

I woke up a whole ten minutes before my alarm was set to go off, and I spent that time reabsorbing another batch of steel. I was already loving my nine-circle partional. Not having to clean the runes and reapply my blood every time I wanted to use it was amazing in and of itself, but the added time lessening of unwanted aspects was a huge bonus.

I spent a few minutes cleaning myself up before heading out into the city. It was considerably darker by then, the afternoon having turned into the early night as I napped. Finding a spot to change was easy as we made our way to the pre-agreed meeting spot, as the city slowed down and the streets emptied out. The city of Brockton Bay was in rough shape, and while that didn't mean the sidewalks were empty, even at night, it was clear to see that people knew better than to walk around as darkness settled over the city.

As we walked, now dressed in my uniform, I quietly talked to Alya. Originally, I had intended to ask Panacea if any name requirements or guidelines weren't advertised to the general public. I was now fully aware that she was just a teenager, one clearly struggling with some less-than-healthy opinions. I would find no help from her, so I was back to square one.

I knew from reading PHO, an online cape forum, that some name conventions, like copying the names of gods and goddesses, were taboo. They also claimed that picking the name of a deceased cape was okay as long as it had been a few years. Thankfully, a few searches through the cape wiki attached to PHO showed that no one had the name I had been thinking of.

After a long walk, I finally stepped into the small park that Tony had directed me to. It took me a second to spot a car parked nearby, with Tony standing next to it. Next to him was an older man, at least fifty years old. He was smoking a cigarette while talking to Tony, both of them standing under the light of a nearby streetlamp. Tony seemed pretty nonchalant about what was going on, either because he was confident in something or because he was naive. The second man, on the other hand, was almost constantly looking around, much more suspicious about his surroundings and clearly waiting for *something* to happen.

Considering the differences in alertness levels, it was no surprise that the stranger spotted me first, saying something to Tony as I approached, nodding in my direction. Tony turned to see me, waving as I got closer.

"Mage, good to see you," He said, reaching out to shake my hand as I got closer. "This is John. He's gonna take us to one of the nearby encampments."

"John, nice to meet you," I said, reaching out to shake his hand. "And I actually settled on a name. Call me Arcanum."

"Well, 'Arcanum,' Tony is a good guy, but he is about as gullible as a puppy, so I'm going to need to see your healing with my own eyes," John said with a voice like gargled granite, taking one last pull from his cigarette, before dropping it to the ground and stomping on it.

"Understandable, I don't blame you for wanting to see my abilities firsthand," I assure him. "Do you have an injury, or....?"

Rather than answering, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a shockingly large knife, passing it to Tony, who winced and accepted the weapon. He looked at it for a second, looking up at John, before looking back down. He was about to cut his palm when I spoke up.

"Hold on, just wait a second," I said, holding up my hand, Tony stopping immediately. "Two things. One, if you're determined to make Tony cut himself, at least let me numb his hand first. Second, there is an alternative. Just let me heal your lungs."

Tony visibly sagged in relief, pulling the blade away from his hand. He mouthed a thank you to me while John looked at me confused.

"My lungs?" John asked, looking at me with a raised eyebrow. "What about them?"

"Well, you're a smoker, right?" I asked, gesturing to the crushed but on the asphalt. "I should be able to clean out the tar and smoke residue, plus heal some of the damage. Some of it might be too old for me to fix, but they will be better than they are now."

For a moment, he watched me, looking at me with discerning, suspicious eyes. After a few seconds, he reached out his hand to Tony, who eagerly gave him his knife back. When the weapon was once again hidden, sheathed in something behind his back, he focused back on me.

"Well, what do I have to do?" He asked.

"Nothing, just give me your permission to heal you," I said with a smile.

"Is it gonna hurt?"

"There's gonna be some golden light and a few strange-looking symbols. The energy I make is going to go into your body, but there won't be any pain."

"...I give you permission," He said, almost seeming to chew on the words. "But you should know, people know where I am and what's going on."

"Well then, we best not keep them waiting," I said, before stepping closer and raising my hands. "*Ad tollendum venenum ex pulmone!*"

A pair of golden vertical ovals appear around my hands, four arcane symbols surrounding each. Normally, that would be way too much for me to use at once at my current skill level. Thankfully, these were the same four symbols, just repeated, which made it significantly easier to handle. Once the symbols lined up with the ovals, they shifted forward, sinking into the man's body. This spell was specifically made for cleaning contaminants that were breathed in, something especially useful for alchemists and smokers.

*"Ad tollendum venenum ex pulmone!"* I cast again, waiting for the golden glow to fade again. *"Sana damnum ad pulmones! Sana damnum ad pulmones"*

I cast the cleansing spell again, just to make sure I got everything, before following it up with a healing spell focused on the lungs. It was very specific, which should increase the depth of what it could repair. It started as a relatively normal-looking spell before it dissolved into a mist that flew into John's mouth. It was all symbolic, as the energy could have just as easily gone through his chest instead.

The first spell caught him off guard, but since I warned him about the lights and weirdness, he managed to control himself. However, the golden mist going into his mouth and down into his lungs was too much. He stumbled backward, looking angry and reaching back toward his weapon.

"What the fuck was that?!" He asked, cursing at me as he recovered. "What the fuck are you trying to do to me? I ain't-"

He stopped mid-sentence, his brain finally catching up with his body, realizing that his last breath had been remarkably easy. He took another breath, his eyes slowly widening as he just kept breathing in, his lung capacity suddenly much closer to what it should have been at his age. I could see him wince, no doubt anticipating a hacking cough brought on by the deep breathing, only for nothing to happen.

"I... god damn, I knew it was bad, but... I had no idea I lost that much," He admitted, a smile growing on his grizzled face. "Alright, your mojo works, even if it's freaky as hell."

"Yeah, I know. It's why I went with a magic-themed name," I admitted with a shrug. "Technically, the chanting isn't necessary. It just makes it easier."

"Huh... well, it's weird, but I won't argue with the results," He said. "Okay, let's go."

Without much more to say, John turned around and walked away, heading across a nearby street and waving for us to follow. Tony was the first to move, clearly trusting his friend, and I was right behind him. I couldn't help but smirk as John chucked his cigarettes into a dumpster as we walked.

On the way, I answered questions about the uses and limitations of my "power." I explained that I could heal current wounds with no issues, clean infections out, and beat back most diseases. I also explained that the older the injury, the less I could do about it, and I could only ease the symptoms of genetic issues. Cancer was straight out of my wheelhouse. That was a limitation on my topic choice, as healing spells, as far as I could tell, were more about returning a body to its natural state. As genetic issues were part of a person's natural body, healing spells didn't do much for them. Cancer was more or less in the same boat since it was the person's own cells going out of control. It would be like trying to heal away a finger.

I wasn't a hundred percent sure, as my knowledge didn't extend that far, but I heavily suspected that this was an intrinsic issue tied to healing *spells*. As far as I could tell, a healing ritual or some other healing process would stand a much better chance of fixing those issues.

John seemed to get the distinction and assured me he would call me to the people I could help and warn the people I couldn't.

It took us ten minutes to finally arrive at the camp, which came out of nowhere. One minute, we were walking behind an old, abandoned car dealership when suddenly we were stepping into a shantytown. The camp had been completely hidden by a line of trees and a garage that ran at the back of the car lot, which I imagine was probably the only reason it existed. I had no doubt that people, including the police, knew it was there, but it was better somewhere hidden and out of the way, which people didn't complain about, than somewhere that detracted from the city's natural "charm."

It only took a few seconds for people to realize we were there, first spotting John, then Tony and me. I had a feeling Tony had been here before, but I was obviously a bit of a spectacle. People started stepping out of tents, opening doors to ramshackle structures built from pallets and scrap wood. As we walked deeper, I got John's attention.

"Sorry if this is a stupid question, but I got the feeling that Brockton Bay has a lot of abandoned homes. Why not try living in those?" I asked, thinking of my own temporary home inside the abandoned shop.

"Because if you start breaking and entering, the cops have to do something," He said with a frown. "It's a lot easier to ignore if we squat in somewhere nobody cares about."

"Plus, we need to stick together," Another voice said, startling me enough that I whirled around, hand raised, ready to cast. "If the groups are too small, we get picked off by Merchants."

It was a woman, somewhere around my age, with a shaved head and scars that ran along the left side of her face. The eye on that side was cloudy, and what little I could see of her left side, even her arm, was covered in wraps and cloth. When she stepped out from between two tents, John stopped as well.

"Picked off?" I asked, meeting her eyes. "How so?"

"Merchants are small time wastes of space," John responded, prompting me to turn and look at him. "Nobody joins them by choice. You get hooked, and then you join. Sometimes people get hooked cause they abuse, sometimes the merchants hook them on purpose."

"That... how often does that happen?" I asked.

"Not very," The scarred woman responded. "But enough to be a worry."

"E88 is worse," John said, practically spitting out the gang's name. "They take anyone not white for initiations."

I feel a rising anger in my chest at the horrifying conditions these people are living in. The homelessness is bad enough, but the constant threat from *Fucking Nazis*.

"Fuck. I..."

"Don't worry about it, we get it, hero man," The woman said. "No need to worry about us, the dregs and forgotten."

"Can't exactly stop that now," I said, shaking my head. "I can't do anything now, but I will help soon. The E88 is a fucking stain. The fact that they exist is an affront to just about everyone. I will do something about them when I can."

John didn't seem convinced, and neither did the mystery woman. Even Tony winced at my statement. I couldn't blame them, of course, not really. The Empire had a ridiculous amount of capes and resources. They also had a reputation for smacking down capes that stood up to them hard.

"For now, though, I can help by making sure everyone here is as healthy as I can make them."

"John mentioned Tony found someone willing to heal people," She said, looking past me to John. "The fact that he brought you here must mean you're not full of shit."

"He fixed my breathing," John explained. "I can breathe like I'm thirty again."

"Is that right?" She said, studying me for a moment. "I guess you aren't completely useless. Good luck then."

She gave me a sarcastic salute with her unwrapped hand, before walking back through the gap in the tents she had emerged from, disappearing from view. I frowned, opening my mouth to call her back and offer to help her when John grabbed my shoulder.

"Don't. She'd just say no," He said, shaking his head as I turned away. "She doesn't like people mentioning her marks."

"Who was that?" I asked with a frown. "I could have helped her."

"Goes by Mary, not her real name," John responded. "Showed up one day, asking for help. Pulls her weight, but she is... flighty."

He struggles for a moment to find the word, but when he does, he continues with a frown.

"She won't let you help, not the kind to want her marks gone."

I chewed my lip at his statement, wondering how he could possibly know that. Unfortunately, it was too late, and she was long gone, so there was no point in arguing about it. I turned back and gestured for John to lead on, the older man guiding us through the tents and lean-tos. Our first stop was one of the newest-looking tents. John leaned in the open flap, and after a few minutes, a younger man stepped out. He winced as he did, limping and immediately sitting near the entrance.

John introduced us to the young man, who was apparently the victim of a mugging, resulting in some cracked ribs and a slice across his thigh from a knife. He was clearly nervous, but John assured him I was the real deal.

After confirming I had his permission, I cast a few spells on him, cleaning out a minor infection and healing the cut on his thigh, before finishing off with his ribs. All in all, it took about two minutes to do, and while my magic had been reduced by a significant amount, it was almost full again by the time the young man finished thanking me.

"Right... Well, who's next?" I asked John with a smile.