

It was the dead of winter, that time of year when people didn't go outside at night for fear of things we have not had names for since we left the caves. I was walking down the street in the city, thinking the events of the past few months over. Eight months ago, I was visiting a friend in Montreal, a physics major who was working on a project he thought I might be interested in. When I got there, he had some artifact, a Greek Xiphos, hooked to dozens of wires. There was some sort of energy crackling and flickering in the blade. My friend was trying to extract this energy somehow, I didn't really understand what he said. He turned on the machine, and something went wrong, there was an explosion, and then I was cold, so cold. And then I *felt* Warmth. Not in me, but around me, as if my sense of heat had been extended a hundredfold. I reached out and pulled the warmth to me, and then blacked out. When I came to, I was warm, but surrounded by ice on all sides. I could still feel heat, and I could still pull on it. After about a month, I figured out that I could push it out of me as well. After about two months I decided to put my skills to good use and started using them to help people. Whether that be stopping a robbery, or something as simple as lighting a fire for some homeless people, I've helped where I can.

I was wandering, lost in thought, when I heard a scream to the right of me. Looking around for the source, I saw a bank, doors wide open. That was where the scream was coming from, but... there was something odd. I put on my mask and ran to the door, and realized that I couldn't see in. The sun was shining outside, and the door was wide open, but it was pitch black inside. I faltered on the threshold, but then heard another scream, and took the plunge. It was like stepping into a void, dark and lonely. I felt *something* whizz past me, and realized that I needed to see what was going on, otherwise I would be useless. I reached out with my senses, looking, searching, until I found what I needed. The lightbulbs were still on, despite the all encompassing

darkness. I pulled what heat I could from them and pushed it out of the palm of my hand, creating a small fire. For a split second, I saw a man with shadows burning in his eyes pointing a hand at a terrified bank teller, and two men with guns pointing at several terrified civilians, one of whom was lying in a pool of his own blood, and then the darkness closed in around me again. I could still feel the heat of my fire, cycling repeatedly between my palm and the air to stay lit, but no light was coming off it. It was dark, and there was danger, and I was scared.

About two months after I started using my gifts to help people, the internet gave me a name. I don't know who started it, where it was first said, but I know how it got started. A news site interviewed an old lady who I helped while she was being mugged. She said that I had made her feel safe, like sitting by the fire at home on a cold winter's day. Various sites got a hold of that interview, and gave me a name: Hearthbearer, the hero who brings safety with him. Bravery is not the opposite of fear, simply the strength to fight despite it. No, the opposite of fear, that crushing feeling in the pit of your stomach that things can only get worse, is hope, knowing that things will get better.

I could not afford to be afraid. I also needed to see. I heard a sound to my left, and leapt to the right seconds before hearing something crash into the spot where I just was. This was bad. If I couldn't find a way to see, then I wouldn't be able to do anything. And then I felt it, like a hand guiding me, some force telling me to close my eyes, and concentrate on my sense. I closed my eyes, focused on finding Heat, and did something I've never done before. I *saw* heat. Not like infrared vision, more like... seeing lines where there was heat. There were lines in the air showing the ebb and flow of heat, lines in the floor where it had been absorbed, and tight bundles of lines where there were people. I could see. And if I could see, I could fight.

I placed my hand on the floor, and pulled heat from it as fast as I could, using that to shoot a jet of fire at the first goon. He wasn't expecting it, and fell backwards trying to dodge it. With my other hand, I pulled heat out of the air, sending a wave of absolute zero at the other one, who was frozen solid. I looked up just in time to see the man with the shadows in his eyes do... something. I don't know what he did, but to my eyes it looked like a disturbance in the lines hurtling at me, no heat, just pitch-black nothingness. I leapt to the side before it could touch me, and heard a cracking of stone where I had just been. I heard a scream, the sound of sirens, and realized that I had to end this, fast. I reached out and grabbed as many lines as I could, and pulled them into me. It was more heat than I had ever handled before, burning inside me like fury. I released it all, straight at the shadow-guy. The darkness lifted, and a gout of pure heat blasted into him, but he didn't go down. He made some gesture, and then crossed his arm, and a shield composed of perfect darkness erupted in front of him, absorbing my attack. He molded it into a ball, and looked like he was about to throw it. I knew I didn't have it in me to dodge this one, that attack had taken too much out of me. He looked me in the eyes and... stopped. I don't know why he stopped, only that he did. He let the energy disperse, and took a vial out of a pocket of his jacket. He threw the vial on the floor, and then in a flash of darkness was gone. I quickly went around the room, checking on people, making sure that they were safe. The man with the gunshot wound was still alive, and there was an ambulance on the way. It was then that I made my exit. They were safe, and I didn't want to interact with the police. I don't know where the man with the burning shadows went, but I know that he's still out there. And if he, or anyone else wanted to harm people., they'd have to go through me. I am the Hearthbearer, as long as I am here, there is safety.