

I shifted around on my seat, making sure most of my body was hidden by the bus stop's protective wall. I knew the bus didn't come by here for at least another fifteen minutes, and by then, I would hopefully be long gone. Or I would be, as long as the young girl I was keeping an eye on left her house when she usually did.

I paused, letting my previous thoughts run through my head, rolling my eyes when I realized how strange it sounded. It was thoughts like that, as well as a few other equally surreal moments, that made me stop and question my sanity. It had been nearly a week since I found myself here, in a world that, on the surface, seemed so familiar but, on closer inspection, was so radically different. I was currently sitting on a street that looked no different from any suburban street from my world. And yet, this morning, I saw a teenage girl flying through the air, dressed in a tiara and a golden outfit.

Hello, my name is William Kalus. I'm 28 years old, technically currently homeless, and stranded on a version of Earth that makes *my* Earth's 2020 look like a paradise of calm, certainty, and bountiful prosperity.

Oh, and I'm a mage. In a world where there was no magic.

That was a relatively recent development, actually. In fact, it was one of the several things about this new... life was the right word, I supposed, that made me question if I had lost my marbles.

You see, 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.

I remember my thoughts being remarkably clear 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. I could feel myself dying, slowly losing strength, my heart slowly stopping. 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.

"Is everything alright?" A familiar voice whispered into my ear, coming from just over my shoulder, despite the fact that I knew no one was there.

"I'm fine, just thinking," I answered quietly, taking solace in the familiar presence that surrounded me.

I felt a comforting, slightly worried sensation wrap around me before it reluctantly pulled away. After a moment alone, my thoughts sunk back into my first steps into my current situation, this time slightly buoyed.

I had died, and a second later, I woke up, standing in some sort of ethereal dimension. It was beautiful, but it made me feel incredibly small, standing amid planets and galaxies like someone had taken all the best images of space and photoshopped them together.

Then, the entities came. There weren't any faces or anything I could even identify as a body, but I could still feel their presence, like a weight on my soul. 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 and that I had no choice in the matter.

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

Thankfully, they did give me two separate boons, a sort of reluctant apology since they weren't even pretending to care about what I wanted. The first was called 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?

Turns out that was a stupid assumption. There was a lot I didn't know about this world, but even some short time at the Brockton Bay Public Library told me that any protection against what this world called Thinkers was a massive advantage. There were people in this world who could see the future, and the past, and could divine all sorts of information from seemingly nowhere. It was like Marvel and DC decided to have a kid, and it was born fully formed with a grudge against its own well-being and sanity. I didn't recognize it in the slightest, and that was perhaps the scariest thing of all.

Well, it would have been until I read about the Endbringers.

I suppressed a shiver, though my frown shifted to a smile as a warm breeze blew over me, washing away the encroaching panic.

"Thank you," I muttered, feeling the wind ruffle my hair slightly.

After spending a minute or so just sitting at the bus stop, stewing in my bad luck, I shook it off. I knew, eventually, I would most likely be able to handle the Endbringers, whatever the fuck they actually were, but reading about what they were capable of was still harrowing. It made me want to run away and hide myself in the middle of nowhere, where they would never go. It made me want to invest all my next recharge into something that would let me leave this world and escape to one not currently circling the drain.

But no, I couldn't do that. As horrifying as the realization had been, I now knew I was too good of a person to run from something like this. As much as I hated the entities for snagging me away from whatever afterlife I was heading towards, they had given me power and a mission to help this world survive its encroaching apocalypse.

Thank god I got something powerful enough to make that possible.

It was interesting because I recognized my power. Or, rather, I recognized what it was based on. Inspired Inventor, the ability to spend an allowance of recharging points to purchase knowledge of topics. I knew a few different versions existed, all from fanfiction, but I wasn't sure of its exact origins. Depending on just what version you were talking about, the user was restricted by how many points they received, as well as how expensive buying each stacking level was.

My version was different at its very foundation. Rather than tech or scientific knowledge, my version was focused on magic. I got six charges every two weeks to spend on the knowledge of spells, rituals, potions, and everything in between, with each level of knowledge costing its number in charges. So my two charges in healing spells cast three points, as did my two in lightning spells. My two in geomancy were free, but I'll get back to that.

I also got the opportunity to earn a few more charges in the form of quests. I wasn't exactly sure what activated the quests, I just knew that I would occasionally get new ones. My first and current quest was to prevent a young girl from triggering. Since the quest activated, we had been keeping a close eye on her, which was why I was creepily waiting outside their home at a nearby bus station.

"She is on the move," The whispering voice said into my ear. "Coming out of the front entrance, just like usual."

I nodded and focused on the moment. According to my task, sometime between two days ago and tomorrow, a young girl would live through something so terrible that she would undergo a trigger event, the process that was this world's power genesis.

According to what I read online, it was considered the person's worst day ever, something so terrible and horrifying that it would forever mark them psychologically, while also giving them superpowers. Interestingly enough, the theory seemed to be generally discounted and hardly talked about, despite my power clearly believing it was correct. It also seemed to think this particular young girl's life would be much better off without one.

Another breeze, this one a bit rougher, pushed at my back, and I stood up, accepting the nudge for what it was, a reminder to move. Just down the street, I could see the young girl step out onto her front porch, waiting impatiently for someone else. A woman, not old enough to be her mom, stepped out soon after.

Immediately, the young girl started to walk down the front steps, forcing the woman to hurry and catch up. When they got to the edge of the front walk, the younger girl clearly wanted to go left, while the older woman wanted to go right. For a moment, they debated before the woman sagged, and the young girl cheered, leading the way in the direction she had wanted.

Despite the woman losing whatever debate they were having, both of them were smiling and chatting as they walked, making their way down their street and towards the city. I was

pretty sure they were on their way to visit one of the young girl's parents at work, but I wasn't sure.

I didn't want to invade their privacy too much, just enough to stop whatever catastrophe was supposed to happen from happening.

I followed after them from a distance, relying on the breezes and nudges to keep me on track whenever I lost sight of them. I didn't know when it would happen, I just knew that it would happen eventually. The pair continued to walk toward the city, the buildings getting more and more dense as they went. They were cutting through an area that didn't have a very good reputation, which was probably what the debate had been about.

I watched as, further down the street, the pair turned around the corner, disappearing from view. Suddenly, gunshots echoed through the streets. They were depressingly common in this city, but these came from the street my current target had just headed down, and I couldn't help but curse. Defying all personal expectations, I rushed forward, crossing the street and stepping around the corner.

There, only a dozen or so feet past where I had lost sight of them was the woman and the girl. The girl was partially cowering beside the woman, who was now lying on the ground, clutching her stomach. Beyond them was some sort of ongoing gang activity, the Azn Bad Boys, or ABB, if I remember their colors correctly.

Even as more bullets flew, shattering a nearby car window, I pushed and ran around the corner, ducking low. I approached the pair, finally in range to hear what they were saying.

"Dinah, go hide behind a car, it's okay, I'll be okay," She said, sounding weak already, even as Dinah was trying to drag her into cover with her. "Just go, sweetie, it's okay-"

"I got her girl, just go," I said, reaching down to grab the woman's arms and pulling her behind a car.

I wasn't sure, but I might have seen a few bullets slap and skip off the asphalt just about where the woman had been lying. Once we were behind cover, I started examining the woman's wounds. If the growing blood stains in her clothes were any indication, she had been shot three or four times.

"Is she going to be alright?" The girl, Dinah asked, ducking down as another bullet whizzed over us. "This is all my fault, I should have known the area-"

Before I could do anything, the woman passed out, her face pale from blood loss. Dinah screamed, reaching out for her in panic.

"It's okay girl, she is just unconscious," I explained, but I knew that it was a bad sign.

She was losing too much blood way too quickly. If I didn't do something now, she would be long dead before help got here.

"Alya, is anyone looking?" I asked, not looking away from the woman, waiting a few seconds for a warm, encouraging breeze to flutter around me.

"Alright then, leap of faith," I muttered, before reaching deep and pulling on my mana, guiding it into my hands as I placed them over the woman's stomach. "*Sagitta de mea carne ventilabis.*"

My hands glowed for a moment, two small circles appearing around my hands. The circles glowed gold, as four arcane symbols appeared inside each one. The sigils pulsed, and my magic released into the woman, reaching inside her and pulling out four bullets. The small but lethal chunks of metal slid out through the holes in the woman's clothes, rolling off to the ground. Dinah gasped, her eyes wide as she watched me perform my magic.

"*Reficere carnem, musculus et os,*" I intoned next, my magic flaring again in the same gold color. "*Altiozem intensionem salutis! Imple corpus sanguine eget!*"

This time, a pair of gold bands, made from my mana, expanded from my hands, wrapping around the woman's torso. More arcane symbols traced around the band, spinning around it as I added an extra boost with the additive second spell. I was using a good chunk of my mana to make sure this woman would be completely healed.

With a final pulse, the energy of the magic poured into the woman, heading right for her wounds. The blood and holes remained in her clothes, but I could feel the magic working, repairing almost all of the damage the bullets had done. When the glow subsided, the woman was looking significantly less pale, and her breathing had returned to normal. The young girl, Dinah, looked like she was struggling to figure out who she should stare at, me or the newly healed woman.

"You saved her!" She said excitedly. "Are you a cape? You can heal people!"

"Yeah, I did, but... Dinah, listen, I need you to keep this a secret for me," I asked, trying to impress just how serious the situation was to the young girl.

"The gangers are running, and the police are on the way," Alya whispered in my ear. "I'm keeping your conversation quiet, but you don't have long.

Trusting Alya to have my back, I focused on Dinah, who was looking at me while desperately clinging to the woman's hand.

"I'm not ready to debut yet, and I don't have my mask..." I pointed out.

Technically, that wasn't a hundred percent true, I just didn't have it with me. I had made one as a precaution, only to realize there was no way I would be able to follow after the two of

them with a mask on. Of course, if I tried to put it on before coming to help, chances are I would show up too late.

"Oh my gosh..." The young girl said, "You're right! I won't tell anyone! I'll take your secret to my grave!"

"You don't have to go that far," I assured her. "Just tell anyone who asks you aren't sure what happened."

"Oh! I'll tell everyone I fainted after pulling Aunt Claire out of the street," She said, surprising me with the decent idea. "Does that work?"

"I think that works perfectly. Thank you."

"No, thank you!" She said, leaning over her aunt to give me a hug, surprising me yet again. "Thank you so much!"

"It's time to go," Alya whispered before I could say anything else, and I slowly pulled away from Dinah.

"You're welcome. I'm just glad I could help," I said with a smile as I stood, looking around and seeing that no one was really looking our way.

"Good luck!" Dinah called after me as I stepped away and jogged around the corner, out of sight.

Slipping away was easy to do with all the chaos, even as the police started to arrive on the scene. Alya guided me along through alleys and across parking lots until I finally recognized where we were and could make the rest of the way from memory.

After about fifteen minutes of walking, I reached the abandoned shop where I had been living. Its windows were all solidly boarded up, and its interior was pretty wrecked and covered in graffiti, but after some time spent cleaning it up, it was passable. Most importantly, it was dry. It was raining when I first arrived, and while it was surprisingly warm for December, the rain would have absolutely killed me if I had tried to sleep in it.

I pull off a loose plywood board from one of the back windows, jiggling it free of the board holding it in place. I then carefully crawled inside, disappearing into the abandoned shop's interior. Once inside, I reached out and lifted the board, sliding it back into place and hiding the entrance completely.