

After spending some time discussing my options with Cauldron, I teleported home. Well, technically, I teleported above my home, using my flight harness to circle around Kali's forest, following along what she had claimed as hers. By now, I could tell where her influence had spread by the golden, energy-drawing trees, as she had started to plant and grow them on her own as she expanded. She did not fill the forest with them, I thankfully, but instead replaced maybe one every fifty feet. They dotted on her range, with more growing as she pushed further from the compound. They fed her power directly into her domain, forming a web of mana infusion, which was sinking deep into the forest. Already, I could see the forest was more alive and lush, the natural wildlife reacting well to the infusion of mana.

Before learning what I had from Cauldron, I would have likely been concerned about the repercussions of spreading her influence and her trees, especially with Director Piggot's distaste for biotinkering. However, with the threat we were facing down, I all but dismissed the idea of restricting her from my mind. Kali was loyal, kind, gentle, and eager to protect me, Olivia, and humanity. Giving her more power would be a major focus for the coming months, right alongside making a way to counter and kill Behemoth.

After I was done with my survey, I landed on the outskirts of our compound and walked into its heart. After a quick call out, Kali revealed that Olivia was in town, leaving me alone for now.

Eventually, I ended up pacing back and forth, talking to Kali and Alya, going over a discussion we had been having a lot, ever since I settled on Conceptual magic being the answer to our new, daunting question. Cauldron had had plenty of ideas of what I should pick, but their view was... small in scope. They missed the nuances of magic, the very idea of a Concept was difficult for them to understand. While they grasped the factual concept, they related it to a simple, if not a powerful and growing striker ability, mixing with blaster effects. It meant that while their ideas had valid parts, they were based on empty facts and dull opinions.

If I thought it was likely that they would believe me, I would explain magic to them, but there was really no point. The group clearly believed they had the answers, gripping onto them like a lifeline against their impossible odds. They were happily accepting the weird mechanics of my powers, but to consider them magic would likely be harder for them to accept than the idea of surrendering to Scion.

Thankfully, throughout Kali, Alya, and my debates on what Concept I should pick, we did make some progress, namely settling on our first subject, Space.

With what we had learned about the Entities, their Agents, and everything Cauldron was aware that they could do, it was clear that a significant amount of their power, from what they granted to parahumans, to what they used themselves, was directly connected to the manipulation of Space. Not space as in outer space, but Space, as in the fabric of what reality was woven into. The glimpse of Eden and the flesh garden that Alya and I got was *filled* with spatial anomalies, and I could only imagine that a living, fighting Entity would throw them at someone trying to hurt them as easily as a human might toss a pebble.

I needed a defense against that. I also needed a way to get to the Entity itself, since its body was not on any Earth that Cauldron had access to. Having an understanding and a deep connection to Space would solve that and give me massive, flexible control over quite a bit more.

Now there was a downside to this. Space was likely going to be a *very* dense subject. It was a fundamental aspect of reality, and while manipulating it didn't entirely warp reality, it was still a huge Concept.

It was why we were discussing the secondary Concept I would invest in. I needed something with potent offensive capabilities, something I could use to attack Scion directly. If I reached the point where I could manipulate Space instinctively, it would be the best defense I could possibly ask for, but I needed something to hit back. I wanted to pick something potent but streamlined and small, both so I could reach the upper levels sooner, and so I could potentially pick a *third* concept, something to augment my first two, and to make it harder for Scion to adapt. Both Kali and Alya disagreed.

"While multiple weapons in your arsenal would be handy, having two Concept at your beck and call would allow flexibility without multiple investments," Alya pointed out.

"The cost would be greater, William-Father," Kali agreed, but quickly added. "But with the right Concepts, you would be gaining access to multiple sub-concepts."

At this point, this conversation had been going on for an hour, but had existed far before our current debate session. I had to admit, they were making good, solid points.

"... Okay, I can see the wisdom in that," I finally admitted, running my fingers through my hair. "I'm just worried that it would be stretching my charges too thin. Our biggest enemy is time here, we have no idea when Scion will snap. The parahuman element says we have years... but I'm afraid my presence is making the prediction inaccurate."

"In what way?" Alya asked, floating in a semi-corporeal form.

"Well, I'm a pretty big anomaly," I responded, chewing my lip. "If I keep growing in power... Will he attack just to get me off the board?"

"He doesn't know how powerful you are," Alya pointed out. "He can't read you like he can a parahuman."

"We killed an Endbringer," I pointed out with a wince. "That's a big warning sign."

"...Are you suggesting we don't kill Behemoth in three months? Alya asked.

I considered her words for a long moment, feeling disgusted that I took even that long to consider the idea of leaving thousands and thousands of people to a horrible fate. Eventually, I shook my head in refusal.

"...No. I think that not taking down Behemoth would be a mistake, even if there is a small chance it might be safer," I said, my choice made. "I made a promise, and... they likely need to be destroyed either way. Besides, Scion didn't even flinch when we killed Leviathan. There isn't even any real evidence that says they are his creation or are linked to him in any way. I mean, they are connected to powers, obviously, but beyond that... Too many people die while facing them. I can't not destroy them when they attack.

The three of us continued to talk, before eventually settling on a plan. I would invest all six of my current points into Space, and continue to do so until it reached level eight. That level was specifically chosen because it is the last level that doesn't require multiple cycles of saving to purchase. Levels one, two, and three would be purchased by one cycle, while four and five would be purchased by one each. They would also build up spare charges, with six being a full-cycle worth. Seven and eight would use up the extra charges I built up in four and five.

At that point, we would pause and start investing in my secondary choice, Energy. It was broad, maybe even broader than Space, but not only would it make an excellent offensive option, it would also add a whole secondary layer of defense, protecting me from energy attacks.

It was incredibly flexible, which would hopefully be useful.

Part of me desperately hoped I would have plenty of time, and that I would have enough cycles to fully unlock dozens of concepts before Scion finally went off the deep end. But I was doing my best to keep my mind focused on more realistic potential scenarios.

After all, if killing the S9 was enough to set the potential date back several years, I didn't have much confidence that something else happening wouldn't randomly drag it back to a tighter countdown.

Once I had chosen my path, with the help of Alya and Kali, I invested all six points of my latest cycle into the Concept of space.

And suddenly the world around me exploded.

From the moment the idea had filtered into my head, I had always had a feeling that Conceptual magic would feel different when I unlocked it, that it would have something that set it apart from the rest of what I was learning. All signs pointed to it being the penultimate of any subject I could think of, and as three levels of Space were unlocked, I had the vague satisfaction of knowing I was right, before I was overwhelmed by sensory input, the sensation so thick it washed itself out.

I was feeling Space. Feeling the edges, the outline of mass as it ran against the fabric of reality. I could feel the Earth beneath me, feel the deep well that it pulled down in space. I instinctively knew I couldn't affect that pull, after all, that was the domain of Gravity, but since it was a derivative force of mass against the fabric of Space and Time, I could still feel it.

Billions of impressions swirled around me, pressing down on my brain. I could feel the distance between me and every particle floating in the air, I could instinctively feel it all around me, and it was beyond too much information. Almost instantly, the wave of data overwhelmed me, and with the feeling of a hundred iron spikes being slammed into my head, I passed out.

When I finally woke up, Olivia was holding my head in her lap, looking down at me. Kali was holding my hand, and Alya floated behind both of them, watching silently. When my eyes fluttered open, fighting something crusty and sticky, Olivia gasped.

"Oh, thank god," Olivia said, trembling slightly, her eyes red and puffy. "How do you feel? Are you okay?"

"I... my head hurts, but other than that..."

"Good, that's good," she said, the relief in her voice palpable.

Then she slapped my chest, letting out a frustrated curse.

"You dumbass! I came home to find you twitching on the ground, bleeding out of every hole in your head!" she said, now torn between anger and relief. "Kali and Alya said you unlocked new magic. What the hell happened?"

"I tapped into Conceptual magic," I explained, carefully sitting up, running my fingers under my nose, feeling the partially dried blood. "I'm sorry... I didn't know it would do that. Admittedly, though, in hindsight, I should have seen it coming. Conceptual magic is... different."

"But you're okay?" She asked, wanting me to confirm it again for her.

Rather than reflexively confirming I was fine, I paused to scan myself with magic. Bleeding from my orifices was no joke, no matter what the movies might show. I was not surprised to find a worrying amount of damage, but it was quickly washed away with a few higher-end healing spells, the pain in my head fading quickly after.

"I am now," I finally assured her, taking her hand and giving it a squeeze. She nodded at my response, uncoiling slightly.

"What happened?" She asked after a long moment, watching as I sat up. "Did whatever you were trying to do work?"

"I was unlocking the Conceptual magic of Space," I explained, staying still as Olivia leaned forward to clean my face with a damp towel Kali conjured from nothing. "The input sensation from that was... unsurprisingly overwhelming at first. As for it working..."

I closed my eyes and focused, trying to summon back just a tiny fraction of what I had felt before. I found it almost immediately, but it lacked the deep, infinite clarity it had before, almost like connecting to the concept had opened a floodgate, which was now greatly reduced to reflect the charges I invested.

It was still interesting, but three levels were just the barest of starts. I could feel some of the weight around me, a vague second sight that saw mass distance, all spatial aspects instead of light. I could also feel the dimensional effects I had put on various things, including my finger bones and our equipment. With a mental flex, I pushed on the pouch of holding I had recently added to Olivia's costume, expanding it without casting a single spell. I nearly tripled their sizes and further reduced their weight ratios.

"Yeah... I think it did," I answered after a long moment. "It's still underpowered, despite being three levels strong, but I can feel it..."

I focused again, this time on the space around me. After a moment of looking, I spotted a stone on the ground about five feet away. I reached out for it, manipulating the space between us as I did, shortening the distance in space. In a moment, what had been out of reach was suddenly in my hands. I pulled back, releasing shortened distance, holding out the rock.

"So... you're like Vista but worse?" She asked, raising her eyebrow.

"Well... she gets screwed up by people, I don't," I responded, stretching out the length of my finger.

There wasn't any new finger, no new mass or weight. My finger was technically just as long as it was before, but now that length meant more.

"But at some point I will surpass her completely," I continued, letting Space snap back into place. "Probably in a cycle or three. I'll also be able to do a lot she can't. It's just a bit early for that."

"Was it worth almost dying for?" Olivia asked, her tone saying that I had better get the answer right.

"Obviously not," I responded. "But... I need to get stronger, and I didn't know I would be so overwhelmed. As I get more invested in Space, and eventually start another concept, I will be more careful. I can get you some healing equipment so you can watch over me and help... or something. I'll think about it."

That seemed to at least partially mollify her, and she quickly finished cleaning up the blood that had leaked out of me while my brain was getting suckerpunched with new magic. When she was done, I stood slowly, thankful that there wasn't any wobble in my legs.

After I had finished recovering, I looked up and realized that quite a bit of time had passed since I had first invested this cycle's points. I winced at the lost time, before eventually heading off with Olivia to have something to eat. Apparently, getting your brain rattled by the very building blocks of reality was hungry work.

When I was done with that, I spent a few hours practicing with my new abilities, testing the limits of what I had invested so far.