

After confirming that I was willing to meet with the director, I had to give my statement to a PRT officer. After that, we waited for the PRT troops to finish securing the location. As we did, I chatted with Miss Militia and Aegis for a while, the latter seeming nervous at first but quickly calming down after a minute or so. I also got a few answers for what exactly had happened.

"Shadow Stalker was with us on patrol when we first got word of the robbery," The young hero explained. "The first call didn't make it clear it was a parahuman, so we broke off our route intercept. Then we got confirmation that it was a new cape that nobody recognized. Wards aren't cleared to engage unknown Capes, so we had to retreat. When we were told to pull back, Miss Militia was called to take over the response. Shadow Stalker claimed radio troubles and continued to move."

"That a common problem?" I asked curiously. "Shadow Stalker ignoring orders?"

Aegis opened his mouth to respond, but he finally seemed to notice that Miss Militia was giving him a pretty hard look. He quickly shut up, his eyes wide as if he had just realized what he was saying. I couldn't help but chuckle at his slip-up. It wasn't exactly a state secret, but he clearly had revealed more than he was supposed to. Poor kid would probably end up getting a talking-to about operational security or something. Unsurprisingly, he refused to talk to me after that.

During all of this time, Vista had been engaging with the crowd, talking and signing autographs. It was smart, drawing the public eye, but I felt like it was wasted in this specific scenario. Still, it kept them from trying to push the boundary that the PRT troops set up.

When the scene was finally under control, the PRT officers started to gather the trash that Heap had used as his golem. When I asked Miss Militia why they were shoving the pounds of waste into bags and boxes, she explained that it was just standard procedure. They needed to contain it until they were certain Heap's powers didn't contaminate, spread, or otherwise alter the material it used.

"Imagine if he retained a connection to the trash he bonded to," She said. "He could use it to hurt people, even while sitting in a cell."

Luckily, we didn't need to help with the cleanup, because the only reason I wasn't gagging from the smell was because Alya was maintaining a gentle breeze away from me and my escorts.

When it was time to go, Miss Militia guided me to the back of a PRT van, empty save for the driver. Normally, I would be nervous about just climbing into the vehicle and submitting to the whims of the driver, but it was very clearly not a prison vehicle. There was no barrier between the driver and myself, the seats were normal with no restraints, the door had a handle on the inside, and as far as I could tell, any armor the vehicle had was designed to protect the people inside, not keep them from escaping.

Hell, I even shook the driver's hand as a test, the nameless agent accepting the shake with an air of confused acceptance.

When we pulled away, I could hear Miss Militia's motorcycle revving up beside us, traveling alongside the van. Unsurprisingly, the PRT agent wasn't that interested in conversation, so the ride was silent. Thankfully, it was also short, only seven or eight minutes passing before I climbed out of the van. Gone was the open street, replaced by fluorescent lights, concrete, and asphalt. We had parked in the PRT motor pool compound, which turned out to be under the main building itself. A quick elevator ride later, and we were inside the main building, Miss Militia guiding me to my final destination. I was basically fast passed through the building, right into Director Piggots office.

"Anything I should know?" I asked quietly as we approached.

"...She doesn't appreciate humor," She said after a pause. "Just be straight with her."

I nodded in understanding as the Protectorate heroine knocked on the wooden door, opening it when a voice called from inside to enter.

Inside the simple, unadorned office was a single wooden desk overloaded with stuff. It wasn't messy by any stretch, it was just neatly organized without a hint of being dirty. In fact, the whole room was meticulously clean. Despite that, the desk still looked cluttered because of the sheer amount of stuff on it. There was a desktop computer, a laptop, and several stacks of paper, two of which were more than an inch thick. One of them, the one the director was reading, was stored inside the classic manilla folder.

"Hello, Arcanum," Director Piggot said, putting the folder she was reading from down. "Have a seat."

I nodded and sat down at one of two chairs, Miss Militia taking the second one. As I sat, I got the opportunity to study the woman herself. Emily Piggot was a large woman, her fat, unhealthy form at odds with her clean, crisply pressed clothes and tightly braided hair. She came across as a no-nonsense military woman, but someone had messed with her weight slider during character design.

After a moment of silence, during which she didn't so much as twitch her eyes away from me, she finally spoke.

"Do you understand why we attempted to trick you during power testing?" She asked, seemingly completely unashamed by her actions.

"...I assume you saw the opportunity to learn more about an unknown parahuman in your city and took it," I guessed after taking a second to recover from the sudden topic shift. "You probably would have gotten away with it, too, if you had briefed your testing people."

"That has been discussed," She admitted, now with a frown. "That is not the reaction I anticipated."

"What am I supposed to do? Throw a tantrum? Toss around threats?" I asked. "That wouldn't get anything done. Don't get me wrong, you lost even the slightest chance of me ever joining up, but I'm not going to cry and scream that it's unfair."

The look she gave me said that a tantrum was *exactly* what she had expected from me, but after a moment, she continued.

"I appreciate the candor," She said, actually sounding appreciative and shocked by it. "Most Parahumans would not be so forgiving."

"No, not forgiving," I refuted, shaking my head and leaning back in my chair. "Not throwing a tantrum is very different from letting bygones be bygones. You and your organization burned any bridge between us before either of us could attempt to cross it. We can work together out there, but I do not trust you, not by a long shot."

That seemed to flip a switch in Director Piggot's mind, as if the world suddenly made sense again. She nodded in seeming understanding before continuing.

"And what of your healing?" She asked. "I was told you are already in talks with Brockton Central."

"I am. They are just waiting on PRT approval," I explained, pointing out that the ball was in her court.

"Only a full day left before we can declare the volunteers you treated successfully healed with no side effects," she explained. "When we issue you your verification, would you be willing to heal PRT agents and Protectorate heroes?"

"Of course, with the same stipulations as the hospital," I nodded. "Under eighteen for free, adults have to pay unless it is a life-threatening injury. Emergencies happen as they come, but I always reserve the right to say no."

"How much is the fee?"

"How much is the standard fee?"

"It depends on the injury..."

"Then it sounds like you have your answer," I responded with a shrug. "I suspect you're not dumb enough to underpay me, either. Honestly, I expect you will primarily be calling me in for head injuries since Panacea doesn't seem to charge, and you guys are okay with screwing her over."

"Her mother refuses to accept payment on her daughter's behalf," She responded with a frown. "There was nothing we could do."

"There is always something you can do, Director Piggot," I corrected. "But that's not what you called me here for. Unless I'm once again the victim of a misdirect?"

"No, no misdirect this time. I simply wanted to get that discussion out of the way," Piggot responded, leaning forward and bridging her fingers together. "I wanted to discuss the recent... incident. While the footage captured of Shadow Stalker's actions paints a clear picture, I would like to ask you a few questions about the incident."

"I'll do what I can," I responded, gesturing for her to continue.

"What exactly were you discussing before Shadow Stalker fired her weapon?" She asked, glancing to the side at her computer.

"I was attempting to calm Heap down," I explained easily. "He was clearly agitated, but he also seemed confused. I was hoping to calm him down enough to get him to surrender."

"And then what?" She asked. "What would you have done if you succeeded?"

"That would depend on what was going on," I explained. "I was under the impression that there is a certain amount of leeway for recent triggers?"

"Depending on the situation," the large woman admitted. "But that's not for you to decide."

"I never claimed it was, Director," I assured her. "I was simply trying to de-escalate the situation before more people got hurt."

"Admirable," She said, though her tone portrayed a different opinion, mainly that she considered it foolish or pointless. "What was it that Shadow Stalker said?"

"She questioned my connection to Heap and accused me of being his ally," I said with a shrug. "I ignored her because it was untrue, and I was concerned about the store clerk."

"And when you disarmed her?"

"I was concerned she would hit Heap, who was already neutralized, or worse, a civilian," I explained. "I didn't want to hurt her, so I took away her weapon. At the time, I assumed I would be fine. I did not know she could phase objects into people in her smoke form."

"And what did she say?"

"She shouted that she didn't care about the store clerk," I responded with a shrug. "I was placing Heap down when she attacked me."

"Yes, the footage corroborates that," She admitted.

"Could I ask you a question?" I said, catching her off guard, stopping whatever she was about to ask next. When she gestured to me, I continued. "Where exactly did that come from? Shadow Stalker's attack, I mean. I did some research on capes and people before I put on the mask, and I did know that she was a vigilante before joining the Wards."

"Shadow Stalker... has some issues when it comes to appropriate levels of force and violence," Piggot admitted. "She was probationary Ward, meaning that we were attempting to rehabilitate her. We were told she was making progress, but for obvious reasons, those statements are now being investigated."

"But she is clearly just a kid. How does that sort of thing slip under the radar?" I asked, not entirely satisfied by her response.

"To be frank, I don't entirely know," She admitted, leaning back, her own frustration evident. "But when I find out, heads will roll."

"Why are you telling me all of this?" I asked, curious as to why she was being so open.

"Because I am hoping to convince you to let the PRT handle the press about this unfortunate event," she admitted without shame. "Footage of the entire situation is already all over the internet, but our people are already working on the best way to spin this into something that isn't a complete disaster."

"And what exactly is the... 'Situation,'" I said, emphasizing the last word to get my meaning across.

"That the PRT and Protectorate value our children, even those who are lost and struggle with the law. Shadow Stalker was nearly arrested and sent to Juvie when we caught her being too violent during her vigilante days, but we offered her one last chance to clean up her act," Director Piggot explained. "Publicly attacking a hero, a PRT certified healer who was clearly only trying to help, especially when their back is turned, is not the kind of behavior that the Wards stand for. She has failed her last chance and thus must now face the consequences."

"How silent do you want me to be about this, exactly?" I asked, ignoring the clear attempt to butter me up with the declaration of my PRT certification.

"Standard boilerplate answers," She responded. "I regret what happened, but since I do not know the whole story so, I cannot comment on the details."

"Are you going to ask me to sign anything?"

"Would you?"

"Absolutely not," I responded, staring back at the director.

"Then there's no point in asking, is there?" She responded.

"I suppose not," I said. "Why should I let you dictate what I say?"

I made sure to keep my tone rather than aggressive. I wanted to know her reasoning first so I could make an informed decision.

"Because we are struggling to maintain positive PR on a normal day, with disasters like this," She explained. "If people can't trust us to protect them, this city is going to fall apart. A lot of people are going to get hurt when they turn to less-than-legal places for protection."

I was tempted to tell her no, but I couldn't deny that she wasn't entirely wrong. As much as I thought the Protectorate as a whole went overboard with the PR, the local branch was on shaky ground as it was. Some of that was deserved, at least according to Tony, but losing more trust would not be a good thing. I wasn't sure just how badly this event would be received, but it would certainly not be good.

I didn't like it, but I saw her point.

"I will keep the information about Shadow Stalker to a minimum for now," I finally responded. "I would be more upset about it, but since I don't know the details of the situation, I would only be telling the truth anyway."

Director Piggot let out a long sigh, sitting back in her chair, though I could see a slight wince as she shifted her body. Once it passed and she was comfortable again, she shook her head.

"Arcanum, I will be the first to admit that your introduction to the PRT and Protectorate was a wash," She said, sounding very much like she hated admitting it. "That said, it was nothing personal. While I understand your faith in the system was shaken, not everything is as simple as it may seem. We are fighting an uphill battle in this city. We are outnumbered and often outgunned. We have to grasp whatever advantages we have, and taking a chance to gather intel is something we can't pass by."

"Director Piggot, I know I am new to this, but I would like to think I am pretty perceptive. I know what kind of workload you and your people must be under. This city is disturbingly few steps away from being run by Neo-Nazis, after all. That alone says just how dire it is." I pointed out. "I'm not naive enough to assume that you have the luxury of playing by the book in all circumstances. Eggs, omelet, all that jazz. But if I could offer some advice? Save the back alley strong-arming and cigar room dealing for people you don't mind pissing off. It's not worth losing potentially valuable allies, especially when you fuck it up."

Piggot leaned back about halfway through my response, and I could feel Miss Militia staring at me as well. Once I was done, I stood up from my chair and stuck out my hand, taking a step closer to the director.

"It's been nice meeting you, Director Piggot, but I believe it's time for me to head home."

For a moment, I wasn't sure if she would take my hand, but eventually, she did, reaching out to give me a single, quick shake. She then gave Miss Militia a look and a nod. As the Protectorate member stood, Piggot directed her attention back to me.

"I appreciate your agreement and your cooperation," She said. "I understand that coming back probably wasn't something you were looking forward to."

"It was good to see where we are both at," I explained. "And to make sure I could get my opinion on the matter heard."

Piggot nodded before Miss Militia led us back down to the motor pool. After a quick ride in another PRT van, I was back in the same neighborhood as before. Completely drained from the whole ordeal, I quickly changed into my civilian clothes and headed back to the shop.

Tonight was the night my charges were refilled, and I could feel my anxiety rising as each minute went by.