

Lady Photon spent about fifteen minutes explaining their fight with the two members of the Slaughterhouse Nine. It was impressive to hear, the experienced hero family overwhelming the dangerous capes shockingly easily. It was also surprising to learn that Weaver had been with them from the beginning, assisting them in their fight. I had assumed they picked her up after the attack.

Just another reason that Weaver would likely do better as a permanent part of their team.

"It was at that point that Panacea leaped out from on top of the porch roof," Lady Photon described, sounding a bit shocked, as if she had forgotten it had happened. "She landed on Crawler's back-"

"Panacea participated in the fight directly?" Director Piggot asked, sounding surprised.

"Not at our direction, we intended her to stay inside. Though to be fair, that is largely due to habit at this point," the cape mom admitted. "With the enhancements and tinker tech that Arcanum gave her, she is more than capable of acting in the field."

"I see," Director Piggot responded. "Please continue."

"Thank you. Once Panacea was able to make direct contact with Crawler's body, she used her ability to stun him," Lady Photon explained. "That allowed us to find out where exactly we could hit him to actually hurt him. As we hit him with everything we got, we discovered his weak point, a sort of core. Glory Girl managed to hit this core hard enough to destroy it, and Crawler died."

As I listened to Lady Photon, I internally frowned. I got the feeling that the leader of New Wave was being intentionally vague. I stayed silent as she talked, because why would I rat an ally out to someone who barely counted as the same? At least comparatively.

"What made you think to look for a core?" the director asked, stiffly taking notes on a pad of paper.

"We didn't go looking for it," She explained. "We targeted it because reports said that Hookwolf had one in his body as well, which was what protected him when he changed. We figured it must be important."

The pause after Lady Photon's explanation went in just a tad too long, which told me that Piggot either knew or suspected Lady Photon was obfuscating the truth, at least slightly. The larger, heavily injured woman said nothing, but glanced at Armsmaster, who continued to sit there stoically.

After a long moment, the PRT leader eventually nodded, seeming satisfied for the moment. With Lady Photon done telling New Wave's side of the story, Piggot moved on to asking questions. She wasn't quite trying to poke holes in Lady Photon's story, but she certainly

wasn't holding back. Eventually, after over a dozen pointed questions, she switched her focus to me.

"So, that brings us to you, Arcanum. Reports say you fought the Siberian before she ran, and directed my people to pick up a male corpse from a van nearby," she stated, reading from a paper. "This, rather shockingly, turned out to be cape expert William Manton, who has been missing presumed dead for quite some time. Scans show he was a parahuman. So. What the hell happened?"

"Well, first, I was able to fight the Siberian because my annihilation tech, like the wand I showed you during our last meeting, was a hard counter to it," I explained. "I would hit it with the latest version, and it would pop like a bubble."

"A bubble?" She asked incredulously. "That's... kind of ridiculous, even for you, Arcanum."

"Normally, I would agree, but there is a bit of information you don't realize," I assured her. "The wasn't real, the Siberian was a projection. An interesting expression of an all-or-nothing class of power. It's why nothing worked to hurt her."

That statement caught the Director off guard, as well as her two bodyguards. After a moment, she seemed to put two and two together, thankfully reaching four.

"And that would mean that William Manton was the cape creating the projection," the director said, finishing my reveal for me.

"Correct. The truth is, the Siberian was too much for me, even with my enhancements and equipment," I admitted, shaking my head. "It was overwhelming me slowly but surely, picking me apart, I was barely keeping up, healing what it would break, with just enough time to pop it before it killed me. As we fought, an ally spotted the van you likely found Manton inside."

"How did you connect the two together?"

"My ally noticed that every time I would pop Siberian, the man in the van would flinch," I explained. "We were in the process of deciding what to do with the information when the Siberian finally managed to catch me, and was preparing to tear my arm off. My ally saw this and took immediate action, and it turns out we were right. A single bolt of lightning later, and the Siberian was gone. As for who he was, I had no idea."

Of course, the Director was not immediately satisfied with this answer. She followed up with a barrage of questions, ranging from how I did not know who William Manton was to repeated requests to reveal my ally, which I did not. They would probably assume it was Crow, but I was still determined to hold on to Alya's existence for as long as I could. The people who mattered knew who she was, and it would remain that way until revealing her was necessary.

Eventually, we moved on to talking about the final confrontation with Jack and Bonesaw. Piggot almost had a stroke when we revealed Bonesaw had attempted to unleash at least one of her backup horrors, which was fair, as I had nearly freaked out in the moment. She asked

several probing questions about just how gone they actually were, but seemed satisfied that my annihilation spell had truly eliminated them and everything they could have unleashed.

She almost had another stroke when I pointed out that Jack Slash might have left something around the city, and while explaining that we had done a pretty thorough search, she still called in an emergency to WATCHDOG, the PRTs thinker think tank. Within ten minutes, she had a report stating that the city was clean. When she finished going over that report with a fine-tooth comb, we finally continued and eventually finished the debriefing. When she was done asking questions, Director Piggot quickly switched gears.

"We need to release a statement," she explained, gathering her folders and papers, sliding them to the side. "We have a very short window to reveal the right details and correct information. Regardless of whether you wish to participate, the PRT has already scheduled a press conference to reveal the information. However, I would suggest at least being present."

I winced and leaned back in my chair. I had very deliberately not interfered or engaged with the public perception of myself and what we had been working on. I was perfectly aware of how fickle the public could be, so rather than engage and allow myself to be swayed by public opinion, I removed myself and simply did my best to do my best. Besides, I had enough of social media depression from my previous life, I didn't need any more of that this time around.

"I also suggest that you at least say a few words in particular, Arcanum," Piggot continued, only making it worse. "So far, you have been generally elusive to the general population. Many people know what you look like, and some footage of your work has begun trickling into forums, but this is an opportunity to tie your words to your presence."

"How long do we have to prepare?" Lady Photon asked, noting that I was remaining quiet.

"Two hours," the director responded. "That was as long as we were willing to take. Reporters have already started showing up at our announcement room."

"Alright. I will be there," I agreed.

"New Wave will be there as well," Lady Photon agreed.

"Good," Piggot said.

For a moment, the injured woman was silent, letting out a long breath, wincing as it pulled at her wounds. After a moment, she continued, looking at both Lady Photon and me.

"If I might be candid, this news will send shockwaves through the country and beyond. The destruction of the Slaughterhouse Nine is definitively good news, something that is unfortunately rare these days," She said, shaking her head. "A lot of people will sleep easier knowing those bastards are dead, and a lot of victims will finally be able to move on. It sounds cold and calculating, but this sort of thing is something we need to take advantage of. People are desperate for good news, and being able to give it to them can change everything."

"So take this seriously?" I asked.

"Exactly. This is not some casual speech. What you say could very well change someone's life," she explained. "We can go over the basics, you can come up with something, just a few words will do, then our people can take a look at it to make sure everything is fine. PR may not be something you are interested in, but don't underestimate the power of good news and the knowledge that people are working to stop the bad guys."

The conversation shifted to some of the things we should avoid mentioning before Director Piggot, Miss Militia, and Armsmaster left the room, leaving Piper, Lady Photon, and myself alone. Thankfully, Lady Photon already had some experience writing and giving speeches, and she was able to provide me with some tips and help me write what I was going to say.

To be honest, I wasn't overly concerned. I never really struggled standing up in front of crowds, though I held no delusions that this would be the same as getting up on stage in high school for a school project, or giving a presentation to coworkers. Still, I was confident I could handle it.

The two hours passed pretty quickly, and by the end, we had everything set and ready. Most of New Wave had joined us at this point, save Shielder, who strongly disliked press conferences and preferred to stay home. Crow had joined us, and while she wasn't ecstatic about being put on display, she was too loyal to leave me by myself, even after I assured her I would be okay. Smokey had arrived as well to support Piper and me.

Time seemed to pick up quickly, and in what felt like moments, we went from sitting around a meeting room, discussing what was going to happen, to suddenly being in the middle of it. Director Piggot, injured as she was, did not give the introduction speech or the reveal. Instead, that was done by Deputy Director Renick, who started off by apologizing for her absence, explaining that she was seriously wounded in the line of duty, but was set to make a full recovery in time.

The Deputy Director gave a rather nice speech, clearly understanding the game. He first announced the Slaughterhouse Nine had arrived in Brockton Bay, drawn by the unprecedented time of peace that the city was enjoying. He explained that they split off to directly target New Wave, myself, and other independent heroes.

By the time he explained that they had failed to kill or even seriously harm any of us, you could have heard a pin drop.

When he announced that, as of earlier this morning, all official members of the Slaughterhouse Nine were declared officially deceased, and that any potential dangers that stemmed from them were contained and eliminated, it felt like all the oxygen had been sucked out of the room, only for it to explode back in as the cameras flashed, reporters shouted questions, and people demanded answers.

It took a moment for Deputy Director Renick to regain control of the space, but eventually, he began to give a vague outline of what happened, mentioning the attack on New Wave, the attack on the homeless community, and their attempt to attack my home. He did not give out many details, but confirmed repeatedly that their deaths had been confirmed officially.

Eventually, he passed it off to Lady Photon, who took the podium with a practiced calm. She confirmed that all members of New Wave were unharmed, expanded slightly on the fight, and assured everyone that New Wave was more dedicated than ever to protect Brockton Bay. She also explained that their victory was, in part, born from the false assumption that a parahuman with the ability to affect normal metal would be able to affect the golems and guardians that protected the city, which was emphatically wrong. She happily explained that my creations that had made a large part of this unprecedented victory possible, before passing the proverbial baton to me.

I took the stand and, for a moment, looked over the crowd, letting everyone settle in and get their pictures. Once everyone seemed to calm down, I began to speak. I briefly described my fight with the Siberian, revealing that it had been a projection all this time, before moving on to describe the final confrontation with Jack and Bonesaw. After a long pause, taking a moment to look back at my team and at the crowd, I continued.

"Just yesterday, there were few things more feared in this country than the idea that your home might be visited by the Slaughterhouse Nine. For quite some time, their shadow spread from one side of the country to the other, tearing through homes and ruining lives. That my team, my allies, and I could be part of where that reign of terror ended is something I will always hold close to my heart."

I paused, eyes passing over cameras and reporters, looking out at the people who I knew were watching, while trying not to imagine just how many of them there likely were.

"This victory, however, goes beyond just this moment. It goes beyond today, and tomorrow. Let this victory show that this sort of evil does not go unpunished. That no villain is infallible, and that no threat cannot be stopped with the right people working together. Because that is what made this possible. None of us could have done this alone. I did not win alone, New Wave did not win alone, and Piper, guardian of the city, did not win alone. We supported each other, made each other stronger, and fought side by side. Most importantly, together, this will not be our last victory."

I stepped back, allowing Deputy Director to take the stand, closing the speech section quickly, before we shifted to answering questions. A table was brought out, and most of the people left the stage, leaving Lady Photon, Flashbang, the Deputy Director, Armsmaster, Miss Militia, and myself on stage.

Once we were settled, Deputy Director Renick leaned forward to speak into his microphone.

"Alright, let's keep these questions focused on the topic at hand," He said, looking at the reporters with a serviceable stern face. "I know this is a first for Arcanum, but please respect what this press release is about. We will now start taking questions."