

As I stood there in silence, my mind stuck like a jammed clutch of gears, grinding and twisting against each other. Eventually, Alya blew a cold breeze over my face, breaking me out of my stupor.

"That... was interesting," I said as the distant young hero finally disappeared, dipping below the tops of a faraway building. "Not to mention just about the last thing I expected to happen today..."

"I did not know humans could talk that long without breathing," Alya said, whispering into my ear as usual.

"Be nice. She is obviously dealing with some really serious stuff," I gently reprimanded with a frown. "I would have offered my number, but I wasn't sure how she would take that. I'm more than ten years older than her."

"I'm sure you'll hear about it eventually," She commented. "The drawbacks of living in the open. They are celebrities."

"Yeah... I'm starting to reconsider my cavalier attitude to my identity," I said, shaking my head after a moment. "Alright. Let's go get my civies, then go home before anything else weird happens."

It took twenty-five minutes to walk back to my clothes and another fifteen to change and make it back to the shop. Despite me tempting Murphy, I made it all the way back without anything strange happening. However, when I was literally fifteen feet away from my secret entrance, my phone rang. I quickly picked it up and answered, looking around to see if anyone had heard the ringtone.

"Hello?"

"Arcanum! It's Tony," A familiar voice said on the other side. "How's life treating you? You reach out to the PRT?"

"Life's going, Tony, not much more it can do but that," I responded, chewing on my lip as I tried to open the entrance to my temporary home with one hand and failed. "Give me a second."

I placed the phone along the window sill before finagling the plywood barrier open. I slid into the shop with a practiced ease, grabbing my phone and re-inserting the barrier once I was inside. While I was doing this, I was contemplating how much I should tell Tony about what had happened in the PRT, or how much I should tell anyone. They had clearly lied and tried to take advantage of the situation, and the only reason I found out was the ever-present weakness of bureaucracy, specifically the lack of communication. If I was so inclined, I had every right to plaster it on the front page.

But I really couldn't afford to make enemies, especially not government-backed ones. It also wasn't a big enough story to serve as blackmail, not that I would seriously consider doing that anyway.

"Hey Tony, I'm back. Sorry about that," I responded after putting the phone back to my ear. "I did make it to the PRT for the whole dog and pony show. With any luck, I should be accredited soon."

"Well, that's good, I supposed," He responded, not trying to hide the fact that he clearly didn't understand why I cared so much. "Anyway, I got word back from one of my pals. He said he would act as our in to a large group in the Docks. I know this group. I've dropped off blankets there one bad winter. It's nearly double the size of John's place, set up in a couple old warehouses just on the edge of the area."

"When can we expect?"

"Lots of rough guys on the bad end of their luck," Tony explained. "It's a rougher place to live, especially homeless, so it doesn't have the variety that John's place had. Lots of homeless dock workers, old guys, grizzled and broken. Plenty of veterans, too."

"Alright, that's fine. You know I can handle myself for normal people," I responded. "What about gangs? Are we gonna be stepping on anyone's toes?"

"Kind of, but not really," Tony said, quickly continuing. "Technically, ABB owns that area, but they don't really defend it because it's trash. You're more likely to run into Merchants, though they hardly count as a real gang."

"Alright, as long as we don't step on anyone's toes and cause trouble for the people we are trying to help, I'm happy to go," I agreed. "When is the meeting?"

"Tomorrow, ten in the morning," He responded, cutting me off before I could ask my question. "I know it's weird, but my pal said it will make keeping an eye on you easier. Plus, they don't have any real reason to hide. Nobody wants the building they are squatting in."

"Alright. Just give me an address and some basic directions, and I will see you tomorrow."

Tony fed me a few general landmarks to help me navigate, as well as the address, just in case. After a few minutes of casual chatting about how the soup kitchen was going, we hung up, and I crashed back on the couch, having spent the last few minutes pacing.

"Well, I guess we know what we are doing tomorrow," I said, watching Alya form up beside me on the couch. "What do you think?"

"I think that helping people makes you happy, and healing people makes them happy, so it is a win-win," She responded with a smile.

"I was referring to the location," I said with a frown. "So far, we have avoided cape conflict by sticking in generally safe places. The Docks are *not* what anyone would call safe."

"I will be keeping watch over you," She responded. "You cannot let fear hold you back."

"It's a very reasonable fear to be scared of someone with superpowers, Alya," I said, shaking my head. "But I get your point."

I settled in for the night, setting up my bed and crashing early. Ten in the morning wasn't nearly early enough in the morning to be worried, but if I went to bed late... Well, I was a bit paranoid, and I wanted to bring my A-game.

The next morning, it took me an hour to walk across the city, find a place to get changed, and finally arrive at the meeting spot. As I was walking through the Docks, it was hard not to let the state of the area get to me. Almost every building was run down, covered in graffiti, and surrounded by trash. Some of the active businesses made an attempt to clean up... but the grime, trash, and desperation was just too deep.

Eventually, I found myself in a pothole-filled parking lot. Along the far side was not one, not two, but three burnt-out cars, abandoned and rusted. I spent about a minute standing around, sitting on the hood of the closest car, when Tony's car pulled in, going slow to keep from blowing a tire or throwing a shock. Rather than parking, however, Tony stepped out of the passenger side door, waved to someone inside before heading to me, the car turning around and leaving. As if sensing my question, he chuckled.

"Cars end up on cinder blocks here quicker than you can turn around," he explained with a morose chuckle. "Better to get dropped off and picked up."

"Fair enough," I responded with a shrug. "Listen, Tony. I know you want to come with me, but I'm fine with you just making the introduction and leaving. I don't-"

"Let me stop you right there," Tony said, shaking his head and cutting me off. "My father might have been a bastard, but he did teach me a few things before my mother kicked his ass out on the curb. One of those things was that you never send someone to do something you aren't willing to do yourself. I know you can handle yourself, but I'm not sending you out here alone, not when I can help keep things calm. I know a lot of these people, and a lot of them know me."

I let out a sighing groan before chewing the edge of my lip. I was silent for a moment before finally making up my mind.

"Tony, I'm going to tell you something, and I don't want you to ask any questions," I said, giving him what I was hoping was a severe look. "If shit starts to go down, and you hear a very close woman's voice telling you where to go or what to do, do your best to listen to her."

He opened his mouth, obviously wanting to ask what I was talking about. Thankfully, he seemed to catch my nonverbal hint before he could say anything. He let out a sigh and nodded.

"Alright, Arcanum, I've been in enough trouble to know the "you better off not knowing" voice," He said, nodding in understanding. "I'll do as you said, as long as I can."

We waited in the parking lot for another ten minutes before, finally, a man stepped out from between two nearby buildings. He was old, maybe late seventies, with a wicked scar along his jaw, with quite a bit of it missing. It was clearly a very old wound, something that could potentially be mitigated by intense plastic surgery.

Or magic.

"Tony," The man said simply, a gruff voice altered by the damage to his mouth. "This them?"

"Yeah, Gregory, this this them," He said. "How you holding up."

"Depends," he said, eyeing me up and down. "On if he is full of shit."

"I could demonstrate?" I suggested, the man's stare intensifying at the offer.

"Will it hurt?"

"No, but you may feel strange phantom sensations, depending on what I'm healing," I explained.

"Fuck... Do it."

I nodded to the man, stepping closer and holding my hands out. First, I cast a diagnostic spell because while I could see his face, there was nothing else I could see. When the scan was done, I had to stifle a gasp.

The man was falling apart.

Their joints were failing, their bones weakening, muscles deteriorating from poor nutrition, along with some pretty serious damage to his liver. He alone blew half of the cases I treated at John's group out of the water.

"This may take a few minutes," I explained, pausing for a moment. "And there will be some of those phantom sensations."

I keep the spells going for nearly fifteen minutes, slowly easing most of his long-term injuries, fixing a lot of damage due to malnutrition and drinking. None of it was gone completely, however. It was way too old to wipe away, especially his facial damage. That said, I did manage to ease his suffering quite a bit, fixing a good amount of internal and external damage. I managed to fix a good portion of his jaw, regrowing and healing some of his teeth, before encouraging some of the skin around the injury to soften and grow. His jaw would likely never look the same, and it was impossible to miss that, at some point, this man had been hurt pretty badly. Now, however, the scaring was much lighter, and the hole in his jaw was gone. It honestly looked like he underwent extensive corrective surgery when it was finally done.

When I was done, the man spent a few minutes getting reacquainted with his body.

"Damn good work," He said before promptly turning around and walking away.

As he left, I turned to Tony with a confused expression.

"He is a man of few words," he explained with a shrug. "Pretty sure we are supposed to follow him."

Looking back, Gregory was already across a street, so we had to rush to catch up, finding the now much more spry man before he could turn a corner and disappear. We followed him for a few more minutes before he finally led us to a pair of warehouses tucked behind a few other buildings. Quite a few people were walking around, sitting on crates and boxes, talking and working. It was like it a miniature community, with people cleaning, tending to the buildings, and more.

We quickly drew a crowd as people spotted Gregory first, spotting that he was healed before looking back at Tony and me. Of course, the old man ignored everyone, leading us inside the smaller of the two warehouses.

The interior of the warehouse was surprisingly orderly, with tents and tarps being used to divide up individual spaces for people to live in. Looking around more, I spotted strings of lights hanging from the ceiling, strung across polls and walkways, lighting up the interior. It was honestly an impressive setup, especially considering the condition of the area outside.

Rather than lead us around to people who were injured as John had done, Gregory seemed eager to foist us on to someone else, apparently finding a younger man, probably just about my age, to pass us off to. The young man was a few inches taller than me, with short brown hair and dark brown eyes, a five o'clock shadow on his face. Gregory quickly said a few quiet words to the new man, before patting his shoulder. Then he left, turning away and leaving without warning. Before we could even thank him, he had slipped back into the crowd,

disappearing in seconds. We watched him go for a moment before the new man chuckled, shaking his head.

"Sorry, Gregory can be... a bit intense when he is anxious," The man said, reaching out to shake my hand. "Names Charles."

I returned his handshake, careful not to break anything, before looking around at the gathering crowd. After giving Tony a glance, I looked back at Charles.

"We were under the impression that Gregory would help us help the people around the camp," I said, the man nodding in understanding.

"I know, don't worry," The man said with a small smile. "He was testing you, apparently. That was him telling me you passed. Congrats."

"Should have known," Tony muttered quietly to himself behind me.

"He looked good," Charles said, pushing past Tony's commentary and giving me a hard look. "You can fix stuff like his face?"

I spent a few minutes giving him the lowdown on just what I could heal, what I could help, and what I could do nothing about. He listened closely, taking in everything I said, before nodding at the end.

"Alright, if what you're saying is true, there are quite a few people here you could help," he said. "Are you willing to travel to people's spaces, or do you need us to bring them to you?"

"Bring me to the people who are struggling or immobile," I said simply. "When we are done with them, we can set up a line for those of able body."

"Sounds like a plan. Lars!"

The shout caught me off guard, but if Charles noticed, he didn't mention it. A guy, probably a few years younger than me, who had been standing off to the side, quickly stood and rushed over.

"I need you to handle this," Charles explained. "I'll be walking around with Arcanum, taking him to people who need help."

"Sure thing, Boss," Lars replied with a serious nod.

Charles nodded and handed the man a clipboard of all things before turning to me and gesturing back the way we came.

"Let's get you started then."