

After apologizing to Kali for hurting her trees and spending a few minutes fixing them, I spent some time practicing with my new toy. After struggling for several hours, all the way through the early morning, I finally got a good grip on the process, well enough that, after saying goodbye to everyone, I took off and flew into the city. It was still very early, but coffee shops were just starting to open up, and I wanted breakfast.

After finding a good spot, an empty stretch of road, I swooped in for a landing, skidding to stop, just barely managing to keep from tumbling and rolling across the ground. It was becoming increasingly obvious that I could not simply give Weaver her flight belt, a pat on the back, and some words of luck. If I wanted her to survive the learning process, I would likely need to give her a geomantic reinforcement close to my own.

After signing some autographs and grabbing some breakfast, I flew around a bit before settling on a rooftop overlooking the ocean, landing hard enough to damage the thankfully abandoned building. Thankfully, despite my energetic landing, I managed to save the food. After I finished eating my bagel and lox, I made a few phone calls and set up another meeting with Weaver. We had a lot to take care of, but Lady Photon agreed that it was better to get them done as soon as possible, so she was happy to work with me to set up the day.

When we were done making plans, I flew to the hospital, spending some time healing. I had plenty of time, since Weaver would be in school for quite a while. As I focused on keeping myself busy, spending some time working out new ideas, and doing some light work to design a ritual, Weaver was eventually released from school. Not long after that, New Wave, specifically Lady Photon, Glory Girl, and Crystal, escorted the young aspiring hero to an inconspicuous meeting spot, where I picked them up and brought them back to the forest compound.

While Glory Girl and Alya showed Crystal around, I got to work drawing out and explaining the geomantic ritual. Weaver was pretty shocked that I was basically offering to turn her into a brute four or five so readily.

"If I'm being honest, Weaver, I'm sort of moving past caring about small-scale issues," I said, sitting back on my knees, ritual half completed after she asked. "Sure, if you went off the deep end, I would do my best to stop you, something you would find I do pretty easily since you're using my gear. But one more cape with a bit more power? That's not something I'm concerned about at the moment."

"So why are you doing this for me?" She asked, gesturing to the ritual. "This and the flying device."

"A variety of reasons," I explained. "You're young, and I want to give you the best chance of survival I can. You're trying to be a hero, and that's worth something. I'm worried about the eventual shoe drop now that we've cleared so much of the city. I'm concerned about what underhanded crap Coil might try. Take your pick."

When I finally completed the ritual, considerably upgrading Weaver's power level, I promised to do the same with New Wave, as soon as I gathered some more resources and

redesigned the ritual to affect several people at once. There's no use wasting time and resources when I could get everyone with just one drawing. The only reason Weaver was jumping the line was that she needed the protection to learn how to fly. I needed to redesign the geomantic ritual anyway.

When that was finally done, I teleported us all out to the beach, since the sand and open area made a pretty decent place to practice. By then, Taylor was practically vibrating with excitement.

"Okay, so the first thing you need to understand about flying with the belt is that it functions like natural flight, not flying brick flight," I explained. "That means hovering in place will be hard to learn, landing is complicated as hell, and going fast means compensating for momentum when you want to stop."

Most hero flight, including all flight-capable members of New Wave, functioned the same way as Superman's flight did, or, for people more familiar with gaming, like most creative flight systems did. That meant stopping on a dime was usually possible, as was turning on a dime and hovering in place.

My flight, on the other hand, functioned like a bird's ability, with swooping and forward momentum, angled turns, and everything in between. It was still flight, an impressive achievement and a powerful tool in getting around the city, but it was far from perfect. It would never be as precise as Glory Girl's or Lady Photon's flight, and not being able to simply float meant our options were limited when using flight to reach something.

Still, it was a lot of fun, and I knew it would be incredibly useful. It was unfortunate that the ritual was so dense, multistaged, and even had a complicated golem brain as part of it, meaning I would never be able to truly mass-produce them.

Maybe the medics could use them, assuming we ended up having specialized medics at all.

"What does that mean for learning?" Weaver asked, turning the belt over in her hands. "If it's so difficult, how will I learn?"

"You take it slow, learning how to walk before you run, and don't expect to just get it after a few minutes of working on it," I explained. "I've already got about five hours of practice, and I still stumble and mess up my landings."

She nodded before carefully putting on her belt, working it into her costume as well as she could. The leather belt was already quite dark, the color having shifted when I infused it with her blood, but it still stood out from the rest of her well-made costume, since it was the only bit of leather.

True to what I said, Weaver's first attempts at flight were somewhat discouraging, even though she listened well and took it slow at first. She barely managed to get her feet off the sand before spinning out of control and slamming into the ground. Still, she was unharmed thanks to

the geomantic ritual, and, better yet, she was undaunted by the task of learning, immediately popping up to try again.

Over the next few hours, Weaver slowly but surely got a handle on flight, going from crashing and cratering to being able to slowly circle around the beach, landing with a spray of sand, but managing to stay on her feet. The way she was laughing and chasing after Glory Girl was actually refreshing, as she usually seemed like such a serious kid.

Eventually, we brought the practice session to a close. Both Glory Girl and Crystal left to return home, while I teleported Weaver and Lady Photon to my base.

It was time to start the process of unmasking and meeting Taylor's father. Before Weaver could pull off her mask, I stopped her.

"So, now that we have a bit more privacy," I started, giving Lady Photon a nod. "I need to admit that, unfortunately, I am already aware of who you are, Weaver."

"What? How?" She asked, sounding more confused than annoyed. "I thought I was being so careful."

"You have been, but unfortunately, I have a bit of an advantage," I explained with a frown. "When we first met before, Alya noticed the odd behavior of the bugs around us, and how they seemed to react towards your emotions."

"You've known since then?" She asked, sounding shocked. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"Well, for one, it wasn't my place. You had just gone through a traumatic event, and I wanted you to have some time to recover," I pointed out. "On top of that, I didn't want you or your father to think I was leveraging my help in exchange for anything. I thought it would be best to let you settle your choices on your own, and then lend assistance if and when you started going out in public or joined the Wards."

She let out a sigh and unceremoniously pulled off her mask, revealing the young teenager's face. She also pulled out her tight bun of hair, revealing her wavy, long locks.

"Well... thank you, then," She said. "Both for letting me set my own pace and for helping me with my problem."

"I seem to be at a disadvantage," Lady Photon said from beside me, though she was more amused than anything. "Could one of you possibly fill me in?"

Taylor blushed and nodded, explaining what she had gone through and how I had stepped in. I did my best to curtail her praise, but it was clear the young woman had picked up a bit of hero worship around me. It only cemented my determination to make sure she got what she needed to become a proper hero. I could only hope that working with me, combined with frequent patrols with New Wave and our team, would give her the variety and experience she needed.

When the young woman was finished retelling her tale, Lady Photon approached the young girl and, after confirming it was okay, gave her a long hug. What Taylor had gone through extended far beyond what I had learned during my time, ensuring she got the justice she deserved, and I could tell it stirred something in the Mother Hero.

Once the pair had separated and calmed down, we began discussing how to approach Taylor's home. The simple plan was to teleport straight into her backyard after we all changed out of our obvious costumes, then Taylor would go inside and get her father while we waited outside. It would be rude to teleport straight inside, and I didn't want to scare the hell out of the poor man. We were about to split up and put on our civilian garb when Smokey, Piper, and their golems returned.

I made sure Taylor was okay with them seeing her face, since the guardians sometimes seemed like a separate group, but she assured me it was fine. In fact, she wanted to meet them. She shook Smokey's hand, the first Guardian I made, smiling as he greeted her. However, as soon as Taylor turned to Piper, I realized the Guardian was standing stock still, like a frozen statue. Taylor greeted her awkwardly, but the Guardian remained frozen in place.

"Piper? Is everything okay?" I asked after the silence continued to stretch. "Piper?"

I approached the Guardian, wondering if I had perhaps missed something when I repaired her arm after she was attacked by Purity. As I was about to start poking at her, she moved, raising her hand to open her vest, exposing her metal frame. Her golem body wasn't detailed enough for this to be inappropriate, she shared more in common with a Barbie doll than a human. Once her chest was exposed, she raised her hand to where her heart would be, right where her spirit anchor was.

We watched as the golem frame opened, revealing the flute that served as Piper's anchor. It glowed slightly as she carefully pulled it out, presenting it to Taylor before the golem froze up like a statue, the spirit guardian no longer connected to it.

"W-what?" Taylor asked, her eyes wide, reaching out for the flute, only to pull her hands back. "Is that...?"

"That's her anchor," I responded, still confused as to what was going on. "To make guardians, I need something... important, personal. Things like that carry a sort of imprint, an echo of experiences. That serves as the seed for the Guardian's consciousness. Piper is fine, she is just disconnected... I don't know what she did that though..."

"It's... that's my mother's flute!" Taylor explained, the words pouring out. "Sophia and Emma stole it from my locker. They said they broke it and threw it in a dumpster. But... it's intact... is she... is Piper."

Internally, I cursed. Out of everything that could have gone wrong with the spirit guardian concept, how had I never anticipated someone recognizing the anchor? And of course, it just happened to be the mother of a superpowered teen with way too many existing problems, and who just can't seem to catch a break.

"I found it, using a scanning method for items with the proper... charge for guardian anchors," I explained gently. "If I had known it was precious to you, I would have returned it after repairing it, rather than using it without permission."

"Is she, is Piper... You said echoes of the owner existed?"

"The anchor is like a seed, and like an instruction booklet," I explained. "Showing the Guardian how to walk, talk, and how to interpret emotions. How to *have* emotions as well. When they first spark, the Guardian relies heavily on these instructions, but as they develop, the need for them decreases. Piper is not your mother, she is somebody raised on snapshots of her life. A student of her memory."

I pointedly did not mention that, before sparking Piper, I would have had to trim and carve the echo to remove certain worrying influences. I didn't precisely remember what I did for the flute, but I know it happened, and I couldn't imagine that it would sound nice to Taylor.

For a long moment, Taylor stared at the flute, her body tense. I was shocked when Alya didn't whisper into my ear that Taylor wasn't doing her creepy trick of shifting her emotions to her bugs. Her expression remained full of sadness, confusion, and a wash of more complicated emotions that I struggled to decipher.

"Is she okay?" the young teen eventually asked, looking over at me. "She looked frozen..."

"She is fine, she is probably listening right now," I explained, stepping closer and scanning the flute, confirming the spirit was still going strong. "She could probably play music and use her ability even without it, but the golem body is a shell that allows the guardians to interact with the world more easily. Without her input, it's basically just a frozen statue, waiting for more instructions."

"Can I talk to her again?"

I nodded, carefully taking the flute and pushing it back into the slot in her chest. I then sealed it shut with a quick spell, fusing the hole around the anchor. Once the anchor was secure, the golem lost its statue-esque look, suddenly shifting and moving. Piper quickly focused on Taylor, while carefully buttoning back up her shirt.

"I apologize, Taylor Hebert," Piper said. "I am... unsure of how I can help, but I am sorry for causing you distress."

"No, it's okay... I'm glad the flute is whole," Taylor admitted, still sounding conflicted. "And I'm glad that it was used... used to help the city."

"I will do my best to honor your mother's memories," She responded. "Perhaps I should leave, give you a chance to think."

When Taylor didn't respond, Piper bowed her head and walked away, Smokey patting her shoulder as they both walked further into the forest compound. After a minute, I stepped forward, putting my hand on her shoulder.

"Taylor, if you're not ready for this... we could postpone-"

"No. No, if we do... I might not go through with it," She admitted, nervously plucking at her armor. "It's better if we get it over with. Just... please don't mention this to my dad. I will tell him eventually, but... He is delicate."

I frown, sharing a quick look with Lady Photon, who seemed equally concerned by her statement. Still, I would respect her decision for now.

"Alright, that is fine for now," I agreed with a nod. "How about we sit down for a few minutes, and then we can teleport."

Taylor nodded, and I guided her and Lady Photon to the sitting area, where we shared some food and water. A few minutes later, Taylor was looking a bit more stable, so we gathered around the ritual platform, ready to teleport to her home.