

As I continued to heal myself, I did my best to shake off the deep, creeping cold that had started to squeeze in on me. The fact that it had spiked so far made me nervous about what it would feel like to completely drain myself since, as far as I could feel, I had only been down by two-thirds. Already, my mana was regenerating, warmth suffusing itself back into my body. Unfortunately, it was becoming pretty clear I was going to be dealing with the sensation of the biting cold a lot. I would just have to learn to get used to it.

When I was fully healed, seven casts of the same spell later, I quickly dropped my stunning charges on every one of the Merchants, ensuring they would be out for a while. I also checked over the one I had tackled through his chair. I had collided with him pretty hard, but more importantly, his dumbass friend had shot me when I was kneeling over him. The shotgun had definitely not been loaded with slugs, so I wanted to make sure a stray pellet hadn't hit him.

I also dropped a stabilizing healing spell on him just to make sure his broken ribs weren't stabbing into his lungs or anything.

When I was done checking up on and stunning everyone, I got to work searching the premises. My first find was a small bag of loose bills, sitting next to the shotgun dealer. I also found a small bag filled with several different types of drugs close by, which I obviously left alone. As I moved inside, I searched the building room by room, eventually finding one with a table in the corner. There were several more organized stacks of cash, as well as another few bags of drugs. I grabbed the cash, tossing it into the bag of loose bills I had grabbed from outside.

When I was done searching the building, I stepped out through the front door, bending down to go through one of the dealer's pockets. Very carefully, I grabbed their cell phone and used it to dial 911.

"Hello, Brockton Bay Police Department. What is your emergency?" A very tired-sounding voice said from the other end. "Hello?"

"Yes, wanted to report that a Cape just rolled over a Merchant drug house down in the slums," I said. "There's about twelve of them unconscious through the building, with a whole lot of drugs around them."

"Sir, is the parahuman still on the scene?" The voice asked, with a tone that said he very much knew I was talking about myself.

"No, he is gone," I lied, standing on the front porch. "And I'm gonna join him."

"Sir, please stay on the line-"

"Sorry buddy, don't wanna get mixed up with this," I responded. "I'll leave the phone on so you can track it."

I put the phone down on the Merchant's chest, ignoring the sound of the dispatcher asking me to stay with him. I knew the chances of putting the Merchants away went up if I gave a statement, but honestly, between fingerprinting and the amount of drugs on the premises, if they couldn't make something stick, then they were too useless to engage with anyway. When the phone was resting on the dealer's chest, I took one more look around before leaving, calmly walking away to disappear into the night.

And by that, I meant I ran away as fast as I could. Between the adrenaline, what I had just done, the fear of being caught, and the anxiety from finding out my protections weren't nearly as good as I thought, all drove me to put some serious distance down. I continued to run until I was around the corner, an entire block away from the drug house. There, I slipped into an alleyway and quickly pulled off my mask, my hat, and the overcoat.

Then I continued to move, my stuff under my arm, cutting across the city back to the cover of my temporary home. I didn't stop until I finally pulled the plywood back over the window entrance to the shop. When I was sure it was secure, I sank down with my back against the wall, feeling the panic and tension I had been holding at bay finally start to dissipate.

I fucked up.

While I had been confident the geomancy absorption would be enough to protect, I had clearly been mistaken. Thank god he had been packing buckshot, or who knew what might have happened.

My mind raced as I tried to figure out where I had gone wrong. While my partional was far from the best, I was pretty sure it wasn't the problem. The only thing I could think of was the steel. If it was poor enough quality...

When my hands stopped shaking, and my breathing had returned to normal, I opened the bag of money and started to count it. I soon realized that the stacks of bills were not organized in any way, meaning I would have to pull them apart and re-count them. Scowling at the lazy bastards, I continued counting, breaking everything down into its different denominations. I was confused by the number of coins in the bottom of the bag before I remembered that they phased out the penny in this world and switched the dollar to a coin.

My final count was one thousand seven hundred and fifty-four dollars. When I was done sorting through everything, I used my metal cutting spell and some metal scraps to make money clips, storing the paper money away neatly and leaving the coins at the bottom of the bag. I then took three hundred dollars from the clips in various bills and coins before climbing up on one of the few cabinets still standing and hiding the bag in the ceiling tiles.

For a moment, I considered stepping out immediately to grab a burger or something from one of the city's few fast-food joints, but I quickly reconsidered. Depending on how the investigation went, the Police would have most likely reported the Merchant business to the PRT. While they might play it cool, more likely than not, they would be out in force, doing extra patrols and hoping to catch me. They would try to predict me using normal parahuman

standards, i.e., the more conflict, the better. Most parahumans would consider what I did tonight a good start and go looking for more trouble.

Thankfully, I didn't have a conflict drive.

All that boiled down to me being safer if I just waited until morning to get some food. Yes, running into trouble was very unlikely, and I was starting to get very hungry, but the food would be there tomorrow, and sleep was important as well.

I was being paranoid, but considering my earlier blunder, I wasn't going to push through it.

I made my way to the back room, using the single chair to jam the door closed. I then used all the clothes I had "borrowed" to make a bed for myself. It sucked, but hopefully I would have a solution soon.

I woke up the next morning sore and stiff, which a quick spell helped me work through. It was still very early, but it was officially impossible to ignore my empty stomach any longer. I made my way from my temporary home to a nearby cafe, a local equivalent of Dunkin Donuts. I bought enough food for the two of me and the largest hot chocolate they had. While I did drink coffee, I was looking for warmth and comfort right now, and nothing did that better than a lot of breakfast food and hot chocolate.

A quick walk around later, I found a run-down sitting area and plopped down on a bench. I quickly ate half my food, sipping my warm drink, my hunger getting the best of me. When I was about halfway done, my stomach stopped demanding more, so I slowed down to enjoy the rest. As I did, I started to form a general plan for what I would do next, now that I could meet my immediate physical needs.

First, I needed to buy a few things to make living on the streets a bit more palatable. Even if I spent a couple hundred bucks, the remaining cash I stole would last me two weeks, at least, as long as I didn't go too crazy buying stuff for my geomancy. That left me a lot of time to kill, since, as far as I could remember, there wasn't much going on in Brockton Bay at the moment. I was pretty sure I had a few months before Taylor decided to tango with Lung, and until then, the manufactured stalemate the PRT and Protectorate painstakingly engineered and maintained should pretty much hold.

That meant I had nothing but time on my hands, which I could spend practicing my magic and exploring the city. When my new charges came around, I would invest in something that would give me a safe location to huddle down in and survive on my own, maybe something like Arcane home crafting, Mage tower construction, or wizard lair design. Two levels in one of those topics would hopefully let me secure somewhere safe. The remaining two charges... I was tempted to put them into more healing spells. That would push my abilities into a full-fledged healer mage, which would hopefully unlock some impressive spells. After what had

happened at the Merchant house, I realized that spamming healing spells to fix every injury was going to suck in the long run.

I also briefly considered putting three points into Geomancy when I could but ultimately decided not to. While it would be interesting to see what a level three topic would look like, and I was sure there would be plenty of useful knowledge to gain, I was happy with the level I had now. Yes, I had overestimated it and gotten hurt because of it, but that was more on me than the topic itself. Geomancy very neatly filled a void in what I knew, namely my defensive magic, but I wasn't quite interested enough in what would come next to spend three of my points.

I was also worried I might do something to mess up the free charge I had gotten. I had no idea where they had come from or what they had meant, but for all I knew, the entities had just decided I would get Geomancy, and that was the only freebie I was getting. I was not going to throw points at the topic until I knew it wasn't a waste.

I did have a theory that it was just a random purchase, which was actually kind of exciting. Who knows what I would get, and who knows what sort of synergies I would be able to get out of whatever I got? I was pulling ideas for what to spend my charges on from familiar media, but who knows what other topics were out there.

Honestly, I wouldn't be too upset if I got another level of Geomancy, but the thought of another random piece of magic, at the same level of Geomancy? That was exciting.

I shook my head and focused back on my food before it could get any colder. I had plenty of time to consider my options, and agonizing over them now wouldn't help me. Though I should get some sort of notebook, in case I had any really good ideas.

When I was done eating, I took a look at the map I printed out and made my way to the closest second-hand store. It was a thirty-minute walk away, and by the time I got there, the city had picked up a bit. The store itself had a good selection and decent pricing. It seemed like the second-hand business was booming in Brockton Bay.

I spent an hour perusing the aisles, buying a decent selection of clothes, a pair of boots and gloves for when I go out in costume, a foam roll to sleep on, as well as a blanket. I bought a large duffel bag and a few hand towels as well. It would suck washing off with water from a sink, but until I could get somewhere with running water, or figure something else out, it would have to do.

I spent about two hundred and fifty dollars on various goods, but by the time I left, I felt a lot more confident about living semi-homeless. As I made my way back to the shop, I snagged a large water container from someone's recycling. I thoroughly cleaned it out and filled it up with water at a gas station on the way back. It was lukewarm at best when I finally used it, but it was enough to rinse myself off in the abandoned building's bathroom.

I changed into my second-hand clothes and stored everything I bought in the same ceiling tile as my money. I then headed back out into the city, bringing my bag with me, folded

up and tucked under my arm. My main goal for that day, and for a while after, was to start looking for somewhere I could build and secure as a base for myself. Besides that, if I happened to stumble on some higher-quality metal for my geomancy, I would definitely be bringing it back with me.

As I explored the city, I once again tried to set a list of goals and priorities. I had already achieved step one, getting enough money to sustain myself for a while. I would need more eventually, but for now, I could eat, I could clean myself, and I had things to wear. I had what I needed to survive and function as a normal human.

Next up, I needed somewhere I could work. I knew from the single level in Healing Magic that there were many different flavors of magic. Some of them were simply mana and method, like my basic spells, while others required resources. Some of them, however, like geomancy, required both and more, in the form of prolonged setup. Rituals needed ritual sites, potion making needed a dedicated workspace and enchanting needed specific tools. While I could technically do very, very, *very* low-level alchemy in nothing but a copper pot and a stove, most of these complicated, material-intensive branches of magic benefited greatly from dedicated space with various enhancements, specialized tools, and secure environments.

With the right resources, I could make my geomancy absorptions at least double what they did now, maybe even more.

But to do those sorts of things, I would need a place to set up. Somewhere secure, where inlaying the floor for a ritual circle, or replacing a portion of it with slate wouldn't be a massive waste of time and money.

Once I had a place I could feel safe in and work on my magic, then I could think about what would happen next. Probably look for a way to hunker down and avoid anyone's notice. Having some solid stealth magic, maybe three or even four levels of it could probably hide me from anything, even Scion himself, so that was an option.

I returned to the abandoned store that night, having spent a good deal of time in and around the docks, exploring the area. I had even managed to find some abandoned construction materials. With a quick spell, I filled my duffel bag with some much higher-quality steel in the form of rebar and piping. It was all covered in rust, but that didn't matter. I went to sleep with a smile, satisfied that I had spent my day well.

The next morning, I woke up and took a walk to the nearest gas station for water and a quick breakfast before walking back to "shower" and change. When I was done with that, I applied some geomancy absorption, carefully hiding my stuff again before once again heading out. I explored the docks again, this time remembering to make a note of where the steel was on my map for when I needed more. A bit later into the afternoon, I made my way back to my shop, grabbing some lunch on the way and reapplying the steel absorption. Then I left again, heading into the city. When it got too late, I returned home for the final time, set up my bed, and called it a night.

I woke up the next morning five days into my new life and started it much the same as the day before. A trip to the gas station, my new morning routine, more geomancy, and finally leaving to explore the city.

By now, I could feel it start to tug at my thoughts. I was wasting my time, doing nothing, pretending I was doing something worthwhile. I pushed it down, of course, because I had to. I had already made some questionable choices attacking the Merchants out of desperation, but now that I was okay for a little while, I was not going to be so quick to jump at risks.

When I finally retired for the night, my sleep was fitful, filled with tossing and turning. What sleep I did get wasn't enough, and when I woke up, I was bleary-eyed and still very tired.

I stayed in my foam pad bed for a long time, staring up at the ceiling.

It had been six days since I first arrived on Earth Bet. Six days spent running around, jumping between ideas, desperate to do anything but consider what had actually been happening. Anything to keep my mind off of what the future held for this world.

A future that I now shared.

What was I doing? What was my goal? I had been running around Brockton Bay like a chicken with my head cut off, but I was no closer to answering either of those questions than when I first woke up here. Sure, survival was a given. I had no intention of giving up, lying down, and waiting for death to take me. But beyond that? What did I want?

I growled at my own indecision, finally rolling out of my bed and pacing around the store. I had a week and a day left before my charges returned. My primary concern was building or making somewhere safe for me to stay, somewhere I could practice magic and work without being interrupted or even found.

But just killing time until my next refill was not going to work. I wasn't some white knight, self-sacrificing hero, and I never agreed with the Peter Parker mindset. But I couldn't just do *nothing*. Just walking around the city, pretending to be busy, wasting time, and waiting for more charges would drive me insane.

I wanted to do something. I wanted to be useful. I wanted...

I wanted to help.

I could sit back, do nothing, and coast on my powers until I had the perfect combo to survive or even beat Scion. But I didn't want to. I wanted to help.

Yes, staying alive was my first priority. That meant being careful, especially at first, and building a base was a solid next step... But even while I was doing that, I could help people. I could even help without putting myself in danger. Well, no more than I was normally in a world like this.

My mind made up, I quickly got dressed and exited the store. I had a phone call to make, and there was no way I was doing that anywhere near here.