

Having spent the morning and early afternoon running around working on rituals, I was looking forward to doing something different. Don't get me wrong, I was incredibly eager to get started on several projects, not the least of which was my new home. However, I needed to make sure I didn't forget what was important: helping the people of Brockton Bay and my own mental health. Staying sequestered away in the safety of my temporary home would only turn me into a wizard recluse.

Besides, I was quickly approaching brokenness and needed to spend some time not spending large amounts of money on ritual materials. With any luck, my healing would pay enough to keep me afloat. I just needed to wait out the PRT's test.

I left my temporary home, dressed as a civilian, just around four PM. Ayla quickly helped me find a place to change and stash my clothes before I headed out into the city. My staff clunked on the concrete sidewalk as I walked, and while I was doing pretty well ignoring the attention, it was hard not to feel the new stares attracted by the new implement.

I was halfway to my destination when I passed by a small corner hardware store. An idea flashed through my mind, and I smiled. I whispered for Ayla to keep her eyes open before I went inside, waving casually to the cashier as I entered. After perusing the aisles for a few minutes, I finally found what I was looking for, a leather tool belt loop. It was a simple leather strap with a snap button on one side, made for latching miscellaneous tools to your belt. I handed some cash over to a stunned clerk, informing her to keep the change when she didn't respond, before working the belt attachment into my costume. I then used the plant spell to coil my staff up tight, hooking it onto the tool strap securely.

It was a bit bulky, but the majority of my staff was now hidden by my overcoat, restoring my casual, Constantine-inspired look. I would probably end up changing my costume once I had more time to dedicate to improving my equipment, but for now, I was happy.

With my staff secured to my hip, I cast the marathon spell and ran to my destination, a corner store that I knew had a decent produce selection. Once again, I stepped inside with a casual wave to the clerk before I grabbed a bag and filled it with a few oranges, apples, avocados, peaches, and pears. I paid for them in cash, and this time, the clerk was able to recover enough to ring me up and hand me my change. I tossed the coins into a donation box of some kind before heading back into the street.

After a quick check with Ayla, I headed back off, making my way to the first homeless camp I was introduced to. I slid in behind the old abandoned car dealership undetected, Ayla guiding me in without drawing attention to it. Once I was close, it wasn't difficult to get someone to direct me to John, the unofficial leader of the group.

"Arcanum, good to see you," He said, shaking my hand as I got close. "How are you feeling??"

"I feel fine?" I asked, tilting my head in confusion.

"After Shadow Stalker attacked you, we were worried the PRT might do something stupid," He said, shaking his head and looking frustrated. "News traveled pretty fast about it. She's not popular around here, likes to assume all homeless are merchants or criminals."

"Yeah... That doesn't surprise me, though I don't think you'll have to worry about that for long," I admitted, shaking my head. "Still, she was a kid. I hope they can help her with whatever turned her into... that."

"Better man than me," John said with a snort. "So, what are you doing here? Happy for a visit, but there's not many who need healing, and nobody who needs it urgent..."

"I'm not here for healing, though I will help anyone who needs it," I assured him. "I'm here for something else."

I reached into my bag and grabbed an apple, tossing it to the older man. He caught it easily and looked at it before looking back up at me.

"A bag of fruit?" He asked, sounding confused. "Not to be ungrateful, 'cause it's a nice thought, but I don't know if one bag is gonna be enough."

"Oh, I know. These ones aren't for eating anyway," I explained with a cheeky grin below my mask. "How about I patch up anyone who needs it, then I can show you what I mean?"

The grizzled old man didn't seem too happy about being kept waiting, but he couldn't deny "His" people healing, so he nodded and led me further into the camp. There wasn't anything too major, a couple of deep cuts and a pretty bad pulled mulled muscle, but I was happy to help either way. When I was done, I had him lead me to the edge of the community. There, along the outskirts, was a large patch of decent-quality dirt. I handed him the bag of fruit and knelt down on the ground, quickly digging a hole with my hands.

"Toss me an apple," I said, the man passing me one silently.

I quickly buried the apple under about two inches of solid, placing my hands on either side of the now-filled hole.

*"Hanc plantam fortiter crescunt, radices deponunt,"* I intoned, pressing my hand firmly against the dirt.

My magic pushed into my hands, a green circle appearing around each of them. A single line extended from each circle, forming another circle around the hole I had just refilled, six arcane symbols spinning around it. For a moment, my energy sank into the ground before I could finally feel a slight rumble as the seed began to germinate at an extremely accelerated rate. A small sprout appears from the ground, growing and aging fast. After nearly thirty seconds, it was a small sapling, just under a foot tall, with leaf-covered branches.

I knew from my downloaded knowledge that it would have a considerable root system as well.

Over the next twenty minutes, I cast nearly a dozen different spells, some repeatedly, lacing my magic not only through the ground and the soil but the plant and sapling as well. Luckily, this process was almost standard, according to my knowledge, so I was confident in the results. Soon, the tree towered over us, a full-grown apple tree with green leaves hanging from the branches.

I smirked as I stood, turning back to look at John, only to find a good chunk of the community had come by to watch. I couldn't help but rub my neck and gesture back to the tree, turning away from the crowd as John stepped closer.

"So, this guy is gonna grow a lot of fruit pretty quickly. Probably ten or fifteen apples a day once it gets going," I explained. "You don't have to worry about much, I'll have to come visit once every three or four days to tend to it, but between it and the rest of the trees I'm about to grow, you should have a pretty serious supply of fruit."

John seemed to struggle to speak for a long moment, almost thirty seconds. He alternated between looking at me and looking at the slowly growing apple buds along the branches.

"...Arcanum... that was... what the hell was that?" He finally asked, giving me a strange look.

"My power is... weird," I answered with a shrug. "I have a source of energy inside me, and I can use it to do a lot."

"Right... well, thank you," he said. "...How many of these can you grow?"

"Let's find out, shall we?"

We spent the next two hours planting, nurturing, and growing massive fruit trees, all along the side of the community, enough to significantly help keep everyone fed. The magic itself was multi-layered, specifically designed to help the trees grow large amounts of fruit. It was *horrifically* detrimental to the lifespan of the tree, reducing their life span from about a hundred years to maybe five or six. On top of that, if I didn't stop by to regularly support them by refreshing and recasting the spells, the trees would wither and die in only a few days.

There were rituals to fix that, just at the higher levels of my knowledge, but I wasn't about to introduce my rituals to the public, especially with how they reacted to me making the trees in the first place. No, the spells would do for now until I could unlock more levels of druidcraft or come up with some way to introduce my rituals without people clutching their pearls and whispering about Satanism.

Unfortunately, by the time I was done setting up the plants at John's community, it was getting pretty late. The sun had set, and the streets were getting dark, so I decided to go home and get some rest. That meant going back to find my stashed civilian clothes, changing, and then heading back to my temporary home.

The next morning, I woke up early, and I headed out to the second community, the one run by Charles. He greeted me just as friendly as John did, though his smile told me he knew something was going on.

"I admit, news might have reached our ears," He explained after I called him out. "I had to calm down a few people who thought you were skipping us over since you didn't show up yesterday."

"It was getting late, and I didn't know what kind of lighting you guys would have," I explained with a shrug.

"And that's what I told them," He responded, patting my shoulder.

I spent a few minutes healing anyone who needed it before repeating what I had done for the other community, this time on a slightly grander scale. The Docks community was more extensive than John's, so I made them more trees to better keep up with the demand.

When I was finally done, I dusted off my pants and hands, stretching my back and making my way to Charles. Like before, I had garnered a sizable audience during my work. I waved to some people before pulling Charles aside.

"These will produce a good amount of food," I explained. "It's for everyone to enjoy. I plan on stopping by tomorrow to check on them, but in all likelihood, you'll get some fruit before I stop by."

"And is this all safe?" He asked, looking up at the orange tree I planted. "I mean... Arcanum, you realized you just grew a bunch of trees from basically nothing, right?"

"I mean, I grew them from seeds," I pointed out. "Perfectly normal seeds I bought from a store yesterday."

"Honestly, I would be more worried if I hadn't seen you grow them...But I still gotta ask," He pointed out. "Are they all safe?"

"Yes, all of the fruit grown this way is safe," I assured him. "If you would like, I can go through and taste test them all before you start eating them?"

"I mean... It might make everyone feel better about it," he admitted. "Personally, I think I can trust you though."

"Alright, save some for me, and I'll eat them when I come by to check on everything," I said with a shrug. "If it makes people feel better, that's fine."

"You got a lot of trust from coming by to heal us and not making a scene," Charles admitted. "Most aren't gonna wait, but a few are slower to trust than others."

"I understand. Can't exactly blame them either, not with all the crazies out there," I responded, shaking my head. "Well... I'm gonna move on. Gonna go see if I can go find some trouble on patrol."

"Alright, Arcanum. Thank you for all your help."

I shook Charles' hand before leaving the community behind, heading out on the same path I had taken the last time I had visited. I was walking for about five minutes before Alya whispered into my ear.

"Someone is heading your way," She said. "Don't worry, it's not the Undersiders. It's Mary, the woman from John's community."

It took me a second to remember the scarred and bandaged woman, recalling how distrustful she had been. I assumed there was some sort of trauma involved, considering her injuries, so I didn't exactly blame her.

"Is she sneaking around or looking to catch up?"

"Seems like she is trying to catch up," Alya responded. "Not being very quiet. She is trying to intercept you from the side, cutting a few corners."

I nodded and purposely slowed down, letting her easily intercept me as I walked along an empty, mostly abandoned street.

"Healer, zapper, and now a farmer, huh?" She asked as I passed by an alley, the bandaged woman leaning against the wall, waiting for me. "Interesting combination."

"What can I say? I'm multi-talented," I responded. "What can I do for you, Mary?"

"No, no, Mary was last week," She explained, shaking her head. "I'm Sarah now."

"Right. Well, what can I do for you, Sarah?"

She stepped out of the alleyway, approaching me silently before walking around me as she got closer. She was definitely looking me up and down, as if trying to puzzle out just who I was.

"Why would you make the food for everyone?" She asked, stopping once she had walked all the way around me. "You know the PRT are going to be looking at you now?"

I gave her a strange look, confused at her question. Not because of what she was saying, as I was fully aware that this would definitely get the PRT's attention. Rather, it was how she asked. Out of everything she could have asked, that was not the angle I had predicted her going to. It seemed... well informed.

"They are already focusing on me," I explained. "As for why I did it, I wanted to help. Free food to supplement what they can already gather will help make things easier for them."

"Assuming it's not gonna poison them or something," She added. "Or worse."

"It's a hundred percent safe," I explained, resisting the urge to make a joke. "I'm coming by tomorrow to do a check-up, and I'll be eating some of the fruits. You're welcome to come by and watch."

I started to walk again, passing the bandaged young woman. I didn't have a problem chatting with her, but I also wasn't gonna stand around doing nothing while she mistrusted me for a while.

"Sounds like fun," She said sarcastically, her footsteps following after me. "Sooo... what else can you do?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, following a breeze from Alya towards the center of the city.

"Well, you can heal, throw around lightning, and make yourself faster with that running thing you do. You're tougher, and now you can do that plant voodoo," She responded. "Soooo, what else can you do?"

"I make a mean Chicken Parm," I said, shaking my head. "The key is to season the chicken, the dredge, *and* the breadcrumbs for maximum flavor."

"Of course, the world's first Super Chef," She said. "Think that would qualify you as a Tinker?"

"Probably not," I said, unable to stop a smile from ticking up the corners of my mouth.

She chuckled, and for a moment, I thought she was going to ask another question, but Alya whispered into my ear.

"She turned down an alleyway," She responded. "Pretty quietly, too, like she wanted to keep you thinking she was following you more."

"She... She tried to *Batman* me?" I asked incredulously, turning around to see that she was, in fact, long gone. "Dammit... Should have spun around quicker... Maybe I should run and catch up..."

After a few seconds spent contemplating my options, I shook my head and turned back around, letting Alya guide me away from the community and back to the more populated parts of the city.