

My thoughts were stuck in gridlock for a long few minutes before I finally shook my head. I needed to get out, a change of scenery to help my thinking. Brockton Bay was a coastal town, a walk down by the boardwalk would do the job just fine. I needed to think, and sulking in the back of an abandoned store wasn't the best place for that.

Pulling my jacket on a bit tighter, I walked out of the back room and made my way to the window I vaguely remembered crawling in through. The rest of the building had been boarded up, but the plywood covering this particular window was loose, something I noticed despite my less-than-stellar condition. I climbed out through the window, stepping out into an empty, trash-covered alleyway. This time, rather than leave it open, I carefully wedged the plywood back in place, so it appeared to be boarded up still.

With any luck, it would dissuade other homeless people from giving it a look.

I made my way out of the alley, looking left and then right before looking back and taking a left. As I walked, I let my thoughts wander a bit, trying to figure out what I should do next.

My need for food and water was still obviously important, but as I walked, looking at buildings and passing cars, I realized that information was also something I desperately needed. While I could tell it was either early winter, or maybe very late fall, I did not have a specific date or any idea what was going on. With how little I paid attention the previous day, this could be post-Leviathan for all I knew. I highly doubted it was, but I just didn't know for sure. I needed more information before doing anything.

Part of the problem was that it had been a while since I read the original story. I had read plenty of fanfiction, but the original story? It had spent a long time hanging out in the back of my mind, plenty of time for it to fade and for whole chunks to disappear, or worse, get replaced by non-canon information.

I frowned and stopped, looking back the way I had come. I seemed to remember Taylor using the public library to do some research, which meant computers I could probably use as well. As limp as it was, that was about as good a start as I could get.

Unfortunately, I had no idea where I was in relation to the city's public library. I was pretty sure I was somewhere in the Docks area of town, the portion that wasn't wholly abandoned or complete trash. Thankfully, I wasn't the kind of person to struggle through on my own out of stubbornness, so after a few short conversations with people walking by, I finally had some proper directions.

As I crossed from the Docks and into Downtown, I couldn't help but frown and shake my head at the nearly comical shift from downtrodden and struggling to well-off and stable. It was like someone had taken the time to draw a line around a chunk of the city, and somehow, everyone agreed that it was legitimate. Any worse and I would have expected to see a physical line on the ground, with any buildings, greenery, or anything in between bisected to have a broken down side and a flourishing clean side.

Eventually, after about an hour and a half, I finally made it to the library. Ten minutes later, and after a long conversation with a sweet but overly nosy librarian, I had temporary permission to use the computers. Not long after that, I sat down in front of one of the ancient-looking machines and began to fill in some of the blanks. The first thing I learned was that I was too late to save Taylor from triggering, since it was late January, and I was pretty sure she triggered early January.

That was unfortunate to learn, not just because I wanted to save Taylor from experiencing that horror. By preventing her trigger event and putting a permanent end to her bullying, I could have potentially completely avoided the future headache that was Skitter. Plus, I wasn't nearly cold enough to ignore that situation, either. I wasn't about to simp to the Queen of Escalation, but not doing anything to help would have been pretty fucked up.

Shaking my head, I continued to read through some local news, trying to spot anything I might be able to use. It seemed like the E88 was on a recruitment drive, which was wonderful, and the ABB was tightening its grip on its own territory. Honestly, everything I read seemed to scream, "We know everything is on fire. Please just move on and do the best you can."

It was horrifying, but at the same time, considering the state of the world, it wasn't so hard to believe that people would be too worn down and broken to think there were any other options. It also explained the public obsession with parahumans to a degree. In a world that was very obviously spinning down the drain, of course people would idolize anyone who gave them hope.

I'm pretty sure Contessa had something to do with that as well.

After a few more minutes of catching up on local news, I pulled up a map of Brockton Bay, printed it out, and then spent some more time marking a few important things. There were a few different places where I could probably source some metal, a handful of shops that might have the non-precious gems I was hoping to find, a few supermarkets, and the three goodwill stores around the city. Once that was set, I left the library behind, waving to the librarian as I did.

With some of the basic information I was struggling with answered, it was time to start moving forward. I needed to stop putting off my choices and figure out what the hell I was going to do.

I walked down the front entrance of the Brockton Bay Central Library, stopping and sitting down on one of four benches along the sidewalk. I sat there, looking out at the streets, watching people go about their day. People were visibly less withdrawn in this part of town, lacking the hunched-over, urgent walk people did when they knew trouble was all around them.

I sat there for a few minutes, just watching, considering my options. I could start looking for a job, something under the table, or even something temporary. Manual labor was something I was pretty familiar with, having grown up working several such jobs.

Despite knowing it was the safest route, something about finding a day job felt... wrong. Maybe having powers was already getting to me, but the idea of waiting tables, digging ditches, or finding a construction company to work with sounded like a step backward, not forward. I would do it if I had to... but only if I really had to.

Not to mention, with the state of this city, something told me finding a job would be one hell of a miracle. I mean, the dock workers must be hemorrhaging people like a head wound, all of them looking for work. There was no way there were any manual labor or entry-level jobs just waiting around for me to stumble into.

My other option was to use my powers. I could, hypothetically, go to a scrapyard and hope I could find something pure enough to use as a source for my Geomancy. I knew that scrap yards and similar spots were under surveillance for Tinkers, but one guy walking out with a pipe or a handful of screws wasn't going to set off any alarms. Metal was cheap, and as long as it was a consistent alloy, it really didn't matter what alloy I used. In fact...

I groaned and rubbed my face, realizing that, in all likelihood, I could have pulled apart the fridge in the lounge or any other metal stuff in the abandoned shop to use for materials. I had spells designed to cut and trim metal to make the absorption ritual easier, which would make quick work of most metal scrap. The floor was probably concrete under the linoleum tiles, too.

"Son of a bitch," I muttered, shaking my head and leaning back on the bench.

So, apparently, I had everything I really needed to set up a low-level Geomancy absorption ritual. I suppose that proves that, even if I was getting a whole lot of knowledge downloaded into my brain, locked in, and positioned perfectly for near instinctual use, I was still completely capable of being an idiot.

I rubbed my face, trying to work out my frustrations before letting out an annoyed huff.

Stupidity aside, the question still remained. What was I going to do with my powers? I could go hunting, a risky proposal that could land me in a lot of trouble, including but not limited to, an early grave. Alternatively, I could wander into the Brockton Bay Hospital and offer my healing. It would kick off one hell of a shitstorm, I'm sure, and certainly catch the attention of damn near everyone. Everyone wanted a healer, even the people who already had one. The PRT and Protectorate would certainly show up and start asking questions.

If I started healing people or even walked into the hospital and offered to heal people, every major gang in the city would know about me by the end of the day. Hell, every major player in New England was likely to stop what they were doing and question if it was worth it to try and snag me up.

On the other hand, if I kicked down a few merchant dealers, grabbed some cash, and destroyed some drugs, I would just be some random vigilante, new on the scene and looking to

cut his teeth on the city's most useless gang. Sure, I would still pop up on people's radar, but not front and center as someone they *needed* to have.

How fucked up was it that going out to hunt down drug dealers for cash was actually *less* dangerous than going to a hospital to heal people? Sure, I would be in danger while cracking skulls, but I wouldn't immediately be the cape scene's most valuable rookie.

For a moment, I considered going to the Protectorate, only to shake my head. Depending on how you read the original, the Protectorate either came off as useless and ineffective or downright negligent. Once they got a sniff of my real power, AKA the real greatest trump of all time, they would never let me go. I hate to think how far Alexandria would go when she realized what my real power was.

The Protectorate was not an option.

That just left raiding Merchant dealers for cash. I wasn't exactly happy about it, but it was the safest option for now. Thankfully, with each of my spells coming with a bit of understanding on how to fight with them, I was pretty sure I could handle it.

I left the library behind and walked my way through the streets of Downtown Brockton Bay, heading right back to where I woke up that morning. I hadn't wasted quite a hundred percent of my time, as the map and several spots I researched would come in handy, but it certainly wasn't the most efficient morning ever.

When I finally arrived back at the shop, I walked around to the back and entered through the same window as before, this time doing my best to re-attach the plywood from the inside. It wasn't perfect, but it was better than nothing.

Once inside, I began inspecting the broken remains of the shop interior. There was plenty of scrap metal in the form of cheap shelving, metal fixtures, and other scrap, but the vast majority of it was covered in metal paint. I could work with that, but it would be easier with enhanced strength.

After about fifteen minutes of searching, I finally found what I needed. While the metal shelving was all painted, the reinforcement metal skeleton inside was not.

*"Scalpere metallum,"* I intoned, focusing my mana on my finger.

My energy spun up and around my pointer finger, spiraling around it until it reached the tip. An arcane symbol flashed, and the small, glowing blue blade extended from my finger. It was just about the most basic metal-cutting spell out there, but it came free with Geomancy, so I wasn't about to complain.

With my tool conjured, I got to work cutting the metal reinforcements free, continuing until I had about five pounds of metal. I set that aside on one of the few remaining cabinets before starting to clear a chunk of space. Then, using a chunk of sharpened scrap, I began

peeling up the linoleum. After fifteen minutes, I managed to clear around a seven-foot square, exposing surprisingly clean concrete below.

*"Scalprum lapis."*

Using a similar mana method as the metal cutting spell, but ending on two flaring symbols, I conjured a tool for carving stone, testing it on the very corner of the concrete. After confirming it worked, I gathered some scraps to use as a straight edge guide and crude rulers. I got to work, kneeling down on the floor and carving away.

Nearly two hours later, I wiped the sweat off my face and leaned back, studying my work. Seven circles surrounded and were connected to a large central circle. Dozens of arcane symbols and lines were carved around each of these circles, each symbol highlighted with a few drops of my blood, which was rubbed into the concrete. While I could identify it as a harmless geomantic partional, anyone without my knowledge would assume it was something much worse. The whole thing was a grisly process, only made palatable by a numbing and cutting spell from the Healing Spells topic. Of course, I also needed to heal the damage I was doing to myself.

It was crude, had a few mistakes, and was built using lackluster materials, but it would work.

I carefully cut up and distributed the metal chunks, each of the seven circles getting an equal portion. Once everything was in place, I performed the last step of preparation.

I stripped off my clothes.

Now buck naked, I gingerly climbed into the core circle, sitting down in the center and crossing my legs. Trying to ignore my unease at being nude in an abandoned building in the middle of the city, I closed my eyes and focused.

When casting a spell, at least as far as I knew, your mana hardly ever went past a few inches from your skin. This was because the further away from you it got, the more difficult it was to control pure mana. That was what the geomantic partional, as well as what most ritual circles, were for. They guided and implemented the magic through arcane sigils, way past what a human could hope to control. That's why the symbols were smeared with my blood, to better work with my magic.

While a relatively simple spell might contain a few symbols, and a very complicated spell might contain a dozen, maybe two, a ritual could, theoretically, contain thousands.

The only criteria was that the mage needed to have enough energy to charge them all.

I leaned forward and put both my hands on the very edge of the inner circle, and channeled my mana. While I was completely confident that what I had made would work, since my knowledge saw no reason it shouldn't, I couldn't help but be a bit nervous. This magic would

directly affect me. While Geomancy was relatively safe, especially since its effects would fade all on their own, it was still a ritual.

As my mana spread throughout the partional, the arcane symbols began to glow. When all of them finally filled, having drank almost half my mana, they pulsed once, twice, then three times before lighting up like a signal flare, my blood burning away in a split second. Luckily, I knew this was coming and had time to close my eyes.

When the flare of light passed, I reopened my eyes. The arcane symbols, while still intact, were stained with soot, which would have to be cleaned out. On top of that, all of the steel was gone, absorbed by my body. Slowly, I stood, stepping carefully out of the circle, a smile on my face as I moved. I could already feel that I was slightly heavier, the partional failing to filter out all of the negative aspects of the absorption. I bent over and grabbed a piece of metal scrap and, after a moment's hesitation, crushed it in my hand.

Now, it wasn't a solid slab of steel or anything like that, but the metal still bent and crumpled easily. I smirked and whirled around, punching the nearest wall. My hand cleanly punched through the drywall and whatever was behind it, with nothing but a slight scuffing on my knuckles.

“Oh yeah... I can work with this...”