ABRASION 1.1

Saturday, August 21, 2010

-Same Day-

Stepping into Brockton Bay's PRT headquarters was… bright. Like stepping out of a dark room and deciding to look straight up into the sun level of bright.

In actuality, it was just an overbearing amount of fluorescent lights glaring off white tile, but it made me squint my eyes all the same.

The interior of the imposing building felt a lot more friendly. It had an open lobby area mostly colored in white tile with some benches set alongside the walls. There were a few metal doors on the far side of the room along with some elevators, and off to my right was an entrance to what looked like a gift shop. There was also a reception area on the far end, set into the wall. Hanging above it were framed pictures of the Brockton Bay's current Wards, all seven of them in heroic poses.

Of course, I knew them by heart.

Triumph, Aegis, Gallant, Clockblocker, Kid Win, Shadow Stalker.

Vista!

I shivered, my stomach doing a little flip flop. It hadn't really hit me until that moment what I was doing, that if everything went well, I might soon be *meeting* actual superheroes in person.

Under normal circumstances, I'd be bouncing up and down with excitement.

Swallowing down my racing anxiety, I glanced around the rest of the lobby. It was empty except for a receptionist and four PRT troopers scattered around the room.

The troopers were covered in dark, heavy looking riot armor with a chain mail mesh underneath their vest and plates. They had on full helmets with smooth, opaque face masks, making it impossible to make out any identifiable features. It gave them an intimidating air that was only increased by sleek, giant guns in their hands, tubes reaching from the weapons to the large backpacks they wore.

Oh, and all of them had shifted to face me, the only other person in the lobby. Maybe it was my imagination, but it looked like they had raised their weapons slightly.

My throat suddenly felt dry. Of *course* they were nervous. A ragged, homeless-looking girl in layers of concealing clothes, a disposable medical mask, and a backpack just entered in the middle of the night. Combined with my hood, scarf, and oversized winter beanie, most of my features were concealed except for my hands and the upper half of my face. I couldn't have looked more suspicious if I tried.

I knew I should have found a way to call ahead!

I wilted a little, hurt panging through me as I realized how stupid I'd been.

None of the troopers approached, so I forced myself to move, making sure my steps were slow as I went to the front desk. That wasn't hard considering how much my entire body ached, but I did try to hide my limp as much as possible.

I only stumbled a few times in the oppressive silence and counted that as a win.

The receptionist desk looked like it had room for three people but was currently only manned by one. She was a young woman in a suit with long blond hair. She gave me the same plastic smile the polite shopkeepers at the mall usually wore right before they told me to leave their store. Her eyes darted over me, taking in my frayed clothes with wariness only to widen in something like alarm as she met my eyes.

I winced a little.

Should have worn sunglasses…

As I got closer to her, a sudden *awareness* popped into my mind.

A low heat burned along the receptionist's back, lightly pulsing like a constant ache. It was a light warmth, but still noticeable if for nothing else than its size. I also felt a tight knot of sullen fire in the back of her neck too… Maybe a cramp starting to form from looking down at the desk too long?

I mentally shook away the intrusive senses as she began to speak, and the feelings of warmth faded.

"Hello, miss," she greeted me in a tight but otherwise polite tone. "Is there something I can help you with?"

I nodded, slowly reaching into my hoodie pocket and pulling out my notepad and pen. I made sure my movements weren't sudden, hoping I didn't spook her or the scary troopers watching me. My heart felt like it was racing a million beats a second as I carefully flipped the notepad around, offering it to her.

Her face scrunched in confusion as she looked down at it. I watched as her expression changed, eyebrows raising in surprise as she read what I had written on it ahead of time.

[Hello! I can't speak. I am here to ask about joining the Wards.]

"Oh! Um, I see. One moment, please."

She picked up a phone from the desk, and pressed a single button. Barely a half second later, I heard the click of somebody answering her.

"Hello, this is Miranda at reception. I've got a concerned citizen looking to speak about a possible issue regarding one of our interns. Yes, that's right. No, I don't think we'll need a supervisor. Yes, it seems obvious they have a valid concern. Okay, I'll let them know. Thanks."

At my confused look, she simply gave me a cheery smile as she hung up.

"Somebody will be down shortly to discuss your *issue*," she said, emphasizing the last word weirdly.

It took me a moment to piece together what she was talking about, but I felt dumb when I did. She was using code phrases like in some of the spy stories I've read, trying to keep my identity as somebody interested in joining the Wards a secret.

It made sense. The gangs were *always* looking for new capes, so being discreet seemed reasonable.

Except there was nobody else in the lobby but us and the troopers, so I wasn't really sure why she'd bothered.

Also, my eyes kind of gave away that I *wasn't* just a normal person. Unless they weren't as bad as I thought?

I gave her a thankful nod anyway, stepping back from the desk while I waited.

It probably didn't take a long time for somebody to step from one of the doors, but it certainly felt like it, especially with the troopers watching me. They seemed a little more relaxed than before, though. Honestly, it was hard to tell how long I was waiting with the sharp pain in my ribs underscoring my breaths. I tried my best to hide it, but the longer I stood still, the worse the various aches seemed to get.

Miranda herself got a phone call a few seconds later but spoke quietly enough that I didn't catch any words.

I also took a few more steps away to give her privacy.

I didn't want the heroes to think I was being rude!

Anxiety continued to ripple through me, but each nervous shift of my weight sent pain echoing through my body. I tried to control myself, fingers tightening around my frayed backpack straps as I tried to ignore the throbbing aches of my bruises.

The person who finally stepped into the lobby was a woman wearing a fashionable suit. She was young looking, her cinnamon brown hair tied into a tight bun. She smiled at me as she gestured for me to follow.

"Right this way, miss."

I moved towards her as she ushered me through the door into a featureless hallway. She seemed like a normal office worker except for the handgun holstered on her hip. I kept my eyes on her hands, more out of habit than anything else. I mean, yes, she was supposed to be one of the *good* guys *(uh, good girls? Good persons?),* but I was all too aware of how little that meant sometimes.

As she led me down the hallway, I could feel my *other* sense trying to tell me about the woman like it had the receptionist. I pushed the awareness down, making the vague, almost blurry sensations I was getting from her disappear completely. The sudden quiet in my mind made me stumble a bit, but I recovered.

I'd have to get used to that.

The woman glanced back at me with a gentle smile, her freckles somehow making her face seem softer.

“Now, just so you’re aware, there’s a few safety procedures to follow with this sort of thing,” she spoke as we walked. “First of all, I’m obligated to ask if you have any weapons on you and what items are inside your backpack.”

I stopped in my tracks, partially because I had to pull the pen from my hoodie’s pocket and write down my response and also because I felt really, really stupid. She watched me with interest as I wrote, and I quickly scribbled an explanation above my answer before I showed her the notepad.

[I can’t speak.] was scribbled at the top as a prelude. *[I’m really sorry! I brought a pocket knife in my backpack without thinking! And pepper spray. Everything else is just clothes and stuff like that. Sorry! I wasn’t thinking!]*

She read through the jumbled response before giving me a reassuring smile.

“That’s alright. Just don’t reach into your backpack without warning, and it won’t be a problem. Just so you’re aware, we’ll be going through a tinkertech scanner in the next room. It detects things like weapons, explosives, or anything that might be dangerous like that. It’s just an extra safety precaution.”

I let out a sigh of relief and nodded, hoping the jerky motion didn’t show how jittery my nerves were making me. The woman just gave me another warm smile as we reached the end of the hallway and stepped into the next room.

It was a plain, white room that was… empty. Other than the cameras in the corners and strange black discs scattered along the walls, that is. When she had said tinkertech, I’d imagined something more flashy, or at least one of those metal detector arch thingies.

I mean, tinkertech was supposed to be hyper advanced technology that only certain kinds of capes could make. Power armor, laser pistols, jetpacks, and other sci-fi things like that, not little black discs.

Although, maybe it was more impressive that the disks *didn’t* look so eye-catching?

The woman closed the door behind me, giving me a quick grin.

“This will just take a moment. Sorry about the noise.”

A high pitch hum vibrated the air a moment later, and I flinched hard enough to tweak my bruises, the dull background aches briefly flashing into a sharp agony across my body. An

involuntary hiss of pain escaped through my clenched teeth as something particularly sharp stabbed through my chest, and the woman flashed me a concerned look.

“Are you alright?”

I jerked my head in a quick nod, the motion stiff as I didn’t meet her eyes. She frowned when I didn’t elaborate, but the humming stopped a moment later. Glancing between the door and me, she only hesitated for a moment before continuing forward.

I followed her into another short hallway and then stopped in front of an elevator where we only paused long enough for the doors to open before entering. I tried my best to give her as much space as possible, not wanting to spook her.

Yes, I did it for her. No, it had nothing to do with the burbling panic rising inside me about being confined in a small space with somebody else.

She didn’t seem to notice me squeezing into the corner opposite of her, only giving me the occasional glance as the elevator went up a few floors.

When the doors opened and we emerged, I found myself in another hallway, this one with carpet and a few plants that gave it a warmer feel. Doors lined either side of the hall, little informational labels on each of them. The lady led me forward until we turned through one of the doors into a conference room. A long table with a dozen chairs dominated the space, a big whiteboard taking up one of the walls.

It looked just like one of those conference rooms I’d seen in a show about lawyers, and something about that excited me. It just felt so… official!

Cool!

“Please, have a seat,” my escort gestured to the table. “We have somebody coming down in a moment to talk with you. It might take a few minutes considering how late it is. Is there anything I can get for you in the meantime? Water, hot chocolate, tea, or anything like that?”

I almost jumped at the chance to get hot chocolate, my hand twitching to start writing on my notepad, but I forced myself to stop and shake my head at her offer instead.

Don’t have the money for that. Maybe soon, though?

With a mournful sigh, I moved to the other end of the table so I faced the door. Shrugging off my backpack carefully, I set it down next to my seat.

Now for the fun part…

I clenched my teeth preemptively, slowly lowering myself into the chair as I fought against the tears watering the edges of my vision. The pain stabbing through my ribs gained a serrated edge as I bent over, but thankfully, the piercing agony dulled once I was seated. My escort watched me with an odd expression, but didn't comment until I was sitting down.

"If you're sure you don't need anything…" she trailed off, before giving a little shake of her head. "Feel free to let me know if you change your mind. The interviewer should be here fairly shortly."

I gave her a nod, and she settled back against the wall, choosing to lean on it rather than take a seat across from me.

Silence filled the room, and I tried to keep my nervous fidgeting down. I couldn't completely stop myself from glancing around, noting the cameras in the corners. My knee bounced up and down restlessly. I felt like I should say something, but, well…

Can't really do that anymore, can I?

The bitter thought brought acid up the back of my throat even as my eyes burned. I took a steadying breath, shoving the emotions down and rubbing at my eyes.

Not the time. I already had my breakdown.

I wouldn't let my first impression be crying in front of the heroes.

A few minutes passed, enough that I found myself drifting. Between the dull, background pains throbbing across my body and my exhaustion, even my anxiety began to lose its edge. I let myself lean against the table, blinking as the room around me began to blur into something indistinct. With my height, the table wasn't far from my head, and I was tempted to just lay my head down and rest my eyes for a moment…

The sound of the door opening made me jerk up in my chair painfully, and I blinked the fuzziness from my eyes to look up at the newcomer who-

Oh my god, that's Miss Militia!

Miss Militia, as in, one of the inaugural Wards who was now a veteran Protectorate member!

As in the gunslinging heroine whose power let her form any weapon!

As in the current Protectorate hero overseeing the Brockton Bay Wards!

Excitement and nervous anxiety flashed through me in equal parts, burning away any exhaustion I had. I could barely believe my eyes, but there was no mistaking the heroine's appearance.

She had dark, medium length hair that fell to her shoulders, olive skin, and wore fitted army fatigues in green that accentuated her curves. A sash hung around her hips with an American flag pattern, and she had a matching scarf pulled up over the lower half of her face, serving as her mask. A handgun was holstered at her hip, shivering slightly with a gentle vibration that gave it away as something *more* than a simple gun.

That's her power! So cool!

Miss Militia turned to the woman who escorted me, whispering something, and the woman nodded quickly before leaving. As the agent left, she gave me a parting smile and a thumbs up before closing the door behind her. Miss Militia took a seat across the table from me, setting down a notebook.

"Hello," Miss Militia greeted me, the corners of her bottle-glass green eyes crinkling at the corners with warmth. "I'm Miss Militia. It's a pleasure to meet you."

She's so pretty…

I shook myself, nervously raising my hand in an awkward wave. Her eyes crinkled more, cheekbones raising. Even with her scarf covering her mouth, I could tell her smile was growing. I was instantly glad my own face was hidden by my flimsy medical mask.

Hopefully it would help hide my starstruck expression and the heat coloring my cheeks.

"I was told you can't speak, so I brought a notebook for you to use, just in case that notepad of yours runs out," she said, sliding the notebook over. "Feel free to keep it. I have a few of these laying around."

Relief flashed through me as I grabbed the notebook. My notepad had been a scavenged one, and I'd been quickly running out of paper. That, and it was hard to read anything from a distance with how small I had to make my handwriting.

Looking down at the notebook, a giddy flash of excitement trilled through my body. It was Miss Militia branded, the cover showcasing her in a heroic pose with the US flag wavering behind her.

I opened it, quickly writing in big letters so Miss Militia would be able to read from across the table when I flipped the notebook around to show her.

[Thank you!!!]

"You're very welcome," she replied warmly. "Now then, before we begin talking about anything else, I want to confirm that you're okay talking to me without your parents or guardian present. There isn't a need for them to be here for just an initial conversation, but-"

I was already vigorously nodding, not quite hiding the shiver that went through me. If Miss Militia noticed, she didn't say anything, simply dipping her head in acceptance.

"Very well. Unless you have anything you want to ask, I was informed you were asking about joining the Wards. Is that correct?"

I nodded, trying to keep myself from bouncing in my seat too anxiously.

"Okay then," she spoke slowly, as if making sure I could follow along. "I suppose the first thing we should cover is the basic premise of the Wards, just to make sure there are no misconceptions. The Wards program exists to give underage people who develop powers a relatively safe place to learn and practice their powers while learning the various responsibilities of being a hero. The idea is that when a Ward comes of age, they will be fully prepared to join the Protectorate or another hero team as a well-rounded cape, working under the PRT to help maintain law and order amongst parahumans. Any questions so far?"

I shook my head. It was all fairly basic stuff, although the separation between the PRT, Protectorate, and Wards was a little confusing, especially when they were all government sponsored organizations made to basically accomplish the same thing.

As far as I understood, it boiled down to whether somebody had powers or not, how old they were, and the exact purpose of the organization.

If you didn't have powers, you could join the PRT, who were basically the police, but they dealt exclusively with crimes involving parahumans, people with powers. The PRT's focus was law enforcement, catching villains, taking down gangs run by them, and keeping the peace.

If you did have powers and were an adult, you could join the Protectorate, the government hero team. The Protectorate had basically the same purpose as the PRT and worked under their command.

Mostly.

The exact details of what the PRT was in charge of versus the Protectorate was a little confusing, and people on the internet liked to argue over the little details which only made things more tangled.

Stupid internet people. Not everything has to be a debate!

Whatever the case, if you had powers but weren't an adult, you had the option of joining the Wards, who were under the joint command of the Protectorate and PRT. The Wards were basically a training team to teach underage parahumans the ropes of being a cape.

Well, the basics of being a hero, technically. Cape was just the term for any parahuman who put on a mask and did things in costume, so that included villains and rogues too.

Of course, joining an independent or corporate sponsored hero team was also an option for people with powers, but teams like those tended to have a weird focus on publicity and money that made me uncomfortable. Plus, they didn't have the government's direct backing and resources.

Or its *protection*.

Which was exactly what I was after.

Considering my power, I didn't have much of a choice even if there were two other notable hero teams in Brockton Bay.

"Good," Miss Militia said after I shook my head, seemingly happy I was following along. "Now, the only two basic requirements for joining the Wards are being under eighteen and, of course, being a parahuman. You appear to be young enough, but may I ask how old you are, exactly?"

[13. My birthday's in April.]

She nodded, taking the information in stride.

“Well that would only leave the second requirement. Powers. If you don’t mind me asking, could you tell me a little about your power? You don’t have to share anything too detailed at this stage if the idea makes you uncomfortable, but it’s important for us to understand what we’re working with.”

Hesitating a moment, I nodded, picking up my pen and beginning to write.

And then I wrote some more.

And some more.

I could see Miss Militia’s eyebrows raising in curiosity, but she said nothing, choosing to let me work. I took my time, trying to be as thorough and professional as I could by including lots of details and a few ideas about my powers that I had. When I wasn’t reading normal books in the library, I liked to spend a lot of time online looking things up about capes. I’d seen plenty of speculation and actual explanations about how some powers functioned, and I did my best to put that knowledge to use in my explanation.

I mean, I wasn’t trying to impress her or anything, I was just… um… showing her I was serious about becoming a hero… and smarter than an average middle schooler!

Yeah…

And even though I’d only had a few hours to experiment with my powers, they were *awesome*.

By the time I was finished, my large handwriting covered an entire page.

[I think I have a few powers or a really complicated one. I can do four different things, but it kind of follows a theme.]

[My main power feels like it is healing. I make light glow from my hands that slowly fixes injuries. It takes time, and I have to concentrate to do it. It also makes me tired. I don’t think I can heal myself.]

[My second power is making force fields. They have to be close to me, and I don’t know how strong they are. They tend to form in a dome or sphere shape, but I can change them a little if I try really hard. The force fields look like the light I make with my healing power, just more solid.]

[I'm not really sure about my third power or if I'm just imagining it, but when I touch somebody, I feel like I have a few options to… enhance them? Boost their abilities? I don't really know the specifics. I was afraid to experiment, so I haven't used that one yet.]

[Finally, I can sense injuries (or pain? Damage?) in people. I can feel a pressure/heat on people's bodies where they are hurt. I have to be pretty close to people for it to work. If I touch them, I get a mental map of their body with colors relating to how bad the injury is. I can turn off the sense by focusing on pushing it down, otherwise it's kind of always in the back of my mind.]

[Also my eyes were brown before but changed to this bright blue, and my hair turned pure white. Apparently my eyes glow a little when I use my power? Also, I lost my voice. I can still make sounds or even hum, but I can't make any words.]

The changes to my appearance had been a little shocking to find out. I'd heard getting powers sometimes made physical changes, but I thought they were usually more drastic like growing wings or turning your skin into metal. Vivid blue eyes and snow colored hair weren't that bad in comparison. Together, the changes looked kinda pretty, too.

As for losing my voice… That did suck. A lot. Hopefully it wasn't permanent, but if it was tied to me getting my powers…

Well, if it was part of the price for them, it still really wasn't the worst thing in the world. I mean, I got superpowers. I should be grateful, right?

Still… I really hoped it was a temporary thing. That, or maybe Panacea or some other healer could help me out.

I looked over my page of explanations before I was satisfied I hadn't forgotten anything, but it looked pretty professionally written to me. Instead of holding the notebook up for Miss Militia to see, I simply tore the page out and slid it over, letting her read over the lines while I waited patiently.

Yes, patiently.

No, I wasn't nervously fidgeting.

Or clicking my pen for that matter.

There *was* a knot of tension in my chest made of steel wires that pulled my lungs tight. It felt weird revealing my powers to somebody, even though it was Miss Militia. I knew just having powers put me in a *lot* of danger from people looking to recruit me, but mine were especially bad. Well, my healing one was, anyway.

Because it didn't take a cape geek like me to know being a healer was *rare*. There were very few capes whose powers could heal another person's injuries. Even then, it usually wasn't the main purpose of their power, just a side effect.

As for a cape with a power focused on healing? I knew of only three off the top of my head, and that was only because Panacea also called Brockton Bay her home while Suture and her reclusive partner Apothecary were internationally famous.

It was part of the reason I'd run straight to the PRT when I realized what I could do. If the gangs found out about my power, it would be a race to see who could snatch me up first.

I tried not to shiver. *That* wasn't going to happen. Not again. I was safe now.

"You… You're sure you have a healing power?"

Miss Milita's question had a hint of surprise in it, and I nodded, pride welling up inside me.

"That's… May I ask how you know that? Is this part of your instinctual knowledge, or…?"

Oh, right. Need to explain that…

I started writing. It was a good question. My best friend from school said capes tended to just *know* what their powers could do to some extent, and I found I was no different. Details felt frustratingly vague, especially for my other powers, but I *knew* I could heal, just like I knew that it was my main power. Or the main focus of my power. Whatever.

How did I know? No idea. I just did. I could heal, and it felt like my other abilities were more distant, less attached to me, somehow. A bit weaker, and further away when I reached for them.

That wasn't really evidence to anybody else, though. Thankfully, I'd already tested it.

[My friend had a cut and some bruises, and I healed her. I think it took a minute or two? Nothing else seemed to happen.]

Miss Militia nodded slowly, glancing back over the paper as if in thought.

“And this friend of yours, are they trustworthy? I don’t mean to frighten you, but if they know you’re a parahuman and tell anybody, it could make things dangerous for you.”

I felt my heart skip a beat, an electric jolt snapping through me. Shoot! I wasn’t supposed to mention Vern! What if Miss Militia asked me for more information about her!? Miss Militia was a hero! I couldn’t just lie to her, but…

[She wouldn’t! I trust her!]

I wrote the words in a flurry, and Miss Militia raised a placating hand.

“It’s okay. I just wanted to make sure.”

Her voice was gentle, a soft whisper-wind that took the edge off my panic. I let out a relieved sigh as she slowly set down the paper in front of her.

“Well, having a healing power is quite rare,” she said slowly. “As is having multiple powers. As for your physical alterations, they’re uncommon but not unheard of. Losing your capability of speech is definitely a more unique side effect, however. Hmm… Before we go any further, would you feel comfortable demonstrating one of your powers for me? Perhaps the force field one just to establish that you are, in fact, parahuman?”

Oh.

Right.

I guess she didn’t really have any other proof I was a cape yet other than my eyes, but those could just be funky looking contacts. With my hair bunched up underneath my hat, Miss Militia couldn’t even see its snow white color except in my eyebrows.

Stretching out a hand to my side, I put forth a small effort of will as I mentally reached out to activate my force field power, imagining a small, circular shield a few inches in front of my upturned palm. In a way, the sensation of calling up my power felt a lot like flexing a muscle.

Blue and silver particles of light burst into existence several inches from my hand, forming a thin and slightly curved palm-sized shield of energy. It was possible to see through the energy, but the constantly swirling wisps of light made it a little difficult. Together, it looked like a sapphire tinted bowl of glass with gently whirling blue and silver fireflies dancing within, some occasionally leaving trails of light in their passage.

The force field gave off a gentle but high pitched noise almost like a softly reverberating chime, happily humming away even as I scowled at it.

You were supposed to be a flat circle!

My force field continued buzzing cheerfully without restraint, clearly ignoring me.

Rude.

“Very impressive,” Miss Militia nodded, eyes flicking over the force field. “And pretty too. Thank you for showing me.”

I tried not to squirm in my seat too much as a wave of giddy tickles washed through my body at her praise, and I let my concentration on maintaining my power slip away. It didn’t require much focus to maintain, no more than trying to pay attention to a conversation, but it was still a consistent murmur in the back of my mind that I was happy to release.

The force field lost its cohesion, and the swirling particles burst forth like escaping embers before winking out of existence. Miss Militia eyed the display with interest before her gaze flicked back to me.

“Well, with that display, the basic Ward requirements are certainly satisfied. If you don’t mind, I have a few more questions to ask you.”

I nodded eagerly, and she folded her hands on the table calmly.

“My first question is *why* you want to join the Wards, exactly. People come to us for a variety of reasons, but I’m curious what yours is.”

I frowned behind my mask, picking up my pen and setting it to my notebook. That question seemed… weird? Kind of like one of those questions a teacher asked you even though the answer was really simple.

[I want to be a hero?] I wrote, and Miss Militia tilted her head slightly.

“Why? To be more specific, what does being a hero mean to you, and why do you want that?”

I shifted uncomfortably. I wasn’t really expecting that question, partly because it seemed kind of obvious. I was pretty sure everybody went through some point in their life of wanting to be a

superhero. The only obstacle was actually having powers, but that wasn't a problem for me anymore.

But now that I thought about it… Why did I want to be a hero, exactly? I mean, I knew I needed protection now. I stood out, and the gangs were always looking for new capes. I didn't have a strong, flashy power like throwing lasers or even plain old super strength to protect myself. Everything I did was *useful*, but it wasn't very good in a fight.

Besides safety… I guess joining the Wards would get me off the street? Not sleeping in a shipping container would be nice, and I read online the Wards actually got paid, so I could afford some actual food for once.

Other than that… I… um…

I felt myself slump into my chair.

Some hero I was. Miss Militia asked me why I wanted to do good things, and all I could think of was what I could get out of it.

Shame burned through my veins even as my eyes began to ache with the growing pressure of tears.

Am I really this shallow?

No… No, there had to be more reasons than just those. I didn't spend hours at the library researching capes *just* because I needed an escape from home. Even before getting my powers, I'd wanted to be a hero. I'd dreamed of it, of being someone cool enough to push past their own fears and problems and help a ton of people, just like Dragon did.

Something in my head clicked at that, and the shame melted away as I blinked a few times.

Was it… Was it really that simple? Was that actually what I wanted?

The memory of meeting Vern for the first time flashed through my head. Seeing her curled up in the alley, sobbing her eyes out and telling me to stay away. At that moment, all I'd wanted to do was to take her pain away, to somehow make everything better, because… because I knew how much it *sucked* to be hurting.

To be alone.

So I ignored her pleas and wrapped her up in the best hug I could manage.

And that had been that. We'd stuck together ever since, and I hadn't regretted a single moment.

I was writing my response before I realized what was happening. Hesitating for a second after I finished, I reluctantly showed Miss Militia, looking down at the table.

[I don't like seeing people in pain. Being a hero means fixing that or at least trying to. That's what I want to do, because nothing is worse than being alone and hurting and having nobody notice or even try to help you.]

It was a little more honest that I felt comfortable with, but Miss Militia had asked. I just hoped she didn't think it was too simple or childish. I risked glancing up at her, and saw her giving me a soft, compassionate look.

"That," she said, her voice quiet and serious, "is a wonderful reason to be a hero. One of the best, in my opinion."

A burst of pride exploded in my chest, and I felt myself straightening a little under her gaze.

She paused for a moment, folding her hands on the table before continuing.

"The only other thing we need to cover for this first meeting is parental involvement."

My heart skipped a beat.

"While it is possible for you to join the Wards without a parent or guardian's permission, you would only be a partial member and highly limited in your activities. As a rule, we try to avoid this if at all possible."

No, no, no-

"Meaning we have to talk about your parents. For many young capes, this can seem like a big step, but…"

Miss Militia paused as I began writing. It was a stop and start, jerky process of trying to pluck the right words from the swirling mess in my head. I could hear myself breathing too quickly in the silence as I wrote.

[I can't tell Mom. She isn't well. She can't keep secrets. ~~She tries but~~ She doesn't live in a good part of town. Is there any other way?]

I flipped the notebook, and Miss Militia read it quickly.

"There might be," she replied cautiously, "but… what do you mean by 'she' doesn't live in a good part of town? Are you living with your dad somewhere else, or…?"

Swallowing, I wrote my answer. I knew this part might get me in trouble, but I couldn't lie about it. Not if I wanted her help.

[I don't have a dad. I left home five months ago. I was doing fine on my own. I even kept up my school grades!.]

It was quiet for a long time. I was pretty sure Miss Militia wasn't that slow of a reader, but her eyes were glued to the paper for a long time. When they slid back to me, they were soft and gentle.

"You've been living on the streets, then?"

I nodded. Leaving the house wasn't that big of a change, really. I'd only really ever been at home to sleep or grab food if there was even anything there. Otherwise, I had spent most of my time in libraries or parks.

Mom didn't like me being around when she was working.

I didn't either.

So, yeah. Leaving wasn't that big of a deal. Just sleeping in a different place than normal and foraging for food a little more often. Nothing that bad, especially once I found a safe spot to sleep in.

I made sure to "visit" mom as well. Between me avoiding home while she might be working and her taking her *medicines* and sleeping after, the visits had been enough for her not to realize anything had changed.

It stung when I realized how easy it was.

"Can I ask *why* you left home?"

Her voice was gentle, smothering some of the anxiety that spiked in me.

It still wasn't enough to stop me shifting around nervously.

I didn't want to tell Miss Militia, to tell anyone really, but I also didn't want to lie to her. She was a *hero*, and she'd already been so nice to me, but…

I don't want Mom to get in trouble… but I also don't want to go back.

The lump in my throat thickened. It was a weird feeling. I knew that what happened earlier wasn't *really* Mom's fault, but it didn't help the sticky, burning feeling that clung to the corners of my heart.

The sense of betrayal.

I was so, *so* angry at her. All the times she punished me even though I was trying my best, all the nights lying awake because I was so hungry it hurt, or the scary moments when I came home to a stranger in the living room eating my cereal…

But…

Mom had always tried her best for me. I *knew* what she did for me. It wasn't her fault life was just so hard sometimes.

That I made it harder for her…

That she needed things to take the pain away.

I hated the feeling, the weird opposites yanking at my heart. Gnawing at my lungs.

The silence in the room stretched on, but Miss Militia didn't say anything. I hated when adults did that. It made the wiggling pressure inside me even worse, like I was going to explode. All I could do was think of the conflicting thoughts, trying to figure out what I wanted to tell her…

I can't go back, and I knew that coming in here.

The sudden thought sent a cold wave of clarity washing through me.

It didn't *matter* what I felt, not anymore. Everything changed the moment I got powers. There was no living like I had been, just scraping by, surviving day to day.

I could *help* people now, and I wasn't about to turn away from that.

And I'd already made my decision by walking into the building. I'd known there would be questions about my life, about Mom and who I was. It wasn't like they would just let a complete stranger into the Wards. One way or another, they were going to end up finding out everything about me.

I'd made my choice. I just needed to be brave enough to follow through.

I'm sorry, Mom.

Slowly, I set my pen to paper, every muscle in my body tense. It felt like betrayal after everything she sacrificed for me. Even with all my justifications, even with her failure from a few hours ago fresh in my mind, it hurt.

I wrote anyway, answering Miss Militia's question of why I ran away from home with the short, simple, and terrifying words I knew would get through to her, that would change everything.

[I'm not safe at home.]

I held my breath in the stillness that followed.

It was the truth, especially now, but it felt like a lie.

My hands shook a little, holding onto the notebook. I was taking a big risk. I didn't know what would happen now, not exactly. All I could do was hope for the best and believe in the heroes to do the right thing.

Please don't disappoint me…

"Thank you for telling me," Miss Militia finally said in a calm, comforting tone. "I can't imagine how hard it was to write those words, but I promise I'll help you. We'll get through this together, alright? You don't have to share any details right now, either."

I sagged in my chair, all the tension snapping out of my body. What little energy I had left went with it, and all I wanted was to find a corner to curl up in to fall asleep. Instead, I forced myself to write, to ask the questions burning in the back of my mind.

[What happens now?]

“Well, It’s not uncommon for a parahuman to come from a difficult home life. We have a procedure for dealing with things like this. First, we’ll have an investigation. We’ll gather any evidence and then present it to a judge. If there’s enough evidence of wrongdoing, we’ll aim to have your custodianship temporarily transferred to the PRT. From there, things will get a little complicated depending on what the investigation finds, but for most purposes, the PRT will act as your legal guardian until a new one can be found.”

[Will Mom be told I’m joining the Wards? That I have powers?]

“Absolutely not,” Miss Militia shook her head. “We’ll be doing our best to keep all of that a secret. As far as she will be concerned, an anonymous tip came in to child protective services that they chose to follow up on.”

I gave a hesitant nod. None of that sounded too bad…

“As for the investigation itself, you’re going to have to answer some questions regarding your home life at a later date. I know that might sound difficult, but the more information you can give them, the quicker…”

[Can I just give you my home address? Won’t that be enough?]

Miss Militia went still, and I heard a short but intense buzzing sound from her side of the table. She shifted slightly in her seat, staring at the paper but otherwise not acknowledging the sound.

“Are… Are you saying there would be enough evidence just from looking around your home?”

I gave a hesitant nod. I wasn’t really sure what they needed for “evidence.” Was there enough to get Mom in trouble?

Yes.

Would it be enough to get me away from her permanently?

No idea.

“I think you’ll probably still have to answer some questions,” Miss Militia replied slowly after considering it. “But like I said, that can wait until later. For now, if you want to give me your Mom’s home address and your name, I can get the investigation started. I know that this will unmask you before you’ve signed the official Ward membership paperwork, but I’m afraid there

isn't much of a choice at this point. If it helps, some people in the PRT and Protectorate would be finding out your identity anyway considering you're joining the Wards. It's just happening a little sooner than usual. I can assure you, your personal information will be treated with the utmost secrecy."

I shrugged again, picking up my pen.

Yes, capes took secret identities *very* seriously, but that was a measure to keep people from going after you or your family in your civilian identity. It wasn't like I was unmasking to villains, anyways. I was unmasking to the heroes I was trying to *join*.

Besides, like Miss Militia said, it was going to happen eventually. It's not like I could wear a mask around all of them constantly, and I doubted the other Wards or Protectorate members hid their identities from each other. Just in case, though…

[I don't mind unless there's a chance I won't be allowed to join the Wards?]

"Oh, no, nothing like that," Miss Militia's assurance bled off more tension I didn't know I was holding in my body. "As far as I'm concerned, you're a Ward in all but name. You won't officially be one until all the membership paperwork is signed, but you'll still be given the status as an 'initiated recruit.' This means that you're in the process of joining, and we'll be able to spend resources on you as we see fit, such as offering you protection and a place to sleep."

I let out a sigh of relief, sagging into my chair. It was good to know I wouldn't have to awkwardly go back to Vern for a place to sleep after our tearful goodbye. It felt even better to know I was officially in the joining process, too.

I'm really becoming a superhero.

The thought made me shake my head in disbelief, and Miss Militia tilted her head at me in unspoken curiosity, so I wrote a quick explanation.

[I was scared that joining would be harder. I thought I might not be accepted unless I proved myself first.]

"We aren't in the habit of turning away parahumans who want to join, especially ones who seek us out first and certainly not ones as polite as you are," she replied, and I blushed. "No, the only real reason we would turn down a cape is if they've committed some serious crimes. Even then, allowances can sometimes be made depending on the severity. I'm sure you don't have any dark secrets like that, do you?"

Her tone was teasing, but I found myself suddenly squirming. Her jovial eyes lost some of the glittering amusement. Guilt rushed through me as I picked up my pen, head lowered.

[I ~~took~~ stole some things,] I forced myself to tell the unfiltered truth, tasting ash in my mouth as I admitted my crimes. *[Clothes and food. Only when I needed to though. Sorry.]*

I mostly just stole during the summer when I wasn't getting free food from school. That, and I considered anything in the school's lost and found free game after it was there for a few days. Otherwise, I only really took smaller things from stores. Snacks and socks and things like that. The charities and shelters were pretty good about giving out enough blankets and clothes, though.

Especially Bad Canary's shelters. The workers were always really nice there, even if they did try to get me to stay or answer personal questions every time. It was usually worth the effort for the extra candy they snuck me.

"None of that should be a problem," Miss Militia gently assured me. "Small crimes like that can be excused given your circumstances, but thank you for being upfront about it."

Another weight lifted from me, and I carefully pulled out a page of paper from my notebook, writing down Mom's address and my name before sliding it over. The heroine gave me a nod, glancing at the clock in the room and letting out a breath. Looking over myself and seeing that it was almost three in the morning made a yawn force its way out of my mouth.

"Well. With all of that settled, let's talk about the next steps. The process of getting you officially into the Wards is going to have to wait until the investigation into your home life gets started. While we still have some questions to go over, it's pretty early in the morning and you seem exhausted, so I think those can wait until later. That is, unless you have anything important you'd like to bring up?"

I shook my head, my thoughts mushy. Considering everything that happened, I was surprised I was even still coherent.

"Well then, I'd love to offer you a room here in the PRT headquarters. We have some available for visiting heroes or officials, and I think it would be best to keep you both safe and off the streets from any prying eyes. You'll have to keep your mask on while walking around the building, but there aren't any cameras you have to worry about in the room you'll be sleeping in. How does that sound?"

I gave a thumbs up. I was kind of expecting to be dragged to a hotel or something, but this made things much better.

Mostly because I was ready to pass out, and this would mean less walking.

“Excellent,” she beamed at me. “In that case, how about I take you to a room so you can get some sleep while I get the investigation rolling along with the rest of your admission process. Hopefully we can have things ready to continue by the time you wake up. Until then, we’ll get you a guest pass and an escort to help you with anything you might need. Any questions or concerns?”

I thought about it for a moment, then shook my head. My brain felt too mushy to really focus on anything aside from finding a place to fall over and pass out.

“Feel free to ask if something comes up,” Miss Militia said as she stood. “We’ll have somebody placed outside your room if you need anything. If you’ll follow me, we can head there now.”

Getting up was a slight challenge. I had to bite down hard on a groan as my muscles whined about me standing. Then I had to bend down and pick up my backpack, which was a whole process. By the time I was finished, Miss Militia was giving me an odd look from the entryway, her head tilted slightly.

“Are you alright?”

I flinched, hurriedly writing an explanation in my notebook.

[Really tired. Been a long day.]

It wasn’t a *lie*, exactly. It just wasn’t an answer to what she asked. I felt bad about trying to hide things from Miss Militia, but…

I *really* didn’t want anybody poking and prodding me right now, even if it was a doctor.

Besides, I knew I’d be fine. Other than my ribs, nothing hurt enough to really be concerning, and even then I was fairly sure they weren’t broken.

Probably.

I didn't meet Miss Militia's gaze as she stared at me. After a quiet moment she gave me a slow nod, leaving the room. I followed and found the same lady who had escorted me up waiting outside. She gave me another smile before turning to the heroine.

"Our guest here is going to be staying in one of the visitor rooms," Miss Militia told her. "I think a veridian level one should be good. Would you mind showing her the way and waiting outside her room until I can get somebody else assigned? I'm going to get her a guest pass and then get some paperwork started."

"No problem!" the lady chirped. "Standard arrangements, or should we go more discreet?"

"Discreet, please. There shouldn't be any problems, but better safe than sorry. Don't let anybody throw any questions her way, either. If anybody has an issue, direct them to me."

"Of course," the woman agreed easily before turning to me with a smile.

"Hey there. I never gave my name before, but I'm Samantha Campbell. You can call me Sam or Agent Campbell. Whatever you feel most comfortable with. If you need anything, feel free to let me know."

I gave her a deep nod, failing to stifle another yawn, and she smiled before gesturing down a hallway.

"Let's get you to your room, then."

She started off, and I only hesitated a second, glancing up to Miss Militia. She gave a reassuring nod, and so I left, following the agent.

Part of me was disappointed to be leaving Miss Militia, the first hero I'd ever gotten to meet and speak to in person.

But another was secretly relieved that I didn't have to feel like I was on my toes anymore as I tried not to embarrass myself too much.

Who knew meeting an actual hero was so nerve wracking? Somehow, Miss Militia acting just as heroic and nice as I imagined only made it worse.

Miss Agent "just Sam" Campbell led me through the building, and I quickly found myself lost in the twisting maze of corridors. Eventually, we got to an elevator and stepped in.

A tired looking man with scruffy hair and a rumpled business suit was already inside, holding a thermos of something. He blinked, dark ringed eyes sluggishly looking between the two of us as Miss Campbell stepped in and hit a button, giving him a bright smile but saying nothing.

He turned his confused gaze to me.

I waved excitedly, trying to match the Agent's nonchalant cheer with the gesture.

His confusion grew noticeably.

We stepped off before he did, leaving him blinking and giving his drink a weird look.

The floor we got off on was much like the previous but with wider hallways and less doors. Some had little stenciled labels on them, but I was too tired to make note of what they said. The agent in front of me hummed thoughtfully.

"Miss Militia said to give you a viridian room. Those are the nicer VIP ones. That should keep you from feeling too crammed in."

She found a door and opened it, stepping in. I followed and blinked in surprise.

When they said they had rooms available, I hadn't really expected much, just a bed and maybe a desk or something.

What I stepped into was practically a hotel. It had a big, fluffy bed, nightstands, a desk and chair, dresser, small bookshelf, mini fridge, and even an attached bathroom. It wasn't a very big room in itself, but it definitely felt more cozy than cramped.

Agent Campbell made a quick sweep of the room, looking around and nodding before turning to me with another big smile.

"Alright then. Everything looks in order. I'll be waiting in the hall in case you need anything, and it sounds like Militia will have somebody else there when I'm off shift. If you're feeling hungry when you wake up, we have a fully staffed cafeteria we can get some food from. There should be some water in the fridge, too. Anything I can get for you right now?"

Pulling myself from my tiredness, I shook my head and mustered what little energy I had left to write in my notebook.

[No thank you. Have a good night!]

“Thanks! Sleep well.”

She gave her cheery farewell and stepped out, closing the door as she left.

Which left me… alone.

I looked around the room, taking it in.

It was quiet. No noises from the outside leaking in, no gunshots from down the street, no drunk laughter echoing around.

For a moment, I felt a little lost, not sure what to do.

The plan was… complete? I was officially in the process of joining the Wards and now squirreled away in a nice little room. The whole interview with Miss Militia had been a little more intense than I expected, but other than that, everything was… fine?

It doesn’t feel real.

I slipped my backpack off onto the floor, leaning back on the wall.

Weird. It felt weird. Was it because I expected things to be tougher? For everything to go wrong?

Maybe…

Or maybe I was just overthinking it? Everything had been happening so fast, and the last few hours had been… too much.

The worst moments of my life.

Going home, then… what followed.

Gaining powers.

Losing my voice.

Leaving my friend on her own.

Meeting Miss Militia.

Betraying Mom.

And now I was on the path to joining the Wards.

I felt the bottled pressure that I'd been ignoring this whole time threaten to explode. My eyes stung with wetness, but I took a deep, shuddering breath in as I pushed my emotions back down.

I'd already had my breakdown about everything with Vern, and she'd spent almost an hour just holding me close while I wept. There was no reason for me to fall apart again, especially not when everything seemed to be going so well, but I couldn't help but feel…

Overwhelmed. That's what it was. I was just overwhelmed. I hadn't been able to stop moving, to stop worrying about all the possibilities, but now everything was out of my hands. All that was left was for me to see where the pieces fell.

Nothing I can do about anything now.

Huh. For some reason, that thought did make me feel a little better. It was out of my hands, so I didn't have to worry about making any more mistakes.

Nice.

I pushed myself away from the wall, looking around the room again. The only thing really left for me to do was go to sleep and wait. Agent Campbell or whoever was in the hallway when I woke up would tell me what happened next.

Something about that thought made me frown, and I poked at it. I realized the problem a moment later, a flush of embarrassed shame flooding through me. It took me a moment of thinking before the solution presented itself, and I went over to the desk, grabbing the chair and dragging it to the door.

Agent Campbell was leaning against the far wall looking at her phone when I opened the door to the room. She looked up in curiosity only for her eyebrows to climb as I dragged the chair out to her. I let go of it, giving a satisfied nod.

Then, because I'd set down my notebook, I pantomimed my explanation. I pointed to myself, then mimed closing my eyes and resting my head on my folded hands. Next I pointed to her, then made an unveiling gesture at the chair.

If you're going to be out here while I sleep, you should at least have a chair!

The corner of her lip quirked up as she seemed to get the message, and she gave me a thankful nod.

"Thank you. That was very considerate of you."

I beamed at her, cheeks warming at her praise. Giving her a double thumbs up and a quick goodnight wave, I retreated back into the room.

There! Last worry squished and good deed done!

Now it was sleepy time.

I found that the door had a little lock on the handle, and I turned it. Probably didn't mean much when they would have the key, but it made me feel better. With that completed, I started stripping off layers.

I'd worn most of my meager wardrobe when I entered the PRT to save room in my backpack for other possessions. My oversized sweatshirt and hat came off first, and it felt nice to shake out my shoulder-length hair. Bundling it up so tightly under my hat hadn't been fun.

The scarf around my neck was next, and I rubbed at the bruises around my throat. Other than the gentle ache as my fingers ran over them, they didn't feel too bad

A sweater and two shirts joined my scarf. Then my shoes, baggy jeans. and the sweatpants underneath. That just left me in my shorts, leggings, socks, and a light T-shirt. Oh, and my face mask. I slipped that off too, putting it on the desk with the rest of my clothes.

Other than some socks, my favorite (and only) skirt, and two extra pairs of underwear in my backpack, that was all I had in terms of clothes. Not much, but it worked. I'd left all my other baggy clothes for Vern to use. She would need them more than I did now.

After taking all the layers off, I realized how sweaty I'd gotten. With everything on my mind, I hadn't noticed how bad off I was.

I raised my arm and took a sniff.

Gross.

Not unfamiliar or even the worst I'd smelled, but still gross.

Oh well. I had some wet wipes and deodorant in my backpack. I'd save them until I woke up, though. That way I could make a better impression with whoever I met tomorrow.

I didn't even consider using the shower or taking more clothes off before I slept. For that matter, I put my shoes back on.

It wasn't that I didn't trust the heroes, it was just… I'd gotten used to it? Being prepared to run at the drop of a hat, that is.

Besides, what if there was a fire or something? Being dressed and ready to go would save me valuable time. It had nothing to do with how uncomfortable I felt with my unfamiliar surroundings or how the thought of removing my clothes here made my stomach curl with nausea.

Yeah. It wasn't paranoia, it was just proper preparations.

Nodding to myself, I finally looked to the bed.

Every muscle in my body tensed.

I tried to make myself step towards it, to curl up in the covers and go to sleep.

I couldn't.

My mouth felt dry, heart beating with heavy, pulsing thumps that I felt in my ears. My vision blurred for a moment, my breath hitching as I tore my eyes from the bed.

My gaze caught on the closet with two of those foldy door things, little wooden slats lining them.

Familiar. Safe.

I was moving before I realized what I was doing, throwing the copious amount of pillows (four!) off the bed and onto the ground before ripping the blankets off as well. Then I went to the closet and opened it.

It was empty except for some clothes hangers suspended from a bar at the top.

Grabbing the pillows and blankets, I set up my nest. Most of the blankets served to make a comfy bedding against the floor. A few of the extra pillows helped line the wall to give me extra cushioning.

Satisfied, I dragged my backpack in with me and slipped inside the closet. After I carefully lowered myself down, I retrieved my two sleeping essentials.

First, my pocket knife. It looked nice and had a silver dragon head engraved onto the black tactical handle. Vern had given it to me to replace the old, rusty one I used to have, and it was my second most prized possession. The knife went under my pillow.

Then I pulled out my greatest treasure: Axy. She was an old, ragged plushie colored a faded white with some stains on her. I'd gotten Axy three years ago after saving up the money Mom usually gave me to buy myself supper. The month of skipping meals had been worth it, letting me actually buy hero merchandise for the first time instead of scavenging it second hand.

Axy was a plushie based on one of the Dragon's creations. Dragon herself was a unique heroine in that she suffered from severe agoraphobia, so she never left her home in Canada. That hadn't stopped her from being a hero though, and now she was considered one of the greatest Tinkers of all time, creating technology and remote-piloted drones that had saved thousands of lives.

I loved everything about her. Even though she had a chronic fear, even though she had horrible circumstances, she had still found a way to overcome it all to help people.

As far as I was concerned, she was the living definition of a true hero.

As for Axy, she was based on one of Dragon's creations, the Axolotl Mark II, a search-and-rescue focused air-slash-sea craft that specialized in watery environments. Appearance wise, it looked a lot like an Axolotl, just with unfolding wings attached to the sides. All of Dragon's suits and drones had a dragon or salamander aesthetic, and even her rescue craft were no different.

Which just proved the best heroine out there also had the best taste.

Axy the Axolotl mech plushie had faint indents to mimic the metal seams of Dragon's actual craft, but her wings were folded tight against the body to give her a huggable design not too different from an actual Axolotl. Colored mostly white, she also had red cross emblems on her forehead and wings. Although Axy was worn and faded, she remained surprisingly free from serious damage.

Maybe it shouldn't be a surprise that the heroine renowned for making super mechs and sci-fi technology also had quality merchandise, but it was nice to know she put maximum effort even into something like making a plushie.

Axy's giant, cute eyes stared up at me, and I gave her a gentle, squeezing hug as I settled down into the blankets.

While I was pretty sure Axy wasn't secretly a tinkertech comfort device, she was magical nonetheless. The second my arms pulled her tight against my chest, I could feel my worries bleed away as they were replaced by a sense of safety and warmth.

Closing the folding doors of the closet most of the way shut helped cut off the lights from the bedroom without leaving me completely in the dark, and I let out a relieved sigh as I burrowed myself deeper into my blanket nest, cuddling into the fluff. The familiar, tight and enclosed space helped settle the unease gnawing at the back of my mind, leaving me just feeling sore and exhausted.

Letting my eyes close, a brief pang of worry flashed through me. What if I couldn't get to sleep? What if all I could do was… remember… and…

Sleep glomped me a moment later, and I folded into it without resistance.

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Author's Note:

Axy the Axolotl-mech Plushie Reference:

