

Assault whisper yelled into his radio for a good few minutes before eventually guiding me through the PRT to a small waiting room, really more of a cutout corner along a long, mostly empty hallway. As we walked, Assault kept looking over his shoulder at me. When he gestured to one of the seats, he talked for the first time since we left the testing room.

"Alright, Arcanum, if you wouldn't mind waiting here for a bit, we just need to get the volunteers ready," He assured me. "I also... I want to apologize for lying. I was ordered to, and honestly, I should have said no. You've done nothing to deserve that kind of treatment."

His admission catches me off guard, and for a moment, I look up at him with a frown.

"Then why do it?" I asked, continuing when he opened his mouth. "I know you were ordered to, but why were you ordered to?"

"Because... well... honestly, the PRT director is paranoid, and your powers are a bit confusing," He explained, looking back and forth down the hallway. "She assumed you were lying, so she wanted to get a look at your powers on her own."

"I was being purposely vague," I responded, shocking the man for a moment. "Because I had no interest in displaying my powers for everyone to see, my only concern was being accredited for healing."

"Huh... well, I can't blame you for that," He responded, scratching his chin. "Certainly not now."

"You're going to get in trouble for this, aren't you?"

"Oh yeah, I'm surprised they haven't already- Oh wait, here we go."

I was confused for a moment before I followed where Assault was looking. At that moment, another hero came around the corner, one I recognized as Miss Militia. She was dressed in a prop, stylized and lightly padded version of military fatigues, with a sash around her hips and a bandana obscuring the bottom half of her face, both of them stylized US flags. She had a holster on her hip, with an ethereal green revolver, the manifestation of her powers, holstered inside.

"Assault, Director Piggot wants to see you immediately," She said, her face obscured by her bandana.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm going," He said with a smile and a sarcastic salute. "Sorry about all this, Arcanum."

"Yeah... Thanks for being honest," I said as I watched him leave before focusing back on Miss Militia. "I don't suppose you're gonna apologize too?"

When she refused to say anything, I couldn't help but frown. According to the online reports, after Assault, Miss Militia was the most personable and approachable member of the Brockton Bay Protectorate. And yet, somehow, I ended up sitting in front of her as she watched me closely, her glowing green sidearm shifting several times.

"You know, I was at least looking forward to meeting fellow heroes, even if I didn't want to give away all my secrets," I pointed out, meeting the woman's eyes. "This isn't exactly a great introduction. Then again, at this point, I shouldn't be surprised. Introductions haven't exactly been going well so far. First Panacea, then Battery, now this... I'd say more, but I'm worried I might actually summon Murphy himself here to make it worse."

Despite the fact that most of her face was covered, I could see her expression soften. It was at least nice to know she wasn't wholly remorseless or emotionless.

I waited patiently in the hallway for around twenty minutes, with Alya occasionally whispering secrets into my ear. She was mainly concerned about them ambushing me somehow, though I didn't think that was likely. Even if I admitted that I was playing fast and loose with what I was actually capable of, I hadn't actually done anything wrong, not that I knew about, at least. The entire PRT and Protectorate would have to be ridiculously broken or corrupt for them to actually make a move on me at this point.

After about twenty minutes, when the urge to just leave was starting to get really hard to ignore, Miss Militia reached up and touched her ear. She nodded once before focusing on me.

"They are ready for you now," She said simply before leading me down the hall, eventually stopping outside what looked like a miniature hospital.

Over the next two hours, I healed a dozen PRT volunteers, working on injuries ranging from a twisted ankle all the way up to a broken arm and a gunshot wound. All of them were recent, which made sense, considering they must have a quick in with Panacea. The process was relatively painless, even with a pair of doctors looking over my shoulder the entire time. I could practically feel their eye rolls and scoffs when I started chanting and moving my hands around, even with the various arcane sigils floating in the air.

When I finished healing all of the volunteers, I discussed some of the limitations of my healing, as well as how some of it worked. This, I was completely honest about, giving them as much detail as I could provide, which was a lot considering just how much information I got for each level of investment.

When the doctors were satisfied, meaning they were finally done trying to trip me up and make me look silly for chanting, Miss Militia returned to walk me out of the building. Either she was given permission to talk to me, or she was taking a page out of Assault's book, because she spoke up as we walked.

"I would like to give you the Protectorate's official apology for the confusion around power testing and verifying your healing ability," She said as she walked, her glowing green weapon set on a switchblade. "It was unprofessional and underhanded."

"It really was," I agreed with a nod. "But I got what I came for, and I was never going to join anyway, even without an egg on your face."

"...Are you sure?" She asked, turning to look at me, somehow radiating genuine concern. "I know Battery was... a bit aggressive in her explanation of why it's important, but none of what she said wasn't true. You are in significantly more danger on your own."

"I know, but I don't need people on my back, forcing me to do stuff I don't want to," I explained with a shrug. "Like lying to a new hero because my boss wants a better understanding of his powers."

That got a wince out of her, and for the rest of the walk, she remained quiet. Eventually, we reached the same door I had entered with Assault. We stopped, and Miss Militia held something out for me, a pair of cards.

"One of these is for the people you can talk to about your verification should something go wrong," She explained. "The other is for Assault's hero line. He wanted you to have it. Keep in mind, this is not a publically available number."

I paused for a moment before reaching out and taking them both, sliding them into one of my many pockets.

"Thank you, Miss Militia," I said, shaking her hand, careful not to crush it with my enhanced strength. "It's unfortunate how this day went, but I'm sure in the future we will joke about this. Or at least Assault will."

That got a smile out of her, the exposed parts of her face shifting enough for me to tell what she was doing. With one final goodbye, I stepped out of the door into the front lobby. I took a quick look around before turning to the exit and walking out and into the street.

With a sudden abundance of time, I was tempted to try my hand at some shopping, but instead, I decided I would be better off going on patrol. I had about six hours before my absorption ran out, and since I was already in my uniform, I could get right to it.

"Alright, Alya, why don't you spread out," I mumbled to myself. "Start looking for anything interesting."

I could feel her agreement as she pulled away, spreading herself over a massive area around me. In all likelihood, she wouldn't find anything, especially so close to the nearby PRT headquarters. I would likely have to cover a bunch of distance before I was in a rough enough neighborhood.

I quickly cast the marathon spell, letting the stamina enhancement rush over me as I began to jog, heading north toward the Docks. My last patrol had been in the "bad" areas of Downtown, towards the west, where E88 held territory. Today, I would be working my way along the north side close to the South Docks. It took me about twenty minutes to get to the right area, and I could really start the patrol.

I ended up walking all around the area, spending hours jogging and walking. The entire time, even with Alya's help, I saw next to nothing. Once, I scared off some guys looking into a car, which definitely wasn't theirs. I would have been happier if I hadn't been sure that the second I left the area, they would be smashing the windows to grab whatever was valuable inside.

I also helped a pair of lost kids, who had assured their parents they would stay nearby and had instead rushed off and gotten lost. Their parents were very glad when I led them back with Alya's help. I was happy as well since I couldn't imagine that situation going well, especially as it was getting darker at this point. There were still a few hours before sunset, but it was still too close for comfort.

I was finally making my way back home, or more specifically, making my way back to where I left my civilian clothes to change when I heard someone from above me.

"Mage! Hold up."

frowned and turned, looking up to see Glory Girl floating down from the sky. As she approached, I could see a conflicted look on her face. She glanced at the people stopping to look at the both of us.

"It's Arcanum, actually," I said before following her look around. "What can I do for you?"

"Nothing, I just spotted you when I was flying over," She explained. "But... maybe we could talk, somewhere private?"

I looked around at everyone watching, frowning at the complete lack of privacy. I was about to ask where she would like to go when Alya whispered in my ear.

"The rooftop, it's clear," she said, tugging on me with the wind and pointing me to a nearby building. When I spotted what my partner was pointing out, I nodded toward it.

"I'll meet you up there," I said before walking into an alleyway.

As I moved, I cast a relatively quick spell, twin blue bands slinking down my arm, similar to how the marathon spell worked, only with fewer bands that all went down to my legs.

"Ver me altius" I chanted, before jumping up, my spell boosting my jump considerably, way more than I thought. "Woah!"

I passed over my target, a lower offshoot of the larger building I had directed Glory Girl to. I ended up tumbling and rolling as I overshot, having assumed I would have to lift myself up, not clear the lower floor entirely.

"What the fuck?" I said quietly, standing up and dusting myself off. "What the hell was that?"

"Your strength is enhanced," Alya pointed out. "You could already jump much higher than normal."

"And the spell only increased that," I muttered with a nod. "Okay, let's try that again."

I quickly cast the spell again, running along the lower section of the roof before jumping, pushing myself hard. Between my enhanced strength and the buff in my legs, I easily cleared the edge, landing on the flat roof. This time, however, I was ready and landed smoothly on the roof, a smirk on my lips. I really needed to revisit my running. If there was a way to leverage my enhanced strength as I ran...

"Everything alright?"

I turned to see Glory Girl floating a dozen or so feet away, touching down on the roof easily, patting her skirt flat as she looked at me with a raised eyebrow.

"Yeah, still getting used to the powers, you know?" I explained, and she nodded understandingly.

"Oh, tell me about it. The amount of phones I went through when I first got mine," She responded, shaking her head. "Hard to control yourself sometimes, you know?"

"I know the feeling," I said, chuckling softly. "So... what did you want to talk about?"

"I... well, I wanted to apologize," She said, rubbing her arm, the spitting image of an embarrassed teen, mostly because that's what she was. "I kinda messed up our first interaction, and then... well, Amy had a meltdown..."

"Meltdown?" I asked, making sure my concern was audible since she couldn't see my face. "Is she okay?"

"She... well, she is pretending to be," She admitted with a frown. "She's not your biggest fan at the moment, though. I think something about you really, really got under her skin. Which is totally not your fault! I just...She..."

I looked around the roof, spotting an air conditioning unit not too far away. I made my way to it and sat, gesturing for her to continue.

"Tell me what happened. I might not be able to help, but I can at least listen."

Apparently, I had been standing on the low end of a failing dam, because all Glory Girl needed was my permission before opening the floodgates full send. The young woman started talking and didn't stop for several minutes. I can only imagine she didn't intend to be as open as she was but got caught in the moment, because eventually, she stopped to take a breath and froze. She was explaining how Amy had been sneaking out at night to go to the hospital again, when she appeared to realize just how much she was revealing.

"Relax," I said, holding up my hands. "I'm not going to say anything to anyone. Who would believe me anyway?"

She laughed nervously, before shaking her head.

"I just don't know what to say," She admitted. "She insists that nothing is different, which means that I've been a horrible sister and didn't realize she was working herself to exhaustion because she thought it was all she was good for."

"What about your parents?" I asked. "Have you pointed it out to them?"

"Well, Dad... has some issues," She said, chewing her lip. "And I think Mom might be part of the problem?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, sitting up straight.

"Mom... is really intense," She admitted. "And she pushed Amy to volunteer at the hospital in the first place. I'm worried she might have the wrong idea because of that."

I took in what she said, rolling it around in my head for a long moment. Eventually, I nodded.

"Do you want my advice?"

"...It couldn't hurt?"

"Well... I can't say I know enough to offer a simple solution, but I will say..." I said, trailing off to restructure my thoughts before eventually continuing. "Sometimes, the best response is to lay it all out on the table. It sounds like your sister needs help, and you might be one of the few people who's noticed. So help other people notice it. Just like you, they can't help if they don't know. You'd be surprised just what a little communication can do."

The young woman, dressed in a white and gold super suit and gold tiara, floating several inches off the ground, chewed her lip as she nodded.

"I guess? I'm just worried... I'm worried it won't be enough," She revealed. "That I'll tell my parents, and they won't do anything."

I leaned back, my eyes wide at that statement. On one hand, it could be nothing more than an anxious teenager, worried that people don't care enough about her to listen. On the other, it could be an admission of something much worse.

"Well... if that's the case, then go up the chain."

She looked at me now, confused at what I said. I raise my hand to hold off the inevitable question.

"When you tell your teacher there's a problem, and they do nothing, you go to a different teacher. When they do nothing, you go to the principal," I explained. "When they do nothing, you go to the superintendent. If they do nothing, and the problem is bad enough, you call the police. If you tell somebody something, something that is their responsibility to take care of, and they ignore it..."

"I go up the chain," She repeated with a frown. "Aunt Sarah, maybe?"

"I don't know, Glory Girl, there is a lot about this situation I don't know," I admitted. "You're going to have to use your own judgment."

"I... yeah, okay," She said with a nod, seeming to gain confidence as a plan formed in her head. "I... Thank you for listening. I just wanted to apologize, but..."

"Hey, I'm glad I could help," I said with a smile, though I idly noted she couldn't see it. "I hope everything works out."

"I do, too," She said with a solemn nod before pulling out her phone. "I need to go. It's getting a bit late. Thank you again."

She waved before taking off into the air, rising above the buildings before blasting away at a pretty impressive speed, leaving me on the building, watching her go. I couldn't help but shake my head as I watched her fly away.