

The following morning started as most did, with my morning ablutions. After that, I headed out into the city, stopping first at the hospital. Technically, my day was free, since New Wave was handling the patrols around the Empire's old territory, making minor busts and cracking down on any thugs trying to throw their weight around. That left me time to meet with the PRT, as well as Weaver.

According to Lady Photon, Weaver had also shown interest in joining their patrols, but seemed most interested in talking to me. It appeared that I had left a bigger impression on Taylor than I realized, which, in hindsight, I should have seen coming.

To her, it must have seemed like I had achieved something impossible, stepping in and crushing issues that she thought insurmountable. Many of her problems had been self-maintained, rather than self-inflicted, as her stubborn desire to suffer silently stranded her in her own hell. Like many teens her age, she was blind to the fact that her school was a small part of the world, rather than an inescapable, locked-off independent state. If she had just reached out or called someone outside the system, it would have likely changed quite a bit.

That isn't to say it would have definitely changed things. People, unfortunately, do fall through the cracks sometimes, but her case had not yet descended that far.

Of course, I would never in a million years tell her anything like that. For one thing, it would be cruel to minimize her very real suffering, regardless of the role her stubbornness or blindness played in it. Beyond that, she was a bright girl, she would likely realize it on her own over time, when she could look back on it with a clearer head.

Either way, she was rather eager to talk with me, clearly expressing interest in joining my team specifically. I set a time to meet her, sometime after she finished school, with Lady Photon and Glory Girl also present, since I felt uncomfortable meeting with a minor alone in such a situation, especially when she would be at the whims of my power to such a degree.

But that was for later in the day. I still had a morning of healing at the hospital, which I completed just about an hour and a half after I arrived. After making the rounds, I headed back to the forest, where I made a call to warn Armsmaster I would be stopping by soon with a delivery. Fifteen minutes later, my golems grabbed the crates of luck-enhanced bracelets before we teleported right outside the PRT.

As we landed, I turned to find that PRT officers were already waiting with several moving carts, ready to accept the delivery. Armsmaster himself was standing there as well, though he quickly made a beeline towards me.

"Arcanum, thank you for the timely completion of this task," he said, extending a hand out to shake mine. "You have done a great deal for this city."

As I shook his hand, I thought for a moment I could detect a lot of complicated emotions in his statement. Something told me he wasn't quite sure what to make of me, but since I

delivered results, he had a begrudging respect for me. It was hard to tell, the Hero was hard to read, especially with most of his face covered by his power armor.

"I'm happy to help. I was also hoping to get a meeting with Director Piggot. If possible," I mentioned. "Now that the Empire has been stripped of its capes, I was hoping that we could re-examine her limit on how many guardians I could create."

"...If you don't mind waiting for her current meeting to complete, I believe she should be able to fit you in for a short meeting," He said, even though I would have bet a lot of money that she was already listening to our conversation. "Do you have time?"

"I do," I admitted. "Not too long, but at least an hour and some change."

"That is more than enough," He assured me. "Please, follow me."

The Protectorate hero led me through the building outside of a now-familiar office. The secretary gave me a smile as I sat down by a row of chairs. Once I was comfortable, I pulled out a notebook, flipping through the pages as I pulled out a pen. I was more than happy to sit down and go over a few plans I had for the Endbringer soldier loadout, as well as do some general brainstorming.

During my previous time contemplating the idea, I had already settled on a modified geomantic ritual. I was reasonably certain I could change the base ritual to accommodate multiple people at once. Combined with the fact that the ritual circle was permanent, it meant I could slowly but surely make my way through a large population of people. The geomantic ritual, with the right focus materials, would enhance people's speed, strength, durability, and mental clarity, as well as provide an additional layer of low-level heat resistance.

According to the schedule, Leviathan was the next Endbringer to strike, which meant I should also focus specifically on gear that would help combat him, since I would have more time after that to work out things for the next one, Behemoth.

I already had a few ideas for him.

However, my focus was on Leviathan, which meant I needed to find a way to breathe underwater, or even better, eliminate the need to breathe altogether. Unfortunately, I wasn't exactly sure how I could create that effect without casting a ritual on someone directly, which in this case might not be an option.

I was still brainstorming ideas after about ten minutes, which was when Armsmaster returned. Seconds later, I saw the secretary hold her ear for a moment before nodding and gesturing to the door.

"She is ready for you both now."

I quickly slid my notebook into my pocket and followed Armsmaster inside the barebones office, sitting down in one of the chairs, while Armsmaster stood off to the right of Director Piggot. She leaned forward after a moment and nodded, putting her elbows on her desk.

"First off, Arcanum, let me thank you for the hard work that you, your team, and New Wave have put into Brockton Bay," She said, staring me down a bit, clearly carefully wording everything. "You've done something that the Protectorate lacked the resources to do, and for that I thank you."

"I'm just glad that I could help," I said with a smile. "The Protectorate and PRT were clearly understaffed for a city like this. The fact that you managed to keep the peace as long as you did is impressive and a credit to you, your forces, and the Protectorate heroes. "

While I might have various opinions about the PRT, I was not stupid enough to talk shit just before I asked permission to do something. Further, whatever my problems with them might be, no one could argue with the fact that they had been understaffed for the number of cape villains in the area. There were places with more villains, and places with more dangerous villains, but Brockton Bay had had a potent mix of both that was almost entirely unique. Only my unique abilities had truly allowed me to step in and avert disaster without the city tearing itself apart.

Not to mention a fair bit of luck.

"Now that the city has calmed down some, and we have your guardians patrolling the streets, we can start patrolling out further into nearby suburbs and towns," The director said, seeming shocked that she could say it at all. "We have been neglecting that responsibility for so long, not many people remember that it's something we are supposed to do."

"Speaking of the guardians, director Piggot, I would like to suggest extending our agreement," I responded. "With just a few more groups, as well as some golems, we could patrol the now ex-Empire territory easily, freeing your people up even more."

For a moment, she studied me, looking out past her fingers. Everything about this conversation had several layers to it already, but I could feel her holding back to ensure I remembered that I had come to her to ask. It seems like even after everything, she still wanted to play power games. Not that I could blame her, after everything we had done for the city, playing games was just about the best she could do.

"Two more groups, which I believe are four more guardians, would be fine," She finally agreed. "Is that enough?"

"I believe so, though it wouldn't be as good as three groups," I pointed out. "Just two groups would mean spreading the teams out more, meaning a less dense patrol network. That would mean more things would get missed."

"... Fine. Six guardians, three groups," she relented after a long few seconds. "Do not make me regret being so flexible."

I resisted the urge to groan, instead simply nodding in understanding.

"Thank you, Director Piggot, I appreciate the flexibility," I responded, giving her the cookie-cutter, boilerplate smile before standing. "I appreciate you making the time to set up this

meeting. Would it be possible for you to set up another, something within the next few days? I have another project I am working on, one I think the PRT will be very interested in."

That got her attention, the large woman raising a single eyebrow.

"What would this project entail, exactly?" Armsmaster asked, getting a look from Director Piggot.

"Anti-Endbringer developments and strategies," I divulged, both of them perking up considerably at the words. "I've been working on a project I think stands a significant chance of making a difference. I just need the PRT's help. This meeting would be about a proof of concept."

"In that case, as long as your intent is serious, then yes, we can absolutely set up a meeting," she said, eyeing me closely. "How much time do you need?"

"No more than a week. Say in five days?" I suggested, looking at both of them, resisting the urge to make a joke about them both having more spare time. "Does that work?"

"I believe it will," the director agreed, picking up a pen and marking something down. "If that's all?"

"Yes, thank you both for your time," I said, standing and shaking both of their hands, before Armsmaster escorted me out.

After a brief goodbye, a PRT agent guided me out of the building. Once I was standing on their front lawn, clear of any pedestrians, I then teleported out, landing on the ritual platform.

"They still want to pretend they are in control," Alya said, forming into her partially corporeal form, her arms crossed. "Like they have a say in what you do."

"Aren't you the one who encouraged me to go the extra mile to stay on their good side?" I asked with a chuckle, stepping off the platform and heading towards the orchard for a snack. "What changed?"

"Nothing changed, it's made a lot of things easier, hasn't it?" She pointed out, and I couldn't help but nod in agreement. "Doesn't mean it's not annoying."

"Maybe, but as long as they aren't fucking with anything, they can play all the games they want," I said with a shrug. "And in the meantime, we can make actual progress. Besides, I doubt Piggot will remain our primary contact once our idea gains traction. She won't be able to make the decisions necessary to run the project. With any luck, we will get someone useful."

Alya and I chatted for a bit, mainly focusing on my projects and just generally killing time before our afternoon meeting. When the time came, we headed to the Docks community to pick up Olivia, as I wanted her there when we met Weaver. After talking with Charles for a while, we teleported away to an abandoned parking lot along the docks, settling in to wait. It didn't take

long for Ayla to sense Weaver's approach, as all of the bugs around us began acting strangely, the bug controller seizing control.

Surprisingly, she arrived with Glory Girl, the teenage flying carrying her bridal style, carefully letting her down, with Lady Photon following after.

"Hey, Arc!" Glory Girl said, waving as she swooped around and closed the distance quickly, the other two slowly following behind. "How's it going?"

"Hello, Glory Girl. It's going well, got my morning duties finished so we can spend as much time as we need discussing everything," I explained with a smile, before turning and nodding to the other two capes. "Lady Photon, Weaver."

"Hello, Arcanum, Crow. It's good to see you both," Lady Photon responded. "When we talked on the phone, you hinted this was more than just a conversation about Weaver and what happens next."

"I did. I figured it was time to show you my base of operations," I explained, smiling at all three of their surprised expressions. "It's where I feel the most comfortable making introductions, and I can assure you that it is safe and far from prying eyes."

"You live in the woods, right?" Glory Girl asked with a frown. "I kinda figured you just had a cabin or something."

"Not quite," I said with a smirk. "I've had plenty of time to work on my home, so it's a bit beyond a cabin in the woods."

"You're willing to take me to your base?" Weaver asked, a bit nervously. "I haven't even officially joined..."

"To be honest, I'm not particularly worried about the safety of my base. It has plenty of protections, and they are only getting stronger," I assured them. "There are a few ground rules, however. One, don't fly too high or run too far into the woods. The person in charge of the defenses could keep them from affecting you, but it might be distracting. And don't eat anything I don't give you. Some of the stuff isn't normal anymore. Oh, and be careful of the orchard and flowers."

All three of the women shared a look, but Crow just snorted, rolling her eyes at my words.

"He is being dramatic, it's perfectly safe. I spend plenty of time there," she assured them, shaking her head. "Just don't do anything dumb and you'll be fine."

"I'm not being dramatic," I said, looking at Crow with a frown. "I'm just telling what they should remember. And if I thought they would be stupid, I wouldn't be inviting them."

Crow rolled her eyes again and reached out, putting her hand on my shoulder, holding on so she wouldn't get left behind when I teleported away. See this, the other three did the

same, holding onto my arm as I held a spell storage crystal in my hand, choosing that for the sake of convenience.

A moment later and we were all standing on the ritual platform, at the heart of my forest home. All three newcomers gasped, caught off guard by the sight of the plant-grown homes, hanging bottle lights, carefully planted and grown flowers, and platform living spaces. I couldn't help but smirk as they stepped off the platform, carefully walking along the wooden paths to look around, eyes filled with wonder.

I might have grown accustomed to it at some point, but it was nice to be reminded that your home was truly remarkable.