

While what happened at the hospital was mentally draining, it was too early to head back to the shop for the night. So, instead, I decided to walk around the city for another patrol. It was just around three PM by the time I left the hospital, so I had a good chunk of time to kill. Technically, Downtown was Empire territory, so my first goal was to angle myself away from the center and towards the border between it and Docks South.

I hated the idea of being forced to leave an area because of Nazi's, but I knew I had very little chance of coming out on top if I picked a fight with them. They had a disgusting amount of capes supporting them, especially considering the movement they represented. Even if a terrifying amount of them weren't capable of soloing me into the ground, they would still be able to overwhelm me with numbers alone.

I was counting down the minutes until I was powerful enough to stand up to them. For now, I needed to bide my time. Staying off the Empire's radar was an unfortunate necessity for the moment.

Or, that was the plan, at least. Unfortunately, that plan went out the window as, about ten minutes later, Alya directed me to an alleyway just off the route I was running. As I turned down into the path, I spotted a trio of big, heavily tattooed white guys looming over a single black man who had clearly been knocked to the ground. He was bleeding from a busted lip and trying to crawl backward away from the marked Nazis.

"Fuck... god dammit," I cursed, before entering the alley and raising my voice. "Hey! What's going on here?"

I called out, all of the people turning towards the sound of my voice. The man on the ground spotted me first, his eyes opening wide as they locked on to me. His expression shifted from fear and anger to one of hesitant hopefulness. The three Nazis all turned to face me as well, all of them looking shocked at my interference.

"Fuck, it's a cape," one of them cursed, one of the others slapping him in his stomach to shut him up.

"What the fuck do you want?" The largest and most heavily tattooed of them all aggressively asked. "This ain't any of your business. Just keep on walking."

"Three dumbasses standing menacingly over someone who is bleeding?" I rhetorically asked. "Something tells me that is absolutely my business."

The same member who had told me to take a hike took a step toward me, doing his best to seem intimidating and unconcerned.

"Look, chump, I'm sure you're a big bad hero, but this is Empire territory," He explained as if I was a particularly slow child. "Just go on and get the fuck-"

I cut off whatever dumb shit he was about to say by launching a quick spark of electricity. The zap made the man jump and yowl like a stuck cat, slapping at the hole I had burned through his jeans. When he tried to recover, he quickly learned that the leg that the spark had struck was useless. He nearly collapsed backward, one of his buddies having to catch him before he could.

"I'm gonna cut you off right there. I don't care whose territory we are in," I responded, walking forward, my hands crackling threateningly. "I'm not gonna let someone get the shit kicked out of them because a couple of overcompensating punks decide they hate black people."

For a long moment, I felt like they were about to charge me, but eventually, they pulled back. As all three of the empire goons slinked away, keeping an eye on me as they escaped. I considered trying to stop them, but I had a feeling that even if I apprehended them, they wouldn't spend much time in jail. Besides, my priority was the injured man, who was starting to breathe funny. As they disappeared down the far end of the alleyway, I waited for a breath or two to make sure they weren't coming back before I approached the still-struggling man.

"Hey, take it easy. The bastards are gone," I explained. "You alright? Anything broken or..."

"My hand and my chest, they stomped on me pretty hard," He said, hissing in pain and revealing a mangled, purple hand and several dirty boot marks on his torso. "Pretty... sure they broke something..."

Looking at his hand, specifically two of his fingers that were definitely bending in directions they weren't supposed to, I couldn't help but flinch. That must have been one hell of a stomp.

"Yeah, you've definitely got some damage here. Would you like me to fix it?" I asked, reaching out and holding his hand up by his wrist. "I've got a healing power that should let me fix this right up."

"Healing? Like Panacea?"

"No, my power works completely differently," I explained. "But the end results are basically the same. You not being hurt."

He debated internally for nearly a full minute before finally agreeing to let me help. Compared to some of the stuff I had been fixing over the last week or so, this was relatively simple, as was fixing the other bumps, bruises, and scrapes the three Nazis had given him. Once he was back on his feet, I asked if he wanted to call the cops. He laughed and shook his head.

"What for? So they can arrest me for disturbing peace or something?" He asked, shaking his head. "Nah, I just need to get the fuck out of here. Much less likely for them to plant some coke on me so they can apprehend me after I 'Resist Arrest.'"

I nodded, not particularly surprised by his statement. I had heard a lot of bad news about the police here in Brockton, especially those that hung around Downtown specifically.

I watched the man leave with a worried, anxious speed to his walk, his head on a swivel as he went. I couldn't help but curse and shake my head as I watched him step onto the sidewalk and turn out of sight.

Why did it seem like everywhere I looked, all I could see were more signs that this city was hanging on the precipice of full-tilt chaos and anarchy.

"This place is broken," I said, feeling Alya coiling around me, still invisible. "Like a ticking time bomb just waiting to explode into unrecognizable chaos. The worst part is... I'm not sure if it would be better off or not. At least the board would be wiped clean in the process."

"That sounds like a great many people would be hurt," Alya pointed out.

"... Yeah, I know," I responded, rubbing my neck. "I wasn't actually suggesting that."

Confronted with just how screwed up this city was, I found myself unwilling to continue my patrol. It felt futile, more so than usual. It was painfully clear that I would never be able to make a real difference until I could directly face the kind of threats the city held. I needed a power-up desperately, but I wasn't sure if I was going to get one.

The time for my second group of charges was fast approaching, and while I could dump the points into something new and flash, I also knew I needed a home. There was a lot of magic I could access in the future that required a place to work, and I wasn't about to spend days, and who knows how much money setting those up somewhere I would have to abandon the second someone found it.

I needed a permanent residence, someplace I could protect and hide with magic. A place I could retreat to, if necessary, that I knew wouldn't just fall over like a stack of cards the second any cape with a brute rating knocked on my door.

The issue was that every point I ended up spending to unlock the ability to build a place like that was also points I wouldn't be able to spend on making myself more powerful. My only real option, assuming I continued with my plan to invest points in some sort of mage home branch, was to invest slowly and hope I got lucky enough that one or two levels of knowledge was enough. I highly doubted it would be since it was such a broad concept, but I could still hope.

There was also a chance I would get a new quest. I wasn't a hundred percent sure what the criteria were for getting one, but I had a feeling it had to do with the points recharge cycle. The most likely scenario I could think of was that I was going to get one quest per cycle, but I wouldn't be able to confirm that until I had more experience.

That night, I barely slept, the towering, daunting reality of just what kind of uphill battle I had gotten myself into weighing on me heavily. Alya did her best to soothe me with a cool breeze, but I still tossed and turned for most of the night.

When morning finally came around, my first stop of the day was a nearby coffee shop. The heavenly bean juice just managed to wake me up enough that I could be considered a functional human being. When I was done kick-starting my brain with caffeine and confectionaries, I headed back out into the shop to get ready for the day. The process was a bit drawn out because I had to refill my water containers, which included a trip to the nearby gas station.

I had to admit, the idea of finally having a place with running water, working lights, and other usual amenities was also a big part of why I was still determined to stick with my plan of building a stronghold of some kind. I might be determined to do as much good as I could in this world, but that didn't mean walking to a gas station every morning for shower water wasn't grating. It was the very definition of first-world problems, but I couldn't exactly help it.

When I was finally ready for the day, I headed out into the city, donning my costume and going back on patrol. At this point, I was just killing time, both until my charges were refilled later tonight and for Tony to get back to me about the next outreach stop.

According to him, there was only one more large homeless community left. It was somewhere between John's and Charles' place in terms of size, and Tony was certain he would find an in soon. Once we had helped that community, I was hoping to discuss the idea of them spreading the word whenever I was about to stop by. Charles' place had already done that to an extent, but I wanted them to understand I was happy to heal anyone who would come by and needed the help.

I was happy with the progress I had made in healing people so far, but I knew there were a lot of people I was missing.

As I contemplated the future and the next steps I was going to take, I continued my patrol. About half an hour in, as I was walking around the blurry line between the Docks South and Downtown, Alya got my attention.

"There's... a pile of trash robbing a corner store two blocks to the east," She said, blowing against me in the right direction. "Some sort of golem."

"Golem? I... don't recognize that description," I frowned, quickly altering my course and starting to vault toward what Alya had spotted. "Anything I should know?"

"Whatever it is, it already knocked out the store owner," she responded. "He is behind the counter."

I cursed and pushed myself to move faster, my mana draining as a result. I skidded to a stop just a few buildings away, only to watch a wave of trash pour out of a corner store. The windows of the building were smashed, and quite a bit of food, magazines, and other loose stuff from inside the store was being pulled outside by the wave. Once it was outside, the wave formed into a shabby, half-formed humanoid, maybe about eight feet tall. It turned to face me, freezing for a second.

"What do you want!? I'm not going back!" a voice said from inside the golem-like amalgamation of trash and food, somehow still quite loud. "I just need the food! I can't eat any more rotten trash!"

I stopped about two dozen feet away from the shaggy trash golem, partially because I really didn't want to get closer to the stench. I put both of my hands up, trying to calm the parahuman down.

"It's okay big guy, I'm not gonna fight you," I said. "It sounds like you're struggling, I know how that feels."

He stopped, the golem rocking back slightly as if confused. It took him a minute to constitute a response, and even then, it lacked most of the vitriol his first shout had.

"I'm just so hungry," He admitted. "I ain't got nothing... Nobody waited for me..."

"It's okay. You got a name?" I asked, taking a few steps closer. "Something I can call you?"

"I... I was thinking about Heap," He admitted.

"Alright, Heap. My name is Arcanum," I responded. "By the sounds of it, you must be pretty hungry. Why don't you let some of that trash go, and I'll buy you lunch. As much as you can eat."

"I don't need your pity," He responded, the scowl in his voice clear as day. "I can do this just fine on my own! I just need a bit of food, then I can start."

"Start what?"

"I don't know! Getting back on the straight and narrow, stop stealing! I... just need a bit now..."

Something about the way he was talking told me this man was struggling to keep it together. Part of me wondered if he was a Case 53, a living pile of trash, but I wasn't sure if asking that was a good idea.

"That's good, but starting that out by stealing isn't a great look," I pointed out. "Especially after assaulting the clerk."

"He had it coming!" The trash golem shouted, its limbs sagging for a moment before pulling back together. "I have nothing! He-"

"William, there's something on the roof above you, some sort of mist!" Alya said into my ear, trying to make herself heard over the loud shouts of Heap. "It's-"

Whatever she was about to say was cut off as a black crossbow bolt suddenly appeared in Heap's chest with a dull thud. Both of us looked down, me and the golem, to where a bolt had stuck into some metal panel from some sort of appliance, as well as a whole rotisserie chicken wrapped in plastic. The bolt itself was clearly special, with a vial of some kind running through the shaft.

For a long moment, we were silent until, finally, the large trash and food golem snapped free of our collective shock.

"You were just setting me up!" He screamed. "You son of a bitch!"

The golem turned, trash gathering up in his arm as he charged at me, the wave of trashing drawing in against him as if he was pulling for more density. Before I could even react, he swung his arm out, extending it outwards and side-swiping me with a surprising amount of force. It lifted me off my feet and slammed me into the side of a van. The trash overwhelmed me, and for a moment, it blocked out the sun, the world going black.