable wall between him and his sensei.

He'd been wrong, before. This was the true end. This was what would drive the last wedge between them. How could Genos ever stand beside him, on equal footing, when he had given up the one thing needed to ascend to that incredible strength? He was no longer human. They would never be equal, not now that he was a cyborg.

Genos would never be able to reach him.

"This is my final achievement. It's everything I have. I can already see a real hero in you... You inspired me to make this suit."

Blinking away dark oil from the corners of his eyes, Genos slowly refocused on the screen he'd been staring at without truly seeing any of it. There was no knowing how much he had missed in his melancholy distraction.

A familiar yellow suit was held up for the audience's view, complete with a large white cape clasped to each shoulder.

Oh, he realized dully. This must be the tailor sensei told me about.

The scene jumped forward without warning, treating everyone to a view of masculine hands slipping on a pair of shiny red gloves and adjusting the yellow suit on a finely muscled body. The view tilted upwards and focused on-

Startled, Genos twitched violently in his seat as his teacher's face filled the screen, staring neutrally into a mirror with beautiful ebony locks falling down into his eyes. This was a Saitama he had only ever dreamed of in an occasional, wildly imagined fantasy; a Saitama who had not yet lost any hair as the price for his incredible power. His jaw fell open silently, slack with awe.

Saitama had always been a striking, handsome man with his narrow eyes and sharp facial features, but the loose black hair tousled gently around his eyes and cheeks made him appear far younger - softer, somehow. As though he were a normal man you might pass on the street or in a grocery
store, instead of a hero that casually saved the world without hardly even trying.

Gentle puffs of steam escaped the holes in his shoulders with a quick, high-pitched whine that made him duck his head a little in embarrassment.

_S-So cute!!_

Beside him, King released a soft, nearly inaudible cough. Genos deliberately did not think about how close it sounded to a laugh.

The scene jumped forward again, several months blurring by in a rush of images that paused only long enough to hear brief thoughts or comments from the lonely hero:

"Right? Having overwhelming strength is...pretty boring."

(As the days pass, my emotions grow more distant. Fear, tension, joy, anger...I feel none of them anymore. In exchange for power, maybe I've lost something that's essential for a human being?)

"I've become too strong..."

How horrible. To finally achieve his greatest dream, only to find at the end that it wasn't at all what he really wanted and brought him no joy.

_Sensei..._

Suddenly, the whirling images froze briefly on an all too familiar day, seen from new eyes.

"Please, tell me your name!"

"Huh? Uh...it's Saitama."

"Please take me as your disciple!!"

"Oh...okay...?"

The scene turned and then all movement froze. "Wait, what?"

(Is this guy for real?)

A door opened to reveal a nervous cyborg standing stiffly at attention. "Sensei!"

(Oh my god, he actually showed up. Seriously? I have nothing to teach this kid.)

Genos slowly sunk down into his seat, feeling his shoulders warm with building steam. Shit. He hadn't thought about this part of seeing his teacher's memories.

_I don't want to know_, he thought frantically. _I don't want to hear how little he thinks of me!!_

"Uh...what was your name again?"

"It's Genos, Saitama-sensei!"

"...sorry, but could you stop calling me that?"

"Master!"

(Oh my god that is so much worse. What's with this kid? Does he ever chill out?)
"Don't call me that either."

The cyborg felt an irrational urge to crawl under his chair, curl up in a ball, and just burst into flame. Yes, that would do quite nicely.

"Please teach me how to become strong like you, sensei!"

"...hmm."

(Ahh, what the hell. He seems really earnest, no harm helping him out a little. Now what was his name again...)

Or perhaps Kuseno had a need for some extra cyborg parts. Maybe he could just be a floating brain in one of those glass cylinders in the workshop.

"I don't mind teaching you, but it'll be tough...are you ready to take it on?"

"Yes, sir!"

(Hm. Good. He seems like he could be really- ...what the hell is he doing? What's up with this guy? Does he ever slow down?)

Or maybe Fubuki wouldn't mind using him to refurbish some of those shiny cars they were always driving around. He could be a fancy GPS or a-

Wait.

Weren't these supposed to be important memories in his teacher's life?

So... so then...

(Hm, this guy's pretty good. It's kind of cool to watch him fight.)

Genos sat a little straighter, preening. So he had impressed his sensei just a bit, even way back then?

(Hey...this is a little fun. It's kind of nice to have a student, I guess.)

"There are two life-forms coming this way."

"-Genos?!"

Genos winced as his past body was shoved into the nearest wall, acrid smoke billowing out from the abused metal.

"Eh? ...o-oi..."

(He's...is he okay? He's not responding...) The scene turned and craned upward to stare at a large beetle-shaped monster.

(I'm gonna squash this cockroach.)

"You'll pay for making Genos look like modern art! Lead the way!"

Snickers erupted from the heroes around them, but Genos sat stiffly and continued staring up at the screen, hungry for more. If these memories were being shown, then... then surely he was important
to his teacher? Perhaps more than he had ever suspected or dared to hope?

The scenes progressed quickly, only lingering on small moments - like the fight with Ashura Kabuto, where apparently his sensei had actually dashed forward to catch him after his mangled body was hurled across the room (how had he missed that?!), or when Saitama had offered to allow Genos to become his disciple if they registered together, and also-

"I'll be counting on your guidance as my mentor from now on!"

"...sure thing."

(Oh crap. Maybe I shouldn't have said I'd make him my disciple after all. Especially a guy like him...)

Genos flinched a little at this thought, but before he could even begin to feel any shame, the time in the memory had jumped forward once more, showing a small path as the older hero stared down at his trudging feet, walking home during an orange sunset.

(Genos is actually really amazing...)

!!!!!

He swallowed reflexively, feeling his core whirl ever faster just like the heartbeat he'd left behind long ago. Did Saitama really think such things about him? But he'd always acted so grumpy with their continued friendship... well, at least at the beginning. Actually, now that he thought about it... Saitama had been rather kind to him lately. They interacted comfortably with each other, going through their days side by side, hardly any conflict between them. The peaceful days (in between monster fights, of course) had been a balm to his grieving soul, a way to reclaim the untroubled days of his youth which had been filled with love and gentle companionship.

*Could it be...? Sensei actually really likes spending time with me?*

He glanced back up at the screen eagerly, hoping to have his hypothesis confirmed somehow.

"Can I live here?"

"Hell no."

Ah. Perhaps not.

(Uggghh. I know he said he'd pay the rent, but... I really just don't know what that guy expects from me. He's been doing all the cleaning and cooking, too. Why is he wasting his time here? I have nothing to teach him. He's always staring at me and saying such weird things about me, too.)

"Like I'm all that great...sheesh."

Saitama really never believed a word out of his mouth, did he? It had always baffled Genos that his teacher could be so modest and humble, despite his incredible power.

But now, knowing what he did about his teacher's horrifying past...was it really any wonder that the hero struggled to believe those compliments? When everyone else around him had always been so cruel, so dismissive of his worth?

"-21 minutes left until the meteor hits Z City."

(...wait- what meteor?)
The view on the screen refocused immediately on the small television that used to sit near the window of their old apartment.

"Experts say that Z City will be completely destroyed. S-class heroes Metal Knight, Silver Fang, and Demon Cyborg are on the scene, but it appears as though they are so far unsuccessful in stopping."

(Hold on. Demon Cyborg...isn't that Genos? So then, he's...)

The view of the TV on the large screen above their heads suddenly shot upwards as the Saitama of the past leapt to his feet and then dashed around the apartment at a ridiculous speed, shedding clothes and changing into his hero outfit with a desperate fervor.

(No meteor is gonna fall on my city! And certainly not my student!)

The memories zoomed onward quickly, showing brief glimpses Saitama's race across the city to reach Genos and Bang before the meteor could land, his path through the meteor that shattered it upon impact, the aftermath of his actions where a crowd of people shouted and jeered in a circle around him, demanding that he quit his life as a hero.

"Give it up! Give it up! Give it up!"

(No. I can't. I have...nothing else.)

So. He'd been right, after all.

The thought was not a comforting one.

"I'm the one that smashed the meteor into pieces! Got a problem with that?! Say it to my face! I'm all ears!!"

(This is all I have left after I lost the will to live. I can't give it up.)

"Let me make one thing clear! I'm not a hero because I want your approval! I do it because I want to!!"

The crowd of people was suddenly replaced by a view of Genos himself, staring determinedly at the audience. His jaw was set, eyes blazing gold and resolute in fierce determination. "Even if the public doesn't appreciate you...I will still follow you."

(....why? Why are you so...)

The point of view turned swiftly, showcasing the destroyed remnants of Z City.

"You don't have to butter me up. Really."

(I don't understand. What does he see in me? Why is he the only one who...)

The memory jumped forward quickly, showing an empty city street deluged by an intense rainstorm. On the edge of the screen, the faint outline of a cellphone held in one white-knuckled fist was just barely visible.

"The monster even took out a class S hero!"

(Class S? It can't be.....Genos?!)
A view of the cyborg in question then appeared on the screen, a macabre wreck of his mutilated body drenched in pouring rain.

(Shit! Is he-)

"H-Hey Genos!! Are you alive?!"

"S...sen- s- -sei..."

(Oh, good. He's okay.)

"Hang in there for a second..."

(How dare this bastard hurt my student.)

"I'm gonna go kill this sea-freak."

The memory jumped forward a few minutes, finally giving Genos an insight into those moments where he had stared beseechingly at the older hero, desperately wishing he would stop talking and taking the city's blame and hatred onto himself.

(No. I won't let you belittle their sacrifice. Can't you see how hard these guys fought for you? How they gave it their all and almost died?)

"Good thing I was late! I hardly did anything! But I beat it alone!"

(Stupid punk. Genos almost died for you.)

"Hey, spread the word! Even if I just swooped in at the end, I finished it off! If you tell anyone I showed up last, I'll knock you one!"

(Dammit. I wish I was half as cool as them. This isn't the kind of hero I wanted to be.)

Genos bit the inside of his polymer lips, hating every word that emanated from the screen. His sensei shouldn't have to endure such agony simply for achieving his dreams of strength and power. It wasn't fair.

"Sometimes I wonder if I'm even human anymore."

A brief glimpse of Genos' stricken face filled the screen suddenly, and then the expression crumpled into one of agony as he buried his head in his hands, dark liquid dripping from between his fingers.

(No. Don't cry for me.)

The words they had spoken to each other at this moment in time warbled through the screen, distorted as his teacher focused more intently on the cyborg's face, hidden behind dark oil and shaking metal hands.

(It's not so bad...not with you here.)

Genos sucked in a sharp breath. Could he...could he truly believe that? If he was able to ease some of Saitama's pain, even a little... If he somehow made life even slightly worth living for this incredible, powerful, broken man...

Well.
There weren't really any words that could possibly encompass the depth of how much that meant to him.

The screen switched abruptly once more, showing a glimpse of-

*Oh, fuck.*

Completely slaughtering the silent, stoic image he'd always portrayed himself as for the mass public, the giant screen filled with a (terrible, horrifying, mortifying) image of himself dancing wildly in the tiny kitchen of their last apartment; his hips swayed to a beat that could only be heard within the confines of the cyborg's skull, humming openly as he danced and gyrated across the room, alternating between stirring the contents of pots on the stove and preparing ingredients on the counter, wearing that pink apron he was unfortunately fond of. Completely unbeknownst to the cyborg swaying to an unheard beat, the Saitama of the past had craned his head backwards at an awkward angle in order to stare into the room through the kitchen pass-through. Muffled explosions and dramatic sound effects overlaid the scene, emanating from the television that Saitama was seated in front of - and not paying a single shred of attention to.

"Please, just kill me now," Genos muttered, hunching down in his chair as if he could somehow melt through the floor. Beside him, King quickly stifled an abrupt snicker, his shoulders twitching with the effort. He could almost feel Fubuki's quiet, malevolent glee from several rows behind them.

(Sometimes I forget how young he actually is.)

Genos warily glanced back up at the screen, watching as his teacher quietly stood and moved stealthily into the hallway, where he was able to lean around the edge of the door and gaze openly into the kitchen. The cyborg groaned quietly, trying not to analyze the estimated millions of people who were likely watching this around the world (and probably laughing at him). Surely he would have no secrets or dignity left at the end of this day. *Fucking Amai Mask.*

(Look at him,) Memory-Saitama thought wistfully, his internal voice hushed as if he would somehow be overheard. (He's so...vibrant. So full of life.)

Genos swallowed heavily, an instinctive nervous reaction left over from his days as flesh and blood.

On the screen, his teacher watched attentively as his past self danced through the tiny room, whirling closer as he reached out to open the refrigerator. Consequently moving closer to Saitama in the open doorway, the cyborg visibly startled, his golden eyes widening in horror as he realized he'd been seen. His normally stoic expression morphed into a boyish, nervous grimace of embarrassment - if he'd been more than wire and metal, there could be no doubt in anyone's mind that his face would be bright red.

"S-sensei! I'm sorry, I didn't mean to- I hope I'm not disturbing you! Please forgive me!"

(He's more human than I am.)

Genos stared in dismay at the screen, his chest cavity aching with a phantom pain despite the lack of nerve settings inside. *Saitama-sensei...*

As if this morbid thought hadn't just crossed his mind, Memory-Saitama snorted and waved one hand dismissively at his student. "You can relax and be yourself, man. It's your home too!"

"I- ......home?"
The baffled question was evident on every inch of his cybernetic face.

"You've been here for a few months now, Genos, of course it's your home."

Wide golden eyes stared out at the audience, filled with a deep, quiet longing. They stared at each other in silence as the cyborg slowly parsed through the sentence, his expression creased with an old, gentle sadness. "I...haven't had a home for a long time."

Saitama just looked at him for a moment, and then raised an arm to clasp his hand on one bulky metal shoulder.

"Okaeri, Genos."

Memory-Genos gazed back at his teacher, a wide, radiant smile slowly stretching his lips. His black sclera glistened faintly, a hint of oil shimmering rainbow colors at each edge, refracting off of his brilliant golden pupils.

"Tadaima...Saitama-sensei."

(His smile is like the sun.)

Genos' jaw hinges slackened slightly, parting his mouth in open surprise. This was a memory from the early months of their companionship, and yet...even so, his teacher had thought such kind things about him? He'd never even hinted-

His phone vibrated gently in his pocket. Distracted, he slipped it out onto his palm and tilted it upwards.

Fubuki: Oh my god you are both so fucking precious.
Fubuki: I think I'm going to vomit.

Scowling, he replied with a rude emoji, immediately annoyed. He was grateful to her for her assistance to Saitama during the horrifying beginnings of his memories, but gratitude only went so far.

Resolving to ignore any further responses or messages from the irritating woman, he deliberately turned his phone off so he could focus fully on the precious memories being revealed. Several quick moments in time appeared one after the other in succession on the screen, utterly silent but filled with a quiet sense of peace - master and student, going through the daily motions of life together, attending festivals, fighting monsters, cooking, shopping, and sometimes just sitting in each other's presence without feeling the need to actually speak. And then, the view shifted to show a strange humanoid being with one large eye, surrounded by a shock of wildly lavender hair standing straight up on his narrow skull. The blue-skinned creature (man? Alien? Monster?) gracefully stood from a large throne, his crimson cloak billowing around the golden armor encompassing his body.

When did this happen...? Who is that?

"You the boss of these invaders?" Saitama's voice rang out lazily, wholly disinterested.

Completely ignoring this statement, the blue creature uttered a single, exultant word: "Wonderful!"

"...eh?"

"Before we fight, let us exchange names!"
"I am the leader of the pirate band known as Dark Matter. I am also known as the Dominator of the Universe. I am Lord Boros."

"Look, I don't know what the Denominator of the Universe wants with Earth-" and here several members of the audience snickered delightfully at the (terrible) pun. "-but you're not getting away with trashing City A."

"Once, I traveled the universe, ravaging every planet in my path. But I was too strong. Eventually, there were none left who could challenge me. I came to know the torment of utter, all-encompassing boredom."

"At that time, a seer told me this: on this far off planet, there exists someone who can match me and rekindle my passion for battle." The pirate paused for a moment as if expecting a response, then continued when he received none: "That was 20 years ago. Do you have any idea of the distance I have traveled to reach this place?"

Boros approached Saitama confidently, filling the screen with his upper body and face as he stepped close to the superhero. His one eye reflected an eager hunger, tentative excitement beginning to blossom as his voice curled hypnotically around the syllables he spoke.

"My men thought the prophecy was a ruse, made up to lure us away." He leaned closer to the hero, shark smile widening in hungry delight. "But now I am certain! Come! Give meaning to my pointless existence!! For that is why I am here."

The fierce punch came out of nowhere, a whiplash of unbridled power and mild annoyance. The creature called Boros was flung backward and crashed into a pillar on the far side of the cavernous room, sending a large plume of dust and metal pieces into the air and obscuring his undoubtedly...
broken form.

"Are you stupid?" questioned the hero dubiously. "You can't just go around attacking other planets because you're bored. Even telemarketers wouldn't do that."

(Even I wouldn't do that.)

The billowing dust cloud dissipated and revealed the alien's legs hanging lifelessly out of a crater in the pillar. Genos smirked, reveling in his teacher's unmatchable strength.

*What a fool. He should have-*

The legs twitched, and then began to move.

........what?! Th-that's not possible!

Genos stared in absolute horror as the alien righted himself and then stood, apparently unharmed; he was rooted to his seat as the foundations of his world shattered around him. His teacher had never encountered a single enemy he could not destroy with one simple, casual punch; the cyborg had begun to believe it was a universal truth, almost a law of physics unto itself - Saitama's power could not be withstood.

And yet-

And yet-!!!

The golden armor encrusted on Boros' long blue limbs shattered and fell noisily to the floor, revealing bulging muscles that rippled with sheer power.

"Huh," mused Saitama thoughtfully.

"This suit of armor, used to seal in my immeasurable, irresistible power..." the Dominator of the Universe spoke lowly, almost reverently. "...has been broken."

"...OK."

Still reeling from the sudden upheaval of everything he'd known for the past year, Genos barely heard a word of the memory or the shaken, chattering audience surrounding him. His teacher had confided that the leader of the alien invaders was the strongest guy he'd ever seen, but somehow that casual comment hadn't quite penetrated his unshakable belief in Saitama's unmatched power. Though his superhero outfit had been rather disheveled and ripped at the time, the man himself had been entirely unharmed - so the cyborg had of course assumed that a single punch had felled the alien, as a natural course of events.

On the screen, Boros crossed his arms over his face in a strange sort of ritualistic pose, his muscles tensing in preparation. In the memory, Saitama simply stood and quietly observed every move, waiting for the incoming battle with an oddly resigned silence. With a grunt, the lurid purple markings all over the alien's body shuddered and then exploded into an electric blue; lightning crackled across his blue skin as it darkened into the midnight color of a night sky. His lavender hair shivered as if in a gust of wind, brightening into a shock of neon pink as electricity coursed through the alien's body. The sheer power of his aura lifted rocks and pieces of debris, sending them flying towards Memory-Saitama and bouncing off of the metal walls of the giant room.

That one, giant eye opened once more, focusing upon the human hero before it with a feral, unbridled joy.
"It is time!"

The collision that followed was one Genos would never, ever forget. Even if he were not already recording the sight before him, nothing could have ever deleted this from his memory storage.

It was a battle of gods.

Time held no meaning. Sound was irrelevant, even though the resulting explosions were entirely overwhelming in their intensity. The world-shattering power of this one moment in time, watching a single being actually match Saitama's unlimited speed, meeting those unfathomable fists with punches of his own, nearly disregarding the laws of gravity and momentum as they shot around the cavern like unstoppable ping pong balls - it was utterly mind-blowing.

Their fists detonated firestorms when they touched.

Their feet left gouges in solid metal like a volcanic eruption.

Their every movement sparked maelstroms of displaced air.


Can this even be called a battle? Genos gasped in the privacy of his own mind, his eyes open as wide as they could possibly stretch in order to record even the most minute detail. This is a fucking cataclysm. They could destroy the entire planet without even trying.

He was suddenly, inexplicably, immeasurably thankful that Saitama was the one person on their planet gifted with such strength. If it were anyone - anyone else - surely the human race would have been enslaved or destroyed by now, like this Dominator whom had apparently annihilated planets in search of a cure for boredom. Instead, the power had been given to the most pure, guileless, selfless, innocently kind-hearted man in the entire universe, whose hands could gently hold a squirming cat just as easily as they could topple mountains.

Or, as in the case of this memory, rip an alien's arm completely off of their body with a single gesture.

The cacophony of sound and explosions froze for an interminable moment, with Saitama staring calmly at the far-off wall of the room they were in, marred by pillars and a fathomless darkness.

"Though my true power has been unleashed," came the quiet, thoughtful voice of the alien Boros. "You are still able to keep up."

"Yeah," replied Saitama, simple and direct as always. He turned around to face his opponent, raising one fist lazily. "You are strong."

Genos blinked, his eyebrows furrowing over narrowed pupils.

It would no doubt be impossible for anyone else to realize, fathomless as his master's blank expression and voice usually was; but he - having spent so much time in the hero's presence - recognized the slight, nearly imperceptible shift in tone, and startled at its implications.

His sensei didn't sound elated or overjoyed to have finally found the battle he had always wanted. He didn't even sound interested.

He seemed...sad. Resigned.
As if, despite having found an enemy that could withstand his punches at long last, the battle still held no meaning for him.

Puzzled beyond words, the cyborg stared up at the screen intently as the tidal wave of battle began once again. It took him long, endless moments, but he finally noticed that one strange, tiny detail of this fight that he had been missing since its very beginning.

...Saitama wasn't fighting back.

He wasn't even trying. He didn't throw any punches save for those first two, and the second one had been almost laughably weak in comparison to his first irritated strike. Most of Boros' blows were instantly blocked with an open hand, as if the hero were gently catching a baseball rather than stopping the powerful attacks of a planet-ending behemoth. Some of the alien's blows were even allowed to land, like a jab to the hero's stomach that flung him backwards through several layers of the ship. Upon impact, Saitama did not even bother to move - he just hung there like a lifeless doll and watched the incoming freight train that was Lord Boros.

The next series of blows took them both outside, to the very top of the spaceship's exterior hull. They landed on the textured metal a short distance away from each other, the magnitude of the ship's incredible size dwarfing the alien pirate king and making him appear as a tiny speck upon an endless landscape.

"Nice moves!" Boros shouted approvingly. The immense grin of razor delight on his face would have appeared rather at home on the skull of a great white shark. "You are indeed strong! Of all the myriad beings I have fought, only you have ever survived this long!"

Electric delight erupted all over the being, blurring the outline of his features as lightning and raw energy surged all over his form, distorting its edges. Saitama stared quietly, unmoved and simply waiting for the next strike.

Why...? Why are you just letting him do as he pleases, sensei?

Genos simply did not understand. Saitama had never allowed a foe to stand against him for so long before; they were always put down within moments. Did sensei feel empathy for this xenocidal monster?

"Now to release the destructive energy hidden within me!" crowed the elated alien. "Any normal creature hit by it would find even their bones vaporized!"

Saitama simply let it come, watching dully as the world erupted into fire and the metal plating of the ship crumbled into ash around him. Members of the audience cried out in horror, reminding Genos abruptly that he was in fact watching a memory rather than a battle in real time. Startled out of his intense focus, he lowered his eyes once again to the stage to seek out the form of the present-tense Saitama. With a frisson of concern, his eyes took in the slumped form of the hero, who was watching the screen with flat, grief-filled eyes. He looked more like a man watching his impending death sentence rather than someone reliving their past.

Genos ached to go to him, but knew he would not be allowed to do so. He curled his fingers around the edges of his seat, undoubtedly bending the metal but not caring in the slightest.

On the screen, as the firestorm began to finally relent and reveal some of the blue sky once more, Saitama straightened up from a crouch and looked over to the spot where Boros had been before. It was empty.
"...huh?"

"Behind you!"

The gleeful shriek was followed by an impact that shattered the sound barrier and utterly annihilated the remaining fire surrounding them. Unbothered, Saitama simply continued to stand where he was, his durable superhero suit somehow withstanding the energy yet smoking and beginning to dissolve under the continued onslaught.

"You were a worthy opponent, but the outcome of this battle is clear."

Silent since they were first seated, Atomic Samurai startled his fellow S-class heroes by snorting derisively at the alien's prideful comment. "Fool."

A few of the nearby heroes hummed in agreement, relaxing back into their seats and watching with rapt attention as the oblivious alien continued to gloat over his own strength as he dramatically regrew his entire arm with a thought.

"Shut up."

The flat interruption seemed to surprise the pirate, who had obviously assumed the hero was too weakened to fight any further.

"Blah, blah, blah."

The landscape tilted to the left and then to the right as Saitama gently cracked his neck, and then leveled out as he stared in resignation at his enemy. "Are you finished yet...with this fight?"

Genos ached suddenly to hug his teacher. The endless well of sadness, the depth of grief in that one statement, was so all-encompassing that he would be surprised if anyone listening had missed it at all.

Outraged, the alien exploded into a ball of raw energy, snarling a defiant: "Not yet!!"

With a savage cry of "Meteoric Burst!" the pirate lord barreled toward the screen in a snarling visage of teeth and demonic power; Saitama had only the briefest moment to utter a sound of mild surprise before the impact flung him backward in an explosion of crackling power. Boros did not give him even a moment's respite, following his limp form and continuing the assault, sending him through miles of alien metal, utterly wrecking his own ship with the tiny human body of a simple hero. The pirate prattled on about his own power, boasting of its propensity to exceed the limit of human flesh, and then a mighty kick flung Saitama's body up into the sky as the world below exploded into fire and lightning; he careened upwards, passing clouds and watching silently as the ground fell away, farther, farther still, until-

...until he came to a stop in a crater on the moon.

Multiple exclamations of "WHAT!" and "What the fuck!!?!!" rippled among the citizens and heroes bearing witness to the battle of these two unfathomable titans, but Genos barely heard them as his jaw slowly slid open in awe. He had of course known that Saitama had been to the moon and back, as the man had briefly mentioned it and then subsequently lost the moon rock that had gotten stuck in his boots, but it was something else entirely to watch it happen. The entirety of planet Earth was contained on the screen, somehow more striking than any photo he had ever beheld, the depth of its blue and green magnificence magnified by the chance to see it through the eyes of his most beloved person.

(Wow.)
Saitama slowly sat up and looked around himself, marveling at the sudden change in location.
(Huh. Am I really on the moon?)

A wordless grunt of surprise echoed through the man's mind, and the blurry outline of a hand appeared at the bottom of the screen, clutching at the faint outline of his nose. (Shit, I can't breathe. Gotta get back.)

He vaulted upwards at an odd, lagging sort of pace, hovering above the surface of the moon for a brief moment.

(Hmm.)

Genos felt suddenly like laughing out loud. Whom else but his sensei could ever be in such a ridiculous situation?

The Saitama in the memory bent down, gently clutching a moon rock and testing its weight and momentum by tossing it ever so gently upwards. He closely observed its trajectory and the slowness of its nearly weightless movement, repeated the motion even more softly, and then clutched it firmly as he bobbed his head in a short, decisive nod.

(There. I think I've got the hang of it now.)

Saitama casually tossed the moon rock over one shoulder, crouched in preparation while gazing in determined resolve at the planet far above him, and then launched himself towards it. The audience surrounding them gasped wordlessly in awe.

With a sudden, blinding clarity, Genos realized that his teacher had been calculating the amount of force he would need to exude in order to land on the planet, rather than accidentally jump through it. He had always been indescribably impressed and awed by Saitama's limitless power, but this...this was beyond comprehension.

Holy shit!!

In the memory, Saitama landed with a colossal impact that buckled the sound barrier, immediately tilting the spaceship at a sharp (and rather obvious) angle.

"That was YOU?!” shrieked Tatsumaki in sudden outrage. Everyone in the building, including Saitama himself on the stage, flinched in surprise. Behind the S class row, Iaian snickered helplessly and then immediately stifled the sound before the Tornado's outrage could turn upon him. The esper wilted slightly in her chair, grumbling and hissing under her breath like an offended cat whose tail had been stepped on.

Above them all, the screen cleared of dust and debris to reveal Saitama stepping out of the crater he had made in the spaceship, calmly observing the earth and the very, very startled alien below him.

Boros stood in mute shock, his vibrant, neon skin and hair paling in bewildered awe. His one eye was nearly the size of his entire face, the sudden lack of mouth not diminishing his expression of disbelief in any way.

"Oh!” Saitama uttered, casually pleased with the results of his impossible leap. "I made it!"

Beneath him on the lower edge of the angled ship, the alien pirate's wide eye narrowed in apparent outrage. Utterly, wordlessly furious, the being shot towards his foe once again, unleashing a barrage of hits that didn't even slightly phase the yellow-clad hero.
At long last, a single, colossal punch was unleashed upon the alien, stopping his neon form mid-motion and sending a shiver of crimson markings through the previously monochrome body. The white face split open in a monstrous facsimile of a mouth, blood splattering out as the eye filled with crimson, spidery veins, and Boros was launched backward at an unstoppable speed. Far below the hero, he eventually managed to right himself and skid to a stop, blood splashing the metal at his feet as his oozing wound of a mouth moved to form the delighted words: "That's the way, Saitama! You are indeed worth the effort!"

(Time to end this...before he realizes.)

'Realizes'? Genos echoed within the confines of his own mind, thoroughly puzzled. "Realizes what?"

"Consecutive Normal Punches."

The flurry of red-gloved fists utterly blurred the screen, stopping only once the alien's body was a tattered, floating remnant, one single eyeball twitching in panic and undeniable pain. An explosion of blood and torn flesh splayed outward into the sky, revealing a single, pink jewel of contained energy at the center of the destroyed body. Humming in sudden interest, the S-class heroes whom had faced off against one of the alien generals together sat up straighter and stared avidly at the screen. Perhaps every alien invader had possessed a similar gem at their core, the source of their apparent regenerative abilities? Genos could only surmise this from the clues presented to him, but it seemed a fair assumption from the facts he'd gleaned about that day.

Impossibly, the shreds of Boros' body surged and knitted back together, his previously white body dyed a dark red as if it had sustained too much damage to fix itself properly. His singular eye erupted into a burst of golden lightning, energy snapping through the air in wild slashes and surging along the creature's spine.

"I will defeat you!!" Boros roared as his body dissolved into a form that was pure, raw power. "All of my energy will be released, sending you and this planet straight to hell!"

(....dammit. I don't want to have to kill you.)

Oh, sensei...

"Collapsing Star...Roaring Cannon!" the demonic energy visible on the screen shrieked in defiance, a black hole of sheer, unadulterated power untethered from the confines of its tiny container.

"In that case," murmured the hero from the past, resignation morphing into firm resolve. "I'll use my own final move."

Genos straightened abruptly in his seat, eyes wide. He had never seen his teacher do more than casual punching before; this was the chance of a lifetime! He was only sorry that he had missed it when it actually happened.

On the screen, Saitama's hand clenched into a tight fist, corded muscles flexing in his forearm through the tight spandex of his suit as he drew it back to deliver a single punch.

(I won't let you destroy this planet.)

"Killer Move, Serious Series: Serious Punch!"

(Ah. Looks like he's finally enjoying this.)
If Genos had not already been staring in expectant adoration at the screen, he would have groaned aloud at the man's utterly awful naming conventions. It was a fairly apt description, however, as his teacher was indeed serious and he did throw a single punch into the center of the energy blast headed straight for earth, and-

And the world on the giant screen above their heads imploded.

A void appeared in a perfect circle, directly in the center of the immense power that had been unleashed upon the Earth and its single, lonely defender; on the edges of that perfect circle of emptiness, a maelstrom of fire and ruin exploded outward in two perfect arcs, utterly wrecking the sound and light barriers of their planet and its laws of nature, a nuclear bomb detonated on the end of a small human fist. Within the center of its devastation, the atmosphere collapsed in upon itself as the very atoms within the air ripped themselves apart in a (frankly) terrifying display of Saitama's limitless power.

As the energy dissipated, a long chasm of emptiness stretched across the planet as far as their eyes could see; all clouds in the sky had buckled with the impact, outlining the cylindrical path left in the wake of the man's apocalyptic punch.

Silence reigned.

"...did I...lose?" came a raspy, weak shadow of Lord Boros' voice.

*How the hell is he even alive?!* Genos reeled. To possess the kind of strength that would allow a person to survive that-

"You're still conscious?" Memory-Saitama remarked in surprise, turning to gaze at the creature over one shoulder.

Gasps of horror traveled through all of the people captivated by these impossible memories; even Genos found himself somewhat recoiling at the ruined husk of the alien splayed out upon the hull of the spaceship. By all accounts, he shouldn't even be breathing, let alone speaking with even a remnant of intelligence - his body was a pale shadow of the immensity of his previous form, skin blackened and shriveled like an over-ripe plum, his hair in pale, wilting shreds lying limply on his head. His single eye was black and useless, and his organs were mere blobs on the metal below him, a useless wreck of a torso. (Seriously, how was he still alive?!)  

"You really are strong," Saitama acknowledged quietly, staring at his fallen foe.  

"The prophecy held true." Boros' lips moved minutely, his voice a gruesome wisp of his former baritone. "The battle was...hard-fought."

The scene whirled abruptly as Saitama turned away, focusing his gaze upon the horizon line where his single strike had split the heavens. "Yeah. It sure was."

(Don't notice. Don't notice. Please-)

"...you lie."

(Fuck.)

The screen darkened as Saitama's eyes closed abruptly, his regret evident without the need for any words.

"You were holding back," the alien continued relentlessly, his tone resignedly amused. "I never
stood a chance."

Memory-Saitama's eyes opened once more and lifted slowly to focus on the moon above the ship, where a dark crater left from his astounding leap could be seen from thousands of miles away.

"So much for prophecies," Boros gasped out a weak chuckle, and then he paused in a sorrowful moment of silence. "You're just...too strong..."

With a nearly soundless sigh, the scenery began to move as Saitama stepped forward, leaving the dying alien with his fallen ship.

"....Saitama..."

The choked, broken-off sound of his name was like a yearning sob on the wind. Genos flinched at the sound, but his teacher's stride in the memory did not falter as he walked away.

All of the scenery faded away, and then slowly altered to show an empty wall from their old apartment, blurred at the edges as if seen through grey fog.

(...that guy...he said he'd traveled the universe for 20 years...)

The scene darkened briefly as his eyelids closed and then opened in a slow, dazed blink.

(...but he never found anyone to match his strength...)

A brief silence followed as he quietly pondered this.

(...so then...that was it. That was the strongest guy I'll ever face. There's...no one else....

.............I'm alone.)

Genos ached. This is what his teacher had been thinking about, that day?

The scene darkened again, a longer pause as hours passed from that awful day. A muffled, incomprehensible shadow of the cyborg's own voice mumbled softly in the background; though Genos knew he'd been frantically trying to get through to the man, his words sounded garbled and far away as if spoken underwater.

"...sen-..................please-..................-up?"

The top half of Genos' face appeared on the screen, so blurred that only the barest hint of yellow hair and worried gold and black eyes could be seen, shapeless and without any definable outlines.

(......what's the point anymore?.......it doesn't matter......)

Closing his eyes again, the frantic blur of his concerned disciple disappeared from view.

(......................so tired.................)

Time surely passed in the memory, though it was only a brief moment for those watching, as the worried cyborg was gone when the screen filled with shapeless color once again.

(.............in the end, we were the same. Neither of us got what we wanted.)

The screen shifted a little as Saitama moved his head, catching a glimpse of Genos staring worriedly at him from the other end of the room - blurred but still recognizable.
Lazy eyes slowly blinked and tilted, gradually shifting their gaze across a tiny room to focus more steadily upon the blurred image of a blonde cyborg running their hands over their face, tugging on strands of grafted hair in frustration. The apathetic hero stared for a few moments in silence, and then he blinked once, quickly.

(...oh!)

The foggy shape of the cyborg on the screen refocused immediately, coming into sharp contrast with every tiny detail of his small metal parts and glinting eyes. Though the colors of the world were still somewhat dulled, Genos realized with startled clarity that none of Saitama's memories after the death of his mother had even come close to the sharp detail of this moment, ever so much more startling in contrast to the previously dulled moments of his teacher's past. But...what made this moment so special?

(...oh.)

Eyelids blinking rapidly, the Saitama of the past slowly moved a body that had been immobile for nearly twenty hours, grabbing onto the pillow under his head and clutching it with fingers that shook noticeably.

(That's right...... I'm not alone. Not anymore.)

With a quick, deft gesture, the pillow sailed across the room and smacked directly onto the past Genos' head. Black and gold eyes widened and swiftly jerked to one side to focus upon the hero lying in a disheveled futon. Hope twisted the cyborg's expression immediately.

(You're here.)

Seeing this moment from the eyes of his teacher was...heart-breaking, though he didn't actually have one anymore. Genos fidgeted in his chair, waiting for the moment he knew was coming; the one that had taken his world by the ankles and flung it upside down, irrevocably altered.

Ah, yes. There it was.

His inhuman skull filled the screen, looking as though he had just been slapped directly across the face unexpectedly; brown hulls and bits of fabric hung all over him like misshapen polka dots, accenting his impossibly widened eyes and slack lips.

The screen darkened as Saitama closed his eyes in the memory, laughing uproariously and utterly unrestrained.

"Y-your face-!! Hahaha!"

After several moments of unfettered humor, the screen filled with color once more, brighter and more vivid than ever before, as the hero opened his eyelids again.

"Ahh~ that was hilarious."

(..."like the flowers by the willow," huh?...)

(....why did he choose to destroy everything?............what made me so different?.............why did I never-)

"-ensei.......please-"
...what?

*Flowers?*

The edges of the screen crinkled as Saitama smiled at his friend and student, the last vivid rays of the sunset shining through the curtains over their window and alighting upon the cyborg's face in a deep orange and gold kaleidoscope.

He looked as if he were on fire.

(You were right, mother..... it really is a slow and gradual thing.)

Genos sucked in a sharp breath, reeling back in his chair at the same moment that the Saitama on-stage flinched where he sat, hunching his shoulders up as if to guard against an incoming blow to the head.

!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

[WARNING: Oxygen intake arrested. Core revolution levels exceed recommended baseline. Nucleus accumbens activity spike; dopamine levels rising rapidly.]

Recommendation: Restore oxygen levels immediately.

Subroutine: BREATHING OVERRIDE pending initialization.]

Genos gasped wildly, steam erupting from his shoulders in a ridiculous cloud that obscured him and the nearest S-class heroes from view of the audience behind them.
This- this- ohmygodohmygod holyshit does this really mean- oh oh oh fuck holy fuck SENSEI-??!

The scenes on the screen sped by quickly, continuing on despite the fact that his universe had just been hit by a god-level punch and remade from the ground up, whirling through scenes of Fubuki, King, Mumen Rider, and even Bang, inserting themselves into the heroes' domestic lives and cultivating a building, awkward friendship with each other. He paid exactly zero attention.

This- this- he meant- oh god.

His core revolved at a dizzying speed, sending a blinding blue light through the ventilation slats in his chest and illuminating his shirt and the cloud of steam hovering around him. So overwhelmed by the magnitude of meaning in that one, life-altering thought, he couldn't spare even the slightest breath to be embarrassed about his inhuman body's reaction or the heroes staring at him like he'd melted into a puddle right where he was seated.

Sensei......does this really mean you- that you-

Genos fixed his gaze upon his beloved hero, golden eyes burning into the hunched back and bald skull.

Are you in love with me?

(Could it really be?)

The thought seemed....ludicrous. Impossible. A cheap, yearning fantasy only dreamed of in the darkest of night, without even a sliver of the moon's glow to disrupt the inky depths of his most secret desires.

"Sensei," he choked out, biting his bottom lip and silently begging the man to turn around and somehow confirm his impossible hope. The world around them held no meaning; a monster could have broken into the stadium and he would not have noticed. There was no measuring how long he drifted, not hearing or seeing any of the hero's other memories for an indeterminable amount of time (the martial arts tournament? Garou? Who knew what he had missed-), until finally he registered that the lower half of the screen above Saitama's bowed head was suddenly filled with the backs of people's heads, gathered together in rows, as memory-Saitama's eyes focused upon a giant screen showing his smiling face.

"(...god, I love him so much. I want to-)"

"That's enough."

The screen went blank immediately as Saitama's hand darted forward swiftly, catching the wrist of Lady Kasumi and yanking her away from his head. She hastily began to stammer out apologies, but he ignored her and stood abruptly, turning to face Amai Mask several yards away.

"I'm done here," he announced firmly, staring at the blue-haired hero with a foreboding expression that dared him to contradict this pronouncement. "You have what you wanted."

The idol visibly faltered, glancing around as if he could find assistance from one of the other people on the stage. "I- ...this event isn't over yet, you can't just-

One moment Saitama was a slouched, unassuming man standing calmly next to a tiny, frail girl; the next-
An overwhelmingly powerful aura seeped into the air surrounding the stage as Saitama loomed into the taller hero's space, crowding him with an air of barely contained fury. His expression was utterly blank, but his eyes were dark and glinted with tightly leashed ferocity.

"Try and stop me," he murmured, tone deceptively calm and thoroughly devoid of any inflection.

Amai Mask shivered slightly, his eyes bright and wide in a disturbingly hungry way as he gazed back into the ticking time bomb before him.

"Genos."

He straightened immediately in his chair, feeling as though his core might explode right out of his chest cavity and spin across the floor toward the stage. His voice squeaked embarrassingly high as he replied: "Y-yes!"

"We're leaving."

"Yes, sensei!"

**Chapter End Notes**

**Trigger warnings:** violence, traumatic death of parents, child abuse, choking, attempted murder, bullying, attempted rape, suicidal thoughts, suicidal ideation, suicide attempt, chronic depression, heartache, etc.

Chikinaa, that last bit with Amai was for you. ;)

Since Murata revealed that Saitama had depression and apathy long before he gained his powers, I set out to answer how he might have become that way so early on. A traumatic childhood was my answer, though not necessarily one I had originally intended. Interestingly, the orphanage system in Japan is apparently horrible, with several stigmas associated to those who come from that background (according to my research); orphans tend to be turned down for jobs just on account of them having no family or thorough, stable upbringing. With this in mind, and the way Saitama never seems to have a last name attributed to him and gets turned down for jobs, I just kind of took that idea and ran with it. But I wanted him to have at least some joy, something to hold onto that would keep him plodding along and staying alive even when he doesn't want to, somewhere he learned that innate noble and humble kindness from, and so his incredible mother was born in my head. I hope my head canon is enjoyable to read and at least makes sense... :) Let me know your thoughts, please!
Chapter Summary

The internet explodes.

Chapter Notes

Oh my god you guys, I am so overwhelmed by all this feedback. ;;;

Also BK/noni drew more fanart and they are the most gorgeous things I have ever laid eyes on. Behold and weep, my friends. She has now drawn something beautiful for every chapter of this story. She is now the official Call Me Home illustrator. The end. ❤

PS learning to use CSS and HTML to format a chapter like this is absolute HELL.

Chester Bennington's suicide hit me like a fucking freight train and I needed time to grieve. On that note, I have something important to say. In this fic, I delve into an analysis of Saitama's canonical depression, apathy, and suicidal ideation. Many readers have commented that it felt real and visceral, and that it reminded them of their own struggles. The reason I am able to write that is because I have been there; I have stared into that void and come out the other side. I have permanent visible scars from attempts to kill myself and bleed out the numbing pain I was going through. If you ever feel this way and want to kill yourself, TALK TO SOMEONE. Hell, talk to me! Send me a PM, harass me on Twitter, just please do not go that route. The pain you think you are escaping does not end, it just transfers it to the people you left behind and leaves them with a gnawing, gaping open wound for the rest of their lives.

With that in mind, here is my writing Twitter: @aeryneverstar
Would love to chat with you anytime. I also post insights and thoughts about this fic, as well as fangirl over anime, and I sometimes post sneak peeks of the next chapter before it gets posted. (´⊙ω⊙´)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[Transcript of A City News' broadcast on 01/05/2017, 15:00]

[15:00:07] MIKA HATORI, SENIOR A-CITY NEWS ANNOUNCER: Good afternoon everyone, I am Mika Hatori and we are opening with breaking news from the A-City Concert Hall where the Heroes Association is holding their biggest publicity event on record - an inside look into the life events and memories of the H.A.'s most popular heroes. We have several reporters on site to bring you a high quality live-stream on our website and hope you will join us online. Right now we are following reports from our source at the scene; Takahashi-san, can you please let us know what's happening right now?

[15:01:37] DAISUKE TAKAHASHI, SENIOR LOCAL CORRESPONDENT: Hatori-san, I- I'm
still in shock. Everyone here has just borne witness to the origin of what may be the greatest hero our world has ever seen.

[15:01:52] MIKA HATORI: For our viewers, the esper who makes all of this possible is Lady Kasumi-san, whose unusual abilities allow her to project a person's memories on any available screen. Takahashi-san, you have just seen the memories of A-rank Hero: Caped Baldy, correct?

[15:02:26] DAISUKE TAKAHASHI: Y-yes, that is correct. Please excuse me, we are all very overwhelmed. It has just been revealed that Saita- that is, Caped Baldy-san, has performed far more acts of heroism than previously known by the public and has saved our world many times over. Whether the Association was aware of this before today is up for debate, as the staff members on stage all appear to be just as shocked as everyone else here.

[15:02:57] MIKA HATORI: We have been following live tweets of the public's response to the broadcast, and there are many demands from citizens for the Association to explain why Caped Baldy-san was given a C rank level upon his first exposure to the public; furthermore, several prominent members of society have pointed out that the H.A.'s ranking system is clearly flawed, if someone with this much power could be labeled as-

[A clatter filters through the microphone as the camera's viewpoint wavers in place, the cameraman lurching forward to correct the view and angle it toward the stage, where two heroes stand in each other's personal space.]

[15:04:05] DAISUKE TAKAHASHI: Ah! Forgive me for the interruption, but it seems as though Caped Baldy and Amai Mask are having a disagreement! He- I- oh my god how did he move so fast?! Did you catch that on camera?


[15:05:31] CAPED BALDY, A RANK HERO: We're leaving.

[15:05:49] DEMON CYBORG, S RANK HERO: Yes, sensei!

[15:06:01] DAISUKE TAKAHASHI: Caped Baldy and Demon Cyborg appear to have had enough of the event and are leaving without permission. Amai Mask, A Rank Hero #1, has made no move to stop them! I'm not sure if-

[The two heroes make their way down the aisles, heading for the exit. Suddenly, a loud, rhythmic clapping sound echoes through the stadium.]

[15:07:24] DAISUKE TAKAHASHI: It seems as though Mumen Rider, the Number 1 C Rank Hero, is leading a standing ovation for the two heroes! Look, King and Blizzard of Hell are also stand- and even Atomic Samurai, oh my go- and now the entire audience is standing and clapping for this previously unpopular hero!

[In the aisles, Caped Baldy and Demon Cyborg have stopped in place. Caped Baldy is looking around at all of the citizens clapping and cheering his name.]

[15:08:42] AUDIENCE: Saitama! Saitama! Saitama! Saitama!

[15:09:14] DAISUKE TAKAHASHI: Wow! This is unprecedented!

[The camera zooms in on Caped Baldy's face. His blank facade has cracked. His eyebrows are...}
furrowed over red-rimmed eyes, mouth turned down in a frown of confusion.]

[15:09:42] DAISUKE TAKAHASHI: He seems to be very, very lost. This may be the first time the public has ever acknowledged him with anything other than insults.

[Demon Cyborg reaches out to take Caped Baldy's hand. He tugs, and Caped Baldy stumbles into a walk once more, staring down at their clasped hands as he is led out of the stadium.]

[15:10:00] AUDIENCE: Saitama! Saitama! Saitama!

[TRANSCRIPT CONTINUED, SEE PAGE 167 OF ARCHIVED RECORDS.]

#hashtags.org

What's trending on Twitter right now?

According to Hashtags.org's proprietary trending algorithm, here are the current top 25 trending topics.

#capedbaldy, #demoncyborg, #demoncape, #saitama, #genos, #saigenos, #genosai, #liketheflowersbythewillow, #HeroismIn5Words, #heroassociation, #ProtectTheEgg, #fubukibestgirl, #HAexposed, #wtfboros, #DenominatorOfTheUniverse, #KINGREFUSES, #amaimask, #CinnamonRollMumen, #mumenrider, #TornadoOfTerror, #eggmama, #adorableborg, #genosfangirlsharderthanyou, #onepunch, #isthisreal

[Read More]

HERO ASSOCIATION OFFICIAL FORUMS

[H.A. Live Broadcast: Official Thread]

Join us in discussing the biggest public H.A. Event ever!

Posts and Replies: 282,597

Posted by: samuraiqueen547, 01 May 2017 at 02:14 pm

ARE YA'LL FUCKING SEEING THIS??!!??!!

Posted by: cyborgfan92, 01 May 2017 at 02:14 pm

UM YES WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK

Posted by: bananyachan, 01 May 2017 at 02:15 pm

How the hell did no one notice this? Like, wtf were the reporters doing when all this was goign on above the city?

Posted by: kingthebeast, 01 May 2017 at 02:16 pm

I thoght all civilians were killed or evacuated. Mumen Rider was ther helping with search n rescue, right?

Posted by: cyborgfan92, 01 May 2017 at 02:16 pm

Probably wasn't enough time to mobilize the news crews until after everything was
already over.

Posted by: bananyachan, 01 May 2017 at 02:17 pm

Ok like i get that, but seriously how did NO ONE KNOW about this badass guy until today? Like what the actual hell have the HA been even doing, stickin their heads under a damn rock? They're supposed to pick up on this kinda stuff yknow!?

Posted by: kingthebeast, 01 May 2017 at 02:22 pm

Dear GOD that is savage

Posted by: fcknpwned, 01 May 2017 at 02:22 pm

LULZ GET WRECKED ALIEN SCUM
@kristagotgame
@HeroAssociationOFFICIAL how did you NOT notice #capedbaldy is stronger than literally
every other hero? Like wtf? 2:12 PM - 1 May 2017

@tweetersgonewild
BRB curling up in a ball and sobbing my damn eyes out 2:25 PM - 1 May 2017
@tweetersgonewild
Like i can't hANDLE THIS OK ???!!? He's so pure and his childhood was so fuckign SAD

#ProtectTheEgg 2:25 PM - 1 May 2017

Telyne
@herofan4life
I'm calling it right now. #liketheflowersbythewillow is gonna be the new way to say "i love you" in

2017 2:55 PM - 1 May 2017
23.9K

@bananyachan
Ok but like, how did these oblivious dorks not realize how in love they were? I saw that in the first 15 mins of memories??? #demoncape FTW 2:32 PM - 1 May 2017

5
48
@HeroAssociationOFFICIAL
We are aware of your concerns and will be releasing an official statement soon. Please wait patiently for now. 5:00 PM - 1 May 2017

From: mccoy@heroassociation.com
To: agoni@heroassociation.com
Subject: RE: Mysterious man who saved my grandson

We've found him, sir.

Jack McCoy
Chief of Operations
Z-City Branch
Hero Association
"There have been numerous inquiries into the Hero Association's wisdom in determining Saitama, hereafter referred to by designed Hero Title: 'Caped Baldy', to be a C-Rank hero upon his joining
of the hero ranks under employ of the Association.

Therefore I, as the Director of the Main Branch of the Hero Association, along with the Registrar of Hero Records and Statistics who has authority to oversee and maintain these type of vital records, do hereby affirm that our staff examined Caped Baldy thoroughly in accordance with our corporate policy. His physical examination records surpassed all known limits of the human condition, however his written examination records did not adhere to the level expected and maintained by those heroes in the A-Rank or S-Rank.

High-ranking staff were immediately notified of Caped Baldy's exceptional physical records, and it was determined that he could be given an extreme rise in rank in accordance with our policies, provided that he demonstrate an acceptable level of interest in protecting unarmed and powerless citizens in need. This is why he was given the chance to become A-Rank far more swiftly than any other hero candidate in the past.

For further questions or inquiries into this matter, please contact the Citizen Liaison Department of the A-City Branch."

I certify that these statements are true to the best of my knowledge.

*Daisuke Kishitani*

Director and Head of A-City Main Branch
The Hero Association

---

*Kayuri Tamemura* (†hero_shipper67 †) wrote,
2017-05-01 19:29

Candid video of Demon Cyborg and Caped Baldy after The Event.
Yeah, that Event (TM).

[embedded video]

So I was super salty about my mom kicking me out of the HA memory viewing earlier today (had to take care of my bratty sister, blegh) but OH MY GOD LOOK AT THIS. *LOOK AT IT.*

Ok so for those poor souls who can't watch the video or in case the link gets broken, here's a rundown of what happened: so I'm walking down the hall heading back to the main lobby to wait for my parents, little sis in tow, when who pops out of the main hall but none other than fucking DEMON CYBORG OKAY. And he's holding Caped Baldy's hand and tugging him along, and you bet your little shipper's heart I grabbed my phone and hid quick af to try and get a good shot. Stupid me starting recording a video instead of taking a picture but *hey that turned out even better; holy mother of god!!!!*
Right so next thing I know Caped Baldy has collapsed against the wall and he's shaking and covers his face with his hands and then Demon Cyborg is RIGHT UP IN HIS PERSONAL SPACE like hot damn yes please. And I can hear him asking "Sensei! Saitama-sensei! Are you alright?!" and then he just stands there freaking out (have i mentioned how freaking adorable that borg is?????), and then in this little quiet defeated voice Baldy says "I don't...know how to deal with this right now, Genos" and after a few moments of silence Demon Cyborg pulls Baldy's hand away from his face and gets so close to his face I fucking stopped breathing.

Then he says, "Sensei" and Baldy looks up into his eyes and he just looks so damn lost I wanted to give him a hug, and they're fucking LOOKING INTO EACH OTHERS EYES LIKE A HOLLYWOOD ROMANCE FILM and then Demon says "Come home with me...Saitama-sensei" while GENTLY HOLDING HIS FACE WITH BOTH HIS HANDS and they're just standing there, like freaking 5 centimeters apart, not even kissing, just looking into each others' eyes and,

I FELT LIKE A GODDAMN VOYEUR.

❤️ 1.2M | 875,239 shares | 114,371 comments

Chapter End Notes

UPDATE AS OF 5/9/18:
I am going through a deeply personal, emotional, and stressful crisis right now.

I have not forgotten about this story. But it will be some time before I can post the next chapter. I am....really going through a lot right now.

UPDATE AS OF 8/15/18:
I am working on chapter 6! Hope to post an update soon. :)

UPDATE AS OF 3/07/19:
Hey so 2018 can go fuck itself. I had to have hand surgery to repair an excessive amount of damage to my left hand and have to be very careful how much time I spend typing. I know it's been ages since this was updated, and I'm truly sorry for that. But please know that I am working on this, little by little, and fully intend to finish the story. I adore you all. Thank you for loving this story and giving it so much more attention than I ever anticipated or dreamed of. You're amazing.

UPDATE AS OF 11/9/19:
I'm almost done with the next chapter.

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If you like my writing or my artwork, you can find me on Twitter!
Colors

Chapter Summary

The Talk™.

Chapter Notes

I LIVE BITCHES

Okay, but in all seriousness: I’m truly sorry this has taken so long. Life happened, shit hit the fan, 2018 and 2019 have been actual hell. I had to have surgery on my left hand and was unable to write for months, then ended up homeless for a couple weeks, etc. It’s...been a wild ride. Thank you for your patience and understanding during this long wait!!!

Noni (@balljointcyborg on Twitter) continues to be a goddess and truly amazing friend, and has gifted the world with this incredible fanart of toddler Saitama and his lovely mother. Weep with me.

Also, HOLY SHIT, Call Me Home was recommended on the TV Tropes OPM page. My life is complete.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Their trip home was weirdly anticlimactic.

No monsters made any attempts to halt their progress or destroy the city, no civilians stopped them on their way back to headquarters, and the halls of the Hero Association were utterly silent with all of its resident heroes still holed up in the auditorium where their world had crumbled at their feet. Neither of them even attempted to speak to each other on the way home, still reeling from the event they had walked out of.

Just a few short hours, Saitama reflected idly as he watched Genos unlock the door to their shared apartment. Why is it, that the most drastic life changes happen so quickly?

The cyborg hesitated before entering the apartment first, standing rigidly at attention while holding the door open as Saitama slouched through the open frame. He raised his gaze from the floor and glanced at Genos as he stepped by, their eyes catching and snagging on each other like a live electrical current. Saitama swallowed, staring at the unnatural golden glow of the cyborg's eyes set inside deep black sclera, and then blinked and looked away, severing the connection as he stepped into their home.

"Tadaima," he murmured tiredly, already stripping his hero gloves off in the relief of having four walls between him and the rest of the noisy world.

Behind him, the sound of their front door closing preceded a quiet response of "okaeri."
Saitama flinched as his still-aching heart throbbed once in reply, flashing back to the fresh memory of the first time they'd exchanged those words. Everything felt so new and so raw, in the wake of that stadium with its too-bright lights and too-loud people; too many eyes all staring at him as he fumbled through the only emotion he'd ever experienced strongly enough to shatter the deep fog of apathy that had colored his world for so many years.

He didn't know what to focus his thoughts upon first. Everything was a horrifying jumble of colors and sound and emotion, a disembodied thing that reached out to grab his heart so carelessly, gouges left behind in the wake of its grasping claws. Should he break the strange silence that had fallen over them? He'd asked Genos to talk with him after everything was over, hadn't he? God, could he even handle something like that right now? What if they started and he opened his mouth and he didn't know what to say? Or worse, what if everything just fell out of his throat in a merciless jumble like the incessant rants he always told Genos to cut off before-

"Sensei?"

With a sharp intake of breath, Saitama blinked and settled back into the bland quiet of their living room. With a mild jolt of surprise, he realized his right hand was rubbing fiercely at the skin over his heart; he quickly lowered it before turning to face his cyborg roommate. "Hm?"

"I..." and here Genos paused, his thick eyebrows furrowing down over a concerned gaze that lingered where his fingers had been. "......would you like for me to make some supper?"

The bald hero briefly entertained the thought of eating and decided immediately that no, he very much did not want to send food into his roiling stomach.

"No thanks."

His roommate and...friend?...frowned at his response and appeared to be seconds away from stubbornly protesting, so Saitama turned away and finished stripping out of his hero suit, leaving him clothed in nothing but his boxers and the beginning warm hues of the sunset filtering through their window. He hung up the yellow spandex and its accompanying cape, then tossed his crimson gloves and boots on the floor beneath it. He turned back around with the intention of heading for the closet where their clothes were stored (pajamas and bed sounded wonderful right about now), and caught a glimpse of Genos staring fixatedly at him before quickly averting his eyes with a little puff of steam shot out of both upper vents.

_Hm? That's odd, why is he- ...oh. OH._

Well. Shit. He had forgotten about the awkward silent elephant in the room for a minute there.

"Um...hey, listen-" he began haltingly. "I... I know I said we should talk after- after everything. But..."

"It can wait!" the cyborg yelped, his eyes widening as more puffs of steam filtered out of his vents. "It's - I know it's been a horrible day for you, sensei, I completely and wholeheartedly understand if you want to put off our talk until tomorrow or the day after or- or, well. Okay, I would still like to talk about what happened today at some point, but I know this has been a trying day by all accounts and it is perfectly understandable if you want to take some time to decompress and think over all that has occurred and maybe if-"

"Dude."

This one word was usually enough to stop his babbling tangents, and it worked satisfyingly again
now. He eyed the shape of the cyborg's cellphone in his pants pocket, remembering the broken shards of his own raining down around him, the fragments of his iron composure shattered in the wake of one simple thought spoken aloud for all the world.

Too much.

He sighed. "Can...we just go to bed? All of...that stuff. Can it just...be a problem for tomorrow's Saitama?"

Gold eyes stared at him unblinkingly as the cyborg reflected over his halting words.

"......yes. Of course, sensei."

They prepared for bed in tense silence.

Saitama grabbed his new striped pajamas (a replacement for the ones destroyed in the Monster Association's recent attack) and pulled them on quickly, trying not to wonder as he did so if Genos' awkward behavior meant that his.....feelings.....also translated to physical attraction. Can cyborgs even be physically attracted to another person? His disciple had behaved a little oddly at his lack of clothing, but did that really mean he'd been checking him out or-

No, he decided quickly, cutting off the thought as swiftly as one of his serious punches. Don't think about that now.

He tried to keep his mind blank as they finished getting ready. The two heroes brushed their teeth together quietly, with only the soft sounds of gargling or spitting breaking the gentle silence that had fallen over their shared living space. They rolled their futons out on the floor, side by side as usual, and slid under their respective covers at the same time.

Genos looked at him for a moment, and then closed his eyes and murmured quietly, "Good night, sensei."

Saitama hesitated before responding, wishing he could punch away the awkwardness coiling between them like an impassable ravine. He reached out his hand unconsciously at the thought, but stopped himself before he had the chance to make a fist.

With a quiet sigh, he closed his eyes as well and opened his mouth to convey the same. "Good night, Ge-"

He froze.

"Because I was born from genocide."

Oh. He had almost forgotten.

"Hey."

The cyborg did not respond in any way, but Saitama knew he hadn't gone into sleep mode yet - there was no mistaking that quiet hum of the revolving blue core and multiple fans inside his cybernetic frame.

"What's your name?"

At this abrupt question, Genos' eyes opened and re-focused upon his teacher, confusion evident on his smooth features. "S...sensei? I don't understa-"
"Your name. What is it?"

"My...?" Alarm swelled over the young man's tone immediately. "Sensei, are you having trouble with your memories after that woman-"

"I'm asking for your name."

The cyborg froze with a hissed inhale, at last understanding the deeper meaning of his question. Only the quiet whirring sound of his retinas widening and focusing as he analyzed the words betrayed his rapt attention, his irises glinting gold in the fading glow coming through their window.

Long minutes passed in silence as they gazed at each other, the world falling away in the hush of nightfall as soft tendrils of moonlight began to creep across their floor.

".........Kaito," the young cyborg whispered finally, a hushed murmur, quieter than their own breath. "....my name....was Ishikawa Kaito."

Saitama began to move the hand he had reached out with previously, slowly edging across the floor while continuing to hold his disciple's eyes, at last bridging the silent divide between them. Those shining gold irises faltered, glancing down at the hand moving across the floor, then darted back up to focus upon his face. Uncertainty flooded his otherworldly sclera for a moment, and then the cyborg quietly reached out as well.

Their hands met in the middle distance between them, at first tentative and hesitant, then slowly gaining confidence in the connection as their knuckles intertwined. Saitama laced their palms together, holding the other's gaze with his own as warmth built between their bonded hands.

"Nice to meet you...Kaito." He felt one side of his lips quirk up slightly, the aching organ in his chest clenching with a quiet, painful joy. "My name was Furukawa Makoto. ....yoroshiku."

The ebony of his disciple's synthetic eyeballs glinted with shimmering liquid that sparked rainbow in the moonlight for but a single moment, and then it was blinked back fiercely. "Yoroshiku."

Saitama found himself smiling, just a little, as he closed his eyes on their tumultuous day.

"Good night, Kaito."

"...good night.......Makoto-sensei."

He snorted, eyes slitting open to glare at the cheeky cyborg. "Oi. Lay off the sensei."

Genos flashed a wide, brilliant grin at him (bright, so bright), and then closed his eyes and immediately powered down into sleep mode - effectively ending any sleepy protests. Faint traces of the boyish smile he'd gone to sleep with lingered along the edges of his lips, and Saitama found himself staring at them until his eyelids drooped.

He followed the cyborg into peaceful sleep in this way, with the remnant of a smile on both of their mouths, their fingers entwined gently over the space between their futons.

Saitama had expected to dream of his mother; of blood and tears and broken screams that fractured into wailing sobs of agony and grief. Of houses exploding from the inside, purple skin shuddering with death throes, shattered spines and bloody smiles that faded into a silent, expressionless line under empty eyes.
Instead, he dreamed of their garden; of gentle hands nudging the dirt and tenderly cultivating the plants as they grew; little buds of sunflowers peeking out from dark soil, new fledgling seeds of life. The loud, familiar buzzing of cicadas drowned out the sound of the wind whistling through rustling leaves above their heads, a contented hum in the background as the summer heat seeped warmth into the back of his neck.

She smiled at him gently; beautiful, kind, and radiant as a sunflower. "Have you found it yet? Your answer?"

He found himself looking up, searching out the brilliant rays of sunlight as they fell through the parted leaves and branches entwined above him, connecting across the divide of the sky. Bright light sought out the deep shadows beneath their old willow tree, teasing color out from the shaded garden below.

The world was hued in gold.

Makoto smiled.

"Yes. I found him."

Saitama woke slowly, gradually fading into awareness with long and quiet breaths. It was rare to awaken in such an unhurried way these days; they were so often awoken by the pinging of a distress call or the city's threat level announcements, he had stopped buying alarm clocks altogether. Even if there were no disasters, his cyborg roommate usually woke him promptly before seven with an enthusiastic "Good morning, sensei!" as soon as his sleep mode had finished.

Confused and somewhat delirious with the cobwebs of deep sleep and peaceful dreams, it took him far too long to realize that his fingers were empty.

He stretched out his hand blearily, seeking the warmth from the night before. Grimacing, he forced his eyes open to search out the cyborg so often found at his side.

"Genos?" he croaked, blinking. The word sounded odd in his mouth now. I wonder why...?

A faint clatter from the kitchen made him blink a little more forcefully, and he sat up with an enormous yawn, stretching his arms over his head as high as they could reach. The blankets shifted down to pool around his hips, and he scratched idly at his stomach while waiting for his brain to wake up fully for the day. After several quiet moments contemplating the dust motes floating in front of their uncovered balcony door, turned shimmering and golden in the light of the morning sun, he finally blinked back into awareness and memory.

Yesterday had been...catastrophic, honestly. He hadn’t realized how much he had managed to push away the memories of that awful day that had ruined all chances of happiness in his childhood.

(He didn’t want to remember.)

There was just.....so much. He felt like an entire planet had shifted on its axis in the wake of yesterday’s devastation. Everything had changed. What had once been a gentle, warm breeze morphed into a torrential cyclone that sunk claws into the fabric of his life and wrenched the threads apart, leaving behind fibers so shattered that nothing could ever hope to repair the remains. He was unwoven, undone, immeasurable strength unmade at last.

He didn’t know how to live this way, with his heart broken open, raw and oozing emotion inside his chest like streams of blood, sobbing with every shuddering beat.
"Ah! Good morning, sensei. I made breakfast."

He looked up at the words and felt his lips curl involuntarily in a tiny smile as his disciple rounded the corner of the kitchen entryway and stepped into the living room. "Good morning Geno- ...ah. Kaito."

The cyborg smiled at him shyly, his eyes flicking down to gaze at the bowls clutched in both of his hands. "You don't have to use my old name, sensei."

Saitama’s mouth twisted at the edges. "I'm not going to call you Genocide."

"Gen-? What?" the cyborg blinked at him owlishly in bafflement, then grinned ruefully in realization. "Oh. To be honest, sensei, I stopped thinking of that name as 'genocide' long ago. 'Genos' is the name that my sensei calls me, and all of our friends. It is a good name. I would be honored if you continue to use it."

His fingers twitched in surprise as his heart throbbed, sudden and sharp. Saitama huffed quietly and rubbed at his chest. Would it continue to ache this way from now on? How annoying.

"Sensei? Are you feeling well?"

Saitama hummed noncommittally and slid out of his futon, preparing to roll it up and store it for the day. He could feel Genos' gaze linger on him for a few moments longer, and then the bowls clattered quietly as the blonde set them down on the table for their meal. After storing his futon away, they ate together in silence. The awkwardness from the night before slowly crept back into the space between them, filled with things unsaid and the heavy weight of memories from two lifetimes.

After they had both finished, they lingered at the table in an odd limbo of quiet anticipation, waiting to see what the other would do or say.

Floundering to find something to break the silence, the bald hero finally blurted, "Are you really in love with me?"

He blanched immediately (that's not what I meant to say!!) and stared wide-eyed at the cyborg seated across from him, whom had frozen in unabashed shock. Genos blinked rapidly, lowered his gaze to his hands, then clenched them and sat up straighter. He lifted his jaw and gazed directly into his teacher's eyes, a defiant challenge in every angled line of his body.

"Yes. Yes, I am."

Air snagged in Saitama's throat immediately, an impassable lump preventing any breath from passing through. His chest shuddered with a nameless ache.

Irrationally, he wanted to thank and curse Genos at the same time. He could now feel all the emotions that had been so far out of his reach for endless years, but...god, it hurt. How did people live this way?

"And you, sensei?" Genos asked, hesitation lacing his soft tone. "Is- Is it true that...you, also-?"

Saitama stilled.

"I..." he swallowed. "I don't know."

His student's golden eyes immediately filled with a sharp hurt that was quickly covered by a
trembling, forced neutrality. "...I see."

Ah, fuck. He was doing this all wrong.

"No, that's- I don't mean it like that. It's- I think so? I think I am, but...I don't..." he shook his head, clamping his mouth shut firmly and frowning down at their table. After a few brief seconds of silence, he attempted words again. "I don't really know what love feels like, Genos. I've never felt anything like that before. For a long time, I didn't feel emotions at all. And then..."

Saitama looked up slowly, focusing on the cyborg's face. His chest felt sore, like an invisible bruise had stretched over his heart and left to fester into ragged pieces.

"Then I met you."

Genos' expression relaxed minutely, his lips quivering with some unnamed, held-back emotion. His otherworldly eyes filled with a careful, reserved spark of hope.

"I don't...know how to explain it. I thought I would never feel anything ever again, that the price of my strength was the loss of whatever it is that makes us human." He paused, gazing down at one hand as he flexed it, feeling the power that simmered under his skin, tightly leashed at all times. "I didn't realize, at first, that I was already starting to feel again. You brought color...and life...back to me, before I even knew what was happening. I felt irritation, and sadness, and...and even happiness. I had forgotten...what that felt like."

The bald hero glanced up again, dimly registering the way his pulse was beginning to speed up, thrumming nervously in the spaces behind his eyes and eardrums. His disciple's black and gold eyes glinted faintly, the beginning traces of oil seeping out to coat his lashes.

"So...I don't know that this is...that. But I..." He paused, one edge of his mouth quirking up in self-deprecating smile, trying to put words to that nameless something clenching deep within his chest. 

("I suppose it's when you find someone that you feel you cannot live without.")

"I want you to stay by my side. I want to turn, and always find you there. I want to eat udon with you. I want to kill monsters with you. I want to go to bed and see your face, and I want to wake up and see your face. I want to go to sales at the supermarket together. I want to always come home with you." He swallowed, trying to open up his throat as it closed around the words. (What is this overflowing feeling...) "Because of you, I was given the chance to meet others. I was moved. I got to discover emotion. The world took on...color, and meaning. Everything you say and do is...so bright, it's blinding. Sometimes I want to squint, or close my eyes and turn away, but you- you opened up the world for me, when I had always thought I couldn't possibly fit, that I didn't know how to be happy. My world was grey, until I met you. And now I -"

Saitama faltered, realizing suddenly that his disciple had silent trails of oil pouring freely down his face, gathering at the lower edges of his jaw and dripping into a small puddle on his lap. "Ah-sorry, I'll get you a towel."

He placed his hands on his knees, pushing down to counterbalance as he gently hefted his body up into a standing position. A silver hand caught the edge of his sleeve and held on tightly, tugging him to a stop as he tried to shuffle past. He glanced down curiously, confused.

Genos stared up at him, his lips clamped together in a trembling frown, framed by twin streams of ebony. "Sen- Sai-.....Makoto." (Saitama's breath caught in his lungs, strangled and throbbing.) "That's...that was beautiful. You are beautiful. I...I always want to be at your side. I promised you,
before: I will always follow you, for the rest of my life. I never want to be anywhere else. My home is you.”

They gazed at each other for a long, charged moment, bereft of further words. Saitama eventually tugged his arm out of the cyborg's hold and went to retrieve a towel; after returning to the table, he knelt down in front of Genos and gently framed his face with his hands, covered with the edges of the towel. Golden eyes closed as he rubbed the oil off with firm, yet gentle scrubbing; on a sudden whim, he leaned forward and placed an affectionately chaste kiss on the other's forehead, relishing the texture of his soft golden bangs.

Black eyelashes fluttered open, lifting slowly to reveal the cyborg's amber irises, covered in a thin sheen of translucent, shimmering liquid. The wet strands glistened in the amber light of morning.

"Sensei..." Genos whispered, his voice a low, molten hum.

"Hmm?" he hummed distractedly in response, focusing on the traces of oil refracting into rainbow hues across the cyborg's skin.

"May I kiss you?"

Saitama jumped in surprise, his fingers spasming so abruptly he accidentally ripped straight through the towel. Ignoring the shredded remains for the moment, he lifted his eyes up to lock with his disciple's own. His heartbeat felt very strange and uneven, tripping over itself at the base of his throat.

"I...you..." he stuttered, blinking twice in astonishment. "You want to...?"

Genos gazed back at him with that same intensity he had always possessed from the very first day they had met, sincerity emanating from his eyes with quiet, steadfast determination. "Yes. I would...very much like to kiss you, Makoto."

_He needs to stop saying my name like that_, Saitama thought wildly, barely skirting the edge of panic while his expression remained as blank and apathetic as his heart had once been.

Once, he had tried to fit in with the rest of society and attempted kissing with a few people, but that was a very long time ago (and he had never truly understood the appeal of smashing your mouth against someone else's). He had always supposed that something within him was just broken, fractured and irreparable, unable to comprehend the same feelings and desires the rest of humanity seemed to ease into so naturally.

What if they kissed, and he still felt nothing?

(What if he was just...not really human?)

They stared at each other, one resolute and unyielding in his patient expectance of an answer, the other floundering and hesitant to confirm his own doubts and fears.

"S-...sure," he answered slowly.

His disciple eyed him for a moment longer, considering. “Are you certain?”

Saitama waited for one heartbeat to pass, then another.

"Yeah.”
Genos did not move for several more heartbeats, then slowly, carefully, began to shift toward him.

The hero kept very, very still as his student (friend? lover??) gradually leaned closer. Cybernetic hands reached up cautiously, cupping his jawline with such tender care his heartbeat tripped over itself in agonized expectancy. Genos drifted closer, filling his world with a myriad of golden hues. A gentle huff of breath ghosted over lips frozen slack in shock, dragging a shiver down the edge of his spine to pool molten heat in his gut. His muscles tensed in flinching anticipation, waiting for that first moment of contact with a yawning void of anxiety churning deep inside him, coaxing him into trembling, frozen dread.

"...breathe, sensei," Genos murmured softly. They were so close by now that Saitama could feel the smile curving up the corners of his disciple’s lips rather than see it, each movement as his mouth coiled around those two simple words brushing the tiny sliver of air between them and sending electricity skittering down his tightly clenched muscles.

Saitama’s mouth trembled as a tiny amount of irritation flared up inside him (why was he the only one affected by this tidal wave of nervousness??); but just as quickly as it had come, it immediately faded into warm, giddy affection as his gaze focused upon the anxious widening of Genos’ cybernetic pupils. He realized suddenly that the other male was just as overwhelmed; evident by the frantic refocusing of his golden irises and the swift whirring of his core, casting both of their skin into shades of iridescent blue, lit from below. Despite the anxious longing reflecting in that otherworldly gaze, still the cyborg remained a fraction of a breath away, watching across the tiny space between them, waiting for that final assurance that his actions were not unwanted.

He smiled back, just a little, feeling the tension shuddering through his frame relax with each wild twirl of that azure light. It's just Genos, he assured himself silently, staring into the gold and black eyes he’d become so familiar with over the last year. The same person whom had seen the worst of him and yet remained at his side, steadfastly loyal and affectionate.

Even if his fears were proven true and he couldn’t share the same desires or feelings...

Genos wouldn’t leave him.

With this thought held firm in his mind, Saitama tilted his head ever so slightly, closed his eyelids, and broached that final breadth of distance between them, gently fitting their lips together at last.

Despite being the one to initiate contact, the easy touch of their mouths against each other sent shockwaves of electricity skidding down his chest, pooling giddy warmth within his gut. They touched lips together with careful hesitance at first, gradually easing into cautious movements that slowly gained confidence with each serene caress against each other as neither male pushed the other away.

It had been so long since he’d felt such tender and intimate physical contact with another person; the shock of it urged his mouth open on a gasping inhale that fitted their mouths together even more closely. The cyborg made a contented hum of surprise deep within his throat, breathing out into the shared space between them, dragging tension and heat across his shoulder-blades like the pinpricks of tiny claws.

Saitama wasn’t entirely certain how he felt, in this moment. A part of him was occupied with a bemused, distracted focus upon the odd softness of his student’s cybernetic skin (what was he
made of??). Though there was no discernible taste to the fake skin beneath his mouth, and the texture made the inhuman composition of his counterpart immediately apparent, each drag and slide of their mouths against each other was soft and gentle, tripping warmth across his veins. Nothing made of metal bones and bolts should feel that soft, and yet he felt no resistance or coldness against the hesitant brush of his lips.

The other half of his mind was focused solely upon his remaining senses: the beating of his own heart, speeding up and tripping over itself with insistent urgency as their mouths continued to brush together with aching gentleness, thumping louder than he had ever heard it, shuddering at the base of his throat and reverberating against the inside of his eardrums; the soft, gasping friction of their mouths fitting against each other, gentle wet sounds breaking the silence surrounding their intermingled air.

Metallic fingers shifted against the line of his jaw, tilting his head down just slightly so their foreheads could touch once more. Their panting breaths collided in the tiny space between them, skidding heat and contented joy down the edges of his spine.

"Is this okay?" Genos murmured breathlessly against him, the shape of each word bringing their mouths into brief contact and sending shivers through them both.

Saitama only hummed in response, feeling oddly drunk on the intensity of this shared intimacy. He did not experience the explosion of sheer lust that others in his past had spoken of (and which he had privately wondered at the absence of in himself), but his past attempts hadn’t prepared him to expect this gentle passion shared between two people who cared for each other, either. The tumbling fog of random thoughts in his head had quieted, replaced by a heady, tingling warmth shimmering like sunlight through his veins.

He felt content...warm, understood, wanted.

Maybe...he could feel like this every day?

Maybe the resurgence of his emotions wasn’t as terrible as he had thought?

Maybe, just maybe...this was okay.

Tilting his head once more, he pushed his lips up against the cyborg’s pale ones and breathed out softly against them, eyes hooded and unfocused. Genos shuddered visibly and huffed a low groan out of his straining voice box, pressing against him firmly with more urgency than before.

With no small amount of surprise, Saitama jolted as a synthetic tongue tentatively slid between his open lips. He froze momentarily, eyes widening as he refocused his wandering gaze upon the shining pupils in front of him. Genos returned his look calmly, eyelids hooded and gaze simmering molten gold, reaching out again with his tongue to stroke against his own with cautious gentleness. His eyes seemed to ask for permission and oozed reassurance at the same time. Saitama gave a mental shrug, closed his eyes, and deliberately relaxed muscles that had tensed at the new form of contact between them.

The metal fingers cupping his lower jaw pressed insistently, tilting his head a little more to the side, deepening the angle of their kiss. He met the other with shy hesitance, fumbling to extend his tongue forward to brush softly against the foreign one inside his own mouth. They slid against each other with a wet, easy glide and, to his bafflement, tasted slightly of spearmint and artificial sugar. He hummed in curiosity and pushed closer, chasing the sweet taste and lapping up more with every swipe of his tongue.
A deep, throaty sound reverberated up from the cyborg’s vocal cords, shuddering through their combined lips and vibrating across the surface of his mouth. Saitama flinched back in startled surprise as a bolt of heat and raw, desperate want lanced through his frame, culminating in a full-body shudder. He gasped and winced at the force of it, clutching at the shredded remains of cloth still tangled around his fingers as if they could somehow steady his bewildered confusion.

*I've...never felt that before. What...?*

"Sensei? Are you alright?"

Genos lurched closer and frantically scanned his face with both eyes. "Did I hurt you? Was that too far? Are-"

"I'm okay," Saitama reassured his disciple quickly to stave off any panicked babbling. "It was just..."

He hesitated, unsure how to form the contradictory gaggle of emotions churning in his guts into words. Lamely, he stuttered out a soft: "Just...a lot."

His student relaxed visibly, posture sagging a little in evident relief. "Too much at one time? Yes, I understand. I'm sorry, sensei."

Saitama smiled softly at the cyborg, reaching out to place a comforting hand on top of those silken blonde strands. "Genos, it's okay. I...didn't dislike it."

Gold eyes snapped up quickly to stare at him in hopeful, nearly childish delight. "Really?!"

A weird, fluttery emotion coiled behind his ribcage like a panicking bird. Was it normal for his cheeks to feel so warm and...oddly tight?

He hummed in response, absently pondering the strange heat that slithered beneath his skin. "Mhm. I enjoyed it. We can...do it again, sometime."

Genos stared at him, awestruck. "Sensei...you're -- ...you're blushing."

Blinking in surprise, the hero raised one hand and poked at his cheek tentatively. “Interesting.”

When was the last time he’d felt like this? (Had he ever felt like this?) Everything felt so... new, and strange. Like he had missed a step while climbing a flight of stairs, but instead of catching himself on the railing, he just kept falling down more steps. All the emotions he'd been unable to feel (or, perhaps, suppressed?) for so long clambered over each other like newborn kittens, yowling loudly for his attention, so that it was hard to focus on just one feeling at any given moment. In the space between his sternum where once before had been a yawning void of apathy, now resided a jumbled mess of joy, contentment, unease, nervousness, and curiosity; too intense to be anything other than painful.

Yet still, he wouldn't trade them for anything in the world.

He hummed thoughtfully, leaning forward to press their foreheads together once more, and simply breathed.

How to put this feeling into words?

"Genos..." he murmured, gazing unfocused at the golden strands before his eyes. "...stay with me."
The young cyborg's smile was audible in his reply.

"Always, sensei. I'm yours."

Oh, *fuck*.

"T-too much..." he mumbled, pitching forward so his face was hidden in the crook of the cyborg's neck. His cheeks ached again with that strange, phantom burning sensation.

The cybernetic body beneath him shook slightly with a quiet rumbling chuckle, much like the purring of a cat or an idle engine. Genos shifted then, lifting his right arm to curl up and around his back securely; the other arm snuck upwards from his opposite side, smooth fingers sliding gently across the nape of his neck before cupping firmly. The touch sent light sparks fluttering down the length of his spine, making him shiver even as he leaned into the hold, grounding him in the quiet, contented silence of their gentle morning.

They stayed that way for long, endless minutes; simply basking in their shared peace as they breathed the same air.

Eventually, Saitama shifted in the cyborg's hold, eyes gliding lazily across the dust motes dancing in the sunbeams coming in through their window. "What happens now?"

Genos hummed thoughtfully. "We have not received a summons from the Association yet, to my knowledge; so I am uncertain as to whether our presence will be required for official hero duties today."

Sighing, the bald hero straightened upwards out of their peaceful embrace. "Well I broke my phone, so I wouldn't know even if they did summon me. Is there anything on our door again?"

"You- ..." Genos blinked owlishly at him. "How did you break...?"

Saitama looked away and scratched his cheek, slightly embarrassed. "...lost control of my strength."

This was not an unusual occurrence for the bald hero, as many an alarm clock and other assorted furniture had been casualties of his unthinking strength, so Genos accepted this easily with a brief nod and turned to locate his own phone to check for any missed messages from the Hero Association. Whilst he did so, Saitama gathered their abandoned dishes from breakfast and transported them to the kitchen for washing.

He scratched idly at the back of his calf with one foot as he worked, staring at the water flowing in gentle rivulets over his hands as they gently scrubbed and cleansed. It had always been easy for him to disassociate while focusing on any given task, even as a child, and he found himself again slipping readily into that deeply quiet headspace that was so familiar to him. Distantly, he felt his shoulders loosen and release tension inherited from the previous day, an anxious weight he hadn’t even realized he was still carrying. Breathing deeply in the stillness, he distractedly turned off the faucet and drifted over to the cleaned dishes, drying them slowly and methodically.

With an unhurried blink, Saitama turned his focus inward and began to unravel the tangle of memories and emotions from the night before. Hearing that Genos was in love with him had shattered the barrier he’d previously thought so impenetrable, causing all of his muted emotions to rise instantly to the surface and overflow into all the empty spaces between. Though Saitama had already been slowly regaining his ability to experience emotion ever since the cyborg inserted himself forcibly into the hero’s empty existence (a realization that still surprised him even now),
yesterday had broken open the tiny crack within his soul and turned that gradual trickle of feeling into a flood of intensity. Talking with the cyborg this morning had centered him, their long peaceful embrace grounding him, and now he had finally begun to feel as though the shattered structure of his inner self was rebuilding its mental foundations. Though the breadth of his unbound emotions still felt overwhelming at times, he no longer felt as though he were drowning beneath their weight.

Smiling softly, Saitama blinked back to awareness and gazed in surprise at the empty counter before him. Normally Genos would find him and break through his deep reveries, or at the very least interrupt his attempts at cleaning with a precocious demand to take over as his disciple, so it was rather odd that he had been left to his own quiet devices for so long. Humming with an inquisitive tilt of his head, the hero turned swiftly and headed back towards their main living area, seeking out the north star to his quietly thumping heart.

He paused in the doorway upon seeing the cyborg curled over his phone, gaze intent and speed-reading through whatever contents held his attention so thoroughly. Saitama grinned slightly at the other hero’s hyper-focus, absent-mindedly admiring the way his metallic arms refracted the sunbeams pouring through their window into a kaleidoscope of warm amber gold and crimson hues upon the bare walls of their apartment. He shuffled over to the crouched hero and plopped down beside him, hooking his chin over one bulging metal shoulder. “Oi, Genos - whatcha looking at?”

The cyborg jolted in surprise, guiltily fumbling his phone and then turning to gaze shyly at his sensei out of the corner of one eye. “Um...”

Oh, now he was definitely interested.

”Hmmmm?” he smirked gleefully, peering down at the screen below them in order to glean the contents.

The screen displayed what appeared to be a thread from the official hero forums, one of the multitudes that were posted every single day, which Saitama usually cast hardly even a single glance over. The one that had ensnared his disciple’s attention displayed “DemonCape: I Ship It!!” in bold letters at the top of the screen; an odd title to be sure (and when exactly had ‘ship’ become a verb?), but what caught Saitama’s eyes more than anything else on the page was a very high quality image of none other than the two of them, standing in each other’s personal space, one metallic hand curled tenderly around the bald hero’s tear-stained cheek.

Heat rose in his cheeks and curled warmly around the tops of his ears. “G-Genos...” he protested weakly.

The cyborg ducked his head shyly. “My apologies, sensei. It’s just... well, the world knows who you are now. They have finally acknowledged your strength, and we are currently a viral trending topic worldwide.”

Saitama wasn’t entirely certain what ‘viral trending topic’ meant, but he could guess at the meaning easily enough. “You mean people all over the world are interested in our... uh, relationship? That’s creepy.”

Steam puffed quietly out of Genos’ arms at the word ‘relationship’ (which, cute), but then the cyborg huffed in gentle admonishment. “Sensei, you’re finally gaining the recognition and admiration you deserved from the beginning. I think this is wonderful. It should have happened long ago.”

The older hero gazed at his disciple thoughtfully for a moment, then shifted away with a small
lopsided smile. “I don’t need their admiration. The only thing I ever desired... it turns out I already
had.”

Genos went rigid in startled surprise, then turned to regard Saitama closely. “...sensei...”

He knocked one shoulder against the younger hero’s bulky frame, then stood and stretched
languidly. “Come on, Genos. There’s supposed to be a good sale at the market today. If we get a
good enough deal, maybe we can splurge on some udon.”

”Yes! Saitama-sensei!”

”Oi, lay off the sensei already.”

”Yes, sensei!”

They still had many things to talk about, of course.

Some of the memories they had seen from each other’s lives would need to be acknowledged and
discussed, even if only briefly. There would be many awkward, halting attempts at trying to fold
their budding relationship into a new shape; both of them slowly and gently testing the remade
rules of their shared existence, discovering all the new and surprising ways in which they fit
together, as well as all the ways in which they did not (though there weren’t many). Together, they
discovered how to stay in love despite the hardships and hurdles that came with such a deep
relationship.

Saitama’s apathy was not fully cured, as this was not a condition that could be overcome in one
instant. There were days of empty staring and muted energy from the bald hero, whilst his cyborg
partner earnestly and ceaselessly tried to break through that invisible barrier. Gradually, these
frustrating days grew to be less and less frequent; and eventually they learned ways to recognize
the early signs and take steps to lessen the impact before it could even begin.

Genos did finally find the source of his tragic past. They ended the mad cyborg and its creator as
they did all things: together.

The Hero Association continued to gain in strength and rebuild itself from the fractured state Garou
had left it in. Though monsters never disappeared entirely, they devised new ways to combat such
creatures and prevent further devastation before the heroes could arrive.

Immediately after their pasts were revealed to the public, Saitama gained a very fervent and
passionately devoted fanclub. Through their combined protests and efforts, Caped Baldy was
renamed “One Punch Man” - a title that embarrassed Saitama to no end, but which Genos
absolutely adored. Eventually the two of them had a minor argument over the endless
accumulation of hero merchandise that slowly began to take over their living space, and Genos
sulkily consented to downsizing his excessive collection.

Six months after the very public realizations of their feelings for each other, Saitama grew
comfortable enough with his renewed emotions to tell Genos directly. (They both cried.)

Three months after that, they made love for the first time. (And Saitama realized that he was, in
fact, capable of desire - he simply hadn’t found the right type of connection before.)
They continued living as they always had: together, orbiting each other like twin stars. And, eventually, when it was time for them to go at the end of their days, they did that together as well.

Saitama never did manage to convince Genos to stop calling him sensei.

Genos pretended not to know how much his hero secretly loved it.

Chapter End Notes

There is **one more chapter remaining**, however the main bulk of the storyline is now complete.

Thank you so much to everyone who has read, commented, messaged me, drawn fanart, and enjoyed this story. Thank you for reading. Thank you for being so kind and patient with my long hiatus. I love all of your comments more than anything, and often go back to reread my favorites on days when I’m feeling down.

I began this story on a self-indulgent whim during a time when I was struggling with my own depression and apathy, much like Saitama. As he grew and healed, so too did I. Writing this story has gained me many friends that I adore (Noni, Aima, Decha, Janina, Angie, I’m looking at all of y’all), helped me rediscover a part of myself I didn’t know I’d lost, and inspired me to get back into art; now I have my own art store and have made several sales doing what I love. Writing this story is honestly one of the best things that ever happened to me. Thank you for coming with me on this journey.

If you like my work, please follow me on my **writing account** and/or my **art account**!

If you like noni’s art, please follow her at **@balljointcyborg** or **@bnkn62**

Works inspired by this one: **The Pain of Me and You** by Lady_Of_Wretches, **Set(That Crown On The Ground)** by Idealism_Sits_Imprisoned, **How to Mimic Social Media in an AO3 Work** by aerynevenstar

Please **drop by the archive and comment** to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!