

It took me a few hours to fall asleep when I got back to the shop, mostly because I was wired from what I had just agreed to. I knew deep down that I was going to get involved with this world's cape scene. I had already mentally committed to helping this world, even committed to someday fighting the Endbringers when I was powerful enough. But all of that had been future concepts, not real hard steps. The power I would need to fight the Endbringers was astronomical, so far from what I was now that it hardly felt real.

This, though? It was a much more real step forward. A step out of my comfortable anonymity.

Okay, yes, showing up and healing Dinah's Aunt was my real first step, but that had felt different. I was just following the task my powers gave me.

I couldn't even consider going back on my word. Between Tony's contagious excitement and my own guilt and stubbornness, there was no way I would let myself step out on my word. I maintained that I wasn't a self-sacrificing hero, but I was hoping to at least be the kind of person who helps in general.

When I did finally fall asleep, it was the fitful, tossing and turning kind, where I spent most of the night barely dozing, rather than fully sleeping. I woke up just as tired, if not more tired, than I had been when I fell asleep. There was only one cure for a night like that, greasy food and a double shot of espresso.

I left the shop after cleaning up a bit, heading to a nearby breakfast cafe. Once I had my breakfast, I headed down to the boardwalk to enjoy my food by the ocean. It wasn't nearly as pleasant a view as you might expect, with the beaches covered in trash and stained with oil, and the view of the ocean itself was marred by the Boat Graveyard. I could see it clearly from where I was, though it would have been better if I couldn't. The whole thing basically looked like several mountains of rusted metal, half submerged in the ocean. There were at least two massive cargo ships partially sunk, with who knew what else shoved together and falling apart.

It was like staring at the physical embodiment of economic collapse.

A cold breeze blew at me, and for a moment, I panicked, looking around for trouble. Alya frequently used cold winds to warn me I had turned in the wrong direction or something was coming, so feeling one suddenly immediately put me on alert. I only stopped looking around furtively when a warm breeze blew over.

"Sorry, that one gust slipped by," Alya admitted, talking softly into my ear. "I was watching a pair of Enforcers."

"Anything wrong?" I asked as I lifted my egg sandwich to my mouth.

"They were just watching you, but they moved on," She assured me. "Don't worry, I'm keeping an eye on them too."

I nodded and continued to eat, drinking my coffee and enjoying the morning. Eventually, when I was done, I leaned back on the bench.

"You're worried," Alya said, not as a question but as a statement.

"Can you really blame me?" I asked, taking a sip of my coffee. "Once we start doing this, a lot of people are going to take a pretty big interest in me. I knew it would happen, but I was hoping to have some more to work with before I did."

"I'll be watching over you, as always," She pointed out, the crashing waves losing a lot of their volume as she muffled our conversation. "And I don't think you would be happy with yourself if you declined."

"Yeah... you're not wrong," I admitted, letting out a long breath.

I could feel her presence pushing by me, ruffling my hair before dispersing around me once more, watching over a significant portion of the area at once. It was impressive how much ground she could cover, but I knew from experience that while she could *feel* such a large space, she couldn't watch everything at once. Instead, her focus drifted, while anything aggressive, violent, or noteworthy would tug at her awareness, prompting her to look closer. She was not omnipresent, and if someone was subtle enough, they could get pretty close before she noticed.

Eventually, I stood from the bench and stretched, my back loosening after a moment. With one more look out over the ocean, I started making my way back through the city. I wanted to grab some steel scrap, so I had some stocked up. That would only take a few hours, but I would likely take my time exploring the city and looking for a place to eventually make my permanent home. I ended up spending most of the day doing that, returning to the shop as the sun started to set.

The next day, I realized I was lacking a critical piece of infrastructure, so I grabbed a bit of cash from the ceiling tile stash and headed Downtown. It didn't take me long to find a shop selling prepaid cell phones, and while one of the clerks tried to upsell me, I insisted it was only for temporary use, so I didn't need anything fancy. In all honesty, the phones in this world were kind of crap, both because it was fourteen years earlier than I was used to and because the world's tech industry kind of screeched to a halt when the Endbringers started crushing cities.

Even if I spent thousands of dollars on the best phone they had, it would still be pretty basic when compared to what I was used to.

I walked down the road, letting Alya guide me as I focused on booting up the phone and getting it started. When it was all set up, I punched in the number on the card Tony had given me. The phone rang twice before a familiar voice came through the phone's speaker. Even before I could say anything, I could feel Alya muffling our conversation.

"Hello? Who is this?" He asked.

"Tony, hello. It's Mage," I said simply. "You told me to call you?"

"Mage! Yes! I'm glad to hear from you!" He said excitedly. "Listen, I managed to get a hold of a few people, and one of them is interested in meeting you tonight. Could you do that?"

"Uh.. yeah, I can do that," I responded, scratching my cheek. "Where exactly would we meet?"

"There's a small park not far from where the kitchen is, we are going to meet there. It's a bit of a walk to his community, but he didn't want to bring you too close without meeting you first."

"That's fair. Alright, Tony, I'll be there."

The older man gave me some brief directions, directing me to an area a half dozen blocks away from the address on the card he had given me. After a few more words, I hung up and started heading back to the shop to reapply my steel absorption. I could feel I still had plenty of time on my existing charge, but I wasn't about to risk running out when I was out and about all masked up.

Why was I getting masked up when the meeting with Tony wouldn't be happening for five or six hours? Because, while I was determined to help, I fully realized there was a lot about this situation that I didn't know about. So, rather than flounder about and possibly mess things up, I wanted to talk to someone else who could heal like me.

I was going to seek out Panacea and ask for advice.

I left the shop after packing my costume into a small leather messenger bag, since there was no way I was going to walk across the entire city in my costume. Not only would I feel like an idiot, but the chances I would attract the wrong kind of attention skyrocketed the further I went.

I took my time walking across the city, making my way deeper Downtown, trying to find my way to the hospital. Luckily for me, there were clear and obvious signs that directed me to the Brockton Bay Central Hospital.

Eventually, as I got closer, Alya found a spot for me to change. I quickly pulled out my costume, taking off my shirt to reveal the same white shirt I had worn before. I threw on my mask, then my beanie, before finally pulling on my black overcoat. Finally, I folded up my shirt and slid it back into my bag, letting Alya partially manifest and carry it to the roof of the building I was hiding behind for safekeeping.

Once I was dressed, I admit it took a few minutes for me to leave the alley I had changed in. The night I rushed out the door to save Tony, I hadn't been thinking much about what I looked like. Even better, I had somehow managed to completely avoid any onlookers.

Now, I was about to step out into a heavily populated area, dressed up in what would have constituted a bad Halloween costume back home.

I didn't consider myself to be easily frightened or scared, but I had always had a weakness for public speaking, and being at the center of a large group. It wasn't quite social anxiety, at least as far as I knew, but whatever it was, it was certainly kicking in now.

"Could I make a recommendation?" Alya asked, picking up on what I was feeling through our connection. "Right now, with that mask on, you're not just William Kalus anymore. Your *William Kalus*, Mage of Brockton Bay. Healer and Master of Lightning. Step into that role and let it protect you."

I let out a long breath, letting her words roll over me, nodding along with her suggestion.

"You know, for being new to this whole consciousness thing, you are pretty wise," I pointed out, purposely standing up straight.

"The wisdom of youth, I'm sure," She responded with a giggle. "I don't see the world as complicated as you do, it makes seeing the truth easier."

"Must be nice."

I paused for another moment before finally stepping out of the alley before I could get inside my own head again. The effect was instant, with the people around me going silent and immediately focusing on me. I forced myself forward, though, ignoring them as best I could.

As I continued to walk, the stares turned to whispers, and soon those changed to people pulling out their phones, snapping pictures, and taking videos of me.

"Should I short out their phones?" Alya asked, and I had to bite back an instinctual urge to say yes.

"No, it would only cause problems," I said with a frown, though it was hidden behind my mask. "Best to save that ability for later."

After making my way across the last street, I was finally standing in front of the hospital. It was well maintained, with clean white walls and a bright, well-maintained sign. Even the street in front of it was newly paved. I nodded to myself before slowly making my way to the front door, opening it, and stepping inside.

Immediately, I could tell it was unnaturally quiet. The large open area was almost entirely devoid of movement, with nearly everyone focused on me. I resisted the urge to cringe away from the attention, and instead pushed forward, following the gentle, encouraging breeze. As I approached the front desk, the five people sitting behind it remained frozen, until finally, one of

the older ones stepped forward. She reached out and pulled the two younger-looking women back, stepping forward to greet me. She even managed to smile.

"Hello, Welcome to Brockton Bay Central Hospital," She said calmly, standing directly in front of her coworkers. "Is there something I could help you with?"

"Yes, actually. I'm new to Brockton Bay, and I wanted to meet Panacea," I explained, smiling beneath my mask when the older woman frowned. "No, I'm not some groupie or looking for free healing. I wanted to shake hands with the fellow healer and discuss how it works here, mostly to avoid stepping on any toes or making a scene."

That surprised the older receptionist into silence again, though she broke through much quicker this time.

"You're a healer?" She asked, her eyes wide. "That's incredible, I-"

"Hey! What's going on here?"

A loud, brash shout came from down the hall, and suddenly, a costumed girl came flying down the hall, stopping just a few feet in front of me, her arms crossed. She was wearing a golden tiara on her head and a predominantly white costume lined with gold highlights. Even her boots were marked with gold. Despite the situation, the first thought through my head was that she must fly everywhere when wearing her costume, as her shoes were way too white to actually be used.

"Who are you, and what are you doing here?" She said, her face colored with just the slightest hint of a sneer. It wasn't quite disgust, more along the lines of suspicion and distrust.

For a long moment, I was frozen, a creeping nervousness rising up through my head. Like I was an ant and a very annoyed giant was about to step on me. Before I could do anything, Alya was there whispering into my ear.

"She is influencing your mind," She explained. "I can feel it through your bond, it doesn't reach your soul but it reverberates through your feelings."

As if all I needed was permission to ignore it, knowing it wasn't real was enough for me to push through. I still felt like a small kid on the bad end of a big bully, but now I could fight it.

"I'm new to this, but for now, I am going by Mage. I assume you are Glory Girl?" I asked, recognizing the young woman from the many, many, *many* photos online. "Whatever you are doing with your powers, I recommend you stop. This is a hospital. It's no place for posturing."

For a moment, I thought she was going to push, in fact, I could feel her emotional manipulating power start to tick up, only for someone to reach around her and grab her arm.

"Vicky, calm *down*," the person said, tugging the teenager's arm. "They aren't doing anything wrong."

"They were asking about you," She responded, partially turning to reveal Panacea standing behind her, dressed in a white and red cloak.

"And? Everyone is asking after me here, it's the hospital," She responded, rolling her eyes before focusing on me. "Though it's more than a bit aggressive to roll in unannounced."

"I wasn't aware you made appointments," I responded, feeling the mental pressure pull back slightly.

"What are you looking for?" She asked, adjusting her cloak around herself, looking at me with eyes that... Well, they seemed a lot more jaded than I would have expected from her age.

They also looked incredibly tired.

"I don't do requests, and I don't do on-the-spot healing unless it is an emergency. If you are from out of town, you'll have to wait in line," the young heroine continued, gesturing behind me. I turned to look and found dozens of people sitting in the lobby, all watching us with wide eyes.

"Uh, no, I do not require healing," I assured her. "Rather, I came to talk to a fellow healer."

The robe-wearing Parahuman's posture changed immediately, and her barely restrained indifference disappeared, replaced by sudden interest, her eyes locked on me.

"What did you say?"