

With the window now sealed, my eyes quickly adjusted to the dark interior. It wasn't completely dark, as there were too many gaps in the boards for that. I had also bought a battery pack that was currently running some lights, just enough to make the place livable. I charged them with a rather handy lightning spell.

I looked around, making sure that I was alone. Call me paranoid, but with thousands of parahumans, or capes as they were frequently called by the public, I was a bit slow to trust my surroundings.

The front of the shop had been a mess of broken shelving, cabinets, and other junk, which I had thankfully been able to sort through and break down. There was still a pile of trash tucked into one of the closets, but with the place at least partially cleaned up, I could almost pretend I wasn't squatting.

As I looked around the area, a breeze blew in, picking up as it passed me. Dust started to swirl a bit as, before my eyes, Alya took her physical form in front of me. Her hair, which was cobalt blue around her head, fading into white and dark gray at the ends, flowed over her shoulder, never quite going completely still. She could almost pass for a pale, rather tall human woman if not for her long ears, angular features, and swirling blue eyes. Also, her body had a tendency to flicker and fade, only to reform seconds later. I knew she could stop that if she focused, but why would she when we were alone?

"Well done, William," She said with a warm smile. "You did a fantastic job helping that woman and the poor girl."

"Yeah... Mission accomplished," I said, returning her smile. "Got a single point for it, just waiting to be spent."

"We both know that was just a bonus," She responded with a knowing grin. "You would have happily helped for absolutely nothing."

Rather than answering her directly, I shrugged, stepping by her to sit down at the old, ratty, but relatively clean couch I had grabbed from off the street one night. I could feel her clearly when she was this close, the connection between our souls making talking technically unnecessary.

Alya was my familiar of sorts, a soul-bound Air and Wind elemental, and my second boon for being stranded here in this world without my consent. She was carrying a small sliver of my soul, which bound her to me at a level that was far beyond anything I was capable of. I was unlikely to reach the level of magic to understand it for a very long time.

As an air elemental, she was capable of becoming invisible as she blended with her element, spreading her senses and consciousness around a vast area. She could whisper into my ear from long distances, muffle sounds around herself and move around incredibly fast. The downside to that was her durability or lack thereof. Anything more than ten or fifteen pounds of weight or force caused her physical form to almost pop, reducing her to rapidly dispersing

clouds. Still, she had been an incredible asset and part of the reason I was still sane, keeping me grounded as I came to terms with my new situation.

Hell, she was the only reason I had money to eat and buy the few things I could, having spent quite a few nights spread out around the city, finding lost and abandoned things worth selling and even a few forgotten caches of cash, probably dead drops for the gangs. We stopped once we realized that showing up at the pawn shops with new stuff to sell every day was going to draw more attention than it was worth. Still, we had a couple thousand dollars tucked into the ceiling tiles above the back room.

"Have you decided what you will do with your reward?" She asked, floating down beside me on the couch.

I frowned and chewed the inside of my lip, shaking my head.

"It's a toss-up between saving it and what we discussed before," I responded, leaning back on the couch.

I closed my eyes and dove back into my mind, viewing the purely mental layout of my powers. It wasn't anything cut and dry, like a menu or a readout, but I could still sense it like I had somehow gained an extrasensory ability.

At first, my ability might seem complicated, but thankful the entities that stranded me here included a pretty comprehensive understanding alongside the power itself. I got six charges every other week, and at the very moment, Sunday night became Monday morning. I could spend that charge on any subject of magic that I could think of. If the subject was broad, the charge was more spread out, and while I was getting more knowledge, the potency was lower.

For example, if I spent a charge on healing magic, I would receive a spread of all healing magic, from enchantments and potions to rituals and spells. However, all of this knowledge would be incredibly low potency, with most of it being useless. On the other hand, when I spent a charge in healing *spells*, the information I gained was restricted to actively cast healing spells, but the potency of those spells was high enough to actually be useful. Even better, when I invested two more points to raise the topic to its second level, my repertoire and understanding expanded even more. As far as I could tell, I was the equivalent of a competent first-year college student, focusing on healing spells for his education.

I even got a decent download of basic first aid since several healing spells required some action before they were cast, like setting a bone before casting a bone healing spell.

On top of my purchases, I also had two extra additions. The first was a seemingly random gift that I had no control over. Shortly after arriving, but after Alya had found the shop, I randomly gained two levels of a topic called "Geomancy." It was honestly perfect and exactly what I needed, which made me think that whatever the source was, they were on our side.

Geomancy was a ritual adjacent form of magic that used something called a geomantic partional, basically, a unique ritual circle carved into stone, or in my case concrete, that allowed a mage to transfer certain properties of stone and metal to their own bodies. With two charges, I was capable of taking eight pounds of steel and transferring a significant portion of strength and durability to myself.

As a squishy, vulnerable standard human, it was extremely comforting and useful.

With my current setup and materials, it was far from perfect, but I still rarely left the shop without absorbing something, even if it was usually the subpar steel scrap from all of the shop's shelving.

Eventually, I would switch to something like tungsten or titanium, but that was once I had more money to burn and wasn't worried about attracting attention.

For a while, I briefly considered putting three of my future points in geomancy but ultimately dismissed the idea. 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, geomancy very neatly filled a void in my magic, namely my strength and defenses, but I was satisfied with its capabilities for now.

I was also curious if its purchase had just been random and if I would get another random topic, which was actually kind of exciting. Honestly, I wouldn't be too upset if I got another level of geomancy, but the thought of another random magical topic at the same level of geomancy? That was 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?

So that was my power. So far, I had two levels in geomancy, two levels in healing spells, and two levels in lightning spells. Alya and I had discussed my offensive options for a while, eventually settling on elemental spells, specifically lightning. We had chosen that because not only was it flexible for power output, in case I needed to take down a brute or unpowered civilian, but it also worked well with Alya.

Alya and my connection was soul-deep, as her consciousness was literally made around a tiny sliver of my soul and my magic. This meant that she was always going to grow with me, rising in power as I did. She couldn't perform magic per se, but since I now had some decent skill with lightning spells, she had gained a small sliver of storm aspect. It wasn't much, and using it really tired her out, but if I continued to grow in power, learning more and more lightning spells and further attuning myself to that element, so would her capabilities.

Besides, in a world where a bit of static shock could ruin a computer worth thousands of dollars, being able to generate something akin to a very low-level stun baton for a few seconds was more than enough to be useful.

"I think testing the waters is a good idea, but having a charge on hand for emergencies is more important," Alya said, repeating her earlier opinion. "Getting a preview of what you might need might be more efficient, but keeping it in reserve is safer."

"I know, you're right," I said, nodding in agreement as I opened my eyes. "Alright, I'll keep it for now. Can always just spend it later if I change my mind."

"Of course," Alya said, rolling her eyes at me. "I'm going to continue searching, William."

I nodded, giving her a wave before she disappeared, her physical form swirling away into the air. I could feel her close by, but diffusing herself like that meant the connection was a bit less direct. She was around, not standing next to me. That feeling shifted as she moved away, her invisible, intangible form no doubt floating above and through the building. Currently, she was looking for a large amount of slate, so I could remake my geomantic partional, the ritual circle I used for geomancy. My current one was currently carved into the concrete floor of the shop, which I had exposed by prying up the linoleum tiles.

Concrete, though, was heavily influenced by its man-made nature, meaning that it made filtering out unwanted aspects of the metal I was using extremely difficult. Even now, I could feel the extra thirty pounds weighing down on me. My enhanced strength stopped it from being detrimental to my movement, but I could feel it in my own momentum. I could also feel a slight decrease in flexibility.

I would be able to get rid of those unwanted aspects, as well as prolong the duration and increase the potency with a better setup, but that required materials. Most of them I could buy easily, but the slate wasn't exactly something I could buy cheap at CVS.

Alya was searching through abandoned buildings for slate countertops or slate tiling. It was unlikely we would find anything, but she disliked sitting still, and I wasn't about to stop her from helping out. She had made it perfectly clear that she was not human, so things like overworking her or me basically having complete control over her was not an issue. It still felt weird, but apparently, she was more than happy about the situation.

According to her, natural, unbound elementals were thoughtless aspects of nature that had no intelligence or emotions. They just simply existed, like a naturally occurring computer, in worlds and realities where magic steeped more deeply into the fabric of the material plane. Binding an elemental to yourself was incredibly potent magic, but in the process, she gained active thought, a sense of will and desire, and emotions. She insisted it was a more than fair deal, and she was happy to work for me until the day that I died, which she fully expected to be a very, very long time.

For obvious reasons, I was very interested in learning the magic required to replicate the binding process since she insisted it was beneficial to both parties, but she assured me it was likely to take several levels to fully understand the process, which I just couldn't spare at the moment. Even worse, I wouldn't be able to bond with another elemental until my soul had a chance to heal fully, or I risk damaging it.

Not exactly something I liked the sound of, so I reluctantly put the plans of an elementary strike force to the back of my mind.

Not long after Alya left, I started cleaning out the geomantic partional. The unique ritual consisted of seven circles that surrounded and connected to a larger central circle. Dozens of arcane symbols and lines were carved around each of these circles. At the moment, each of those symbols was caked in soot, but while performing the absorption they would contain my blood. It wasn't much, just a drop per symbol, but the whole thing was still a grisly process, only made palatable by a numbing and cutting spell from the healing spells topic.

I was really looking forward to when I didn't do that anymore, but at least there were only three or four dozen symbols. Generally speaking, the more symbols, the more complicated the spell or action you were attempting to perform with magic. That's what separated rituals from spells. Even the most skilled archmage could only control his mana through a dozen, maybe two dozen free-floating symbols. But rituals could contain hundreds, even thousands of those symbols, the mana guided through them through the caster's blood or other medium.

I was just finishing up the final circle of symbols when I felt Alya's familiar presence return.

"Welcome back," I said, sitting back and wiping my brow. "Find anything?"

"I have searched all surrounding abandoned buildings in this part of town and beyond," She responded, her form swirling into shape as she talked. "I'm afraid I have yet to find any slate."

"Yeah... I can't say I'm very surprised," I responded with a frown. "It's fine, I'll just have to buy some."

"A task for tomorrow," She said, not so subtly pointing out it was time for some rest.

"I doubt anything is open now anyway," I responded with a chuckle. "But it is time for some sleep."

I quickly washed my hands and cleaned up my work, before setting up my bed, which was just the couch with the back cushions removed to give myself a little room. I said goodnight to Alya, who responded in kind before she vanished. I could still feel her, but now she was all around the shop, keeping watch while I slept.