

For an hour, Mark was tense, standing there on the main deck of the Dreadnought, eyeing kaiju everywhere.

In the second hour Eliot finally got the adamant engine up and running.

It was like night and day switching places. Mark suddenly felt it as his caltrops touched the soft wood of the deck and he did not sink in all the way. The floor offered actual resistance, like he was grabbing a kaiju's scales. It was kind of a miracle, really. Mark smiled as he walked on the open deck of the *Dreadnought* and he felt almost at home. He even rose up into the air, standing on his caltrops and getting much better views of everything. The air barely brushed at his body, but it did, and it felt amazing—

Eliot made a ship-wide announcement, “Adamant engine is up and running, working exactly as expected. With that active... I don't want to tempt evil, but we should be safe from most casual kaiju attacks. We're now at the basic measure of survivability that all ships should expect before they go into Endless Daihoon. Maybe a little bit above. Please remain on high alert until we can get the mithril engine up and running, then comes engine integration and various scanner creations. I might need your help with that, Mark. About an hour.”

Mark told Quark, “Tell him okay.”

Quark replied, “I have done so. I have also put in recommendations for intercom badges.”

“Ah, shi—” Eliot's voice came over the air again. “Right. I can make those. Everyone pick one up at the Hub. Someone bring Mark one.”

Soon, Derek came out from the middle of the ship, carrying a badge and a fanny pack and some simple webweave. Derek held it out, saying, “I got some shorts for you, too! They'll probably tear and they're pretty much just underwear, but Tartu enchanted them with some of Andria's mithril to make them flexible and repairable.”

Mark set back down onto the deck, feeling apprehensive about Andria, but he was getting over it, and clothes made by someone else besides just Andria seemed like a good thing. He took the clothes into his hands, but he did not put them on yet. The fanny pack and badge got clipped up by small adamantium hands, gentle as Mark could be, as Mark said, “Thanks, Derek... So you’re the only one on the ship doing everything *and* with extra time, too... Anything happening I should know about?”

“Wanna talk about Andria?” Derek asked, guessing what Mark really wanted to know.

... Mark looked at the shorts and put them on, under his illusionary clothes, saying, “I’m sorry I’m not friendly towards her, or you, yet. I’ve just been... through a lot recently. I’ll warm up soon enough, I’m sure.” The shorts were kinda like booty shorts, but at least they held everything in and up. It felt good. His ‘real clothes’ were the illusionary ones, anyway. They were plain illusions but they were good, too. Mark said, “I’ll tell them the shorts fit well. Thanks for the delivery.”

Derek softly smiled. “Anytime! I’m busy and free at all hours of the day! I’m... I’m really happy to be here. Frelaya told me not to partake of the prismatic mana, and I won’t, but I wanted to. And then the very second after I heard about it, Freyala told me that there was an 80% chance I would monsterize if we found a replicating kaiju. I’d be much better off taking the 20% chance to monsterize through any other kind of kaiju out there, but even 20% is too much for me.”

Mark put the fanny pack around his waist and secured it on his lower back, as he listened. It felt secure. The shorts felt secure, too, and Mark recalled that Eliot had given him some repairable clothes before, not 12 hours ago, but then Mark had fucked those up escaping the Force Twins. A lot of things had happened fast back there.

Mark asked, “This kaiju mana thing is dangerous, huh? 20% chance of monsterization?”

“Less so for you, I understand. Unstable Bindings are made stable in the application of prismatic mana. Stable Bindings like my own are made unstable, first, so... bad idea. Apparently the Alteration of a Binding counts as ‘unstable’, but I’m not about to do that to myself.”

Mark realized something. “You talk about Bindings like you’re in Mage Society... Did you get that apprenticeship you were after?”

“I did!” Derek said, beaming. “You remembered.”

Mark realized another thing. “Sorry if I’ve been short with you—”

“You haven’t been short with me! A completely normal amount of trepidation— Hey. If it makes you more comfortable, I’m just the help, man. Anything you want, I will do! Eliot has about 20 scouter ships ready for me to go out on, to scout further! See a kaiju? Something interesting? Send me out! I have several bodies down on Daihoon and Earth, and they seem to be just as distant as they were before, so no issues there. *I’m* good. Are *you* good?”

“... Yeah, I think I am.”

“Andria is fine, too, by the way. She knows she’s here for a task and she already got a 750 million goldleaf payday.”

“Ha,” Mark said.

Derek grinned, and then nodded and vanished, disappearing into a flash of released mana, or whatever it was that happened to him when he disincorporated a clone.

... And so, wearing new ‘clothes’, Mark hovered about 50 meters off of the hull of the ship, looking around at everything, keeping eyes on the nearest visible kaiju, all of which were more than 250 kilometers away, according to Quark. Endless Daihoon was kinda ‘layered’, which Mark didn’t really know about until he was here, seeing it for himself, but it made sense. The auroras that one could see from Daihoon were all separated from each other, or not-so-separated, and those were the layers that made up the space out here. To go down into one of those layers was to see that land down there from up close, like it was real, but up here all you could see was the endlessness of it all.

Mark turned his attention to the ship; the part of the world that made sense. Mark had yet to explore any of it, and he might end up out here on the deck the whole time, so he asked Quark about it, and soon Mark had a wireframe model of the place to go along with his Unionsense of where everyone was.

Mostly, the ship was ship-shaped, with a large 'pleasure cruiser ship' functioning as the main hull of the thing. Standard wood, but writ large. Very, very large, at 400 meters long. That was among the largest sized sailing vessels anywhere, and comparable to the *Grey Whale* that had brought everyone from Earth to Daihoon, to the settlement, way back in January. The *Grey Whale* was bigger, and by a lot; and not just by length. The *Dreadnought* was still huge.

Mark didn't know where Eliot would have gotten such a large base vessel in such a short amount of time as they had had. Mark had *thought* Eliot was going to just make his own vessel, and maybe he had, because this wood looked new, and the layout of the ship was very open, according to Quark.

Mark supposed that was a question to ask.

Another question was 'where is the hover ring?'. *Grey Whale* had a giant ring around the back of it, acting as the envelope for the ship. All hoverships had big hover rings. That's how they worked. Sometimes the hover rings were enclosed, as they were in all hovercars and vans and the like. But big ships usually needed rings *around* them somewhere, usually in the back, to act as a shield system and a gravity control system.

But, there were a hundred cars strapped to the undersides of the vessel, gradually becoming one with the main ship as Eliot worked through them. So that's where *some* of the lift was coming from.

And yet, that center castle, spearing through the top and the bottom of the back half of the ship, absolutely needed more lift than a hundred hovercars. That thing was solid stone, meters thick on the walls. Eliot had *absolutely* picked that up off of the ground somewhere... Or maybe he had made it, too? The stone looked fresh-cut and the mortar... there was no mortar? Ah, yeah. It just *looked* like it was made of individual stones. Seemed to have some metal reinforcement throughout the whole thing, linking it to the ship, too...

Ah.

Yeah.

Eliot had absolutely made the new-wood ship *as well* as the castle and the greenhouses...

Mark reassured himself that though there were lots of spaces for infiltrators to hide in this place, there weren't any *pre-made* hiding zones from previous owners, or whatnot... Except for maybe the hovercars? To be sure, Mark picked out the intercom badge from his fanny pack and clicked the button, very lightly, and asked, "Hey Eliot? Testing?"

"I'm here," Eliot said, coming through the badge, and also Mark's Quark-provided ear hooks.

"Oh! Ha." Mark put the badge away. "The badge is redundant?"

"Yup! Quark can hook into it as a secondary transmitter; that's why I wanted you to have it. You shouldn't have to speak into it directly."

"Ah, good... So where'd all this stuff come from? I'm concerned about infiltrators and the, uh, size of it all— Ah..." Mark gazed out at the land beyond, eyes flickering to a thing that Quark had noticed in the last few seconds. Mark moved fast to the side of the vehicle, to look down past the ledge at the land. There were some floating mountains down there, coming into range. Maybe 150 kilometers away. Some worm kaiju were burrowed into the mountains, hanging out, or whatever they were doing. They were... just close. Not important. Not a threat. Mark watched them as he asked Eliot, "What made you go with this huge construction?"

Eliot seemed to be working on something, too, down there at the center of the ship, below the main command center. He was able to speak anyway, saying, "Everything in here including the Pantheonic Spire in the back is fresh-made. Lola and Derek helped to grow the wood for the main ship, while David fast-processed it. Sally and Isoko secured the stone, and the metal came from the remains of your metal elemental. The main reason it's this big is because these were open-source plans. Tested and proven plans, using only materials available for creation inside Endless Daihoon itself. If we fall and break all we have to do is survive and I can *eventually* remake the whole thing."

"Awesome," Mark said, smiling a little, relaxing. And then he rapidly added, "Not the planning-for-failure part, but the whole 'we can rebuild' part."

"I thought so, too. There were hundreds of options using a lot of that metal that you brought back from Goblinhome, but this one used the least amount of metal possible. The only non-renewable things are the hover rings from all the hover vehicles I bought straight out of the yard. I gutted them down to their

metal and their rings, though. There's no chance any of them have any tracking devices... Well." Eliot focused on the call for a moment. "If someone *really* wanted to track us, they could. It'd be hard as fuck, but it's possible. The hovercars and whatever were the only thing I couldn't make myself in a fast way, so I had to buy those. If we *do* crash and need to rebuild, expect 2 weeks of me growing crystals and a much, much smaller ship to start. Could probably get a courier-sized ship up and running in 10 hours, and set up grav-crystal grow tanks for on-the-go. Anyway! The real reason we're so big is because anything smaller than 100 meters is food. 250 meters is the size of a possible threat. At 400 meters, we're avoiding a lot of fights just by virtue of our size alone."

"Ahhhh... That explains a lot. Thanks, Eliot," Mark said, "I just wanted to know about it all and to have a modicum of security... Well. An abnormally large amount of security, actually. This is all really good."

"Sorry the shit around the house wasn't good enough. Those archmages... Sorry."

"That's not your fault. It's my fault. I expected... I don't know what I expected of Aluatha. To be better? No. I suppose not." Mark changed the subject, "What will need to happen if we crash? Which parts need to be saved?"

"Our lives; that's it. I can remake everything given enough time and space, and I'm pretty sure you can make a kaiju and protect us well enough. Hopefully we can find a Sky Shaper kaiju for Isoko, first— Ah! Yeah. Did someone tell you yet? Isoko needs Sky Shaper, first. That's the order-of-attack we decided on when we were coming up here because then we'll be able to fly and protect the ship a *lot* better. But if you have a better idea for a first kaiju, or if you really need to sleep and we need to get a metal kaiju super fast, then tell me now."

Mark didn't need to think about any of that. He said, "A Sky Shaper kaiju for Isoko first is a good idea. I like it. I do not need to sleep at all right now, so don't worry about that."

"Good. Glad to hear that."

"So about that... is Andria doing some sort of... scanning device, or something?" Mark asked, "What's happening right now?"

“Andria is creating some preliminary stuff down in her workshop and I’ll help her make the scanner later. I will need your help there.

“Tartu is working on protective hexes for the ship, and that’ll take several days for several arrays. Each completed array will give the ship another PL though, since he’s using your adamantium, so we want him on ward stone creation as much as possible.

“Isoko is helping me with the ship. Sally is, too.

“Derek is helping everyone.

“Lola and David are doing stuff in the gardens with Derek, making sure we have food. We’re not planning on any meat while we’re here, but we have beans and rice and that’s fine.

“I’m working on the main computers, power, and hover systems right now, cycling through the hovercars on the hull, pulling them apart and bringing their parts into the ship. In 4 more hours we’ll be at 50% expected capability. And then it’s a week of flying away from Daihoon, deeper into the mirage, so we can avoid the dragons that patrol the lands near the Crossings. But! When I finish here, I’ll help Andria, and the scanner should be online shortly after that. Tartu will be involved as well.

“If we see a kaiju *nearby* that we want we might consider taking it and damn the dragons. The dragons are mostly too scattered to really defend ‘their land’ here... And we can talk about that when the ship is more stable. Or ask Lola or David. And that’s the news!”

Mark said, “Thank you, Eliot.”

“No pro— Ah! Speaking of security sweeps. Derek and David have already done sweeps of the entire ship, but they can do another one?” Eliot said, “Calling David and Derek. Please can you do a security sweep of the entire ship, thank you.”

Derek sounded off, “Sure!”

David sounded off, “On it.”

David's vector became an absolute blur. Mark needed to do Alacrity/Slowness to even catch a glimpse of what he was doing but by the time Mark fully got into the moment, David was already done. Mark muttered a small 'holy shit' to himself, as he dropped back into normal time. That was absolutely faster than x35 speed. How fast did David go?

Derek went a lot slower, but a lot more solidly. Every single Derek became 2 Dereks, that then became 4, all of them walking all over the place, looking at everything, inundating the entire ship with overlapping, concentrated, and coordinated Unions of Good and Bad. Mark joined their Union, and after a few more divisions Mark *stopped* feeling like one very strong person connecting to a city's block full of people, and he felt more like one person connecting to an almost-kaiju.

Derek felt pretty darn huge when he really went for numbers.

Derek's Good was flavored like the Good of being seen and understood, and he connected to absolutely everyone and everything in the place, while the Bad was flavored as fear. And for a brief moment, the ever-present Kaiju Call happening in the background of Endless Daihoon began to attenuate, to silence.

Mark lapsed into relaxation as about 500 Dereks piled on to the main deck and then they went overboard, grabbing onto the sides of the vehicle and piling over, eyeing everything on their fall down into oblivion. Mark rapidly came back to himself as a spike of completely natural fear took hold. Those Dereks were gonna die! But then those Dereks evaporated, most of them feeling like they were 'signing off'. Mark was sure he heard, 'Okay down here, boys!', but who could ever really be sure about that sort of thing, except for Derek himself. Other Dereks climbed the main castles, and others clambered over the hovercars still stuck to the sides of the Dreadnought, like barnacles waiting for Eliot to consume and make part of the ship.

And then, 5 minutes later, the Dereks began to disappear, disintegrating into dispersed mana, reducing from 2,200-ish Dereks down to 60. Some of them were vaguely interested in whatever they had found.

Derek's voice sounded in Mark's ears, through the open coms, "I have found 24 items of low importance. I believe David found them, too. I have marked them in the log at the Hub."

“Ah, shit,” Eliot said, walking upstairs from down below the center of the ship. He kept going upward, Mark only seeing him through his vector-location, and from the wireframe model of the ship, thanks to Quark. “What’d you find?”

“Broken beams, mostly. Stress fractures. Maybe some mechanical problems?”

Eliot said, “Okay. Help me find them. Go to channel 2-Repairs— Ah. Quark. There’s a list of channels you can tune into, and a ship’s guide to explain the ship. Please show Mark all about that stuff.”

And then Eliot’s voice went away.

“About what, Quark?” Mark asked.

Quark explained, “We’re on Channel 1 right now; big ship news, meant to be kept clear most of the time. It’s always on, but you have to actively speak into it to speak into it. Channel 2 is operational systems maintenance; repairs. Eliot is always on that one. Channel 3 is Ship Talk. It’s currently Isoko, Andria, Tartu, and Sally talking about ship stuff, about spaces and rooming and plans. Channel 4 is Open Talk.

“The ship’s guide is already downloaded and listed on your wireframe view I am giving you, but to reiterate, from the top:

“We are on the main observation deck.

“The Hub is the center of the ship, and it is located in the middle of the castle area. The Hub extends all the way under the observation deck, and to the back of the ship. Almost everywhere is accessible from the Hub. The nearest entrance to the Hub deck is that opening on the observation deck over there, in the centerline of the ship.

“Main Command is below the Hub, in the castle. It is mostly unused. It will be used if something threatens the ship itself.

“The Nest is at the top of the main castle. It is the commanding center used most of the time. It is accessible from the outside, or from the Hub.

“The rooms are located below the Hub Deck, right below us. Beside the rooms, are Utilities, which run off-center and in the center of the ship, from front to back, forming the center axis of the ship.

“Greenhouses 1 through 5, all of them redundant, are found below here, and are reachable from the Hub. The Church is located behind the castle, and it is accessible from the Hub.

“Power/servers, Shields, and Weapons are accessed through the Main Command, which is accessed through the Hub.

“Flight Deck is at the bottom of the ship, along with Storage, and they are both accessed through the central axis that is the Hub.”

Mark watched as Quark illuminated his wireframe model of the ship, highlighting the decks as he named them. When Quark was done, Mark asked, “Illuminate the currently unused parts of the ship?”

90% of the ship briefly lit up, as Quark explained, “The Hull has a buffer zone, all around, and the cars attached to the sides of the ship are being integrated as we speak, so they will go away soon. 90% of the ship is still unused.”

Mark said, “Join Channel 3, please; Ship talk.”

Quark beep-booped.

And then Isoko’s voice was there, going, “—to get broadcasts from Earth? Or Daihoon?”

“Not really,” Tartu said.

“We can get broadcasts from Earth and Daihoon,” Andria said, voice confident. “It’ll be a break in security, but we can do that if you want your shows.”

Mark was surprised to hear Andria speak that way. It was completely different from normal, because her tone was normal. Usually she was more fearful.

... She must not know that Mark had entered the channel.

Mark decided to keep it that way.

“Right, and that security break *is why we shouldn't* open rifts to Earth or Daihoon, not to mention the kaiju risk,” Tartu answered. “So we're stuck with whatever stuff we got before we left, *unless* you want to break security protocols. In that case it's a matter of stabilizing the ship in place both metaphysically and actually. That way me opening a pinhole rift doesn't cause an actual rip.”

Andria said, “We can do that. We can make a few sky anchors. They're a low priority but we can do it, and with Mark's adamantium we can make the best sky anchors in any world. And with Tartu being able to open pinhole rifts, we can probably open channels to the Two Worlds *without* summoning kaiju toward those rifts.”

“Pinholes are *still* a danger—” Tartu began.

“Well yes! But not a *big* one,” Andria said. “Not anymore than us being here in Endless Daihoon at all.”

“I'd prefer not to increase the risk at all,” Sally said. “I can stand to miss a month of shows.”

Isoko said, “We need to keep up with the news, though. Like... News briefing is a thing that we do need to do—”

“Absolutely,” Andria agreed. “I didn't even think about that! I have 5 stocks I was keeping a close eye on.”

“Okay so yeah,” Tartu said, “We should plan for daily news scoops. Eliot can rip a day's worth of relevant news from the pinhole gate as long as we aim the rift right..”

The conversation meandered, with Sally happy that she'd get her shows back, and then Isoko spoke about HVP stuff with Tartu, focusing on possible Endless Daihoon and what the ship would need for that sort of thing. Tartu thought HVP in Endless Daihoon simply wasn't going to happen, since all of Endless Daihoon was treated as though it didn't exist, and no shows ever showed Endless Daihoon to the general public.

"And besides that, Shawn and Lenny aren't here," Tartu said.

Isoko replied, "Eliot is recording stuff because he's doing the Bard thing, so we're getting a good record of the whole thing that will be put behind big safety protocol laws regarding prismatic mana, but I want something that is going to be a *public* record. *Some* story about us being out here and doing this that the public can see. That's what I want."

"Well... Maybe so," Tartu said, "But we can't do that until the ship is fixed up, and there is no end to the defenses we can put up in this ship thanks to Andria and Mark, so I don't see us ever having real downtime."

"He's right about that, for the most part," Andria said.

Sally asked, "What do you think our weaknesses are going to be? What do we need to cover?"

"The adamant engine could be better, and the same goes for the mithril engine. But beyond that... Maneuverability," Tartu said, "If we find a wind kaiju for Isoko then we can solve a lot of that problem, but even so, the ship itself could use some better hover rings."

"The crystals *are* growing," Andria said.

Tartu said, "And when they come in we'll use them. Next biggest problem is cloying attacks. Mark should be able to handle any elementals swamping the ship, and the shields should give him time to be able to do that, but a fire elemental simply turning up the heat would be bad. Us entering physically hostile territory, like accidentally stumbling into a lava layer, or a water layer, would be *bad*, and that can happen if we start going through layers to hunt kaiju..."

Tartu continued for a while, and the enormity of the problems got to Mark. It got to Isoko and Sally, too, but Andria was fully on-board with Tartu's list of issues, and they spoke back and forth about lists of things to make.

In a lull, Mark asked, "What about mental attacks, from mental kaiju?"

Andria's vector shuddered and her voice was a quiet, "Ah shit he's in the channel."

Isoko laughed happily.

Sally spoke with a smile in her voice. "He'll warm up to you eventually, Andria, long as you don't try to kill him or anyone else."

Andria practically shouted, "I would NEVER— Oh gods, I'm so sorry, uh— I have work! Uh. Sh—"

There was a click and a disconnect sound, like on an Accord call. Eliot must be using that framework for the channels—

Another click.

"Sorry. I am back," Andria said, voice and vector composed. "Apologies. I have been weird. Mental attacks are taken care of through Eliot's Castellan, and the various things I and Tartu are making. It's on the list. Low priority because it's already handled as well as can be handled at the moment."

"No worries. Good to hear. You guys need more adamantium to make more stuff?" Mark asked. "I got lots. I literally just heal my body and make more."

"That is so fucking wrong," Tartu said, "And I demand another 10 kilos."

Mark snorted. "For what?"

“*For using and selling*, and I’m not too sure about the second option. Maybe I’ll sell a single kilo and live off of that for the rest of my life.”

Mark smiled as he looked out at the world, searching for threats, even as he poked at Tartu, asking, “What are you gonna make? What *could* you make with 100 kilos?”

“A 100? Archmage’s robes. I have no idea how to make them, but I want them.”

“Ohhh,” Isoko said.

“What do those even do?” Sally asked, highly interested.

Mark said, “I wanna know what they do, too.”

“If I knew that then *maybe* I could make them,” Tartu said, “All I *really* know is that they give the user’s spellwork adamantium strength. It’s completely redundant when you’re around doing the same thing, Mark, but it’d be great for when you’re not there— And speaking of that: You need to put, like, a few thousand tons of adamantium into the hold while you can. If you get a kaiju that erases your elemental body then this might be the only chance you have to have this much metal.”

Andria got a weirdly worried color to her vector, but she did not speak. “Can you do that? That’d be fricken *nuts*.”

Isoko excitedly said, “Ohh! Yes! You should do that, Mark.”

Sally asked, “Isn’t weight a problem?”

Eliot, who had joined the channel when Mark wasn’t looking, spoke up, “We’re at 30% capacity, at a 90% empty ship, and even so the ship can handle another 72,000 metric tons of weight.” He added, “With each of your bodies at around 2,500 kilos, if you wanted to put a few thousand bodies in the ship, we can handle it, weight wise.”

“Oh shit, wow,” Isoko whispered.

Andria was deeply worried, though, and Mark felt he knew why she was worried, because Mark was suddenly worried about the same thing, though he had already thought about it a little bit. Hearing actual numbers put those worries to the forefront, though.

Mark asked, “I’m sure there are long range wealth scanners that could absolutely detect us, though, right? And that seems bad.”

Andria latched on to that, using it to allow her voice to join the group, “Yes! There are lots of wealth scanner varieties out there. We’ll be making one to find the kaiju we want. And I need to make a Ring of No-Wealth... that will not work for Mark, uh... The ship has an anti-wealth array in the hull, right? A stationary no-wealth array will still work— for a given definition of ‘stationary’. ‘On a ship’ is still ‘stationary’ enough to count... and now I’m rambling.”

Eliot said, “It’s on the list of things to do, which seem to be ever growing. Still don’t have any proper weapons systems or even any deterrence systems aside from you, Mark, and then we still need better hydroponics...”

Mark floated behind the back of the ship, watching a serpentine sky kaiju curl and float forward, about 120 kilometers below. It was a thin thing, glowing brightly in neon yellows and pinks with long, bright orange wings, as a warning to all others. Mostly, it was a noodle, or maybe a tapeworm. Quark wasn’t sure. Mark wasn’t sure either. It was eerily beautiful, curling in and out of clouds as it flowed forward, bright red eyes open along every segment of its body.

Quark had spotted the kaiju 20 minutes ago, about 200 kilometers forward of the ship.

Now, the kaiju was behind the ship, and far, far below.

It seemed to be basking in the sun, reflecting and absorbing light, and not doing much more than that. Quark had identified its main powers as light-based. It might have been a Light Shaper. Not of the illusionist-variety, but of the giant-fuck-off-laser-beam variety.

Another 10 minutes passed and the kaiju vanished into the sky far behind the ship.

Eliot came over the coms, "We're ready for you, Mark. Come on down to the Hub. It'll take 30 minutes to get this part up and running."

"Coming," Mark replied, as he pulled himself back onto the ship, completely.

Mark had crawled all over the ship in the last few hours, putting himself between the ship and any possible kaiju nearby. It was really kinda fun, grabbing onto the wood, sticking nails into planks here and there, and then swinging down and around the hull, and then all the way up to the top of the ship, crawling on stone or wood to get there. Whatever that adamant engine was doing, it was doing A Lot.

The stone castle in the center of the ship was the strongest part of the ship, of course, but the stone shield made of granite and other hard rocks in the back of the ship was also pretty solid. It was like an entire wall of rock back here, at least 30 meters deep in some places. If the ship had to tank a blast from anything, then it would be best to tank the blast from the back, against all this rock, as opposed to all of the wood up front. 2-meter-thick wood was nothing compared to 30 meters of rock.

Mark set down behind the rock shield, onto 'cathedral grounds'. It was beautiful back here. The entire place was enclosed by strong rock walls while cleaner plants grew in abundance, their tubular stalks gently filling the air with the smell of flowers and purity. Jasmine and other flowering plants made the scent in the air even better. It was the most peaceful place on the ship, nestled behind the big rock wall and the castle itself.

And then there was the cathedral in the center. The spire of stone was a good 50 meters of ornate white stone, with a bunch of curling ornamentation flowing up every ridge of the spire, like flames. Those flames were edged with gold. A golden crown floated on the very top, while the space below, at the

bottom of the spire, was a 6-arched open gazebo with 6 altars set around a perfectly round and floating white stone. Eliot had called it the 'Pantheonic Spire', and it represented the New Pantheon.

Freyala, Goddess of Union.

Drakarok, God of Retribution.

Hearthswell, Goddess of Castellan.

Verdago, God of Farmer.

Pluta, Goddess of Prosperity.

And Malaqua, God of Stone.

The Pantheonic Spire was a holy space, and though Mark couldn't directly feel the presence of the gods, they were here, in the glint of gold light on the edges of the flame motifs, and in the golden light when it glittered upon the white stone.

Mark moved very carefully through the center of the space, passing beside the spire. He touched it, said a small prayer to the gods for their guidance, and then moved on. He wasn't a paladin, but the gods were real, palpable forces in the Two Worlds, mostly present in the Chosen Powers granted to most everyone here, aside from Mark and Tartu. There was an argument to be had that Mark was still a 'chosen' of Freyala, but it was not an argument Mark wanted to have with anyone. He certainly considered the goddess an ally.

Leaving the garden felt like leaving safety, and maybe it was, a little, but they were on a ship in Endless Daihoon and nowhere was safe out here.

The castle loomed, with a big archway that led to the very middle of the Hub.

Mark flowed down a slope into a grand open space, with stairwells to the left and right going up and down. Mark went down to the side, down a big open hallway to a big open space on the right side of the ship.

Eliot, Tartu, Andria, and Sally were here, along with several Dereks. To the side, a big, temporary hole opened up into the guts of the ship, to the command center and the electronic bowels of the *Dreadnought*. Here, in this space, is where they were going to make several scanning devices, so Eliot had brought a bunch of electronics and metal up to prepare for that creation.

A cubic-thing, about a meter across and with a dense geodesic wireframe-thing in the middle, sat on a workbench between the guys. It had some roller wheels set into the interior edges of the cubic-thing, to maybe support the geodesic sphere, which looked like it could maybe rotate freely... if it had some more metal to it. Right now it looked like it would catch on the wheels, and not turn at all.

“What are we looking at?” Mark asked, as he sat down next to them. “A wealth hider, or whatever it’s called? It looks like a hider-thing.” It had a ‘shield’ vibe to it, with every triangle, when taken in whole with any 5 of its neighbors, and every one of those triangles able to do the same, looking like a protective hexagon. Mark added, “Or a new shield system?”

“We should redo the shield system later,” Tartu said, though it was to the others.

Andria was nervous. She asked the others, “The current shielder works well, but I suppose... Since we have an abundance of adamantium?”

“I’d like to make a full-adamantium shielder,” Tartu said, “Just to see if we can.”

Mark wanted to know more—

“The shields are good for now,” Eliot said, ending that tangent, though it seemed like he would be revisiting that later. Eliot told Mark, “The obfuscator is already active and currently working at 80% efficiency, and yes, it looks exactly like this. We made that without you. And yes, the geodesic dome is a pretty universal actor in a lot of different ways, from Binding work to shields, scanners, and obfuscators, and more. Navigational compasses, too, and *that’s* what this thing is going to be; a very specific compass. We need a purpose, Mark.”

They all looked at him.

Mark asked, "I assume you mean something *specific*? Not a general purpose? Because we're all here for a general purpose already?"

Tartu answered, "We need crystallized purpose turned toward a direction and a goal. Should be pretty easy for you."

"Ahhh," Mark said, kinda understanding.

Tartu continued, "Usually scanners are made with fake crystallized purpose, in the shape of adamantium, or the barest sliver of the stuff which is then affixed to the top of a needle that spins around in one of these things. *Real* crystallized purpose is a lot better for this sort of thing, and the larger the fragment of adamantium the longer the range. It doesn't have to be needle-shaped. It needs to be shaped properly for the purpose which you will be giving it, since that's your whole thing."

"Huh! Neat," Mark said, grinning. "What kinda purpose, *exactly*? Finding powerups? Any specific language to use?"

Eliot frowned, unable to answer. He had ideas, but nothing that he knew would work.

Tartu shook his head. They had officially reached the end of his knowledge. "Andria?"

Andria was at the end of her knowledge, too, but she was able to answer, "If this was a normal scanner, I could make it, no problem. We could aim it in a specific direction and it would be able to tell us the distance and degree of that thing, be we searching for gold, any sort of metal, any of a hundred thousand different monsters, mana, or alchemical parts... But we're searching for prismatic mana with flavors inside kaiju, and that's a *whole mess* of issues. The big issue is that the prismatic mana is inside of the kaiju, and we can't scan inside of kaiju very well at all, without being very close.

"And we can't get close to them, since we're scanning through layers and also distance. It's *hard* to find stuff out here... At least that's what I was told."

Tartu said, “That’s what I know to be true, as well.”

Andria said, “The *one thing* that makes me think this will work *at all* is that Second Princess Walaria told me how to make it.

“What you want is to make a shard of adamantium, however it ends up being shaped, that will point toward sources of prismatic mana.

“From there, we will build the scanner around that shard, to focus the shard and to interpret the shard. Language can help you make the shard... maybe? Do a ritual, if you want. It might help? If the first scanner doesn’t work then we can try to do a... a union of mithril and adamantium construction, since the majority of the scanner is going to be mithril, anyway.” With a bit of a red face, Andria finished with, “I can work around whatever you make, and we don’t have to try for a true cooperative working of metals yet.”

Mark nodded.

He wasn’t ready to do a union of metals with Andria, either, since that seemed weird. But maybe later, after he got to know her.

“Sounds good.” Mark held up a hand and condensed a shard of adamantium, flashing bits of black into purpose; to find good sources of... He paused. He asked, “How does your part work? The rest of the system?”

Andria and Tartu and Eliot all shared a look.

Eliot said, “We don’t know.”

“There is *a normal way*,” Tartu said. “But not for this sort of thing. This thing is all prismatic mana and kaiju, and the problem with searching for prismatic mana is that you always end up pointing at the moon.”

“Ahhh,” Mark said, “Because of the Tutorial ritual... But wait? That’s always far away? Why do scanners always point at the moon? Shouldn’t they point at the nearest source of prismatic mana? Like magnets fuck up compasses?”

“The Tutorial is *not* far away because the System is always right here,” Tartu said, “And ‘right here’ leads to the Moon.”

“The main problem is overcoming that natural direction,” Eliot said, “Which is something I will be doing most of the work for.”

“Ah,” Mark said, wondering how to solve for such a thing.

Andria spoke up, “There is hope! We’re not searching for *any old prismatic mana*. Everyone will need to make a drop of mana to put into the scanner, and then we solve for prismatic mana that is *flavored like their mana*.” As though she realized she had just spoken openly around Mark, she suddenly retreated conversationally, adding, “Uh... It should work. Second Princess Walaria said it would?”

Eliot hummed, unsure.

Tartu shrugged. He was resigned to being surprised if it worked at all.

“That brings up another problem.” Mark asked, “*Can* everyone here condense mana into a shard? You can, right, Tartu? I saw your father do it, once.”

“Yes I can,” Tartu said, completely sure of himself.

Eliot said, “I’m working on it. Isoko can do it already.”

Sally, who had yet to speak up, said, “I’m working on it, too.”

“I can!” a Derek said, smiling.

Another Derek shushed that one. Another Derek shook his head and tsk'd.

Andria continued, "All of that are personal problems to overcome. Regarding the scanner... A bit of Prosperity usually bridges most technical gaps, and Tartu and I can ensure the magical side is as easy to interpret for Eliot as can be. And then it's just a matter of... of firing it up, and scanning all of Endless Daihoon."

Eliot said, "Individual scans might take a while to work out."

Tartu countered, "Might be instant, though. We're scanning kaiju Calls, mostly, and those propagate forever. Chances are that what we want is already alive and well out there, somewhere."

It was like a lightbulb went off.

"Ohhhh!" Mark said, and then he chuckled. "Awesome. Okay! Quark. Bring up the diagram for prismatic mana, from Manawork."

Quark flickered a sight in front of Mark.

The magical signature of prismatic mana was a perfect platinum-mirror cube.

Mark held up his hand again and liquefied a good handful of adamantium, forming a sphere. With directed purpose, and outside of his direct control, Mark imbued the center of the sphere with prismatic purpose, as he Called to it, "**Like Calls to like.**"

The liquid sphere flash-crystallized, like precipitate crashing out of a solution, becoming a solid cube of solid black adamantium. It was a bit spikey on the edges, and especially on the points, but it was definitely a cube. The points kinda seemed like compass points, actually, so that was probably a good thing.

Mark handed the cube over to... to someone, holding it out there, floating it, saying, "Anyone?"

Eliot stared at it like one would stare at a particularly surprising, yet small bit of art. He said, “Neat. Didn’t know you could do that with Aethercalling?”

“It felt like the right thing to do,” Mark said, still holding the metal.

Andria wanted it, but she wasn’t sure how to take it.

Tartu said, “Andria take it, and only with mithril. Do the joining now.”

Andria went, “Ah... yeah. May I?”

Mark held it out to her.

Andria flicked a swish of mithril out of nowhere, out of her astral body, and swept up the spiky cube into a flow of molten-like silver that was so much shinier than silver could ever hope to be. Mark began to hand off the cube, little by little, and the weight of the cube did not surprise her. She compensated and was fully focused on the work, her vectors flowing with concentration and subtle, tiny movements.

As silver condensed around the cube like swirling vortices, Mark let go of the adamantium completely—

The mithril-solidified completely, becoming miniature hurricanes and water flowing atop a mostly spherical surface, frozen in time. Eight tiny black spikes, from the eight corners of the cube, stuck out from the centers of eight little whirlpools... Actually, looking deeply at it, Mark saw a whole hell of a lot of work done in a flashing instant. The arrangement of mithril storms on the tiny thing was perfectly symmetrical all the way around, with eight storms around the points, eight larger storms around the faces, and eight smaller storms around every central-face storm.

Mark said, “Huh! I’m impressed. That’s a lot of work very fast, Andria.”

Tartu was speechless, staring at the object.

Andria blushed heavily, stammering, “I have to work that fast or else there are problems with focus... and I can’t claim credit that much. The whole adamantium core made focusing on utilization of the core a whole lot easier. All I did was piggyback on your own work.”

Mark said, “Still impressive. Is it going to work?”

“Probably,” Eliot said, eyeing the core with a few glasses that had appeared over his eyes when Mark wasn’t looking. And then the glasses pulled up and Eliot told Mark, “Back on patrol, please.”

Mark snorted. “Okay okay.” He started floating away, saying, “Hope it works!”

“I think it will!” Andria said, her vector deeply interested in whatever she had made.

Tartu held out a hand, his vector full of intellectual *need*, but his voice was a simple, “Can I see that?”

Andria was loath to give it up as she played with it in her hands. “Just a minute!”

“Here, Tartu,” Eliot said, as he brought up electronics from the hole in the space, crafting holographic displays in the air and connecting those displays to the computers running through the centerline of the ship. Scanner images flickered into the air, highlighting the depths of the adamantium/mithril ‘storm prism’, as Eliot was tentatively calling it, as Eliot said, “I can already tell it’s rather balanced, but there is a polar weight to it around this axis here that makes me think it would be good in this sort of arrangement, in the scanner..”

Mark floated back on deck, leaving the crafters behind and feeling the wind on his body, wondering what they were going to do with with the ‘storm prism’, but also just loving the sight of all the myriad lands out—

A murky yellow/grey cloud loomed ahead, passing between a band of sky, and a band of ocean, like a weird sort of stormy downdraft. It was moving weird and flickering in the sun and it had to be 300 kilometers across. Maybe more. The ocean below was a lot more than 300 kilometers away. Space was weird up here, and the ship moved at about 30 kilometers an hour, but it covered a *lot* more space than that.

That cloud had not been there when Mark had gone into the ship to help with the scanners.

“Quark. Analysis on that cloud.”

“Cloud of slipper fish. Non-aggressive. Migratory. Sharks prey on them. The sharks are worrisome. There are thousands of sharks, and we cannot see them yet, but I can pick out spaces where they might be. The cloud looks to intersect this entire layer of sky. There is no going around it.”

Quark enhanced Mark’s vision, and Mark saw into the depths of the cloud of slipper fish. Open spaces appeared in the cloud, like holes in cheese. There were dots in those openings.

“How large and dangerous are these fish?”

Quark answered, “The slipper fish are between 5 to 10 meters long, and they will try to get into the ship to hide. The sharks will follow—”

“Tell Eliot,” Mark said.

A shipwide alarm triggered almost instantly, pinging the air as spinning yellow lights popped up around the edges of most of the structures of the castle. Quark’s voice came over the air, as every vector in the place got suddenly concerned.

“Analyzing the threat. Estimated yellow level. Hold on,” Eliot said.

Moments passed.

Lola and David perked up. And then David flickered. He came back, and he was a lot more relaxed. He must have said something to Lola down there because she relaxed, too. Derek seemed permanently relaxed already.

Isoko was hanging out at the pilot’s room, but now she rushed to her seat. “Can I reverse the ship? Should I... slow it down, at least... right?”

Eliot was nervous as he said, “Uhhh... Maybe— *Yes*.” Eliot definitively said, “Engines reverse to halt forward movement. *Slow deceleration*. Moving to the main command center. Go ahead Isoko.”

Tartu and Andria focused on their work, while Eliot went with Sally to the main command center—

The ship began to decelerate.

Gravity felt weird.

Mark’s body swayed forward as the ship slowed down. Everything kinda flexed. A few stones broke and fell from the castle—

CRACK

Panic spread instantly and Mark caught the tail-end sight of several planks of wood launching into the air, on the left side of the ship. The railing on the left suddenly splintered and fractured in every direction, wood curling hard and then flying off into the distance, and then the air crackled again, like the breaking of a bunch of sticks, but so much larger than that. Mark hovered high, looking down, as a gap opened up in the ship.

Not a wide one.

Not a full break.

Not yet.

Eliot began to panic and work fast while Isoko suddenly felt very foolish.

Fear leaked in from outside, and Andria went internal, all thoughts fleeing as she probably sat down or something, down there, with Tartu sitting down beside her. Dereks multiplied and the Fear went away some—

A crack appeared in the geodesic sphere of Castellan fire and invisibility that surrounded the ship, right near where the ship had broken on the left side—

The crack in the shields yawned wider and then suddenly the entire sphere broke, shattering like campfire embers doused with a bucket of water. The air felt hot, and then the heat vanished as a strong wind blew across the entire deck of the Dreadnought. The wind broke against Mark, but one of the greenhouses on the castle shattered and wind whistled inside.

“Not great,” Mark said, as he looked down at the break in the Dreadnought.

The break didn't seem to be widening, but breaking-wood-sounds crackled all across the inside of the ship.

A soft whirring filled the air, and then died.

Silence, save for the wind whistling across the deck.

Moments passed in terrible wait as Eliot focused deeply and Sally felt impotent and Isoko was probably yelling at herself, calling herself ‘stupid stupid stupid’ up there, but the only one who could actually see that was Derek, up there with her. Lola and Derek were okay. Tartu was with Andria, and they were okay. Everyone was okay... sort of.

“... Are we crashing?” Mark asked, through the coms.

“We are **not** crashing!” Eliot said, like he could make it happen by just saying it. “I'm fixing it!” The crack widened a little and another loud CRACK filled the air, echoing on the wind, followed by a series of cracks. “Don't worry about it! We're exposed, and we're not going anywhere. The hovercars are functioning at 100%... fucking... 200% in some cases. Dammit... ughhh.” He removed the tone from his voice, maybe with a filter, as he said, “Repairs will take an hour.”

“... Well okay then,” Mark said, looking out across the damage. Mark was already doing a Good and Bad Union with everyone. But he could do more? “Would some more ‘I'm helping’ buttons help combat the wash of non-human influences in the air?”

Mark didn't hear a response, but he felt it as Derek after Derek got a new, powerful purpose, and Eliot spread his influence into the castle. Everywhere Eliot touched, at Derek rushed toward, and then Derek's vector felt truly accomplished, for a moment. He started feeling like he was really helping. Mark felt out hundreds of Dereks inside the castle, but he only saw a few, in the open archway, and those guys were tapping on the walls, pressing palm-sized green buttons on yellow bases that Quark helpfully identified as 'I'm Helping' buttons.

Mark moved back to the crack in the ship, to look down at the damage. The crack itself had propagated through several layers of the ship, ripping from the hull to the central stairwell in the middle-front of the ship. It was like the ship was made of cake, and not 2-meter-thick wood, and that cake had separated when the front half had kept going while the back half had tried to back up, exposing a weakness in the construction right here—

"Slap the break with some adamantium, Mark," Eliot said.

... Mark got to slapping wood with broad dollops of adamantium. With every slap, the wood stretched out, broken planks zipping back together, and soon Eliot had another idea. Mark did not hear that idea, but he did see it, as Dereks began to multiply, filling the ship once again, each of them punching a wall or the floor, and that seemed to do a lot more than the buttons, but Derek was still pressing buttons, too.

Far ahead the slipper fish and the sharks continued their migration through the sky of Endless Daihoon, uncaring about the stalled-out ship.

Isoko's embarrassed voice came over the air, "Sorry."

"Not your fault. My fault," Eliot said, mostly not present. He was working.

Mark slapped wood with heavy metal as he asked, "Want some Glory, Eliot?"

Eliot said, "Hit it, Mark!"

Mark breathed in Glory, connecting to himself and everyone else in the ship, into every Derek, into every person, and he exhaled Fear from everyone. A dark miasma burst from the ship, into the whipping skies of Endless Daihoon, and every single person seemed to glow a little bit.

It was not the best sort of Union, since the Glory-side was heavily weighted and the Fear side was just the world, and 'the world' was always the least effective Union sink. But it worked well enough.

Everyone seemed to relax a bit, to work easier. Better. Derek was doing a lot, too, with his own Union of Good/Bad.

And then one Derek sounded off, "Let's do some working songs!"

Other Dereks denounced that one—

But then 20 Dereks started up a working song, chorusing with themselves, "No more wood in the forest; they turned it all to planks! Ground ain't got no metal; it's all been turned to tanks! We work a day for gold; they work a day for more! We're on the line for life; we're in the line for war!"

Mark grinned at the words, almost laughing at the absurdity of it all, and then he joined in when Derek started repeating the verse.

"No more wood in the forest; they turned it all to planks!..."

Glory glowed subtly upon every person, and especially upon Derek but only because there were, like, 2000 of him.

He had a decent singing voice.

Mark said in a lull, "You sing well!"

Several Dereks laughed. One piped up, "It's only practice!" Another one said, "Lots and lots of practice." Another Derek said, "And here's another one!"

“There once was a ship that sailed the gloam, liddle-dee-dee, liddle-dee-doh~

“There once was a crew I called my own, liddle-dee-dee, liddle-dee-doh~

“Seen all the sights; we loved to roam! liddle-dee-dee, liddle-dee-doh~

“They’re all still there, but now this is my home, liddle-dee-dee, liddle-dee-doh~”

And the ship came together.

The break in the hull was only the first major issue. Now that they were stopped, work proceeded quickly.

Mark hauled himself over the edge of the ship and began strategically pounding the cars into the side of the ship, to solve the problem that had just happened, that had almost wrecked the ship. The hoverships were not fully integrated yet. That discrepancy between the myriad hover engines strapped to the outsides, a minor glitch in the computer systems due to non-humanity influences, and some faulty wiring, had caused the forward engines to go forward *even faster* when Isoko pulled on the throttle, when she was trying to reverse the Dreadnought.

“I was only trying to slow it down,” Isoko said, over the coms, heavily embarrassed. “I pulled it back to *neutral! Gods!*”

“It’s my fault, Isoko,” Eliot said, sounding defeated.

“It’s growing pains, children,” Lola said, speaking up. “We’re fine. What can we do to be more fine?”

Eliot handed out tasks.

Mark already had one.

With careful application of adamantium rods, wielded like they were giant wiffle bats, and with caltrops holding Mark out over empty sky, Mark waited for Eliot's vector to gather underneath the hovercar they were working on. When Eliot swirled strongly, Mark smacked the hovercar's frame, and Eliot 'melted' it into the side of the Dreadnought, one meter of metal at a time. 6 or 7 smacks was usually enough to speed up the integration process, all of the parts flowing into the ship, out of the elements, and fully into Eliot's control.

Mark smiled as he sang, "76 ships on the Dreadnought's hull, 76 ships on the hull. Smack one in, parts go around, 75 ships on the Dreadnought's hull~..."

The major repairs were complete in 1 hour and 37 minutes, and the ship looked so much better than it did on takeoff. It even had a coat of paint! Or stain, really.

Eliot had cordoned off several spaces inside the ship with plastics that he had been making this whole time. They were his 'clean rooms'. The very air of Endless Daihoon was filled with an unexpected amount of interference that had degraded much of his control over the ship, without his knowledge. The new spaces allowed him to operate at semi-normal levels of action. From those spaces poured forth plastics, resins, shampoo, foam mattresses, bedding and cloth, and so very many electronics.

Eliot gave the Dreadnought a plastic bath, with Derek's help, soaking dark resin into the pale, new wood, and then layering that color with polyurethane and other stuff. Mark wasn't too sure on the technical parts, but Quark helped explain what Eliot was doing, according to what Mark was seeing, as a deep brown color seeped into all of the wood and then a sheen baked into the wood grain. The ship was dark brown now, and it was kinda shiny. It looked good! It even got an official name, written on the front and on the back.

'DREADNOUGHT'

Big doors went onto every opening in the ship, and soon, they were flight-ready, prepared to journey once again. Maybe they could even sustain an accidental trip into a water layer, now. Fire layers were still absolute no-goes. Mark wasn't quite sure about the never-ending cloud of slipperfish and sharks, though.

"*Can* we make it through?" Mark asked, as he stood on the deck, before the castle.

Eliot, Sally, and Derek stood with him.

“The ship was only just repaired,” Sally said. “Sure, the slipper fish horde is huge, but we can absolutely go around it if we need to go around it.”

“Not really,” Isoko said, “It occludes the whole layer.”

Sally countered, “There are other air layers over that way? Can we hit one without slipping into the wrong one?”

“We go through the fish,” Eliot decided, “The adamant engine is working and the fish will absolutely break the invisibility and shields as they crash into it, but the ship itself will be fine. The wood is PL 75 now... so—” Eliot shook his head, cutting to the chase, “The main thing is this: Kaiju have ecology. We need to test the ship against that ecology.”

Mark solidly said, “We go through. I’ll Fear the fish away if we have to.”

“You probably will,” Lola said.

Eliot backed up into the castle, his voice sounding over the speakers, “Everyone inside but Mark! Hatches are closing now.”

Eliot, Sally, and Derek all went into the ship, and soon a giant rolling metal door, like a set of gears, rolled into the opening, closing the ingress.

Mark stood alone on the deck, feeling good, as he rushed forward on dollops of adamantium, spreading Glory into the people of the ship, as he waited for the fish to get closer. The wall was still 30 kilometers away, but it undulated heavily. The entire thing could flash this direction without warning.

The wall of fish and scattered sharks loomed, like a grey/silver cast to half of the world.

Soon, they would be among the fishes—

The world crackled.

The sky to the left of the ship suddenly peeled open, revealing a great swath of yellow scales lined in yellow lightning, and the great maw of a dragon, opening wide, yellow violence churning in its giant, fang-filled mouth. The world drained of color in that churning.

Lightning burned forth, right at Mark.

- - - -

Mark stepped into speed-time and kaiju helped, a lot. The dragon was already doing minor speed magics, for sure, and now Mark benefited from those magics.

Quark was right there with Mark, already moving fast, waiting for Mark to catch up, a series of noises rapidly adjusting to understandable words, like he was tuning a radio.

“Unknown dragon on the smaller side. Initial inspection estimates at 300 meters of body. A lot more meters in wing and tail. Lightning, illusion, and speed capabilities. Facial expressions reveal a desire to strike first and ask questions later. The lightning appears to be especially dangerous to the electronics in the Dreadnought, with half of the ship now disabled. It is attacking. This is not an opening discussion. This is the worst outcome for a dragonfight. Usually they want to talk. Based on the ineffectiveness of the lightning upon yourself, we should assume that they are a young, weak dragon, or maybe this *is* an initial discussion. Whatever the case, it is attacking with deadly force.”

As Quark spoke, Mark felt the world out.

The dragon's vector was full of *need*, predominantly the absolute need to kill Mark as fast as possible, and then it would move on to the others. It was here for blood and treasure, and it was the most greedy thing that Mark had felt in a long time.

Mark imagined it had been tracking them for some time, far out of range of sensors, or maybe hidden with magics that the Dreadnought had no way of sensing through. Mark's range was only 1.3 kilometers in a single direction. Maybe when Isoko got Sky Shaper, then her sensory range would get bigger. Maybe when they finished the scanners, then they could sense dragons even through illusions, but that seemed like asking for too much.

Sometimes enemies came prepared, and you could only respond to the damage they inflicted.

A great spike of that attempted damage currently connected Mark to the dragon, yellow lightning gathered from all over the dragon's body and then focused onto Mark through an arc of brilliant yellow that crossed over the dragon's front. The shape of it all told Mark a few important factors.

One: the lightning was 'weak' and 'natural'. It was not magical lightning from a single source, and that was good. Magical lightning flowed from start to target. It was kinda slow. Natural lightning, caused by magical effects, flowed *both ways*, connecting course to target, and it was incredibly fast.

Two: Mark was not the target. He was incidental. The target was far down below, inside of the ship. Mark was in the path of the lightning, though, because he was the biggest, most metal thing out here, and the dragon was choosing to shoot through Mark, to maybe damage him, on the way to the real target down below; the ship's internals.

Three: Mark was pretty much immune to natural lightning. This was a fucked up way to find that out.

And Four: Mark was gonna kill this dragon, even if it was opening up with a 'weak' attack.

Mark moved at the speed of thought, ripping into the air, clawing his way forward, headed toward the yellow dragon's maw. Lightning crackled against him, moving just as fast as him, as he broke shockwaves into the air, zoning in on the dragon's maw.

Mark slashed out adamantium caltrops, right into the dragon's maw, into his 4-meter-wide teeth, into his main lower and upper fangs. The whole maw was maybe 30 meters across.

Mark did some dental work, starting on the lower right fang. It was about 7 meters tall. It was not easy. The dragon flinched as Mark cut. But Mark cut anyway, near the root, because he was going to leave a corpse, and that corpse had to send a message.

But cutting dragon teeth was perhaps the hardest thing Mark had ever tried to cut. Harder than the necks of those balloon lizards back on Daihoon, for sure.

Mark cut anyway. Into the enamel, then into the bone-ish stuff, and then into the soft, pulpy meat in the middle. The dragon's vector filled with instant pain as it registered the attack, but Mark was already through the first tooth, the bottom right. He moved on to the bottom left, ripping through the air, and then cutting into the second tooth—

The dragon felt that, too, and its vector began to unravel and panic. Greed vanished. Worry overwhelmed. Still, it hoped to survive this. It was going to wait Mark out, because it wrongly assumed that Mark wasn't able to keep this level of speed up at all.

It was wrong, and it soon realized that.

It tried to pull away, but not before Mark cut the second tooth out of the creature. With a shockwave pull, Mark ripped the cut fang out of the mouth, throwing it onto the deck, where the tooth slowed down and then hovered in the air. It was still moving, exactly like the first tooth was still moving, but it was moving a lot slower now that Mark wasn't moving it directly.

Mark gripped onto the dragon's upper left fang, fingers of adamantium gripping other teeth while some adamantium 'floss' went around the fang, cutting—

The dragon's panic reached a fevered pitch and all of its attempted attack fizzled, lightning sparking and dying. Magic churned inside of yellow-scaled flesh as the dragon tried to accomplish something else—

The entire yellow dragon turned ephemeral... And that was it? Yes, that was it. It was enough to stop the damage. Mark's adamantium found no purchase. The dragon began moving, as much as it could, and it reminded Mark of someone trying to move without seeming to move. It was pretty fucking slow.

But Mark was good against ethereal things. Disrupting etherealness was usually enough to seriously kill or injure something; even something as large and as powerful as a dragon. But that would require Mark to change up his Alacrity/Slowness.

... So sure.

Mark switched to a union of Adamant and Ethereal. Instantly, time sped up to a normal degree, as Mark took all of the creature's strength and fed it all of Ethereal's weaknesses.

The dragon was already a kilometer away, flapping its translucent wings once, but then its wings broke like a bird with a bone disease. The air cracked. Leather flapped. The dragon roared in pain and it dropped out of its ethereal spell, and then kept flinging far away, falling fast and in full retreat, like someone had catapulted it directly away from the Dreadnought.

For one brief moment, Mark wanted to kill it. To really go after it.

But it was already far away from the ship, there could be others, and the dragon's vector was completely different than before. It was scared as fuck, and it felt, honestly, like a child. A scared, crying child. It even looked young from this angle, with its big head and its small body, and its stubby, broken wings, and Mark was absolutely sure it was not a child at all... but maybe it was?

Mark watched it go, not quite sure if he was doing the right thing to let it go, but this was the dragon's territory and... And it was already 15 kilometers away, burning power to fly even faster, to escape...

Shit.

Should he have killed it?

"... fuck fuck fuck."

The coms were filled with people talking, Isoko needing instruction, Eliot complaining about the damage to the deck and a complete power outage in the first 2 thirds of the central core.

“Fuck,” Mark muttered, and then he called to the team, on the coms, “Should I have gone after—”

“Absolutely not!” Lola spoke, taking charge of the situation. “We need to leave fast, Eliot, and to consider going to ground, or to another ribbon of sky. Can the ship handle transitioning through layers yet?”

Mark looked at the deck, where 2 dragon fangs had landed and lightning had scorched the wood. The damage wasn't healing. Mark went over and slapped the ground with a wiffle bat of adamantium, and then he scraped at the scorches, finding a big hole. The yellow dragon's lightning had burned a giant hole in the deck. Fires ignited inside that hole, in the extreme heat inside the ship.

Mark stared at the fire, not sure what to do about it all, muttering, “I think I should have killed it?”

And then suddenly the fires were out.

David stepped onto the operations deck about 100 meters away and then he walked closer, being sure to give Mark enough time to notice his approach. He said, “First off: There are some things all speedsters are told when they turn into a High Speedster, like yourself... and I'm not sure if they apply to you, but I'm gonna err on the side of caution and give you the spiel:

“Don't go at your full speed unless you have to. Most speedsters age in normal time when they go fast. How old do you think I am? 40-ish? I am, yes, but I was only born 25 years ago. I'm on a de-age list, like all High Speedsters who work for big powers, but it's still a concern.

“I don't know if you have that concern. Err on the side of caution, though.

“Secondly, it's much better to fake enemies out while keeping your true speed in reserve, and so, the very second you felt that attack wasn't major you should have switched back to slower time and let the ship get damaged as well as clipped at the dragon. No one was in real danger but you, and that dragon

was testing you, directly, and also disabling the ship so that we couldn't fly away. Maybe we could have found out its motives, aside from the greedy, obvious motives.

“And finally, regarding the dragon: It's a good thing you *didn't* kill that one, because that was *absolutely* the opening for diplomatic talks. Prepare to talk to some dragons, Mark, because *someone* is absolutely coming.”

Mark frowned a little as he listened to David's calming voice, which he supposed was the real reason David was talking so much. The frown went away. David helped to center Mark in the moment. As that time passed, Mark felt Eliot wind his vector through the centerline of the ship, junking and repairing things far below the surface.

Mark turned to David. “It really felt like a murderous attack, though.”

“Maybe it was,” David said. “But we don't know that since you responded with full force, right away. I don't think it was, because it could have clipped at us far away from you, and the lightning didn't hurt you at all.”

“Ugh,” Mark said, shuddering a little.

Eliot said, “I can get the ship up and running again in 10 minutes. It's decision time. Forward, to another layer, or wait here? It'll take an hour to get through the cloud.”

Mark made a decision, “Into the slipper fish cloud. Full speed ahead, away from the Crossing. I'll Fear the fish away from the ship.”

“Okay okay,” Eliot said, and then he added, “Let the first ones through, to strike the ship, to see if we need to rely on you the whole way... The ship should be able to take a rain of fish, though... I think.”

“Heard and understood,” Mark said.

The 10 minute repair wait time was tense, made more tense by taking Eliot 12 minutes to get the ship fully operational again. And then Eliot called an 'all clear', Isoko gunned it, *carefully*, and the Dreadnought flowed forward, through the sky, into the yellow-grey fish migration.

The wall of fish loomed, moving in a general upper-left to lower-right sort of way, blocking all of the way forward in a great swath of movement of flying fish. Soon, the ship got near the veritable wall of flesh and then the fish began to swish around the ship, like speeding hovercars, all silver and flickering yellow—

A fish, 5 meters long and like a giant tuna, crashed into the prow ahead of Mark, denting the wood and then slapping its way across the surface of the ship, rushing through the railing, breaking the meter-thick railing as it went over the edge—

Another two fish crashed into the ship, each of them 6-ish meters long, like *really big* tuna. Nothing but muscle and forward motion. They slapped into the wood, crashing off of the surface and leaving giant gouges where their spike fins carved into the grain. Those fish did not try to leave. They swam toward the front-center bulge in the operations deck, and then they hung out back there, hiding near the large obstruction, circling the entryway into the bowels of the ship like a pair of prey hiding from predators... No. Mark understood what they were doing. They were looking to make a nest—

One of them squirted bright yellow eggs at a nook in the forecastle, and then the other one squirted a white cloud at the eggs. The whole thing kinda latched onto the ship, like a giant clump of frog eggs, and then the two fish swam on, breaking the railing on the way off of the ship.

This was a spawning run, it seemed—

Other fish rained down and slipped around the ship, hiding in the nooks and crannies—

A large fish slammed right into the wooden surface 50 meters behind Mark, cracking through 2 meters of solid wood, as it went *inside* the ship.

"I got it," David said, blinking away, and then the fish was dead and David was throwing the giant fish off of the operations deck, into the swarm.

“Okay that’s bad,” Mark said, mostly to himself, as he watched the density of approaching fish. “Gonna get worse, Eliot. So should I...?”

“Fuck shit,” Eliot said, “Okay. The base wood ain’t enough. Do it, Mark.”

“On it,” Mark said, speaking to everyone.

Mark Unioned with Glory and Fear, reaching out into the swarm of fish.

It was like the entire Dreadnought had become a shark. The fish swimming this way all instantly shimmered and flashed away from Mark’s touch, zooming out and down, or out and up. Whichever way got them furthest away, they took, and then...

And then Mark stared out at the swarm as it resumed its normal swarm-like behavior, with Mark and the Dreadnought acting like one of the sharks.

The river of fish curved behind the boat, sealing them into the swarm, and then it was shimmery silver darkness everywhere.

Mark was the only reason the Dreadnought could go this way at all. Millions of fish, each 6-ish meters long, each flashing silver and yellow, swarmed around the ship, flying downward. All sight lines were lost. All the mirages of horizons were gone.

Mark meditated in Glory and Fear, floating near the center of the ship, letting the rain of fish feel like actual rain to his senses... or maybe more like a monster wave. The largest monster wave that Mark had ever seen, or heard of.

It was kinda beautiful.

... And nothing really happened, except for Eliot got a whole lot of power from Mark, taken from the fishes, and so Eliot was able to strengthen the ship a great deal more. The lightning hole in the hull grew over as Eliot’s vector flickered through a bunch of new systems inside the centerline of the ship, creating redundancies everywhere. Isoko asked about having an emergency secondary ship for them to retreat to,

if needed, and Eliot spoke about how the castle could fly on its own, just fine. Then Eliot asked Mark to let the fish through once, when the swarm was lesser, to see if the ship could handle it. That started an argument between Lola and Eliot regarding prudence in dangerous situations.

Mark said, "I can let a few through. I have that much control."

With a difficulty that looked easy, and sort of was easy because of how often Mark had to do this sort of thing, Mark specifically ignored some of the tens of thousands of fish in the envelope around the Dreadnought. Those fish, sensing that the way forward was open, zoomed through the open space—

They went right back out, crashing into the surrounding swarm and rejoining their brothers and sisters in the migration. They had not been Feared, but everyone else was Feared, and so they moved with the school, each of them not really acting on their own at all. That's how fish were, Mark supposed.

Mark said, "Looks like we can't test the ship. The fish don't want to be out of the swarm... You know? I bet you could Fear them yourself, Derek, even with your reduced range and not having Fear at all."

"You think I could?" Derek asked, sounding interested in the idea.

"The individuals are mostly part of a group consciousness that's not really conscious at all. Poke at one and you poke at all of them."

"Let's *not* do that sort of test right now," Lola said, in a final sort of tone.

Derek had already multiplied tens of times over, but he retreated like he hadn't done anything at all.

And the ship sailed on.

Now and then, great holes opened up in the river of fish and 30 meter long sharks appeared. The sharks were impressive things, all sleek and grey and partially invisible with optical camouflage, with their multitudes of fins and multitudes of eyes all down their bodies. They flowed softly, following the swarm, drawing slightly closer to the Dreadnought than the fish, but Mark Feared them away well enough and they slipped to the sides, leaving the ship behind.

The dragon's teeth remained on the deck of the ship, next to Mark.

Mark wondered if their owner would try again.

--

Isoko stared out at the ocean of fish at the edge of Mark's range.

The fish blocked out the rest of Endless Daihoon with a flickering grey and silver density. Black miasma soaked into some of that greyness, and for moments here and there Isoko imagined herself as a Sky Shaper, causing a storm and pushing the Dreadnought through the eye in the hurricane. But then reality asserted itself and Isoko looked at Mark down there, in the middle of the deck about 200 meters away, all glowing and strong.

That dragon hadn't even phased him.

Aside from her fuckup with the engines, Isoko felt they were going to be alright... Except.

Isoko pressed the comms button, and asked, "You wanna eat one of those fish, Mark? I bet they're good!"

Mark responded, "Nah. Do you guys want one? I can grab one for you."

"... No thanks—"

Sally moved forward and pressed her comms button, saying, “Yes. I want 3 of the biggest ones. Go get ‘em, Mark!” She let go of her coms and looked at Isoko, whispering, “Maybe he’ll try some after I cook ‘em.”

Isoko had already let go of her coms. She was hopeful, but... “Mark not wanting fish is pretty fucking weird, right?”

“Yes, absolutely, it is,” Sally said, looking forward.

Mark rose into the sky, pulling his Fear back, letting the fish get closer, and then he swiped up with quick claws, grabbing three out of the air. He made quick butchery of them as he settled back down, Fearing the world and soaking the team and the Dreadnought in Glory once again.

David appeared next to Mark, as Mark sat down on the deck of the ship, having already carved the fish into fillets. They talked to each other out there, and Isoko had no idea what they were saying, but soon David vanished, taking the 5-meter-long fish fillets with him.

Mark cleaned off the deck with a strangled Union of Purity, concentrating hard to keep Glory and Fear still going—

David appeared in the command center, saying, “I put the fish in the kitchens, Sally.”

“Thank you, David,” Sally said. And then she asked, “Eliot? Got some cooking equipment?”

“Give me 10 minutes,” Eliot said, vector focused down below. “Still helping Tartu and Andria.”

Tartu and Andria were working together down in the workshop, Mark’s Glory funneling a lot of power into them. Glory was funny, in a weird way. Andria was like a different person when she had Glory going; a much more confident person. Tartu was the same as he ever was. Isoko hoped that Andria would warm up to Mark in a normal way soon enough, and maybe it would happen... but then what?

More to the point: What was going to happen to Mark, if they found the appropriate kaiju?

He was already losing his humanity to that elemental body. If they found a metal kaiju, or if Mark made one and then consumed it (if that would even work), then would he be metal forever?

Andria wanted a metal kaiju, too. What would happen if *she* got one? Would she turn all metal, too?

... Would she be a better companion for Mark, if she did turn metal?

Gods above, why was Isoko even worried about *that*?

Isoko still had some stupid emotions for Mark, of course. She knew that. Who *wouldn't* have emotions regarding a savior like him?

... But whatever. That was a problem for later.

Isoko looked to Lola and David both, and asked, "Is he going to be okay?"

A tension filled the room.

"No," David answered, simply and quickly.

"Maybe," Lola answered, less simply, looking at David with a disappointed face.

David countered, "If he turns full metal all the time then he will move further and further from humanity, from everything that makes him—"

Lola quietly begged, "Please, David."

David hmm'd, face focused, and then he continued spilling the bad news, "Food is always the first thing that the elemental bodied lose interest in. Sex is a close second. Everything else comes next. Since Mark doesn't have a need for intimacy then the rest will follow a lot quicker. He only *imagines* he has a heart; he does not. He only *imagines* he has a brain; he does not." David stopped talking to Lola, who seemed to be in the midst of a quiet breakdown borne of guilt and sorrow, and he turned to them; to Isoko, Sally,

and Eliot. “The best thing you can do is focus on normal human things. Eliot can make the place suitable for standing around in, like he doesn’t weigh 3 metric tons. Sally can make food and maybe Andria and Tartu can figure out how to make it have texture. Isoko, you need to share your human experiences with him, and keep him mentally balanced, since you can do that with Union.

“Mark is never going to be who he was. Not exactly. Not after this. But he will be most of that person. And if we find the holy grail of a *temporarily*-metallizing-kaiju, like you with your Platinum Body, Isoko, then he might go back to normal.

“But maybe he shouldn’t.

“Maybe, what the *world* needs, what *Mark* needs, is for a body that can take a beating and always come back.”

Lola did not like that, and so Lola found her footing. Her vector was almost a solid thing, pointed at David, pointed at everyone, and the world as well. Lola stated an absolute truth, “Mark has given enough to the world.”

“He certainly wouldn’t think that,” David countered, stating an absolute truth of his own.

Lola turned away.

Sally decided, “I’m making food. Do we have lemons and butter?”

Eliot said, “Synthetic butter; margarine.”

Lola asked Derek, “Could you please check to see if we have lemon seeds in the package from the farms, Derek?”

Derek saluted. “On it!” He didn’t move. Another Derek was probably moving downstairs, in the hydroponics area— “We do! I’ll plant one now!”

Lola said, “Thank you, Derek. I’ll join you down there.”

She went down the stairs, and David went with her.

And then it was just Isoko, Eliot, and Sally... And also Derek—

Derek popped like a rather chunky illusion.

Only the team was left in the upper command center; Mark's team.

Quark was probably in here, too.

Sally said, "He'll be okay."

"The scanners return solid metal in his body," Eliot said. "He has no human parts anymore. He only looks how he looks because he believes he looks like that. I think we should start looking for suitable kaiju *right now*. One for Isoko, for general purposes and because he believes we're doing that anyway. And then one for Mark. Maybe even a dragon. They have prismatic mana, right? We should just get him a dragon."

Sally turned distant in that proclamation, her face going pale, her eyes going to Mark, glowing out there on the deck.

Isoko had a similar reaction, but she came back sooner than Sally, but only because a thought stuck in her head that went against what Eliot was saying. "The kaiju has to be born on Endless Daihoon and have been here its whole life to have prismatic mana, right? Dragons aren't like that. They all come from Earth or Daihoon, right? From archmages? So dragons won't work."

Eliot looked at Isoko. "So you agree that we should start hunting *now*, even though we're in dragon territory."

... Isoko looked away.

It was answer enough, for the moment.

Sally shuddered. She looked away. "... I'm going to cook up some fish. Is Andria able to enchant food crunchy enough to be anything but a cloud to PL 98 Adamantiumkinesis?"

"Tartu would be the one to ask about that," Eliot said. "The kitchen is ready, too. You can find it down there easily enough."

Sally went down the stairs.

Isoko turned back toward the front view of the ship, to look down at Mark. And then she tapped some buttons on the controls and opened up a specific communication channel, asking, "Lola?"

"Speaking."

"Is there a Union of Humanity?"

Lola softly said, "Yes. We'll do it if we have to, but we should not have to, and it would be dangerous to start doing that; to define 'humanity' versus 'inhumanity' with a person who has an unstable Binding. Mark seems stable, for now, and soon we will find a kaiju that fits whatever criteria we need it to fit."

Isoko glanced at Mark, and he looked back at her and waved. Isoko tried not to worry too much, because she knew that he could feel her, even if he couldn't hear her.

Isoko said to Lola, "Okay. Thank you."

--

Sally stared at the humongous fillets of fish sitting in cold storage, and in the freezer Eliot had crafted in the last half an hour. In *any other scenario* she would have been thrilled. The kitchen was massive, made especially for Sally, with a whole giant fireplace, a big stove, huge cutting tables, and so very much space for cooking. Slipper fish looked like pure delicacies, too. The meat was deeply pink/red, like tuna, a meter thick in some places, and every fillet was boneless, 4 to 5 meters long, and completely free of parasites.

“Gods damn,” Sally said, picking up a carbon steel knife that Eliot had made for her, out of a very large set of knives. She put the knife to the fish... and the fish didn’t cut at all. Sally chuckled, a bit of mirth returning to the world as she stabbed at the flesh of the fish, and the knife did nothing. Useless! Except the knife wasn’t useless at all. It was a good knife! She wasn’t using her TT, but she didn’t expect to *need* to, and yet... “The fuck is this? Do you know? It should have lost PL levels upon death, right?”

Tartu stood next to the table on a little stool to reach the surface of the wood. He watched Sally try to cut it, and his eyes went a little wide. He voiced a hypothesis, “I think the PL of stuff doesn’t decay in Endless Daihoon?”

“Evidently!” Sally laughed, and then TT’d with the knife as she brought it down on the flesh of the fish— The knife went in, and it was like cutting butter straight out of the refrigerator. “Oh wow. That’s stiff! Why does it *still* have such a high PL?”

“I am guessing that the mana density of Endless Daihoon allows things to retain integrity? But... I am not sure. No one hunts in Endless Daihoon—”

“On account of the dragons.”

“Yes. I learned that too, recently. And knowing about the dragons, I know why no one hunts here —aside from the kaiju— but I’m not sure about anything regarding this PL-retaining... It’s almost like the whole land is under some Gathering Skill? To keep things preserved for later use?”

“More like ‘every Gathering Skill mimics what happens naturally in Endless Daihoon’ perhaps.” Sally chopped through the fish, saying, “So that means that Gathering Skills just lock in mana, inside of a thing?”

“We already know that much is true...” Tartu asked, “Maybe you don’t need my help at all?”

“No no, I do,” Sally said, cutting off a slice of fish a meter long, 40 centimeters wide, and 3 centimeters thick. It was brilliant red and solid as heck, but Sally went at it with great control, and only the barest of sawing motions. “My PL for Giant’s Strength is 97, and this is a basic steel knife— Eliot’s fantastic at making knives, and you should get yourself a set if you’re interested in that sort of thing. But Mark will be coming at this stuff with PL 98 Adamantium.” She cut off the section of flank and then she diced it up into 3 centimeter cubes, saying, “So it’s still mush to him.”

Tartu nodded. “Eating is an important part of keeping one’s humanity as an elemental. Normally, one would go out and seek items that are made of the same types of item that the elemental finds themselves as, and fashion those into ‘food’. But eating adamantium seems like it would be... Well. It would have to come from him. Cannibalism doesn’t seem good for keeping one’s humanity.”

Sally had the pan already heating on the stove, but it wasn’t quite hot enough so she cut up some more of the fish as she asked, “Do you know much about elemental bodies?”

“Have I studied them? No. Did I read a lot in the last few days? Yes.”

Sally nodded. “So what are you going to do, exactly? To up the PL of the food? Is that what needs to happen?”

“I *thought* I was going to do that, yes, and it *would* have involved preparing the fish to keep its PL high throughout the process, doing some of that mana reinforcement that Gathering Skills can do, but now I will be shifting toward a secondary answer that will likely work better,” Tartu said, “When Mark wants to eat, I’ll put him inside a Domain of PL equalization. It will drop his PL and increase the PL of everything else; especially metals.”

Sally hummed, then asked, “ ‘Especially metals’?”

“With the exception of adamantium, which is not technically a metal.”

“It *is* a metal, though.”

“Yes, but I can split the difference with a properly applied Domain.”

Sally nodded a little. And then she put her hand over the pan. It was hot enough. With a bit of margarine from a nearby tub, and some oils that were also pulled from the very air with Eliot’s machines, Sally splashed the pan with oil and then margarine. It sizzled strongly. With some quick fingers, Sally put the fish into the fats. This was just a test run, to start, so it was good enough to do it like this. Some herbs would come later.

The fish didn’t even sizzle.

“Well damn. It’s not cooking... Hmm.” Sally asked, “When do you do your part?”

Tartu flicked Power across the stove burners and a rectangular prism of air, about 2 meters square and 1 meter tall took hold of the space. The fish began to sizzle, as Tartu said, “Not sure how long that will last.”

“So that made it actually start cooking... What are you doing, exactly?”

Sally guessed he was ‘Gathering’ into the space, and raising PLs across the board, which made the oil hot enough to function against the meat.

“Imbuing Power Level into everything in the space, which means the oil and pan, mostly, and the fish secondarily.”

Sally smirked. “I have a pan that does that at home. It needs to be charged all the time, and it doesn’t work well. This is working quite well, though.”

The fish were getting a good sear and the air smelled of food instead of like new wood. It was a good mix of flavors, really.

Tartu said, “I’d imagine you have gained a lot of appliances and magical items to make food function well.”

“I do,” Sally said, watching the fish transition from pink-throughout to tan at the bottom, in the oil. The cooked portion slowly got bigger. It was only half a centimeter cooked right now, but it was getting hotter in there, and it would continue to cook when it was taken off the grill some... Now. Sally flipped the cubes of meat onto the other side— The Domain in the air broke. Tartu reapplied it quickly, but not before Sally said, “Ah? It broke?”

“Domains are fickle things when they have to interact with a lot of different nuances. I could just make the oil stronger so it could cook well, but then the oil wouldn’t gather enough heat from the pan, and it would stay there, cold and useless.”

Sally pounced on the subject, saying, “You should consider a god, Tartu. Domains and the Pantheon should work very well together.”

Tartu did not roll his eyes like he usually did, when Sally brought up the subject of gods around him. In fact, he seemed to be considering it. Sally was surprised, but she hid that surprise for now.

Sally had long moved past the topic of getting Tartu to pledge to Drakarok, because Tartu did not think Retribution would work for him well at all. Hearthswell was a great pick for Castellan and Domains would have a natural synergy, for sure, but Tartu didn’t want to be tied down to any location.

Sally had never really spoken to him about Freyala, Verdago, Pluta, or Malaqua, but any of the New Pantheon would do. Tartu really should just get Chosen. It’d make Sally feel a whole lot better being around him, as a mage, but that was a ‘whatever’ sort of reason for her. Sally trusted Tartu these days. They all did.

Sally wanted to push the subject... but she refrained. Mostly.

“Just a thought,” Sally said.

“Yes, and it’s a thought you and Shawn have both come at me with several times... but I’m actually considering it now.”

Sally made an exaggerated fist pump, saying, “Woooo! Win one for the good guys!”

This time Tartu did roll his eyes.

Sally put some margarine into the pan and she flipped the cubes onto their uncooked sides, teasing, “Malaqua, right? Stone strength seems like a good one!”

“No... I was thinking Verdago.”

Sally raised an eyebrow. “Really? *Farmer?*”

Tartu looked slightly embarrassed. And then he stood straight and tall, saying, “Yes, Farmer! What’s wrong with Farmer?”

“Nothing! Just... a noble Farmer? With the orchards and bushes and picking carrots out of the ground?”

“There’s a lot more to Farming than *farming*,” Tartu said, perfectly composed, which is how Sally knew he was acting strong for the ‘camera’, though there were no cameras around here. He was trying out a spiel on her, because she was ‘safe’. Tartu continued, “Farmer helps with raising families, raising teams, supporting communities, strengthening my Domains so that they would grow over time, instead of fade out over time—”

“That last one is why Castellan seems like a better fit.”

“*Castellan is not a good fit and I am not a homebody*,” Tartu said... And then he composed himself again, renewed the Domain over the stove, and said, “You can Farm anywhere, with anything, and that is why Farmer is better for Domains than Castellan. Farmer is the *broadest* Pantheonic power, next to perhaps Union, and Farmer fits a lot better than anything else out there. If the Old Gods actually existed, perhaps I would pledge to them, but all we have are broken churches that...” He frowned a little at the end, like he was realizing a line was imperfect.

Also a non-sequitor, but that was fine. Tartu’s words weren’t really for Sally.

Sally asked, “Do you think your father would buy that reasoning?”

“... We have a church at the Old House. So no. That would be the wrong thing to say.”

Sally nodded, and then she pulled a few cubes of fish off of the stove and set it aside. “They’ll continue to cook and they should turn out barely pink in the middle, which might be good for these not-tuna. Give it a minute and then try one.” She added the herbs and more butter to the stove, for all the rest of the fish. “I’m gonna see what happens when I fully cook the rest, with the herbs.”

They talked about gods for a while.

Eventually, Sally tried the fish, and it was like biting into a tire, but back before Sally could actually do that and not hurt herself in the attempt. Sally chewed, tasted, experienced, and then she said, “Not bad.”

Tartu spit out his piece, saying, “I cannot eat that at all, and if I swallowed it I would need an operation to remove it.”

Sally grinned. “Let’s see if Mark can eat it!”

--

Eliot watched through the cameras as Sally and Tartu brought a plate of fish out for Mark. He was excited and thankful, and then he picked up a piece and bit into it, and it was like watching an industrial metal shredder finally find something that caused the engine to require effort. Mark’s face split into a wide grin as he tasted the fish, actually had to chew, and then got super happy.

He said something about how it was still soft, but in a very good way.

Sally cheered, Tartu said something about other methods they could use, and the conversation meandered slightly, with Mark talking about how he was still doing Glory, so of course the fish would taste better later when he wasn’t self-empowered, which reminded the other two that they were still in a warzone, and that dragons could burst through the fish-cover any moment now. Sally and Tartu remained on the deck for a moment, though, still talking; they’d head inside, soon.

Mark smiled softly, for a good long moment, as Sally and Tartu just stood out there with him, talking.

Eliot sighed a little, feeling happy, too, as he turned back to Andria and the scanner.

Andria looked at him. “Did the fish work?”

“Looks like it did, thank Hearthswell. Not sure what we would have done if it hadn’t.” Eliot lifted his head at the scanner. “This looks ready for me?”

The Storm Prism was locked into the center of the housing sphere, while a whole bunch of crystals, mithril, and even some more adamantium, was curled into the cube that contained the sphere. Inputs and outflows were all wired to one side of the whole contraption, which was unnecessary and required a lot more diligence and cleanliness in artificing than Andria needed to do, but that’s why Eliot liked her.

Eliot could put the part anywhere and hook from anywhere, but Andria had put in the effort to make the hookups in one location, the wires welded properly to the machine, and all orderly. No crossed wires here!

Andria solidly said, “It’s ready.”

“I got a place for it behind main command. Upper command can get a hologram display.”

Andria kinetic’d the scanner onto a cart, and then she pushed it along as Eliot led the way into the ship, into main command.

The main command was in two parts. An upper floor with chairs, screens, and other normal interfaces for people to use, and several lower floors full of towering servers, insulated electronics, and the engine core, in the very center of the ship. Further below the engine were all sorts of various sensor arrays, with the most sensitive sensor arrays located at the very bottom of the ship, hanging down from the bottom castle.

Fat lot of good those sensors had done sensing that yellow bastard dragon.

This thing here would do better.

Eliot went to the floor directly below main command, to a series of pillars set to the side, connected to sensor arrays located across the ship. Thanks to that yellow dragon Eliot put in 3 more circuit breaker systems between this location and everywhere else, as well as a great deal of shielding. Most of the main sensors could go here, with this pillar bank.

But this sensor needed to be integrated with the main shields themselves, in a very special location.

Eliot opened a tunnel in the Faraday cage and other shields, and pointed to a sensor tower located 20 meters down a tunnel, to a location 20 meters below the Pantheonic Spire, in the backside of the ship. He led the way to a pillar sticking out of the ground.

“Here.”

Andria looked up and said, “We’re below the Spire?” as she kinetic’d the sensor onto the pillar.

“Yup,” Eliot said, digging deep into the pillar, into the wires and the electronics, and into the Castellan power he had imbued in the Spire overhead. Wires slipped up from the pillar, into the sensor, as he pulled a stabilizing pillar down from overhead. “This should be good.”

Eliot emplaced the Storm Prism in the systems of the Dreadnought and began running through some system checks. Interfacing magic-to-machine was not always easy, and it was never clean. Eliot pulled sensors out of the wall, connected to sensors out in the hull of the ship, compensated for interference with a dedicated server that also acted as a last-line breaker, and all the while the Storm Prism flickered and came to life. The sphere inside of the cube began to float. The cube glittered with inputs. The sphere began to rotate, unimpeded, spinning wildly—

“Shit,” Eliot said.

“No no no,” Andria muttered, stepping forward, disconnecting something even as Eliot did the same.

The rotation calmed. The lights dimmed.

“I see what the problem is,” Andria said, moving some parts and some runes around with a flow of mithril, separating them more from their connection to the electronics. “There. Try again.”

Eliot restarted the system, digging deep into the actions allowed to him by the interfaces Andria had created. This time the inner sphere rotated slowly, carefully. Eliot opened his eyes and the inner sphere was softly hovering. Not catching on anything. “There we go. Now for a test run. Andria? Since you’re here, let’s find you a metal kaiju.”

Might find one for Mark, too.

Andria grinned, and then she held forward, even as she was saying, “Obviously I’m not the first one.”

Eliot nodded but said nothing as he just let her work, as she brought forth a drop of mithril.

The front of the scanner had a dimple in the top right corner of the cube. It was a hollow space with some hover magic, for liquid mana to float within. Andria put her drop of mithril into the divot in the corner, and that drop hovered there.

Slowly, the sphere began to rotate, to shift left and right, and then to flow in a downward turn. The scanner leveled out and then began to turn back, and after a few settlings, which Eliot hurried up with some tighter inertial dampeners, they had a heading.

Eliot brought up a screen to the right of the small room, listing some coordinates.

16 layers, 8,900 kilometers, 80% match.

“... Did it work?” Andria asked.

“Well it’s not pointing at the moon, so...” Eliot said, “I think it did?”

Andria winced. “That’s pretty far, though... right?”

“Pretty darn far, yeah. But an 80% match to your own mana signature, which includes Prosperity as well as Mithril Shaper...” Eliot wondered... “Do you think you could end up with Prosperity as a real Talent, instead of just through the Chosen system?”

Andria froze.

She hadn't considered that.

Eliot was pretty sure no one here had considered that at all, but he had. Eliot already had a 98 in Castellan, which was way, way higher than it should ever go naturally. He was probably just a bath in prismatic mana away from getting the real, actual Talent.

Andria had never considered as much for herself at all.

“Maybe?” Andria looked up at the ceiling, toward the Pantheonic Spire in the gardens overhead. “Do you think the gods would want that for me? For... oh. For *us*?” She asked Eliot, “There are a *lot* of paladins on this trip.”

Eliot nodded. “I don't know.” He looked upward. “Seems possible.”

Andria reached out and plucked her mithril bit away before vanishing it into her astral body, telling Eliot, “Put yours in there.”

The readout screen vanished.

Eliot said, “I'm still trying to crystallize my own mana. Let's get Isoko down here, though.” Eliot tapped the button on his chest, saying, “Isoko. Come down to main command, to the tunnel leading to the back of the ship. You can't miss it. We have a scanner, now. David, please take over driving.”

“Coming!” Isoko said.

“Affirmative,” David said.

Eliot let go of the button, and said to Andria, “This is an amazing piece of work.”

Andria nodded seriously, saying, “I think we made something truly miraculous... if it works.”

“I think it will. The readouts are all funky, but it is working... Let’s set it to the nearest kaiju. Actually. I’m gonna put up some holograms around here. One sec.” Eliot dug into the ship and put hologram emitters into the room as he spread the room out, into a spherical-ish space. A few buttons onto the base of the scanner were the final touch. One button for kaiju scanning, one button for mana signature scanning. Eliot was kinda scared of that first button, but... Hmm. He almost touched the kaiju button, but then he stopped. He told Andria. “You can do the honors.”

“I don’t want to touch that button either!”

Isoko was in the hall, running this way, asking, “What buttons are we touching!”

Eliot stepped to the side. “That kaiju scan button there.”

Isoko breathed heavily, happy, and then she took a breath, stood before the machine, and slapped the kaiju scanner button. “I bet we’re fucking *surrounded*— Oh shit.”

It was like turning on a light in a room full of cockroaches, but the cockroaches didn’t flee at the light.

Eliot’s heart almost leapt out of his chest.

Lights populated in the air around the sphere, which was the Dreadnought, each little light illuminated with numbers. Most of the lights were scattered, with several sitting at 300 kilometers away. That made sense, since the nearest layer was about 300 kilometers away. Distance was funky here in Endless Daihoon, where the layers of reality crossed and uncrossed each other all the time, like auroras in a sky. So those 300-km-away kaiju were probably more like 320 to 650-ish... or something like that.

The slipper fish cloud was kinda visible in the scan, like a cloud of soft light.

The problem was the 4 kaiju, floating in a line, about 30 kilometers away, right in front of the ship. Right beyond the edge of the slipper fish cloud. The Dreadnought was maybe 10 minutes from breaching the waterfall of fish.

Eliot tapped his button, saying, “Red alert, kaijus straight ahead. 30 kilometers. 4 of them in a line. An organized response. I’m not sure what to do— turning on alarms!”

Red lights flickered on across the entire ship—

David spoke, “That would be the dragon greeting party.”