

I approached the group slowly, not wanting to startle or catch anyone off guard. Part of me half expected John and the others to tell me to fuck off the second they spotted me. I had been the reason they were targeted, after all, and they were well within their rights to want nothing to do with me. So imagine my surprise when John reached out and patted my shoulder when I was finally standing next to him.

"Looks like we are in it now, huh?" He said, shaking his head. "You realize those Empire bastards are going to claim they did nothing wrong and that we attacked them, right?"

"I... I wouldn't be surprised," I responded, caught off guard by the camaraderie and inclusiveness.

"We need to move the community," He said, chewing his cheek. "But even if we do, I'm worried about future reprisals from the Empire."

"We?" I asked, my brain not quite keeping up. "I-"

"Yeah, 'we.'" He responded, looking at me like I was slow. "You healed us, fed us, and when we were threatened, you defended us. You're one of us now, Arcanum."

"But, it's my-"

"No, you get that thought out of your fucking head," He said, slapping my shoulder. "You think this is the first time the Empire gave us trouble? Stopped by to send a message? Son, you ran into a three-on-one fight like a goddamn guardian angel. Nobody has ever run to help us like that or put themselves in harm's way to protect us like that. Nobody blames you for this. You didn't force the Empire to do this."

I looked at the older man for a moment, before scanning the crowd of homeless and less fortunate. They looked back, some with tears in their eyes, others with hard looks that spoke of John's allusions to this not being the first time. Despite the array of emotions being displayed, none of them looked at me accusingly.

"... Okay... I... Thank you," I said, my eyes getting a bit watery behind my mask. "What can I do to help?"

"We need a new place to live," John said with a frown, looking back at the wrecked space behind them. "Now that the police are here in force, and it's a crime scene, they can't just turn a blind eye. They aren't gonna let us stay."

"Dammit... Okay, do we have any options?" I asked. "I can re-grow the trees somewhere else. We just need to find someplace with some halfway decent soil."

"I... not off the top of my head," John admitted. "I've been focused on keeping this place stable."

Before I could respond, one of the nearby members stepped forward, wringing his hands. I recognized him as someone I healed during my first visit.

"I hate to suggest it," He said, looking like he was worried what people would think. "But we could all just split up and spread out. It-"

"We can't do that."

Both John and I turned to find Mary... Sarah, just standing there. She had definitely not been there a second ago, and I cursed Alya's temporary absence. The fact that she had snuck up on all of us was a bit worrying.

"If we split up, we'll just get picked off one by one," She explained. "Sticking together is what kept the Merchants and ABB from snatching us up and the E88 from picking off the usual minorities."

"Being a group attracts too much attention," The man pointed out. "Arcanum can't always be around to protect us."

"Tasha's group split up a few days ago," Sarah revealed, a gasp echoing through the group. "Apparently, they couldn't stand up to the Empire's pressure, and rather than throwing their black people to the dogs, the community is split... Tasha is already dead."

That got another gasp, and I couldn't help but curse. Tony had been trying to find a way to get in touch with that community, but hadn't been having much luck. They must have already split or been too suspicious to respond.

And now it was too late.

"What about the other community I helped? The ones further into the Docks?" I asked. "They have shelter and numbers. What if we combined you guys together? It will make it easier for me to help and keep the Empire off you."

"Charles' place?" John asked. "They are a bit close to ABB territory...But I know a few people there... they would help if they can."

"If the two groups merge, I can... I can come up with some way to make you guys safe," I assured them. "I can't talk about it now, but I can figure something out."

That got me a few odd looks, especially from John and Sarah. Out of everyone, they seemed to pick up on the fact that I did not just mean my own strength or defending them from attacks myself. While I didn't have something specific in mind, I knew I could come up with something. I had ideas, so many ideas, but I had no idea how many of them were bullshit and how many of them would work. I would need some time to come up with something.

I needed to get back to my temporary home, grab my stuff, and head back into the forest. I would put making a home in the forest on hold for now so that I could focus on making sure these people were safe. I'm sure Charles wouldn't mind if I crashed at their place in the meantime. I was nervous to leave them alone anywhere.

Sarah/Mary, John, and I talked and planned for a few more minutes before I pulled out my phone and called Charles. He picked up immediately.

"Arcanum, what can I do for you?"

"We have a problem."

I spent a few minutes describing what had happened, explaining the damage I did, and how Alabaster was dead. While they had heard the news of the attacks and riots going on, they hadn't realized we had been targeted directly. That got the usually calm man to curse up a storm.

"That's bad, but John has the right idea," He assured me. "You are one of us now, as useless as that may seem to be considered part of a group of homeless people."

"It's not useless, I'm honored," I assure him, nodding to John as he listened. "

"If you say so," He responded, though I could hear his smile through the phone. "To answer your earlier question, yes, we can squeeze them in. There is some room in the warehouse, and we have another building we have been clearing out in case we need more room."

"Thank you, Charles," I said, feeling a bit of tension uncoil from my spine. "We will be heading to you soon, and I'll be staying for the rest of the night to watch over you. After that... I'm gonna see about coming up with a way to keep you guys safe while I'm gone."

"Alright. I can't promise it's going to be comfortable living for now, but we will do our best."

We discussed the merge for a few more minutes before I passed the phone to John so he could hash out the details. I then headed back to the nearest police officer I could find, who happily pointed me in the direction of the man in charge.

"How long until they will be able to grab their things?" I asked after introducing myself and shaking the lieutenant's hand.

"Their stuff? This whole place is illegal on so many levels! They are lucky I'm not shipping them all to jail," He said with a frown. "All this stuff is getting chucked. Most of it's stolen anyway, and what's not is all trash and junk."

"What?" I asked, genuinely shocked at his response. "Officer, I understand this isn't exactly optimal, but this is all they have. They need a chance to-"

"They should have thought of that before throwing together this trash heap somewhere they didn't belong," He growled out. "Now I want you and your friends out of here within the next ten minutes, or I will start calling in vans to haul you out."

Resisting the urge to raise my voice and start a scene, I simply gave him a hard star while clenching my fist. Rather than ruin my relationship with the police, I simply turned around

and made my way back to Assault. Dauntless had already left, leaving the red-themed hero and his partner, Battery.

"Hey, Assault," I called out as we approached. "When the police are finished taking statements, I'm going to be leading the group to another homeless community. They think they can help them get back on their feet. The thing is, this place has all their stuff, and now it's a crime scene. Plus, the lieutenant in charge of the scene is being a problem."

"Damn. The statements could take another hour or so... Alright, let me talk to him."

I watched Assault have a quick, low conversation with the officer in question, the man clearly not enjoying the process. It made me wonder what Assault was saying to him. After a few minutes, the officer seemed to calm down, and Assault patted him on the shoulder before making his way back to us. Meanwhile, Battery and I simply stood there in awkward silence.

"He apologizes for the confusion," The red-covered hero assured me, though he clearly didn't believe him any more than I did. "Once the scene is properly recorded, any lost civilian materials will remain on site for several hours before a clean-up team will be coming through."

"Thank you, Assault," I said, genuinely appreciative of the Protectorate hero. "I don't know why he was being so difficult."

"No Problem, just glad they listened to me," He responded with a smile. "Good luck getting these poor folk somewhere safe, and call me if you need anything."

I shook hands with him and his partner again before finally heading back to the others. After that, it was just a matter of waiting for the police to be done interviewing everyone before we could leave. Mary/Sarah agreed to stay behind to watch and make sure the officers didn't get any bright ideas about tossing their stuff. John was the one who explained why they were being so difficult.

"Empire sympathizers," He explained with a scowl. "They are everywhere. Sometimes, they are subtle, and sometimes they don't have to be. Someone clearly doesn't like that you toasted three of their capes."

I couldn't help but grind my teeth at the explanation, cursing whatever fucked up geis or curse that had settled over this city that protected *Nazis* from getting curb stomped.

The trip to the docks community was nerve-racking and stressful, the large group moving relatively quietly through the city. I noticed more than a few people peeling off, leaving the group. I couldn't help but wonder how many of them would be back. I was sure that, despite John's kind words, some people were no longer comfortable living somewhere that I was connected to, and I couldn't blame them.

When we finally reached the warehouses that made up Charles' community, it was slowly approaching midnight. The dark was encroaching closer and closer, and we were traveling by moonlight and street lamps, at least when they weren't shot out or busted. Charles and quite a few others met us at the doors and let us into either the warehouse or a nearby

building, the one he had mentioned over the phone. The oldest among the group got the spare blankets and cushions to sleep on, while the rest of us did the best we could. Everyone was eager to get whatever sleep they could.

Once everyone was settled in, I made my way to one of the roofs, sitting up there and keeping watch. I could use healing magic to reduce some of the effects of sleep deprivation, so I planned to stay up for most of the night. I would probably crash hard at some point, but honestly, I didn't feel like sleeping much anyway.

Things were just starting to get quiet when suddenly, I could feel the connection between me and Alya begin to swell. It was slow at first, but over the span of ten or fifteen minutes, it finally solidified into what I had come to expect from our connection.

"Alya, are you alright?" I asked softly, worry creeping into my voice.

"I am fine, William," She assured me after a long moment, her voice whispering into my ear as always. "I apologize. I was so focused on taking out the gangsters' communication equipment that I used too much energy. I slipped into a resting stasis before I could warn you."

"Dammit... That was... That can't happen again, Alya," I said, struggling to put my thoughts into words. "I know I gave you a task, but you should have been keeping an eye on your energy reserves."

It was unrealistic for me to expect neither of us to make mistakes, especially since all of this was still so new. But her ability to watch an entire area at once and keep trouble from sneaking up on me was a big part of my advantage. Without it, overwhelming me became disturbingly easy.

"I know, I am sorry," She apologized. "It was a mistake born of nervousness and worry. It will not happen again."

"I believe you. And honestly, I'm just glad you are okay," I admitted. "I'm terrified that we will have another power interaction moment like what we had with Shadow Stalker, and somehow, a cape will manage to really hurt you."

"While I suppose it is technically possible, I do not think that is very likely. From what we have managed to see, there is no sign that anyone has the level of magic, particularly soul magic, necessary to injure me permanently," She explained, repeating earlier assurances. "We will simply have to remain vigilant for strange powers."

I nodded in agreement, crossing my arms behind my head and laying back down on the roof. Now that Alya was back, I felt infinitely better about the prospect of sleeping. I hadn't realized how nervous and exposed I felt until she was back.

"How do you feel?" she asked. "While the night could have gone much worse... It did not go well."

"I... I don't know," I responded honestly. "I... don't feel guilty for attacking the Empire head-on or using what tricks I did. They were innocent people in danger, and I put a stop to that. I don't feel guilty... but I do regret killing Alabaster, but only because it was an accident."

"What do you mean?"

"If I came to the conclusion that Alabaster needed to be dead, whether it was for something he did, a plan he had, or whatever reason I thought he deserved a death sentence, I would kill him. Or any of the villains in this city, for that matter," I admitted, frowning as I looked up at the dark night sky. "Half of them are murdering psychopathic *Nazis*, and the others have a reputation for kidnapping people for horrific reasons. But the fact that it was a misunderstood accident or a fluke? I wasn't in control of that moment, and I didn't intend to kill him. I would have if necessary, but I hadn't made that choice. I regret it, even if I don't feel guilty for it."

"While I understand your sentiment, William, you were forced to engage the enemy on their terms. You were flying by the seat of your pants. It only makes sense that mistakes are made," My familiar and partner said. "The only ones responsible for what happened tonight were the empire and their subordinates."

I nodded, the coil of nasty feelings and corded emotions eased slightly at Alya's words as I laid there and looked up at the mostly empty sky. Occasionally a plane would fly by, but with Alya back to watch the night, I quickly fell asleep.