

“The most important thing to know is that you cannot use healing magic on him at all,” Addavein said, standing beside Mark in hovervan. “I don’t know this man, Cade Waterson, but I do know of Grand Mages, and when they Break their Bindings the reasoning is always similar, and the fallout always falls along certain lines.”

The hovervan was packed with just Mark, Addavein, and Sunder and Stitcher.

The Winter Ball was still in full swing underneath the dome of Domal’Takela, looking like lit-up parties happening between large stretches of darkness, with strips of light from the trams, from various outdoor areas, and from people, connecting all the light to each other. The actual structure of Domal’Takela on the horizon was lit up enough to make it look like the sun still shone upon that tumble of dragon-sized white stone

The sky beyond the glass overhead was full of auroras, and the moon.

First Imperial Hospital was straight ahead. They’d be there in 5 minutes. Walaria was already there. Mark imagined she was probably getting some medical assistance herself due to her injured arm with that loose black bandage, and Mark almost kicked himself for not trying to heal her of that earlier. He was a healer, after all. He could heal most things! Why didn’t he even offer? Or just *do it*. Normally, he *just did it*, healing everyone near him simply by virtue of them being near him, though he did ask pretty much every single time. All paladins were trained to do this, and Mark might not have been a paladin, but he still had most of the training.

Mark had never dealt with a Broken Binding, though. No one did. Not really. People *just died* when their Binding broke, and especially when they broke it themselves. Apparently, this ‘Cade Waterson’ had managed to hold onto life for a lot longer than anyone expected. The Second Princess had originally given Mark a deadline to figure out ‘Binding Switching’ of 24 hours, about 7 hours ago. Now, Mark only had 3.

That 24 hour estimate had been way too generous, apparently.

And now, in the flight to the hospital, Addavein tried cramming in more information about Bindings, hoping something would help Mark heal Cade. And yet, Mark was 100% sure that Addavein was *much more interested* in seeing if Mark could manage to make another soulhouse in another person. Mark was sure that everyone involved in this was interested in Cade for reasons beyond the man's own life, too.

For his own part, Mark wondered how much he cared about the guy's life, versus this lure Thrashtalon had thrown down. Did Transcendent Body, Mind, and Soul really make a soulhouse? Mark hoped they did, because if they did then Mark could give a lot of people soulhouses, and thus Aluatha could fend off Okuana's threat of war *without* going to the dragons *OR* having people Contract with demons.

... Maybe *that* was Thrashtalon's endgame.

If Cade Waterson lived, if he thrived with the Transcendent series of Powers inside of him, if the best outcome happened, then he was going to be protected by the Empire. If Thrashtalon thought he could... what? Steal Cade's potential soulhouse for others? That was probably *not* going to happen—

"You are distracted?" Addavein asked.

"Sorry. You were talking about Binding fallouts?"

"Yes... Just don't heal him. I know you would try, but you would hurt him faster. Broken Bindings no longer have the safeties that normal Powers have, and this Waterson boy had Water Shaper and Water Manipulation. He probably Broke himself trying to combust the water inside of others, which is the most normal way to Break Water Shaper. They likely have him drugged and sleeping, as well, so waking him through healing him would likely cause him to cascade into self-destruction." Addavein asked, "Now what were you thinking about?"

"The problem won't be this guy. Sure, he could be a Thrashtalon plant, or any number of things. Even if he dies, Walaria is going to ask me to continue trying this Transcendent thing with others, and I'm going to do that, just because I can see that having immortal warriors of Aluatha is better than the alternative of falling to Okuana, or dealing with dragons, or demons. So eventually Thrashtalon will get what he wants, which is, I assume, someone with an immortal triple-Transcendent Binding who is Contracted to Thrashtalon's demons." Mark finished with, "That's what I was thinking."

Addavein said, “In my professional opinion, learned from dealing with demons for a long time, unless you know their goal or their specific outcomes they desire *and* you’re actually interacting with them constantly, then you should ignore what you cannot control and focus on what you can control. When Thrashtalon’s ploy eventually comes into the light, then we deal with it. For now, the battle before you is the one of saving the life of a warrior of Aluatha. Breaking the Binding is a delayed, horrific death for many, but it’s also going out in a blaze of glory to save that which you can save. Mostly, it works. Mostly, such people die instantly. So if you can save him, you will have saved a hero from one of the worst deaths imaginable.”

Mark nodded a little, breathing in the Good and out the Bad—

The hovervan jostled.

The guys up ahead called out 30 seconds to landing.

Mark focused.

And then they were landing at one of three hoverpads on top of a grand hospital that was a lot smaller than Mark imagined it should have been, but it was still 5 stories tall and it covered a kilometer of land on the edge of the glass dome of Domal’Takela. An entry portal to Domal’Takela was set into the glass high overhead, and Mark imagined that many people had emergency flights into this hospital through that entryway.

Walaria stood beside the hoverpad, still wearing her witch’s battlegown with all her silver ornaments. Her black armcloth was gone, revealing reddened skin.

Mark stepped off of the transport before it fully landed—

“Don’t try to heal him,” Walaria said, as she started walking toward a large pair of open doors set in front of a tunnel leading down into the hospital.

Mark walked beside her, saying, “Addavein told me a few things about that. What part of his Binding is broken, exactly? Water-combustion?”

Then they were in a tunnel in the hospital, heading down an empty hallway, past a nurses' station with a bunch of people working if they were working, and bowing if they were able. Doctors in white coats were here and there, and some of the doctors had on white mage robes instead of coats. The difference was small, but it was a difference, easily noticed and usually with the sleeves. Doctors had normal sleeves. Mages had big sleeves. These mages here all seemed to have sleeves with little pull strings in them so that they could tighten them up when they needed to actually do bloody-type work.

Signage overhead pointed toward surgery, imaging, and other such locations. The place was Earth-modern, but with a few exceedingly rich Daihoonian details, like the marble floor and the space, and the smell. It smelled sterile, but not nearly as strongly sterile as hospitals usually smelled—

They passed the main emergency surgery centers, stepping into a different wing of the hospital that was for longer term care.

Mark hadn't been in a hospital in a long time. Not since he was recovering from the mana-flavoring incident that put him into a coma, before his Tutorial. He barely remembered that, because mostly he was in a coma, so was he actually remembering anything at all? No. He was imagining things. He hadn't been in a hospital at all. Being here, in a hospital, made him imagine memories that never happened.

They passed through a large archway that contained a pressure in the air, keeping sections of the hospital air-quarantined; separating short term emergency care from long term care.

Most of the hospital was long-term care, because most injuries and cancers and otherwise were easily healed with magics of all kinds, both through Pantheonic methods and through actual healing magic Talents. Mark saw some Pantheonic imagery on the walls, mostly Freyala with her wings and Hearthswell with her basket of fruit. Mark felt other Unions in the air here and there, so yeah, there was real healing happening here. But for the stuff that was too hard for healing magics, there was alchemy and therapy, and so that's what most of the hospital consisted of.

Mark already knew not to go healing people as a matter-of-course in this part of the hospital.

Art held on the walls. Big windows had nice views. People walked and hobbled around, each of them making do, as circumstances allowed.

Mark kept his Union very contained.

People stared at him, at Walaria mostly, and at Addavein, with his tail swaying behind him and his cloak of wings around his shoulders. Some people tried to bow, but they were injured, and it was the thought that counted more than the act.

And then Walaria brought them to a hall where the windows were covered in black cloth, and a doorway held between those windows. A pair of guards stood by the door and some old man stood on the other side of the hallway, holding a cane and wondering what was happening beyond the guards. The old guy saw Walaria. He gasped and bowed his head; the rest of him was too stiff to bow at all.

The guards opened the doors and Walaria strode through into a small, false-light courtyard garden, open to a fake, daytime sky. The whole room was maybe 10 meters cubed, with a single tree in one corner and little bushes here and there. At the center stood an ancient-looking white stone table, large enough for a person.

A man lay on that cold slab of stone. He had IVs going into his arms and a machine beeping out his status. 110 beats per minute. He was unconscious, but also in pain, and the sweat on his body kinda floated off of his body, into the air, and then popped like steam bubbles. That steam swirled and came back together here and there forming ice chips and then water droplets and then steam, once again.

The IV drip was not saline or any sort of water, Mark realized at a glance. It was grey shavallian. Diluted, for sure, but still shavallian. It was kinda working, but not really. Mark imagined the 'off switch' of Cade Waterson's Binding had been one of the first parts to go when he Broke his Binding.

Cade was dying, his vector barely present at all.

The witches Pearl, Amy, and Uva stood to the sides, and a doctor in white mage robes stood beside the patient.

That doctor almost panicked as he called out, "Don't try to heal him!"

“I have been made aware. Thank you,” Mark said, standing over Cade’s body, looking at the damage with all of his senses, his Union still very controlled. “And people wouldn’t be in a hospital if Union could heal them.”

“I see your Union touching him,” said the doctor, calming down but still firm, adding, “Do you think you can actually do this miracle?”

“We’ll find out,” Mark said.

The doctor was uncomfortable with that, but he had mostly made his peace with the extreme nature of today’s experiment.

Mark focused on the patient.

Cade Waterson was blond, with a warrior’s physique. He had lacerations to his chest, stomach, and legs, all of the long wounds pointing in the same direction, looking like they were made by a clawed hand of indeterminate size. Probably some sort of Shaper Power and not a clawed hand at all. The surface healing was crudely done, and blood seeped out of the wounds to join the droplets of water bursting in the air, and against Mark’s skin.

Cade’s body jostled as he hit Mark with his droplets, the counter force of his Shaping pushing him away. It seemed he was automatically attacking everything near him.

He had probably been a very difficult patient, and he was still mentally fighting something, his vector curled inside of his body and warring with something... some memory. Maybe the goblin infection? No. He would have died long before now if he had been infected with goblins... Probably.

Maybe he had been infected with the Bite, but then he had ripped it out of himself?

Mark surveyed what he needed to survey, giving voice to his thoughts, saying, “Okay. So him attacking me is good. I was wondering if we’d need to get him to come to me somehow, but he’s doing that on his own. I can do the rest from here. Is he infected with goblins? What is he fighting?”

The doctor took a half step forward, but no closer. “He cleared the Bite himself but his dream was shattered due to that clearing. He’s fighting a war with goblins. It’s a common end-stage scenario to Broken Bindings when it comes to those who fight goblins, because he’s re-tuned his Dream toward killing goblins. That’s how he got rid of the infection and how he cleared the goblin threat at that harbor.”

The doctor was very, very worried about the patient, in a way that Mark didn’t want to explore right now. It was a lot more than a professional-type worry, though.

“Okay,” Mark said, looking down at Cade in a different way. “So he *did* change his deepest memory at the core of his Binding, too. I’m going to be ripping that out—”

“Will he remember anyone? Anything?” the doctor asked, in a fatherly sort of way. And then he added, “I... I can’t lose all my boys in one night.”

Mark looked up at the doctor. The doctor had tears in his eyes.

Yeah. He was the father.

Mark suddenly guessed at the arc of transmission of information that got Cade Waterson to be noticed by Walaria at all. That arc of information passed through this father here. Was he a doctor here at this hospital? It was highly likely. Grand Mage for a son, too. Water Powers tended to run in families. Water mana people usually had healing powers, which made them highly successful doctors and otherwise if they had either enough power behind them or enough training. So yeah. Doctor and healing mage for a father, here at First Imperial Hospital.

Big deals, all around.

But Mark’s patient was his patient, no matter where he came from or how he came to be sitting in front of Mark.

Mark told the father the truth, “I have no idea how much he will remember. I’ve never done this before, and this is all experimental. But I did just get a cram session with Understanding magics and under this

Empire's top necromancers, and I did manage to throw together some undead experiments, ripping Bindings in and out of them, and the undead were fine. I'm also a decent healer. So yes. I think I can do this, and yes, there will be unintended consequences. For starters, he won't have Water Manipulation or Water Shaper anymore."

Cade's father listened deeply, his vector flexing at Walaria and Addavein and at Mark. He steeled himself, and said, "Yes. Just... Just..." He went quiet. "Yes." He looked toward Walaria and bowed deeply. "Thank you for this chance."

Walaria acknowledged the doctor, and then she stepped nearer to Mark, looking at the patient with him. The droplets of bursting water and blood never touched her. She asked, "How will you proceed?"

Mark said to pretty much everyone in attendance, "The only thing I'm not sure about is where to start; on the Mind, Body, or Soul. His body is—" fucked up. "—not healthy. His mind seems fractured, and his soul is falling apart. Disturbing any one of them might cause the whole thing to crash. So I'm leaning toward installing Transcendent Body first."

Walaria said, "Go with Transcendent Body. The girls and I will step in to stabilize him if needs must, but he will start decaying fast no matter what you choose."

The necromancers Sunder and Stitcher held back. Addavein said nothing. The witch girls remained to the side, and the father mentally pulled back, adopting a persona of professionalism.

The father offered, "His Body Power Level remains decently strong, so replacing that might allow him to keep... most of himself." With tears wicking away from his face, kept separate through his own Power, the father remained calm-looking as he added, "Hopefully."

"That was my initial assessment made outside of seeing the patient's actual issues, so... Yes." Mark said, "I'm going to begin now."

Walaria nodded quickly and then she stepped back. Pearl, Amy, and Uva stepped to the sides, and Uva gently suggested the father step further back as well. Soon, Mark was the only person near Cade Waterson, and everyone else was 4 meters away. Walaria did something to the space beyond that, her vector curling in the air around them. The solid black curtains in the windows seemed to turn darker.

The vectors beyond the room vanished.

Mark hadn't thought about people spying on him, or interfering, but he was glad Walaria had thought about that.

Mark took a breath, and then, with half-lidded eyes, the dream overlapped with reality.

Cade's little waterbursts touched Mark like little sparks of a dying fire.

Mark followed those sparks, inviting them into his dream.

And then Cade was there.

He was a mess of a broken soul.

Mark held out Transcendent Body with his right hand and he placed his left hand into the dying fire that was Cade Waterson. Cade reacted in reality with an undirected attack that broke against Mark's adamantine flesh, and that Mark used that attack to pull at all of Cade in a heartbeat Union of Fragmented Binding and Transcendent Body.

It was like pulling down a cobweb.

Everything suddenly collapsed, all at once, and Cade's heart stopped, his brain flickered—

Mark Unioned with life, with the lightning of firing neurons and with the very nature of existence itself, forcing Cade to remain with them as he ripped out cobwebs and slipped in Transcendent Body, like slipping an octopus into a fleeing soul. Mark's thoughts drifted, barely, as he fell deeper into the dream, as he forced Cade to remain alive in the smallest measure of that reality.

Transcendent Body flowed into the half-corpse, and suddenly the heart started and the dream faded, just a little. Mana, lost and fragmented, began to slip into its proper place, as a dream at the heart of Cade Waterson began to coalesce once again. Was it the same dream? The same memory? As before? Who knew.

And then Cade's mind fragmented further and something ephemeral began to fall away from the body, even as wounds began to heal on the living corpse. Mark knew the issue instantly. Cade didn't have enough mana to make Transcendent Body function. Brain death was coming, and Mark was pretty sure his soul was leaving him under the strain trying to keep Transcendent Body intact.

*Time for Transcendent Mind.*

Mark Unioned with Transcendent Mind and Transcendent Body, pulling out the Binding keeping Cade's body functioning and installing a stopgap to stabilize his mind. The body could be healed later. The mind needed to remain strong.

The father yelled something outside of Mark's capability to hear. Sounded angry. Something about how Mark was killing him. This much was true, technically. Cade's body suddenly stopped, but his brain was functioning well. Yes, eventually the body would die and the brain would follow, but the brain was now very resilient against damage, and Transcendent Mind was a much more focused Binding with a whole lot less going on, so Cade's body and soul could actually handle that.

That ephemeral thing leaving Cade's body stuck around, like clothes drying on a line, held onto that line by the firm clips that were his mind.

Mark learned something, he supposed. Brain first, and the rest will follow. He was sorry such learning had to happen in this kinda setting.

Someone stopped the father from coming forward, and Mark focused on healing the mana inside of Cade's newly-functional brain with a Union of Energy and Entropy so as not to disturb the body with excessive healing.

The mind suddenly flared to life, fully online, as Transcendent Mind coalesced fully like a brightness in the darkness—

Cade 'woke up' in front of Mark in the dream, on the grass outside of his Binding House in his soulhouse.

Cade looked at Mark, and from here it was going to be *physically* easy, because Cade was fully inside of Mark's soul, for Mark had fully enclosed him with his astral Body. It was not going to be emotionally easy, for Cade, because Cade's living, wakeful mind flashed with a thousand questions at once, his eyes staring with fear and wonder, his vector struggling to free itself.

Mark spoke in the dream, and in reality, saying, "Have no fear. You're at First Imperial Hospital near Domal'Takela, and your father is with us, overseeing your Binding surgery."

Cade blasted out questions with a mind that had too much to say, too fast, and that wanted to know more.

Mark couldn't even hear the questions, so he said, "Quark? Can you talk to him? Tell him some basics?"

Quark stepped out into the dream, already speaking rapidly to Cade, who responded even quicker in turn. Within a second Cade's worried vector turned quiet, secure, and full of melancholy. Transcendent Mind was not a speedster Talent, but the mind always worked faster than the body, and Minder's minds exemplified that nature most of all.

Mark said, "Your body is dead right now, but we're going to fix that, too, before your mind follows."

Cade's fear returned.

Quark said, "I, uh, did not tell him that, sir."

Mark said, "No worries, Quark." And then he told Cade, "I'm going to put you back to sleep now. Please relax."

"Okay," Cade said, at a normal speed, fear in his voice, body wavering like sand in the wind that was Mark's domain. "Thank you, sir."

Mark nodded.

And then Mark pulled out Transcendent Mind, and Cade's mind fluttered into sand, as Mark put Transcendent Body into him and his fluttery body became something solid, filling out from the place that was his mind. Mana equalized into the body and the body beat with life once again.

"The mind is asleep again, and the body is stabilized now," Mark said, mainly for the benefit of onlookers. "I will keep Transcendent Mind out of him until the end, so he will wake up slower."

Before the mind woke up from the body being able to support it, Mark took Nothing from Cade, and put in Transcendent Soul.

As the sandcastle of Cade's existence became more solid, as his mana filled out his Soul Binding, Mark continued with the final piece.

A Union of Life, taking Nothing and giving Transcendent Mind in turn.

Three Transcendent Powers filled out Cade Waterson's Binding, solidifying him into something truly solid, but dim. He didn't have enough mana to support all of them at full power, so they were all terribly weak. His overall Power Level had crashed back to nothing, no doubt.

Mark pulled out completely, dismissing the dream and stepping away from Cade.

Cade remained on the white stone, his wounds sealing up slowly but surely, his mana stressed trying to keep up. He was probably still very wounded but he could be healed now, and so Mark did a small Union of Good and Bad, breathing in the Good for both of them, and then breathing out the Bad. Goblin-green spread in one of his wounds and the father yelled, terrified, about goblins. Mark was already healing that, though, pulling Corruption from Cade and giving the Purity of adamantium to him.

Green acid spilled out of Mark's skin, dissolving small portions of his clothes, but soon the corruption stopped coming and Cade slept soundly under a Union of Good and Bad. Some of the shavallian in his blood disintegrated under Mark's Purity, and some of Cade's astral body woke up and flexed outward instinctively, but the IV was still there, still dripping silver-grey poison into his veins, and soon Cade's astral body turned limp.

Walaria asked, “I would like to have Quark’s recording of the event, Mark.”

Mark rolled his shoulders, stretching a little as he said, “Quark; send it now, please.” And then Mark took stock of his surroundings.

Addavein stood by the father, letting go of his wrist, and the father rushed Cade, collapsing onto his chest, saying small words of love and prayer, gripping healing flesh. Sunder and Stitcher stood further away, looking on, talking in small words to each other about what they had seen. Pearl, Amy, and Uva were around the room, standing in a triangle formation with Cade and Mark at the center, but Walaria nodded to them and they formed a line behind their mentor.

Cade’s vector was fully internal, but he was breathing easy, his wounds were sealing up, and he was no longer detonating water droplets in the air. The shavallian IV had fully shut him down, too, so that was a very good sign that his Bindings were very intact.

Walaria asked Mark, “The Mind was more important than the Body?”

Mark broke it down, “All of the Bindings are pretty much the same size, but the Body was trying to heal all of the body at once and that was too much for the remnant mana that Cade had to start with, so it was failing completely. The mind was smaller and more easily healed, so I should have started with the Binding for the mind, first. I didn’t know that, but I saw the issue as soon as I could and so I fixed it. A case could be made for how the Soul should have gone first. When the soul solidified in my house I was able to keep him together a whole lot easier. I think trying to keep Cade’s Power Level intact with a solid Body first was a mistake. He’ll just have to regrow his Power Level from scratch, now... What’s he at, Quark?”

“PL 8 estimated,” Quark said, from on top of Mark’s shoulder—

Cade’s vector flexed outward, groggily, and he lifted a hand, weakly. He touched his father’s grey hair, and the father laughed and cried and held Cade’s hand, and Cade opened his eyes. For a moment, everything was good. And then Cade saw his father, and tears fell as memories surfaced, as he tried to sit up.

“Are Ellis and Owen... Oh gods.” Cade sobbed, “They’re still dead, aren’t they?”

“But you’re alive, Cade!” the father proclaimed, holding his son’s hands, his son’s shoulder. “You’re still alive!”

Walaria stepped away.

Mark followed, glancing backward for just a moment.

And then they were in the hallway.

The others were still in the courtyard.

The door closed, separating them.

Walaria told Mark, “We’ll keep him under observation and shavallian for a while. He might appear at the Ball tonight, or not.” She moved on, asking, “Was that difficult?”

“No. It was easy. I think the houses are purposefully-made to allow immortal elves to switch out Powers at-will. We heard as much in the elven lands. So I think I’ll be able to make a book of life, soon. Maybe after I experiment with Necromancy directly. I’m thinking I need to make a full copy of a person out of Death mana so that they can re-inhabit it at-will, or however it might work. Not sure.”

“I suspect they’ll have to Worship you for you to collect their souls upon death. Not actual worship, mind you. But Worship, the language of gifted power, and to determine where souls go upon death.”

“... Oh,” Mark said, “Uh... Yeah. That tracks.”

Walaria moved on, “We have criminals. I want you to remove their Skills so that we don’t have to lock them up or care about them beyond normal enforcement. We’ll figure out a way to get you lots of Healthy Bodys to give them in turn, so they’ll be able to live actual lives once again.” She added, “And now that we know you *can do this* I would prefer to never see you in any physical danger ever again, but I know that it will happen, and that you want it to happen, so where are we going from here, Mark?”

Mark made a Big Decision, saying, “I want Resurrection from Jessie Stills and I want to give it to Eliot. I want Crystal Tower to reinstate us as Hero/Villain Program participants. And I want to make powerhouses for the war, so that there isn’t a war and so that we don’t have to resort to dragons, or demons. And I’ll strip Powers from criminals *if* they agree to it.”

“I’ll consider it, I’ll make it happen, and *Yes*. As for the criminals, you should reconsider your stance on actively removing Skills from criminals, even if they do not want it. I assure you that the first of many people to volunteer for such removal will be those who simply cannot live normal lives as they are, and who are criminals merely due to their Powers. They will be lining up to have them removed.” Walaria glanced toward the courtyard room, saying, “Do you want to observe him for a while?”

“No. I want to know if the goblin corruption was the trick, or not.”

“Could have been, but likely not. You already know how to heal that.”

Mark nodded, feeling a whole lot better as the situation seemed to be winding down. Mark said, “I’ll observe with Addavein for a bit, until at least he’s satisfied, then I’ll head home.” Mark glanced at Walaria’s reddened arm. “Do you want healing with that?”

“It’s not an injury of my own but one I must bear. Good work tonight, Mark. Do you want another Understanding Party with the Imperial Necromancers?”

“Not yet, but later. Thank you.”

Walaria nodded, and then she took her leave, stepping away and opening a door to elsewhere—

For a moment, a great pressure flowed out from that open doorway, swirled around Walaria, and then that vector touched Mark. It was the gaze of a dragon, or a kaiju, or something of a similar statue, and it was highly protective of Walaria in that moment, moving to contain and protect her as she stepped into its domain. Mark’s hackles rose. And then the Walaria stepped into a grand, imperial hallway beyond the door and the presence vanished, pulling back into the imperial palace beyond.

She shut the door.

And Mark was alone in the hallway again...

Mostly.

Two guards and that older man were still there. They had been there 10 minutes ago, too. The guards shuddered a little, one chuckling nervously now that the great pressure was gone, and then he realized that Mark was still there so he stood up straight and tall and went quiet, just like the other one had remained this whole time.

The old man let out a bellowing laugh. "Holy gods of Light and Dark! You're that Blackvein fellow, ain't ya! You got his webweave on underneath your suit, don't ya? I recognize the white lines!"

Mark grinned, looking down at the regrown black underneath his acid-eaten white shirt and white suit. The bright white vis-lines on the black webweave were visible on his arm, and by his cuff. "I got self-repairing webweave but the clothes kinda lack in that regard."

The old man grinned, pulling at his hospital gown, ass hanging out his backside, saying, "They got more of these down the hall if you need one."

"I'll manage. Thank you, though."

And then Mark went back into the courtyard to check out the scene from afar, like the others.

Someone had wrapped Cade in a hospital gown and he sat on a bench to the side with his father, talking softly about very personal matters.

Mark stood with Addavein, the witch girls, and the necromancers, quietly asking anyone who could answer, "See anything concerning?"

"He doesn't have a *full* demiplane," Sunder said, definitively, and with both hope and disappointment in his voice and vector.

Addavein hummed, saying, "I believe *that* was the demon trick; he doesn't get a house until he Contracts with a demon, and now everyone knows that is what Thrashtalon was really promising. It's a coin toss whether the Empire agrees to archmage Cade with a Contract now, because the Empire wants more soulhouses under its control, but any such Contract will be on harsher terms than a Simple Contract, because now we know what to avoid with some specific wording."

Mark frowned. "Ahh... Not sure how to feel about that, actually."

Addavein nodded, and added, "He's still going to be an incredibly strong power, with a natural proto-demiplane, and his astral body seems uncommonly dense in a way that will unfold more and more as time goes on. I'm guessing that he will be an archmage in terms of mana and power *without* being an archmage at all. The term for such people is widely out of date, but we used to call them demigods."

"... That's good?" Mark asked/suggested.

Addavein nodded a little; unsure. "All I can say is that he will be a much better Grand Mage, if only for the depth of power he can now produce. It's still Water Mana, by the way. Not Adamantium."

"Heavy water," Stitcher clarified.

"It's different from the normal Water that it used to be," Sunder said, still staring at Cade, across the courtyard.

Addavein hummed, agreeing, "Heavy water. Also known as Abyssal Water or Dark Water, though those terms have always been outdated... ah."

Addavein went silent.

Cade and his father had finished talking, at least for now, and their vectors had been pointing toward Mark since he had come back into the room. Cade stood up under his own power, though his father still tried to help him stand. His hospital gown slipped this way and that and his father pulled the tie around his waist and gave him a bit more dignity, or at least as much as could be had in the moment. Cade took

a breath, blue eyes staring at Mark, and then he ambled toward Mark, his feet carrying him easier and easier with every step. It wasn't far to go, so that helped.

And then Cade was 2 meters away, and he said, "Thank you, sir. Please tell me how I might be of service, how I might make this new life worth living once again, and I will strive to serve in whatever capacity I can."

Mark said, "Heal yourself, figure yourself out, and, when you're able, you will rejoin the front lines for the oncoming war. Hopefully Okuana will simply need a demonstration of the powerhouses we're creating in order to reconsider actual war."

"Of course, sir..." Cade had something to say, but he wasn't sure how. He glanced at Quark's silver blob on Mark's shoulder, but he remained silent as he once again locked eyes with Mark.

Quark said nothing, either.

Everyone noticed it, but nothing became of it at that moment.

"Please speak freely," Mark said.

"Thank you for a second chance at life, sir," Cade said, completely ignoring Mark's offer to speak freely.

... Mark added, "I have heard of your brothers, and some of what you did against the goblins. I am sorry for your losses."

"Thank you, sir."

Mark departed.

Addavein joined him, though Addavein paused at the guard stationed outside of the room to ask them what sort of overwatch program they were going to run on the patient. The guards said something about standard overwatch for recovery from shavallian; separation from others, open spaces, no manacles, and a gradual release from anti-magic.

Mark bade Pearl, Amy, and Uva farewell, wished Uva good luck with Sally, and then he said goodbye to Stitches and Sunder.

Soon, Mark was on the tram with Addavein, riding back toward the Green House. They were alone.

“So what was that hesitation with Cade about, Quark? What didn’t he want to talk about?” Mark asked.

Addavein hummed, also wanting to know the answer, and also wondering *when* Quark had had a private conversation with Cade. Addavein hadn’t been party to the conversations happening in Mark’s soul space, after all.

Quark said, “Once he got past the surprise of not dying, he was angry at being denied Water Shaper and Water Manipulation. But I outlined what he was being offered in turn, and he seemed to accept it, and then I told him about you, and he knew you, and he wants to separate from Aluatha. He feels he has given them enough of his life and he absolutely is not going to give them his immortal life, for he is an immortal now, or at least he believes he is, based on what his Transcendent Mind was telling him. He said he watched your shows, sometimes, for his family is from Earth, primarily. They like superhero culture and abhor noble culture, aside from Noble Obligation.” Quark clarified, “Mostly, he was furious at his Powers being stripped from him, but he decided that wasn’t worth being angry over.”

Mark nodded a little, accepting that for what it was. He’d be pretty mad if he died and someone else put other Powers into him and then resurrected him, but it’d be a hard day in hell before he ever actually voiced those opinions out loud, to the person who resurrected him, especially if the new Powers were potentially better.

Mark said, “That explains his hesitation to actually speak his mind.”

“I’ll have to look up his family,” Addavein said, sounding rather pleased with the whole day. And then he added to Mark, “This is a big day, Mark. You don’t have the experience to know how big of a day this is, but it is a big day.”

Mark rolled his eyes, saying, “I think I know what it means to be able to choose your own powers, but whatever! What are the best high-powered combos of Powers out there?”

Addavein grinned, showing off sharp fangs, as he said, “Ohhhh... There are so many nuances and possibilities out there that to name any particularly good combos. Such naming would be doing a disservice to the unnamed. *But!* I’ve always been partial to paired Powers, going off of opposite sides of the Power Hex. Natural and Body, Shaper and Arcane. Mind and Arch. Mind and Arch is truly the most dangerous one, because you’ll have all the capability of some Manipulation Power, and the Mind to know how to use it properly. That said... The biggest gatekeeper of True Power is *not* just the Powers themselves, but *also* having a person who keeps going until they reach higher and higher, and then further beyond.” Addavein told Mark, “Like you. You could have stopped at any point in time, but you kept going.”

Mark smirked a little, the pressure of the night falling away. He asked, “Give me a real answer, Addavein. I want *specifics*.”

Addavein laughed, then began, “You’ll have to go back to Bitterend Mausoleum for more Transcendents —”

“Of course.”

“—But there’re tons of places to go to rip random Powers out of specific monsters, in the hope of getting specific Powers. It’s not something that anyone ever really researched, but off the top of my head there’s Ocean Shaper, which is the major upgrade over Water Shaper, and that’s located in the waters south of the portal to Earth, out of New Tokyo. Just a few of those as well as any sort of Water Manipulation would be enough to secure the oceans against Okuanan aggression for a very long time. The skies are a different matter, *but...*”

Mark listened, Addavein talked, and as the sun rose in the east and glinted gold and drove the auroras of night out of the sky over the dome of Domal’Takela, it felt, to Mark, like the sun was rising on a totally different world. On a better, more self-deterministic world.

Mark had once lamented about how he had been doomed to a low Brawny Power. He had gotten his False Tutorial readout and then he had smashed his bike on the ground, and spent an hour trying to fix it before he pretty much gave up for the night, and then he tried to figure out something else.

Mark had ended up how he ended up.

And now he was here, with the capability to decide his own Powers, and to decide the Powers of others.

It felt... right.

Exactly right.

The only thing that stood between him and everything he wanted was a whole lot of shit, and he had just had to trudge through it, never stopping. Like Addavein had said; most people stopped.

But not Mark.

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Mark checked himself out in the mirror, making sure his white suit was looking good. It was. Perhaps he should have a different one today, for the big party, but this one fit well and Eliot had repaired it earlier, and so this was what he was wearing. He liked it.

Eliot walked into his room, all ready to have a fight as he blurted out, "I'm not going to take Resurrection from that guy even if he offers it."

"Okay," Mark said, and he meant it.

Eliot paused. And then he focused. "I'm serious. It's not right. People get the Powers they get at Tutorial and it's a sacred thing."

Mark had to pause. He rolled his eyes very hard, and then he slammed his gaze into Eliot, and deadpanned. “Really. You believe that. You really believe that.”

“... No but... Kinda? I don’t know, man! Maybe I’ve been on Daihoon too long and the traditionalists are getting to me— I just... Tartu would say it’s wrong to switch Powers?”

“No he wouldn’t or else he would have told me that already... Ohhh! But we could do a whole storyline in the HVP with it. Tartu could be the traditionalist, all about how people are who they’re born to be, and I’ll be the guy coming in and disrupting everything, and— oh wait! Tartu is a mage who makes Domains that are spell-bindings and he got Farmer from a god, and the Chosen System is all about getting better Powers anyway, so where is this all coming from, Eliot?”

Eliot was quiet.

Mark added, “You seem to be pulling at whatever thread you can find to make this not happen.”

“... If this happens, I’ll have a responsibility to keep *everyone* alive.”

On the surface, that could have been a rather callous statement, especially from someone who made sure the walls were secure, the cities were clear, and the people were safe. Mark just had to kill monsters. Eliot had to see to *everything else*. But Mark knew Eliot. So, perhaps... having Resurrection was too much? The guy already did a *whole lot*.

Mark said, “But you *already* try to keep everyone alive. You *already* do everything you can possibly do, all the time. So having Resurrection just means you can fail sometimes, and then you can fix your failure.”

“... I don’t know if I want... *all of that*, Mark.”

“Yeah. It’s a big addition, for sure. You can probably automate most of it, and I’m sure you’ve even thought about how you could.”

Eliot looked away, thoughts spiraling around something he didn’t want to confront.

Mark nodded, and then said, “I don’t buy into that stuff about how people get the Powers they should, even if the Powers you get are directly related to your mana, which is related to your memories and dreams and... What you get is *not* ‘decreed by fate’, and therefore ‘the only valid Power you should have’ or any of that bullshit. But I *do* know that it’s wrong to impose your will upon the soul of another, and upon their desires for Powers or... or for anything like that. So I’m *not* going to try and convince you of anything, *unless* you want me to convince you. But, just so you know, from what I saw of Jessie Stills, if he knows the offer to get rid of Resurrection is on the table I am rather certain of one thing:

“He will ask, and I will give him something else in return.

“It is highly likely that I’ll be taking Resurrection and putting it into someone hand-picked by the Emperor, or someone of similar status, unless you want it, and then I’ll fight for you. From what Walaria said about having tons of people in lockup or prison or whatever who would rather not have the Powers they have, and how she wants me to strip their Powers from them, I’m probably going to be shifting around a lot of Powers, and soon.

“And you can handle a Third Power.

“So... Just think about it, okay? Before it’s too late and Resurrection goes to someone else.”

Eliot blurted out, “The demons don’t want Resurrection, so if Resurrection becomes automatic and safe and out there, then they’re going to come for me, Mark.”

Mark took a moment so that he didn’t laugh at Eliot’s crazy comment, and then he calmly said, “They’re *already* coming after us, Eliot. Me, you, Isoko, Sally. All of us. Whatever that shit was with Buckler and Lancer was *not* just them. It was also the demon behind them. As soon as I get a real chance I will be talking to Blackthorn and Planty about all of that.”

Eliot locked eyes with Mark and said, “It’s too much. I want to do less and I want you to pull the pressure back, because I am feeling a lot of pressure to do everything, and I don’t want to do everything. I want a family. I want security. I want to help others. I *don’t* want to save the world, and I do NOT want to go to war with Okuana. I’m 90% sure I am at the point where I want to say ‘fuck Daihoon’ and go back to Earth.”

Oh.

Oh shit.

Okay.

Eliot never came to Mark and spoke about stuff that heavy unless he had already made up his mind a while ago.

“Okay. Let me... think for a second— Let’s start with the biggest basics: Do you still want to be a part of the team?”

“Yes, but...” Eliot trailed off, unwilling to voice that final decision.

“Okay okay. How about: Do you still want a familiar and a floating castle? Security through mobility?”

“Yes,” Eliot said, that answer much easier to give than the previous one. “I was *supposed* to have a talk with United Sapients this week for final approval, but it didn’t happen and we think Okuana is putting pressure on them through one of the biggest livium suppliers... I think you heard about that?”

“Tartu told me about some company named Haleotopic in the Californias and how they wanted to buy your and Tartu’s mana crystals and how their whoever-is-in-charge’s family was suddenly posting on social media from northern Okuana— Oh. *That’s* why you haven’t gotten your familiar. Okuana was making a play. They went through United Sapients, too. Sorry. I didn’t... uh, realize that that was more important than I thought it was.”

Eliot grinned, just a little, and said, “I think it’s forgivable, Mark. You’ve been busy, and Okuana is an *empire* fighting against us, and against the settlement.” He lost his grin. “It’s a lot.”

Mark said, “I’ll... I’ll talk to Walaria again.” Mark continued, “So you want to do less. Do you want to be book-of-life’d, or not? I am assuming ‘not’... Assuming I can make it happen without any issues, of course.”

“A big assumption,” Eliot said, seriously.

“... So that’s a ‘no’.”

“I don’t want to go to war, Mark. So even if you could... I’m not going to be on the front lines in a war with assassins and... and all of that.”

Mark nodded... and then he made a connection he hadn’t really thought about until that moment.

Eliot was scared of monsters, and rightfully so. Monsters and non-humans of all kinds sort of hard-countered Man-made Manipulation, because non-human astral bodies lingered on stuff and disabled Man-made Manipulation. So... Mark kinda wondered why Eliot was scared of *people* at all. He would ask that question first, he supposed. The rest of the thought was this: Castellán was able to stop monsters pretty effectively, but only when they got inside, and not completely. Bigger monsters plowed through all defenses.

But the major defenses of Daihoon cities of all kinds were all made of Death mana.

Eliot had been wary of Necromancer, and yet Lola had tried to get him to ‘get over that’ fear and do some Pantheon-based necromancy work, to see if he wanted to be able to fight his fear of death directly and also, perhaps, to figure out Resurrection. But maybe there was a bigger reason that Eliot should go for Necromancer.

Mark lined up some thoughts—

“No no no,” Eliot said, stepping away, “I know that look. You’re gonna talk me into something but you JUST SAID you weren’t going to try and convince me of something unless I asked and I’m... asking you not to convince me of anything, Mark. I know you can and... don’t.”

Holding his tongue was like trying to stop a punch that he had already thrown.

Mark tried, “Please... let me say *one* thing.”

Eliot was wary... “Okay. Go ahead.”

“Death mana is really good against other people, and other living things, and especially against assassins and their death mana attacks.”

The statement hung in the air, Eliot letting it wash over him... and he was perplexed. Wasn't Mark trying to convince him of something? So what did Death mana have to do with anything at all? Like, sure, it was good against a lot of really dangerous things... so? So what?

Mark watched as Eliot tried to figure out what Mark was saying.

Eliot opened his mouth to ask a question, but he paused, he stopped, and he narrowed his eyes at Mark, not really understanding what he was saying at all. Eliot relented, “Okay, fine. Say more.”

Mark started very small, saying, “Jessie might be giving away Resurrection to others, but you don't want that responsibility. I get that. But maybe you could use Necromancer—”

Eliot shook a little, like a nervous tic, saying, “Ughhh!”

“—as a weapon! Death mana is how all the cities of Daihoon protect themselves from major threats! You can make a real weapon out of that capability,” Mark said, rapidly, and when Eliot kinda paused, as though he was seeing something he had never thought about before, Mark continued, “You can probably clean up an entire city's worth of Death mana and store it in batteries and have mausoleums of your own. You won't have to deal with dead bodies. You can make them deal with themselves. So don't go for Resurrection. Try Necromancer. And help me figure out how to make books of life without stepping on the minds of the people who really matter to me. Because *I'm* terrified of making a book of life and then having someone come back wrong.”

Eliot was kinda grimacing by the end.

Mark waited.

Eliot said, “Necromancers are fucking nasty.”

Mark grinned. “Dead things are nasty, yes. I agree. But the Power of Necromancer insulates you from Death mana and other potential one-shots from stuff like Death bombs. And hey! Maybe with Necromancer you can make some power armor that will be really strong against monsters and... and there’s a lot there, Eliot. And I know Lola was talking about—”

“Okay okay... yeah. Lola... talked to me about a lot. About Necromancer, too.”

Mark grinned a bit more, and then he tried to stop that when Eliot frowned at him. Mark cleared his throat, and said, “Stuff to think about.”

“... Necromancers are actually nasty, though. They’re...” Eliot knew Mark wasn’t getting it, so he spelled it out. Eliot said, “Necromancers are not sexy.”

... sexy?

Mark laughed this time, and loudly. He couldn’t help it.

“I’m serious!” Eliot tried to say, even as he laughed a little bit himself. “They grey out! They get all weird and they feel corpsy! I was with this one girl once and she was kinda... It was fine! But she was... colder than she should have been.”

“They’re immortal if they do it right. Plenty of time to solve those issues.”

Eliot blinked. “... Oh yeah... They... uh... yeah they are.”

“And I doubt *you’ll* get greyed out. You got that permanent tan-thing going on!”

Eliot felt a flush of pride and joy at that, chuckling once, and then he shot back, “I am pretty fine, unlike your pale ass.”

Mark snorted—

“But seriously, though... Necromancers are the opposite of sexy.”

“You know what’s sexy? Giant death lasers that kill kaiju and save the day.”

Eliot grinned a little, and then he laughed, and shot back, “Then I *definitely* shouldn’t take it. I wouldn’t want to compete with Aurora for your affection.”

“That was ONE time!” Mark bantered.

Eliot laughed.

Mark smiled... and then Mark said, “But seriously, though. You don’t have to use Necromancer to make undead. They didn’t talk about it at the Understanding Party, but I’m pretty sure that half of those guys just maintain the Death Cannons of Aluatha.”

Eliot shook his head a little... and then he paused, and said, “Maybe yeah. But those systems are maintained by hundreds of people— Thousands, really. Castellan shuffles Death mana around for them to use, too, so... I mean... I never thought about Necromancy in *that* way.”

Eliot seemed like he needed time to really think about using Necromancer for offense and defense, and whatever.

Mark said, “Pray on it to Hearthswell, and see if the mana types line up.”

Eliot said, offhandedly, “I already checked and they do. It’s Death fire and it’s particularly...” Eliot changed the subject, looking at Mark, and saying, “You sure that’s the outfit you want?”

Mark grinned. “I am.”

And then Mark glanced to the side, extending his Unionsense out to the other parts of the Green House where Addavein was talking with Rekaro about something, Tartu was with his guys and also Isoko, Sally, and Andria, who were meeting up with Pearl, Amy, and Uva who were just coming out of the tram down the way and heading toward the house. Sally was at the door, and her vector brightened as

Uva walked forward a bit faster, headed toward Sally. Lola and Rylan and Tulo were talking about something near the bar. Derek was in more than a few places, including hanging out at the hovercraft in back.

The sky was bright, but it would be darkening fast. The auroras were already coming out.

Everyone was ready.

Mark said, "I think we're going, soon. But if the war should start then I'm probably going to get teleported somewhere and I want you guys to follow Addavein, or to stick together."

Eliot nodded a little, gaining a severity to his features. "I don't want to stick around for the rest of the party, even if the war doesn't happen. We should go back home tomorrow or Monday at the very latest."

"Tomorrow morning, then. After the party."

Mark walked out into the middle of the Green House with Eliot, to stand with Isoko and Sally and the others, and even Pearl, Amy, and Uva. Everyone was nervous, but the party gathered, with its possible-new additions, and then they were off.

On the tram ride to the party, Mark broke the seal on some big questions as he asked Pearl, "How was Cade? When did you all leave him?"

"He was doing remarkably well before we left," Pearl said.

Amy joined in, saying, "Walking around and everything."

"His memories are slightly altered," Pearl said, "But he recognizes that. Transcendent Mind is filling in the blanks he has lost and recovering most of his memories with just a bit of prompting. His father is doing all the heavy lifting and videos of his childhood and his social media accounts are helping. He's heavily traumatized, but the trauma is slipping off of him quickly according to what we've heard from the mind healers."

“Are you still in contact with the situation?” Mark asked.

“Yes. We’re getting updates from the AI overseers in the hospital, in case you wished to know what is happening to him. Do you want to be cleared for that oversight, too?”

Mark shook his head. “Thanks, but no thanks. I’ll let the experts tell me if something is terribly fucked up and this entire idea of switching Powers on people is a non-starter.”

Addavein told Mark, “There is no putting this mushroom cloud back in the bomb.”

Pearl bowed just a little, as she held onto the overhead railing in the tram. She said, “He might come to the Grand Ball, though he was still making that decision as of an hour ago.”

Mark nodded a little... and then he put Cade out of his mind. He’d hear about the guy, or not, soon enough. No need to bother him with a call, or anything like that.

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The Grand Ball of the Winter Ball was, perhaps, the most ornate and elaborate party that Mark had ever seen. It was held at the Grand Imperial Center, still located under the dome of Domal’Takela, and about 5 kilometers away from the public house of Aluatha’s Imperial Family. It was used for every large event of the Empire, and it showed.

Towering spires of black and gold. The red flags of the royal family flying high. Bright lights everywhere, shining down on wintertime decorations and on major pathways into the party itself. In the distance the actual imperial castle lay, like a black and red beacon on the hill. You could see it from the entrance to the Ball, but you couldn’t go there unless specifically invited.

10,000 people had been invited to the Grand Ball, and many of them were praying that they’d be allowed a private audience with the Emperor or Empress or one of the Princesses or the Prince of Aluatha. For many, this would be their first time seeing any of the Royal Family in person—

“Oh hello... uh,” Mark said, to some bearded guy who came right up to him out of the tram station. Mark had no idea who he was, but he and his family were right there, and they were mixing with people already, and— Quark provided a name and a bit of other information. Mark said, “Lord Hammerstein of Redrock.”

The older man grinned wide, and started talking, “We just wanted to thank you, Mister Careed, for the donation to our coffers. We’ll be able to support the expansion of several hunter outreach programs now, and gods know we need them now more than ever.”

“I’m glad it’s working out, Lord Hammerstein, but the real people to thank would be my friends here, Andria Metallicmore and Sally Wuthers.”

Andria was right there, ready to go, bowing just a little, as one does in these situations, and talking about, “I spoke to your daughter on the phone just the other day. Is Alicia here tonight?”

Lord Hammerstein readily took to discussion with Andria.

And then Mark was in a conversation with someone else about the next topic.

Mark barely got to see anything at all before he was surrounded by people and walking rather slowly toward the party, talking up a storm and making connections, and trying to talk up everyone around him in order to foist off some conversational weight to others. Half of the party was outside, though, so this was expected, and tables and catering was set up everywhere. Mark ended up with a drink in his hand that tasted amazing and Lola handed him some treats that she had grabbed from the table which were even better, and then Mark met with some people from some place that *did* matter, but which Mark could barely recall afterward. That happened a lot.

He got separated from his team, but they were all nearby, and Derek was with every single person, and also by Mark’s side. If something happened Derek would tell him.

The Witches’ Welcome was thicker than ever before, and if Mark looked even a little bit into the dream he saw fractured reality bending and moving around every single person in a complicated dance of fate and possibility. People met each other when they needed to meet each other, and relationships blossomed in the Empire. People separated before there were any real issues, and hatred was eased in

the Empire. Charismatic people pulled introverts into conversations that the introverts could participate in, and more than once Mark saw a serving person get stopped by a lord or a lady because they recognized the serving person from somewhere, and yes, the serving person was from somewhere important. Mark saw at least two ‘extras’ he had been in an HVP production with, that he did not know the name of and who were serving food at the party, get recognition for that HVP production and thus make a connection with someone important.

Mark heard people talk about the upcoming war. He heard people deny that a war was happening, and that Aluatha had some special things in store if ‘that uppity tree’ got any ideas. He heard concerns over demons, and more than once someone spotted Mark and walked toward him with a vector of violence upon them, only to be met with a vector of cooperation from someone else also walking Mark’s way. A talk was diverted, and Mark was fine for that.

Some older woman in a floofy dress walked Mark’s way, some young gentleman —a grandson?— holding her hand to help her walk steadily. The Witches’ Welcome wasn’t fully touching her, which already made her rather suspect. She interrupted someone else, speaking loudly to Mark.

“What about the Reset Quest? I want it to happen, but you chickened out!”

“*Grandma,*” whispered/hissed the young man.

Other people around Mark got a distinctly uncomfortable feeling, but they wanted to know the answer as well, though Mark had given his answer to this particular question many times already.

Mark repeated, “We’re not pursuing the Reset Quest. We’re just not ready for it, and I doubt we ever will be.”

The older woman huffed, then she waved a free hand at the air, disturbing the Witches’ Welcome as it tried to latch onto her, to turn her away. She stared Mark in the eyes, unblinking, as she asked, “Are you for Aluatha, or yourself?”

“For the world, ma’am, and right now I’m helping out Aluatha.” Mark added, “I’d even give overtures to That Big Tree if he wasn’t such an asshole, but I doubt that will ever happen.”

Some people gave polite laughter to that response.

The old woman scoffed, not really liking Mark's answer, but accepting it. She walked away, swatting away the Witches' Welcome with a few backhand swipes.

Isoko stood beside Mark, asking, "Quark knows who that was?"

"And current rumors," Mark added, to Isoko's question.

Quark answered, "Grandmatron Rocktower, of the city of Rocktower, located on the Daihoon-side of Earth's Mexico city. She is the mother to the king of Rocktower. Current rumors have her as seeking a wife or husband for her son, to be queen or king's consort. There is no shortage of kids from the late Queen Rocktower, but the king was recently given 40 years of youth due to the oncoming war, and the need for stability."

Isoko went, "Huh..." and then she asked, "What did you think could have been a 'right answer'?"

Mark looked at the Grandmatron's departing back and he sensed something in her vector that he usually failed to recognize unless he was focused. Grandmatron Rocktower was on the hunt for relationship matches... or maybe just sex? Or a good mind? Mark had no real angle to understand any of that, so he just mentally marked it as 'not his problem', and left it be.

Mark said to Isoko, "I think she wanted me to step in line with Aluatha, now and forever."

Isoko nodded a little, saying, "They do all the army at Rocktower, you know? That's where the Daihoon Kannos are, and where my cousins were until they signed up for the Grand Guard."

And then the next person started talking to Mark.

The lawn party outside of the main party was expansive, and it touched the entire Aluatha Empire.

Slowly, meeting person after person, long after the sun and the auroras lit the sky beyond the glass dome of Domal'Takela, Mark managed to walk into the main ballroom.

Gold and mirrors. Glass and ice. People in dresses and suits from all ages and cultures danced and talked and ate little foods all around the main floor, and also on the three other floors of the main room. A giant chandelier made of rainbows glittered overhead as bands played music and bards sang songs.

And there was Emperor Salvation, sitting on a throne at the far, far back of the party, overseeing everyone from atop a raised platform. He wore white and gold and his eyes subtly shone with a blue light, while the Witches' Welcome spun around upon him like he was the center of the entire magic—

He locked eyes with Mark, the Welcome snapping against Mark's existence, but failing to penetrate Mark's Clean House ritual. For the briefest of moments the Emperor's vector was concerned, but then he looked away, registering Mark as Mark and dismissing him as an actual threat—

Some guy standing atop a small pillar, next to Mark and the entrance, lifted a trumpet and gave it two quick toots. He announced, "Inheritor, Kaiju Slayer, Tri-Talent, Explored of the Endless, and Deep Seeker, Mark Careed, of Earth."

The music never stopped. The party never slowed.

The throne next to Emperor Salvation was empty, as were the other three thrones that led away from that empty throne. On the Emperor's other side was a knight in solid black adamantium armor that was so thoroughly enchanted that it would never qualify as adamantium ever again. Mark guessed that the other chairs were for Empress Cataclysm, then First Prince Doomo, Second Princess Walaria, and finally Third Princess Kalimara.

Walaria was nowhere to be seen.

Mark walked in, with Isoko on his arm, Isoko smiling brightly as she held a bit tighter.

"I wanna dance," Isoko said.

Mark smiled and said to her, "Then we shall dance."

The room glittered as Mark put a hand to Isoko's lower back and took up her hand in his hand. She had taken dancing lessons as a child. Mark had been a rugby kid. She was much better at this than Mark, but both of them were warriors and both of them knew their way around each other.

They danced, gliding onto the floor among everyone else, the Welcome guiding the flow, taking Isoko along for the ride, Mark going with her. Every footfall was perfect. Every thrum of a drum caused a spin or a dip. Eyes locked with eyes, and for a long moment it was just the two of them, dancing to a song that surrounded them, buoyed them.

Breath came and went, shared between partners.

And then the song was done, and Mark chuckled as he walked with Isoko to the side and other people took the floor—

The Welcome shifted hard, knocking out the joy from Isoko's face, filling her with confusion at the subtlety of the shifted moment, and then she was stepping to the side, not even aware that she was being moved. The whole dance floor was being moved. Redirected. And then Sally was there, standing with Isoko, having walked over here for some reason that she didn't quite understand, with Uva right beside her—

The black armored guard of the Emperor was there, standing silently and looking at Mark.

Mark assumed, "Ah? A meeting?"

The silent knight merely gestured toward the side, to a path that led to the Emperor.

Mark glanced to Isoko and Sally and Isoko almost went with Mark, but Uva softly told her not to. Isoko... sort of agreed to that. Mark kinda agreed to it as well.

Soon, Mark was walking around the party, to an open, white-carpeted pathway that wound around to the side of the large stage where the Emperor sat in his throne, beside four other non-occupied thrones. It was not the real Throne of the Emperor; that was in Domal'Takela, deep inside. This was just a replica.

The person sitting on the throne was very much the real Emperor; Mark could tell because the Welcome twisted around him, flowed with his desires, and when the Emperor looked at Mark the Welcome snapped against him again, trying to sweep Mark into it. But Mark's Clean House ritual kept it at bay. The Emperor didn't look pissed that the Welcome wasn't working on Mark, nor did his vector seem that way, either, but who really knew about these things.

Emperor Salvation was a lot less imposing than Godking Dominant, though, and that made this small meeting kind of a breeze.

The black knight guided Mark to step with him, to stand a few steps below the Emperor's throne, and then the guy stepped to the side.

People were watching intently.

Mark almost felt that he should bow, or something, but he decided not to. He merely said, "Hello. I hope Aluatha is enjoying all that metal I got for you guys from the goblins, and all the other stuff."

Emperor Salvation chuckled once, and it seemed real. Not just for politeness's sake. He said, "I heard an interesting tale about a man doomed to death, yet you come along and save his life and grant him even more strength. In light of this latest strangeness, and for all your other accomplishments, I would grant you a boon on behalf of Empire. Ask, and it will be done."

"I have no idea what I could possibly ask for at the moment, Emperor."

Emperor Salvation arched an eyebrow. "I was told you desired something in particular."

"Oh! Well..."

Was he talking about the three things he asked Walaria for? Crystal Tower to stop blackballing them, Resurrection from Jessie if Jessie agreed, and to help make powerhouses for the upcoming war to stop the war from happening and to prevent the need for Demon Contracts or dragons? All of that seemed like rather normal stuff that the Empire would agree to, anyway, except maybe the thing with Jessie. The Empire probably had very specific goals with Resurrection, and especially if Jessie didn't want it

anymore... which was a big 'if'. Mark didn't see Jessie anywhere around here... Wait a minute. Shouldn't he be here at the party? Whatever! Not a concern right now.

Mark said, "I want a whole lot of things, Emperor, and I'm getting most of them. I did ask Walaria if she could help me get Resurrection from Jessie, to give it to Eliot, but Eliot has told me in no uncertain terms that he doesn't want that, but I still feel bad for Jessie being locked up here in Aluatha like I was going to be locked up. So I'd still like to offer him a power-switch, if he wants, so he can go free and Aluatha can get Resurrection to someone who wants it."

Emperor Salvation nodded, as this was the conversation he expected. "Your man Eliot doesn't want it, then? That is a shame. I was considering that. This is a new development you are bringing me, so I will have to consider this. Would you like to speak to Jessie yourself?"

"Yes, Emperor."

"You're not to do anything without approval from me, directly."

"... Yes, Emperor."

Emperor Salvation grinned, easily noticing Mark's hesitation. He nodded to the black knight beside Mark.

And then the black knight was guiding Mark away, down a walkway, past a doorway—

Addavein was there, leaning against a wall.

The black knight turned away.

Mark shuddered a little, the emotions of whatever had just happened back there catching up and then passing him by as he exhaled a little bit of Bad. He chuckled once, adding, "Okaaaay! Hey, Addavein. Did I do that right out there? I honestly had no idea what he was asking about at first, or if I guessed right."

Addavein said, “Salvation is an easy going guy when he is allowed to be, so in that manner that was deftly handled. A lot of people will say you were not nearly deferential enough, but as the Inheritor of Xerkona, a lot of Xerkonan refugees among Aluatha’s people will see that as a good meeting. The specifics of the topics spoken about don’t matter all that much.”

Mark shook off a bit more stress that he didn’t realize he had been under until it was gone. Was everything catching up to him? It *felt* like things were catching up to him. Buckler and Lancer, the necromancers, the war, Cade Waterson and the Transcendent trio of Powers, Jessie the Resurrection guy, and then it was Emperor time. And now he was here, talking about ‘propriety’ and bowing and all that shit.

Mark felt like admitting, “Bowling to Walaria at the start was one thing because she’s my master in Mage Society, but Lola said never to bow to anyone— Gods.” Mark shuddered, leaving that topic behind. He looked around, sensing a mostly-bare hallway space and beyond with his Unionsense, asking, “Where is Jessie? And why are you here?”

“We’re going to be led to him, whenever we’re allowed. Or at least that’s what I was told by Iliandra.”

“Oh! Ambassador Iliandra... I haven’t seen her since we split at the start of the Ball.”

“She’s out there, mingling— Ah. Here she comes, now.”

Mark glanced to the door leading to the main party, and sure enough Ambassador Iliandra Snowstepper’s vector was flowing this way. She appeared beyond the door—

Walaria opened up a side door and stepped into the space, kitted out in her full witch regalia with all her hanging silver charms, right as Iliandra appeared.

Iliandra froze, like she had been preparing to do something she didn’t want to do, but now Walaria was here and—

“Do you know of the Alawani Obelisks, on the edge of the Meteor Sea?” Walaria asked.

“Ah, fuck,” Addavein softly said.

Iliandra instantly went to a knee, prepared to do whatever needed to be done.

Mark recalled Quark talking about those, but with the severity of everyone’s sudden attention, Mark had to Union with Alacrity/Slowness to try and remember it quickly enough.

With the publishing of the gang’s documentary of their trip to Endless Daihoon, United Sapients had told Mark, though Quark, that every ‘True Empire’ had a Great Weapon of Empire, and every Great Weapon was the same:

A source of Prismatic Mana that would become a solid line of destructive power to annihilate anything that stood before it. Each Empire had different ‘tuning methods’ for that power, and it was very possible that the so-called ‘Great Weapons’ weren’t actually ‘weapons’ at all, but instead the geographical ‘locks’ or ‘source nodes’ for some sort of System-based connection between Earth, Daihoon, and Endless Daihoon... or something like that. Something that pinned Daihoon and Earth together, and formed the basis for the System itself.

No one really knew what they were, except for maybe Godking Dominant and he wasn’t talking.

Okuana had the Pyramids of Longwater.

The Dragon King’s theorized former empire, Metrovakara, had the currently-sparking (and broken) Lightning Spires on the northern coast of D’Australia. The goblins were unearthing those right now, as far as Mark knew.

Xerkona had something, but no one knew where it was, except that it was ‘somewhere in central Sheorune, in the old homelands of the Xerkona Empire’.

Aluatha had the Alawani Obelisks in Eastern Crytalis, on the edge of the Meteor Sea. It was about 130-ish kilometers north-east-ish from Domal”Takela, from right here.

If Okuana wanted to strike the Alawani Obelisks, to kill Aluatha's 'Final Line' defense, then that would be a pretty big opening move in a war. The Obelisks were pretty damned close to the capital, as well, and they were tied into the whole system of magic that kept the Empire's Death Beam crystals operational... or something like that. Mark didn't know exactly how it all worked, but that's what he assumed to be true. Whatever the Obelisks actually did, aside from killing anything that came their way, that Aluatha targeted, if Okuana managed to destroy the Obelisks, it would show a great deal of capability on their part, and be a huge threat for the rest of Aluatha.

The only reason Domal'Takela was where it was was because of the Obelisks. They were far beyond the horizon at the moment, but they still protected a very, very large swath of the Empire, and Domal'Takela was inside that sphere of protection.

Comparatively, the Pyramids of Longwater were about 2,600 kilometers away from Okuana's Verdant Citadel. Mark wondered if Godking Dominant even used them as a Great Weapon, at all, or if they just sat there doing nothing. But that line of questioning didn't really matter at the moment.

"I recall the Alawani Obelisks," Mark said, coming back to normal time. "Is there a strike force to repel?"

And then Walaria terrified Mark, saying, "Dominant has set up relay stations across the ocean and the outer islands that can bend the beam from their own Pyramids of Longwater all the way to here. It's an 11,000 kilometer strike. I'm going to send you out to someplace in the middle of the ocean. You have 2 minutes to prepare—" Addavein tried to speak, to try and be assigned alongside Mark. Walaria told him, "I want you at the Spires. Right now. There is a strike team as well. They're trying to take down the shields and induce vulnerability. Don't make a scare. Just go and deal with the strike team." She said to Mark, "You're going to a node over the ocean. Ready?"

Mark cut down the sides of his suit, stepping out of the cloth to stand in his already-repairing webweave, saying, "Read—" His voice cracked.

He was going to have to kill people.

"Do not hesitate, Mark," Addavein said, and then he flickered, his human-coloring vanishing under the strength of his power, turning him silver as he flowed away, down the hallway, turning invisible before he got fully out of sight.

Mark pulled his aura all the way and told Walaria, “Ready.”

“You must negate this surprise attack by destroying enough of the hovership so that they cannot bend the path of the Great Weapon enough to matter. Most of the bending comes from the Pyramids themselves, but the nodes are absolutely necessary to lay a path for the beam to take. Expect two teleports, for we can’t have them tracking back to this location that easily. Expect heavy weaponry and gravity-based Skills. Expect to kill another ship after the first target is down.”

And then the world blipped.

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For a moment, Mark was in the middle of a wide open field under a dark sky.

This was just the first blip, then.

Mark kept himself small, his astral body tucked in tight, as he told Quark, “Prepare for speed combat.”

“Yes, sir. I am in contact with Aluatha Command Center. They have allowed me access to many different overwatch channels. We have another 40 seconds to the second teleport, to our destination, which is located over D’Cuba; AKA Terrible Monster Island. Tertiary destinations include an area south of the Great Gate of Okuana, AKA the Strait of D’Gibraltar, and several possible locations in the middle of the D’Atlantic Ocean. Many teams are being deployed to many locations. We are going to be on our own.”

Mark breathed in the Good and exhaled the Bad.

Cool night air breezed through his hair, dark grasses wafting in the wind, while the sky was full of lambent pinks, greens, blues, and whites. The auroras looked particularly vibrant tonight. The moon was getting full, most of it illuminated in stark white and deep greys, while radiant gold shone through the cracked shell of that lunar surface. It was pretty bright. It was a good night for a fight.

Some bright Aluathan city lay on a mountain over there. Mark had no idea where he was, exactly, but he was clear of any danger.

He expected to be shot instantly, and for some backtrace of spellwork to hit where he had come from. He hoped that city was going to be okay. It was probably going to be fine. What was the worst thing that they could throw at him, anyway? Probably Death Magic.

A hovership couldn't possibly have that much Death mana to matter, but it probably did have some.

Death mana was pretty dangerous, though. Replacing the entire astral body of a person with something that was incompatible with their body and existence was a pretty good way to kill someone. It had even worked on Mark once, but his witch-connection to the Empire and his soulhouse had protected him from that true death.

Empires figured out how to kill people that needed killing, though. Just take a look at Buckler and Lancer. They had been prepared. They had almost got him—

Quark said, "We'll be coming in from the side. 2 kilometers distant. I have a visual on the carrier now."

A holographic image flexed into Mark's view, rapidly resolving into a 200-meter-long hover carrier. It was on the smaller size, comparatively. Larger ships than this one went through the gate at the settlement all the time.

This ship had half-deployed bright purple half-rings floating high, high above the ship. Only two of them were up and active. Two of them were still being deployed. Mark mostly recognized them as hover rings, like the larger ones that encircled the transport ship's front and back. These half-hoverrings looked like half-moons, floating like balloons in the night.

The prismatic beam was scheduled to come from Longwater, so it had to bend around half the world and travel something like 11,000 kilometers, mostly high above the surface. Those half-moons were the gravity magic that would bend the beam. Mark found the whole thing easy to imagine, but impossible to believe that it would actually happen at all.

"Gods," Mark breathed out, "Could they really bend it that much?"

“The theory is sound and there are historical records of Okuana bending their beams to strike nearer targets, but this is new tech, invented and never deployed about 50 years ago,” Quark said. “It is likely much better than what they used to have.”

“30 years into the great peace of post-Reveal was the last time Okuana shot a bent beam, huh, so... fuck..”

Mark let it go.

Mark took a breath, and he waited.

Some monster lay in wait in some grasses up ahead. A bunny. Horned, it seemed. Mark easily ignored it, but it had been prowling around Mark ever since he appeared. And then it leapt at Mark—

Fire and death ripped across Mark, destroying everything.

The fire dissipated and Mark stood unharmed and falling in the sky over the dark ocean.

He had blipped.

Mark breathed in Alacrity and breathed out Slowness, speeding up time slowly. Not all the way. He didn't want anyone to suddenly return-from-death at true speedster levels. Thinking about it now, that was kinda funny; David had once told Mark to never go at full speed even when speed was necessary, because you always needed to have something left in the tank; something that no one expected. How nice for Mark to remember that *now*, huh!

Anyway.

The sky was dark and full of auroras and the broken moon high overhead, but at a different position. A little left of where it had been; closer to the horizon.

The hovership Quark had shown Mark was now real and hovering 2.3 kilometers away, according to Quark's sensors.

A single trail of illuminated, golden-black fire-honey mana missiles were headed Mark's way, shot from the tip of some spire in the middle of the ship, arcing through the sky on more or less a single invisible thread, linked right to Mark's existence. It was basic auto-targeting mana missile artillery, probably based on the Bolt spell, though Mark had no idea what the mana-type was. Maybe something Death but also Fire aligned. It was expensive as fuck —the settlement couldn't afford that shit at all— but it was also the cheapest you could get when it came to high-end, antipersonnel weaponry.

Everything about the mobile relay station in front of Mark screamed EXPENSIVE, so yeah, this was a big damned deal. This was a real, strategic asset, and it seemed to be floating over the coast of some island down there. D'Cuba? Probably. The land down there was dark, the ship was dark, and the only illumination was the auroras all overhead, the moon, and the fire.

The burning spells struck Mark and sank in as much as they could, doing nothing to him at all except for burning on his webweave and incinerating it away. The Death mana sunk into him very slightly before Mark's Clean House brushed that away, the Death leaving him like a particularly purple tinge to the black veins in his astral body.

Visual obscurity was Mark's real issue, but right now it was just a single auto-turret hammering at him. Quark tagged 17 more black-fire fireballs headed up the thread of targeting, at Mark. They had already stopped firing, and it had only been 5 seconds of battle, so far.

The faster AIs and people on that ship —since there were certainly a few of them, at least— were either seeing that Mark was fine, or they were gearing up something more.

*Okay.*

*Enough reconnaissance.*

Mark flicked his astral body out to his full range, bits of adamantium gripping far, and then he turned a few of those bits of adamantium into air brakes, expanding them into umbrellas a hundred meters away. He ripped himself through the burning sky, toward the dark ship. One anchor after another. Yank, yank, yank. Mark burned the sky in his passing, leaving the deathfireballs behind as he tore toward the ship itself, aiming at the large cables that connected the half-moons of the four deployed 'beam benders'.

Those beam benders floated about 75 meters above the ship, one at the front and back, and two closer together in the middle. The entire ship was geostationary, its normal twin hoverrings giving of a characteristic scatter-glow pattern that said that the ship wasn't moving anywhere at all, anytime soon—

Mark suddenly fell down through the sky, pushed on gravity too strong to deny, his front tethers of adamantium airbrakes snapping out of his control. It was not pleasant, and all of Mark's body turned solid black in response to the real threat, his weight magnifying and making the problem even worse.

Quark identified the problem in Mark's tumbling vision, highlighting a pair of tiny tuners that had stuck out of the side of the ship and aimed his way. Those purple-tinged tuners had created a bubble of massive gravity around his body.

Mark dropped a hundred meters in a fraction of a second, so he Unioned harder with Alacrity and Slowness, moving faster, turning his fall into a directed dive. He was not fast enough to avoid the high-gravity bubble, for the targeting systems were either automatic, AI-based, or speedster-enhanced. Mark grabbed on the air better, pulling on larger gatherings of atmosphere, yanking himself upward with a PL Shaper strength that stretched his body, spaghettifying him—

He snapped out of the gravity field and suddenly he was moving faster than the targeting systems could keep up. Mark slammed the forward umbrella forward even more, splitting it into several air anchors, slamming into the hull of the ship—

The ship discharged electricity, like living lightning. That electricity followed Mark's astral body to his real body and burned him with Death and Lightning mana. Mostly Lightning mana. It did nothing but reveal the ship in all its glory.

It had been running dark. Now, all the lights came on at once.

It was a dryad ship, and now that Mark was close enough he could see the whorls of branches that made up its hull and the giant green eyes that lined the bottom. Those eyes locked onto Mark, the dryad's vector unfurling like a hidden dragon, which is what it had been. Mark was pretty sure Quark's initial images had shown a white hull, but that had been an illusion.

Mark slammed adamantium anchors into kaiju-strength wood, connecting with Union to a kaiju-sized being that had been hiding itself as much as possible. The dryad unfurled with light and a whole lot of speed-infused lightning the very second it felt Mark's intrusive Union worm into its astral body.

Mark swallowed that speedy lightning, making that speed his own, yanking himself forward, into the kaiju, spilling out adamantium blades that tore the sky with fire long before Mark carved into the kaiju's body.

The dryad screamed as it came apart into roots and branches, pulling away from Mark, revealing a shining silver ship's hull below it. Ah! It had been hiding itself on the hull. This, then, looked a lot like the ship Mark had been sent to kill—

Something sharp and viscous tore out of the hull a hundred meters away, as the dryad pulled away. Quark caught it before Mark did, but Mark looked that way and saw a hail of cutting-somethings pulling his way. It was a person surrounded by Shaper-stuff. Maybe ice? The guy had a glowing belt that shimmered some sort of golden aura over his entire body, the world falling away around him as he came at Mark with speed.

The guy was wearing speedster gear, he was a Water Shaper, and none of that mattered because sudden recognition blossomed in the soldier's eyes as he met Mark's gaze, as he recognized the black adamantium Mark was carving into the hull. The guy flinched hard, suddenly reeling back, fear overcoming all conscious thought.

Not a concern, then.

Mark ripped into the hull, trying to avoid some vectors he felt inside, though his speedy movements and ripping power probably caused a whole bunch of casual injury. That didn't matter. These people were soldiers. They knew what they were getting into.

Mark made his way to the central axis of the ship, to where he guessed the power core probably was. Quark helped, analyzing the stuff Mark tore through, which was good, because Mark reached the center and he found nothing. Quark pointed an arrow forward along with a question mark. Maybe it was that way, maybe not.

Fire blazed as Mark ripped forward, through metal and wood and dryad, aiming at one of the many power cores the ship probably had—

Bright, blazing hot light. It was there, right in front of Mark, long before he realized he was there. What kind of core was it? Nuclear, maybe. But also crystallized mana. Not Death mana, thankfully. Wherever the Death core was it was not here. Mark would find that one later.

The core was mana, so Mark drank in the core, switching to a Full Union of Glory and Fear.

People pissed themselves, the dryad withered trying to slink off of the side of the ship, and Mark became even brighter than the core he suddenly, violently drained of mana. The ship disintegrated around him and Mark helped it along with a violence of adamantium; cutting, churning, carving—

Someone made a terrible decision a few tens of meters away.

Dark Death ripped out of some place in the ship a good 50 meters away, detonating down the entire central corridor of the ship, flooding every cargo space and room and especially the core where Mark stood, still Glorious but now suddenly half-dead, his lower half fallen apart and his arms broken and breaking even more. Death nipped at his soul and Mark closed himself off, concentrating on Adamant and Ethereal, stabbing into all that Death mana with a dissipating Union.

The dryad was still there, just beyond sight, clinging to the ship.

Mark swam through fiery Death, breaking the surface of the ship and making some rapid conclusions.

The ship was fine. The 4 floating half-moons of gravity bending power were still up there, floating above the ship. The dryad had grown up the connecting cables of all four benders, trying to manually hold it all together. The ship's hoverships were still fully active and fully locking the ship into geo-stationary position; Mark could tell based on that particular sparkliness that all stationary-locked rings shared.

Some necromancers or otherwise were still active and alive down in those Death-filled depths, and the Death was soaking into Mark, trying to break him apart. Some 'Death Shapers', which was not a real thing, were inside the miasma and trying to funnel it into Mark. They were not actually present except

in spirit, otherwise Mark could have killed them easily. They were kinda ethereal, though, and that made them easy targets for Mark's distinct ability to harm ethereal things by switching up his Union of Adamant and Ethereal.

The nearest gravity semi-circle was about 35 meters that way.

Mark slammed out a Union of Adamant and Ethereal, vibrating it back and forth, dropping four people out of the Death miasma all around him. They'd take too long to recover before Mark's main job was done, so Mark ripped through the air, toward the nearest 'gravity moon'.

The dryad wrapped tighter around the cable, preparing for Mark with all of its strength, its roots and branches suddenly 5 meters thick and getting thicker, Death soaking into the wood and strengthening it in some dangerous way.

Mark didn't care about that.

Mark made a 5-string adamantium garrote, wrapped the entire cable and dryad tendril, and then he started twisting faster than the speed of thought, ripping through half—

The world filled with prismatic light, coming from over the horizon.

It was as thick as a train, and bright as a thousand suns. It was the light of the prismatic lines that ran throughout all of the elven lands in Endless Daihoon, but unshielded. Unleashed.

Mark ripped through the entire cable. The dryad tried to hold it in place, rapidly growing over and around Mark's cutting monowires, locking the cable in place, but Mark Unioned with Growth and Decay, suddenly bulging with muscle and adamantium as the dryad suddenly withered in turn. Mark ripped through the cable and the power system that attached it to the ship—

The prismatic line overhead bent, running over the half-moons of gravity magic, squealing the world like a metal sheering, like a train derailling, or rather staying directly on course—

And then the cable Mark had cut through was broken and moving fractions of meters—

The prismatic line suddenly derailed, for real, untethered gravity spiralling it, uncontrolled, in every direction, like molten crystal shrapnelling.

Something caught Mark, splashing away half of his body, knocking him out of Union.

Time sped up as Mark regained consciousness a fraction of a moment later, body burning away in Prismatic fire.

Massive crystals of Prismatic crystal splashing through the ship, like metal and wood and people were nothing more than suddenly-boiled water. Explosions took away Mark's sense of up and down, and then Mark was in the superheated water. He was in the ocean below? He was in the ocean! How the fuck did he get down there?

Down was the ground.

Up was the surface of the water.

And beyond the water, was a prismatic apocalypse. That apocalypse reached the water's surface and Mark was already rushing away, Unioning with Alacrity and Slowness, drinking deep of the prismatic everything that the fire overhead supplied and running faster, swimming faster.

The sky was crashing down and everything was turning into splashed nothings.

A subjective minute later and Mark rose from the surface of the water 5 kilometers away from where a prismatic line of crystalline light danced across the surface of the world at a steep angle, scraping away everything and then slamming up and down, directed like a stream of molten fire from some far, far destination. It was actively killing everything that was there, if the distant targeting systems could find it —

The line of prismatic light swung Mark's way.

He kept running, far to the side, flying fast, prismatic line chasing him—

“Pull in, sir,” Quark said, in speed-time. “Teleport ready.”

Mark pulled in fast.

A blip took him before the crystalline light could.

Mark appeared on the grasses far outside of the Winter Ball party. No one was around him, which was good. Mark was currently a whole bunch of himself, so he took a moment to condense, to store away adamantium that he didn't need right now, to become himself, to stand tall on the grass and to make himself some temporary adamantium clothes, and to look at the sky with everyone else currently standing outside of the Winter Ball.

There was a giant rent carved through the top of Domal'Takela's dome, and a splash of prismatic fire far below everything else.

Mark breathed, almost hyperventilating. Could he even hyperventilate anymore? He had no idea. He knew nothing at all, in that moment. All he had were questions.

The attack had been aimed at Domal'Takela. Not at the Obelisks.

Quark analyzed fast.

The attack had missed everything. It had struck about a kilometer to the side of the main party.

It still obliterated all that was over there, in that field, and quite a few people who had been outside when it came through the roof of Domal'Takela.

Mark crashed to his knees, thanking the gods, hating the Godking, and sobbing just a little for the knowledge that everyone he loved could have just died. But they didn't. Because he had been fast enough. He had altered the course of the beam, just a little.

Holy fuck.

Everyone at the party was freaking out, and Mark was among them, trying to find his people—

And then Isoko dropped out of the sky and Mark was hugging her, and Eliot got Mark some clothes and Mark panicked, asking where Addavein was, and where Lola was, and where Tulo was, because those were the only three people he didn't see.

“Lola is fine,” Isoko said, “She's with Tulo and Derek, trying to respond to help heal the people who were outside when the beam hit. A few people were vapo—” Isoko's voice cracked. “Vaporized.”

“Oh gods,” Mark said, faltering a little.

Sally steadied him, looking furious at everyone but there was nowhere to direct her anger. The enemy was half a world away. He had struck from beyond the horizon—

“Walaria has left you a message, sir,” Quark said.

Mark's team focused on him

“Play it.”

The first thing Mark recognized was that Walaria did not give him this message. The voice was AI, and obvious about it. Walaria didn't have time to talk to Mark directly, but she had had time enough to authorize this message.

“The attack was not as-calculated. You were sent to one of several nodes necessary to disrupt the beam. Most nodes failed. Addavein lives, and he will return when possible. Most people did not live, or succeed. Thank you for succeeding. We will not allow such a thing to go unanswered. Prince Doomo's talks with Nobody Important and Dominant are now revealed. If any honor is left in this world, Nobody Important will act on behalf of Aluatha as he has agreed to act, since Dominant has attacked through Systemic means.”

There were screens here and there at the party.

Every single one flickered with a bright red banner of Aluatha that then resolved into Prince Doomo, standing before the camera.

“On behalf of Aluatha, and for all good, free peoples of the Two Worlds, I call upon Aluatha’s compact with Nobody Important, as he has chosen to call himself, to enact a stop against further aggression from the Godking Dominant through his misuse of the System. Please tear down the Pyramids of Longwater, and prevent this weapon from being deployed again.”

Then the flag returned to the screen.

It fluttered for a little bit—

The cameras opened to a scene half a world away.

Isoko gripped Mark’s hand tight.

A night sky full of auroras loomed over a trio of bright white pyramids. The image was staticky, as though taken from a hacked, closed circuit network. There was barely any sound at all, and what sound there was seemed to be coming from another room, just beyond sight. It sounded like a rushing hate. A kaiju, somewhere out there. Mark instantly knew that this was live footage, and that Doomo *hadn’t known* if Nobody Important was *actually* going to—

The sky rumbled, a yellow aurora splitting open into a bright, draconic eye, and then molten titans descended, coalescing into cleaving warriors that splashed the pyramids apart, moving too fast for things that were so very, very large. The world detonated into crystalline light, a voice coming through for just a moment—

THAT IS NOT WHAT THESE ARE SUPPOSED TO BE USED FOR, DOMINANT. THIS IS INTOLERABLE.

—and then the sound was gone. The visuals were gone, too.

The moment stilled.

And then Prince Doomo came back on the screen, looking too relieved. He bowed and ducked away.

Emperor Salvation, still wearing his Winter Ball outfit, took the screen, eyes flickering with blue fire as he said, “Aluatha is once again at war with Godking Dominant and his ilk. We hold no enmity toward the people he has crushed under his roots, and so we offer asylum to all citizens of Okuana, and to those paladins and priests and people of the Pantheon that he has already aggrieved so dearly. The free world is always at risk from tyrants, and Godking Dominant has proven, once again, that he is not human, and he never was, no matter what sort of ghosts he claims to be part of himself, and his history. The tyrant tree can never be trusted with power over any people, at all, ever again. Further information to follow.”

The broadcast cut. The red and black flag of Aluatha went back up.

Mark stood there for a long moment, staring... and then he got moving. To where? To do what? He wasn't sure—

And then, for a moment, he saw Lola far afield, standing in step with other healers in white, healing some nobleman who had terrible burns over his entire body, and he saw Jessie Stills, surrounded by guards and his father, casting Resurrection on piles of dust and bringing back yet another person from death. Mark felt the moment like it was becoming a cultural monolith, seeming to embed into the nobility of Aluatha.

This was real. This had happened.

Someone was screaming out in fear of their dead father. Someone was sobbing. More were stunned. Some people were moving to escape, to leave before something else happened. Some were organizing. The Witches' Welcome had broken. The Winter Ball was no longer a safe space, where people could organize for the betterment of the Empire, and instead old rivalries, old fears, old grudges came to the surface. Someone screamed in someone else's face. Someone pulled a knife.

Mark softly said, “Death to All Monsters. Death to the Godking.”

Sally tipped over into absolute rage as she grew two meters more and roared, “DEATH TO ALL MONSTERS! DEATH TO THE GODKING!”

Isoko screamed to the sky, and soon others took up the call.

Mark Called out across all of Domal'Takela, his voice joined to those of all others, shaking the broken glass overhead and the sky beyond, as they all roared together, "Death to all monsters! Death to the Godking!"

The fire of war blossomed.

Mark got to healing people, to helping Jessie resurrect faster, to bringing people together, as he could.

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Mark stood in a small room across from Walaria, who was still wearing her silver-chain-enhanced witch's wardrobe. She had many wounds on her body, but all of them were surface wounds.

Addavein stood next to Mark, and he was wounded, too. He held onto his side while a dangerous-looking black spot undulated under his neck and across half of his face. He had appeared a few hours after the strike had hit Domal'Takela, and he had not gotten much better since then, but he had assured Mark that was fine. The problem, as Addavein had explained it, was some sort of soul-replacement technique. The only way to heal this was time.

For now, the two of them were 'reporting for duty'.

Walaria said, "I need to know where you stand."

"With Aluatha," Addavein said.

"With Aluatha," Mark said, affirming his choices in life.

"Okay. You're both on backline defense, as per normal operating procedure for our High Talents. Addavein; your progenitor has been at war with Okuana before, so we'll allow you to have semi-autonomy. Tell us if you have ideas of what needs to be done, and I'll make it work. For now, the generals are mustering the army, and we want you, Mark, to help make that army strong. The settlement

will be more important than ever due to the gate, so you will both remain there. Do either of you have anything you need to say, right now?"

Mark asked, "What about Jessie Stills? I helped him out there as he worked hard to Resurrection people, and he seemed grateful and furious and fulfilled. In light of that... Does he still want the responsibility of his Power, or are we giving it to someone else?"

"He desires his Power, and we may ask you to give him another one. For now, Cade Waterson is healed up to PL 80 and rising fast, and he's watching over him. We feel they might be a good match for asset and knight." Walaria asked, "Anything else?"

Mark shook his head.

Addavein said, "Fighting Godking Dominant will require dragons. Consider overtures to Kabberjaw."

"The official story is that we're never doing that. The real story is that we're considering it. Say no more on this topic, please."

"What's the immediate goal?" Mark asked.

"For now, the goals are securing the gate and our unfettered access to Earth's resources and people. Dominant has already made inroads into New Tokyo's gate, trying to enforce sanctions from a 100 kilometer-wide radius blockade. That will lose him just as much support as his first strike, which is not nearly as much support as we wished he would lose. We might go help Crystal Tower to break that blockade, but Crystal Tower is hoping for a peaceful resolution to that blockade. Events are developing. For now, go home and secure the gate. I'll have Aurora give you specific first-strike missions against any incoming dangers, when we find them."

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On the flight back, Eliot quietly told Mark, "I want Necromancer."

"Okay," Mark said. "How about right now?"

Eliot's eyes went wide and he rapidly said, "Not right *now*! But... soon."

Mark nodded.