ABRASION 1.2

Saturday, August 21, 2010
-Same Day-

The living room was dark, lit only by the TV as it flashed with the changing scenes, dim light occasionally illuminating the trash-littered space. The shadows helped hide the ragged, dirty furniture, peeling wallpaper, and discarded beer cans. It didn't help much with the smell, but I barely noticed that anymore.

The noises from Mom's room finally stopped, and I felt myself tense, curling up into a ball where I sat on the living room floor as I pulled the mountain of blankets I'd gathered tighter around me.

I heard the bedroom door open, but kept my eyes on the TV. A few distant words were drowned out by the cartoons. Then a man passed by, another stranger with features muddled by the shadows, and he left out the door without so much a glance at me.

I wiggled more comfortably into my blankets, my grasping hands loosening around them.

There was the muffled sound of somebody rummaging around the bedroom and some sniffs.

Then footsteps.

Mom stepped out into the living room wearing a bathrobe. She stared at me with sunken eyes and smeared makeup over her too-thin, sharp features. Eventually she came and sat on the floor next to me, pushing some of the wrappers and empty beer cans away to clear a spot. An arm wrapped around me, her head resting on my shoulder as her long brown hair tickled my cheek.

We sat there, watching cartoons together for several minutes, the subdued volume from the TV blurring the sounds and words together into an indistinct mumble. I relaxed into the moment, trying to enjoy it while it lasted.

Because it never lasted long.

Ninety-eight seconds later, I saw Mom reach for the plastic baggie the man had left behind on the stained coffee table.

Then she picked up the syringe next to it.

I kept my eyes on the cartoons and wished I could take her pain away so she didn't have to use the needle again.

At least the latest stranger left enough money on the table for me to get some cereal after Mom fell asleep.

Sometimes they only left the baggie.

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I gasped, opening my eyes with a start. The world around me blurred even as a dozen aches and pains throughout my body flared into existence. I stifled the whimper that tickled the back of my throat, biting down on my lip as I took in my surroundings.

It took me a moment to put the order of events together, to remember what had happened yesterday when I tried to sneak home to grab some food.

Then the aftermath and… getting powers.

Figuring things out with Vern.

Deciding to go to the PRT.

Meeting Miss Militia.

And finally being given a room.

I squeezed my eyes shut, letting out my breath slowly.

So much had happened in only a few hours. Was that why the memories felt all fuzzy?

Probably. Not really anything to do about it but keep moving forward. That, and to stay positive.

Remember. Vista's around my age, and she fights supervillains! I can at least get through this.

Right.

So, first things first.

Wakeup checklist!

I looked around my surroundings first.

Almost entirely closed closet? Check.

Knife under pillow? Check.

Wrapped in blankets? Check.

Clothes?

I lifted the blankets a little and let out a sigh.

Check.

Cool.

Now, injuries.

I wiggled around a little. I felt a sharp stabbing sensation in my ribs at that, tearing some of my breath away. My left hip throbbed pretty bad too, the opposite ankle twinging a little as if I had pulled a muscle in it. My shoulder on that side hurt too. Same with both my wrists, and my neck…

Speaking of neck, I opened my mouth and tried to say something. Anything, really. Good morning, hello world, please God let me speak.

Nothing happened.

I could feel the words on the tip of my tongue, but when the air tried to leave my throat it just… wouldn't.

My vision blurred. I'd been hoping that maybe after some rest…

No, no this is okay. Nothing's changed. Vern thought it was something to do with my powers, so the PRT might have answers.

A few shuddering breaths later I was back in control. Focusing back on my injuries, I was a little surprised how sore I was. I hadn't felt even half of the aches last night, but maybe that was just because I was running off adrenaline? Or maybe exhaustion when that ran out?

Probably both.

I gave a mental shrug. No point in really thinking about it too much…

It was at that moment that my stomach gurgled, talons forming to claw inside my belly.

Right.

I hadn't eaten anything since… a little over a day? It was why I'd decided to risk going to Mom's house in the first place…

Yelling. Pain. Being locked into my room. Mom sleeping off her medicine. The door opening and-

No.

I shook my head, forcing away the whispering thoughts as I unwrapped myself from my blanket burrito. It wasn't the time to dwell, and I didn't really want to either. Today was going to be a good day! I was joining the Wards! It would be dumb to ruin it by thinking about what already happened.

I opened the closet door and stepped out, shivering a little in the relatively cool air. Looking around, I found a tiny little digital clock on the nightstand.

12:36 p.m.

I blinked.

Uh… Huh.

It had been around, what, three in the morning when I came in?

I wasn't sure what was more surprising, that I'd gotten almost nine hours of sleep or that I'd been allowed to sleep in so long.

I must have seemed really exhausted last night.

I gave another mental shrug and started getting ready.

First order of business was grabbing my clothes for the day and changing in the bathroom after quickly using some wet wipes to clean myself. I also sprayed myself with a liberal amount of deodorant to make sure I smelled okay.

For my outfit, I went for something a little nicer: leggings, my red plaid skirt, and then a pale pink shirt with long sleeves.

Looking at myself in the mirror, I decided to add my scarf and knit beanie after a moment. The bruises around my neck were turning into a rainbow of ugly colors I wanted to hide, and I didn't know if I should be showing my white hair or not.

Besides, it was *really* messy. It had been a long time since I'd given myself a haircut.

It took me a while to get all my hair bunched up beneath my beanie, but with that done, I reappraised my image in the mirror.

It was… nice. Not good or great or anything, but nice. The skirt was frayed at the edges, the shirt's graphic design of Mouse Protector was fairly faded, and the scarf and hat combo was a bit odd to be wearing indoors, but I didn't think I looked awful. Sure I was too thin and ghostly pale, but at least my split and puffy lip would be hidden by my mask.

With that taken care of, I stepped out of the bathroom and noticed the completely bare bed.

Ah.

Right.

I fixed that by deconstructing my closet nest, tucking in the blankets and replacing the pillows as best I could. I held my breath as I worked, my muscles tense as iron as I fixed up the bed. It still ended up looking rumpled, but it was better than nothing.

Satisfied, I made sure the rest of my things were in my backpack before I put on my mask, grabbed my (Miss Militia!) notebook, unlocked the door, and opened it.

To my surprise, Agent Campbell was sitting out there reading something on her phone.

She looked up as the door opened, and she gave me a bright smile.

"Hey there! How'd you sleep?"

[Good. Thank you. Were you here all night?]

“Oh, no,” she chuckled with a wave of her hand. “Somebody swapped out with me. I just got back on duty a little while ago.”

I nodded in relief, and she stood up, pocketing her phone.

“So, I got plenty of good news for you. It sounds like the process to get you officially into the Wards is moving along quite quickly. I was told the higher ups wanted to set up some meetings with you after you woke up and got some food. Luckily, we have a cafeteria here staffed at every hour, and they should be serving lunch right now. They’ve got some really good desserts, too. I figure we can go grab something to eat, and I’ll let them know to get the meeting set up for right after. How does that sound to you?”

My stomach clenched as it burbled hungrily.

I started to nod eagerly only for my excitement to come crashing down a moment later as I realized a big flaw in the plan.

Namely, I was almost completely broke. I had maybe seven dollars in my backpack not counting my loose change. Maybe that would be enough, though?

I nervously went back to my notebook.

[I don’t have much money. Is there something cheap? Cereal?]

I showed her my notepad, and her smile fell slightly.

“You don’t have to worry about the cost. I was told that for now, your meals would be completely paid for. I’m pretty sure Wards normally get to eat here for free anyway.”

Shifting anxiously, I looked down.

It wasn’t that I was adverse to free things, especially food. It was just that it always made me skittish to just accept things from places I hadn’t already gotten stuff from before. There were more than a few “free” food or clothes scams around the city set up by the gangs as soft recruitment schemes. I’d mostly been able to avoid them, but I’d still had a few close calls.

Even the soup kitchens and shelters weren’t totally free as they still expected me to answer questions I didn’t want to. Thankfully, they usually weren’t too pushy.

Was it stupid to feel suspicious when the *heroes* were the ones offering free things?

Yes.

Did that change how it made me feel?

Not really.

“What’s wrong?” Agent Campbell asked, and I felt my cheeks heat up as I realized I’d just been awkwardly standing there completely silent.

[Is it really free? No strings attached?]

The look on her face softened further.

“Well, maybe ‘free’ isn’t quite the correct term. Most jobs have perks, right? You’re joining the Wards, and this is one of the perks. I guess you could call it an exchange, and you’ve already done your part. Now it’s up to us to live up to our end.”

After thinking over her words for a moment, I felt my shoulder relax, and I let out a sigh.

I guess being a hero *was* a job, weirdly enough. Thinking about it that way helped ease the uncomfortable tingles in my stomach.

[Okay. Should I leave my things here?]

Her cheery smile returned.

“That should be fine. You can bring them along if it makes you feel more comfortable, though.”

I thought about it, then forced myself out the door without my backpack. I *would* have felt more comfortable with all my things on me, but I wanted to show a sign of trust to them.

Besides, what were they going to do, steal my sweaty clothes?

Gross.

Although, if Axy or my knife disappeared, I would be very unhappy.

Agent Campbell led me through the corridors, oblivious to my musings. She quickly started to outpace me as I took my time, trying not to aggravate my injuries too much. It only took her a moment to notice, and she slowed down to match my pace.

I tried to mask my injuries by looking around, as if I was just curious. She didn't comment either way.

One elevator ride later along with some more wandering, and we made it to the cafeteria. There were more people in the halls this time, most in suits but some wore something more casual like a short sleeved shirt and cargo pants. Most of those people were layered in muscle, and they had a disciplined air to them I normally attributed to the enforcers at the boardwalk or some police officers.

I kept my head down, but we still got some looks. Thankfully, nobody stopped to talk to us, though I did hear some whispering as we went by.

Regardless, we made it to the cafeteria without incident. It was a big space, filled with long tables and benches. It reminded me a little of my school's cafeteria, just nicer. More clean, better looking tables, decent lighting, things like that.

It was also completely filled with people.

The noise wasn't too bad, but there was still that low clamor that came with any crowd as conversations overlapped. Adding to the chaos was the fact my power kept trying to ping off people we passed by, trying to tell me about their injuries. Pushing my power down was a little harder in the crowd, taking more focus than it usually did.

I tried to hide my nerves as Agent Campbell led me to a line, passing by the long tables filled with people. It wasn't that I was afraid of crowds or anything, it just put me on edge to be so packed in with everyone. Especially with all the curious glances and stares. It kind of reminded me of-

The smell of warm, delicious food tore me away from my thoughts as my stomach gurgled.

Then, as the line advanced some more, I saw it.

A glimpse of heaven.

Food lined up from one end of a counter to another

Fried chicken, burger patties, mashed potatoes, gravy, bacon, salads, fruits and vegetables of every sort, three different types of rice, ham and turkey slices, three different pasta dishes, a few types of seafood, all kinds of cheese and bread, and, of course, various juices and drinks.

Any comparison to the meager offerings of my school were blown out of the water.

Is this what a feast looks like?

I stumbled a little on my next step, but Agent Campbell didn't seem to notice, merely picking up a tray and giving me a bright grin.

"Grab as much as you want. You missed breakfast, so don't be shy."

Numbly nodding, I tucked my notebook under my arm and picked up a tray of my own.

Then I took a deep breath, and I went to work.

I wasn't picky. Anything that looked or smelled good, anything that made my mouth water or looked like something I'd always wanted to try went on my tray. I didn't care if two separate dishes touched as I crammed as much as I could onto the tray, smushing things together as much as possible.

By the time I got to a little cashier station at the end of the line, I had a delicately balanced mountain of food that was taking both hands on my tray to maintain.

I realized my mistake a moment later, seeing the drink dispensers with no way to grab anything. Agent Campbell was giving my tray a mixed look of awe, amusement, and maybe a little bit of apprehension, but when she saw me looking at the drinks, she let out a quiet huff of laughter.

"Let's get you seated with that first. I can come back and pick up something for you after."

I nodded eagerly, trying to convey my thankfulness. We got to the cashier and Agent Campbell pulled a card from her pocket and swiped it after her food was typed in. The middle-aged woman manning the station was looking at my tray and blinking a few times after Campbell's transaction went through.

"I've got a pin number for her," Campbell said, breaking the cashier from her stupor.

She gave a nod, ringing me up, and Campbell put in a long string of numbers when she finished. A happy little beep went off, and the cashier gave an amused shake of her head before turning to me.

“You enjoy that, little lady.”

I gave an excited and thankful nod before following Agent Campbell as she led me off to a corner of the cafeteria.

“Now, with your mask, it would be hard to eat without giving away your identity. We’ve got little cubicles in the corner over here facing the wall with privacy curtains for that. Or for anyone just needing some time by themselves, but heroes obviously have priority access.”

We reached the corner a moment later to find a dozen or so sectioned off areas, none of which were in use. I picked one, setting down my tray excitedly, and Agent Campbell took the one next to me.

“Why don’t you get started, and I can go get you something to drink. We’ve got pretty much everything here, so just let me know what you want.”

[Thank you! Orange juice without pulp?]

“Not a problem. Be back in a second. Don’t forget to close the curtain before you start digging in.”

I gave a thumbs up, and she went off. Closing the curtain, I took a seat and took off my mask.

Then it began.

What happened next wasn’t a meal by any polite definition of the word.

It was a massacre.

And I did not simply eat.

I *devoured*.

Nothing on my tray was safe, not even the celery sticks or broccoli.

I found out I didn’t really like whatever fish I grabbed.

Didn't matter. It disappeared all the same, spoonfuls of potatoes between bites taking away the fishy aftertaste.

At some point, Agent Campbell returned with a glass of orange juice she handed me through the side of the curtain.

To think that grabbing the juice slowed me down would be a mistake.

The only thing that really delayed me was my need to breathe, and even that was minimal. I did try to slow myself down to enjoy the delicious mix of flavors, I really did.

But the food itself was just too amazing. No surprise bits of mold, no burnt and crispy bits, and no stale bread.

It was warm. It was fresh. And there was plenty of it.

I had a weird twisting feeling in my heart whenever I finished one type of food only to see there was plenty more waiting for me. It made my eyes water, and I had to wipe them a few times.

Hopefully my quiet sniffling sounds were lost in the noise of the cafeteria.

All too soon, it came to an end.

Nothing remained except a few grisly splatters of juice from various foods and sauces. It kinda looked like a particularly abstract painting if I squinted enough.

Leaning back in my chair, I let out a content sigh. My belly felt more than a little full, and I was pretty sure any sudden movements would result in catastrophe.

Worth it. A thousand times over, worth it.

Putting my mask back on, I pulled open the privacy curtain with the tray and empty glass in hand.

Agent Campbell was waiting outside, leaning against the wall. She gave me a wide, amused grin as she looked down at my tray.

"Enjoy your feast?"

I gave an eager nod even as I blushed a little. Then I started moving to place my tray at one of the return receptacles, ignoring the chuckle from Agent Campbell as she followed behind me. Satisfaction tingled through me, and I probably would have had more of a bounce to my steps if it weren't for the heavy, stuffed feeling of my stomach.

As I was walking by the various tables, a man in a rumpled suit happened to be walking by, and he gave me a curious tilt of his head before stopping directly in my path.

"Well hey there, miss," he said, a friendly smile forming underneath his well-cut blonde hair. "I don't think I've seen you around here before. Are you-"

Before he could finish, Agent Campbell had stepped in front of me with a liquid grace and quickness that made me blink as she gave an apologetic smile to the man.

"Sorry, sir. I'm afraid I was told not to let anybody ask her any questions."

He blinked a few times in surprise before letting out a chuckle. An uneasy feeling rose in my stomach, and I stepped back so Agent Campbell would be more in front of me.

"Oh, no problem. Just saw her here and was curious. With the cheap mask, I can't tell if she's sick, some kind of special witness, or a new-"

"Again, I'm afraid I can't answer any questions at this time. If you'd please move out of the way, I have a meeting to get her to."

The expression on his face twitched a little, smile fading.

"Hey, no need to be unpleasant. I'm just trying to be nice. The poor girl looks half scared out of her mind. There's no harm in some friendly banter to ease her, is there?"

Agent Campbell glanced back at me, causing the man's smile to grow. The hair on the back of my neck rose.

Something about his smile was weird. It reminded me of the smiles from some of the men Mom had brought home, just with a different slant to it. I found myself tensing up, hunching my shoulders into myself as I bowed my head slightly to make myself smaller.

Agent Campbell saw my reaction, and her trademark bright smile slipped from her lips as her eyes narrowed and turned cold.

“Sir-” Agent Campbell began, her voice firming up.

“Is there a problem here?”

I jumped a little, turning to my left to look at the new figure I hadn’t noticed approaching.

I blinked in surprise.

He was wearing a costume, but I didn’t recognize him.

He wore a full bodysuit covering every inch of his thin body. It was colored a dark midnight blue, the only other color a white swirling line that curled around each leg up to his chest where they met up in the center to form a double helix. Then the white lines split apart again, curling down each arm to his hands. The entirety of his face was covered by the bodysuit as well except for two white lenses where his eyes would be. The only other parts to his costume were some armored pieces over his chest, joints, and on the gloves and boots he wore.

The costumed man was carrying a food tray, and he had his head tilted inquisitively at the other blond guy. I knew he had to be a hero considering he was in costume and inside the PRT headquarters, but I didn’t recognize him for the life of me.

Come on, think! There’s eight protectorate heroes in Brockton Bay. Armsmaster, Challenger, Miss Militia, Velocity, Assault, Battery, Dauntless, and… Recourse!

That was it! This had to be Recourse!

It made sense why I didn’t recognize him now. Everyone online agreed he was the most mysterious of the local heroes because he never went on any patrols and was barely seen at public relation events. There weren't even that many pictures of him on the Parahumans Online wiki other than the ones from his official reveal. Nobody even knew what his power was, just that it must be a non-combat one of some kind if he stayed out of the spotlight.

Most people thought it was a Thinker power of some kind, which made sense. Thinkers didn’t really have flashy powers, but their powers were super good at getting or analyzing information through various means.

Whatever the case, knowing I was standing next to a hero filled me with both ease and an electric giddiness tinged with anxiety.

“Oh, uh, no trouble, sir,” the man sputtered to the hero. “I was just trying to help the civilian here feel a little more at ease. She looked a little scared.”

Recourse hummed thoughtfully, stretching out the sound with something like amusement.

“Perhaps strange men walking up to her isn’t the best way to ease her nerves?”

The man sputtered, but Recourse wasn’t finished.

“I’m also sure she would be anxious about being late to whatever meeting she and Agent Campbell have. So maybe it would be best to move out of the way of the two ladies before you inconvenience them further?”

The man’s face flushed a shade of red, and he gave a curt nod before briskly walking to a table. Agent Campbell watched him go, letting out a quiet breath before turning to the costumed man.

“Thank you for that, sir.”

“Not a problem,” he shook his head. “Curiosity is usually a good thing in our line of work, but people should know when to drop a subject. Speaking of, I won’t hold the two of you up anymore than you already have been.”

He turned to look down at me, giving a slight shrug of his shoulders.

“I hope that wasn’t too disquieting for you, miss. Good luck at your meeting, and I hope you have a wonderful rest of your day.”

I gave him a stunned but thankful nod. He returned the motion before turning on his heel and making his way towards the privacy cubicles. I felt torn for a moment, wanting to ask for his autograph and not wanting to linger with all the attention we’d drawn.

And boy, had we drawn attention. I’d mostly been able to ignore the curious looks before, but now the glances were much less subtle, and I could practically hear the whispers as the ambient chatter picked up again from the quiet that fell during the confrontation.

Letting out a frustrated and anxious breath, I continued on my way to the tray return station, setting my tray and cup down before taking out my notebook from under my arm and writing a question for Agent Campbell.

[Was that Recourse?]

“Oh? I’m surprised you recognized him. He’s more of a behind the scenes kind of guy as far as I know. Usually, he’s working out of an office doing paperwork here instead of the Protectorate’s HQ. I’ve worked with him a bit, and he’s a pretty nice guy. Makes a mean cup of coffee, too.”

I nodded a few times, absorbing the information greedily. I wanted to go get his autograph even more now, but he’d already made his way to one of the privacy cubicles, so I didn’t want to annoy him.

I got to meet my second hero! And he even helped me out! So cool!

“Anyways, I wasn’t lying about that meeting,” Agent Campbell gave me a smile. “We’ve got one scheduled for twenty minutes from now. We can go up there now, or…”

I was already nodding, and she smiled.

“Roger that. I’ll lead the way.”

We started weaving our way out of the cafeteria, but after a moment of hesitation I scribbled a quick note on a page, ripped it out, and ran over to the cashier, handing it to her. She gave me a curious look as she took the page.

[Can you tell the cooks the food was amazing? Also thank you! All of you!]

The woman let out an amused laugh, giving me a glittering smile.

“Sure, hun. I’m sure it will make their day. I know it made mine.”

A wide smile bloomed beneath my mask, and I gave her a few quick, grateful nods before hurrying back to where Agent Campbell was watching me with amusement. She didn’t say anything, merely working her way back out of the cafeteria.

We weaved our way back through the labyrinthine halls of the building to an elevator, went up a few floors, navigated some more, and then finally arrived at the door of another conference room.

The whole way there, I could feel my nerves building up. I had no idea what this meeting was supposed to be about, and I really didn’t like surprises. Hopefully it wouldn’t be more questions.

Maybe it was just paperwork? I hadn't filled anything out yet, and from every show I'd seen on TV, getting a job was supposed to involve lots of it. They even complained about it on *Weekend Wards* whenever a new member joined! It was the running joke on the show for the stack of paperwork to get bigger every time. The latest member had even just been thrown into an actual pool filled with it.

I was pretty sure it wouldn't be *that* bad, but I didn't really know what else to expect. There wasn't much online about the actual steps in the joining process, just the basic requirements and various benefits the Wards received.

As Agent Campbell opened the door, I was surprised to see we weren't the first two there.

Miss Militia was in the room, talking politely to a young woman wearing a yellow cardigan over a floral dress. Both were sitting at the table already, with thick folders and a laptop in front of them. The woman also had a big notepad she was writing something in as Miss Militia spoke. Upon the two of us entering, the woman looked up, her ponytail bouncing.

"Ma'am," Agent Campbell, giving a nod to Miss Militia. "I've brought our young friend as requested."

Miss Militia gave a nod to the agent as she stood up with the other woman. Turning to address me, she gave a tilt of her head.

"Hello. Did you sleep well?"

I nodded vigorously, stomach doing flip flops at meeting Miss Militia again. Her eyes wrinkled in a smile.

"That's good. I have somebody I'd like to introduce to you. This is Molly Young. She's with the Youth Guard and is going to be sitting in with us for the meeting."

I gave her a greeting nod that she returned even as I started writing in my notebook, everyone waiting patiently for me to finish.

[It's nice to meet you! Sorry, what is the Youth Guard? People online are confusing when they talk about it.]

"It's a pleasure to meet you too," Miss Young gave me a fond smile. "And I'm not surprised you don't know much about the Youth Guard. They aren't usually a group most people know too

much about, but I'm guessing people online weren't saying very nice things about the organization, were they?"

I felt my face redden, and I looked down a little. I wasn't really sure how to respond to that other than give a slight shake of my head.

When people talked about the Youth Guard, the discussions were usually mixed. On one side, people praised them as a group that protected young capes from danger by making rules and regulations to keep them safe. On the other side, people yelled at them for interfering too much and being overprotective, keeping young capes from really being able to do anything at all.

I'd never looked up information about the group because they didn't come up too often, and I was always more interested in the actual cape stuff.

"No worries," Miss Young said gently, noticing my embarrassment. "I don't take any offense. Why don't you take a seat, and I can explain things to you? I wanted to talk to you in private before the meeting started anyways."

A knot formed in my stomach at that, and I turned a worried look to Miss Militia as I wrote.

[Am I in trouble?]

"No, nothing like that," the heroine assured me. "Miss Young is simply here to ensure you're informed of everything involved in both joining the Wards and dealing with your circumstances at home. Because she's from another organization, she's able to act as a neutral third party whose only priority is your wellbeing."

Miss Young gave Miss Militia a wry smile.

"That's a very generous explanation. I'm not sure all your colleagues would see it that way."

"Maybe, but I was a Ward too at the very beginning of the program. I remember more than a few times where a group like the Youth Guard could have solved some early growing pains. Besides, considering our young friend's home situation, it's important she has somebody on her side that isn't invested in her joining. As impartial as I like to believe I can be, having another person supporting her can't hurt."

Miss Young was practically beaming at Miss Militia now, giving her a respectful nod before turning back to me, tilting her head slightly.

“Speaking of which. I know I’m not technically permitted to know your private identity just yet, but is there something I can call you? It’s going to be offly ridiculous and a little rude if I can’t address you directly.”

I was a little taken aback by that, and I hesitated. Of all the various things I’d considered, picking an actual cape name had somehow never crossed my mind.

It was such an obvious oversight, I had to force myself not to facepalm.

“If it helps,” Miss Militia said. “We’ve given you the temporary codename ‘Aide’ in our files. That’s Aide with an ‘E’ at the end, for clarification.”

Tilting my head, I considered that. It wasn’t the worst hero name, and it *did* reference all my powers at once. I was a little surprised they hadn’t directly referenced my healing ability, but maybe there was a reason for that.

Aide. An assistant. But also like aid, to help. Clever.

Wait! Is that why aides are called aides in the first place? Because they aid people?

That would make so much sense…

Mentally shaking away the shocking revelations from my mind, I gave a tentative nod as I wrote.

[That’s fine. I’m not sure if I want it permanently.]

“Of course. Picking your actual cape name will be a whole process, but I’m getting ahead of myself. First, you should really have a conversation with Miss Young.”

Shifting my weight, I looked at Miss Young cautiously. After hearing the two talk, I felt a little more comfortable speaking with her. She seemed nice, and Miss Militia seemed to like her, so…

I gave a hesitant nod, fidgeting with my notebook.

“Alright,” Miss Militia said, heading to the door with Agent Campbell. “We’ll be right outside if you need anything.”

They stepped out, but not before Agent Campbell gave me a smiling wink that helped ease my nerves a little. The door shut, and I turned my attention back to Miss Young who gestured to the table.

“I’m going to have a seat, if you don’t mind. Feel free to join me or remain standing, whichever makes you feel more comfortable.”

Well, that was an easy decision. Between how stuffed I felt and the throbbing aches across my body, I wasn’t going to turn down a chance to sit. I took a chair across from Miss Young, and she gave me a beaming smile.

“So, like Miss Militia said, my name is Molly Young. You can call me Miss Young or Molly, whichever you feel most comfortable with. As for why I’m here, I’m a caseworker for the Youth Guard. Before I get started with explanations, there’s one thing I want to cover first.”

She looked at me softly, and when she spoke, her tone rang with gentle sincerity.

“This is a safe place. You can say anything you want here without worrying about getting in trouble, and nothing you say will leave the room unless you give me permission. If you feel uncomfortable with anything during this process, I would like you to tell me. This includes if anybody upsets you or makes you feel uncomfortable, including me. I’d like to know if something is wrong so that I can work to make sure it doesn’t happen again, alright?”

She had such a warm, understanding voice filled that I felt myself settle more comfortably in my chair. It reminded me of the way some of the people at the shelters talked to me when I went for food or clothes.

Generally, it was hard to fake that kind of passion.

It didn’t make me completely trust her or anything, but…

Maybe I could try something low risk first?

Chewing on my lip nervously, I got out my notebook and started writing.

[There was a guy in the cafeteria who stopped me to ask questions. Agent Campbell tried to make him go away, but he was being weird. I didn’t like it.]

Miss Young frowned.

“What kind of questions was he asking, and could you tell me more about how he was being weird?”

[He was asking who I was, and why I was there. He sounded nice, but he just made me feel weird. He wouldn't leave when Agent Campbell told him to go away.]

I shrugged, not really sure how else to explain it. Thankfully, Miss Young seemed to understand, writing something down as her frown deepened.

"I'll make sure to look into the situation. Thank you for telling me about this, Aide. These are exactly the kinds of things I'm here to help with. I'd like it if you continued to tell me if anything or anyone bothers you like this. Your well-being is my priority, but there's not much I can do if I don't know about the problem. So please, don't be afraid to share no matter how small the issue might seem. If it's important enough to bother you, then it's important enough to bother me with. Okay?"

Nodding, I felt myself settling in even more. She reminded me of some of the better, nicer teachers at Rosewood Middle School, the ones who actually cared.

It didn't mean they could do much, but they tried.

"Alright," she gave me a soft smile. "So then, the Youth Guard. What are we? To put it simply, we're an organization that focuses on protecting and looking out for the health and safety of the Wards and other underage parahumans acting as capes. Our goal isn't to stir up trouble with the PRT or Protectorate despite what some might say. Our main mission is to make sure underage capes aren't being exploited, are getting their educational, physical, and emotional needs met, and aren't being put into excessive danger."

She let out a sigh, leaning back in her chair slightly.

"That last one is the main point of contention among the Youth Guard's critics, but what people don't seem to understand is the purpose of the Wards isn't to fight villains, it's to educate and train young parahumans to learn about their powers safely. Yes, that sometimes means learning to use their powers to help catch criminals, but it's only supposed to be in the safest, most controlled of situations, preferably with plenty of backup and direct Protectorate oversight. The Wards are *not* child soldiers and shouldn't be utilized as such."

Taking a deep breath, she folded her hands on the table with a sad smile.

"Unfortunately, reality does not always cooperate, especially here in Brockton Bay where there is an unusually high density of capes. Still, there's a difference between letting a Ward get some experience catching purse snatchers or unarmed muggers and setting them against somebody like Hookwolf. The Youth Guard plays a large part in determining how much danger a Ward can be

reasonably exposed to, if any at all. Yes, getting the Wards experience for when they join the Protectorate is important, but the most important thing is getting them there *unharmed*."

I shuddered a little at the mention of Hookwolf, looking away.

Everyone in Brockton Bay knew who Hookwolf was and had heard the stories of his viciousness.

Not everyone had seen one of his victims first hand.

The body in the alley was covered in shadows. No… not shadows. Blood. So much blood. He wasn't wearing ragged clothes either, it was his frayed and torn flesh.

The body let out a quiet whimper of agony, and I screamed.

I ignored the sudden queasiness swirling in my stomach, focusing on Miss Young as she continued speaking.

"So, that's more or less the goal of the Youth Guard. Keep the children safe, look out for their best interests, and ensure the PRT isn't pushing the boundaries on what Wards are doing. By being an independent organization focused purely on oversight of the Wards, we act as a sort of checks and balances system more than anything else. That, and we're able to act as mediators or advocates if a Ward has a problem. Does this make sense so far?"

After forcing myself to take a moment to review her words, I nodded. It all seemed pretty straightforward.

"Good," Miss Young gave me a warm smile. "Now, you know how I mentioned we're supposed to be advocates for the Wards? Well, this includes anybody looking to join the Wards, especially recruits with your circumstances."

Tilting my head in a silent question, she responded by folding her hands on the table, and looking directly into my eyes.

"I've been told a little of your situation, that you may have a troubled home life and lack any parent or guardian that can be trusted. That's why I've been brought into this meeting, to be an impartial adult that can advocate for your best interests. Not the PRT's, not the Protectorate's, not Brockton Bay's, but *yours*."

I scrunched my eyebrows together in confusion, and she chuckled, waving a hand at the door behind me.

“Let me put it this way. The PRT is highly motivated to get you to join the Wards. The number of total villains vastly outnumbers the amount of heroes, and Brockton Bay is no different. Every Ward is a future hero, so it’s in the PRT and Protectorate’s best interests to get you to join. That means that in these upcoming meetings, they’re going to try putting their best foot forward, to convince you this is your best and possibly *only* option.”

She gave a shrug, spreading her hands to either side.

“And maybe sometimes that *is* true. My job is to simply support you, to make sure nobody tries to take advantage of you or treat you unfairly. That, and to make sure you’re making an informed decision and aren’t bullied or frightened into choosing something you’ll regret. Does all of this make sense so far?”

Sitting back in my chair, I went over everything in my head. It wasn’t really a lot of information, but it was *important* information, so I didn’t want to just breeze through it and miss something.

Still, it really wasn’t that complicated.

The Youth Guard was focused on Ward safety.

The PRT were good guys, but also might be biased about getting me to join.

Miss Young was here to make sure I was represented because I didn’t have anybody else.

She was also patient and seemed genuinely concerned about me, which made me feel warm and tingly to think about. Especially considering she didn’t even know me, and she was nice when I told her about the lunchroom confrontation.

She’d taken me seriously and even thanked me for trusting her. There had been no doubt or brushing off my concerns, just instantaneous acceptance and making sure I knew she was going to look into it.

At first, Miss Young had reminded me of some of my nicer teachers at Rosewood Middle.

The thing was, she was *way* better because it seemed like she actually had the power to do things, and she was using that to help *me*. Not the popular girl or one of the connected gang children, just regular old me.

It was really hard not to squirm with the yearning warmth that was filling my chest.

Eventually, I shook my head, paused, then began writing.

[I think I understand. What is this meeting about? Nobody told me.]

“Oh, I’m sorry about that,” Miss Young looked embarrassed. “This first one we’re having is going to go over the initial findings of the Child Protective Services investigation Miss Militia initiated. Even though you aren’t a full Ward yet, the PRT takes lead on any CPS investigations involving a parahuman. If I understand the situation right, they sent some investigators to your home early this morning. We’re going to go over their initial reports and then move on to asking you some questions about your home life.”

I lowered my head as I felt my throat tighten, a reaction Miss Young didn’t miss.

“I understand this is going to be tough. If you need a break at any time, let me know. We can even stop the meeting and continue later if we have to, okay?”

I gave a shaky nod, unable to ignore the nausea fluttering in my stomach.

“Okay then,” Miss Young smiled gently. “If you think you’re ready, we should let the others in.”

Another nod, and Miss Young grabbed her things before she stood, heading towards the door. I forced myself to take a few deep breaths as it opened, and Miss Militia entered with somebody I didn’t recognize.

He was an older looking man in a worn suit with gray, wispy hair and thick glasses. He gave me a small smile and nod as he entered, softening the wrinkles on his face into a kindly expression. I gave a small wave, eyes briefly flicking to the laptop and thick file folders he had under his arm. He moved, taking a seat directly opposite of me across the table.

Surprisingly, Miss Young sat next to me. Miss Militia moved to join the man across the table after closing and locking the conference room door and pressing a button on a panel next to it. She nodded at me as she sat, and some of the building tension lost its sharpness.

“Aide, I’d like you to meet our Child Protective Services specialist, Mr. Wells.”

“It’s wonderful to meet you, Aide,” he spoke warmly. “It’s always a treasure to meet an up-and-coming hero before their official debut.”

I gave a shy wave, blushing at the thought of me being called a hero.

I hadn't even done anything yet!

"Before we begin," Miss Militia continued, "I'd like to remind everyone that while we've all signed non-disclosure agreements regarding Aide's private identity and any personal information discussed here, we should do our best to limit discussing or mentioning any aspects that may potentially identify her including her legal name or the names of any relatives. Does everybody understand?"

Everyone nodded while I simply tilted my head, writing a big question mark on a page and showing it.

"We take the security of our Ward's private identities very seriously," Miss Militia explained. "Normally, beyond the director, deputy director, and the Protectorate member overseeing the Wards, nobody has access to the full details of a Ward's identity by default. Unfortunately, due to your situation, Mr. Wells had to be informed of more information than usual in order to properly investigate. I understand this might make you feel uncomfortable, but I can personally vouch for him."

I gave a thumbs up. It did make me feel a little weird, but I wasn't sure if it was because I wasn't used to the whole cloak-and-dagger, hidden identity life as a cape thing or if I actually felt uncomfortable with him knowing.

Maybe a little of both?

But if Miss Militia trusted him, that was all I needed to really know.

"Good," Miss Militia nodded gently. "With that out of the way, shall we begin?"

"Of course," Mr. Wells nodded, the smile slipping from his face. "Now then, to make sure we're all on the same page, we're all here today due to information that came up during Aide's Ward recruitment interview early this morning. During the interview, the issue of parental consent came up and Aide expressed that she both didn't feel safe at home and that her mother couldn't be trusted with the information that Aide had powers. Due to this, we began a quick, emergency investigation which involved myself and some officers visiting her home to collect any information, especially after Aide indicated that she thought there would be enough evidence that she wouldn't have to directly answer any questions."

Mr. Wells grabbed the file folders in front of him, passing one to Miss Militia and Miss Young with a grim expression.

“Unfortunately, I’m afraid to say she was mostly correct.”

The file folders opened on the table, Miss Young glancing at me briefly before sliding the papers over so I could lean over and see them. There were a few pages stapled together along with a stack of pictures printed out. The top one looked like a fairly normal image of my home: a decrepit house crammed between two others, weeds growing out of the unkempt patches of grass leading to the door.

Looking past that, I started skimming the paper.

…located on the edge of known gang territory…

…no immediate response to inquiries at the front entrance…

…eventual entry made in accordance with the warrant…

…one adult female discovered unconscious with drug paraphernalia nearby…

…appeared stable. Ambulance contacted for transport…

…baggies of heroin, used needles, loose pills, and cans of alcohol in plain sight…

…house in general disrepair and filled with trash…

…search of bedrooms revealed-

I looked away from the report, slumping back into my seat.

I wasn’t sure what I was expecting, honestly. I already knew what my house was like, and reading over a description wasn’t particularly enlightening except that Mom was okay, just still passed out.

She probably didn’t even know what happened to me.

Shifting my attention away from *that* thought, I saw Miss Militia and Miss Young reading intently, occasionally glancing from the report to look at me. The friendly smiles were gone, replaced by searching, concerned gazes.

It got worse when Miss Young got to the pictures, letting out a quiet hiss of a breath as she looked over them.

I squirmed in my seat, uncomfortable as the attention on me seemed to double. I wasn't really sure what the big deal was.

I mean, yes, I knew it wasn't good, that Mom's choice of medicine wasn't really allowed, and the house itself was far from clean or pretty. That's why I'd been confident in telling Miss Militia they'd find what they needed there in the first place. I wasn't stupid, I knew Mom's drugs were pretty bad even if Mom needed them to get by.

I just hadn't expected this much of a reaction from them. The building tension as they flipped through the pages and looked at the images, the covert glances at me and tightening of their posture…

It didn't help that they were grimacing at some of the pictures and I couldn't figure out why. I wasn't sure why images of the mostly empty cupboards and refrigerator (except for two cases of beer) were making them behave like that.

Seeing the reactions of people around the table was making me feel weird, my stomach doing tiny little twists as my gut tightened.

I didn't like it.

And just seeing the notes about Mom made it feel like there was glass shard in my veins.

I didn't want to think about her anymore.

Grabbing my notebook, I started doodling while I waited. At first I just made a half-hearted attempt at a maze while I considered what I wanted to actually draw.

Axolotl's were generally my go-to. They were pretty smooth and kind of funny looking in a cute way, which made them fairly easy to sketch.

Racoons were good too. I'd tried drawing a raccoon styled knight after I heard about a new Ward in Boston going by that theme, but my rendition of her armor always turned out too blocky.

Dragons or some of Dragon's robot suits were also fun, but the proportions never turned out right which made me feel bad for messing her designs up.

Tempting as it was to draw Miss Militia or Vista, I'd already learned my lesson about trying to draw human figures, and there was no way I was going to embarrass myself like that again. Costumes were always fun, but…

I blinked, my thought process suddenly derailed.

Costumes.

Heroes and villains wore them.

I was joining the Wards.

The Wards were a hero group.

Therefore, I would be getting a costume like them.

My mind spun at the implication, making me dizzy for a second. I hadn't really considered that fact before, that I would be getting a costume myself soon.

Spurred by the sudden thought, I started sketching designs as excitement pulsed through me.

Hmm. A knight theme? No, that's overdone. Although, a dress with armor might make it more like a battle princess? That doesn't sound bad as long as it isn't too fluffy.

Wait, my main power is healing, so I don't want anything that looks too aggressive. Does the princess part counter the battle aspect? Hmm…

It would be nice if it was cute too, just not over the top. I've never really gotten to wear cute clothes before. Maybe a mix of practical and pretty like Vista's costume?

Definitely a skirt of some sort, though…

A half-dozen different doodles formed on the page, and I added little notes about details or questions. None of them looked that great, but sketching individual clothing pieces was easier than trying for a full person wearing a costume.

Maybe I could-

"Aide?" Miss Young's voice startled me, and I looked up to see everyone looking at me.

Blushing, I quickly turned the page to hide my drawings before making a quick question mark.

“I think Miss Militia and I are caught up with the investigation,” she gave me a small smile. “So we’re ready to continue if you are.”

I fidgeted with my scarf, the cloth suddenly feeling tight around my neck.

I slowly nodded.

I didn’t really want to talk about it, but I knew I had to if I wanted to become a Ward.

Just get through it, one step at a time.

“So, as you can probably gather from our initial investigation,” Mr. Wells spoke, folding his hands on the table, “we’ve got quite a bit of evidence that Aide isn’t and *hasn’t* been taken care of at her home. Combined with her house’s location on the edge of contested gang territory, the condition we found Aide’s mother in, and the fact Aide is a parahuman whom the gangs will be looking to recruit, it’s safe to say we’ll be able to get an emergency removal order filed and executed without issue. There’s clear signs of neglect if not outright abuse as well as the immediate danger of kidnapping.”

I scowled, hunching into myself as I wrote.

Mom didn’t abuse me. I mean, she punished me like any other parent would when I was bad, but that was just what good parents did.

And the idea of her neglecting me was stupid! She spent all her time trying to make money for us. It wasn’t her fault she needed time to relax after her job…

I didn’t write any of that though, because while what they were saying wasn’t true, it also wasn’t completely wrong.

I didn’t run away because of Mom, not directly. I just wasn’t safe there anymore.

And last night had proven that to be all too true.

“Grab the girl instead. Promises are not things to be broken so lightly.”

I clenched my teeth, biting back the surging wave of revulsion and horror, choking down the nausea.

I'm safe. It's over now. I'm literally in the room with Miss Militia. Nobody is going to hurt me here.

Taking a deep breath, I forced myself to finish writing my questions.

[What does an emergency removal order mean? What's going to happen to Mom?]

"An emergency removal order would take custody of you away from your mother," Miss Young explained, her voice gentle. "The PRT would take on the temporary responsibilities of guardianship until a more permanent solution can be arranged, most likely with a foster family. In the meantime, the court would also appoint somebody who would be responsible for observing you and representing your best interests. In this situation, that would most likely be me as I'm already a Youth Guard member and will be more or less doing the same duties with the PRT anyway."

I soaked all that in, giving a small nod.

It was what I wanted, basically.

For some reason it still made the lump in my throat thicker, the scarf around my neck tighter.

My fingers tugged lightly on my scarf, loosening it as I wondered if Mom was going to hate me for getting her in trouble.

"As for your mother," Mr. Wells began. "What happens largely depends on what the full investigation into her reveals. To that end, I'm afraid we're going to have to ask you some questions."

Ice formed in my chest, and I hunched more into myself.

I didn't want to talk about Mom.

In all honesty, I wanted nothing to do with her anymore.

She'd taken care of me and sacrificed so much it hurt, but the last few years leading up to last night had been… bad.

It still hurt to betray her like this, even if I told myself she might get the help she needed this way, especially without having to take care of me.

None of that made it easier for me to actually talk about things.

But I had to if I wanted to become a Ward…

I tried to write that I would cooperate, but my pen wouldn't form the words.

My hand started to shake as I tried loosening my scarf some more, but there was no escaping this, no escaping-

"If I might make a suggestion?" Miss Young interrupted. "Aide can only write her responses, and forcing her to sit here trying to perfectly articulate them in written form is going to not only take time but also be incredibly distressing. Instead, would it be possible to form a list of questions to hand to her and then have her write out the answers to submit on her own time? That way, she can chip away at them without feeling overwhelmed. How would that sound to you, Aide?"

I slowly turned to meet Miss Young's concerned gaze, my eyes watering as a confusing swirl of emotions bubbled in my chest.

I wanted to hug her so bad right now.

I jerked my head up and down in a facsimile of a nod, the motion shifting my scarf as I tried to convey my vigorous agreement with her plan.

"I suppose that makes sense," Mr. Wells nodded a few times. "So long as Aide was timely in her answers, I don't have any problem with this plan. The sooner we can get the information, the sooner we can get the investigation wrapped up and-"

A sudden sharp intake of breath from Miss Militia interrupted the man, and I turned to her in confusion.

Miss Militia was looking at me with hawk-like precision, while Miss Young stared at me with wide eyes as her gaze flicked over me wildly.

Confusion flooded through me as I looked between the two women. What…?

"Aide," Miss Militia said, her voice quiet. "What happened to your neck?"

The bottom of my stomach dropped away.

My hand shot up to my scarf only to find I'd loosened it enough for it to mostly unravel, revealing the ugly bruises beneath. I bunched it up, pushing it up to my neck.

Silence resounded through the room as everyone stared at me, and I felt my heart thumping away sharply.

Unsure what to do, I kept still, my throat tightening.

"Did your mother…" Miss Militia finally broke the uneasy quiet. "Is that why you finally decided to join the Wards?"

I shook my head fiercely, even as her follow up question caused more confusion to bubble inside me.

[No. What do you mean finally?] I asked, desperately trying to distract them with a question.

"You said that you left home months ago," Miss Militia's brow furrowed. "I assumed that was when you had your trigger event, and that you'd been hiding on the streets ever since."

[What is a trigger event?]

I didn't think the tension could become sharper, but when everyone saw my words, a collective grimace went through the room. Miss Militia's eyes were tight, hands clasped together as she cleared her throat. For the first time since I met her, she didn't look heroic or empathetic, just… painfully uncomfortable.

"It's what we call the moment a parahuman gets their powers, a traumatic situation that forces the person to manifest their abilities. Most capes describe it as the worst, darkest moment of their life. All capes go through one, but it's… It's not something most capes like to talk about."

Staring in horror at Miss Militia, I barely managed to acknowledge her explanation with a jerky nod. It matched up perfectly with how I gained my powers. Vern too…

But I wondered why I'd never heard about that online before. Then again, I knew you were never supposed to ask how a cape got their powers. Nobody ever explained why, just that it was something you didn't do.

Now I had my answer.

I felt sick.

Miss Militia cleared her throat, shifting in her seat uncomfortably.

“Aide, when you said you ran away from home, I assumed something happened to make you trigger, and that’s why you left. I was curious how you kept your physical alterations and powers hidden for so long while still managing to go to school, but it’s taboo among capes to ask about trigger events or things related to them. I wasn’t sure how comfortable you were with your physical changes, so I didn’t press. You also seemed nervous but remarkably well adjusted when you came in, so it seemed like you had your powers for…”

She trailed off, then her eyes slowly widened in horror as she looked back to my neck.

“Aide. If you didn’t trigger months ago, when *did* you trigger?”

I was pulled along through the shadowy room, rich-looking patrons sitting at tables with cards and dice watching with interest as the gangster led me past them. I kept my eyes on the ground, only briefly looking up to meet eyes with an Asian woman in a red cocktail dress watching me from a blackjack table. I silently begged her to do something, to do anything to get me out of here.

She didn’t move from her spot, but her hand clenched into a fist.

My heart pounded in my ears, and I could practically taste the ash and smoke in my throat all over again.

Slowly, I looked around the room, stopping when I found a clock.

Seeing that it was a little after 1:30 in the afternoon, I started doing the mental math, but everyone had followed my gaze to the clock, and Miss Young hissed out a quiet breath.

“Aide, did you trigger less than a day ago?” she asked, her voice ringing with soft pain.

The Asian woman lay against the wall, blood pouring down her broken face as the crackle of fire grew louder in the ruins of the caved-in bedroom. Smoke and ash were thick in the air, my already crushed throat struggling to wheeze in a breath. I stumbled over to her, the sound of discordant chimes and flashes of light entering the room from where the outer wall had collapsed onto the street.

My body started to tremble as I tried to stop thinking about it.

I could hear myself beginning to breathe heavier in the quiet room, and I gulped down a breath, trying to still myself as I nodded shakily to Miss Young.

“Aide…” Miss Young breathed my name gently. “Are you hurt? More than just the bruises on your neck?”

I squirmed in my seat, looking down at the table. At the edge of my vision, I saw Miss Militia tapping on her phone with an intense look in her eyes.

I didn’t answer Miss Young, mostly because I didn’t know what to say.

If I said yes, that would mean seeing a doctor, which is the last thing I wanted to do…

But I also didn’t want to just lie to her. She didn’t deserve that after being so nice to me.

Forcing myself to breathe slowly, I decided to tell the truth with a slight stretch to it.

[I’m fine. Just bruises.]

In point of fact, I was pretty sure that was accurate except for my ribs which were flaring up with my erratic breaths. Even then, I was pretty sure they weren’t broken considering I was still moving around mostly fine.

Miss Young didn’t seem to believe me, opening her mouth to say something when Miss Militia cleared her throat. I looked to see her staring at me with pained, searching eyes.

“Aide. Were you at the explosion on Ruby Street last night?”

I froze, staring at her.

Don’t think about it, don’t think about it, don’t think about it…

It was all I could do to shut down my brain, to force the memories from worming their way into my skull.

Miss Militia seemed to take my extended silence as an answer, letting out a slow breath. From her side, I saw a flash of green light beneath the table as her power seemed to react to her agitation.

“Aide. I know the court orders haven’t gone through just yet, so technically the PRT isn’t your legal guardian, but I think it would be best to take you to the hospital we have attached to the building.”

I started to shake my head, but Miss Young interrupted me by leaning forward.

“Miss Militia, what’s this about Ruby Street?”

The heroine’s eyes never left me as she spoke, seemingly searching for… something.

“A little past midnight, there was an explosion that caused the partial collapse of a building. Preliminary investigation points to a gas leak combined with general disrepair being the cause. However, the building was known to be an underground gambling hall for one of the gangs as well as being a front for… other activities.”

Miss Young was frozen as she took a moment to process that before her head snapped to me, but I didn’t look up from the table, fingers tightening in my scarf.

I didn’t want to see the stares I was getting.

There were rumors about what the gangs did, the ABB in particular, but what happened wasn’t as bad as they thought… mostly. The explosion had kind of interrupted everything.

I’d gotten lucky, really.

But even thinking that thought made my stomach roil with nausea.

It certainly felt like what I’d gone through had been bad enough, even though-

Don’t. Don’t think. Just breathe.

I shuddered, Miss Young’s voice coming to me softly.

“Aide. I agree with Miss Militia. I… I don’t know what happened, but we should really get you checked out regardless. Your neck alone doesn’t look good, and…”

Her voice was raw, and she was forced to trail off near the end, clearing her throat.

I really didn’t want to go, but at this point… I knew there was no use arguing. Even if I somehow got out of it now, they would just force me to go when the PRT took official custody of me.

I gave the barest hint of a nod, and Miss Young stood up with Miss Militia. I slowly gathered my notebook and pen, reality around me feeling thick, like I was moving through water.

“I’ll add this to the emergency removal order,” Mr. Wells whispered to Miss Militia, probably trying to be quiet enough that I wouldn’t hear.

She gave him a nod, heading out the door with Miss Young and I following close behind.

The two glanced back at me constantly as we moved, weaving through the halls and briefly entering an elevator. I tried to ignore the looks, heart beating faster and faster.

I didn't know why everything felt like it was falling apart *again*. I’d already had my breakdown with Vern. I should have already been over it, but now they’d just mentioned Ruby Street and-

My insides twisted again, and I took in a shuddering breath, letting the jagged pain in my ribs steal away my attention as we walked.

Eventually, we emerged into what looked like a hospital waiting room. It was mostly white with a small reception desk and an area to the side with rows of chairs. Sliding doors actually opened to the outside, letting in the midday light. A man in nurse’s scrubs behind the desk looked up in surprise as Miss Militia motioned for us to stay put, moving to talk to him quietly.

“Aide,” Miss Young whispered to me. “I… If you want somebody in there with you, just let me know.”

I hugged my notebook tighter to my chest, breath hitching in my throat.

As much as I didn’t want to dredge up my past in front of anyone…

I also really didn’t want to be alone.

Before I could give a response, Miss Militia walked over to us somberly.

“It should be just a moment,” she said, eyes lingering on me.

Wanting to distract myself, I wrote a quick question.

[Why does the PRT have a hospital attached to the building?]

Miss Militia seemed happy for the distraction too as she gave a thoughtful hum.

“Well, this hospital isn’t as fully staffed or versatile as a proper one, but there’s basically two reasons. First, it isn’t really a good look or idea for heroes who get injured to be sent to a public hospital. Keeping their injuries secret helps maintain public confidence, avoids people starting rumors, and also just keeps heroes generally safer while they recover. The second reason is it works well for the PRT troopers. They face similar issues, just to a lesser degree.”

I was nodding along when a doctor stepped out of a doorway. She was middle-aged with auburn hair tied into a tight bun. Miss Militia intercepted her halfway, speaking quietly about some things the doctor nodded along with. I felt my muscles beginning to tighten.

“Do you want me to come with you, or…?” Miss Young asked, and after a moment, I nodded.

I didn’t know her that well, but she hadn’t done wrong by me yet. Combined with the way Miss Militia seemed to trust her and the fact she would probably be finding this stuff out anyway, I didn’t see much reason to say no.

Miss Militia walked up with the doctor a moment later, the heroine gesturing to the woman.

“Aide, this is Doctor Reyes. She’s the primary doctor for our female Wards here, and is up to date on all the privacy and security measures. Anything you feel comfortable with sharing, she’s allowed to know.”

The doctor gave me a little smile, eyes flicking over me.

“Hey there. It’s nice to meet you, Aide. I’ve got an exam room all ready for us. Why don’t we head on back?”

She had a surprising soft voice that didn’t fit at all with the tense, serious demeanors the doctors on TV usually had.

“Would it be a problem if I came with her?” Miss Young asked. “Just so she has a friendly face.”

“So long as Aide is fine with it…” she trailed off as I nodded, and she returned the gesture. “Then there’s no issue. Let’s head on back, shall we?”

The two of us followed the doctor, and I gave one parting look to Miss Militia who waved at me as I left the reception room.

One hallway later, I found myself in a small room with one of those weird exam tables. A small desk and computer was in the corner along with some chairs. There were also a few cabinets and other medical devices around the room, but I didn't pay them much attention.

In the confines of the room, I could feel my power trying to tell me about their injuries, but the sensation felt far away and muted compared to the anxiety pulsing through me.

"Have a seat on the table here, Aide. We've got some things to talk about before anything else."

I followed her instructions as Miss Young took one of the chairs. Doctor Reyes sat in a wheeled chair by the desk and computer computer, turning it to face me. She took a deep breath before beginning, hands folded in front of her.

"First of all, Miss Militia told me a little about your circumstances and what she's concerned about. Above anything else, I want you to know that what you say stays in this room unless you tell me otherwise. If you want to talk to me alone at any point in time, just let me know, okay?"

I gave a nervous nod, not quite meeting her eyes.

"Okay. The second thing you have to know is there is nothing to be ashamed of or embarrassed about. My only purpose here is to help you, but I can't do that if I don't know what the problem is. I know some of the questions I might ask might be uncomfortable, so please, take all the time you need. If you need a break at any point, let me know."

Again, I nodded, a hysteric part of me almost giggling at how similar her speech was to Miss Young's.

"Now, if I understand correctly, the injuries we're talking about come from your trigger last night. With something that recent, I'm going to do all I can to avoid any fresh trigger trauma, so instead of telling me exactly what happened, I'd like you to tell me things in the abstract. You can be as specific as you'd like from 'my wrists hurt' to 'my wrists were squeezed really hard.' If you can, I would like you to include if anybody did anything inappropriate or anything that made you feel uncomfortable. I understand that you're mute, so please, take as much time as you need to write down anything that's bothering you. We can work out what physical examinations we need to do from there."

My stomach squirmed as I gave a shaky nod, opening up my notebook.

Staring at the blank page for a long minute, I forced myself to put pen to paper.

The sooner this was over with, the better.

So I choked down the bile building in my throat.

And I wrote.

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Over an hour later, the three of us emerged back into the reception room, and I felt exhausted.

Doctor Reyes had done her best to soothe the worst of the experience, but even still, there was a certain level of poking, prodding, and other uncomfortable exams that were unavoidable. Thankfully, it seemed like they mostly took me at my word about what happened, and I felt like I was able to avoid anything too bad.

Miss Young was there for me the whole time, simply sitting there and giving me a reassuring smile anytime I faltered at Doctor Young's follow up questions or instructions. Somehow, just her being there made me feel safer.

Doctor Reyes herself had been surprisingly nice too. I had expected some cold doctor to order me around and tell me what was going to happen, but she'd been the practical opposite. She'd explained every examination to me and why it was necessary before asking me if it was okay to go through with it.

Still. Over an hour of examinations and reliving small parts of last night was enough to drain me completely. More than that, all my excitement and wonder at joining the heroes had evaporated. I just felt empty, like somebody had carved out all the good emotions in me and left me hollow.

Even seeing Miss Militia waiting for us wasn't enough to create more than a small spark of excitement.

Nervous apprehension quickly followed, but I swallowed it down as she stood and walked over to us.

"Miss Militia," Doctor Reyes greeted the heroine. "We should be all done here for now."

The heroine nodded, and I noticed the gun on her hip—her power—was trembling almost nervously, faint green energy shifting over it. One of her hands was placed on it as if keeping it in place.

“Now,” Doctor Reyes continued. “Aide has indicated she’s okay with sharing some of the details with you, but I don’t particularly want to drag out reliving her trigger more than necessary, so I’m going to give you the cliff notes. Injuries, what to look out for, and my recommendations for treatment.”

I looked off to the side, staring out the sliding glass doors that led to the outside, not wanting to see her reactions one way or another.

It was sunny out, the world oblivious to how raw I felt on the inside.

“To get the big questions out of the way, there’s no extreme long term injuries. We also don’t have to worry about any other physical complications.”

I tried to tune the words out, imagining myself out on the streets with Vern as we scuttled from one alley to another, hitting up the bakeries that threw out their wares in the thicker plastic bags that protected them from most of the other trash.

“In terms of her injuries, Aide has quite extensive bruising on most of her body. Most of it will heal on its own, but I’m worried about her ribs. From the brief examination we did, I’m sure they’re bruised or possibly even fractured. She’s also indicated several spots in her body that I’m concerned might have hairline fractures or be developing them. I’d need to do an x-ray or MRI to be sure, but I was hoping we could bypass all that by giving her the usual Ward’s treatment.”

I turned back to them in confusion, the faint sounds of sirens in the distance briefly distracting me. Writing a big question mark on my notebook, I held it up.

“We’re lucky here in Brockton Bay,” Miss Militia explained quietly. “I’m assuming you’ve heard of Panacea?”

I nodded quickly. I would be shocked if anybody in the city didn’t know about her. The high school girl was one of the few capes whose power actually was purely for healing, and she was able to fix pretty much anything so long as it didn’t have to do with the brain. Gunshots, lost limbs, and even cancer were no match for her. One touch, a few minutes of her using her power and then somebody would be as good as new. She made regular rounds at the hospitals curing and fixing things doctors had no chance of touching.

As far as anyone was concerned, she more than lived up to her name.

“Well, even though Panacea is part of New Wave and doesn’t usually take requests, the exception tends to be the heroes and Wards of Brockton Bay. We have something of a standing

arrangement for her to treat any serious injuries, though the restriction is generally less for our Wards. In this case, I'm sure she would be more than willing to-"

I interrupted her with a frantic shake of my head, quickly writing out my words.

[No! I'm not that hurt. She has more important people to heal!]

"Aide," Doctor Reyes frowned. "In point of fact, you *are* fairly seriously injured. Depending on the severity of damage to your ribs and the number of stress fractures I suspect you have, it could take weeks to months for you to heal. Fractured ribs in themselves can cause more damage and internal bleeding. I'm not even entirely comfortable with the fact that you're not resting in bed right now. This is *exactly* the kind of thing Panacea wouldn't mind healing, and I know for a fact she's visited for less."

"Clockblocker once pulled a muscle after hunching over playing video games too long," Miss Militia agreed. "He jumped to his feet too quickly when he realized he was going to be late for a PR photoshoot. Panacea's quite generous when it comes to helping out the Wards."

I squirmed, heart falling as I tried to explain.

Did my bruises and ribs hurt? Yes. Constantly. My ribs especially whenever I had to stand or move around too much. I'd been pushing it to the back of my mind, but it was always there, a sharp, gritty agony that kept me from taking a full breath.

But what was that to *cancer*? To a paralyzed man getting to walk again? How could I possibly compare to somebody who really needed Panacea's help?

I was just… me. A street rat who happened to get powers.

Besides, I wasn't technically a Ward yet, so…

My thoughts trailed off as I dimly noticed the sirens I'd heard were getting louder. Everyone else seemed to notice it too, but before we could do anything, two doors leading further into the hospital were thrown open, a group of doctors and nurses stepping out in scrubs.

"Situation?" Miss Militia snapped at them, the group blinking in surprise at us.

"We've got troopers coming in with various injuries," an older doctor responded. "One critical. Took a blast from Stormtiger that ripped him up."

Miss Militia nodded, gesturing with her hand to herd us away from the entrance.

“Aide, Miss Young, over here, please.”

My heart started racing as I followed her instructions, stepping further into the lobby as an ambulance rolled up to the doors, red and blue lights flashing. Paramedics threw themselves from the vehicle, quickly opening up the back and rolling out a gurney that they rushed in through the doors, and I felt my breath catch.

A man lay atop the gurney, and most of his upper clothes were cut away, revealing blood-stained gauze wrapped around his chest and arms. The paramedics were already rattling off information to the doctors as they moved to take over, but the words were a blur as my mind honed in on his injuries.

The moment he entered the room, my injury sense went into overdrive, a blurry blob of red in the vague shape of a body appearing in my mind, burning like a bonfire. Even without touching him, I could feel the intensity of his wounds from almost twenty feet away, a scarlet star that screamed into my head.

The light crimson color was quickly darkening, spots of black appearing in the blob and spreading like some sort of plague, the doctor’s voices rising in intensity at the same time.

At that moment, I knew he wasn’t going to make it.

His entire body blazed in my mind, something clicking together as I realized that the black blobs I was sensing were located where his organs were.

Where they were *shutting down*.

He had maybe a minute before his color changed completely from dark scarlet to black if he was lucky.

He was *dying*, and the doctors weren’t going to be able to save him.

I was moving before I realized it.

I dropped my notebook and pen and dashed forward, ignoring the sharp pain in my chest as I dodged an outstretched hand from Miss Militia trying to stop me. Sprinting to the doctors as they continued to wheel him away, I acted without thinking, grabbing onto the gurney and lifting myself on top of the man to sit on his knees so the doctors could keep moving with him.

They jerked back in surprise, exclamations and questions thrown at me that I ignored as my injury sense *focused*.

Now that I was physically touching him, the blurry, human-shaped mass of scarlet that was his body in my mind sharpened into a proper image. The general glow of red condensed into lines and hot spots, showing the exact locations where he was hurt.

Yellow spots hissed with a sullen heat, wounds that were barely more than scrape.

Orange spots burned like a fire, more serious injuries that needed attention.

Finally, red spots roared with heat like magma, critical wounds that were quickly killing him.

The information came to me in a quarter second, and I was somehow able to process and catalog it just as fast. Yellow lines and patches covered most of his body, a few orange ones shining through, but it was four deep red spots that were rapidly spreading their color that immediately got my attention. Bits of the scarlet turned dark enough to become black as parts of his body began to fail, tendrils of the color reaching to start shading various organs that were already strained with orange.

His heart itself was flushed ruby, desperately beating with a pulse that weakened every beat.

I sucked in a breath, hovering both my hands an inch over his chest, as I took a moment to prepare.

Then I reached for my power, and pushed on it like I was flexing a muscle.

My power reacted to my call with elation, a sudden rush of energy filling my body that I directed down my arms and out my palms.

Both my hands flashed with light, a blue glow tinged with silver appearing around them before quickly spreading over the man's entire body. A high pitched hum like a ringing chime filled the air, condensed particles of the healing light occasionally wafting away from my hands and the injured man's glowing body beneath me.

I watched the image of his body in my mind, the molten red lines slowing in their spread but not stopping. The various lines of color gave me a view of most of his major blood vessels, colored orange and red as they strained to keep him alive. Even with my power pushing into him, the red continued to spread.

Panic and frustration flashed through me, and I pushed on my power harder, the light brightening further as I pushed the welling energy out of me with all the force I could muster.

Ever so slowly, the growing heat and scarlet began to slow their growth, the spread faltering.

“Aide.”

Slowly, making sure to concentrate on using my power, I pulled my eyes from the man beneath me to see Miss Militia at my side, hand outstretched.

“Aide, what are you doing?”

My power faltered at the distraction, and I turned my focus back to the man, absently making a writing motion with one hand. A second later, my notebook was thrust in front of me, held open by Miss Young.

Trying to keep my focus on my power, I carefully took an offered pen and wrote an explanation with a shaky hand.

[Not make it. Heart giving out. Feel it. No choice. Please.]

The colors began to spread again with my split focus, and I dropped my pen into the notebook before placing my hand back over his chest. Closing my eyes, I redoubled my efforts, pushing power through both my hands once again.

I was only vaguely aware of a conversation going on around me as I focused on the mental map of the man’s body in my head. The damage had stopped spreading from all but his most serious wound, the insidious red line continuing to darken the surrounding blood vessels into a scarlet hue.

No!

My eyes began to burn with tears.

I won’t let you die!

I clenched my teeth together as my throat tightened.

What’s the point of this power if I can’t save one person right in front of me!?

I pushed harder with my power, a sharp edged blade of pain forming in my skull as I strained.

The red line slowly began to stop growing, finally halting after another minute of me using my power with all my strength.

Then the colors began to lighten, some of the heat disappearing.

A fierce joy surged through me, one that I used to keep up my effort. I was only dimly aware of my surroundings, the fact that I'd been wheeled with the gurney to a separate room, doctors working around me to do… something. I could feel my lungs burning, and I was gasping for air even through the sharp pain in my ribs.

But I couldn't let myself relax. Fighting the heat and color was like trying to put out a fire with rain. As long as I focused on my power, throwing it in a torrential downpour at his injuries, the colors continued to lighten, but the moment I pulled back, things started to get worse again.

So I kept pushing as much as I could, ignoring everything else.

It was hard. I felt myself faltering as exhaustion began to rise inside me, the pain in my ribs turning sharper with each passing moment, my various aches pulsing against me like they'd been rubbed with sandpaper.

I could feel the tears forming in my eyes as I grit my teeth together. I wanted to stop, to curl up in blankets and fall asleep.

But I wouldn't give in. I wouldn't let somebody in front of me die or suffer. Not now.

Not ever again.

Sweat began to drip down my brow as I forced myself to continue using my power, and I ripped off my hat after a moment, trying to cool down my sweltering head.

A cool sensation almost shocked me a few seconds later only for me to realize a nurse must be dabbing at my sweat with a damp cloth. I redoubled my efforts, gasping as I felt myself grow weaker.

I wasn't sure how long it took, me watching my mental map of colors, but the reds eventually began to change, turning to orange and then yellow. The uninjured parts of his body were a cool green that my power struggled to even pick up without me directly focusing on the spot.

I stopped pushing as hard on my power when the black, reds, and oranges had turned to yellow, but I kept going, continuing until his entire body was a healthy emerald.

Even then, I kept my power on a little longer, just to make sure I wasn't missing anything. Probing at various spots with my sensory ability, all I saw was green. A few spots were a light gray, my powers working to restore them to green even as I continued searching for hidden spots of red, but I wasn't sure what the gray color meant, exactly.

Old wounds, maybe? Scars?

Whatever they were, my sense wasn't pinging off the gray spots like they did his injuries. Instead of a sharp heat, I got more of an annoyed itch.

Regardless, I forced myself to keep going, and it didn't take long for the gray lines and spots to turn green, joining with the rest of his body.

I gave one last mental search, looking for anything I might have missed, but I found nothing out of the ordinary.

Letting out a sigh, I let my power slip away, blinking open my eyes.

I was met with the sight of an operating theater of some sort, doctors and nurses surrounding me with various wide-eyes glances as they looked at various monitors. Wires from the equipment led to various sensors attached to the man beneath me, the gauze wrapped around his chest and arms cut away to reveal…

Nothing. Although his body was covered in some dried blood, it was completely free from any sort of injury or mark, and not even a scar remained. His eyes were closed, a peaceful look on his face as he snored quietly.

A relieved sigh escaped between my panting breaths, and I slowly let my shoulders relax as exhaustion hit me like a hammer. My vision darkened at the edges, and I felt myself begin to sway, the world tilting a moment later as I fell.

Arms grabbed me before I could land, and I looked up to see Miss Militia gently lowering me to the ground.

"Aide, are you alright?" she asked, eyes searching my own.

I nodded, brushing a sweat soaked strand of hair from my eyes, and Miss Militia let out a breath.

“Okay. Let’s… Do you think you can stand?”

I tried to, and although my legs wobbled and I had to lean on Miss Militia, I was able to get up and stay standing on my own. A nurse stepped up, handing me my hat and a water bottle that I took with a thankful nod. Turning away from them, I shifted my mask away to drink.

The water tasted like heaven itself, and I struggled not to gulp it all down in one go. As I drank, Miss Militia turned to the doctors, giving them a serious look.

“A full checkup and monitoring on the trooper, please. And remember, what happened here is strictly confidential until you hear otherwise.”

They all nodded, and Miss Militia led me out some doors, hands poised as if to catch me. My steps were a little unsteady, but other than feeling like I’d just sprinted an entire mile for gym class, I felt fairly okay.

My stomach gurgled a moment later, cramping painfully as hunger made itself known, but I ignored it as we stepped into some sort of waiting hall where both Miss Young and Agent Campbell were seated.

On seeing me, relief flashed across their faces as they both stood.

“Aide! Are you alright?”

I gave a shaky thumbs up, and Miss Young sighed, pausing for a moment before posing a tentative question.

“And… the trooper…?”

“He’s good as new,” Miss Militia answered, shaking her head. “I mean that literally, too. Aide even healed his old scars. It was quite the scene watching his wounds close in real time.”

My cheeks began to heat up, and I made a shaky writing motion. Agent Campbell handed me my notebook and pen with a wink. I had to juggle the water bottle and ended up putting my hat back on before I had hands free to write.

[I’m really sorry for jumping in without asking! My power was telling me he wasn’t going to make it and I just moved without thinking.]

Miss Militia shook her head, letting out a huff of laughter.

“Aide… I’ve seen a lot of injuries in my time as a hero. The wounds that trooper sustained… If not for you, I doubt he would have made it. The doctor’s were all saying the same to me while you were healing him. They didn’t think they could have saved him even if he’d been there five minutes earlier. You saved that man’s *life* today. You should be proud of yourself.”

My face practically burst into flames as I suppressed a giddy wiggle of excitement.

Miss Militia just praised me! Ahhhh!

“Now, you did use an untested power on a person without their permission,” Miss Militia continued, and my sudden joy came crashing down. “But this is probably one of the few circumstances where it can be overlooked. Our doctors can also keep an eye on him for any complications your power might have, and Panacea can give him a checkup when she’s around to heal you.”

I wanted to argue, but a yawn forced its way out of my mouth, and Miss Militia was already addressing Miss Young before I could start writing.

“Now that you know Aide’s power, I hope some things make more sense.”

“Indeed they do,” she sighed. “I also see why you’ve been keeping everything about her so secret, and I approve. That being said, did you know she was going to be such an effective healer?”

Miss Militia shook her head.

“Not at all. Aide herself didn’t seem to know just how strong her healing was, but bringing back somebody from the brink of death to being perfectly healthy in two hours is quite the feat.”

I blinked a few times.

Two hours!? I was healing him for two hours!?

I repeated the internal question on paper, and Miss Militia nodded.

“Just about. He was out of immediate danger in about a quarter of that time and fully healed in about an hour and a half. The last bit seemed to be you just healing any scars he had, but we didn’t want to pull you away in case you were healing something we couldn’t see.”

That… seemed pretty awesome? I mean, it wasn’t Panacea who could have probably done the same thing in five to ten minutes if rumors were to be believed, but she *was* known as the best healer for a reason.

Besides, what did any of that matter when I had *saved* somebody’s life?

The weirdest part was it didn’t feel like it had been that long. Time had kind of blurred together as I worked. There had been something oddly mesmerizing and satisfying about feeling the burning red splotches and lines slowly turn to green before almost fading from my injury sense completely.

My stomach gurgled again, this time loud enough for the others to hear, and I blushed as Miss Militia tilted her head at me.

“Aide, when we first had our interview, you said your healing made you tired. Do you feel hungry right now too?”

I nodded, and Miss Militia gave a thoughtful hum.

“If that’s the case… I know this is probably the last thing you want to hear, but I think it would be best if we put off the rest of our meetings until tomorrow and get you checked out. We don’t know what sort of side effects your power might be having on you, and until we do, having you rest here in the infirmary might be for the best…”

Miss Militia trailed off as I hunched into myself, my heart falling. Miss Young stepped forward, smiling at me sadly.

“I know you just got done with an examination, but I agree with Miss Militia. Aide, you’re swaying on your feet, and you look worryingly pale. You need to take care of yourself.”

Looking between the two women, I realized there would be no getting out of this. Disappointment and apprehension swirled in my stomach at having to go see Doctor Reyes again even though she was nice.

The thought of having to stay in a hospital room only made me feel more miserable.

“Hey,” Agent Campbell suddenly said, giving me a bright grin. “While you’re getting checked out by the doc, how about I go get you some food from the cafeteria, but this time, I’ll bring you *two* trays. One for the general stuff, and the other for all the tasty desserts our chefs specialize in so you have something to look forward to after your checkup? They have this double chocolate cake that is absolutely *divine*.”

I shuffled my feet slightly, hands going over my stomach as another pang of hunger echoed through me.

Well… it didn’t sound *terrible*… and cake with copious amounts of chocolate sounded… adequate.

I nodded begrudgingly, hoping the excited bounce that snuck into the motion didn’t make me look overeager.

Because I totally wasn’t! I was just… anticipating it with all the sincerity that such an angelic sounding creation deserved.

Miss Young hid her face as she coughed, turning away while Agent Campbell’s grin became wider. Miss Militia’s eyes sparkled as she cleared her throat.

“That sounds like an excellent idea. I’ll see if we can’t spare a computer tablet for you to use while you're stuck in the infirmary. It should have internet access and some books stored on it for you to read. We can also stop by your room to grab your things later, if you like.

I gave a thumbs up, some of the excitement dying inside as I realized I still had to get through another round of examinations, even if they were supposed to be basic.

But on the other side of that lay chocolate, internet access, and books!

I took a deep breath, steeling myself, and then I moved as Miss Militia gestured for me to follow her, Miss Young tagging along.

I can do this. Just think of the chocolate, just think of the chocolate…