

“Max?”

“Yah.”

“You’re doing a handstand off the side of a building.”

“Yah!”

Maxine wasn’t sure if this qualified as a handstand anymore. She looked down at the street, to her, well, left, then up at Victoria’s worried face to her right. Goodness. Max found herself useless and gay all over again.

“You’re very pretty when you frown like that,” Max managed. She wondered if Penny was at all responsible for the burst of confidence required for her to say something like that. More often than not, the best she could come up with was a stammer, a blush or a combination of the two.

*Nope*, Penny said with a wide grin. *All you*. Max smiled proudly at how she’d just made Victoria bite her lip. She lowered herself, for lack of a better word, until she sat against the wall on all fours, her fingers splayed. She wondered what had changed, how they could do this now. *You know how I changed you to look different, right?*

“Yeah?”

“What?” Victoria asked.

“Sorry, talking to Penny,” Max said sheepishly. She was going to have to unlearn talking to Penny out loud or she was going to forever be That Person, like the guy with the bluetooth headset. She felt Penumbra snicker after looking up the reference in her memories.

*So I think I can change things to have less... standard properties, as well. Sticky isn’t all that hard*. That was definitely interesting. Max wondered what else could be changed for a moment as they tried to stand up straight against the side of the wall. This meant that she was looking *down* at Victoria while looking *up*. Perspective was weird. *Well, I don’t know what the limit is yet. But I think we have time to figure it out*.

“How are you doing that?” Victoria gasped. Her eyes were almost bulging out of her head. Maxine couldn’t blame her. Things had gone from the mildly sci-fi to the blatant magical. In a way.

*This isn’t magic, Maxine. This is cold. Hard. Science!*

“Do you have any idea how you’re doing this?”

*None.*

“See?”

*Nyeh*. She felt Penny stick out their tongue, which was an odd sensation. Then she had another thought. And another few. Penny made acknowledging noises with all of them but had no real input, so Maxine climbed back onto the roof. She didn’t know what to think, and Penny was too baby to help with moral or ethical quandaries.

“Victoria,” Max said as Victoria rushed over to help her. While not exactly needing it, she was more than a little grateful to clasp the beautiful woman’s hand in her own and let herself be pulled up.

“You can call me V, Max. Or Vicky.” She paused. “Whatever you want, really.”

*Oh -my-*.

“I like your name,” Max smiled sheepishly. Just then, a strand of hair, presumably trying to be useful, unfurled itself and slid in front of her face, allowing Max to tuck it behind her ear to maximise her bashfulness.

“Thank you,” Victoria said. “I picked it myself.” They had a little giggle over that together. “Did you have something to ask? Or say? Or...”

*Goodness, she’s just as bad as you!* Max suppressed a laugh at Penumbra’s commentary. Sometimes it was genuinely like having a younger sibling in your head who was always present and ready to make fun of you.

“I’ve been wondering about like... powers and stuff.” Max said and tried not to stare at Victoria’s face. She was so beautiful, and the way she saw those beautiful brown eyes dart across her own face, she couldn’t help but be reminded of the fact that she was most definitely a cute girl too, now.

“Oh? You’re wondering what else you can do?”

“Well, yes,” Max said, “but that’s not what I mean.” It was a valid question. She already knew she could jump from rooftop to rooftop. She could stand on the side of a building. She didn’t know just how strong she was, but she was *strong*. And she could probably change her appearance at will, if she figured out a way to do it without asking Penny for permission.

*You can, Penny said happily. I’m already ‘using’ your body to move around. You can use mine to change it. We’re a partnership, Max.* Penny paused for a moment, and Max knew they were being dramatic. *Symbiosis*, they explained with a mental flourish.

“Anyway,” Max said, shaking her head. That was thought for later.. Victoria cocked her head. “So I’m thinking, right, you know the comic book thing of power and responsibility?” Max was trying to find the right words. Victoria nodded in response. “I’ve always had a problem with the way that was handled. Like, when you think of superpowers, you think of masked avengers who stop muggers in alleys.”

Victoria nodded again. “Vigilantism is a tricky thing,” she said. “I’m all for community self-policing, but taking the law into your own hands becomes a problem.”

“Exactly. Do I hand people over to the police? In *this* broken system? That won’t solve anything. And I’m not going to start carrying out, like, summary executions.” Max sat down on the edge of the building and dangled her legs over the street below. It was strange, but after the past few days, every semblance of a fear of heights was gone. She knew she’d be fine, even after taking that tumble off the building. “So then, like, where does it stop? Do I patrol the streets at night? Stop *all* crime?” She shook her head.

“The problem is that being really strong is only useful if you think of crime in terms of bank robberies and backstreet muggings. But that’s not what happens. I just don’t... I can’t see the virtue in going after people who were kind of failed by the system already.” Victoria sat down next to her and leaned against her ever so slightly, which took all of Maxine’s breath away, and her thoughts with it.

“You’re worried about solving crime with your powers? Violence begetting violence and all that jazz, right?” It was Max’s turn to nod, and she had to swallow for a moment. Victoria’s face was very close to hers now. Her breathing was definitely getting shallower.

“Y-yeah. I mean... if you prowl the streets at night looking for a fight and an excuse to beat up the poor...” She smirked slightly. “Might as well be a cop.” Victoria chuckled ever so slightly.

“Oof.”

*Big oof.*

“But what do I do then, right, I’m not going to play rooftop fascist, fight anyone who fell through the cracks. So *do* I have a responsibility? *Does* power come with responsibility?”

"Hmm," Victoria said. "I don't know. The strong should protect the weak, right?"

"That's how I see it," Maxine said. "I'm just trying to figure out how."

"What if you play, like, first responder? Or deal with stuff other people can't? I mean, you can't just change the system. Not overnight. But you can maybe help the people the system can't? Stuff like that," Victoria suggested.

"I can see that," Max said with a soft smile and turned to her. Big mistake. Victoria had turned to her, and she could feel the heat coming off Victoria's skin, her face so close to Maxine's; her stomach had turned to butterflies and her brain had turned to screaming. "Hi," she said, trying to keep her voice from quivering as V's brown eyes seared themselves into her memory.

"Hey," Victoria said softly. It took a titanic effort on Max's part not to stare at Victoria's mouth, and even then she felt their inexorable pull. She was fighting a losing battle here. Then, suddenly, she felt like she'd achieved a small victory over Victoria. The other girl's eyes were the first to dart down and back up. Max tensed up and a wave of excited terror washed over her.

*Oh no*, Penny said. *She wants the same thing you want. Horror. Calamity.* Maxine tried to get them to shut up, and Penny obliged with what felt like a little bow. *I'm sure you'll do fine, Maxine. A good thing is happening. Let it.*

They sat like that for a few seconds, and she could feel Victoria's hot breath on her lips. Their shoulders touching. Their fingertips were only half an inch away from each other. Max could hear Victoria's heart beat as loud as her own. The beats were almost, but not quite, perfectly synchronized, and she heard nothing over their deafening cadence. She tried not to move, scared of breaking the spell that was keeping them so painfully close together.

*I am*, Penny said sheepishly, *so sorry*. Max shot them an inward questioning glance. This was a tone she hadn't heard before. Penumbra sounded both a little scared, a little worried, and a lot of apologetic. That last part, at least, Max understood. They had *better* feel guilty for interrupting a moment like that, she thought. But she did want to know what was wrong. *Something's wrong*. Well, yes, but what? *Your body is rejecting itself*, Penny said softly, in a tone she'd only really heard on TV hospital serials.

"What do you mean?" Max asked and sat upright. Victoria looked worried. Max felt Penny wordlessly ask for permission, which was granted immediately. She felt the warmth spread through her body as Penumbra enveloped her and stepped forward. She looked out through their eyes as they got up.

*"Something's wrong,"* Penny said and stood upright, looking at their hands. *"Maxine's body is rejecting the changes I made to it."* They looked at Victoria. *"It shouldn't do that. The changes were complete. I don't know why this is happening."*

"What does that mean?" Victoria said, stepping closer, but she was clearly slightly intimidated by how much taller Penumbra was than her. Max was a little touched that Victoria was willing to overcome her intimidation to make sure they were both all right. And then she went back to being scared.

*"It means I need to give Max... I need to put her back the way she was before. For now. It's... fighting me, and I can't keep this up, I think. I'm sorry I didn't notice earlier."* Max sighed in relief. That wasn't the worst thing that could have happened. She'd been worried for a moment she was dying or something. But the concerned look on Victoria's face hadn't gone away.

"Will she be okay?" she asked.

Penumbra sighed deeply. *"I hope so. This is the only real option, until we figure out why this rejection is happening. What's going to happen is going to be a lot worse if I don't do it."* Max was still a little scared, but she trusted Penny.

When Penumbra retreated, she realized she was a little taller again. A little wider. Her body felt... wrong, now. She looked down. Her hands looked too big. Too *hairy*, like the hairs on an insect's leg poking through.

"Oh," Max said, and when she heard the sound of her own voice she realized that, quite possibly, that *this was* the worst thing that could have happened. Now that she'd been on the other side and had accepted it. The whole world was wrong now, or she was. She wanted to tear off her skin and escape from it. It was *wrong*, so deeply wrong that it was like a splinter in her brain.

*"I'm sorry Max,"* Penny said, and the presence of their voice was soothing, if only a little. An unreasonable and terrified part of her brain had been spooling up the possibility that none of it had been real and that she'd lost Penny too, now. *"I'm not going anywhere,"* came the response. *"And this is only for a little bit. I need to... take a breath. I'm going to keep you from feeling like this as much as I can."*

"Thank you," she mumbled, but again her voice sounded like sandpaper on dry rock and it hurt her for reasons she didn't understand, hurt so much tears were rolling down her face before she knew it, and she fell to her knees. She felt Victoria's arms wrap around her. She couldn't imagine how she looked to her now. How could a woman like that *not* think she was hideous, now. Repulsive. Especially now that she'd seen what Maxine *could* look like. "I'm sorry," Max mumbled softly.

Victoria said nothing and kissed her forehead as she cried.