

I woke up with a swirling, all-encompassing headache. It felt like my brain had been scooped out of my skull, put in a blender, and pureed before being poured back into my head. My thoughts felt slippery and heavy, like trying to move something massive while anchored to the bottom of a large river. After an indeterminate amount of time, somewhere between a few minutes and a couple thousand years, it started to fade. When it had passed enough for my memory to return, my situation did not improve. My thoughts still felt impossible to direct, slow to respond, and difficult to grasp, except now I remembered where I was and what had happened.

I died.

I kicked the bucket, bought the farm, bit the dust, gave up the ghost, and cashed in my chips.

I died surrounded by people looking down at me, their phones out, recording as I gurgled and gagged on my own blood and shards of my ribcage. A car, some dinged-up old shitbox, had slammed into me going way too fast for the road they were on, flung me across the street, where I skidded to a stop along the sidewalk.

It was surprising how clear my thoughts had been at that moment. I knew instantly I was dying. No amount of doctors or medicine would be able to separate the shredded remains of my internals from what was supposed to be my skeleton.

Then, as the light faded, I slipped away. The last thing I managed to do in my old world was to lose control over what little of my bowels were still intact.

Then, I woke up. The people were gone, but I immediately wished they weren't because now I was surrounded by eldritch horrors beyond what any mortal man should ever encounter. I was told in no uncertain terms that I had been chosen, that I was being taken and sent somewhere to participate in a forced after-death adventure. I was then informed that there were no alternatives, that I had no choice in the matter, and that they weren't even going to tell me what powers they would give me.

I had the oddest sensation that someone had pissed them off.

Thankfully, they did give me a minor boon since they weren't giving me any choice or say. I was Blank Spot, with a pinch of Someone Else's Problem added in, to keep me from being attacked immediately for not belonging or standing out. At the time, having no idea where I was going, I had only been mildly thankful. Being a Blank Spot would undoubtedly come in handy, after all, but most settings didn't really require that level of protection, right? Right?

Yeah, I won't pretend that was my smartest conclusion.

Beyond that singular boon, the only assurance that I got was that my power was potent enough to make a difference and even come out on top.

As long as I didn't fuck up and waste my potential.

Then, without another chance to ask questions, they dope slapped me with the aforementioned headache to beat all headaches and dropped me into a new reality. A hell world from a grimdark story known as Worm.

As I'm sure anyone familiar with the setting would understand, the first day I spent on Earth Bet was a blur. The process of dying, getting snatched up, and then getting dumped in a new reality had already clearly messed with my head, the shock of finding out where I was had only sealed the deal. I stumbled around the city, my mind so utterly blown, my panic and despair so deep that it felt like they both spiraled together, looped around, and somehow drove me into a quasi-drunken state.

My thoughts wouldn't connect, and reason flew out the window. It was a miracle I wasn't mugged or hit by another car, because while I certainly remembered staggering across streets and through rough neighborhoods, I have no recollection of following pedestrian laws or basic logic.

I desperately muttered and prayed that something else was going on. Maybe that mental breakdown I was always looking forward to had finally happened. I was hallucinating all of this, none of this was real, not me dying, not my conversation with cosmic powers beyond my understanding, and definitely not waking up in Brockton FUCKING BAY!

What little chunk of denial I had been clinging to was utterly pulverized when I spotted a blonde-haired teenager soaring above the street without a care in the world. I could even feel a slight tingle of awe and wonder as she did, my eyes following her as she passed above me, flying down the road. When she was gone, I remembered diving into an alleyway and hiding behind a dumpster, the shock leaving me a gibbering mess for over an hour. I only left when a pair of rats, big enough to give their New York cousins a good fight, started eyeing me up like I was their next meal.

When I woke up the next day, I felt much more grounded, even if I had spent the night hiding in an abandoned building, some sort of shop at the tail end of what I think was the commercial district. Its windows were shattered, and its interior was covered in graffiti, but there was a back room that was mostly clean, and, more importantly, dry. It was raining when I managed to find my way inside, and while it was surprisingly warm for a vague winter month, the rain would have absolutely killed me if I had tried to sleep in it.

For a while, after I woke up, I laid there in what had once been a break room, looking up at the bottom of a table, counting the pieces of dried gum stuck to it, trying to calm myself. I was stranded here, and while the entities that stuck me here, not to be confused with the entities I was stuck here *with*, had promised me power, they hadn't thought to explain them to me.

I needed to stay calm and figure out what I could do before this whole involuntary isekai, ROBed, translocation fuckery ended with me dead shortly after arrival. This world was a charnel house of conflict and bad luck. Somehow, I had survived unmolested one day, but I wasn't going to rely on miracles much longer. This reality ran on suffering, I would be damned before I let myself be fuel for the pyre.

Eventually, I couldn't ignore my current location anymore, so I carefully crawled out from under the table. There was a singular intact chair tipped over in the corner, so I grabbed it, flipped it right side up, and sat down at the table, leaning against it heavily.

The promise I had received from the entities was that whatever I could do would be enough to survive this hellhole. That promise made me think that my powers would not be simple. Scion was about as close to a god as you could get in a setting without a concept of divinity, so there was no way I stood a chance against him with the standard flying brick powerset.

It took a good fifteen minutes of sitting there, trying to activate a variety of powers, looking and sounding like an idiot as I did, for me to finally identify something different. In my mind, with a sense that I was pretty sure was completely new, I could feel five charges.

"...Inspired Inventor?" I mumbled to myself, leaning back in my chair. "Not bad..."

I could work with that. The ability to pull knowledge from nowhere, to become an inventor on a scale that even the most powerful tinkers could only dream of... There was a lot of potential there, a lot of room for growth, especially if I was allowed to expend my charges on things from fictional settings, like Fallout tech or maybe even Stark-Tech.

I began to fantasize about the idea of just what I would eventually be able to do with such a versatile ability. Sure, I would have to take it slow and keep myself off of everyone's radar, but eventually, I would be unstoppable.

I could instinctively feel that my charges would refresh in two weeks, or rather a week and six days. That was unfortunate, as I was pretty sure the original version of Inspired Inventor included getting points every *day*. Still, again, as long as I played my cards right, this would work.

I could also feel some of the more basic rules, such as how broad topics would require more levels to master but would obviously contain more knowledge. Further, each incremental increase would cost as many charges as its level, meaning the first level was one charge, the second was two, the third was three, and so on and so forth. All this meant was that progress would be slow... and I would probably need to find a job at first...

I shook my head a bit, pushing that to the side for the moment. What happened next was something I could worry about later. For now, I had a superpower to mess with.

Since I was probably going to work a lot with recycled materials, putting a point into recycling and salvaging was a pretty safe bet in terms of testing. With any luck, it was such a precise and limited category that a single point would be enough to get some significant knowledge.

I focused for a moment, trying to figure out how to push the charge into my chosen topic, only to frown when it refused, resisting the shift like two powerful magnets with identical poles facing each other. I tried again, this time simply focusing on salvaging. This time, I could feel slightly less resistance, but it still refused to connect.

I spent what felt like an hour trying to slide a single charge into a topic, any topic. I tried fictional stuff, real concrete science, and even some of the science buzzwords I had picked up over the years, but none of them worked. Some of the more esoteric sciences seemed to have less resistance, but all of them failed to accept the charge.

On a lark, partially driven by frustration, I pushed a singular charge to steampunk, visualizing every style of the genre that I could think of. Most of them, the scientific, steam, and coal-based ones failed to even vaguely connect. Then my thoughts drifted towards the more esoteric, magical steampunk, the kind with fancy glowing crystals and arcane symbols etched in brass.

And it almost connected.

My mind raced, and I stood in surprise, shifting to pace around the room, my boots crunching on broken glass and trash. I could feel it as the charge danced against the topic. The problem was science and tech. The charge had been all too happy to connect to the magical portion of the concept.

I stopped my pacing and closed my eyes, mentally putting together the idea of healing magic, spells like Cure and Cura, regeneration enchantments, and healing rituals. I focused on the very concept of using magic to cure someone of what ails them before sliding a single charge into its slot.

The charge instantly diffused into the concept I was focusing on, and my mind was washed over with a stream of information. Dozens of ways to heal minor scrapes and cuts, soothe illnesses, and purify poisons. I knew rituals, incantations, alchemic formulas, minor enchantments, and more. On top of that, I had a general understanding of how these minor spells worked, and how different healing energies, of which there were a few kinds that I now knew about, could enter into a body and assist the healing process. About how regeneration magic would help the body naturally heal, while a more direct healing spell would heal the body as a function of the spell itself.

When the constant stream of information was finally over, I took a long moment to recover before tentatively scanning through it. It was installed seamlessly into my mind, like an extremely well-practiced piece of information, something that was foundational to something I was very familiar with. Even so, there was still a slightly different feeling about it, like someone had painted a wall, let it sit for a year, and then painted a square with the same exact paint. The paint might literally match, but from the wear and tear, what was old and new was easily distinguishable.

When I got over the bizarre feeling of the new knowledge, I focused on the knowledge itself. The same sixth sense I had about the charges from before, the one that helped me feel the rules of the system, told me that this was level one of many, basically the lowest level of healing knowledge. None of the spells, rituals, enchantments, or other magical methods I now knew would heal anything but minor injuries, and that was only some of the longer, more complicated rituals. Most of the spells would help with minor abrasion and papercuts, but no more. Some of them were spammable, but those were even less powerful, and would still take my energy.

It was hard to categorize and simplify such a wide, massive category, but in general, if magic was taught in schools, this singular charge was just barely past elementary school-level stuff.

I frowned and sat heavily down in the room's singular seat, shaking my head. Despite the fact that the experiment was a success and I finally understood what my power was, it was also clear I had already fucked up. The frustration from failing to figure out what tech concept would work, combined with the relief of getting my first lead, had made me impulsive, and now I was down a whole charge with nothing to show for it beyond the ability to fix the kind of damage you do to yourself by scratching an itch over-enthusiastically.

There were a few bits that might prove useful, especially a few always-on effects that would increase regeneration and healing in certain areas or by wearing enchanted items, but even those effects were small.

If I had just focused on something smaller, something like healing spells or just healing rituals, the charge would have gone much further, maybe even all the way to a figurative high school graduate level.

Metaphorically, at least.

I let out a long breath, doing my best to let go of my disappointment and frustration. This was an important lesson learned, and it helped me understand my magical version of an Inspired Inventor. While it was an expensive lesson, it was probably a necessary one. No more putting charges in without seriously considering exactly what my intent was, what I wanted to get out of it, and if there was a less expensive alternative that would get me further ahead.

Once I had released my lingering annoyance, I focused back on my charges. I now had four, which meant, at max, I could get one topic to level two and another to level one. I instinctively knew I could save the charges, but unfortunately, I needed every advantage I could get at the moment, so saving really wasn't an option. Later, when I was more capable of defending myself, I could start looking for more significant purchases, saving points, and planning much further into the future.

First up, I needed something simple to defend myself with. Something that I could scale up or down depending on the situation and something that would play nice with any future knowledge. My first thought was to pick an element of some kind, electricity and lighting popping up first. It was simple enough that one charge would probably give me some decent options while also most likely scaling well. Even better, I could scale it up to take down brutes or scale it down to take down normal thugs.

Plus, who didn't want to throw around lightning?

After a bit more thinking I finally spent the next charge, focusing specifically on actively cast and manipulated lightning magic.

As the charge sank into place, the difference was immediate. Where the healing charge had quickly been used up on the massive foundation of all things healing, the foundation for casting lightning magic was done almost immediately, the remaining energy from the charge pushing further and deeper into what I was gaining. My understanding of how to use my mana to conjure, throw, absorb, and fire out blasts of electricity quickly grew.

I looked down at my right hand, focusing my mana down on my palm, swirling it around and around in a circle.

*"Fulgur parvum fragmentum!"* I declared, hand held out.

In a split second, a disk of blue energy formed around my palm before a singular spark of electricity lashed out and slammed into a nearby fridge. It all happened in the blink of an eye, the spark leaving a singular heated spot on the fridge door, chipping paint and denting the metal just enough to notice.

I lashed out again, this time keeping my mouth closed. A second spark of electricity lashed out, this one noticeably weaker. Just as the information in my head said, it would, not declaring the spell greatly reduced its effectiveness. The sign of a master was being able to cast a spell at full power, even beyond full power, while staying completely silent.

It seemed that while I was able to download untold magical knowledge directly into my brain, I wouldn't be able to escape practicing with it. Still, it was hard to beat being able to manipulate electricity after doing nothing but investing a mental point into it.

I fired off the spark a few more times before eventually stopping. I couldn't help but chuckle before finally focusing my attention on my remaining three points.

I definitely *wasn't* laughing like a madman.