

Despite now sharing the forest compound with another permanent resident, my morning rituals did not change that much. We had a quick breakfast, and I cleaned up for the day. When I tagged Olivia in for her turn to use the shower, she revealed she planned to take the day off and move in properly. Honestly, I couldn't blame her, as it was only my sense of duty that was forcing me to be active for the day. I had some business to take care of, on top of checking in with the hospital to do some healing.

When I arrived at the hospital, walking through its familiar halls, it was impossible not to notice the shifting change. People who had previously grown used to seeing me around, getting comfortable despite my get-up and ability to casually break the laws of physics, now stood back, looking at me with awe.

And maybe just a little fear.

It was understandable, in a way. After all, I had essentially killed the country's boogeyman, the horrifyingly real monsters that sent shivers down people's spines, the group people didn't even like talking about, lest they draw their attention.

Only a few of the older nurses and doctors, the ones who had seen it all and were too broken by the reality of their jobs to care, treated me the same. They never bothered with walking on eggshells in the first place, something I greatly appreciated. Part of me was beginning to regret opening up my identity, as I could now see the charm of being able to disappear for a while, but honestly, it wasn't a big deal. Besides, if I actually needed a break from being Arcanum, I could make something to disguise my identity. How difficult could it be to build my own version of the Mask of Many Faces?

When I was done healing and dealing with the hospital, it was time for the second reason for leaving the forest compound. I needed to have a conversation with New Wave, and then with Weaver. The young cape deserved to be part of a cape team that could actually be there for her, and despite Crow doing marginally better than I had, it was clear she should be with New Wave. I didn't regret inviting her to join in the first place, as something told me she wouldn't have accepted the offer to join New Wave right off the bat, but now that needed to change.

I stopped by Sarah Pelham's house, accidentally interrupting their breakfast, though only the two adults were home. Thankfully, they were more than gracious about it and invited me in for coffee rather than asking me to come by later.

"So, what's the problem?" Sarah asked, the woman looking remarkably put together despite only having recently woken up. "It's a bit early for just a social call."

"Right, sorry, I'll get right to it. How would you feel about Weaver officially joining New Wave?" I asked, my question causing Lady Photon to pause her spreading of cream cheese on a bagel.

"That... Well, I don't see anything blatantly wrong with the idea," She said, considering for a moment before nodding. "The kids all get along with her, and I think she and Eric are developing a bit of a mutual crush. Why?"

"Honestly, it's pretty much just that," I responded with a frown, shaking my head. "She joined my team so that I could mentor her, and I should be more around, at least enough to notice something like a developing crush. What I'm working on is important, but it's not fair to Taylor if I leave her to basically fend for herself. Crow is trying, but by her own words, she isn't much of a kid person."

Both Sarah and Neil were listening, the latter nodding in agreement. I have a feeling he would have said something, but his mouth was full of his breakfast.

"I can't do both, and while you guys have kids to worry about... I feel like you're still a better match," I added, taking a sip of my coffee. "Even better, you have more eyes, people her age, and more experience with young heroes than my team does. I'm obviously here if you need help or if she needs something important, but..."

"... I can't say I disagree with any of that. I think you're selling yourself just a bit short, but you are understandably busy," Sarah said, finally nodding. "As I said, Weaver joining New Wave would be fine, though she would have to deal with being the odd one out, as she is the only one with a separate cape identity."

"It's not ideal, I know, but it's better than what I was giving her," I said with a frown. "If the mask becomes a problem, I can come up with something to let her take it off and still have a civilian identity."

"Fine... though, discussing it is one thing. Getting her to agree is another."

"I'm hoping that with how much time she is spending with everyone, she won't be as nervous about joining you as she was originally," I said. "She trusted me because I helped her with her issues before, though not nearly to the degree I think that she ascribes. I'm hoping the friendships and trust she has built so far will be enough."

"Do you want me to ask her?" Sarah asked, but I shook my head.

"No, I'm not passing the buck," I said. "I think I can handle it."

She nodded, and after a moment, went back to having her breakfast. I hung around long enough to quickly drink my coffee before leaving them to their morning. After that, it was off to the Hebert House.

This time I called ahead.

Rather than walk up to their front door, I had Ava scan around for anyone watching before teleporting into their backyard, as we had done a few times before. Danny was waiting for me on the back porch, which was more like a set of steps, letting me into the house with a nod.

"So... what's going on?" He asked as we made our way to the dining room, where Taylor was sitting, fidgeting nervously.

"Well, honestly, I'm here to apologize," I said with a frown, taking a seat across from Taylor as her father sat down beside her. "Taylor, when I accepted you into my team, I should have been mentoring you, teaching you the ropes, and helping you adjust. Instead, I've been too busy burying my nose in my other work. It's important enough that I can't really apologize for needing to do it, but I should have seen the problem coming."

"Oh... well, it's okay," She said, calming slightly, though she seemed a bit confused. "New Wave has been helping a lot. Mrs Pelham knows a lot, and Vicky has been helping me learn to control my strength."

"Yes, they have been a great help," I agreed, leaning forward slightly. "Taylor, how would you feel about shifting over to New Wave officially, working with them directly?"

"W-what?" She asked, her eyes widening a bit. "I..."

"To be clear, this is *not* about something you did," I assured her. "I would like nothing more than to have the time to mentor you properly, and to work with you on things like patrols. But unfortunately, the work I'm doing is too important, I can't just push it off. At least not consistently."

"What are you working on that is so important?" Danjy asked, clearly miffed at the implication that something could be more important than his daughter.

"... This is something that needs to stay quiet for now, but now that Brockton Bay is stabilized, I'm shifting my focus to larger targets," I explained. "Specifically Endbringers."

"Oh..." Danny responded, his annoyance shattered in an instant, his words tangled in his head. "I..."

"I... didn't realize you were working on something like that," Taylor said, looking down at her hands before turning her attention back to me. "I appreciate you being honest, and I don't blame you for focusing on something that important... Can I ask why you didn't just suggest I join them in the first place?"

"Well, for one, you asked to join my team after potentially saving my life, definitely from serious bodily harm. I have many foibles, but passing responsibilities is not usually one of them," I pointed out. "And I honestly thought I had a lot to offer you, which I did, it was just in the form of enhancements and gear. On top of that, I didn't think about what my schedule would look like. It was a mistake on my part, not on yours."

Taylor was silent as I talked, and when I was done, she remained quiet, chewing the inside of her lip as she considered my words.

"... While I'm not exactly happy about being shuffled around... I would be lying if I said I haven't enjoyed working with New Wave," She admitted. "They have been very understanding

and supportive. And I've been getting along with all of them, though Crystal is pretty busy with College."

Seeing her smile at the mention of the younger members was a good sign, and convinced me that I was making the right choice, finally quieting the few whispers that had been floating in the back of my mind.

"What about her secret identity?" Danny asked with a frown. "Would she have to unmask to join?"

"No. New Wave still believes in accountability, but their stance on masks has shifted," I said with a wince. "Though, Taylor would still be the odd man out. If need be, I can make something that will allow her to take off her mask and at least pretend to be public."

Internally, I couldn't help but wonder if Carol Dallon would have been as willing to allow someone in a mask to join New Wave. To me, while the group still believed in accountability, they no longer pushed transparency to the point of putting people in danger. Then again, most of my experience with the hero group was *after* Carol had been banished from the team, so my perception of them might have been slightly skewed.

After a moment of silent thinking, Danny nodded and seemed to come to his own conclusion.

"If she can keep her mask, then any complaint I have is withdrawn," Danny said. "From what she says, they have been helping her a lot, and she seems happy with them."

I nodded and looked back at Taylor, who was now studying me with a slightly worried look. I wasn't exactly sure why until she started talking.

"You're not going to become a hermit, are you?" She asked with a frown. "With most trouble stamped out, are you going to come into the city?"

"Well, I still have several responsibilities like working at the hospitals and maintaining the orchard for the Docks community," I explained, giving her a smile, touched that she had been concerned in such a way. "I also plan on using Brockton Bay as a test bed for several ideas. I'm not going to vanish into the woods. Besides, Crow just moved into the forest with me, and I have others already there as well. I'm not going to become a hermit."

"Then... yes, I'll transfer over to New Wave," she said with a nod. "Assuming they will have me."

"Sarah was happy to have you join them when I asked before coming here," I assured her. "She looks forward to working with you... Though at this point, you've already been working with her a lot."

The conversation shifted to some of the logistics of the transfer, though it wasn't like there was anything too official. The PRT would need to be informed since New Wave was a recognized hero team, but the rest was between the team and Taylor. After a few minutes, it

was about time for me to leave, but before I could excuse myself, Danny had one last thing to say.

"I wanted to thank you for the tools you've given Taylor, and even New Wave," he said, fixing me with a serious look. "I... Had no idea what was going on for most of what happened with the Nine, but once Taylor had the chance to fill me in... knowing that she had your tools made it easier to bear. Thank you for helping protect her."

"Of course," I said with a nod. "Your daughter is determined to be a hero, and that sort of thinking should be fostered and strengthened whenever it can. It's part of why I think she will thrive with New Wave."

He nodded, and we shook hands before Taylor walked me out to the back porch. Once we were alone, she surprised me by grabbing me in an awkward, but heartfelt hug.

"I should thank you too," She said, pulling back quickly with a nervous smile. "You helped when no one else would, and the fact that you are trying so hard to get me the support I need... Thank you."

"Happy to help," I confirmed with a nod. "I'll still be seeing you around, I'm sure, Taylor. If you ever need anything, you know how to reach me."

She nodded, and I stepped down off the back porch, giving her a small wave while Alya checked the area for anyone watching. When she gave me the all clear, I teleported away, landing back in the forest.

As I stepped off the ritual platform, my mind turned back to the three charges sitting and waiting for me to invest, earned by killing the Slaughterhouse Nine. I had been so intensely distracted by the danger and the fighting that I had barely noticed the quest being started, or the charges being filled, but there they were, waiting for me.

Part of me wanted to immediately throw all three charges at alchemy, as even just the first two levels had been a complete game-changer. It was definitely a vast subject, which meant it would take a lot to perfect the entire branch, but as I could already see the potential, I was eager to see what its higher levels could do. The ability to infuse metal had synergized extremely well with geomancy, as well as the golems and spiritual guardians, all three of which were essential parts of what I was doing.

Despite the temptation, though, I did hold back from investing the charges. I *still* wasn't sure how the "random" subject I got every cycle worked. If I invested in Alchemy, would it not keep stacking? Druidcraft had gotten to level three before it changed, so was that the limit? It was better to just wait and see.

It was only four days after all until the cycle was over, and I got more points to spend and could see what the random subject did for myself. Not to mention that I could always just invest in alchemy myself later if the random subject decided to switch to some new concept. If it did, I

wouldn't be too upset, as it was honestly a great way for me to expand my horizons, without wasting my charges, or even my time trying to invent weird or crazy concepts to invest in.

I made my way to the fire pit, hanging up my coat and leaning my staff against the storage tree as I went. The fire was already going, most likely for Olivia, who at the moment was not there.

I dropped down into one of the chairs with a huff, and before I could do anything, a cup of hot chocolate appeared beside me. Even as my brain rolled over the problem of what I should do for the next cycle, I picked up the ceramic mug. After taking a moment to appreciate its warmth, I took a long sip of wonderful chocolatey goodness.

"Thank you, Kali, you're amazing," I said, smiling as I could feel her presence reach out and brush against mine.

I took a deep breath and settled into the chair, letting out a long sigh. After a moment, I decided that I could at least take a break until I finished my drink. Then it was back to work.