

When I first concluded that my best bet for developing and deploying an anti-Endbringer army was to rope the PRT into my plan, I had a lot of concerns.

Some of them, like the worry that my creations would end up in the wrong hands, or that they would be used on the orders of the wrong people, I could solve myself. My ability to unravel magical items I create remained incredibly useful, and I even had plans to implement additional security measures for the annihilation rifles, as they were the most dangerous parts of the planned loadout. However, one of my primary concerns was that the plan would become mired in bureaucracy.

The PRT, or even the government in general, didn't exactly have the best track record in implementing rapid concepts. I might have been carrying some baggage from my old world, but all I had to do was look at NEPEA 5 to see the bad decisions that the government here was capable of. I was very worried that my plan would die on the table or get stuck in limbo, even after being approved, due to politics.

Thankfully, while those issues did exist in the greater scale of the government, they did not affect my proposal. Whether it was due to the near-universal threat of the Endbringers or to the PRT being designed to respond as fast as possible to cape-focused situations, once Chief Director Costa-Brown gave me the news that my project had been cleared, things picked up immediately.

The day after my meeting with the PRT, I was called to a shutdown US Air Force base in West Virginia. When Crow and I arrived, it was already a hive of activity, as PRT personnel were inspecting and repairing previously abandoned buildings, bringing the whole facility back to life. After a quick tour, I was guided to my new workspace, a massive empty airplane hangar that was in pretty good shape. It would serve well as a place for me to store the equipment I was working on, as well as a place to run some of the rituals. A few quick spells to repair the building and the concrete floor, and it was ready for action.

After that, I shook hands with a whole lot of people, including the PRT agent in charge of their side of the project. His official title was now Special Projects Lead Richard Kinsey. He explained that, in matters related to this project, he had the same level of command as a Deputy Director and answered directly to Chief Director Costa-Brown. That was certainly encouraging to hear, as he would be able to make many unilateral decisions without putting it up to debate with the entire PRT first.

After discussing the project with him, as he wanted to hear it in my own words as well, we discussed what the first step would be. After bringing in a few cape experts, it was decided that our first task would be to enhance a group of volunteer soldiers, about fifty of them, with the permanent geomantic magic I had offered. These men were the first batch of soldiers brought in on the project, and according to Kinsey, they served a dual purpose. First, they were a litmus test for the project's future, both in terms of the level of enhancements and equipment I could provide and the safety of those efforts.

They seemed to expect and even accept that there was some level of danger involved with my work, and that some harm was unavoidable. As long as it didn't hurt too many of the soldiers, they wouldn't complain. They also clearly didn't expect my level of work, expecting to see a tinker constrained by the same rules as the rest.

The smaller group of soldiers would also make it easier for the group to train and get used to their new abilities. They could then teach what they learned to any new soldiers we inducted. There were plenty of "if" scattered throughout everything that Kinsey explained, with many of the people expecting me to fail in some way. To say I was looking forward to proving them wrong was an understatement.

When we agreed that the geomantic enhancements would be first, I debated internally for a while whether I should give them the infused versions of the process. After some thought, I eventually decided to stick to the basic metals. I hadn't given that level to New Wave, as I didn't have the ability to make the infused metals at that point, and they were more than fine with their enhancements. On top of that, I was already going to be running through a lot of material to enhance the larger groups of soldiers already, having to increase that even more because I needed to infuse the metals as well as was too much. The materials might be free, but that didn't mean they didn't take time to convert.

Once the first step was settled on, I went to the hangar that they had given to me as a workshop and got to work making a permanent geomantic partional. The process was relatively easy, even if it was the expanded, more detailed version that was required to allow the permanent process to be done en masse. When that was done, I shook hands with Richard Kinsey and went back home. The following day, I returned in the afternoon with golems laden with the required metals.

While the PRT had volunteered to source all of the materials I needed, that would take time. It would be useful for a lot of things, like when I need boots for the entire army, but for pure metals, I already had the alchemy stations and scrap ready and waiting to be used. Kinsey was surprised that I was ready to enhance the volunteer soldiers, who had only just arrived. Still, the promise of stable, enhanced soldiers was enough to put any complaints of rushing to bed, and within an hour of my arrival, all fifty of the soldiers were lined up at parade rest inside the hangar.

I was unwilling to throw the soldiers into a process they didn't understand, so I spent a few minutes describing the effects and the process, as well as considerably longer answering their questions. Quite a few of them asked about how strange my tinkering looked, to which I could only shrug.

"As far as I can tell, all tinker creations are bullshit, and may as well be magic," I pointed out. "At least mine is honest and running with a consistent theme."

That got a chuckle out of a few of the volunteers, and I continued to answer questions until there were none left. After that, they entered the geomantic partional in groups of ten, standing at the center of the large ritualistic carving done in the smoothed-over concrete. This

was pushing the ritual to its maximum, but I couldn't afford to hold back from such large groups, especially since a group of fifty would hopefully be the smallest addition made to the anti-Endbringer army.

I ran the process five times, and when I was done, all fifty soldiers had been properly enhanced. After the last of their compatriots were finished, the soldiers carefully made their way outside, moving to a large nearby field. There they could run, jump, and tumble until they had a better grip on their new levels of strength and speed, without breaking anything sensitive. There was also a large outdoor gym set up, which they used to measure the soldier's new strengths. They were also having the soldiers run along the tarmac of the airfield, timing them to compare against their previous recorded speeds.

Watching fifty men stumble, tumble, and roll around as they worked to get used to their strength was funny, and as they improved, I could see the various government workers looking more and more impressed. I couldn't help but be a bit smug about the level of success, especially since I could practically feel all the doubt they were carrying about the project.

"You were correct," Richard Kinsey said, watching his new soldiers practice. "They would easily be rated as brute fives, as well as movers three or four. An impressive achievement, especially since it's permanent and doesn't need maintenance, according to you."

"According to evidence," I corrected with a smirk. "There are several people in Brocton Bay other than myself who have had this enhancement for a few weeks. So far, there are no recorded issues, nor a need for maintenance."

While the first fifty soldiers continued to train and get used to their new abilities, I had a meeting with several PRT power analysts. With their help, we established what sort of equipment I should be focusing on, besides the annihilation rifles. The final list was rather daunting, consisting of a long list of equipment that would take several week's worth of work at least to build. It would be worth it, though, as when it was done, each of the soldiers would be on par with a high B-tier cape, maybe even low A-tier, especially considering the wide variety I could put in their hands. That was an unprecedented level of power for someone to be handing out, especially considering the plan was to create a group of *thousands*.

With a list of equipment finalized, my first project was recreating the boots I had made for the demonstration, since they were apparently a pretty good idea. Being surefooted on a battlefield was incredibly handy, and the ability to walk up walls and even on the ceiling would make traversing broken urban terrain, things like damaged or collapsed buildings, significantly easier. Being able to engage a burst of speed was just icing on the cake.

Thankfully, with a base design already completed, all I needed to do was shift a few things around, add in what I had learned since then, and tie it all together for a final product I could mass-produce. This took the rest of the day, unfortunately, but the following morning, I was ready to actually produce the boots. Thankfully, the PRT had plenty of boots on hand for their normal officers, meaning by the time I was set up and ready, there were several boxes of boots ready and waiting for me at the military base.

Of course, the process for making the boots was not *nearly* as fast as applying the geomantic enhancement was. The rituals required could only be performed in batches of seven, and the enchantments had to be performed one by one. Thankfully, applying already designed enchantments was pretty easy, but it was still another time sink. Altogether, making seven boots took two hours, meaning making all fifty was a fourteen-hour-long process.

I was tempted to pull an all-nighter to get it done, but I knew that this was a marathon, not a sprint, and I needed to pace myself. Working until I crashed out would likely waste more time if I took time to maintain my sanity, and I couldn't afford to waste time pushing my limits until they broke. We had just over two months before the next Endbringer attack was scheduled, and I wasn't even close to confident I would have enough time to do everything that I wanted.

Despite my own anxiety concerning how long I took, delivering fifty completed boots to the military base was met with shock. Being able to hand out a brute and mover rating once to a group of people had been shocking, but not so much that it had broken people's perceptions of me. To them, I was still just a weird, exotic tinker, and powerful tinkers were known to do crazy, powerful things. But to do them repeatedly, on demand, and on this scale, that was unheard of.

That shock became disbelief, and then awe, when I created the next piece of equipment, and then another. By the ninth day of my cycle, the soldiers had been enhanced, had boots of sure footing, had leather vests that gave them the same protective barrier I had, though they lacked the ability to project a shield bubble, as well as glasses that kept their sight clear, and gloves that could hold a decent amount of healing energy. The liberal use of orichalcum meant these pieces of equipment were frequently hitting power levels I had struggled to reach before, making me think it was high time I updated my own equipment. Thankfully, I wouldn't have to remake much, since I could just work in the new metal with secondary rituals.

Despite the approaching deadline, I didn't just work on the piles and piles of equipment, I also spent some time in Brockton Bay, both working on my own projects and taking time to unwind. Thankfully, I didn't have to worry about Brockton Bay being compromised while I was busy, as the spirit guardians had it under control.

This was proven without a doubt a few days into my work with the PRT. I returned home after dropping off another batch of equipment, only for Crow and me to find Piper and Smokey waiting for us.

Apparently, news that I was working with the government had leaked on some level, as the Elite had tried to set up shop in town while I was busy. They had attempted to strong-arm a business into signing over their space, as it was in a prime location for whatever project they wanted to move into town. What they hadn't predicted, however, was the confidence the people they tried to threaten had in the guardians, as they completely ignored the Elite's threats and called in the issue immediately.

Within three hours of the small group of villains attempting to push their way into the city, the guardians had found where they were hiding and arrested them, dropping them off with the PRT. How effective their arrest would be was up for debate, as it was well known that the Elite

had some rather potent jail breakers, and that was only after their high-paid lawyers failed to negotiate a deal.

Still, the fact that they completely handled the situation, from start to finish, without needing my input made me much more confident in focusing on my work. Part of me would have at least liked to have been notified that something was going on, but I couldn't exactly blame them. They were independent sentient constructs, and while I had made them, I hadn't exactly handled their upbringing in the best way.

I was honestly just happy they didn't actively dislike me.

People were definitely starting to notice their effectiveness, too, as I was getting some requests to make more for more cities, though nothing official yet. It was definitely on my list of things to do, but making spirit guardians was a long process, as was making the metal golems that backed them up.

The bottom line was, I just didn't have enough time, not without burning my bed and forgetting what sleep was entirely. Still, it was clear that news of my deeds and creations was spreading past Brockton Bay, working its way into other cities. The Bay had gone from the Cape to the capital of the world to completely villain-free, with even Uber and Leet reportedly making a run for it after we killed the Slaughterhouse Nine.

I did not envy whoever had to deal with their mess when they settled back down.