

I woke up suddenly the next morning, the realization that I was not alone yanking me from any sort of natural, gentle waking process. I had managed to sleep the whole night through, kept warm by my golem horse, only to wake up to find a handful of people, all members of the Docks community, standing at the entrance to the alleyway, watching me sleep.

"What, never seen a life-sized wooden horse before?" I asked, startling the audience.

A few of the people left as I slowly stood up and stretched. As I did, my previous words rolled around in my head a bit, and I couldn't help but shake my head.

"Your name is Troy," I said, patting my now-named steed. "I can't believe I didn't think of that before."

I put my hand on the golem to inspect it with a spell, smiling as I helped it stand up completely. The golem core was keeping the living tree alive, exactly as it was intended to. I spent a minute inspecting it, making sure everything was in top shape.

"I would call you Trojan, but that's already taken," I said with a chuckle, patting Troy's back again before turning to one of the three remaining community members. "Go get Charles and John, would you? Tell them I have something to protect for the community."

The person I was talking to's eyes went wide, and they nodded, rushing back towards the warehouse. The other people, one of whom was getting pretty close to the tarp-covered golems, took a step back as I approached. With a yank, I pulled off the tarp, exposing golems to the air and sunlight. I whistled to them, and they slowly stood, turning to orient themselves to me. As I waited for Charles and John, I went over each golem, making sure everything was in order and that the trees that made up each golem were as healthy as I could manage.

"Arcanum, good to... what the hell is that!? What is going on here?"

I turned to see John and Sarah/Mary standing there, with Charles jogging to keep up. I idly noticed that Sarah, who was also carrying a bag of groceries, looked completely calm and collected, while John had clearly run all the way here to see me.

"I would like to introduce you to your first batch of defenders," I said, gesturing to the four bipedal trees. "Four living wood golems. They are much stronger than me, a bit faster, and just about as tough. They should be more than enough to defend against low-end attacks, and when I finish with the next batch, you'll be even safer."

For a long moment, the others were silent, staring back at me while Troy pretended to eat a small tuft of grass peeking up from the concrete under our feet. It was stiff and not overly convincing, but given time, they would get more and more life-like. They might even gain a certain level of intelligence.

"You made golems... to defend against Nazis?" John asked, his eyes still wide, before he started to chuckle, shaking his head. "You really don't know how to be boring or simple, do you, Arcanum?"

"What's the point of that?" I asked. "Much more fun being unpredictable. Besides, these guys are just what we needed, something to protect the community without putting anyone in danger."

"I... do they follow commands, or...?" Charles asked, being the first to step forward.

He slowly walked around the closest hunchback tree to see it from every angle. Once he stopped, he slowly reached out, stopping before his hand made contact to ask me permission, with nothing other than a raised eyebrow.

"Go ahead. I figured I could tune them to you, John, and Sarah. That way, there will always be someone around to tell them what to do," I explained. "Other than that, they will function predominantly on their own. They will scan the area for incoming threats and adjust accordingly. Now, mind you, they aren't geniuses, more brawlers than anything, but they will get the job done, especially when we start arming them and increasing their numbers."

"How many do you intend to make?" John asked, still hanging back as he watched Charles inspect the nearest golem.

"Maybe another five or six," I explained with a vague hand gesture. "It kind of depends on what I can come up with. I probably won't make any more tree golems, even if I can whip them up the easiest. There needs to be some variety."

All three of them, even Sarah, seemed more than a bit lost about how exactly they should react to everything. Rather than let them flounder about, I started showing them exactly how they could boss the golems around, moving an old abandoned car from the parking lot next to the warehouse. A pair of golems lifted the majority of the vehicle up, carrying it away and tossing it far into a different spot so that they no longer had to worry about it.

"They aren't smart, so don't expect them to follow complicated instructions, but they should fight pretty well," I explained. "Chances are four of them could handle one or two capes, but past that, you're gonna want to sacrifice them to let everyone else run."

"They aren't... alive, are they? Like treants?" Charles asked, watching one of them carry a laundry basket of fruit away from the orchard.

"No, these are no more alive than any tree," I assured him. "Each one only cost me.... Like five hundred bucks to make, which is nothing with what I'm making from healing."

"Well... you convinced me," John admitted. "You said you could link them to us?" How would you do that?"

"First... I want you three to really, truly understand what's going on here. These are dangerous tools. Loaded weapons that I am trusting you with," I explained, looking at each of them with hard eyes. "My gut tells me I can trust you three. But if you betray that trust, I will be coming for more than a pound of flesh. These guys respond to me first, so don't think you can spin them around on me. I'm not saying you would..."

I raise my hand in defense as Charles gives me an indignant look, opening his mouth to refute the idea that he would spit on my goodwill.

"Like I said, my gut says I can trust you, but this needs to be said. I would be saying the same thing, even if I was handing these over to Miss Militia," I explained, which seemed to

mollify Charles. "If I catch you throwing them around to enforce your orders, or they start roughing innocent people up, I will track you down, and you won't enjoy the results."

Once again, I looked at each of them, meeting their eyes and really staring into their souls. I trusted them to use the golems properly, but even so, I would keep an eye on them anyway. Each of the golems had a small record of what it had been ordered to do, which meant I could check up on what they were up to. It wasn't more than a few hours, but it was enough to catch any of them abusing their power on a random inspection.

As I looked into their eyes, Charles and John looked back with determination and eagerness. After all, I was about to hand them something they could use to finally truly protect their people. Of course they were ready and eager. Sarah, however... she looked conflicted, even a little guilty. Before I could say anything, she spoke up.

"I... Think we should talk before you link me to anything," She admitted, seeming hesitant and unsure for the first time since I met her. "I would never use these poorly, but... you should know some things first."

I nodded, confused but focused on getting John and Charles set up first. Charles and John were not surprised by Sarah's admission of having secrets, but then again, she was a woman who frequently changed her name, snuck around and had the tendency to show up at just the right moments.

"Okay, that's fine," I said with a nod. "Let's start with John and Charles first, then we can talk."

She nodded and hung back as Charles and John stepped forward.

"Right! Well, first, I'm going to need to cut your thumbs a bit, and then I'll have you bleed a bit on each golem-"

"What?"

"Seriously?"

"...kinda glad I didn't agree fully yet..."

"Guys, listen. My powers... they are strange and weird, and they clearly have a theme," I explained, trying to calm them down. "But I promise you, this is nothing nefarious. Giving them a sample of your blood links them to you. Think of it as a strange security measure from some unusual tinker tech."

Both of the older men thought about it for a moment before John let out a long, begrudging sigh, stepping closer to me. He pulled out a knife, but I shook my head.

"I got something for that."

I cast a quick spell to numb his thumb before casting another bleeding that came with the ritual crafting subject. Blood was a powerful ingredient in both ritual crafting and as a sacrificial ingredient. After I cast the spell, his finger bled a lot, enough to link him to all four golems. I had him smear a "J" onto each golem's chest, the blood getting absorbed in seconds,

leaving the golem clean. Once he was done, I healed him and repeated the process with Charles.

"Alright guys... Could you...?"

Both of them nodded and left the alleyway, John patting Sarah's shoulder as he walked away. Once Sarah/Mary, and I were alone, she let out a long breath. She looked nervous but determined.

"So... I thought you deserved to know before you... well, before you hand me all that power. I'm a parahuman."

For a moment, I stared at her, doing my best not to react poorly. After all, she had no obligation to tell me, and we didn't even know each other that well outside of me helping the camp. In fact, that she is telling me at all should mean a lot. It still unsettled me, though, knowing someone around me had powers, and I had no idea.

"Anyone I would know?"

"No! Definitely not... I keep to myself on purpose," She explained, looking around for a moment before stepping closer to the alley wall.

As she stepped closer to the shadow, it got harder for me to focus on her, like my eye kept forgetting where she was supposed to be. As she got to the darker parts, she disappeared from my sight completely. After a few seconds, I watched the same effect but in reverse.

"I can blend really well with shadows. The darker, the better," She explained. "My night vision is perfect too and... I'm better when I'm in the dark."

"Better at what?"

"Everything. It's not a massive change, but I'm faster, stronger, smarter... I heal quicker, and my stamina is better. I even learn better, at least from what I can tell."

"That's impressive," I said appreciatively. "With a stealthy ability like that, I'm not surprised no one has noticed you yet."

"I try to stay out of sight, keep anyone from noticing me," She assured me. "The worst thing I've done is borrow some cash from the Merchants. I usually spend it on food for the community."

"That... is not what I would call staying out of sight, but I understand," I pointed out, putting my hand gently on her shoulder. "Why now, though? I can't imagine it was just about the golems."

"No.... I watched you help everyone when the Empire came knocking," she admitted, sounding ashamed and guilty. "I stood in the shadows and did nothing... with how dark it was, I might have actually been able to help, but instead I just watched... like a coward."

"No, Sarah. You watched like a normal human being, probably frozen in fear and conflicted emotions," I corrected, locking eyes with her as she looked at me confused. "Can you say I'm wrong?"

"I... No, I was terrified... But still should have helped!" She said with a deep frown. "I stood there and did nothing while you took on three Nazi capes by yourself."

"Sarah, do you know what kind of person jumps off of a building, throwing around lightning and fighting Nazis?" I asked, looking at her thoughtfully. "Crazy people, Sarah. Crazy people do that. Your reaction is the normal reaction. You've got nothing to be ashamed of."

Despite still being upset, she let out a slightly wet chuckle, shaking her head a bit and wiping at her eyes.

"What if... What if I want to be a crazy person, though? What if I want to help, jumping off roofs and fight?" she asked, frowning as if she still wasn't certain herself. "Watching you face down those Empire fucks... I should be doing more."

"Honestly, Sarah, just knowing you are around the community, even if you're just sneaking around, keeping an eye on people would be a big help. In fact, I could probably offer a few things to help out with that," I pointed out, waving away her confused look. "On the other hand, I won't say no to help. The Empire is going to come for me sooner or later. I wish I could just go around my own business, helping people, but they aren't going to let what I did to Alabaster go."

She looked at me for a long moment, the scarring on her face pulling and twisting as she tried her best to read me. After a while, she nodded.

"At the very least, I will continue to watch over everyone, and... I'll be more proactive in helping in the future," She assured me, though it sounded like she was assuring herself just as much as she was me. "And... maybe I'll be able to help soon."

"That's more than enough, Sarah, I-"

"Olivia," She said, cutting me off. "My real name is Olivia."

"Oh, well... It's nice to meet you, Olivia."

I reached up to my mask, and after looking around, I could feel Alya pull close and blow a cool, encouraging breeze over my shoulders. With a smile, I pulled off my mask.

"My name's William, but you can call me Will," I said, unable to keep from chuckling when she gaped at me before I slid my mask back on. "What? You told me your name and your power. It's only fair."

"You're an idiot," She responded, ultimately failing to hide her smile. "C'mon, cut me up already so you can get to making more of those fast-producing trees. I had to keep your fruit on me all day and night to keep people from eating it."

I smirked but nodded, helping her cut her thumb so I could link her to the golems. She then passed me the bag of fruit before purposely phasing into a shadow and vanishing. I couldn't help but chuckle as she disappeared.

"I'll talk to you later," I said as she faded away.

After a few seconds, I left the alley behind, the golems following behind me.