

For a half hour, in a meeting room in Castle South, Mark spoke calmly about the attack, first to Yoro, then Kandon. Yoro went off to investigate things, while Kandon had specific questions about anything that Quark hadn't already recorded and shown to the settlement, which meant Mark's Unionsense feelings and any magical senses that Mark might have felt. What did the vectors say of those who had gotten off of the trapped tram, right before Mark got on? What about the tram operator? Did he recognize any of them from previous Understanding Parties, or other parts around the settlement?

That particular question caught Mark deeply off guard.

And then Mark got mad.

Mark stared at Kandon, and asked, "Did the systems in place *not recognize* those people?"

Kandon was controlled as he said, "I don't want to ruin the debriefing, Mark. Please answer the questions."

"... I have already answered these questions once. I'm gonna start asking my own questions soon, and then I'm going after people."

"I know Yoro already asked you all of this," Kandon said, "But please focus, and help us help you help all of us. Answering questions multiple times is a common way to unearth new, relevant facts. If you want, we can focus on other parts of your testimony to Yoro, like if anything about the four robed people stood out more than other parts."

Unionsenses aside, Mark didn't see why Kandon needed anything 'more relevant' than what he had already had. Quark had displayed tens of recorded pictures onto the screens of the meeting room, from all angles. Quark had even added notes, both in his own silver-colored text, and white, for Mark, as Mark spoke about it all.

But Mark answered questions and went over events for a third time, anyway.

Aurora had been up in her office for a while, as Mark was being debriefed. She was furious and Mark could feel her fury from down in the meeting room. She was also dealing with a bunch of stuff far, far away from here, if her vector was any indication.

Lola, Isoko, and Sally showed up outside of the castle, but they were stopped by Yoro who talked to them. Eliot came in from the north a bit later with a Derek at his side, and they all got stopped by Yoro.

Mark knew all of these questions were just to kill time. Or maybe to buy time. Kandon was keeping Mark calm, and they both knew it. Yoro and Aurora were doing a lot. Yoro as the spymaster was here and there, all around the place, his vector moving fast and then he'd spend a moment doing something with someone in the command center, and then he'd move somewhere else, to the security center, to the offices upstairs where people were debating things, and then elsewhere, to deal with Mark's team, who were complaining and wanting to be let in. Lola was getting very pissed. Walter was even walking this way. But then Yoro talked to Walter, and then Aurora talked to Walter, and stuff happened out there.

Mark answered questions in here, until finally Aurora's vector touched on Kandon, and Kandon got to the end of it.

"Thanks for being so patient." Kandon finally said, "One last question... And I hate to ask this, because it'll send you off in a direction, but I have to ask anyway. What would you do if the Empire planned this assassination?"

"Kill someone. Probably someone very high up! Maybe just at ground level. Who knows! **Do you?**"

"... And what if it's Walaria, testing you?"

Mark had a moment and the world seemed to darken around him as he considered the question in full. There were many things Mark could say right now. He could lie, and say 'Then it's fine! I hope I passed!' or he could say something like 'Then I guess I'm going princess-hunting,' or he could go a different direction, and swear off Aluatha forever. He could break covenant with them right now, and if they came after him for any reason at all, then he would tell them to fuck off.

He would probably end up killing some people who didn't deserve to be killed, too.

And then he would likely be trapped by some Force Twin Archmages and turned into an adamantium farm, like they had certainly done to that mithrilkinetic goblin last month.

Mark asked his own question, "*Could* it be Walaria? Did she do stuff like this to Aurora?"

Aurora decided to walk this way.

Kandon got a message from her, and he sat back, saying, "She's coming, and she'll answer that herself. But for what it's worth, Mark, something like *this* never happened. But there were tests. This was an assassination attempt using the strongest things we know to kill you, and it still didn't work. It wasn't targeted against you, either, like what you think. Monowire is a universal killer. Wands of Destruction are, too. Shavallian? Absolute minimum for an assassination against anyone. The elemental, though... we don't think that was an elemental. We think it was a corruption ooze. That's why your Fear just made it angrier. Oozes can't be split up into smaller parts like elementals can. So... if this was an assassination attempt from the Empire, then that's bad, and the settlement will stand with you. But we are absolutely not attacking the Empire."

Mark was quietly furious.

He understood the position.

Still made him mad.

Mark said, "Maybe Drakarok has the right idea."

Aurora hurried up and got here, slamming open the door and then shutting it behind her, "You're not fighting the Empire, Mark, and Walaria didn't do this, anyway. I just talked to her."

Mark stood up. "I guess I'm glad, then! That this was all just some fucking test, or some outsider assassination attempt! Or something that doesn't seem to worry the Empire at all! I'll just go to war with someone else, whoever else that did this!"

“We are worried,” Aurora said. “We’ll figure out who—”

“And what if it is Walaria?!” Mark asked.

Aurora glared, her vector focusing, her stance solid and the world rainbowing around her as she said, “You don’t fight Empire—”

“Hey hey hey!” Kandon stood up, and Mark and Aurora stood down, a fraction. “Please, sis, I know that’s not where you want to go with this, and please, Mark, don’t go killing people without a fuck-ton of proof. And the Empire *is* going to figure this out. Where did you get the impression that we weren’t?! Aurora and I and Yoro and everyone is on this shit, right now! We are Empire, too!”

Mark... took a breath. “Yeah... okay.”

Aurora calmed, though it was difficult for her. “I just... You don’t fight Empire.”

Mark ignored that, asking, “Was it Walaria?”

“If it was, she’s lying to me about it, but *she doesn’t lie like that*, so I don’t think it was her,” Aurora said, and then she breathed out. She looked at all of the notes and images Quark had put up on the screens on the walls, and said, “This is a much better starting point to look for more reasonable answers.”

“How did Walaria test you when you were going through this?” Mark asked, not willing to let that go.

Aurora stared at Mark for a moment, then she said, “She told me not to tell you the whole system she has, and I don’t want to go against that direct order, but I can tell you... How it worked was this: She told me a time, and I needed to be ready at that time. At first I would try to run and hide and that helped vaguely. But then she’d start giving me broader times, like for a week. And then I’d get hit hard sometime in the week. She hasn’t done any of that with *you* because *I* was 12 when I started off, and I was terrified of leaving the walls, but then... Whatever. You already killed monsters on the regular by the time you entered her orbit. We had different upbringings, but even so, when I was subjected to the *worst* of her tests it was a *lot* fucking easier than what happened to you today. What happened today was not Walaria.”

She seemed to believe that.

Or at least she made herself believe that.

Mark took a breath, let out a lot of Bad into the room that he threaded into the world, and then he took another breath, and said, “Okay. What are more reasonable scenarios? Because all I can see are either traitors, big-time Skills and skill and planning, or Luck.”

Aurora sat down in a chair, preparing.

Mark and Kandon sat back down, too.

Aurora said, “Getting that stuff into the settlement is easier than it should be because we’re a giant transport hub. Monowire is used in manufacturing, and we got that. Shavallian is on sale at the Alchemist’s Guild for special buyers. Wands of Destruction are mage examination projects. Hacking the scanners and the trams itself until you got onto a tram is child’s work for any Tinkerer, and we got loads of those, but they’d need to be an artificer or even a full enchanter to get around the magical wards to hide stuff like that, *in that specific place*.”

“The corruption ooze is the big thing. It wasn’t an elemental. Elementals are easy to make. Corruption oozes require dense corruption that doesn’t kill itself, but instead creates itself. That’s a big metaphysical hurdle— Yes, question?”

“I’ve fought oozes,” Mark said, “They have cores. That thing didn’t have a core.”

Aurora paused—

Kandon provided, “That’s a classification error between Earth and Daihoon.”

Mark paused. “What?”

“Ah, yes— I know this one,” Aurora said, realizing something, “You know slimes? With cores? Everything you have ever fought with a core that you thought was an ooze was really a slime. Slimes

can get enraged and act like oozes. True oozes are always enraged, and they don't have a core. With slimes you can crack the core and kill the slime. Oozes only die when the entire body is erased."

Mark... nodded. "Okay." He asked, "Where did it come from?"

Aurora replied, "Those particular oozes are tools of assassination from The Settlement of Xerkona."

Both her and her brother were very serious when she said that. Kandon even winced a little.

Mark nodded a little... And then he admitted, "I don't know what that means. That means something big?"

Aurora said, "It *used* to mean something. Do you know anything about Xerkona?"

"As much as the next random person. Maybe a bit more. They're the Settlement of Xerkona and they have no real empire, but they're considered the Third Empire. They got places everywhere, and the culture is incredibly widespread, and they are one of the main reasons that the Reveal worked out how it did, instead of Earth and Daihoon falling into fighting. Thanks to Xerkona the Empires cooperated, instead. Xerkona doesn't want to have a big empire, I think? But they do have some places out in some... some place on the Daihoon-side of China— Whatever that continent is called. Central... something."

Aurora said, "Central Sheorune, yes. That's where their ancestral homes are. Anyway: Xerkona is responsible for much of the politeness in interactions, and the 'humanity saves humanity' sentiments—"

"Yes, yeah. *That*. Yeah, I remember."

Mark's family had some Xerkona politeness influences from Grandpa and Great Grandpa, back when they were in the Reveal. Beyond that? Mark only ever knew Grandpa talking about being polite. Uncle Alexandro would know more, but *was* there more to know? Being polite was just... what you did. Being rude was pretty fucking rude.

Aurora nodded, saying, "Xerkona is all about humanity helping humanity, until some parts of humanity need to be clipped for the greater good. They're pre-Drakarok, but Drakarok has a lot of adherents in

Xerkona for obvious reasons. By that same path, their history is absolutely full of a lot of self-destructive things that history never recorded properly, but which is recorded here and there in Empire records. In some of those clippings there are recordings of corruption oozes being used to hunt and kill particularly dangerous people, and also people that no one expected to be dangerous. Power-behind-the-throne types that Xerkona decided needed to die.

“Most famously, there was an advisor to a king in a bad part of Aluatha that was murdered about 20 years pre-Reveal by one of those corruption oozes, and then the kingdom got better in every possible way.

“*That’s* what Xerkona does with those oozes,” Aurora said, “With that all said, I have *no idea* why anyone would use one against you... A misdirect, most likely? The Empire will be talking with the Fates of Xerkona, though, of that you can be sure.”

Mark nodded, thinking... he wasn’t sure what he was even thinking. His mind was just elsewhere, trying to figure out what had happened. He asked, “Do you think it was targeted so I could counter it? Or targeted with the strongest stuff they had available?”

Aurora said, “We’re dealing with professionals who can appear, act natural in a situation and fool a bunch of sensors into thinking they were always there, and then they leave, and they were never here at all. Yoro and about ten different security experts are going over the footage again and again, and they’re not making much headway. The traps themselves, while impressive, were just undirected attacks, and you shredded pretty much everything, and then those shreds were melted away by the corruption ooze’s cleansing. Undirected attacks are the only kind that can fool you for any length of time, so they knew that, too. If you were *most anyone* but you, Mark, you would have died, and even if you survived you would have been crippled for life due to the merest touch of the ooze shredding your Binding.

“Make no mistake, Mark, and listen now: You were the immediate focus of this attack, but this attack is sending waves all throughout the Empire. Someone already posted it to one of those Herowatch websites, and it went viral already. It got taken down but it already spread. It’s only been an hour and already... Tomorrow is going to be worse. Politically.”

She was worried about herself, and her position here at the settlement.

Aurora noticed Mark noticing her, and she shut her vector down. She continued, “Things like this tend to be big events long after they’ve actually happened. I suggest you vary your normal routine for now, fix up your house with better defenses, and if you *do* go after anyone, then you make sure they’re actually connected to the assassination, and not just a patsy.”

Mark stood, and asked, “Can I be dismissed now? I still need to see the security footage of before and after, with the 4 guys.”

Aurora frowned just a little, then said, “Of course, Mark.”

Mark left.

Aurora and Kandon stayed, and when the door shut they started talking to each other about things that Mark did not hear.

Mark went to the command center wearing his full armor. He had never taken it off. He was still nude underneath it all, too. He needed replacements for his repairing webweave, his rings, and a whole bunch of other shit. Nothing absolutely necessary. But all of the nice stuff was gone. Wealth scanners could pick him up easily, now. Mark would get to that later.

People were in the hallways and they moved out of his way.

The command center was just down the way, and Lola was standing outside, waiting for Mark.

She was calm.

Mark had no idea how she could possibly be calm, but she was calm. And it wasn’t an act either. Mark almost said something. He almost lashed out. But then Lola walked up to Mark, and hugged him, even over his Adamantium. Mark felt the pressure of her hug, and he was absolutely sure he was cutting her, just a little, but he had no idea how to make his scales calm down.

The most Mark could do was hold back his scales from turning to spikes as he stood there and took the embrace.

“I’ll help you kill whoever tried this, Mark,” Lola whispered, softly. “Even if it’s Emperor Salvation himself.”

Mark understood Lola’s calmness, in that moment. She had made up her mind about what needed to be done, and she was going to do it.

Mark’s scales calmed down, and he hugged her back, saying, “Thank you.”

Lola chuckled, a bit nervous, as she pulled away, a little bit of blood on her white clothes here and there, adding, “I would greatly appreciate it if it wasn’t him or anyone even close to him, you understand.”

A tension broke in Mark.

Mark said, “Me, too.” He was about to heal Lola of the damage he had done but she was already healed, and the blood on her dress was already vanishing. “Uh... Sorry.”

“Think nothing of it.”

And then Isoko was there, hugging him a lot tighter than Lola, and fully platinum herself, and Sally was there with a hand on his shoulder, and Eliot was there talking about what they were seeing on the cameras.

Mark followed Eliot into the command center, which was abuzz with activity, with images of the 4 people on the tram dissected and put up on walls. There was a lot more footage of them besides that, too. Mark’s eyes caught on an image of the 4 people coming out of the door of a shop on Magic Street, about the same time Mark had left his home to head to Mage Society, and he watched those guys walk slowly down the path.

Eliot talked about how the guys were meandering, taking their time, arriving at the Mage Society tram stop well before Mark arrived at the settlement-side, so the 4 people took more time, talking on the boarding platform, letting people go ahead of them. What did they talk about? The weather, the Hero/Villain Program, Mark, and then, when Mark’s tram from the Noble District arrived at the transfer station, they got on their side of the Mage Society trams.

There was a missing 30 seconds of footage after they got on the tram.

The scanners in the walls had glitched, too.

There were still 2 trams between Mark stepping past the gate, onto the platform for the Mage Society individual trams. Eliot explained that there were some spiderbots in the system that were unknown and which had self-destructed when the event happened, but it was those spiderbots that had activated the 'overweight' protocol that allowed the 4 guys to set up Mark with that tram that Mark got on.

"We think there were some spiderbots in the tunnel, too, and that they used some spiderbots to plant the traps and tinker with the systems," Eliot said, "So we've got a Tinkerer of some kind."

Mark asked, "When is the first recorded sign of those spiderbots in the wires? The ones that detonated? You log all known bots in the walls, right?"

"We do," Deedee said, "We're still working on that, but we think it appeared either 6 or 7 days ago. Before the event you guys had in Mage Society."

Deedee was the resident bot expert, and she had about a million of them crawling all through the internals of the city.

Deedee said, "But my bots aren't in Mage Society that much, so I can only give an estimated planting time based on where I caught their bots outside Mage Society walls, and on Quark's partial view from where he saw the one working the Wand of Destruction, in this image here."

Mark looked at the image, and all he saw was a silver orb with knife-like legs gripping onto the underside of a seat, and also onto a length of silver metal with a black tip. That piece of metal was the Wand of Destruction, of course. It was aiming at Mark, right in that moment. Quark hadn't caught it at all, because the Wand of Destruction didn't look like a Wand of Destruction. The Wand was unique, and so was the bot. The Wand looked like an eyestalk.

Mark asked, "These spiderbots are unique enough that you can actually make that call that you know when you first recorded one of them? 6-7 days ago?"

Deedee grinned and said, “I can absolutely make that call!”

Quentin, however, was not convinced. “It’s a silver-orb bot with knife legs and an eyestalk-appendage. Could have been here for 3 months, or 2 days.” He pressed some buttons on the screens and out popped a whole bunch of images of similar bots, linked to the people who controlled them. “See?”

Deedee quickly said, “Oh come on! The assassin bot looks nothing like the rest!”

Mark thought all of the ‘silver orb, knife leg, black eyes on a stalk’ bots did look rather similar. It was not a unique design at all.

Eliot agreed, saying, “This silver one is not that *unique*. We can’t even tell what the back end looks like, so... 6-7 days ago might be a mistake.”

Deedee declared with confidence, “It’s not a mistake.”

Mark noted the discrepancy among the experts and moved on, asking, “What about the Wand itself? That has to be a unique shape. It’s like a silver pipe with a black cap at the front.”

Eliot said, “We submitted a review to Rekaro for people who completed their apprenticeships recently inside Aluatha. He’s doing something on his end to officially retrieve records.”

Mark nodded, then said, “Thank you very much for doing this. I hope to see results soon. I need to talk to Rekaro.”

Isoko said, “I’ll go with yo—”

“No,” Mark said, with perhaps too much force. “I can’t risk—”

Isoko got up in his face, saying, “I *know* you’re not about to do some ‘I can’t risk others’ kaijushit, Mark. Right! So I’m going with you... *Say I’m going with you.*” She strongly added, “And we’re still in the settlement! The fuck! I can go where I want.”

“... Thank you for coming with me,” Mark said, feeling slightly better and also like a bit of an idiot.

“Good! I can’t fly well yet, so let’s get outside and spin up that motor. We certainly ain’t taking the trams!”

Eliot was deeply, horrifically embarrassed by that. A lot of people in the command center were.

Deedee instantly said, “We’re checking all the systems! This won’t happen again!”

Quentin said, “It could still happen. A skilled enough infiltrator—”

“We can patch up these holes, at least!” Deedee said.

Eliot said, “I’m going over the entire tram system again. That won’t happen. A *lot* of people are working on it. But Mark, you should vary your routes going forward and... and I need to check out the house again.”

Mark reoriented slightly, saying, “Yeah, so... Flying, yes. Isoko with me to Rekaro. But first I’m out of magic stuff. I need to go get some things. Some webweave, too.”

“Can’t have your ass hanging out, even if it is covered in metal,” Isoko said, nodding, stepping to Mark’s side and ready to walk with him to the Artificer’s Guild—

And then Yoro was 20 meters away, suddenly appearing, and Mark almost caused an **Incident**...

But Mark calmed.

Yoro walked toward Mark, saying, “Re-gear and talk to the Grand Mage later. We’re still doing the International Teleporter List for Kaiju Response, and I’m going with you.”

Mark blanked.

Sally exclaimed, "You CANNOT be serious?!"

Isoko scoffed, disbelieving the whole thing. Eliot frowned.

"Sally is right, Yoro," Mark said, anger flaring a little. "You cannot be serious."

"I am so very serious, but we can go over all the reasonings when you're ready in 45 minutes. Prep is an hour. But basically, Mark," Yoro said, "This assassination attempt set off alarm bells everywhere. This test of the International Teleporter List for Kaiju Response is going to be overseen *directly* by Walaria in the capital, and if ITLKR is compromised, if anything happens to you at all, then heads will roll— Look. I can see you getting mad. Go ahead. Get mad. But be presentable for the cameras. I will be, too."

Mark decided to put off thinking any thoughts for right now.

He got going to the Artificer's Guild.

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Julie Sacredcut had extra stuff; no problem.

Greater Ring of No-Wealth, regenerating webweave in Mark's size, Greater Ring of Repair to make his normal clothes repair, too, and a new spellbreaker to wear around his neck. She had duplicates of all of the stuff he regularly wore and needed to replace every now and then.

It set Mark back a percentile of a point of his total wealth.

Mark asked, “Anything to help against assassinations?”

Julie winced. “Not... really. You got all the good stuff.”

“What else could I have? *Just tell me.*”

“It’s not a matter of holding *back*, but more a matter of there’s *nothing* that would really help. There are solid shield charms, both reactive and permanent, but you got adamantium and your PL’s are already higher across the board than anything we can offer you. There are precog charms that let you experience up to a minute past your death, and then rewind backward, but those are... those make you go fucking crazy, Mark. You don’t want those. I don’t even have any of them right now, and it would take a week to get one. There are even anti-slime charms— Was it a slime? We’re not actually sure but I looked at the footage, and—”

“Corruption ooze, they called it,” Mark interrupted. “Not a slime.”

“Holy gods of light and dark,” Julie said, face going pale. “Something like *that* was in the city? My gods —” She snapped back to it. “Never mind. Uh... We got anti-slime charms —anti-monster charms of all kinds!— but no anti-ooze charms, and corruption... you can’t protect against that specifically. You can only guard yourself stronger. More rigid. And you’re... well, adamant blooded.”

Mark said, “I guess I’m good. Thanks, Julie... And Julie? I’d like to talk to you about what a corruption ooze is later, okay?”

“Absolutely!” Julie bowed deeply.

... she was a bit terrified right now.

Was Mark being scary right now?

Mark might have been scary right now. Mark softly said, “Sorry if I scared you, Julie.”

Julie stood right back up and she was even more scared, but she was professional, as she said, “It’s just... *assassins!* I do not like this.”

Mark found that sudden, true utterance like a small ray of sunshine in a storm. He said, “I don’t like it either.”

Half an hour later, Mark stood at the back end of Castle South.

Castle North and Castle South were more like ‘Northwest’ and ‘Southwest’ castle. The other 5 ‘castles’ had been the original apartments for the settlement, housing over 10,000 people in total, until Eliot had gotten more apartments and houses installed across the land and people moved into those. Those original apartments were now mostly removed, but one of them was the official barracks where anyone could stay if they didn’t have a home yet, and two others remained for temporary housing, in case of destroyed housing in the case of a kaiju incursion, or the like. Mark didn’t live here anymore, but he still liked the place. It was sprawling complexes on the edges, with some nice green space in the middle, like a big lawn with some trees.

Mark stood with Yoro, Kandon, and Aurora on top of a grey stone hovercar launch zone behind Castle South, right in front of the grassy lawn. It was a nice place; meant to look good for people coming and going on official business. It had a lot of cameras and scanning equipment, and it had been swept twice for stuff before Mark even got here.

He was *supposed* to do this test of the ITLKR system beside the lake, at a nice overlook, but that idea had been changed at the last 10 minutes for obvious reasons. Everything that had been planned had been changed due to the assassin attempt.

Mark was completely aware of the implications of what that all meant.

A bunch of other people, including Isoko, Eliot, and Sally, were all the way down near Castle South. They looked on, and they looked worried. Mark was worried, too!

The Inquisitors were out in force, with Walter standing beside Sally, and Lola a bit closer to Mark. Lola was not allowed to approach the actual hoverpad. No one was. There were black and yellow cordoning holograms in the air, around the platform, and no one was violating those at all.

Mark wanted to walk away, right through those holograms, to be *anywhere* but here. But Yoro had explained why they were going through with this, and Aurora had strongly agreed, having some weird emotions about the whole thing that she didn't fully explain. Her main point had been something about 'appearing strong' that Mark didn't fully understand.

It was 10 minutes to go-time.

And so, since Mark still didn't understand, Mark asked, "Tell me again, please, why we're still doing this."

Aurora *sounded* and *looked* perfectly composed as she explained, "How To Avoid Assassins and Still Make Public Statements: If you have something you have to do, which has a schedule to follow, then, if at all possible, change up the direction of approach away from the obvious. Hence, we are here instead of at the lake with the stage Eliot set up, still doing what needs to be done, but from a different angle. If you need to make a speech, for example, then you change the position of the stage to somewhere else, even if it's not as good optics-wise. And if you need to teleport somewhere, then you have eyes-on at the main hub, and any possible connecting hubs, like Walaria is doing at the capital right now. And, mostly, you remember your allies and enemies, and if you die then it makes Walaria look bad. If Walaria looks bad, then she will go on a warpath." Aurora finished with a simple, "I'm already planning a warpath, Mark."

"Good. Hope to see it for myself."

Aurora made a little, "Haah," sound.

Yoro said, "We'll be fine. *Both of you*. We'll be fine."

Aurora still appeared strong.

Her vector made it seem like she was hanging on by a fingernail to the edge of a cliff.

Quentin called out from the side, "Final checks. 9 minutes and counting."

Aurora walked off of the stage.

It was just Mark and Yoro, and Mark did some final checks of his own.

Mostly, he just made sure Quark was okay. The little guy currently had some casting hands on an orb that was currently attached to the middle of Mark's back. Otherwise, the body was free floating. Quark could do a Protect in 10 seconds, and though he did not have time during the assassination attempt today, he should have that much time when they exited the teleport. And if he didn't have that time, the spellbreaker on Mark's neck and his own capabilities would give Quark the time he needed.

Also, they were going to exit the teleport somewhere outside of where everyone expected them to exit.

That part Aurora had said about changing venues was important, and they had already changed the departure venue from the lakeside to here, but Walaria was at Crytalis right now, to hear Aurora talk about it, and the Second Princess would be changing the destination location herself.

Even Yoro and Aurora didn't know where it was going to happen, which set off all sorts of alarm bells for Mark, but... He trusted them. He did trust them. They had never betrayed him before.

That was the thing about betrayal, though. It only came from your allies.

But Mark looked over at some big screens that showed the original, planned destination area. It was outside of an Aluathan outpost by the Shine's delta, on the north side. Some observers from Aluatha and some semi-permanently stationed guards stood around, all nice looking and ready for Mark. There was even a giant stone platform, easily 50 meters across. It was the hoverpad, but they had cleared it and freshly painted it for Mark's arrival. A sign read 'WELCOME BLACKVEIN!', so Mark was pretty sure that this wasn't a betrayal. At least not in any conventional sense.

That reception area was wrong, though.

The new location was going to be close to the old one, but not that close. Mark was going to be told where it was at 30 seconds to go-time, because that's when Walaria would tell Aurora, using whatever communications techniques she shared with the Second Prince—

*'About 200 meters southwest of the destination area, Mark,'* Aurora telepathically told him. *'There's grasslands there. Nothing else.'*

Yoro glanced at his phone, and then he put it back in his pocket. "50 seconds."

"This seems so stupid," Mark said, even as he pulled his adamantium inward, as he pulled his astral body inward. "So dumb."

Aurora enveloped Mark and the platform from every direction. The world seemed a little ripply with rainbows all around Mark, but she wasn't actually doing anything, and she didn't say anything either. She just waited.

The clock ticked down.

Mark prepared for an ambush by asking, "What if the plan is to drape this whole teleport test in various security measures and it's the security measures themselves which kill us all?"

*'Compose yourself, Mark,'* Aurora sent.

"I know you're shaken up," Yoro said, "But you're too paranoid by half."

Kandon had his phone out and he was looking at it as he said, "Here it comes. Stand still."

Aurora pulled back, just a little.

Mark pulled all the way in, like holding in his breath. It was uncomfortable. Yoro stood about 10 centimeters away. That was uncomfortable, too, but only for Mark. The thin man seemed comfortable and confident, and Mark could trust that much... he supposed. Aurora seemed secured, too. Everyone was worried, but it was going to be fine. Right?

It was going to be fine.

Mark sighed, and the world began to vibrate in a weird sort of way—

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—The vibration ended, and Mark stood on grasslands.

Yoro was nowhere to be seen.

Mark instantly went into a Union of Alacrity and Slowness, his range spilling out of him in every direction, the world resolving to understandability. Grasslands, mudflats, water over there, stuff in the water, and in the land. Mostly small animals. Lots of dragonfly-like bugs eating smaller bugs.

And Yoro was gone.

Fuck.

Mark couldn't see around himself at all. Time was moving too slow for him to move any part of his body. Quark couldn't move his body fast, either, but he was a machine, too, and he could think very quickly and respond faster than humans. Most of the time he had to limit himself to human speeds. Quark did not limit himself like that, right now.

Quark displayed images in Mark's sight.

Mark had gotten turned around in the teleport, as well as thrown off-center of the original destination.

Quark showed him images of the original destination.

The outpost behind Mark was a crater. Quark spotted a few bodies here and there. Dead and splattered by various forces. Quark was already categorizing them as Empire's Knight Perrol, the man that Mark and Yoro was to meet, the man in charge of this place, and also about four other people, each with tags.

Other human bodies lay everywhere. Some of them had gotten as far as 200 meters away. They did not get further than that.

There was a goblin.

It was wearing a suit and standing on the platform Mark should have appeared on, on the other side of the cratered outpost. It held a rapier in one hand, held low to the ground, preparing to strike.

This was weird for a multitude of reasons.

The major weirdness that Mark first recognized was that there were bodies at all. A goblin *should* have turned those people into lacunas. Everything else, from Empire shenanigans, which was a *real* fucking possibility right now (But the extra security measures did push Mark off-center enough to survive), to how the people who had attempted to assassinate Mark in the tram had appeared from nowhere and vanished instantly, meant that *there were teleporters*.

And *oh yeah*.

Goblins and the Empire were working together, in some capacity.

It had started with the Ethereal Death Turtle kaiju and the goblins planting death essence into that cave, to lure the turtle into a death bomb attack... But even before that, it had started with House Exatech, hadn't it? Yes. And the changelings, of course.

Mark didn't know much about all of that because other people had been investigating it and he had been busy, but right here was an information source. Right here was someone that knew something.

Mark wasn't going to let this goblin get away.

And he wasn't going to let the goblins in the grasslands get away, either.

There had to be 10 of them out there, hidden in the green grasses, their vectors low and strong. They had magics ready to go, and magics that were still playing out, out there in the grasslands. Fires and stones

flowed through green hands, as grasses raised up around others, and someone was planning something very big in the air, directly overhead. Some sort of invisible-magic user was up there of some sort; Mark couldn't tell. Only that if he had landed there, on that platform, he would have tried to fly directly up and away, which would have put him into that invisible trap overhead—

Ah! Mark realized something.

The goblins had probably killed the people of the outpost in the last 30 seconds. That's why the people were just killed, instead of used as lacunas. They were obstacles to be removed while the big fish rolled in. Yes. Mark understood that, now. That video feed at the settlement, showing the destination zone, had not been faked. The people had probably been attacked the second Mark had started going through the port.

The settlement and ITLKR system probably saw the goblins and the fuckery right now, too, which meant help was probably on its way... unless the feed was being looped?

Ah.

Fuck.

Mark hoped Yoro was still alive, but could solve this himself.

Mark was currently running a Union of Alacrity/Slowness with his entire being, but since the only type of Union that worked at these speeds was brain, it was mostly a neuron-firing Union.

With a switch of speed down to something much slower, Mark's heart started pumping with a Union of Alacrity/Slowness. It hurt like a motherfucker. Mark's head felt like it was going to explode. But his Body PL was in the 80s, and though his Natural Union was 97 (according to a re-Scan today after all the corruption ooze stuff, to make sure he was okay) and 97 was a lot more than 80s and he could seriously hurt himself with this kinda Union, it wasn't that bad. Could have been worse.

If Mark had had a lower Body PL, he probably couldn't push Alacrity/Slowness as much as he was, right now.

He could have fallen right into a goblin trap, too; that would have hurt a lot worse.

With his Brain, Mark made a Union of Entropy/Energy, targeting the switch at the bottom of the soul of all creatures, targeting the goblin over there, and all of the other vectors hiding out in the grasslands. He was manually applying shavallian to every single one of them. And sure, there were a lot of thoughts about all of that, from the fact that shavallian didn't work on monsters (but these ones had all gone through the Monster Tutorial and it should work) to the fact that this was a capability that Mark should not reveal casually.

*But there was nothing casual about this!*

Time sped up fractionally now that Mark wasn't devoting all of his energy to Alacrity/Slowness.

Mark stabbed through the world with black lightning, into the goblin waiting by the teleport zone and into every other goblin vector out there. The suited goblin looked Mark's way, its vector going from prepared-for-violence to 'ah shit, time for violence' in a flashing second—

The suited goblin stepped to the side and started running Mark's way, as though moving at full running speed. Everything else was slow. Mark was slow. Three *other* goblin vectors also moved way, way too fast. Four speedsters, all of them.

This had been a big fucking attack.

Luckily, Speedsters were Body Powers, and Union was Natural, so Mark had absolutely no problem turning off a Speedster if he got the drop on them. Actually injuring a high-tier Speedster with his Union was a lot harder, because bodies were fucking strong at high Power Levels. But interacting with a Speedster *at all* for the purposes of Union? Easy. Mark didn't even have to use an Adamant/Ethereal wedge to get in there.

Mark's lightning touched upon the enemy at the speed of thought, and one by one, each of them slowed down. Each of them returned to normal time, and Mark's Slowness made them go even slower.

The headache was almost unbearable.

Mark endured.

One by one, each goblin got 'turned off', as Mark imparted a Union of 'shavallian' into them, right into their astral bodies, closing them up from the outside in. The invisible trap spell overhead, full of vectors and whatever, took the longest to close off. It shrank like a deflating balloon, and then it became the rubber goblin that had escaped the purge of the goblin city near the settlement. So it had ballooned itself out so much it became transparent? And then what? That would have captured Mark? Mark wasn't sure.

Mark made very, very sure his helmet fully covered his head, and his scales covered all of his body, because, while the ambush was the bigger problem, Mark did not doubt that there were others waiting out there in the wings. Mark formed a tentative plan, right then and there, to kill the goblins who he couldn't capture, and then fly fast back to the settlement quickly, and to keep his astral body wide so that he couldn't be teleported again, because even if ITLKR wasn't *fully* compromised, someone in the Empire was working with the goblins.

When Mark was certain every goblin-sized vector around him was turned off, and all they had were their own personal-sized vectors, Mark switched to a full Union of Adamant and Ethereal, taking in everything he needed to heal his erupting headache and to prepare for a possible Round 2, while weakening every goblin as much as he could. Energy/Entropy had turned them off, but they were still high PL's, all around.

Time resumed.

Everything happened fast.

Quark got to casting Protect at Mark's back and Mark flew upward, erecting shields of adamantium to stop any possible snipers that were out of range.

Three Speedster goblins faltered and the suited goblin almost tripped, but they caught themselves.

The rubber goblin landed on the ground with a crunch that hurt.

The Stone, Flame, and the Water Shapers all lost control of their element.

The weird talents all lost their capability.

A goblin wearing folds of white petals over his entire body, like a sphere, lost control of those petals. The goblin dropped to the ground and the petals lost their glow.

The last goblin was a weird one. It was just standing there, in the grasses, hunkering down far from everyone else. It might have been the last line of defense. But as far as Mark could tell its vector was internal, by a lot, and Mark hadn't turned him off at all. There was something still active inside of the goblin.

The goblins all complained.

Quark frantically made the Protect Sigildry behind Mark.

Mark wasn't going to advance on any of the goblins at all until that Protect was back up and running.

Some goblins started running when they saw Mark was protecting himself rather than advancing.

Mark found himself incredibly angry at that. They would run? Now? When they had come so far to try and kill him? To contain him? To attempt to use him as breeding stock? Did they think they'd Bite him and... and what!

And now they ran!

Fury came out of Mark's throat as he Called, "**Die exhausted or rested. Your choice.**"

The Aethercall rumbled outward, slamming into every vector out there like a rising tide. Some of the goblins crashed to their knees, accepting the fate of the soon-to-be drowned. The suited goblin had gotten four steps away, but he slowed, stopped, and turned. He had pissed himself, but he looked up at Mark anyway. Other goblins screamed and ran in any direction they could, trying to hide. The Stone Shaper tried to dig into the ground and he had a good Body Power Level, good enough to dig deep, but not that deep. The other two Shapers screamed and ran to the side and then they zagged in another direction, everything looking scary to them.

The flower-petal-sphere goblin crawled away.

The goblin that Mark wasn't able to turn off—

Hive Mind goblin.

That's it. Hive Mind. He wasn't really *here*, so Mark *couldn't* turn him off. Mark still terrified him, though.

The Hive Mind goblin, through his absolute terror and Union-imposed Weakness, stood up on shaky knees, and said to Mark, "I... I speak for— green gods this is Biting tough." He composed himself, and shook off his fear. "I speak for Goblinhome. In the establishing of your settlement you have violated treaties with Goblinhome regarding corridors of access. We are bringing this to your attention so that you can rectify the issue—"

Protect went up, like a prismatic sheen that layered hexagons over Mark's senses, and the goblin's voice cut off.

Quark's voice was just fine, though, as he said, "Protect active."

"Ah, fuck you, goblins," Mark said, even while the Hive Mind goblin spoke insidiously. It had been doing some sort of magic, or mental shit, and Quark had killed that connection with the Protect. Mark said, "Keep it up, Quark."

Quark was already moving, saying, "I see the Protect already failing."

The prismatic hexagons were already crumbling.

Mark swept down and beheaded the still-speaking Hive Mind goblin, guessing that it had been Calling to enact its mental magics, considering Protect had killed the sound it was making to Mark's ears.

Quark kept Signing for Protect at Mark's back.

The goblins didn't seem to care that Mark had just beheaded the speaker. Some of them were more of a 'yeah, that happens' kinda feeling to them, in addition to their ebbing fear. Mark's kaiju-ish Aethercall was wearing off fast.

The suited goblin spoke, "Kill us and be done with it."

Mark decided that standing still in the air was a very bad idea, so he kept moving and goblin eyes tracked him. The Stone Shaper goblin burrowed back up, now that the fear was gone, and he, too, tracked Mark as he moved around, looking at goblins, gauging the problem.

The goblins were going to try and work together to take him down but Mark didn't see how they could, when they were all shavallian'ed.

Some of the goblins were too far out of the center space, though, and Mark wanted them all together, so he hovered around the place fast, using caltrops to grab little green arms, to toss them a few tens of meters over to the stone circle. After the flower-sphere goblin hit his leg badly and broke it, the other goblins made sure to catch the falling ones.

The last two out-of-place goblins ran over to the stone circle, rather than be tossed.

Mark flew around the circle now, rising and falling in a random-ish pattern, adamantium shields up and solid and spinning, covering him from every direction as much as could be done. A sniper would have to get very, very lucky to hit him like this, and Protect was up and running again, thanks to Quark, so there was no direct-attack magic aiming his way—

The Protect went up around Mark, and it was already failing.

Something out there was targeting Mark with something.

He knew it.

Mark felt the flower-shield goblin start to regain his Powers a little, so he hit them all with a dose of Entropy/Energy again, killing any resurgence, before switching back to Adamant/Ethereal. On an inspiration, he added in some meaning to Adamant/Ethereal that he had never tried before.

Adamant truth-seeking, and Ethereal inability-to-resist.

If it worked at all, Mark would find out.

Another Protect went up and it faded into the background. Whatever had been targeting him decided to back off, for now. Soon, the Protect faded, hiding into the background.

Mark regarded the goblins. "I would know the names of the Hive Mind goblin and who is now in charge, now that that one is gone. Is it you, Flame Goblin? Are you in charge now?"

Mark was misdirecting them completely. The suited goblin had been waiting on the platform. Everyone else had been beside the platform, or further outside. The suited one was next in line, obviously.

But Flame Shaper Goblin got a really proud aspect to his vector when Mark looked at him and called on him.

Everyone else got pissed off to a varying degree. The other Shaper goblins were most-pissed. The flower-shield goblin was stunned into disbelief, and he thought Mark an idiot. Three of the speedsters were offended on behalf of the suit-wearing goblin.

Suit-goblin was quiet.

Flame Goblin proudly stood tall, saying, "I am Flamey! The brightest goblin! If you give up now I will be sure to go easy on you!"

Flower Shield Goblin scoffed, which caused every goblin there to wince, except for Suited Goblin.

Mark rapidly categorized the goblins here with Hive Mind at the top, with all of the Shapers working under him, Flower and Suit seconds, with the Speedsters working under Suit, and the last goblin,

Rubber, was disregarded. No one cared for or thought about Rubber Goblin. That made sense. He was a new addition to Goblinhome, there in the last month since Mark had purged the goblins away from the settlement. Maybe Rubber was coordinating under Flower? Mark checked their vectors.

... No.

Flower was here on his own. Rubber was now trying to unify with the Shapers. He was trying to get in with Hive Mind, but Hive Mind was gone.

Mark asked, "What was your plan on getting me out of here under your control?"

"Bite you here!" Flamey said. "Run with the body and get you—"

Suit goblin slipped his sword across Flamey's neck, decapitating him with a clean, soft movement. The body hit the floor. The head rolled, blinking a bit, taking a few seconds to die.

Suit simply said, "Quiet."

The Shapers hated Suit for saying that, for killing Flamey, but the Speedsters were proud.

Flower and Rubber both realized that they were all going to die.

Flower simply sat down and closed his eyes.

Rubber panicked, trying to run.

Mark picked Rubber up by the legs and slammed him on to the ground near the others until Rubber stopped moving so much, as he asked, "What was your plan for getting away?"

"Not all of us would have gotten away," Suit said.

That sounded like goblins, for sure.

But it was a total lie.

Someone without Unionsense would have missed the lie.

With closed eyes, waiting for the end, Flower spoke, “He knows you lied. He knew we had plans. Stop talking if you want to leave him in the dark.”

Suit frowned. He did not behold Flower.

Mark asked, “Suit, Flower, and the dead Hive Mind. I would know the names of the leaders, and why you were out here.”

Flower said, “I’m Greeplox. The suit is Old Slave. The one you killed is BiggestBaddest.” And then he opened his eyes, and stared at Mark, “And you are being given up by your Empire to fulfill a bargain which we could not maintain. So we’re doing it this way: Sit down, accept the Bite, and I will help you come out of it with most of your mind intact. It will be like when archmages become dragons, but you will become a goblin, instead.”

Greeplox wasn’t lying.

... or at least Greeplox truly believed he could do that. The other goblins seemed to believe he could do that, too.

“... Well... Setting that offer *far* to the side... Got any names of traitors for me?” Mark asked.

“First Prince Doomo,” Greeplox answered. “Goblins aren’t traitors. We would have your back forever, Black King.”

Greeplox wasn’t lying, as far as he knew... or else he was a great liar. Maybe he was. Seemed like the type. He certainly wasn’t telling the whole truth. Mark had no idea how he felt about that answer, though. ‘Some kinda way’? A little furious? Yeah, probably. He’d feel more later when he wasn’t in a danger zone, and he’d be a fool to take the word of a goblin for anything except an attempt to Bite him.

Rubber whispered to the other goblins, “He gonna kill us?”

“Yes,” Greeplox said. “Focus your mind on connecting to the Green and you might survive the Dark to return to us one day.”

One of the speedsters whispered, “What did he do to us? I can’t Move.”

Old Slave watched Mark. He had been watching Mark the whole time. He softly answered his subordinate, “Something that he should not have been able to do. I want him even more.”

They spoke very quietly, their vectors still focused on Mark, as Mark floated around the zone. Mark let them talk to each other. He had other concerns right now.

Quark was here, and he had made a Protect, but he was still softly blinking a message in the corner of Mark’s vision.

*‘No reception.’*

“Quark?” Mark softly asked the air to the side. He said nothing beyond that.

The goblins whipped their attention back to Mark.

Quark spoke in Mark’s ears only, “I am trying to connect but nothing is working. There is a jamming signal somewhere out there. I had a moment of connection right after we resolved into the area, and then it was gone. I am sorry, sir. I will keep trying.”

Mark didn’t blame Quark for the lack of connection.

This was a setup.

Mark had to move out of the area right fucking now, if possible.

Mark asked, "Anyone want to volunteer to give us more answers? The rest of you are dying, of course."

Greeplox said, "Pick who you want. Strip them of their fangs and burn the sockets with shavallian and they will not recover the ability to Bite." Greeplox lifted up his chin. "I am ready."

Old Slave hated Greeplox at that moment.

Rubber exclaimed, "Not my fangs!"

Mark picked Old Slave and Rubber as interrogation subjects.

He swept adamantium through the rest, chopping them into fine pieces, while he cut the clothes off of Old Slave, discarded the goblin's sword, and cut off the necklace and anklets that Rubber was wearing. He wrapped both of the chosen goblins into a fine-mesh adamantium sphere, with a solid lower half. Both of the cages were thin adamantium shells, with a few small holes in the bottom for air vents and whatever.

And then Mark took to the sky, flying fast and far.

The delta of the Shine spread out below him in every direction, ribbons of muddy brown winding through diamond-shaped islands and scattered trees. Cloudy horizons lay in every direction, all white and fluffy and towering to the auroras directly overhead. To the west lay a big island in the middle of the thickest muddy ribbon. That island was easily 50 meters taller than the flat land in every direction, and it had no trees on it at all.

That island was the mud elemental that Mark was supposed to clear away.

It had been there for 4 years, and it could stand to be there for another 4. Mark would get to it later.

For now, Mark flew fast toward the north.

If he followed the Shrine for an hour, he'd get pretty darn close to the settlement. Hopefully he bypassed the communications block before then.

“How’s it going, Quark?”

Quark said, “We are leaving the jamming area, but it is a lot larger than it should be. I estimate another few minutes. You should consider flying in a direction that is *not* the most obvious one to fly. Whatever was triggering the Protect is likely still out there.”

Mark instantly veered off to the right. “Good thinking... Another Protect, please.”

“On it, sir.”

--

Addavein looked on from far, far away, seeing more than most, and less than some.

Some people, like Second Princess Walaria Aluatha, were located in central Crytalis, right near the ITLKR Crystal, watching it all unfold from multiple screens. Addavein had patched in to those screens through an *old* agreement with Domal’Takala’s eponymous guardian. The Caretakers had been chopping at Addavein’s ingress into Crytalis for almost a year now, but Addavein still knew Domal, and he could still get in when he needed.

But Walaria would notice him if he looked at her directly.

So Addavein watched terrified controllers of the ITLKR crystal, instead, while Walaria’s voice was offscreen, rumbling and promising death.

“So it’s some new kind of jamming, then?” Walaria asked, “Or an old, powerful kind of jamming?”

“I’m so sorry, Grand Highness!” said a terrified Conductor who was rapidly losing her composure with every passing second. Competent, yes; she wouldn’t be there if she weren’t competent. But she was still unable to do anything, and that rightly terrified her. “The target went to the new location, and we can’t lock on to him at all.”

“Bah!” Addavein said to himself, watching, “They better not blame *me!*”

Another crystal Conductor said, “Mark’s crystal is still there! We’re still picking up his signal! But the lock is untargetable! It’s not an anti-resonance attack; we can cover those. It..” The guy gulped, and said words that would probably result in his death. “It almost looks like... the dragon is responsible for killing the resonance in the area.”

“Knew it,” Addavein said, scoffing. “Anything to get out of responsibility.”

The terrified woman Conductor hissed/whispered, “*Addavein did this?!?*”

“He destroyed a lot of crystals and he knows how!” said the male Conductor. “He has to be the reason we can get to Mark!”

“Bah! *Come on now,*” Addavein said to himself, highly miffed. “I only destroyed the other ones because you guys were chasing me! Don’t be stupid, ‘cause I know you’re not.”

There was silence in the Conductor center.

Walaria Looked at the male Conductor. “Who approved your promotion to this position, Conductor Hioh?”

“There we go,” Addavein said to himself, focused.

Conductor Hioh froze in fear. He almost lied. Instead, he softly said, “First Prince Doomo and Third Princess Kalimara, 25 years ago.”

More silence in the Conductor center.

“Well then...” Addavein said, frowning. “You went and muddied the waters, huh. I suppose it was all you could do, really.”

Walaria said, “You’re relieved of duty, Conductor Hioh. Please leave the compound and prepare for an inquiry.”

Conductor Hioh rose from his chair, bowed, and then left without another word.

“Soft approach?” Addavein said to himself.

Walaria told the other Conductor, “Reset ITLKR. Reboot the system. Kill all secondary connections. I want ITLKR punching into that no-go zone, Conductor.”

“Yes Grand Highness!”

Addavein’s connection frazzled.

“Bah,” Addavein said, “I doubt a reset would work, but you do you.”

Addavein checked on his other main set of images.

Mark was flying to the east, which was good. Not sure why the guy was carrying some goblins with him, but that was a rather impressive bit of Shavallian-Union keeping those goblins down. Someone had told him about that part of the Binding, huh? Or maybe Mark had been Mark, and he had figured it out.

Either way, those goblins were going to be big problems for someone in Aluatha, and that was part of the goblin plan, too. Secondary to just Biting Mark, for sure. But still a good plan. They were gearing up for Total War.

Addavein wondered if the humans would let him help them then.

At least Mark was avoiding the secondary line of attack.

To the north, 20 kilometers up the Shine, was a pair of snipers; one spotter, one shooter. They had some truly impressive guns on them. Void-tipped bullets, it seemed. The pair of them wore some truly impressive stealth armor, too, but Addavein had spotted them when they had triggered Mark’s Protect, and then when they kept trying to get through his Protect to latch on with aiming magic.

Their voices were garbled by their stealth magics, but Addavein managed to hear a few different things.

“Target approximately 5,200 meters out, and still headed north. Advise.”

“Is the Protect still active?”

“Shooter cannot get a lock; Protect is active. Target is carrying two goblins in cages. They are not Protected. We can kill the goblins.”

A silent moment.

“Scrap the mission. Leave.”

The sniper and spotter packed up and got into their hovervan, parked under some brush.

Addavein turned back toward Mark, watching him fly north with the two goblins in tow. Addavein hummed. “Is he out of his league yet? Yes, obviously. But it’s a good growth opportunity, so... no big brother to the rescue. Not yet.” He muttered, “The only reason he’s being targeted is because of me, anyway, so getting closer is bad... So... Hmm.”

Addavein hummed in thought.

“... It would be pretty rude to let him flail around, but...”

Addavein hummed in thought.

“... I can do a *little*.”

Addavein looked around to see if he could find that dissenter goblin he had seen the other day... Hmm.

“Now where is— Ah! There you are. Not too far off, too. Only a few hundred kilometers. You could make it if you knew to make it. I just need to... hmm... a tiny nudge, so that no one knew I was even there. Yes. Let’s do that— ah! And I can pass along some information to the settlement. Yes.”

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“—rk. Ca—rk—”

The male voice in Mark’s ears was a sudden static, and then it was gone.

Elation, hope, and then sudden focus.

“I hear you! Come in?!”

Nothing.

Mark flew faster. The goblins were plastered to the bottom of their spheres, and Quark’s hands made another Protect, and the reception flickered between 1 bar and 0 bars, and then, like stepping out of a Faraday cage, suddenly Quark was fully connected.

“—rk. Can you hea—”

“I hear you!” Mark said. “I can hear you, Quentin!”

Quentin at the command center perked up, “He’s on the line! Got hi—”

“Mark,” Aurora’s voice cut in. “You’re okay? Good. You need to *think* about killing the mud elemental. Whatever backup snipers were out there are probably gone, but you can consider searching for them, too. We have a location on where the secondary snipers *were*. They’re hiding under a lot of magics, though. If Unionsense doesn’t pick them up, if you get closer, then you should consider them gone.”

There was a lot there.

Mark slowed down, asking, "Snipers? Where were they?"

"About 5 kilometers west and a little south of your current location, outside of the very edge of the deadzone. Quark has the info. We got the information from an unknown source. I think I was Walaria. They warned of void-bullets. You can ignore the snipers if you want to ignore them because standard operating procedure is to evacuate an area completely if they have to break cover. Under normal circumstances they won't risk being searched for and possibly found."

"... Void bullet? What is a void bullet?"

"The best sniper bullets around, fired from a very, very expensive machine. Takes a while to set up and then deploy, so if they left they probably left fast, with securing the machine a higher priority than their own lives. If you catch them then it'll be a big win. Bigger than the goblins you have. You should kill those goblins, by the way. Anything they say would be designed to fuck you or us over. We saw from a long range that you spoke to BiggestBaddest and you weren't taken in, so that's good. Those two are the same as him, but stupider."

Mark decided, "I'm not going after invisible snipers with weird bullets. They're human though, right?"

"Correct."

Mark suddenly needed to know, "Is Yoro okay? He didn't appear with me when I resolved."

"Yoro is not okay. He'll heal. He's not okay."

Mark let that go, for now, but inside a pit of coldness grew a bit deeper. Mark asked, "Why should I go back and kill the elemental?"

"Because you can still complete the mission, even with all the shit that happened besides." Aurora softly said, "Optics matter a lot, Mark. You should know this. You're a supervillain in that... that damned HVP."

Mark had a think. It was a quick think. He looked at the goblins in the spheres he had made, and they looked at him. They were cold, up here in the sky and with their Powers subdued. Old Slave tried to be stoic, to stand tall in his sphere and project confidence, now that he wasn't squished at the bottom of the cage due to so much wind.

Rubber was perfectly fine with rubbing his arms, huddling on himself, and complaining, "Stupid humans! I'll Bite you! You're not taking my fangs!"

Mark said to Aurora, to the command center, "I need to know what these goblins know. Anyone got any questions I should ask them? Is Lola there? Or Walter? I was hoping for Yoro, but—"

"I can still talk," Yoro said, voice raspy. "I saw Quark's recording, and no one is listening right now besides Aurora and I. What did they mean, First Prince Doomo?"

Mark said, "Fix up his voice, Quark, and let him ask the questions."

Quark did so.

Yoro's voice came through normally, as he said, "Tell me what your people meant when you spoke of First Prince Doomo."

Mark was already working a Union of Adamant and Ethereal on the goblins, geared toward making them susceptible to spilling the truth. There was probably a better way to do that, some better combination of truth-forcing and lie-erasing Key Words, but Mark didn't know them. So Mark forced an Adamant-truth-only and Ethereal-lies-be-gone into everyone present.

"Who is Doomo?" Rubber asked. Truth, probably. He didn't know the guy.

"That damned Greeplox doesn't know what he is talking about," Old Slave said. He was a liar.

Which was scary.

First Prince Doomo was involved, somehow—

The line clicked.

Yoro said, “This is a private line, now, and that’s all I need to know. That suited one is Old Slave and Old Slave is a known entity to the Empire, and he and Greeplox were manipulating you. They are both one of the 10 pillars of Goblinhome, and both of them know how to speak lies and cause issues. Bring Old Slave in if you can, and we’ll trap him forever. It’ll be easier than letting him live— Ah. There he goes. He knew what I had planned.

Rubber remained alive.

But from one moment to the next, Old Slave simply died. His vector sort of sprinkled in every single direction at once. He hadn’t gotten his Powers back at all, but... But he had an internal kill switch, huh? Or something.

Mark asked, “What did he do to himself?”

Yoro said, “A self-kill cantrip with some basic magic. Probably the best outcome. He’ll revive back at Goblinhome, or somewhere else, and then go back to Goblinhome. You haven’t seen the last of him. Kill the rubber one or bring him in. I doubt we’ll get anything good out of him, but you should learn some interrogation techniques and a goblin is a good choice.”

Mark felt himself standing on the edge of something scary.

‘Interrogation techniques’?

Mark had an instinctive reaction to balk.

He felt it was probably a good idea to keep that reaction intact, for his own sanity.

Mark said, “I’m going to try and Fear him into talking, using the kaiju and all of that. Just Fear, that should be enough. And I need to kill the kaiju too, right?” He looked back toward the southwest, toward the Shine’s delta, where the mud kaiju rested like an island in the middle of the largest outlet of the river. “If the communications block comes back then I’m turning around and choosing a different path.”

“Sure, Mark,” Yoro said, sounding tired.

Aurora came over the line, saying, “Agreed.”

Quark said, “I will continue to monitor communications.”

And then Mark turned Rubber’s cage toward Old Slave’s cage, and ripped Old Slave’s cage apart, with the body still inside. Flesh turned to ground meat in a moment, and then scattered on the sky. Rubber was a little quiet for a moment, and then Mark adjusted Rubber’s cage to block out most of the wind, but he could still see outside.

Fear was primed.

Mark flew back south, toward the mud kaiju—

“Communications is down,” Quark said, right as Mark noticed the reception bars crashing from 10 to 0.

Mark turned right back around, muttering, “Okay then.”

Mark almost exited the communications block but suddenly there was a vector barreling in from the ground, screaming Mark’s way.

It was a small vector but very strong, and it was Glorious Goblin, still wearing his white Glorious Man’s kid-sized shirt, and a gold-sequined belt that turned that shirt into a tunic.

Mark turned some metal into blades, fury igniting, almost grateful for the target.

Mark roared at him, “I was wondering when I would see you again, Goofy Gobli—”

“Take me!” Goofy yelled. “Kill Rubberboy and then take me to talk answers! I don’t want to be a goblin anymore! You can kill the fangs and dose them with shavallian! I heard you can do that from Greeplex! Goblins are awful, terrible people, and I don’t want to be one of them!”

Mark paused. Blades pulled back.

Goofy hovered 50 meters away. Well within killing distance. But he wasn't moving to kill. He had reached that level and then hovered there, finishing his surprising decree. His vector was very serious, and he really, truly wanted Mark's help, and to help him in turn, and also for revenge or... or righteousness, or something.

Mark needed to know, "What the fuck?"

Rubberboy yelled from inside his cage, "Traitor! Traitor to the Green!"

"KILL ALL MONSTERS!" Goofy yelled, and then he pointed at Rubberboy. "That *thing* is a monster!"

"I should have suffocated you when I could!" Rubberboy said. "You're a disgrace! How many have you Bitten fully! None! You terrible goblin!"

"YOU ARE CORRECT! I AM A TERRIBLE GOBLIN! I WEAR THIS DECREE WITH PRIDE!"

According to their vectors, both of them were sincere.

Mark made a rapid decision. He mulched Rubberboy's sphere, killing him and scattered the remains on the ground and then he disintegrated the crunched sphere to clean it off. With another shaping he created a box for Goofy, and he gave the goblin a chair in the box, too. He left the roof open so he could get inside, but once he was inside the box was obviously going to close.

"If you're serious then you can—"

"Thank you!" Goofy looked triumphant in every way, and then he went into the box, saying, "Thank you, Mark. You are a righteous man."

He just... got in there. Right into the killing space.

... Goofy wouldn't die if Mark killed him, but still...

Mark said, "... Yeah. Okay. I'll be turning your Powers off, now, and when your fangs are out and permanently sealed, we'll be having some talks over... over some food, or something. I'm not sure how to handle this right now."

Goofy chuckled, and then he chuckled loudly, and then he said, "Whatever you want! I am not sure how to handle the fact that my entire species are obligate horrors!" He laughed again, and it was a dark and twisted laugh, filled with horror that rapidly turned to crying. "They're so awful! ... Greeplox was okay. All of them were so horrible. Horrible, horrible... horror..." He was crying a lot now, in his box. "... I need to... to lay down now."

Goofy tried to lay down between the chair and the wall of the box, but there wasn't a lot of room, so Mark moved the chair in the box to the side, out of the way as Goofy laid down on the floor. Finally, Mark did a Union of Energy and Entropy, turning Goofy's Powers off.

Goofy breathed softly, gripped one fang in each hand, and then ripped them out. He yanked out his lower fangs, too, and then he tossed his fangs through a hole in the cage. He laid down on the bottom. He fell asleep within a few moments, which was both surprising and not. Goblins could sleep and wake quickly, like cats. But to fall asleep that fast? Kinda crazy. The guy's vector was completely honest and exhausted, too.

"... Well okay then," Mark said, as he began flying north again.

He adjusted the box to make it more of an aerodynamic pill-shape, to give Goofy more place to lay down, and to allow less cold wind to whistle into the container. Goofy didn't seem to mind the small jostles it took to accomplish that, barely waking up at all as he got more space, and less of a wind chill.

"So this is weird now," Mark said, flying fast. He corrected, "Weird*er*."

Communications returned.

Aurora instantly deadpanned, "*Is that Glorious Goblin.*"

“I’m calling him ‘Goofy’ and he came along willingly and I don’t know what that means except that he already ripped out his fangs and I need some shavallian to sear them into never growing back... does that work? Some goblin named Greeplex said it worked. But does that work?”

“... Right,” Aurora said, “I’m gonna... need a minute— I don’t need a minute. We’re not allying with any goblins, Mark, and especially not truly strong ones. You can put that thought right out of your head, right now.”

“I want answers to a lot of things and he’s powerful and unkillable without a ritual that I still don’t know how to do, and I’d rather have his cooperation— He’s depressed as *fuck* about his people and I really, really don’t think he’s lying—” Mark cut himself off.

Because Mark had an inspiration, and a deep, horrific realization at the same time. He faltered in his flight, slowly down just a little.

Aurora asked, “What happened?”

When Kardi and Grey Phantom had spouted all that stuff about Thrashtalon being a mortal man, and how Okuana had fucked him over, stealing his family that ‘Malcolm Shaw’ had Adamant Blood’d and turning them into monsters, Mark had been told many, many times, from many people, that all of that was either true, or propaganda, and there was no way to truly know at all. The Inquisitors knew the real story... theoretically. And yet, Lola had told Mark in no uncertain terms that the nuances of that situation were way beyond his and her clearance level, especially since Mark wasn’t even an Inquisitor back then. He still wasn’t an Inquisitor. Just an Inquisitor-in-training.

In *that* moment, just as well as now, as Mark knew he was stepping into big, big events.

Mark wanted to know about all that stuff all over again.

He wanted to know about the goblins, too, since they were clearly enmeshed with Aluatha in weird ways. Hidden ways, for sure. How hidden? How enmeshed? Greeplex had named First Prince Doomo... but what did that *mean*?

And yet, there were concerns if Mark learned that stuff.

Mark was going to kill someone. Whoever caused this shit back there, and whoever caused the assassination attempt in the tram, and the Ether Turtle, and the Changeling scare. All of that was linked. All of that had people behind it. People that Mark was going to kill.

... Or maybe he was just going to kill goblins, and if he killed enough of them then they couldn't be used against him or anyone else, ever again.

Whoever was behind all of this shit was dangerous, yes.

But the goblins were the actual direct threat.

Mark could 'deal' with the assassination attempt and this setup here, too but he wasn't going to allow any of it to blind him to the real issues in the world, like the monsters. So that was the inspiration.

The realization was this: Mark had somehow become a bigger enemy of Aluatha, or someone inside Aluatha, than he was able to deal with, at all. And the goblins were working with that person, or persons.

"So, uh," Mark began, "So the other goblins I had before Goofy were going to lie to me about anything they wanted to lie about in order to cause the effects they wanted, right? Especially Old Slave. They just lie, yeah?"

Mark wasn't sure what would have happened, but he was sure it wasn't going to be good.

"Correct," Aurora said. "Whatever interrogation Yoro was going to have you do to them is better off not happening, and whatever you think you want out of this one is not enough of a reason to bring him in at all— No. wait. Rekaro is talking to me. One se—"

"Let's End him, Mark," Reeni Thumb said, her voice coming through. "I can get the ritual up and running in an hour; by the time you get back."

“This is a fucking secure line!” Aurora said, raising her voice in an uncharacteristic way.

“Not that secure, girly,” Reeni said.

“Gods damnit!” Aurora muttered.

“Yeah, valid,” Mark said, not sure what he meant by that. He continued, “But I got an idea about all of that: This guy is honestly hateful of goblinkind and he I want to use him to teach me about Goblinhome and then we’re going to rip that place out by the foundations.”

Reeni said, “Bad idea—”

“Get her off the line!” Aurora said.

Deedee spoke up, “I’ve got— There!”

Mark might have said something but Goofy woke up, stirring from his catnap.

Mark stopped flying forward, to look at Goofy in his cage.

Goofy had heard everything Mark had just said, even with the wind being so strong. Now, there was no wind. He looked out from the holes of his adamantium cage, and said, “*I agree to the killing of Goblinhome.*” He added, “But if you try and kill me permanently I will run and find my own way to deal with my hated brothers, though I would rather work with Black King and tear down that which should be torn down.”

Goofy put up a good, true front, but he was exhausted and he didn’t much care what happened to him at this moment. So Goofy collapsed in his adamantium cage, and then he started snoring softly.

Mark resumed flying north, saying, “So there you have it. What do you think?”

“... I kinda like him, now,” Reeni said.

Aurora grumbled but ignored Reeni. She did not need to think, or deliberate. She just said, “It’s a bad idea for multiple reasons, not the least of which is that working with sapient monsters is grounds for immediate execution.”

Mark might have been intimidated by that declaration back before all this shit had happened to him, from Addashield to Addavein, to Memphi, to *this* day and all of its utter *bullshit*. But right now Mark was beyond that, and it was like he was thinking clearly for the first time, as he said, “But *you know*, Aurora, that something rotten is happening *right now* and the other goblins were going to tell me *bad shit*, but this one might actually tell me what I need to know about the inner workings of Goblinhome. He might even know about the changeling scare we had, and especially about whatever *happened here today*.” And then Mark’s anger flared as he thought of something else! Even more shit! Mark loudly added, “And you didn’t say anything about ‘working with monsters is bad’ when I was going to interrogate the others! You were okay with interrogations!”

The line clicked.

Aurora spoke, “We’re on a private line again, Mark.”

Mark’s fury almost ignited, but he listened instead.

Aurora said, “Interrogations are not whatever you’re doing right now, and you know it. You’re not thinking clearly, and you are furious, but you’re also right.”

“Good! Thank you!”

“Bring the goblin to East Tower. I don’t want him in the city. Expect him to get taken out by whoever is causing this shit. If that goblin is an asset for humanity, then that goblin is a wildcard who will tell you a lot about a lot. Now I might be wrong about this, but I have fought the goblins before, and they always tell humans curated lies that would have made you mad in probably-predictable ways. You also would have killed those other ones. This one? I don’t know what you’re going to do to this one, Mark. Neuter it and expect everything to be fine since it can’t Bite? What’s going on, there?” Aurora asked, “Why do you think this goblin is different from the others?”

“I don’t know what’s happening right now!” Mark flew fast, the world hidden beyond a layer of his own adamantium. He could only see and hear because of Quark. He could only breathe because he had rerouted breathing holes down across his face, to his neck. There were no direct gaps into his armor at all. “I’m fucking furious, Aurora. I need answers. I’m taking those answers wherever I can get them, and if that means working with Goofy—” Mark had a crazy idea. “Or maybe... maybe, like... assign Derek to the goblin? Derek can’t be Bitten or killed, and he wants responsibility, right? To prove himself? What better way to prove himself than getting all the information he can out of the goblin? I don’t want to be near Goofy at all, and I don’t want anyone else to be near him, and... I just want answers, Aurora.”

Mark flew on.

Silence stretched in the whipping wind.

Aurora breathed, then said, “Okay! Let’s try it. Derek can do that.”

Mark felt a burning sort of victory at those words. “Thank you.”

“Come back quickly, and do a random approach. You’re about 600 kilometers away, but the final trip will end up at about 680 kilometers to avoid any known issues. Have Quark route you a path that avoids those tagged dangers out there, and also to avoid potential snipers. If we get any more intel about snipers in your path, we will contact you again. Until then, fly fast; it’s the best defense against all the monsters in the sky.”

“Heard and understood.”

“Expect to be attacked by sapient forces.”

“... Heard and understood.”

- - - -

Mark was on high alert, flying fast.

The settlement was still half an hour away.

A vector from the right, from directly above, swirled in on Mark like the entire sky was crashing in on him. It was a glowing white fist, like the sun itself had manifested through the auroras. Clawed fingers curled.

Mark reflectively cut the glowing white goblin hand, ripping his rotor blades into the white expanse. He found little purchase at all. Not enough to stop the grab. Not enough to cut anything. It was a kaiju-sized fist, and it surrounded Mark almost completely in the time it took Mark to shift to a Union of Alacrity/Slowness.

The kaiju-fist was moving at more normal speeds now, but the Light Titan was still a kaiju-sized 'speedster'. It was the Light Titan, for sure. Mark recognized goblin fingers and goblin claws. He felt the astral body of the goblin out, and felt its vector, now that it wasn't moving so impossibly fast.

Grax was here to retrieve Mark, punish Goofy, and prevent information leaks, in that rough order of desire. It was the third real attempt on Mark's life in the day, and Mark had been ready to fight a kaiju since yesterday. Maybe not one quite so strong and fast, but Mark could adjust.

Goofy was still asleep, but he was waking fast because Mark was pumping Alacrity into him, too. Not enough to pop his head like others, but it was enough to let him know that something was going down.

Did Mark want to trust a goblin right now?

No.

He was going to trust Goofy anyway, because Mark could feel Goofy sensing something was very, very wrong, and so Mark peeled his adamantium away from Goofy's cage at the speed of thought, moving incredibly fast, and Goofy saw all of Grax, overhead and violently illuminated.

Goofy *hated* Grax.

Good!

The battlelines were as Mark wanted them to be. Mark was really glad this risky bet paid off.

Goofy started flying downward (powers working again even though Mark didn't un-shavallian him; good to know he could recover that fast) out of the grasping hand, though there was basically nowhere to go. There were a few gaps between the fingers, maybe 100 meters below, but those did not count as exits... Or at least they didn't count right now.

Mark tried a different form of Shaping than normal.

His adamantium *could* move beyond the speed of physicality, even if he himself could *not*. Moving his body at the same speeds as his adamantium was going to fucking *hurt*, though. Mark did it anyway, slamming cutting adamantium into a rotor blade right below him and spinning it fast enough to catch the atmosphere on fire, even as he closed his suit up completely.

Flames licked across black scales as Mark slammed against the insides of his adamantium suit while also yanking himself forward, as he pulled himself through the sky, downward, into those gaps between the fingers of the kaiju-fist cage.

He buzzed by Goofy and scooped him onto a slotted grate of adamantium on the way out of the hand, right through closing fingers. There was a lot of fire and the pain of almost being crushed by their own weight, but Mark made it out and Goofy followed, and then the hand closed.

Grax's vector gave the impression that he thought he had pulled off something amazing, capturing his targets without a fight. He wasn't even aware Mark and Goofy were out of the cage. Goofy was half-dead, but Mark would fix that in a moment.

Mark became a beacon of light and dark as he switched to a Union of Glory and Fear, with him and Goofy as one side and Grax as the other.

Time resumed and Grax yelped, the giant hand over Mark and Goofy turning insubstantial and fading inward as Grax suddenly retreated to the horizon, too far to do anything against. But he stood there, staring.

Mark floated in an aura of Glory, and Goofy floated 20 meters from him, under his own power, also shining with Glory.

Goofy reviled Grax. He was absolutely disgusted by the Light Titan. It was as though Grax was a pile of crawling shit that Goofy had not been able to deal with at all. And maybe also like Grax had been the last straw that broke the camel's back.

There was also an undercurrent of sorrow. A longing for something that could never be. Not now. Not ever.

Goofy intoned, "Let's kill him."

Mark asked, "Why are you doing this, Goofy? Why did you turn on them?"

Goofy had too much to say. He didn't know where to begin. He was also healing very fast. His fangs came back, and he hated that, but he left it be, for now. Whatever Union-based shavallian Mark had inflicted upon him was gone, and he was floating under his own superhero-rank Power, whatever that might be.

Grax remained on the horizon; a white goblin the size of a kaiju, but with ribbons of darkness on his hands and body where Mark had scored him with Fear. He was sizing up the issue before him.

Mark narrowed his question to Goofy, "Why do you hate Grax?"

"There are lots of humans in Goblinhome," Goofy instantly began, "All of them will tell you they are happy to be there. Grax treats his humans like they are servants, walking around and cleaning, and they are servants. They are beneath him. There is no abuse or disdain, because Grax is a noble goblin. He does not push his needs upon his lessers. His lessers simply do as they should for their betters. That is what a proper noble is. Grax doesn't care about his human slaves because they aren't really there for him." Grax scowled deeply, hate bubbling. "They are there. They survive and live and have nice lives... Or at least I thought they did."

“In truth, BiggestBaddest has mind-shackled every human in Goblinhome into being lacunas for anyone who proves themselves. The whole body, too. There is no ‘donated leg’ or ‘donated belly’ and lots of healing magics. There are only human slaves, mind-shackled into being there with ghosts controlling them while the real human watches from inside themselves, living in pure horror as their bodies go about doing whatever BiggestBaddest wants.

“I was talking to a human about food... Their name was Kev. Third generation. Happy to be there. But I touched him when we were kneading bread...” Goofy sniffled. “The mind-shackle broke. Kev asked me to help him escape, and we talked about what he wanted. About lacunas and volunteering and all of that, and he didn’t want to volunteer.

“All before that, I was told that all the humans were volunteers. That they can leave whenever they want! They just have to ask! So I tried to take Kev out of the city, to leave him at a human outpost.

“Grax killed Kev as I was trying to take him away, and then Grax told me all of this.

“That was seven nights ago.

“I hate Grax. I hate goblins.” Goofy pulled out his fangs again and flicked them away. “Death to all monsters.” He looked at Mark. “I am not a mimic. *I am not a monster.* I am a person.”

Mark regarded him. “... Your teeth are growing back again, but don’t worry about it. We’ll solve it later. Focus on the kill right now.”

Mark floated forward, toward Grax on the horizon.

Goofy blasted off a lot faster than Mark, roaring as he flew into the fight.

Mark took up the rear, waiting for the trick, because there was going to be a trick. That Grax on the horizon hadn’t moved for the last 17 seconds, according to Quark’s imaging. Grax had left the image there in order to misdirect. So where was the real—

Mark felt Grax’s astral body reach his range far before he saw anything.

It was like the entire world, back and to the right, was pressing in on Mark, crushing his Unionsense like one would crush a pillow.

Mark latched on, instantly, flooding Grax with Fear and taking all of his Glory for himself, and Goofy.

Grax did not run this time.

Grax materialized, full of light and hate, and he roared a kaiju roar, unafraid.

Mark roared a kaiju Call right back, vibrating the world, and Grax's roar cut with Fear lancing into him, making him lesser.

But Grax did not run. He was deathly afraid but fighting anyway.

That was the problem with Fear; some people reacted weirdly to Fear. Mark would know. He reacted to fear with the need to kill. Glory and Fear still carried with it all of what Mark needed to impart and take, though. The Glory of speed and power; the Fear of slowness and weakness.

Grax sent a thousand arrows of light at Mark as Goofy swung downward, moving with speeds far exceeding what he was usually capable of. Mark would have dodged those arrows with minimal steps out of the way, but they only *looked* like arrows. They could curve and bend at weird angles, for Grax's vector was still in them.

Mark spun his rotors at unimaginable speeds, cracking light with adamantium and then flooding those cracks with veins of Fearful darkness.

Grax faltered, Fear gripping him.

Goofy punched through the center of Grax like a beacon of a much better light, cracking the Light Titan through the center with an impressive display of Tactile Telekinesis and whatever Power he had; Mark still didn't know.

Grax turned the sky into a shredding maelstrom of light shards, each more cutting than the last, destroying the land. It was a distraction. He materialized on the other side of the field, maybe two kilometers away and high in the sky, already raining down spears of light.

Mark stabbed into those spears with Fear again, and the Fear crackled up the lengths of light like black ink.

The light faded away.

Grax stood on the horizon again, and it was really him this time. He was ‘breathing’ hard, chest rising and falling fast. He was in his Light Titan form so there was no actual breathing involved, but he was still himself, even when 600 meters tall.

Mark stared at Grax.

Grax stared at both Mark and Goofy.

Goofy floated beside Mark, yelling, “Run, mimic! Run and prepare for death! We’re coming with everything we need to End you forever!”

Grax narrowed his kaiju-sized eyes—

He vanished.

Grax had thought he could win easily, so he had probably only come himself. Otherwise something else would have happened in that brief altercation.

Mark laid down a capsule for Goofy to get back into—

The goblin instantly went inside, saying, “I mean it, Black King. I want him dead and gone forever. I want his poison and all the other poisons in Goblinhome gone. It will be tough, but it must be done if my people are to ever be free of their evil overlords.”

Mark regarded Goofy. He found himself saying, "... I believe you really do want that."

Goofy's composure cracked. He froze, and then he softly said, "Thank you."

And then Goofy laid back down, and sighed. He wasn't asleep, but he was headed that way, and fast.

Mark closed up the capsule and got going, back to the north.

Quentin's voice came over the coms, "So... Uh. We're going on high alert here, Mark. Just so you're aware."

"Okay, Quentin."

-----

Mark stood to the side of a big central room located in a bunker northeast of the settlement. Eliot had made the whole thing as soon as Mark asked for it and Eliot was planning on it being rather important, going forward, so he had sprung for some important upgrades to the place. The bunker therefore had a bunch of different automatic systems, all really high class, but mostly bought and assembled in the last half an hour. It had food, entertainment, and it could be completely self-sufficient for a decade if they closed the vault doors now and never opened them again. Monsters would naturally break that containment, but maybe not!

And Goofy was going to be here, defending the place, since he was going to be living here.

Aurora was going to allow him this space and 50 meters on the surface as his own. Venturing outside of that area was going to cause problems, though. After seeing all of Mark's interactions with Goofy,

thanks to Quark, Aurora was less reluctant about all of this. Aurora wasn't talking to Mark and them right now, though. She was way too busy talking to a bunch of different people.

The whole team, but Eliot and Mark especially, were preparing to throw down with some of the biggest problems in the world, and Eliot wanted Goofy as a resource.

And so Goofy got a tiny palace. Lined with surveillance and had no real defenses at all, aside from thick walls, of course. But it was still a tiny palace. Big enough for humans, too, because Derek would be staying here.

Derek had been very enthusiastic about this whole arrangement.

Mark wasn't sure which one of Goofy or Derek wanted to kill all goblins more.

Honestly, the last 30 minutes since getting to the settlement and settling down out here in the middle of the bunker had been a blur of activity. Mark had talked to tens of people and all of his own people multiple times, and now he was here, holding a vial of shavallian in one hand.

Goofy stood on the other side of the bunker's main room, prepared to self-neuter, for at least this body. If he came back in another body then that body would regain everything, so Goofy had already promised to do his absolute best not to die.

Mark asked, "You ready to cement this offer of amnesty? To help us take down Goblinhome, as much as possible?"

Goofy stared hard. "Yes, Black King. I am ready to become human."

... Goofy had a few weird ideas about a lot of things, but he seemed sincere.

After Mark had healed Yoro from what Yoro had called a 'tele-splice incident', which had been very, very ugly, Yoro had told Mark that stuff like this did happen occasionally, and there was precedent for it, but it would be challenged, a lot. It would especially be challenged by anyone who didn't want a new

resource for humanity against Goblinhome, and by whoever had been trying to assassinate Mark (and Yoro!) today.

Yoro was understandably furious about the near-telefrag incident.

Whoever came out swinging hardest against this arrangement, either legally or with assassination attempts against Goofy, would probably be linked to the Ether Turtle goblin stuff, House Exatech losing 90% of its settlement people right before the hammer of Walaria came down on them, and maybe even Mark's first assassination attempt, his second assassination attempt through ITLKR, the backup snipers, and whatever else was out there still headed his way. There was a lot of shit to be linked to *someone*.

Mark imagined it was all ultimately linked to Thrashtalon and Leash, but so far there was nothing demonic happening anywhere.

So whatever Goofy had to say was probably important.

But...

Mark said, "You won't become human by doing this."

Goofy told Mark, "You can make the impossible happen. You will figure out a way to turn me human. I am sure. Give me the vial." He reached into his mouth and yanked out all four of his fangs, leaving four holes in his smile. "I am ready."

"... Get it in the wounds, and I heal you, and they're permanently sealed off, in this body. Healing won't bring them back."

According to Lola and a few different sources in Inquisitor's Hall, what Greeplex had said had been true. They had needed to do some rapid research and call some people, but they were pretty sure this was going to work. Shavallian wasn't *supposed* to work on monsters that well *at all*, but apparently it did work on goblins sometimes, and it did work to seal the Bite, ensuring fangs never regrew. Lola had said something about 'I learn new things every day!'

Rekaro and Reeni Thumb had confirmed Lola's research and both of them talked about doing rituals to permanently End Goofy if he got out of line, and maybe even before, but Mark and Aurora had come down hard against that.

The last 30 minutes had been a lot.

Mark handed over the vial of shavallian, saying, "Don't let this body die, Goofy. We're watching to make sure you stay in this body."

"I understand precaution!" Goofy took the vial and swished the liquid into his mouth, like he was swishing mouthwash. He made a face and spoke with a full mouth, dripping muddy silver, red, and green. "Gah! Tastes like clay."

"Yeah, it does." Mark said, "60 seconds, and then I'll heal you, and see if it worked."

Goofy nodded.

He swished.

Mark waited.

And then Goofy swallowed it all. His vector crashed into his body, but not too far. Shavallian didn't work on him completely, just like it didn't work on Mark completely. He asked, "Do you think people will try to kill me?"

"Yes."

Goofy hummed. He stood tall, and said, "I will not kill them back. I swear. I might die, though. I will try not to."

"People tried to kill me at least 3 times today, and they didn't manage it. I'm sure you'll do fine."

Goofy grinned. And then he asked, "Can we talk about Goblinhome yet?"

"A bit more time. I want to introduce you to a guy who can't really be killed. His name is Derek, and one of him will be living with you. He's a good guy."

Goofy nodded seriously. "I will defer to this 'Derek'."

"... Yes, you will. Thank you for that."

Goofy nodded seriously again.

... Mark turned on the healing, and Goofy breathed in a little tight, before relaxing. He was afraid his teeth would come back, and he felt his mouth with his hold hand, but sure enough, like Greeploxx had said and others had confirmed, nothing came back. He now had four holes in his otherwise perfect, white set of teeth... which was kinda odd. Most goblins had pretty nasty teeth, and Mark was pretty sure teeth regrew in goblins all the time.

Goofy cheered, "Woooo! No Bite..." And then he paused. His eyes went a little wide. "Oh... My... I don't even *want* to Bite anyone anymore... Oh." Like a haze had been removed from Goofy's sight, Goofy looked at the world through new eyes. Or at least a new wiring in his brain. "Ohhh."

Mark had mostly ignored Goofy's almost-sexual need to Bite him and everyone else. It was a part of what goblins were. Horny/hungry. Every goblin felt like that. But right now Goofy was just hungry, and it was amazing for him. Mark sighed a little in relief.

Mark held out a hand, to shake hands. "Nice to meet you, Goofy."

Goofy grabbed Mark's hand and shook, and yeah, there was a fuck-ton of strength there, but he wasn't trying to injure at all, and Mark could kill him in an instant if he wanted. "Nice to meet you, Black King!"

Mark let go.

Goofy let go.

And then Mark said, "I'll introduce you to Derek, now. He's outside. He's going to be your main contact for the settlement. There are rules. Rule #1, and the most important rule, is that you're not allowed into the settlement for any reason at all."

"Yes yes. I know this one. Even if they attack me I will not fight back, and even if a kaiju comes I will not seek refuge or assistance. Not before I'm human." Goofy nodded. "Can we talk about Goblinhome now?"

"... Yes. Uhh... I got a list here to go over, first." Mark glanced at the list in his vision that Quark had put there. Mark said, "We have a gate opening in a few days. It'll be scary out here. If you attempt to interfere I will murder you and this experiment ends."

Goofy stood as tall as his meter-height allowed. With a serious tone, he said, "I understand. I will fight Grax and the others instead when they show."

Mark had a deep moment.

He took a breath.

Mark asked, "... What?"