

The next vehicle was in slightly better shape than the first, probably due to its larger size. All three of its occupants were thankfully better off as well. Two children were sitting in the back, with an older man in the driver's seat. Other than a little whiplash, bruises, and some minor burns from the airbags, all of them seemed to be in good shape. The children were terrified, but the father was actively helping calm them down.

I helped the dad get out first since there was no immediate danger, and he could help corral the scared kids. As I did so, I explained my ability to heal. The father considered my offer, eventually accepting the healing for himself first, then letting me heal his children when that went well.

Unfortunately, with everyone recovered, the father soon became distracted, spotting the woman from the other car. He immediately stormed off, his face set in an angry scowl.

"Where did you earn your license!?" He screamed, approaching the woman. "The light was clearly red!"

"I-I didn't see you!" She tried to explain, still clearly shaken. "I was pulling right, and I-"

"Then you should have opened your fucking eyes!" He shouted, arms up as he gestured, making the woman flinch. "I bet you were on your cell phone, not even paying attention! My kids-"

He took another aggressive step forward, looking like he was seriously going to lose it. While I understood the anger, he had just been in a car accident with his children in the car, and it certainly looked like the woman was in the wrong. I needed to stop this before it got out of control.

"Woah woah woah," I said, stepping in between the two, confident I could take anything the man had easily. "I know emotions are running high right now, but this is not the time or place for that."

"But she could have killed-"

"I know, sir, but screaming in the street while your children watch is not the best way to handle this," I pointed out, putting my hands on his shoulders and forcing him to step back. "I'm sure whatever happened here will come out in time, potentially with the aid of lawyers. But for now, why don't you go comfort your children. They just had a rather traumatic experience."

At first, I thought he was going to shout in my face, but mentioning what his children had just been through seemed to knock something loose in his head. He turned back to see his young children standing listless, looking lost and shocked. He nodded weakly before moving quickly back to them, wrapping them both in a tight hug.

When I was sure he was done yelling, I turned back to the woman.

"Are you okay?" I asked, getting a nod back. "Good, why don't-"

Before I could finish, an ambulance pulled up at the scene, as did a fire truck and a pair of police cars. The latter seemed to be a bit overkill, but considering all four of the police officers who climbed out of the cruisers made a beeline for me, they must have been specifically sent to handle me.

The following conversation was a bit tense, but overall, it went better than I had hoped, especially considering how poorly Tony had talked about the BBPD previously. They were mostly concerned that I had injured people trying to help, but when the EMT's couldn't find anything wrong with any of them, and all of them confirmed my healing, they backed off a little. During that time, Alya warned me that we had a pair of capes approaching, though they didn't appear to be hostile. I wanted to ask her for more info, but I couldn't exactly whisper a question when I was so close to other people.

"Listen, I get it, but spinal issues weren't anything I needed to worry about," I assured the officer, focusing on him for a moment. "Unless they were missing an entire limb, I could have fixed any injury they had. I was mostly concerned with them getting out of their cars."

The police officer seemed to at least let it go, though they didn't seem happy about it. I got the feeling that the BBPD wasn't exactly the biggest fan of the many capes that populated the city, a sentiment I could honestly understand. Hard to be happy about something when a good chunk of them were villains.

One of the officers took my statement and, begrudgingly, thanked me for my help. I shook his hand and wished them good luck before turning around...

And almost walking headfirst into one of the costumed heroes that Alya mentioned.

He was a taller man, dressed in a primarily red, lightly armored costume, with plates along his chest and arms. The top half of his face was covered in a red visor, which I had to assume was only opaque in one direction. As I turned, he took a step back while raising his hands. I recognized him from a few pictures I had seen online as the Protectorate hero, Assault.

"Woah, sorry, their buddy, didn't mean to sneak up on you," He said with a smile. "I'm Assault, and this here is Battery."

He gestured to the woman behind him, who I had completely overlooked as my attention was focused on Assault. The female hero was dressed in a dark gray, almost deep blue suit, skin-tight, of course, decorated with light blue, almost teal lines that mimicked internal circuitry. Her helmet covered most of her head, save the bottom third of her face. She simply nodded, leaving the talking to her partner.

"It's alright, no harm, no foul," I said, slowly extending my hand, making sure not to spook either of them with sudden movement. "Names Arcanum. It's nice to meet two of the Protectorates finest."

"Here, that Battery? We are the Protectorates finest!" Assault said, shaking my hand and shaking it, his smile somehow seeming even more friendly. "It's nice to meet you as well, Arcanum."

"So, what can I do for you two?" I asked, slowly walking around them and off the street. "I haven't done anything wrong as far as I know."

"No, nothing like that," He assured me. "The PRT gets contacted for anything cape-related that goes through the BBPD, so we decided to come out and say hello. We missed you at your first call, the mugging you stopped."

I nodded in understanding. By some unspoken agreement, we began to walk and talk, making our way down the sidewalk. People stepped out of our way, and Assault would wave and smile at people as we walked past.

"I see. I can imagine it's difficult to get a hold of us sometimes," I said, the older hero nodding.

"It can be, and it can be important since lone heroes... well, there's a reason there aren't many of them," He admitted with an unhappy frown.

"Other cities seem to have more," I pointed out. "They seem to struggle here. Unsurprising considering just who they are up against."

We stopped at a corner, where Assault and Battery both signed a few autographs. Despite no one knowing who I was, I was asked to sign a few as well. We all brushed off any questions, which I was happy to do. I was still thrown off by the autographs.

"You're not wrong. There is a lot to be wary of, especially for a new guy just starting out," He warned. "But enough about that, why don't you tell me a little about what you can do."

"Be careful," Alya whispered into my ear. "He has an earpiece in, and someone is pushing him to find out more."

I frowned behind my mask but realized that I shouldn't really be surprised. Of course, professional heroes would have people backing them up, and of course, they would be rather interested in what I could do.

"Well, I'm a bit of a grab bag," I admitted. "But not technically."

I gave them a general explanation of my powers, in that I fed them the same half-lie, half-underselling explanation I gave Panacea and Glory Girl. As I got to the end, I noted that Assault was being very quiet. When I finally finished, it took him a minute to respond.

"Jeez, when you said you were a grab bag, you weren't kidding!" Assault said, shaking his head. "Healing, lightning, and physical enhancement? A pretty impressive combination."

"Yeah, well... Just good luck, guess," I said, rubbing the back of my head. "I-"

"It might not be as good luck as you imagine," Battery said, speaking up for the first time since we started talking. "Having that many abilities puts a serious target on your back."

"Yeah... but they aren't that potent," I said. "It's not like I can heal like Panacea, right?"

And that was true, no underselling required. While my healing spells were very impressive, they were only two levels strong. Serious injuries required multiple casts of each spell, which reduced the potency of each repeat cast on a single person. Even then, I really couldn't bring people back from the brink of death. Dinah's aunt, which felt like weeks ago, not just a few days, had been on the far end of my ability and had required some of my most potent spells. Even then, I hadn't healed her completely. Yes, she wouldn't die, but her muscles would need a lot of time to heal back to full.

"My friend, comparing yourself to Panacea when it comes to healing is like comparing yourself to Hero if you're a tinker or Legend if you're a blaster," Assault said, shaking his head. "Just what you did today for the accidents was impressive, especially since there were no side effects or a ridiculous process. Well, other than speaking in a dead language."

"You're at risk for being forced into a gang," Battery said, folding her arms and earning a look from Assault. "You would be much safer working with the Protectorate, where you can get proper support on protection."

"I... understand the sentiment, but I am confident I can handle the danger," I assured them both. "It's not that I have anything against the Protectorate. I just think I can do more good on my own."

"How? If you work with us, we can help keep you safe, and you can use your powers in a way that benefits the most people," She said, directly challenging my statement.

For a long moment, I was silent, giving Assault a look, only to find he was equally surprised by Battery's aggressiveness. While I didn't doubt that both of these individuals had more experience than I did, her "we know better" tone grated heavily on my nerves. Still, making a good impression trumped any temporary need to fire back.

"Be that as it may, I want to work alone for now," I repeated, being a bit more blunt the second time. "Though, Panacea did mention that you guys can verify my healing as safe?"

"That's right, we can," Assault said, recovering from his partner's rather rough sell. "We can-"

He paused just long enough for me to notice, before continuing right where he left off.

"We can do that as part of our power testing."

"Power testing?"

"Yeah, we have facilities set up to test a variety of powers, from strength and durability to the potency and danger of blaster powers, even your electricity," He explained with a smile, though it seemed... less open than before. "Come in, let us do our magic, and we can make sure your healing is safe and symptom-free. Even if it's not, we might be able to come up with ways to mitigate any side effects."

The pause he made was highly suspicious, and I could see it in his posture that he knew I noticed it. Still, being a PRT, or Protectorate verified healer would mean that I could help more people, which was worth a little paperwork and a couple hours of showing off my magic. I would be more concerned about showing off what I could do, if that wouldn't change radically over the next week.

"Alright, I can agree to that," I said with a smile. "Should I set up an appointment or...?"

"That would be best. Our secretaries tend to get a bit jumpy when unknown parahumans show up out of the blue," He said with a smirk, prompting me to rub my face, only to feel the warm metal of my mask.

"Yeah, in hindsight, not my best plan to show up to the hospital like that," I admitted, shaking my head. "But in my defense, Panacea doesn't have a way to set up appointments."

"Pretty sure that's on purpose," He explained, before adding. "But you could have contacted New Wave through their website and set up a meeting with them."

I was quiet for a long, drawn-out silence before letting out a long sigh and shaking my head.

"Right, of course I could. Well, at the risk of tempting Murphy, I'm going to go. I will set up an appointment as soon as I can."

"Sounds like a plan, Arcanum," Assault said with a smile, reaching out and offering me his hand. I shook it confidently before turning and walking away.

Eventually, I cut into an alleyway, putting on speed while using the marathon spell to cut away my need to stop running through the city. At this point, it was starting to get later in the afternoon, so Alya subtly guided me back to where I had left my civilian clothes.

"You noticed that too, right?" I asked, finally stopping in the secluded spot not too far from the shop. "The pause Assault made?"

"I did. I couldn't quite make out what the person on the other side of their radio was saying, as the sound was pretty muted, but I could tell that they got louder just before he stumbled."

"Something to do with the power testing," I said with a frown, shaking my head. "I'll have to keep my eye open."

"You intend to go through with it?" She asked, slightly surprised. "I would have thought the pause would be enough to dissuade you."

"Normally, it would have, but I really want that PRT approval for healing," I said with a frown. "Maybe I won't have to spend so much time convincing people to let me help them if I was properly accredited. Let's just hope Battery isn't part of the process."

"She was certainly rude," Alya agreed. "I can't imagine her method of recruitment works very well."

"Which makes you wonder why they sent her," I wondered out loud. "Maybe a good cop bad cop routine? Trying to enamor me with Assault so I'm more casual around him in the future?"

I considered the idea for a moment, as I folded up my overcoat and slid it back into my messenger bag. After mulling it around in my mind for a minute, I shook my head.

"I can't just assume they were trying such an underhanded tactic on someone they were hoping to recruit," I guessed. "I mean, they should no better than to piss off random parahumans, right?"

"Perhaps you shouldn't assume competence?" Alya suggested, getting a snort out of me.

"Maybe, but assuming incompetence is way worse, right?" I responded before putting my messenger bag strap around my shoulder.

"I'm a little worried about how they reacted to me being a grab bag," I said with a frown. "They seemed shocked."

I did some research on grab bags before claiming to be one, but it's possible I misunderstood their level of potency. This meant I had been casually admitting to and showing off that I had multiple powerful abilities, attracting a lot of attention to myself because I assumed I was coming off as a mid-tier power at best. I had been naive despite trying not to be. Worse, this was going to get more difficult as I developed more and more magic.

I let out a long sigh, trying to shake off the admittedly disappointing attempt at subterfuge. I needed to focus on the fact that I was doing good, that I had helped plenty of people at the camp, and that I would continue doing that as long as Tony could find more groups for me to help. I may be bumbling through this a bit, but I was still doing good.

"Alright, I need to get something to eat, and then we can head home," I finally said out loud. "Mind finding me a pizza place, Alya?"

Rather than answer, a warm breeze blew past me, and I followed it out of the alleyway.