

It took me a moment to gather my senses, as the stench of the garbage and the rattling of the impact completely threw me for a loop. Underneath all that, I was undamaged, the impact unable to overwhelm my steel absorption. I was still pinned, though, as after the initial impact, the blow turned into a crushing grinding force, as if he was attempting to squash a particular resilient insect.

Rather than try and fight against his superior mass, when I finally collected my thoughts, I reached out with my arm and grabbed the first edge I could get my fingers around. I then pulled, first with one hand, then with two, before finally managing to pull myself free in a spray of trash. I stumbled away from the car, paper and cans falling away from me as I held up my hands.

"Heap! Wait, I don't know-" I started to say, only to have to dive to the side, skidding to my feet as I dodged another wide, heavy blow. "You don't need to do this. We can still talk."

"You talk, I'll just crush you!" He shouted back, raising a large trash limb up into the air, looking to slam it down against me.

"*Fulgur parvum fragmentum!*" I shouted, even as I jumped to the side, dodging the falling blow.

Using the fully worded and symbolized version of my simple jabbing lightning spell amped up its power considerably, a disk of blue energy formed around the tip of my finger. Three arcane symbols spun around it for a moment before a thick blast of electricity lanced out, jumping from my finger to the Heap's large limb. The electricity impacted the trash and was absorbed, the energy dispersing his control over the loose material. The limb lost cohesion past the impact point, slamming into the ground in a much less solid and dense form.

Unfortunately, the trash almost immediately started pulling back into the trash pile, feeding Heaps size, the large limb already reforming.

"Fuck," I said, watching the arm grow back in seconds, Heap laughing.

"That's right! Can't keep Heap down!" He shouted, his laughter carrying a manic undertone to it. "Gonna fucking crush you!"

I was about to try and talk to him again, only for another bolt to sink into his trash body, this time into his head. He shouted again, advancing on me with a fist raised. With a curse, I realized that this situation was no longer salvageable. It was time to put him down before he hurt someone.

Like me, for example.

I dove and rolled to the side, casting lightning spells as I did, electricity lancing out as I ran around Heap. He was clearly tough, as golems tended to be, but he was also slow. I just needed to use his slow speed to my advantage.

I pestered him with lightning, switching between full-powered and nonverbal jabs, all while outrunning his attacks, which only got more and more aggressive and wild as he got angrier and angrier. Eventually, I had enough time to cast a spell that took a bit long to use.

*"Magna pila suspendisse scintillae!"* I shouted after blasting both of his arms off, his attacks pausing as he regenerated his limbs.

Magic flared around my hands as I held them together like I was about to catch something. I guided that magic into a swirling pattern between my hands. Six arcane sigils flared to life in a triangle around each hand, a sparking ball of electrical energy forming between them, the size of a softball. I dumped a decent amount of energy into the spell before lobbing it underhanded at the parahuman golem.

The crackling ball of energy soared right to the base of the golem's feet, where the heap of trash seemed to pull into the main body. It detonated on impact, a large ball of electricity exploding outward from where it landed. The explosion knocked the golem to pieces, and for the first time, I saw the man inside of it.

He was... well, as unfortunate as it was, he was pretty ugly. He had a rather pronounced pot belly, only made more obvious by his lanky, thin limbs. Luckily, he was wearing a crude mask, literally just a piece of cardboard with holes cut into it and attached with rope.

Despite the power of the spell, Heap immediately began to recover, trash flowing back to him, a lot of it starting to smolder. Thankfully, I didn't need to wait as I clearly had an opening. I rushed forward, plowing through the trash and tackling the man out of the reforming golem. I could feel something snap, as if I had pulled a sagging elastic band until it gave way. Heap let out a scream of pain, scrabbling against me, trying to escape my grasp as I pulled him completely free of the trash pile.

Despite his shouting and screaming, I wasted no time in putting him down on the ground and quickly intoning *Somnum scintilla* as I cast the lightning stun spell, the little ball of energy falling down and knocking him out. I double-checked his pulse, which was high but steady, unsurprising since we had just been fighting. I was pulling out my phone to call in the attack, when Alya whispered into my ear.

"Whoever was shooting bolts just turned back into smoke," She warned. "They are coming down... they reformed on the sidewalk. They have their crossbow pointed at your back."

I looked over my shoulder, confirming my suspicion that the one firing crossbow bolts was Shadow Stalker, a Ward. I rolled my eyes and shook my head. I knew for a fact her crossbow was very much not a threat, so I focused on confirming that Heap was okay.

"What are you doing?" She asked, her footsteps getting closer.

"I'm confirming he is okay," I answered simply.

"Why were you talking to him?" She asked, her voice filled with accusation. "He your buddy or something?"

"I was attempting to talk him down from attacking me," I explained. "What are you doing alone? I was under the impression that is against Ward rules."

"Oh gee, would you look at that," She said in a blank, uncaring tone. "We must have gotten separated."

I rolled my eyes at her tone before carefully lifting Heap onto my shoulder, carrying him closer to the store.

"Where are you going?" She asked, following after me. "Put him down and get on your knees!"

I kept walking, though I did shift Heap so nothing vital was behind me, in case Shadow Stalker had the bright idea to shoot me.

"Shadow Stalker, I am moving Heap closer to the crime scene," I explained. "He mentioned there being a store clerk inside."

Something about me dismissing her so casually must have really set her off, because I had only made it a single step further before a crossbow bolt slapped into my shoulder. It punched through my clothes but broke when it hit my skin.

"Are you out of your FUCKING MIND!" I shouted, whirling around on the teenager. "Did you really just shoot me? I already told you what I was doing!"

"I don't care about some clerk!" She shouted back, already loading her crossbow. "You will-"

I rolled Heap off of my shoulder, the parahuman landing in a pile of trash, confident he was fully out. Even as he was falling, I leaped forward. Shadow Stalker reacted with surprisingly good reflexes, turning to smoke and backing off, but not before I could tear her crossbow from her hands. I snapped the string with a single tug before dropping it back to the ground. I then turned and walked back to Heap, picking him up again. By now, the crowd that had formed around us was in the hundreds, with dozens of people holding out their phones as they recorded the interaction. I carefully put the unconscious parahuman down at the front of the store, sitting him up along the wall.

"She isn't gone," Alya warned me quietly. "She is getting closer, in her smoking form. Will, watch out!"

A searing burning pain flared along my back, just below my left shoulder. I cursed and spun around, lashing out with a burst of near-instinctual electricity. Shadow Stalker had somehow bypassed my durability and stabbed me in the shoulder with one of her bolts. Even before I was turning, she was once again a cloud of smoke, pulling back to dodge what she must have thought was a backhand slap.

Instead, electricity spiked through her as she shifted back into her smoke form. While the burst would normally not be enough to seriously hurt anyone, it forced her to drop her smoke form, where she collapsed to the ground, screaming and twitching.

"Fucking hell, what the fuck was that?" I shouted, quickly standing and taking a single step forward, only to feel a wave of exhaustion wash over me.

"It's a tranq bolt!" Alya almost shouted into my ear. "You need to do something!"

"Tranq... Oh!" I managed to connect the dots in my quickly swirling and slowing mind, barely managing to remember the proper spell. "*Purgare sanguis meus quid me effectus*"

The usual golden glow of healing magic formed around my hand, even as my vision started to waver. Arcane symbols and a swirl of magic appeared over my heart, cleaning all the blood that flowed through it. Almost immediately, the overwhelming exhaustion abated, and I could stand up straight.

Once I was sure I wouldn't keel over, I walked over to the still groaning form of Shadow Stalker, quickly rifling through her utility belt. She feebly swatted at me, but I ignored her. Instead, I grabbed a zip tie, dragged her three feet to the sidewalk, and wrapped her arms around a streetlamp before zip-tying her wrists together. I repeated the process with her legs, before finally stepping back.

I nodded, satisfied with my work, before casting the blood-purifying spell again. The exhaustion had started to creep up on me again, but I could feel its effects fading completely. I let out a long breath, before making my way inside the shop. Unsurprisingly, the place was a disaster area, but my only concern was the clerk.

"Hello?" I called out. "This is Arcanum! Is anyone here injured?"

I heard a groan behind the counter, so I quickly rushed around to check. Just as Alya had warned me, a man was laying on the floor, stirring but unable to sit up. His face was cut up and bloody, and he had the signs of a serious knock to the head.

"Alya," I whispered. "Check the rest of the store for victims, then go outside and keep watch. I can't imagine we are going to be alone here for long."

With a few small splashes of water on his lips, and through his hair, I managed to get the clerk aware enough to agree to healing. He had a pretty serious concussion and deep cuts along his cheek and scalp, but I fixed those up pretty well. When he was awake and fully healed, I slowly helped him to his feet.

"Miss Militia and two other Wards are here, Vista and Aegis," Alya whispered. "They are freeing Shadow Stalker, but she is still out of it."

I let out a long sigh before continuing to help the man outside. By the time we stepped out into the sun, he was more or less moving under his own power.

"Arcanum, freeze!" Miss Militia shouted, an orange-stocked shotgun already readied on her shoulder. "You are under arrest for assaulting a Ward!"

I held my hands out slowly, making no sudden movement. I was pretty sure she was currently using non lethal rounds, since that was what the bright orange stock usually represented. That said, I really didn't want this to spiral any further than it already had.

"Miss Militia, I will go quietly and without struggle," I assured her. "*If* you have one of the Wards watch one of the recordings made by these lovely bystanders. Please."

For a long moment, I thought she was going to deny my request, as unusual as it was. Thankfully, cooler head prevailed, and she gestured to Aegis, who flew forward and landed by a group of people. Several bystanders attempted to shove phones at him, and he simply accepted the closest.

After over a minute of watching, Aegis winced and looked up at his superior.

"Miss Militia... you might want to come see this," He said. "It's... It doesn't look good."

The Protectorate heroine looked over at the Ward, before fixing me with a glare.

"I promise I won't do anything. In fact..."

I looked over my shoulder, confirming my position, before carefully sitting down on the side of the curb, my hands still spread. I looked back at the female hero before shrugging. After a moment, her weapon swirled back into green energy, shifting to a pistol, which she holstered on her hip. After that, she made her way to Aegis's side, watching whatever video he had. Even though I could only see her eyes, it was impossible not to see her expression shift from annoyed to confused, then finally settling on angry.

When she was finally done watching the first recording, she shifted along the crowd to find another person with a different angle. After watching that, she began speaking into her radio, holding her hand to her ear. As she did, PRT troops arrived, making quick work of the crowd, pushing them back and cordoning off the area. A trio of guards gathered up Heap, quickly transferring him to a van and driving away.

As this happened, Miss Militia continued to talk in hushed, rapid words, standing far enough away that I couldn't hear her. Thankfully, Alya had no real issue.

"She is just explaining the situation, talking directly to Director Piggot," Alya informed me. "I can't hear what the Director is saying."

After a few minutes, during which Shadow Stalker is released from her constraints and taken away in another PRT van, Miss Militia approached me again.

"It seems I owe you an apology... Again," She said, holding out her hand.

"Yeah... maybe try and keep that from being a habit," I responded, taking her hand so she could help me to my feet, standing from the curb. "Look, I didn't want to hurt her. She's just a kid, but..."

"You were attempting to de-escalate the situation," She finished for me. "Even after she shot at you once. You should... Arcanum, do you need medical attention?"

She paused and shifted halfway through her sentence as if suddenly realizing that, yes, I had, in fact, been stabbed.

"Actually, I could use your help" I admitted, turning around. "I can't reach it... could you yank it out? I can heal it myself after it's gone."

She seemed frozen at the request but eventually nodded. She reached into her utility belt and pulled out a pair of nitrile gloves, as well as a whole bunch of gauze or something along the same lines. I turned around to give her access to the bolt.

"Okay, just let me-"

Blinding pain fired in every direction as the Protectorate heroine yanked the arrow from my back. I could vaguely feel her applying pressure to keep me from bleeding too heavily.

"-numb myself," I managed to finish through clenched teeth. "Never mind."

"... I'm sorry, I didn't know you could do that," Miss Militia admitted, sounding genuinely horrified at what she had done, watching as I quickly healed myself. "I thought you were going to say clench, which would have only made it worse, so-"

"It's fine, honestly. The pain is already gone," I assured her, letting out a ragged breath. "See, good as new."

"I... see," She said, seeming to seriously be off step. Eventually, after a few moments, she seemed to visibly restart herself and finally continue. "Arcanum, Director Piggot would consider it a personal favor if you would come in to discuss what has happened here."

"... Do I have a choice?" I asked. "And would I be home before dinner?"

"Yes," Miss Militia said with certainty. "To both questions."

"In that case... lead the way."