

With some more time under my belt playing around with the Concept of Space, I was... satisfied with what I had unlocked so far. It wasn't what I would call potent, and most of what I could do, I could have done with other magic, but the sheer flexibility was incredibly impressive. Even if I hadn't chosen a Concept that was so broad, with what I could feel from my relatively shallow understanding of Space, even a more restricted subject would be flexible.

Honestly, while the power level was still limiting, I was finding that my imagination was the real limiter. I spent an hour stretching my limbs out before I realized I could increase the impact of an attack by manipulating the length of space just before the impact. It was taxing, as it required precision and a depth of manipulation that my three levels in the Concept weren't quite ready to hand over freely. After an hour of practice, I managed to turn a halfhearted punch, something that normally would have just chipped stone, into a blow that left a boulder with a decent-sized crater.

From there, it was only natural to try to soften attacks by messing with the space between us as they came at me. That was, for some reason, even harder, and I couldn't quite grasp it. Out of nearly two hours of practice, namely Olivia and a golem swinging a long stick at me, I had only been able to slow it down a handful of times.

Despite my fascination with my new connection to the Concept of Space, I couldn't spend all of my time experimenting with it. I had projects to work on, the first of which was with Amy. I had promised her that I would help make a guardian for her, and I wasn't about to go back on that.

We started with a general planning session, working together to pool ideas for what she needed. My previous suggestion to her, about figuring out what direction she wanted to go with this guardian, had gotten through to her, and she had ultimately decided that she was looking for something to defend her and her patient while she worked in a dangerous location. It was smart, considering how much she had been enhanced by my gear at this point. In most situations, she wasn't in all that much danger, it was more about her patients being in danger, and her being too distracted to concentrate on healing. Having a big, growling bulwark ready to stand between you and something deadly would be a great help in emergency situations.

Eventually, we settled on a general concept. The dog's bones would all be made by me, with a frankly ludicrous amount of storage inside them. While my Space subject hadn't taken the limits off completely, my levels in dimensional partitioning were heavily augmented by it.

I could likely have quintupled the amount of storage I had managed to stuff in my finger bones, though that would have been overkill for what I wanted. Applying that same model to the much larger bones would mean plenty of space. Most of that would be left empty by me, so that Amy could fill them with biomass, giving her material to work with to heal the guardian or even heal patients.

I would also be performing a geomantic ritual on the dog when it was complete, giving it top-tier durability.

In all honesty, I could have very likely made most of these things into equipment that Amy could wear. A biomass bag of holding, deployable shield barriers, temporary buffs for patients so they could more easily escape, all of those were things I could have made myself. But Amy was having a blast, and she rarely got to really stretch her biotinker legs, so I wasn't about to ruin her fun.

When I wasn't making bones and working with Amy on other aspects of her guardian, I was designing plans for several grand workings, all designed for the next Endbringer fight. We had learned a lot when we faced Leviathan, and now it was time to apply that to kill Behemoth.

The problem boiled down to two primary issues, targeting the Endbringer, and having enough firepower. The firepower was self-explanatory, but they were clearly faster than we had all thought, which made chasing after them and targeting them much more difficult.

On top of that, perhaps my greatest limitation was that I had no idea where Behemoth would attack next. There were just way too many potential targets, and I didn't have time to protect every nuclear power plant, oil field, or whatever else sort of infrastructure the dynakinetic planned on going after this time.

All of those issues together led me to the solution of mobile grand workings. The idea was to build a small building, probably out of a tree, then put my strongest dimensional partitioning magic into it, greatly increasing the room I had to work with inside of this room. I was then going to design a decent, but ultimately limited grand working inside.

That was as far as I got before Olivia pointed out that I was thinking about it the wrong way.

"Your Space concept might be limited now, but you were confident you would be able to do a lot more with it, right?" she asked, sitting beside me.

She was watching me sketch out a concept for a mobile shield generator that was not working out because I just couldn't power it. This was my third attempt, and even ignoring the power issue, I still wasn't happy with the power levels of the barrier.

"That's right," I responded idly, chewing on my frown as I studied the idea I had created. "I think I need to create separate power generation containers, then link them with the functional containers..."

"Hey, pay attention," She said, gently turning my head to look at her. "If you're going to be able to bend space to your bitch... what about stable portals?"

I frowned, reluctantly letting my previous thread of thoughts go so I could focus on what Olivia had suggested. It took me a moment to get it into my brain, but I quickly picked up on what she was suggesting.

"If I get a portal generator going... I could make whatever I want, as big as I want, powered however I want, then just send the effect to the other side," I said, my eyes getting

wider and wider as the idea came together. "No limit on size means all of my problems are solved. I just need a portal device of some kind..."

"Can you do that?" Olivia asked, eyebrow raised.

I was silent for a moment, mentally reviewing what I had at my disposal. With a frown, I shook my head.

"No, not yet. I might be able to make a portal doorway, two points in connected space, but I would be leaning heavily into threshold magic, and that would likely require them to be permanent fixtures. However... I'm pretty confident that that's not going to stay true forever. With one, maybe two more levels in Space, I should be able to open them on my own, which would make it a whole lot easier to work with."

"So why don't you start building stationary great works now?" she said, spelling out the trail I was already starting to follow. "Then as you keep adding on to your concepts, you can figure out how to make a portal or whatever."

I considered the concept and quickly realized it was probably my best bet. Trying to build inside a dimensional partition was already starting to show signs of being a problem, and I hadn't even finished the outline for the real plans. Not to mention that I was more or less guaranteed to understand portals, bending space, shifting space, and more. If I got all the way to level eight, aiming a stationary weapon should be possible. Hell, it should be easy with the right magic.

Not to mention, if for some reason eight levels wasn't enough, I could likely convince Cauldron to let me use their doorway opener.

"I think you're right," I finally said with a nod. "It would solve all my problems and basically remove the limits of what I can do. I could also do it somewhere else, somewhere that isn't next to where I live."

"Are you worried about it being targeted?" Olivia asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes, in multiple ways," I said cryptically. "This place is about as safe as I could possibly make it, even discounting Kali keeping an eye on us. But even so, it's generally a bad idea to put all your eggs in one basket."

"So... where are you going to build it then?" She asked curiously.

"Not anywhere near here, " I responded with a frown. "I have some people to talk to, they might have a solution."

I had no doubt that Cauldron could get me access to land, but if I was going to talk to them about finding a place for me to build... Why not go all the way?

With a new option to focus on, I scrapped all my previous basic designs and started to work on ones that were considerably more robust. The previous concept's leitmotif was to make many smaller versions that would all work together, but now that was out the window.

It wasn't until the following day that I reached out to Alexandria. I explained the idea, demonstrated the new abilities I had gained from my conceptual magic, and asked for a favor.

"I think the best bet is to build this on an unpopulated Earth," I explained, standing on a conjured platform high above the PRT building in California. "Pretty soon, I will be able to create portals, meaning the effects could reach anywhere they are needed. It also means that people like the Fallen won't be able to interfere."

"And you want us to provide the location and transportation to this empty Earth," she guessed, expression unreadable behind her helmet. "Why exactly would we help with this? You already know our stance on you being anywhere but the safety of a Cauldron base."

"Because it's the safest place for me to build other than the forest around my home," I said, quickly raising my hand to halt her next sentence. "And before you say it, I do not want to build a superweapon next to my home. Not only is it just inviting people to come try to break it, but Endbringers can't affect it if it's not on Earth Bet."

"The Simurgh has caused breaches into other realities before," the stoic brute responded before eventually adding. "But I see your point. What would you do about supplies?"

"I'll be setting up a material conversion station," I explained. "Here I've been using scrap from the bay, but I have some ideas for something more efficient and functionally infinite."

"...You can create materials?" She asked, just the barest hint of surprise in her voice. "What method do you use?"

"Yes? How else do you think I've been getting my hands on gold and gemstones by the literal ton?" I asked, honestly confused. "I mean, you guys have to have seen me cutting away scrap from the boat graveyard."

"We have reports of that, yes," she responded before moving on, ignoring my question. "I will discuss finding an empty world for you to use with the group. I will let you know by tomorrow morning."

"...Fine, that's fine," I said, brushing away the delay, my frustration with the heroine spiking. "I'll find something to keep me busy until then."

"Is there anything else?"

"No, I just wanted to see if you could spend five minutes helping save thousands of lives and untold infrastructure from the massive kaiju plaguing our world," I said, talking sarcastically. "Next time I'll just reach out to the other Free Mason Illuminati assholes controlling the world, maybe they will care enough not to give me crap for trying."

I could see her grit her teeth at my mocking, the brute that defined the brand floating closer, close enough to reach out and touch me if she felt so inclined.

"Do not accuse me of not caring," she said, her fists clenched hard enough that I could hear her costume creaking. "Our mission is far too important to waste any more time than necessary. The Endbringers are forces of nature, and while we struggle against them, we must stay focused. If your predictions about your power are correct, your potential is too important to risk, and yet you put everything in jeopardy for a comparatively insignificant threat!"

"I am willing to step back from putting myself at risk, but I will not stop trying to take down the Enderbingers," I fired back. "I don't disagree that this Enemy is a larger threat, one that is... nearly unimaginable. But in the meantime, I can work to save people *now*, while I slowly power up to face Scion. Until that time, I would appreciate not being looked down on because I want to do the right thing!"

I could see the moment that she made a decision. What that decision was, to kill me, to maim me, to force me into submission and drag me somewhere she could better control me, I don't know. What I did know was that she pulled her arm back to strike me, her hand flat like a shovel.

In the split second before she hit me, her muscles tensing in what felt like slow motion, one of their portals opened up beside her. Before it even finished growing, the sound of rapid gunshots echoed out, and three bullets struck Alexandria in the head.

The heroine froze, slowly lowering her hand and turning to the portal. I could see inside just enough to spot Contessa, the fedora-wearing Cauldron cape.

"Path to keeping Alexandria alive," she said plainly, with hardly any inflection. "Go home, Alexandria."

For a moment, no one moved. I was holding a glowing ball of writhing purple annihilation in one hand, and was already working fuck with the space between the brute and myself. After a good thirty seconds, Alexandria nodded rigidly, turning and flying away, moving fast enough that an explosion of air blew my hair back.

When she had vanished out of sight, Contessa turned to me.

"Doctor Mother will select an appropriate planet for you," She said. "Expect a portal within an hour."

"... And we are just going to pretend that didn't happen?" I asked, eyeing the suit-clad cape. "How am I going to trust any of you when Alexandria was just about to attack me?"

"She was not going to seriously injure you. Her plan was to show you how outclassed you were. She will be suitably chastised," Contessa assured me.

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" I asked, looking at her with a raised eyebrow.

“... We will be in touch.”

The portal closed, and I was left standing there, high up in the sky above California, wondering just how close I had come to death.