

**April 24th 2016 Brightedge City, Hall of Nevers 12:00 PM EDT**

It was hard not to grin at Donna's Brand, even though I couldn't see it anymore. She was...kind of annoyed when it solidified, but I'd talked her down (and ordered her not to mention it with various layered constraints) and she seemed at least semi-alright with it, especially when I shared that I could make her stronger.

Donna wasn't a submissive, though she could play the role if bested. She was a true blue warrior groupie. Being beaten in combat made Donna's pussy DRIP, and knowing how easily I'd done it drove her even more wild. Part of her fascination with Barbie was how skilled she is, but that wasn't the same as being able to just manhandle her.

Sadly, she was pretty low ranked, only at G, so I was only getting a thousand or so points for her. She had a good baseline though, something for me to work off of, and seeing how effective Bonebreaker was working for me, having my own semi buff muscle slut was appealing (though I'd be merging for compact muscle and definition and not bulk).

At the moment, we were meeting with Barbie, Raven, Zee, Amy, Cherry, and Dinah. Zee had been over using the Hall to try to scry for Lincoln March, and while I thought she hadn't had any luck, she'd apparently discovered more than I expected.

"So." I said as I slumped onto a couch in one of my living rooms. "Give me some non-terrible news Zee!" She stared at me, and I chuckled, saying instead. "Give me some news, Zee."

"He's at Wayne Manor." She said flatly. I raised an eyebrow, curious why she hadn't just found him then. "Took me a bit to confirm. Wayne Manor was warded heavily by my father, and reinforced by spellwork from Dr. Fate. It isn't a magical fortress or anything, but it's impossible to track people there, and there are some nasty traps. I ended up confirming it by process of elimination actually."

I glanced at Barbie. "How would March get in? And where in Wayne Manor would he be? You've been there a few times right?"

Grimacing, she nodded. "If he's where I think he is, it's going to be...unpleasant, reaching him. The traps on that place are no joke. I'm shocked he's bypassed the security even on the Manor, nevermind if he's infiltrated the bat cave. Even you would have trouble with that place. The protocols are designed to be effective against people like Superman and Black Adam."

Humming thoughtfully, I nodded. "That's not ideal. I'll have to think about this. Going in headfirst might not kill me directly, but if he has more Gotham curses like that joker abomination it WOULD soften me up for them."

I looked at Zee. "Could you help us bypass the wards from a distance? Maybe enter magically? If your dad made them..."

She shook her head. “Not how it works Nicky, sorry. Homo Magi magic is much easier to use than most, but it’s also highly individualized. No two spells are exactly the same, which makes it impossible for me to use my fathers habits and style as methods to deconstruct the wards, even if I know what they cover based on their formation.” She pointed at my demoness. “And before you ask she can’t bypass them. Fate warded the place against demons a few years ago, when someone tried to send a succubus after Batman.”

I was skeptical that the wards on the cave could keep Raven out if she decided to push it, but considering Batman lived there when he wasn’t being in space for months on end, I didn’t want to bust it up too badly when we broke in, assuming that March was even there.

Which brought us to our best bet. “It might be warded against demons, but is it warded against ghosts?” I shot Cherry a grin. “I’ve been planning to upgrade Cherry for ages anyway. She didn’t get the boost like the rest of you sadly, so it only seemed fair I kick her up to D rank first.”

Barbie looked less than enthused about that, but Zee seemed thoughtful. “That...might work. I’d have to stop at home to get some books to double check the details of the ward schemes but I think you might be able to get away with that, which is probably a good idea anyway because Jinx keeps trying to molest the new maid slash librarian. Thorn mostly scares her off, but the poor girl categorically refuses to stand up for herself.”

To my surprise, Amy seemed the most worried. “Are you sure she won’t get hurt? Back home we ward all the capitals against spirits and demons with the same ward structures.” I was surprised. My wife wasn’t arrogant or anything, but she tended to be supremely confident in us, especially me.

I could see her worry for Cherry was genuine though. My blonde might be a little psycho, but she was OUR little psycho, and Amy took our family very seriously. She considered the girls under her protection and guidance, and while that often took on a sexual tone because of the way I’d gotten them and how I lived my life, she was also protective as hell if she thought they might be at risk.

Which...was fair. I hadn’t really considered any risk to Cherry, which was a mistake on my own part. My ghost girl was hardly invincible, nor would she be later. March had shown a surprising amount of competence, and he might have some tricks up his sleeve as a System Host, even more than he’d already shown.

It wasn’t enough to really discourage me, but I felt like I at least owed her the chance to back out. “Cherry.” I said quietly. “Do you want to do this? I won’t force you. Even if I could hypothetically make you with the Brand, you know that isn’t how I like to work. March is Batman’s brother, trained to counter him, and with the power he has access to now...it could get dicey. Are you willing to try?”

Amy gave me a conflicted look, but finally nodded, smiling encouragingly. I nodded back. Cherry deserved this. She was one of mine, and I knew what was best for my girls most of the time but...if she was going to be in danger (and with a System involved who knew what might happen) she deserved the chance to weigh in on it. Even if it wasn't something I'd ever really considered before.

It was a bit of a surprise when she hurled herself at me, plastering her lithe, athletic body to mine as she hungrily mauled my mouth in front of all the other girls. Not that I gave a fuck about that nonsense. I just grabbed her ass (to secure her so she didn't fall of course) and let her mack on me for a few minutes.

Eventually, Barbie cleared her throat in annoyance, and I had to admit it was a sign of real progress that she'd actually waited to do it. "Of course!" Said Cherry hotly as she pulled back. "I'd do ANYTHING for you."

She would too, and I smiled slightly as I stared down at her. It was jarring, learning to be a human, but having Cherry around and knowing she was so much like the old me was honestly a relief. Knowing she was still as devoted made me sure I was still me.

Identity crises weren't the kind of thing I'd ever expected to have, but ever since I'd started feeling I'd started having moments where I worried this more human me might not be...me. At least not the same me. The irony of having an identity crisis because of my feelings when I LITERALLY transformed myself into other entities with my powers on the regular was not lost on me, but they could be hard to shake.

Luckily, the girls seemed to help. Seeing how much they still cared despite the changes was weirdly comforting, and Cherry was the one most like I had been before. Her trust was a big thing for me, because as long as I had it, it meant I hadn't strayed TOO far from what I used to be.

And I liked who I'd been. I'd expected to look back on my time as a sociopath with regret when I finally gained the ability to feel, but honestly, I'd do most of that shit over again. I'd had logical reasons for all my choices, even if I could see that I might have misattributed a few motivations.

I forced myself to get back on task. "Alright, then lets talk upgrades." I looked around. "You want the others to clear out? Just do this you and I?"

She gave a pondering hum as she glanced at the girls, especially Donna and Barbie, though for different reasons, but eventually shook her head. My redhead seemed surprised, and Cherry just winked at her, getting a pout from our batgirl.

Searching through my pouch, I looked for anything I'd need. I found a few items that might work, but before I could draw out more than one, she put a hand on mine. "I want you to use the Soulshredder." She said firmly. She wasn't E rank, so I'd need another object to merge, but the

soulshredder WOULD get her to D rank. And I'd put her at D rank because it would keep her safe. As much as I liked saving points for a rainy day I wasn't risking my ghost girl for the extra. I nodded, and she ran out of the room, coming back within a few minutes holding the blade.

The Soulshredder was...disqueiting. The sword was made of some kind of green stone that I hadn't really had the chance to study too thoroughly. Touching it, I could feel the cold seeping from its aura like dry ice. I'd had some impression of it before, but I hadn't reached C rank or become a full dragon when I'd seen it last, and with my current eyes it seemed...different.

I was fairly sure this thin had originally been part of something else before it had been made a sword. Something MUCH scarier than a C rank blade. It didn't matter though. Any traces of that thing I didn't want wouldn't come through in the merge. My system filtered out the bad shit.

To get her within the strike range of D rank I picked a smoky stone I'd found during my Gemworld travels that produced a mild uncertainty effect. Then I continued the merge, combining Cherry with the sword as well, and dumping the points I knew I'd need to complete it. I was left with three point one four million (heh) since cascading merges still charged for each level.

**[Appraisal function activated. Treasure detected. Charise Carnes- D ranked Crypt Queen. Dangerous undead with a penchant for entering protected tombs to rob the souls of the recently deceased, the Crypt Queen is a power in its own right within the realms of the dead. Able to tear the spirit from a living target and unstoppable by all but the most complex defenses, no one is safe from the wrath of the Crypt Queen.]**

As a C ranker myself, I could see what she was properly (the stronger I got, the less common vague cryptic appraisals became, especially on anything close to my own rank), and interestingly I was able to ignore the background info better than usual.

I'd even appraised her before she finished forming, the light fading as she returned to a coherent form. My Crypt Queen grinned at me. Black lips pulling back from bone white teeth as eerie blue eyes blazed beneath snow white curls. The silvery ball gown that draped over her body looked fantastic as she grinned up at me tantalizingly. "This..." She said slowly, her voice ringing with an unnatural echo. "This I like."