

Olivia was extremely patient with me as I plowed through her upgrades, first updating her geomancy to the same levels I had, before working on several new bits of gear, including an annihilation rifle of her own, safely tucked into a holster considerably smaller than it should have been, though that was a later development.

That was only possible because I worked straight through the switching of my cycle, which included a free level in dimensional partitioning. With four levels in total, I could finally create something akin to a proper bag of holding. Not only could I just about quintuple an interior, taking a simple satchel into the size of a large duffel bag, but I could now create larger containers as well. I now had several boxes filled with materials, which considerably improved the organization of my storage of trees and metal supplies. Not only that, but I could adjust the weight of the exterior vessel relative to the interior, though I was limited to a less-efficient distribution ratio for now. Still, for something like a satchel or bag, it was plenty, reducing total weight by about sixty-five to seventy percent, which made a big difference.

Larger things, like the crates holding my store of mithril and orichalcum, were still reduced, but the objects inside were too hefty to move even with the reduction.

When I had finally completed Olivia's new equipment, including things like protective clothes, jewelry to increase her agility and flexibility, a flight harness, and finally some major improvements to her cloak, it was about two days into my new cycle. By then, Olivia had finally had enough of waiting for me to open up.

"William, what happened?" She asked, pulling me into a seat, forcing me to stop for a moment. "You came back from that meeting traumatized, and I've been helping where I could, but... What happened?"

"I... I learned something," I admitted. "Something bad. But I can't really say what it was. The fewer people who know the truth, the better. It's... It's too much, and it could be dangerous."

"That's it? So sorry, I can't tell you?" She asked with a frown. "You really think I can't handle it?"

"I think I can't handle it," I admitted, her expression softening. "But no, it's really true that the few people who know it, the better."

"Oh... something like that," She responded, seeming to understand the danger. After all, mimetic hazards weren't exactly unheard of on Earth Bet. "Then what can I do? How can I help?"

"By staying safe," I said after a moment. "And... If I tell you to come here, I need you to come directly here. It's the safest place in the world right now, by a long shot, and I'm still working on more protections."

"... Alright, I can agree to that," she said after studying my face. "As long as you try and protect Brockton Bay, too."

"The Bay is going to be the second safest place when I'm done with it," I assured her. "I just need a few more days of work."

I had already broken ground on Brockton Bay's massive barrier shield system. Massive mana-generating trees, golden and silver, had already been spread through the city, and each of them was "wired" into one of several massive mana capacitors. I just needed to build the barrier protectors, which I did over the span of a few days.

Before my meeting with Cauldron, I would have called it overkill.

Now, I knew there was likely no such thing. Worse still, I now knew they were telling the truth.

While I was working on making Olivia as safe as I could, my brain was wrestling with how I could possibly prove or disprove what Cauldron had revealed. Eventually, I attempted to put my point straight into a divination magic, only to learn it didn't exist, not in the way I was hoping for. It felt like there was basic divination, but it felt less like seeing the distant future, and more like predicting things in the short term.

I explored the concept for several hours, only to find nothing beyond a few simple tricks for predicting card hands and dice rolls.

In a way, it made a sort of sense. Magic at its core was mutable, always shifting. Even my own version of it, which was solid and rigid by "most mages" standard, was far too flexible to stack and predict things more than a few hours at most. I tried creating spells to confirm results of things before they happened, but not only were they massive spells, but they refused to look into the far future, even a little bit.

Parahumans didn't seem to have that limitation, which also made a sort of sense, since their powers were based on analytical science. A computer could calculate complex math to figure out how something would happen, while magic seemed determined to simply breach the veil of time so it could perform divination, something I was certain was impossible, at least with the spells I could create.

Thankfully, I was able to get around that by taking advantage of parahumans. I traveled to another city, where I snatched a villain thinker from their home. It violated the unwritten rules, but considering their death count included at least half a dozen kids, I wasn't exactly broken up about it.

I picked that villain specifically because they were able to predict the state of their body as a side effect of their primary power. It was a sort of limited form of self-precognition. It had several harsh limitations, which I was able to negate almost completely with magic.

A day of testing revealed that in several futures, New York, DC, California, and several other cities across the world would be wiped off the map.

It was crude, didn't reveal much information, but it was enough to confirm that Cauldron had been correct. Scion was going to tear apart this world sometime in the next ten years.

When I was done working with Olivia and her gear, I took two days to finish Brockton Bay's protections, feeding all the extra magic back into Kali, who was starting to grow at a much faster rate already. The edges of her domain were already starting to push into the city, and she was anchoring herself to the many mana-generating trees now growing across it. When I was done with that and had a chance to confirm the results of my less-than-humane tests with the villain, I finally reached back out to Cauldron.

I handed the villain over to Alexandria, explaining the process I had come up with. It wasn't detailed enough to draw much information from, but it did work well enough to help refine what you already knew.

Handing over the villain was also rather useful to prove something else I suspected about what I was stepping into

When I explained how I had proven their information myself, Alexandria didn't even bat an eye at the concept of just throwing the man in a cell to take advantage of what I had discovered. Now, granted, the guy was a prick and absolutely guilty, but she didn't even ask for proof or who the guy actually was. She just heard he was useful, and that was enough to chuck him into a cell.

That was evidence enough for me to assume that Cauldron was already knee deep in questionable things. I didn't doubt that they were trying to save the local cluster, only the truly insane wouldn't strive to solve the problem in some way, but they definitely were not the idealist group they had described themselves as.

But, unfortunately, there wasn't much I could do. They were clearly determined to keep the planet spinning, and if I didn't at least try to work with them, I would instead be stuck doing all of that on my own. As long as they weren't doing anything horribly morally reprehensible, I would learn to deal with it.

After handing over the villain, I met with Alexandria, Doctor Mother, and Legend again.

"Have you had your time?" Doctor Mother asked, referring to my demand for time to think. "Every moment is precious, we need to work together if we are to find a solution."

"I'm sorry, but I needed to confirm it for myself," I said. "It took longer than I thought, but yes, I'm here to work with you."

"That's good," Legend said with a nod. "You know, inducting you into the Triumvirate. I know you don't want to work under the Protectorate, but we could come up with something to give you space."

"No, I'm not spending time on PR and meet and greets," I said, shaking my head. "I have more important things to focus on."

"You are seriously underestimating the power of what hope can do for the masses," Doctor Mother said, shaking her head. Having the Triumvirate acknowledge you as one of their

own, even unofficially, would give people something to believe in. It will help us keep them from panicking."

"... Once I make some progress on my ideas to take down behemoth, I will consider it," I responded after a long, quiet moment. "The handshaking after Leviathan was bad enough. I need to focus on preparing for Behemoth."

"You're still focused on fighting the Endbringers?" Alexandria said with a frown. "Why?"

"Because, they're the threat I can target right now," I responded. "Fighting Scion will happen, and I will be developing weapons to attack him. But for now, I will prepare for Behemoth while investing my energy in more powerful abilities to fight Scion."

"What powers will you be investing in?"

I took a long breath and released it, leaning back in my chair. I had spent a lot of time debating this very subject with Kali and Alya, since I knew neither of them was connected to the Agent network that Cauldron explained. We spitballed a lot of ideas, but only one thing really stood out.

Conceptual magics.

"When I invest my energy, I'm not throwing a net into the void," I explained, rubbing my eyes softly. "Some things fit, some things don't, while some things almost fit, and some things fit really well. It's like... someone put together a massive infrastructure of powers, an ecosystem of interacting concepts. A lot of my exotic tinkering aspects can be linked together, and my direct powers share common threads, even if their output and uses are massively different."

"That... is vaguely reminiscent of Eidolon," Legend admitted. "I suppose we shouldn't be surprised."

"It is possible you are somehow the expression of Scions equivalent Agent," Doctor Mother suggested.

"It's possible," I responded with a noncommittal shrug before continuing. "Either way, sometimes as I invest in new facets, I get hints at other possible concepts. Some of these are small, some of them are big. One that's been repeated a few times is the idea of Conceptual aspects. That's a capital 'C' by the way."

"...And what exactly would this entail?" Alexandria asked, emotionless behind her mask.

"Well, investing energy in one would allow control over that Concept," I explained simply. "Starting with simple aspects, growing in potency the more energy I invest."

"That.... There must be a downside, otherwise you would already be investing in them," Doctor Mother pointed out.

"There is. The more powerful, potent, or complicated an aspect is, the more energy it takes to get to the upper end of its scaling," I responded. "It also means investing a lot of energy before the aspect is functional for more than parlor tricks. For example..."

I raised my hand, and electricity sparked between my fingers, loud, aggressive, and bright enough to light up the room. Both Legend and Doctor Mother jumped at the loud noise.

"One of the first things I invested in was lightning magic. I have only a fraction of the energy invested in it compared to some aspects of my tinkering. And yet the concept is simple and directed enough that it unlocked a wide range of abilities. The same goes for healing and several other things. Investing the same amount of energy into a Concept would likely get me very little."

"But there is more power at the end."

"There is more power in the halfway point than anything I have. At least in *direct* power," I corrected. "My tinkering is at the point where I have a significant breadth of ability. With time and energy, I could do most things."

"So... it comes down to time," Legend finally said. "You work on coming up with ways to fight and kill the Endbringers, while filling in these Conceptual aspects?"

"Yes. I would need to select one first. I could go tightly focused, with something like Light, which would likely fill up quicker to a point where it becomes quite powerful," I explained. "However, its total potency would likely be lower. The other concept I was thinking about was Space. That is going to eat my energy like a void, but even getting it to a third of the way to full will likely power me up to a significant level."

"What other options are there?"

"Near infinite, including the concept of Infinity," I responded with a smirk. "The problem is not what I could do, it's how long it will take to do it."

"Then why Light?" Legend asked curiously.

"Because light exists nearly everywhere. In reality, it's a near-universal constant," I explained. "Controlling it on a fundamental level would most likely be pretty impressive. There are other Concepts, things like Gravity, Matter, Motion, Force, Mass, Energy, Life, Death-"

"Life and death?" Doctor Mother asked, sounding shocked. "You believe that your power would give you control over life and death?"

"Most likely," I responded. "With everything powers are capable of, do you really think that's impossible?"

"That sounds a bit too... fantastical," Alexandria pointed out. "Powers don't work like that. Not even exotic ones."

"I don't know what to tell you," I responded with a shrug. "This is what my powers are telling me. If that seems impossible to you... It's a good thing I don't need you to believe in me for it to work."

I could almost feel Alexandria staring at me through her mask, I could almost imagine her cold, hard look. I had to admit, she wasn't entirely wrong. If my magic were actually a parahuman power, she would have likely been correct, but since it wasn't, she had no context. Eventually, I continued, shaking my head.

"There is no real rush, the energy doesn't dissipate over time, so I can put as much thought into the choice as I want," I revealed. "Meanwhile, I will be applying what we learned from killing Leviathan to killing Behemoth. With any luck, I'll be able to make something that does it without ruining the town he is attacking."

"Do you think you can manage that?" Legend asked, a hint of hope creeping into his voice.

"I think it cleared up a lot of questions," I responded. "And without them in the way, the target is a lot more clear. Now I just need to make it happen."