

When I finally got back to the shop, stomach full and feeling a bit calmer about everything, I pulled out my burner phone and called the Protectorate hotline. I inquired about power testing, specifically for my healing ability. They seemed to have been waiting for my call because I was immediately transferred up the chain.

After discussing it with a few people, it was decided that I would make my way to the PRT headquarters at around noon, where I would spend the afternoon measuring and testing my powers. The more I talked about it, the less I liked the idea, but I was still hoping that having the PRT healing approval would be worth it. The idea of a group having accurate measurements of all my abilities sounded absolutely terrible, and the only reason I was considering it was that they had no way of knowing if I was telling the truth, meaning I could hold back. Even if I didn't, it was only a matter of time, literally, before I would be adding more powers and abilities to my repertoire.

With my appointment set up, I sat down on the couch, closing my eyes and leaning back with a groan.

"...Do you think it's worth it?" I asked Alya as she formed into her solid shape, sitting beside me on the couch. "Revealing some of my abilities for them to certify my healing?"

"For you, yes," She said confidently. "I could feel your disquiet at being unable to heal those two young women we saved from being mugged. If you had certification from the PRT, they might have accepted."

"... I'm sensing a pretty big 'but' there," I said, opening my eyes to look at my bound partner. "What is it?"

"Nothing, just wondering how much of a risk it is," She admitted. "Imagine if your powers didn't grow. How risky would this be then?"

"It would be a hell of a leap of faith," I said with a frown. "A leap of faith in a government-run program on a superhero world. You think these guys are more like SHIELD or CADMUS?"

"You mean dangerous by accident or dangerous on purpose?" She asked

"Yeah."

"...I couldn't really say, not without directly infiltrating the building," She responded. "But if people went in and never came out, people would know. There would be rumors about it, at least. People would shy away from Protectorate capes, not run up for autographs."

"Rumors... Dammit, I'm being stupid," I said, shaking my head. "I already have someone who would know this."

I quickly selected Tony's number on my phone and dialed, waiting patiently for him to pick up.

"Arcanum! Good to hear from you!" Tony's familiar voice nearly shouted. "Is everything alright?"

"Yeah, everything is fine, Tony," I said. "You got a minute to talk?"

"Yeah, I'm just at the kitchen, doing some paperwork," He explained. "What's up?"

"So, I was invited to the PRT headquarters to go through power testing so that they could verify my healing," I explained. "The problem is, I don't know much about the PRT. I wasn't a cape nerd before this, and I'm not from around here."

"Huh... Can I ask what the point is?" He asked. "Seems like a waste of time. As long as you ask permission first, you're covered, right?"

"Well, if the PRT signs off on my healing, people will feel better about letting me heal them," I explained, scratching my cheek. "I've already had a couple of people refuse, and... well, they were just a bit roughed up, but I want to keep that from happening somewhere serious."

"Huh... that's fair enough, I suppose," He admits. "Well... The PRT and Protectorate have a reputation for being... kinda useless around here."

"Why?"

"Well... They don't do much these days," Tony explained, his frown audible. "Now, to be fair, the situation really isn't in their favor. The E88 is packed to the gills with capes, and the ABB is run by a fucker who went toe-to-toe with Leviathan."

"Wait... Lung fought with Leviathan?"

"For a bit, when it sunk Kyushu," He explained. "I've seen some of that footage and... well, I can't say I blame them for not wanting to fight that."

"What about rumors about people who do power testing or about stuff like that?" I asked. "Stories of capes getting taken advantage of or anything."

"Well... I gotta be honest, Arcanum. Before you came around, I didn't do much thinking about capes either, beyond how to avoid them," He admitted. "That said... no, I haven't heard anything. I can ask around if you want?"

"Nah, no point. I got an appointment tomorrow afternoon," I explained. "I just wanted to know before I accidentally walked into something stupid."

"I'll send out a search party if you get lost," He joked, and I chuckled along. "Oh, and I'm hoping one of my contacts in the homeless groups around the city is going to respond soon. Tomorrow at the earliest, so we should get news about if they accept sooner rather than later."

"That's good. I'm looking forward to helping again," I said with a smile before idly checking the time. "Alright, well, thank you for the information, Tony. I appreciate having a second opinion."

"No problem, happy to help," He responded. "I'll talk to you soon, hopefully."

"Alright, until then."

I could hear the phone disconnect as I pulled it away from my ear, closing the call from my end a moment later.

"Well... that's about as good as I'm gonna get," I said. "Tony seems like the kind of guy who would hear about that, even if he wasn't big into capes."

Alya nodded in agreement, and after a bit more discussion, I prepared myself for sleep, eventually turning in for the night.

The next morning, after my normal morning stuff, including breakfast and getting clean, I went about the usual process of leaving the shop and hunting for a spot to change. This time, rather than heading to the line between Downtown and the Commercial District like I normally did, I made my way deeper into Downtown, heading off to the PRT headquarters.

As I walked through the streets in my costume, studiously ignoring the attention save the occasional wave to some younger children, I made a note of just how better the conditions were Downtown. The PRT and Protectorate had a pretty firm grip on this area, which was unsurprising considering it was where PRT headquarters was, and it showed.

When I finally arrived at the headquarters, I stopped to look up at the building. It was mostly concrete, coming off as one of those cheap, simple public works that popped up in cities that desperately needed facilities but couldn't afford to do anything fancy. The windows were all barred, and the glint on the glass showed it was deceptively thick, probably bulletproof. The PRT symbol, a shield with the logo on it, was displayed above the front entrance. If I had to guess, the simple nature of the structure was a purposeful misdirection to hide the fact that it was actually pretty well reinforced.

Or maybe I was just being optimistic.

After letting out a long breath, I walked through the front door, looking around to take the interior in. It seemed surprisingly modern and obviously fastidiously cleaned. Along one wall was a small waiting area with a space clearly marked for a guided tour. On the opposite side was a gift shop filled with Protectorate memorabilia and souvenirs.

Directly in front of me was the front desk, with four people working behind it. On either side of that was the entrance into the rest of the building, guarded by four large PRT agents, each armed with assault rifles and armored in full SWAT gear. They stood in front of three metal detectors on one side and what looked like a simple security station on the other, which I assumed was the exit, with the detectors at the entrance.

A soft breeze broke me from my examination of the front entrance, pushing me to the desk. I let out a breath and moved, ignoring the people sitting at the guided tour waiting space as they snapped pictures.

"Hello, my name is Arcanum. I set up an appointment?" I said to one of the receptionists. "Of course, Assault is already on his way to act as your chaperone," She said with a smile.

"Here is your guest badge."

She reached into a yellow envelope and handed me a tag with an image of me on the front. Judging from the angle of the photo, I could only imagine they grabbed it from a social media post or maybe some body cam footage. I was clipping the tag to my jacket when Alya whispered into my ear.

"Assault just stepped out of a side entrance," She said softly into my ear. "He is coming this way."

"Arcanum! Glad you could make it," Assault said from behind me, prompting me to turn and face him. "Good, you already got your tag. Let's go this way."

He nodded towards a door along the wall, one clearly marked as off-limits to civilians.

"Assault, good to see you," I said, reaching out to shake his hand before following behind him.

"I was happy to hear you set up an appointment," He said as we stepped through the side door.

"Especially 'cause I get some overtime to guide you around."

"Happy to help," I said with a chuckle. "So what's up first?"

"Well, I'll be honest, the folks who run the testing facility are very interested to see what you're capable of," He admitted. "The description you gave me really perked their interest."

I nodded as he talked, following along silently as he took me deeper into the building. Eventually, we stopped outside a pair of double doors, the government hero pushing them open. Inside was a relatively large room filled with more than a dozen different machines. They all looked like strange, white-gray medical contraptions with knobs, joystick-like handholds, platforms, and scanners. It wasn't quite mad scientist levels of crazy tech, more like if a mad scientist sold out and someone refined and mass-produced their equipment.

"Right, this is testing lab one," Assault explained, staying near the door but gesturing to the entire room. "This is where a lot of blasters and more esoteric energy... stuff is tested, like Vista's spacial mumbo jumbo, or in this case, your lightning."

I quietly listened and nodded along, asking polite questions until a pair of technicians joined us. They guided me to a specific machine, one designed to measure electricity. Or, rather, it would be after they attached a few pieces to it, meaning it was some sort of multipurpose device that could be shifted to multiple uses with the addition of certain pieces.

While that was being set up, one of the people running the tests asked me a series of questions about my powers, specifically my electrokinesis. I insisted it was not electrokinesis, but they assured me it was at least a form or offshoot. Considering I had already planned to obfuscate my abilities at least partially, I just went with it. If that's what they wanted to call it, even if it was inaccurate, I wasn't going to argue.

After the machine was set up, now sporting an exposed copper rod, while the rest of the machine was covered in rubber, the technicians disappeared. A quick look around showed they had retreated behind an enclosed observation bunker along one side of the large room. The man asking me questions quickly finished up after that, joining the others with a bit of a bounce in his step.

The observation room was raised up off the ground by a couple of feet, meaning it could look out over the entire room. It was clearly built to withstand a variety of attacks, keeping its inhabitants safe even if the people in testing lost control.

Assault gave me an excited wave from inside, following it up with a thumbs up.

"Okay, whenever you're ready, why don't you start off with what you could consider a low-level attack." One of the men in lab coats suggested, his voice coming out from a speaker.

I gave them a thumbs up before simply stabbing out with my finger, launching a single spark of electricity. It slammed into the copper pole, which I assumed they thought would attract the spell, even if that wasn't how it worked. The targeting for most of my launched spells was all

mental, which meant my electricity could completely ignore how normal electricity was supposed to work.

Over the next forty-five minutes, I cast a few dozen spells, a few silently, but most of them chanting like normal. They would frequently ask me to cast a spell multiple times, repeating spells they thought were interesting and asking questions when something "strange" happened. Eventually, when they were satisfied, they spoke through the loudspeaker again.

"Alright, now we want to see how powerful you can go," They explained. "For this next one, give it everything you got."

For a moment, I considered the request before nodding in confirmation. I did have something that I would consider my most powerful lightning spell, which I had no issues showing off. In terms of pure power, it was the highest one I had, but it had almost no flexibility or anything else going for it. It was just pure power. It also took way too long to cast for most circumstances.

After a moment, I raised my hands to just above my head, laying the index middle and pointer finger over the others so they formed a triangle with my thumbs touching.

*"Evocabo fulgura ad percutiendum et dispergendum inimicum meum!"*

Calling out the spell took about three seconds, a lifetime for open combat. As I chanted, I brought my hands down in a half circle on each side, rotating them until they were down at chest level, palms pushing forward. As I moved my hands, arcane sigils appeared in the air, connected by a constant line of my mana. Before the first sigil could fade, I pushed out with my hands, a final line of mana connecting them together. Suddenly, the spell snapped, and a bolt of lightning arced from my hands and slapped out against the copper rod, discharging an immense amount of power. Thankfully, the spell dampened my vision for a split second as the bolt flew out, or it would have at least partially blinded me.

I let out a deep breath, my mana almost four-fifths drained. My body felt wired and jittery from accessing so much mana at once. The feeling faded as my mana reserves slowly equalized.

"Not bad!" Assault's voice called out from the safety of the observation room. "I gotta say, I can see why you went with Arcanum!"

I chuckled and nodded, studying the machine I had attacked. It was obviously hot, since I could see heat waves emanating from the exposed copper. But other than that, it seemed intact. I had some visions of destroying their machine, but I suppose I just wasn't that powerful.

Yet.

At the lab workers' request, I repeated the attack a few times before a few technicians came out to disassemble the machine, and one of the lab workers came out to ask me some more questions face-to-face. When they were done, I asked a question of my own.

"So, how exactly do you guys test healing?" I asked, watching one of the techs testing the equipment. "It's honestly what I'm most interested in. I really want official approval from the PRT that my healing is safe."

"Oh, well, there really isn't a standardized test for that since it's such a rare ability," He admitted.

"As for official approval, I think that involves healing some volunteers, who would then be put under observation for some time. I don't really know for sure, though. It's not really part of what power testing."

"So you're saying that I didn't have to go through power testing in order to get official approval?" I asked, looking over the lab worker's shoulder to see Assault, who was now visibly wincing.

"Uh... no, not really..." The man said, now a bit confused. "Did someone tell you it was?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I was told," I responded with a frown, locking eyes with Assault. "If you'll excuse me for a moment."

I walked around the man, leaving him confused as I walked straight up to the Protectorate hero. For a moment, he tensed as if he anticipated me attacking him. When I stopped, he seemed to take that as a good sign.

"Take it easy, Arcanum. I can explain," He insisted, raising his hand up to ward off any aggression.

"You lied about the process so I would go through full power testing," I said, not willing to tiptoe around anything at this point. "Why?"

"...Orders." He said simply, not sounding particularly happy about it.

For a long moment, we were silent while I tried to figure out what to do. The temptation to leave was high, but I wanted what I came for, dammit!

"Set up the healing test so I can get approval," I finally said. "Then I am leaving."

"... Yeah, that's fair," The red-clad hero agreed with a nod. "Would you like to wait here or...?"

I looked around for a moment before plopping down on the corner of some random device. After a moment, he nodded before turning and whispering in harsh tones, presumably through his radio.