

I spent a few minutes doing some light stretches and exercises to better feel for how well the ritual had gone. I was definitely heavier than I had been before, probably by a good thirty pounds. My enhanced strength made it easy to ignore, but I could feel that my steps were heavier. My flexibility definitely took a hit as well. I wasn't locked in place by any means, but I was pretty sure that it had been easier to touch my toes beforehand. All of those negative absorption aspects were entirely overshadowed by my strength and durability. Judging from my knowledge of the process and what I could feel, I was pretty sure I was bulletproof to at least small caliber pistol rounds, maybe even some of the bigger ones. I was definitely tough enough to tank knives and just about any weapon a non-cape could swing at me.

All things considered, the ritual had gone pretty well. The seven-circled geomantic partial was one of the more stable options, even if I had only used the most basic version of it I had in my head. The element absorption would continue to work for another four or five hours before it began to fail, giving me plenty of time to go out and do something stupid.

After I was done making sure I wasn't going to fall on my face and leave an imprint on the ground, I started looking through the metal shelving. Once I found a decent-sized, primarily flat piece, I grabbed it, taking it with me to the shop's bathroom.

The small room was just as trashed as the rest of the building, but by some miracle, the toilet was still intact and... untainted. With a bucket of water, I was willing to bet the porcelain throne would even flush, though there was no telling what state the pipes were in.

I made my way to what remained of the bathroom mirror. It was broken, shattered from some sort of impact, but just intact enough that I could see [myself](#). I let out a sigh and ran my hand through my short, dirty blond hair, scratching at my short beard. I was thankful that I hadn't been dropped into another body when I got thrown here, as I was pretty attached to mine. I wasn't sure how well I would have handled being combined with someone who already existed, either.

Shaking the thoughts from my head, I focused on the piece of thin, painted metal. I readied myself for a moment before bending it over the edge of the sink. With my extra strength, this was pretty easy, so I began dragging the bend back and forth with the edge of the sink. It was kind of like when you try to smooth out a crumpled dollar bill on the edge of a vending machine. The significantly more brittle paint flaked and cracked off the sheet, exposing clean metal underneath. It took a few minutes to get it all off, but it worked surprisingly well. I had no idea how easy it would be without the enhanced strength, but I could probably do it well enough to prepare more of the painted metal for repeat rituals. But that's not what this piece was for.

Relying on my now supernaturally tough face, I took the clean metal and pressed it against myself, molding it to my skin. The result, after a few minutes of work, was a pretty decent, vaguely human mask. A quick metal-cutting spell later, and it was trimmed to match my face. It curled up and around my jawline, primarily to hide my beard, but with enough room for me to open my mouth and talk.

I cut the two eye holes last, before using my thumb to smooth over the edges, literally grinding down what would have normally been a dangerously sharp cut. The last step was pulling the drawstring from my jacket hood and using it to affix the mask in place. I sent a prayer to my father for teaching me the knots I used to weave a proper strap, which would keep the mask on tightly.

I finally examined myself in the mirror again, nodding at what I saw. It was an intimidating mask, showing just enough human features to identify with but not enough to look overly detailed. It was also obviously a rough design, one I would probably ditch as soon as I could, but it would work for now.

With the mask set, now all that was left was something to wear that wasn't my normal clothes. Once I had a little cash, I could buy whatever I needed from the second-hand stores around the city, but for now, I was going to have to bend the rules a bit.

Once again, I left the abandoned shop behind, making my way through the city, stopping by stores, businesses, and everything in between. I got quite a few looks, but after a few hours, I finally managed to find a few lost and founds that were out in the open. From those, I grabbed a black winter cap, a couple of sweatshirts, a gray long-sleeve shirt, and the *pièce de résistance*, a long black top coat. It was worn, clearly built from sturdy stuff, and one corner on the bottom was frayed.

But damn, did it fit my kind of look.

I'm sure eventually I would shift to a more grandiose costume, maybe even bribe Parian with some exotic materials to make me some proper wizard robes, but for now I would rock the fuck out of the Constantine look.

With some alternate clothes found, I returned to home base. I had wasted a lot of time walking around, looking through lost and founds, and borrowing clothes where I could, so I wanted to wait the remaining hour or so to reapply the geomancy absorption. I spent that time stripping down more metal, cleaning out the arcane symbols from the geomantic partial, and even improving the partial. I added a balancing ring around the exterior, encapsulating the entire rite and further stabilizing the transfer of concepts. I also considered making a whole new partial, a nine-circled one. Nine-circled partials were good for extracting as much potency as possible from the earthen material, but often struggled to refine out some of the negative side effects.

I would probably switch to a nine-circled rite when I got my hands on one or several slabs of slate, since the neutral stone would help stabilize the process enough to counter the trade-off.

I was sitting around, going over some of my combat options, when my absorbed concepts finally faded. I quickly got to work, since the sun was starting to go down, which meant it was almost time to get going. I quickly cut my fingers, pushing my blood into each arcane symbol. I then stacked the metal in each of the seven circles, before sitting down and repeating

the ritual from the beginning. When I finished the process I stood and stretched, immediately able to feel the slight difference the balancing ring had made. Most of the stiffness and some of the extra weight had failed to transfer over.

"God, I can't wait to have a proper place to work on this stuff," I mumbled to myself, stretching to explore just how little stiffness had passed to me. "With proper materials as well."

I spent a minute hyping myself up, before finally leaving the store behind. I was carrying a small bundle of clothes under my arm, inside of which was my mask, tucked away from prying eyes. I quickly made my way deeper into the city. I was pretty firmly in the Docks territory, but if I wanted to find some easy Merchant targets, I needed to start looking in the east slums.

I had about four hours left on my absorption when I finally found myself where I needed to be. The real Docks, the area surrounding the actual docks, felt and looked even worse off than the commercial district or the higher-end Southern Docks did. Piles of garbage were everywhere, the streets were terrible, and the roads were completely empty.

Now, at this point in the story, the merchants weren't really a massive gang, just a collection of drug dealers and other scum. They should only have three capes, Squealer, Skidmark, and Mush, active at the moment. Together, they barely held any territory, even though nobody else really wanted it. I wasn't really worried about running into their capes either since, at this stage, they weren't actively attacking or trying to gain territory.

As I walked around the slums, I finally found what I was looking for. A group of seven Merchants, identifiable from their loud, obnoxious shouting, the blatant drug deals going on around them, and the horrifying state of their clothes and bodies. They were sitting on the porch of some old run-down house, drinking, smoking, and even shooting up without a care in the world. These were people who stopped caring about themselves and others a long time ago. They weren't scared of the cops and were clearly not used to being targeted by capes.

I was pretty sure I could take them all head-on, but I wasn't about to bet my life on it. Instead, I snuck away into the shadows, making my way around the obnoxious group. I circled around to the back of the house, putting on my costume and sliding on my mask as I moved. I finished the look by putting on the black winter cap.

When I finally walked around the back of the house, I jumped over the back of the rotted wooden fence, barely having to touch it to vault over it. I landed with a light thud, quickly scanning my surroundings. The backyard was filled with trash and completely barren, with nothing but old dead grass in the dirt. I slowly made my way across the lawn, stepping over piles of trash and broken bottles before eventually reaching the back door.

"*Scalpere metallum*" I whispered, summoning the small blade at the end of my finger.

Carefully, I used the blade to slice through the locking mechanism, carving it out completely and pulling it out of the door. I then reached inside and gently pushed the door open. It squeaked as it moved, and suddenly, the stealth game was over.

"What was that?" A voice said from inside the next room over, followed by footsteps. "I thought I-"

The man who came around the corner was greeted by the remnants of the lock hitting him square in the face, taking him down to the ground with the sound of catching metal. Whoever was following him barely had time to react as I moved around the corner and slammed him in the solar plexus, holding back so I didn't kill him. Instead, he just crumpled around my fist, folding up and sinking to the ground, the air wholly driven from his lungs.

"*Somnum scintilla.*" I whispered, mana dancing between my pinky and thumb, drawing out three sparking arcane symbols, which flared, pulled together, and dropped from my hand.

The sparking charge dropped down and landed on the first man's chest, instantly sinking into his body. He clenched and arched his back as the spell overwhelmed his nervous system and knocked him unconscious. He would wake up four or five hours from now with a headache, feeling like he had been tased.

I repeated the spell for the second man before stepping further into the house, trying to keep track of everything at once. The house was disgusting, with trash, waste, and everything in between stuffed into corners and under furniture. You could just barely make out that this had once been a nice home under all the grime, mold, and filth.

I was shocked to find more Merchants just two rooms over, all three of them having missed the previous commotion. Then again, they were pretty invested in their food, ferociously tearing into some sort of takeout. I wasn't one to stickle over etiquette and table manners, but watching them eat made me nauseous. These were hardly people, just drugs and addiction stuffed into vaguely human-looking shells.

I pulled back and avoided the kitchen, making my way through the dark interior until I found what was once a living room. It stank to high hell, but I ignored it as best I could, focusing on peering out the front window. I was going to have to take down everyone, eventually, but since the people out front were visibly armed, so they needed to go down first. Then I could worry about the people stuffing their faces.

I spent a few seconds studying the view, where everyone was, and who was armed. The only weapons I was really worried about was the AK-47 leaning against one man's chair, and a shotgun lying near the man sitting on the front stairs. I was pretty sure my current level of geomancy absorption would not be able to handle a rifle round like that, and if the shotgun was loaded with slugs, it would probably hurt me even if it didn't penetrate.

With a good vision for a game plan, I waited for a customer to finish their purchase and rush away before taking several steps back and sprinting at the window.

I burst through the glass onto the porch, passing through the frame and out over the porch. My increased strength carried me over the rotted boars, my body punching through the railing running around it.

*"Magna pila suspendisse scintillae,"* I shouted, magic flaring around my hands as I held them together, like I was catching something.

Six arcane sigils flared to life in a triangle around each hand, a sparking ball of electrical energy forming between them, the size of a softball. I threw it over at the center of the group, already turning to tackle the man with the AK. I could feel my body picking up on the instincts and knowledge that came with my topics, pulling deeper than I had ever before. The ball of magic impacted the ground and detonated, sending out a single wave of sparking energy, passing over and through the Merchants. The man I tackled was driven to the ground, his chair destroyed as I drove him through it. I wordlessly sparked a blast of lightning magic into his stomach, slowly turning to find my next target, only to get slapped off of the unconscious Merchant.

I rolled forward, five burning points of pain in my back making me curse and grit my teeth. I stumbled to my knee, spotting the shotgun-wielding Merchant as he struggled to his feet, obviously working through my first AOE spell. He racked another round as he took a single step closer, ready to finish me off.

While my left arm refused to move, I jutted my finger out, quick-casting a spark that impacted the armed dealer's leg, causing him to fail and miss his next shot. Before he could recover I half leaped, half stumbled forward, slamming into him and knocking him off his feet. We both slammed into the porch stairs, before punching him hard enough to loosen his teeth.

I barely had time to think before the front door burst open, all of the Merchants from inside bursting out, one of them armed with a pistol.

*"Disperge pluviam in silva fulguris,"* I shouted, making a wide brushing gesture at them with my right hand.

Four sigils appeared in the air as I waved, glowing with a line of mana, fading as the charge built. A blast of several dozen bolts of electricity fired out, impacting all of them. Their close proximity meant the energy jumped from one to the other until their energy ran out, sparks jumping until they all collapsed.

For a moment, I stood there, the cold of low mana making me shiver, forcing me to clench my teeth to keep from chattering. Then the pain in my back and arm flared, and I grit my teeth harder and flinched. Looking around for anyone watching, I started casting magic on myself.

*"Sagitta de mea carne ventilabis,"* I said through gritted teeth, a pained groan managing to sneak out as the spell forced the five lead balls from my back and slowed my bleeding.  
*"Reficere carnem, musculus et os"*

I groaned in relief as the holes in my back and chips in my bone began to heal. The damage was far from gone, but a quick numbing spell let me focus on what was going on around me. I looked around, happy to see that no one had used my distraction to sneak up on

me. I let out a long breath, looking around at the unconscious and slightly twitching merchants. I shivered slightly, waiting for my mana to refill before continuing my healing.

"That... could have gone better," I admitted to myself, cursing under my breath as I surveyed the damage. "