

When we arrived back at the forest compound, Olivia and I quickly decided that we would spend a day celebrating our victory over the Empire. We had crushed the gang's capes and sent a considerable fraction of their militant supporters to lock up, with evidence deep enough that even the most crooked cop or judge would struggle to let them off easy.

Just like that, another gang was more or less crossed off the Brockton Bay list. While it was far from the last challenge we would face in the city, it was important to celebrate victories when you could. Even if we had stumbled on what could be concrete proof of Coil's existence, as well as evidence that he was not just some small-time punk.

Of course, our method of celebration left much to be desired. We didn't share a drink or pop champagne, and we certainly didn't head out for a night on the town. Instead, we both agreed that our reward was for me *not* to cast the anti-sleep spell on us, and to spend the rest of the day in a lazy, half-asleep, frequently napping daze. After all, we had spent the entire night running around, fighting off sleep with adrenaline and constant activity, and now that we were sitting still, even with the coffee, that was quickly catching up to us. I would correct the damage to our sleep schedules later. For now, we both just wanted to chill.

Kali stopped by a few times to check in on us, now talking to us in her own interesting way. Olivia once again tried to tease me about her calling me father, but I refused to feel even the slightest embarrassment or disquiet about it. I was proud of my creation and what she had become. Why on God's green earth would I deny her right to call me her progenitor, even if I hadn't created her the "normal" way?

It wasn't until well past noon that Olivia and I returned to a relatively normal state of mind, which I immediately augmented by finally casting the anti-sleep spell, waking us up and rejuvenating us completely. Once we were fully awake, I spent about ten minutes fixing Piper's arm, reshaping it to fit perfectly on her metal frame.

"How do you feel?" I asked, tracing the non-existent seam where the new limb had attached. "Any issues with moving? Any discomfort?"

"I feel whole," she responded, shifting and adjusting her arm, nodding in appreciation. "Thank you for repairing me."

"It's the least I could do. Especially after all you, Smokey, and the rest of the guardians have done for the city," I said with a smile. "I'm just glad Purity didn't do more damage."

"I am as well. It was... uncomfortable to be so damaged," she admitted, pausing for a moment before continuing with a question. "Sir, will you be making more guardians?"

It took me a moment to reorganize my thoughts at her sudden twist in topic, but eventually I nodded in confirmation.

"I intend to. I have to drop off the luck bracelets, and when I do, I plan on asking for a meeting to explain why they are needed," I explained. "With any luck, Piggot will let me make three or four more to cover the new territory. I'll need to make golems as well, but at this point,

that's easy. I can already see like four ways to make golem crafting significantly faster, and that's without even trying."

"And guardian crafting? Could you speed that up?"

"...Technically, yeah, I could speed it up. I could speed it up a lot," I responded, doing one last check on her arm before letting her cover it up. "But it feels wrong to min-max the creation of a sentient being. I feel bad enough about making you guys for the purpose of fighting, there is no way I'm gonna make it worse by compromising your individualism by making you in batches. I'll keep making you guys one by one, the original old-fashioned way."

"Thank you," She said again, this time with a nod. "We do appreciate your desire to treat us fairly, even if you feel uncomfortable commanding us directly. We know you could make us into your private, unwaveringly loyal soldiers if you wanted to."

"I could, but I don't want a private army, in that way anyway," I pointed out. "Too many moral questions, too much attention, too much hassle."

"So you will rely on the PRT to assign a soldier to you?" She asked, before continuing to clarify her question. "For your Endbringer army idea."

"I... I think so. The Protectorate and PRT have access to resources and training, which would save me a lot of effort finding a thousand different people for the idea to work," I admitted with a frown. "Sure, I could make a few dozen guardians, or a hundred different golems, but real experience with combat against parahumans is rare enough that having someone help me would be fantastic."

"Are you not concerned about handing over equipment you make to someone you didn't choose?"

Sure, a little," I admitted, scratching the back of my head with a frown. "Maybe I'll make something to detect a person's suitability, including how well they would handle the new power. I'm sure I could negotiate the final say about who joins..."

I trailed off, getting distracted for a moment, the idea of a sort of morality scanner popping into my head and staying there, before eventually I shrugged and mentally moved on.

"Either way, that's something for later. Tomorrow I will pass in the luck bracelets, then later I will look for a meeting to discuss my Endbringer plan," I finally concluded. "I want to put together a sort of mock-up of what the soldiers' equipment would be like, something I can show off to Piggot, then to whoever else I get put in touch with, since this kind of thing is way beyond what she can green light."

"Would the mock-up have actual magic stuff?" Olivia, who had only been half paying attention as she ate an apple nearby, asked suddenly. "Or will it just be potential items?"

"... A guess, a mix?" I suggested, thinking on the idea for a moment before nodding in confirmation. "Yeah, a mix of real and hypothetical gear, I'll whip up a few basic items to

showcase, hand them off so they can do their experiments, but also outline some of the other possibilities. It should give them a good enough grasp of what is possible without railroading their creativity. As much as this might hinge on my magic, I don't know the first thing about fighting on such a large scale."

"What would you call last night then?" Olivia asked with a raised eyebrow. "That wasn't a large scale?"

"I meant at Endbringer levels. Hundreds, maybe even a thousand people fighting at once," I explained. "For example, I need a movement ability, something to let the soldiers get out of danger and move quickly. Would it be better to make them faster on foot, or to let them fly, even if the flying was limited to say... a quarter of the speed of Glory Girl? And for defense, should I make it so they can create a powerful shield, or should I have an always-on barrier that is weaker, but they don't have to worry about seeing an attack coming?"

"Why not just do both?"

"Time and resource constraints for one. If we do this at the scale I'm hoping for, it will take multiple days, possibly even a week, to produce each item. I don't have time to make every aspect, even if I started right now. That doesn't even take into account the bureaucracy of all this. I'll probably end up getting this started before I even have the green light, since I'll be doing it even if I don't, and I don't want to wait," I explained, shaking my head to refocus on the question. "I don't plan on stopping after the first Endbringer, though. I'll keep making them stronger and stronger until they can stand up to all of them. It's not going to be a one-and-done process."

"So, in the meantime, before you have time to make everything, you need experts to tell you what you should focus on."

"Exactly. Someone who is familiar with powers and abilities and has experience with Endbringers and other threats."

"And you trust the PRT to do that?"

"I trust that the PRT will take a feasible and solid chance to defeat Endbringers seriously," I responded with a slight frown. "Do I trust them implicitly, at every level? Hell no. But I retain a modicum of control over everything I make with my magic, so if things start to disappear or the enhanced soldiers start getting sent out on missions that aren't against S-class threats, all I have to do is..."

I looked around for a moment before one of the hundreds of hanging light vials, which lit the area around the forest compound, caught my eye. I focused for a second and, after a bit of mental stretching, managed to feel the magic inside the bottle of light. As my magic connected with the magic inside it, I gave it a hard metaphysical yank.

Immediately, the light flared, before the ritual effects failed. The bottle cracked and exploded, the light inside crackling before blowing itself out. Little shards of glass fell to the ground as the light disappeared into a wisp of smoke that almost instantly dispersed.

"And suddenly none of it is a problem anymore," I finished, adding a shrug at the end. "It would be a pain to do, but I could do it."

Before Olivia could respond, suddenly Kali was back, walking out from behind a tree as if she had always been there. She looked around for a moment, eventually spotting the broken cap that still hung from the tree, before looking down at the broken shards of glass. She then looked at me with a frown.

"Uh... sorry," I apologized with a wince. "I was just demonstrating the connection my magic has to the stuff I create."

"Please do not do that again, William-Father," She said with a slightly less aggrieved look. "Kali could feel it, as if something that belonged was removed. Kali thought something bad was happening."

"I'm sorry, Kali," I apologized, now feeling guilty. "I had no idea you would be able to feel it. I promise to be more careful, but are you alright? Do you need me to replace the vial or anything?"

"No, it is fine, Kali already feels better. Thank you," She said, before looking over at the glass, slowly waving her hand over it, the shards disappearing in seconds. "Kali must return to her dogs."

The Genius Loci vanished back the way she had come, walking behind a tree and disappearing. After a few moments of silence, with both Olivia and I wondering if she was going to come back or not, we both let out a breath. Eventually, after nearly a minute, Olivia turned back to me.

"Could you do that to my cloak?" she asked, her eyes tracing back up to the still-hanging vial cap.

"I mean, yeah, but why would I? The connection isn't something I deliberately create. It's an aspect of using my magic to make the items in the first place," I responded with a shrug. "Your cloak might have some strange items that have inherent aspects of their own, but my magic is what brought that out and strung it all together."

"Right, fine, okay. I guess that makes sense..." she said, trailing off slightly as she absorbed the information. "For future reference, that's something a girl would like to know, that you could undo all of the cool stuff you gave her with a thought."

"Olivia... It's not like it was intentional. I'm not going to just randomly pull it all out from under you," I explained, meeting her eyes with mine. "The only way I would unwind your cloak or your boots would be if you started doing some really upsetting stuff. Do you have any plans to start killing puppies or punting babies?"

She snorted and shook her head, rolling her eyes at my response.

"If you don't, you've got nothing to worry about," I assured her. "Even if we had a disagreement and went our separate ways, I gave you those things as gifts, not as conditional bonuses for working with me. They are yours forever. Unless you start punting babies."

"...Thanks," She said eventually. "... and sorry, I didn't mean to imply you were going to hold them over my head or anything... Just caught me off guard."

"It's fine," I responded with a shrug before leaning back in my chair. "I get it, believe it or not."

She nodded, and for a while we were quiet. Eventually, we did have to be vaguely active, heading into the city to grab some lunch. After we were done, I dropped Olivia off at the Docks community. It had been a while since I did any healing there, so I spent a few hours in costume, tending to a few sick people and healing minor wounds, before checking up on the orchard there as well. I ended up extending the orchard by a few trees, as apparently, news had spread to a few neighboring towns that the homeless situation in Brockton Bay was actually quite good, which meant people coming by to take advantage of the situation.

I wasn't overly concerned, since if the homeless population grew too large, I would simply expand the orchards and possibly add them to neighboring towns. I could also try making homeless camps in the forests and woods between the towns and the city. There were a couple of major forests in the area, beyond the usual spots of woods and trees that ran interspersed in more populated areas. Any one of them would make a decent place for homeless people to live, especially if I added some personal touches.

In a more stable environment, I would have potentially been concerned about enabling people who just don't want to work, but considering the state of the economy and the world in general, I had no problem helping people out. This world was filled with suffering, and no amount of bootstrap pulling would wash away how broken it was. Part of me really wanted to head out to cities around the country and grow as many orchards as I could, easing the strain not just on the homeless, but everyone in general. Unfortunately, while it would definitely make people's lives better, there was no way I would come out the other end without a lot of people looking to put me away.

Even beyond just greedy people who would see me as a threat, my status as a biotinker would scare the shit out of anyone not familiar with me, and some who were. Going across the continent and planting magic growing orchards was a good way to make people panic and start thinking I was doing something diabolical.

When I was done tending to the Dock community's orchard and helping out around the area, I made my way home. Alya corporealized for a while, and we talked about the last few days, including a conversation about Taylor. We had both noticed some concerning aspects of how she interacted with the insects she was controlling, and I was worried enough that I decided to bring it up to her next time we had some time together.

I also needed to introduce myself officially, explain the situation, and acknowledge that I already knew her identity, preferably before I lost all semblance of a secret identity.