

After spending a minute waiting for Alya to confirm that my uninvited stalkers were entirely gone, her presence pulled back to me.

"They are leaving," She confirmed, her voice even quieter than usual. "Are you satisfied with their reasoning for following you?"

"Vaguely?" I said, not sounding entirely sure. "Reaching out to the new healer on the block, offering cash for his power... it makes sense, especially to a group who wouldn't have access to Panacea or Othala."

"But not completely?"

"I mean, from what PHO says, you should never assume certainty when a thinker is involved," I responded with a frown. "I just hope she didn't get to pull too much information from me before she left."

"She was cursing and muttering as she made her 'retreat,'" The air elemental offered. "Her frustration seems to point towards no."

"Huh...well, I'll take it as a good sign," I responded. "But I also need to keep it in mind in case she did."

With my visit to the second homeless camp complete, I still had quite a few more hours in the day. Having left my number with Charles, I regretted not doing the same with John. So I spent the rest of the day in a vague patrol, slowly making my way towards the smaller community. I ended up stopping a mugging on the way, zapping a ski mask-wearing idiot who was threatening an older man with a knife.

When the police arrived, I gave my statement before continuing on, eventually stepping into the moderately hidden community. The place looked different during the day, even if at this point the sun was starting to get lower. The warm light of the fire had given it a campy, homey feel, which was gone in the light of day. This was a place where people with nothing went, where every day was a question.

I handed John my number, as the man also had an emergency prepaid line, just in case. While I was there, I healed a younger man who popped out his shoulder while doing manual labor. It had already popped back in, but a quick spell reduced the swelling and healed the joint completely.

I spent a few minutes talking to everyone and even helped put up a new tent by driving several pipes into the ground by hand. Once I was done at the camp, I repeated my earlier meandering patrol, this time focused on getting home. My only stop was in a seemingly random alley, where I had stashed my civilian clothes. I was just pulling on my sneakers when Tony called.

"Arcanum! Is everything okay?" He asked in a rush. "Your friend explained what was happening, but I didn't want to call back too quickly, just in case you were... busy."

"Yeah, Tony, everything is fine," I assured him. "It was the Undersiders, sniffing around, trying to size me up. They wanted to know if I would put a price on my healing, sign a sort of contract to heal them."

"Oh, hell. How did that go?"

"As well as it could have," I admitted. "They approached me civilly, so I let them leave the same. Not happy to have to deal with a thinker, but it is what it is."

"So, they just... popped in to chat and left?" He asked, disbelief clear even through the phone. "Why?"

"From what I've read, the Undersiders usually don't engage in combat. Their MO is blitz and run," I explained. "I told their thinker to fuck off and acted confident. That either threw them off or they are even less aggressive than PHO thinks. Either way, it's done, not much we can do about it now."

"Yeah... I'm glad it turned out alright," He said. "What would you have done if...?"

"I would have smacked them hard and ran while they recovered," I explained with a shrug. "The only one of them who could keep up with me is Hellhound, but only if she had transformed her dogs and rode on their back. The space we were in was too tight for that, so I was pretty safe."

Tony and I chatted for a bit longer, mostly talking about our next healing trip. I brought up my trip to the smaller community before he promised to start looking for more contacts in some of the other communities around the town. After that, we finally said goodbye and hung up. I was glad he was doing well, even if Alya had already confirmed he had escaped unharmed. I was also glad that the Undersiders weren't the kind of villain group to find out who I was traveling with. If they even knew I was.

I finished changing into civilian clothes as the sun dipped behind distant buildings. With nothing else to do in the day, Alya was guiding me to a sandwich shop a few blocks over for dinner. I got back to the shop about thirty minutes later with a meatball sub and a bag of fries. I sat down on the couch and ate, surprised by the quality of the food.

"Okay, so, we made contact with another community, healed a lot of people, chatted with some teenage villains, who were actually more polite than most of the heroes we met," I listed out. "Got my number to the smaller community, stopped a mugging, and found a nice sub shop that's pretty good. Not bad for one day."

"You listed the sub shop with everything else?"

"Good morale is important," I said with a grin, leaning back on the couch. "Don't underestimate the impact of a good meal."

The rest of the night went by pretty quickly, with Alya and I discussing some plans for the following day. I decided that the first thing I was going to do was finally spend some time

working out how my geomantic absorptions played with my newest additions, the physical movement spells. I had almost tumbled off the roof when I tried the jump aid spell, and now I wanted to know if there was some way I could leverage my increased strength with my running.

I knew from experience that my enhanced strength did help with general movement and the like. Moving around was understandably easier when I could bench press half a ton or more. That said, I didn't quite notice that enhanced strength directly translated into better running speed. Was it because magic differentiated speed and strength so differently? Buffing my speed with geomancy required mercury, so was the steel absorption restricted from giving me speed?

I discussed it with Alya as I prepared for the day, eventually making it out of the shop and into the early morning streets of Brockton Bay. We concluded that, as far as we could tell, this was not some sort of gamified, balanced magic system that I was tapping into. Limitations existed, but they weren't arbitrarily created to balance out mechanics. If a spell, ritual, or anything else caused tangential benefits, I would be able to count on those, not have them repressed in the name of fair gameplay.

So, if the magic wasn't the source of the issue, that meant that I was most likely the source instead. Which was a good thing, because that meant I could change or adapt in a way to fix it.

Alya looked around us as I walked, eventually settling on a stretch of mostly empty alleyways. They were all connected together in a long line, an adequate place to test my speed issues. I had to make one pass-through to clear the alley out, pushing a dumpster to the side and cleaning up a few bags of trash. Once I did that, however, I had a straight shot to practice my running. Even better, it was slightly out of the way, which hopefully would keep people away.

"Okay... So let's start by doing this normally," I mumbled, mostly to myself as Alya was dispersed, keeping an eye on the area around me.

I jogged down the alley, then sprinted, trying to get a sense of how I was moving and pushing off the ground. While moving was still a drain on my stamina, I could feel that my muscles were not actually struggling with the weight. The cardio is draining, but not the aspect of carrying myself. I could only imagine that the sensation had hidden behind the normal stamina drain of running around, but now that I had identified it, it was much harder to ignore.

I slowly made my way back along the alley, wanting to have as much space as possible to run. When I was there, I quickly cast the marathon spell.

"*Marathona potestas cursus!*" I intoned, the blue energy bands encircling my hands as I started to move at a jog.

I spent twenty minutes running back and forth, getting to know the marathon spell just a bit better. While I did know plenty about it already from the initial information download, it was still only one charge, meaning there were a lot of gaps and missing information.

When I was confident I had a good feel for the spell and what it did, which was different from understanding the magic itself, I started trying to figure out how to apply my increased strength to my speed. I started by simply trying to push myself to go faster. That did garner some results, but it threw off the equilibrium of the marathon spell. Basically, I could hit around twenty-five miles an hour, but it was very tiring, especially because it drained my mana in only a few seconds. It was interesting and potentially very useful should I need a burst of speed at the end of a run. Unfortunately, it required me to drain my mana quickly to keep up. I couldn't even make it all the way across the impromptu alleyway track.

I messed around for a little while longer, switching between running with and without the marathon spell and also trying various different gaits and runs. Eventually, I settled on sort of a vaulting, loping run, pushing off extra hard with each foot. After a bit of experimenting, I managed to get it to where it was just enough of a run to count for the marathon spell. It also looked a lot better than else I had tried, especially the Gallup. Thank god Alya could confirm I wasn't being watched, because I made a real idiot of myself galloping and skipping around.

When I settled on a proper form, I ran up and down the alleyway, marathon spell engaged, letting Alya count out the seconds. When I was done, I repeated the process, but this time while doing my new vaulting "run." The result was a significant time reduction, which meant I was absolutely going faster with the vault.

"Well... I'm kind of spitballing it, but I figure that was about twenty, maybe twenty-five percent faster," I said, sitting down on a barrel at the end of the alleyway. "If I want better numbers, I'd have to do this at a track with a stopwatch, but until then, I think I was hitting a solid twenty miles per hour. Makes me want to shake hands with Usain Bolt. The fact that he could beat me in a race even with my magic is crazy."

I spent a few minutes sipping from a water bottle, recovering from my experiments, before finally deciding it was time to go out on patrol. I still felt a bit silly just running around the city, looking for crime, but it was a part of being a hero. The more I got out there, the more people would trust me, which, in turn, would make it easier to help people.

So, at about eleven thirty in the morning, I stepped out of the alley and onto the populated street. As always, I got plenty of stares, pointing, and camera flashes as I started to run, vaulting through between the sidewalk and the road.

I did immediately learn, through a series of stumbles that I thankfully recovered from before falling on my face, that vault running was not quite so easy when not in a straight line. When running, turning is just a series of small adjustments, at least as long as you're doing it right. With vault running, the points of contact with the ground, which was where you made your adjustments, were few and far between. That meant, if you weren't paying attention, it was very possible for you to be in the middle of a vault, need to turn, and be absolutely incapable of doing so.

Really, the only solution to this was to pay attention, meaning that as long as I wanted to go full tilt, I couldn't just casually run through the streets. I would need to keep my eyes peeled and my head in the game. Luckily, I did not learn this by crashing into anyone, though there was a street lamp with a series of suspiciously finger-like imprints, where I was forced to reach out and yank myself to a stop before I collided with someone.

That wouldn't have looked good.

While on patrol, I vaguely and slowly make my way across the city, heading towards a tech store I knew of, the one I bought the lights and battery bank I used for the shop. I was fully aware of the scene I was making just walking inside while still wearing my full costume, but I wasn't about to try and buy a police scanner in my civilian identity. If the PRT had any intelligence at all, that would activate all sorts of alarm bells.

It took me a few minutes to get in and out of the store, mostly because a couple of kids, who had been playing a demo stand for some video game console, spotted me before I could sneak out. When I finally left, just a little bit poorer, Alya found me a space I could be alone in, an empty roof not too far away. Once there, I spent about fifteen minutes reading the scanner's manual so that I knew how to use my new toy.\

After a bit of troubleshooting and a pair of AA batteries, I was the proud owner of a scanner capable of listening to police and fire broadcasts, meaning I could now show up at larger emergencies like fires.

With that set, I went back to my regular patrol, now with a police scanner tucked into one of my jacket pockets. It was hooked up to a pair of earphones, only one of which was tucked into my ear. The scanner was turned down pretty low as well, low enough that I could ignore it easily but loud enough that if the people talking on it started getting excited, I would be able to tell.

I vaulted through the streets, making my way through the city. I made sure to mostly stick to the streets, keeping off the sidewalks and away from squishy people.