

“That’s enough sleeping!” said Blackthorn, as he threw open the door to the team room.

Mark was instantly awake and sending out a jolt of Union that woke everyone else. Eliot yelped. Isoko groaned. Sally was up and on her feet without being actually awake, and then she blinked her eyes and focused on Blackthorn. She grumbled.

... And Blackthorn’s words registered. Complaining about ‘too much sleep’ seemed like a non-valid complaint—

“I promised you magic lessons! And we only have the next 10 hours to do that!”

Mark was actually awake now, and he got up and started putting on some real clothes—

“Mark. Only wear what you’re fine with losing because your clothes will get shredded. Isoko. You’re going to be catatonic for an hour and unable to defend yourself at all, so dress warmly. Eliot. I have secured some more lessons from Sentinel for today, since you two had to split early last night. Sally. I want to interview you about your desired path in this life and these worlds. It will be an exhaustive interview.” Blackthorn clapped his hands. “Everyone move! Mark’s lesson is going to take us far away from the city because he will kill everything within a kilometer of himself. Maybe even further out than that!”

Everyone was already getting dressed but they all kinda paused when they heard Blackthorn’s final proclamation.

Mark asked, “Uh... What sort of lesson is this?”

“A tap to your soul, done in a very specific way, that you will have to do yourself. It’s basically a ritual, known as the Shaper Decouple Ritual. It should help you disjoin your kinesis from your physicality. I expect you will be able to return to normal functionality with your kinesis after an hour, but until then you will be shredding everything near you because your adamantium will move at your max range and... Well. I’ll let you figure it out. It’s better that way. The end result should allow you to spin adamantium faster than normal, allowing you to fly, after a fashion. After it is over Quark should be able to help you to understand what happened, so you can create the effect again. Most other Shapers would take months or more to recreate the feeling that caused them to disjoin the first time.” Blackthorn grinned. “Maybe if you’re truly determined you might be able to fly with your adamantium by this time tomorrow, so you can fly for Episode 4!” He clapped again. “Let’s get going! 24 hours to the final episode!”

Mark rapidly finished getting changed.

He was practically giddy by the time they loaded up into Blackthorn’s sometimes-invisible hovership.

Grax the goblin sat upon a block of ice carved into a throne, far outside of the city walls. Light danced around him, illuminating the cave with subtle glows. Three servant goblins chewed the bones of some malformations, eating instead of spread the Bite. Their hungry chewing echoed Grax's growing hunger, the gnashing and the gnawing feeling like mirrors of Grax's stomach. The sound of teeth on bone made Grax's teeth drip with venom. He tasted hunger, and... he spat the spit out, trying to ignore the hunger. The drive to Bite.

Grax had tamed himself ever since the Tutorial.

He was no longer a slave to his emotions, or his desires. He was an enlightened soul.

And he was on a hunt for much better prey than a simple meatsack to birth a brother or ten.

Grax spread himself outward, light blossoming from his soul, filling the cave, and then fading to invisibility as Grax's light became one with the light of outside. His sight went with his light, and soon Grax was flowing across the sky, looking for something that would be beneficial.

The goal was to get back to Daihoon.

He did not know exactly what he was looking for, what would help him cross the Veil, but every day he learned new things about humans and he learned new things about the worlds. He even found some monsters that might be helpful.

There was an ice snail that vanished into the ice, into some other place beside the ice. It was similar in nature to the dark snails that ate corpses until you got close enough, and then they evacuated elsewhere, too. Both the ice version and the shadow version were possible solutions to Grax's issue. But whenever Grax approached the shadow snails they simply vanished. Light could not catch a shadow, it seemed. Grax doubted that light could catch ice, either. Now if there was a *light* snail... But Grax had not found one of those. Those were just the monstrous solutions to his problem, anyway.

Grax kept looking.

Over the hills, through the ice sheets of ponds, into caves, Grax searched.

Primarily, he searched for an actual opening back to Daihoon. Monsters sometimes popped out from Daihoon onto Earth, but Grax had never managed to find an open hole. The holes closed too fast.

Secondarily, he searched for a way to *force* an opening back to Daihoon.

Grax needed to get back to Daihoon, to Goblinhome, so that Grax could take his rightful place as one of the Elders. Once he did that, he would come back with an army, because he could not believe what he was seeing out here.

The humans were ripe for the picking.

Weak ones walked out of the walls all the time, looking to kill things. Strong ones rarely showed themselves. Based on some of the humans that walked outside of the walls, Grax had his pick of good birthing targets. So many powers! All of them up for grabs!

And then, Total War.

Yes, it would be difficult and billions would die, and humanity would be reduced to nearly nothing, but the goblins would come out on top, and then they could cage the humans into one city and use them as breeders for goblinkind. Humans made the best birthers, by far!

Grax was pretty sure he could accomplish the dragon's share of the coming war, too. He had passed the Tutorial and he had gained true power. His flashes of light did a lot more than disorient, and distract. He could do a lot more than blend in with the light and heat of the world.

Grax could do a lot.

Not as much as that Rainbow Person of that settlement, just beyond the gate of Memphi. But close enough.

Grax was in his cave, and also a hundred kilometers away, right next to a particularly slow ice snail, creeping toward the monster, gently reaching for the—

The snail turned to ice, and not ice that was actual ice, either. It inhabited the ice that it became. It wasn't actually in the ice, though. It was in some sideways thing that was near the ice... And Grax still didn't understand any of what he was seeing and feeling. So... Not a great way forward, to forge a path to Daihoon.

... Well... Maybe the snails didn't hold the key at all.

Grax already knew what truly held the key.

The gate.

It sat there, beyond the city, and yet still contained within the walls of the city. Seeing it was difficult, for when Grax got too close to the gate his vision turned hazy. Something within the space was disrupting his own power, and if he tried to push through that disruption then something tried to follow him back through the light, to find where he was, and what he was doing.

Grax had learned very fast that whatever tracked him was not to be trifled with.

If he couldn't have hidden himself as well as he could, then the kill team that had tracked him back to his previous lair would have gotten him. That kill team, all black and yellow, had looked rather powerful, too, as Grax walked around them, ducking out of the way of their scanning lights and might. They had almost caught him, and they certainly would have caught him if Grax would have attacked. But Grax knew that to hide was better than to strike without a plan.

Old Slave had been right about that lesson. It was the most important lesson of all.

Most goblins never learned that lesson.

So Grax learned to keep his sight to long measures, when he investigated the gate.

Grax looked at the gate, now.

It seemed so docile, from so many kilometers in the sky. When it had opened those few times several days ago, Grax had almost dropped everything and rushed through, even with all of the humans everywhere around the opening. The opening had filled the world with the sound of tearing, and

afterward Grax had used that sound to find other, temporary openings to Daihoon. The normal ones that dropped monsters off all the time. But back then, at that first gate opening, Grax had frozen, thankfully.

He spotted the Light Queen, the one who brought down the auroras, and the Black King, the one who killed with dark lightning.

His two most loved and hated humans in the world. Grax wanted to Bite them both, but he knew he was still too weak to do that, and besides, those two were being met with other humans who felt almost as dangerous. So Grax had ran.

Grax still remembered watching the Black King strike his troops with sparks and kill them all, bursting them like blood-filled sacks.

And now Grax watched the gate, both the larger one and the smaller one in the middle, lensing the air and spying closely at the people walking around. He read their faces and understood their words, and his sight passed by posters on the walls here and there, and he read them again.

The signs warned of ‘gate rage’, which caused people and animals to go crazy when a gate was open and active, and it was quite common. The stronger you were, the more rage you experienced. A normal being would not know a gate was open at all. Someone like Grax felt it every time the gate opened, for any length of time at all.

The artificial gate, located here in that archway of stone, made the Veil scream when it was torn. The natural openings, the ones that wild monsters fled through, were much quieter.

Every day, Grax was learning new, important things.

Hopefully they would do another test soon, while he was fully awake and investigating, because maybe Grax could learn how to open the path to Daihoon if he saw it again. Once he learned how to open his own rift he would be able to escape everyone that ever came from him. He could attack with impunity, and then swirl through the Veil to escape across worlds—

The Veil thrummed.

They were doing another test.

Grax *needed* to see.

Grax risked it all to slip his sight closer to the gate, to the small arch at the bottom where the Veil parted like so much broken reality—

A twitch in the light.

The only warning Grax ever got.

He came back to his body all the way and started *running*.

His three servants looked at him.

The smartest one of them asked, “What happen?”

Grax was already far, far outside of the cave, his brothers left to their fate as he slipped through the ice, under the snow—

Light. Fire. A roaring pressure.

Fire exploded the cave, cracking stone and sending snow and trees flying upward. A rocket strike, Grax was rather sure. The fire burned, and now his three servants were gone.

... Annoying.

Now who was going to get him food? Himself? No way.

... Maybe these humans needed to learn not to shoot rockets at people who were just spying. Yes. Grax decided he would embiggen another animal. He might not have learned how to open a gate to Daihoon yet, but he had certainly learned how to do one thing very well.

He could turn an animal into a kaiju.

He had gotten to see more of the Black King's capabilities when he embiggened that squirrel the other day, too, which was just silly. Why did the Black King come out? Did this place not have proper defenders of its own? Surely they did. So why didn't the other ones appear?

One very large human did not count as a defender in Grax's opinion. The squirrel would have killed that 'Titanfist' if not for the Black King.

... Grax's fangs dripped venom as he thought of Biting the giant man.

... No no. Not ideal. Let it go. Titanfist had taken down the squirrel with just the Black King at his back, but thousands had been ready to step in to help, and Grax knew nothing about those other humans.

Grax turned to light and flowed across the world, looking for more embiggen targets to test more of Memphi's defenses, for humans to Bite and make into new servants, and to see if he could find an easy way home.

He wondered which he would find first.

... The Black King had been hunting yesterday. Perhaps he was out hunting again?

"The City AI was reporting that there are no people here, and we've double and triple checked, so now there is this: one easy ritual," Blackthorn began.

Mark was standing next to a nice flat stone that Blackthorn had unearthed moments ago, in middle of nowhere, somewhere far to the south of Memphi. Memphi's city walls were over in that direction somewhere, but all Mark could see in every direction was snow and a few trees, and also his team and Blackthorn's obsidian-like hovership.

Blackthorn stood on the frozen grasses near Mark, dressed in black and gold.

Mark wore jeans and a tee shirt, and nothing else. Blackthorn expected all of his clothes to be destroyed the moment Mark created and activated the ritual circle on the stone underneath him.

Blackthorn pulled a roll of paper out from nowhere and handed it to Mark, as he continued, “This is the design for the ritual circle you need to build. I made it using plain language. It’s all very self-evident. Ask Quark to help you with creating the actual circle, if you need help, but perfection does not matter for ritual magic— Not for *this* kind of ritual magic.

“I heard Reeni Thumb gave you a basic rundown of how this works, yes? Eliot has already had this lesson... And I don’t believe Sally or Isoko have?”

Mark looked over the paper and Quark blinked in his eyes, telling him he had the design, as Mark was saying, “Isoko and Sally were there with us when I activated the Winter Breaking Formation... or whatever it was called. I think someone called it that?”

Blackthorn nodded. “It probably had no formal name, but the name you gave it right now is a good one, since it did exactly that. Rituals are very easy when you know how to work them right. They’re actually incredibly dangerous things to teach, as well, because they are so easy to learn and do. This is a Mage Oath sort of thing, Mark.”

Mark solidly said, “I understand.”

“... I see that you do. Paper please.”

Mark handed him the paper.

Blackthorn turned the paper to ash, to flutter on the winter wind. “However you want to do the ritual is fine. Just do what feels right. You only want to learn how to disconnect astral body speed from physical speed, to be able to use your astral body as fast as... Well. I’ll let you figure it out. It’s better that way. NOW! *That* said. You cannot kill yourself with this sort of ritual, but this is a very dangerous. You will see why soon. Perhaps it is better this way so that you will know *why* this sort of magic is highly guarded, and why there is a natural limitation on astral body speeds, based on the speed of the human body.” With extreme seriousness, Blackthorn stressed, “All you are doing is **suppressing** *one* coupling. Remember that! One coupling! *One*. Temporary!”

“Don’t do anything until we’re a good 3 kilometers away!”

“I *highly* doubt anything could hurt you when you trigger the ritual so *you’ll* be fine, but *we* will not be fine until we’re far away.”

Blackthorn *looked* at him.

“... I fully understand,” Mark said.

He imagined Quark overlaying his sight with ritual circles and the whole thing suddenly activating.

Which seems like it would be bad.

Blackthorn frowned a little, staring... And then his eyes went a little wide and his vector went from concerned-does-he-even-understand to concerned-he-understands-completely. Blackthorn turned and began to run away, calling out a cryptic, “You be careful with that now! It’s easy to abuse! Which I think you already figured that out!” Blackthorn ran faster, toward Isoko, Eliot, and Sally, all of whom had stepped out of the vehicle to watch from a distance, yelling, “Get back in the fucking hovership! Go, go!”

Quark said, "I think I can overlay your sight with this image and you can activate it at will, sir."

Mark smiled a little, saying, "It's probably more complicated than that, but let's specifically *not* do that. Not yet." Mark looked at the rock. "Overlay my sight, please. Whole thing at once."

Little blue lines popped into being upon the rock, but they were really on Mark's eyes, so when he moved a hand over the rock he saw the overlay on his own hand.

"Can you compensate for intervening objects?"

Quark said, "Compensating... Done. Is that sufficient, sir?"

Mark moved his hand over the rock, watching as the overlay flickered a little around his skin. It vanished when his hand was in the way and returned when he moved. "Very good. How much processing power is that?"

"I am not limited in that way. This is simple. I still have full surveillance capabilities in a wide spectrum of electromagnetic radiation and sound-based systems." Quark added, "The acclimation period is over, yet you barely use 5% of my capabilities, sir."

Mark smirked a little, studying the diagram before him, making an attack plan as he said, "I'm not sure how to use you to your full extent, Quark. When this Attack the Gate thing is done and we're back on Daihoon, I will try to use you more."

"Thank you, sir. That is all I ask."

Mark nodded, his mind now focused on the diagram.

Basically, it was a donut, with Mark needing to sit in the empty middle to activate it all.

In a more nuanced way, it was an outer ring, an inner ring, and words that repeated around those rings.

It *almost* looked like the 'ritual circles' that he saw characters on kids shows activate at each other, throwing blasts of fire or lightning or whatever. Mark never watched those shows because he had better things to do, but some of the guys on the rugby team watched them all the time, and so Mark had seen a few episodes with the guys. Mostly clips online.

This ritual circle was not one of those oversea-cartoon ritual circles at all. There was no 'sacred geometry' here. It was just purposeful words. 'Disconnect the astral's speed from the physical's speed' was repeated 4 times to form the basic structure, written along cardinal directions and swirling into each other, while the word 'TEMPORARY' ran along the inner donut 4 times, in the hole area, and 'ignore the action limit' bound the exterior of the outer donut area, written small and long, filling the entire space outside of the outer donut. There were some lines and curves added to the design, and Mark was pretty sure those lines and curves were very important, but for whatever reason, Mark could not say.

Blackthorn had left a note on the paper he had given Mark, which he had then burned, but Quark had saved that note. Mark read that note as he looked into the air.

'Ritual Magic, of the kind you are practicing now, works as the user wants it to work. What I have given you is a guideline. Add your own understanding, and be purposeful about it, and you will get there.'

Back when Mark had activated the ritual that Reeni had created in the farms of the settlement, he had Unified the trees and the little dolls that Reeni had placed all over. That was a ritual of Union.

This was going to be a ritual of Adamantiumkinesis, though.

Mark had a few good ideas of where to go with this, to make it actually feel like magic. He started, of course, with making a blade of adamantium, refining it to a needle, and then he started carving on the lines Quark laid before him. The stone Blackthorn had pulled from the ground was about 4 meters across and mostly flat... Hmm.

Mark pulled back, and looked at the stone.

He took his adamantium and made it into a thin blade, pulling on two ends, making the center as straight as could be. In a matter of a moment, Mark created a 5 meter long thread of adamantium. Like a wire through very crumbly cheese, Mark removed the top several inches of the boulder in one quick slice. The noise was incredible and Mark had fucked up the cut at the end, chipping upward. A bit more carving solved that problem, and now Mark was left with a perfectly flat surface. It looked level, and Mark asked Quark to level it for him.

Another 5 minutes worth of carving and shimming later, stuffing rocks into the northern and western undersides of the rock, and the rock was level *and* flat.

And now, with a completely flat and solid granite surface, Mark started carving with adamantium... which was more like scratching. Scratching seemed wrong, so Mark had Quark look up carving options.

Mark ended up with an adamantium tool shaped like a V, with a knife edge on the front. Mark skimmed the tip of the V into the granite and ribbons of granite chips flowed up the channel of the V where they scattered off the end of Mark's tool, and soon the circles were carved.

Carving the words was simple. Mark had never had the best penmanship, but Quark's lines helped make it all rather legible. Carving into the tier 0 stone with PL 79 adamantium, backed by a PL 90-ish astral body, made for short work.

15 minutes after he had started Mark was done.

Mark smiled at his handiwork, and then he clambered onto the rock to sit down in the middle.

It was kinda weird, sitting there.

Would carving a ritual circle like this actually make magic happen? Mark hardly believed it. None of this felt really magical at all. Not like the Winter Breaking ritual that Reeni had made.

Mark was rather certain that the lack of that magic feeling was his fault.

The ritual circle was clearly missing mana.

... And adamantium was mana.

... How much of his adamantium *did* Mark want to dedicate to this crazy dangerous result? It wasn't an experiment, after all, so Mark didn't call it an experiment. It was a result.

Mark had had 8.9 kilos of adamantium a handful of days ago, after buying Blackthorn's help for this entire Attack the Gate thing with 2 kilos of adamantium. Mark still had 8.9 kilos of public adamantium. Mark *also* had a bunch of adamantium inside of his bones, waiting for him to take it out. Maybe about 3 kilos, according to his rough estimates. It was getting pretty dense inside of his bones, like for real.

He did not want to bring that adamantium out into the open, though, because to do so would mean losing a hidden weapon, and that hidden adamantium was also his proof that he was adamantium blooded. He planned to reveal he was adamantium blooded after this whole Attack the Gate program was over, to prove that he had what it took to play with the big heroes *and* that the empires were after him for selfish reasons and that he would not be controlled.

Fighting a shadow war for a week was one thing. Fighting it for the rest of his life? No thank you. Better to have open war and open season on people trying to turn him into a slave.

The Collective would become an ally in that sort of fight, too, after they saw that their bosses were using them to try and do the exact opposite thing that a paladin should be doing with their life. The Collective made sure that True Healers and (some) metal blooded people remained free. Most metal blooded people, from mithril to orichalcum, were supported and kept free by the banks of the world, like Metallic Bank. Mark's bank. Were there hidden adamantium blooded people out there, too? Probably. Mark didn't know about those guys, though.

... Mark looked at the ritual circle and decided to leave the 3 kilos of adamantium in his bones, in his bones. It would not come out without him actively pulling it out, after all, and not with Adamantiumkinesis. He had to use Union to get it out.

This ritual was only about Adamantiumkinesis, though...

Was it, though?

Mark was adamantium blooded, and therefore adamantium was in every thing he did. *Could* he decouple his kinesis speed from his physical speed, without involving everything else?

Probably not.

... Let's keep going, anyway.

How to start, though? To make it feel more magical?"

... Mark took one spike of adamantium and turned it into a prop, as for an airplane. He hovered that prop above himself, right above, and then he turned that prop, spinning the prop as fast as he could. It made a downdraft, but not much more than that. Mark focused, spinning the prop at his top speed, focusing, focusing... focusing...

He looked down at the ritual, then up at the prop, and the prop spun faster and faster, or at least Mark wanted it to.

"Overlay my sight with the ritual, Quark, projecting the words I carved into the air above me."

Mark's sight flickered and lines rose from the stone all around him, into the air, around the spinning prop—

Mark felt something come together. Like a line was being touched.

This wasn't enough. Not at all.

... Mark knew what he needed to do. The spinning prop was Mark's goal, to be able to spin the metal so fast he could fly with it. But if he just... lined the letters of the rock with his adamantium... yes.

Mark looked down while he still spun the prop overhead, and with his Adamantiumkinesis he turned almost all of his adamantium into liquid that he poured into the words, into lines, that kind of reminded him of that kaiju squirrel's monowire tail hair, or how his Union threaded through the world—

It was like throwing a switch on a power station.

Suddenly, something gave way.

Mark's adamantium ripped through the letters of the rock all around him and then shot off into the distance, into every distance, like threads of Union, impossibly thin and truly far reaching. The spinning prop above Mark disintegrated into adamantium lines that spread upward like so many spider threads. Mark felt the world through those threads like it was a soft thing, like he had a thousand feelers reaching out into every direction.

Mark floated in a crater of churning gravel, adamantium wires turning rock to stones, to pebbles, to sand.

Every touch was the swaying of a hundred feelers through the rock, through the trees, through the sky.

Mark watched adamantium trail across his skin, carving away his clothes, playing in Quark's body, with Quark mostly ignoring the feeling of all those lines touching him.

Quark's voice was a distant thing, "Sir? Are you, uh, in control, sir? Mark?"

Mark turned his head and raised his arm, and the land in that direction suffered from monowire disintegration. It was a phenomenon that Mark had seen yesterday, with the kaiju squirrel's tail, and which he had momentarily thought about when he enacted this ritual, which... was working out as he wanted it to work? But... Er. Monowire was wildly illegal all the world over, and for very good reason.

... Was Mark in control at all?

Mark said, "I think I'm in... uh... control... hmm."

Mark had seen his monowires carve the land ahead, his voice giving vibration to those wires that then billowed through the rock with every word uttered, which was disturbing. But...

Mark was floating in the middle of a mass of wires that had broken and destroyed the land underneath, reaching deep into the depths, but his wires still supported him. He was floating over a crater right now. A constantly mulching crater. Hmm. Yes. Perhaps there were some, uh, unintended synergies between Adamantiumkinesis and Union's thread-like behavior.

... But could he spin a propeller fast enough to fly—

His adamantium crashed together, coming from every direction all at once, slamming into the space in front of him, sending Mark plummeting into the gravel and stone underfoot. Mark startled and released

the gathered adamantium to its normal hovering position behind him, and the adamantium instantly moved behind him, smacking into his head and splashing in every direction like at thousand released bullets that carved into the ground and sent Mark flying forward as the rocks struck ground and he tried to regain control, to pull the adamantium back to him, back to his close control.

Mark went flying toward the ground, pulled in by his adamantium anchors that were buried 200 meters below the surface, and then the adamantium slammed back into Mark, to become droplets high in the sky.

Mark breathed a simple healing Union and the adamantium became monowire again, but in a billowing sort of way, and Mark catapulted into the air, tumbling and going, "Whoops!" very loudly.

Mark tried to do nothing, to hold his hands outward and spread his legs a little.

He was nude again, because of course he was.

It was cold.

But he was stable in the air, held maybe 50 meters in the sky by a lot of monowire that was very casually carving more and more land into gravel with every beat of his heart.

"... Quark? You okay?"

"I am unharmed, sir. I seem to have your same invulnerabilities to adamantium. This should come as no surprise."

"Right! Yes."

Mark moved a little and hillsides crumbled.

He imagining getting back down to the ground safely.

His adamantium retracted back to his body, all the way, splashing against him like a soft punch and then scattering around him. This, of course, sent Mark plummeting.

Instead of easily touching the ground with his adamantium to cushion his fall, Mark instead pushed off of the gravel with all of his entire might. Bad news: he blacked out from the sudden upward throw. Good news: when he managed to force himself to start a Union with the world, to heal, he came to, and all of his adamantium spread out into a monowire poof-ball with him at the center. All of that monowire was supporting him even if he wasn't making any real movements anywhere.

Even if he was high in the sky.

Air had its own density of weight, after all. As soon as you had enough surface area, even air's low density still affected you.

Mark came to in a winter sky, watching the world from on high, nude and barely feeling it because of the sight of it all. He was flying. Flying in a way he did not want to fly, so he would need to find another way. But he was flying under his own power.

Floating.

It was magnificent.

The world was a white and brown winter landscape, except for the parts Mark had destroyed on his way upward. That part was thoroughly gravel'd.

But the rest of it was magical. There was the Mississippi, like a brown snake through the land. There was Memphi, far to the north, looking comfortable with all the smoke rising from chimneys here and there. The sky was overcast but kinda clear, with big open blue areas... And Mark wanted to fly into those spaces—

His adamantium crashed into propellers and wings and some of them were dragon wings and some were plane wings and the propellers were made of claws and Mark began to fall back to Earth, yet again, because there was no order to the propellers at all.

“Oh dear,” Quark said, as the ground rapidly approached.

Mark's adamantium poofed outward, into a land-mulching ball of adamantium threads before he hit the ground.

“Okay, so,” Mark asked himself, his adamantium sweeping across the land and attaching to things in the way that Union usually did, but also moving faster than Mark could think. “How long is this going to last.”

Mark killed a hundred small animals hibernating and every single tree and plant in the area, because every vector he felt out there, he *felt*. With adamantium monowire. And then the vectors vanished and the monowire moved on to find another vector. Any vector at all.

Mark churned through vectors rather fast because dead things did not have vectors.

Mark held himself outward, in every direction, just being calm, like a rock—

His adamantium crashed inward, like a thousand weighty rocks, which were more like splashed drops of water when they hit, and then Mark was falling again, like a rock usually fell.

He *tried* to throw out caltrops, to stabilize himself and hover like he usually did, but monowire formed instead and then the black threads became impossibly-fast-spinning bits of metal that burrowed straight down, at the very edge of Mark's Union range, and Mark sort of floated downward. He *thought* about stopping the spin and just hovering, and how the caltrops were usually only 4 meters from him, at the average, and Mark slammed himself into the ground as the caltrops yanked him downward, and the caltrops came to him.

“... Ow,” Mark said to no one in particular, face and body deep into the gravel, as he switched back to Union and his adamantium became monowire again. Mark gradually ascended on cutting wires, as the ground mulched even more, as he muttered, “Okay. This can stop now.”

He was glad his friends were probably very, very far away. Maybe they were even beyond the walls—

His monowire drifted toward the city, pulling him in that direction, and Mark instantly shouted to Quark, “Missions to kill monsters in the area! Missions out in the wilds!”

Mark found himself whipped around on his monowire Union and facing white hills once again, his monowire searching for monsters.

Like a seeking, searching squid, Mark was the center of an undulating mass of monowire that he barely controlled, except in the largest of ways.

He tried not to panic.

“Good news,” Quark said.

“Okay?!”

“I am in contact with Blackthorn and he suspects that this will last maybe 45 more minutes, and everything happening right now is simply a linking failure that will last only as long as your astral body can sustain the action.”

Mark was about to say something about how Union meant he could go forever.

... But he could also purposefully weaken himself?

Ah.

Yeah.

“That works!” Mark announced.

“Yes, sir,” Quark said.

Tartu stared, unseeing, at a show about cooking, or something, on the large screen in Shawn and Lenny’s recovery room. Shawn and Lenny were healed, but they were not whole, and they were currently under a medically induced coma so that the healing magics would work better. They had been up and awake for a few hours, but now they were back under and healing.

Tartu returned to ‘watching’ the cooking show, to see some woman dump tomatoes into some sort of blender—

He changed the channel to something else. Anything else.

Now it was a show about boats. This was better. The cooking show had had too much blending. Tartu would never look at a blender the same way—

Kardi walked into the entrance of the room, holding her phone. She looked up at Tartu and she opened her mouth to speak, but she stopped.

Tartu was probably glaring at her again. He needed to stop that. Kardi was still a valuable member of the team, but she had crossed... She had crossed so many lines. Holy fuck—

And now Tartu was getting mad again.

Why the fuck did Tartu ever agree to bring her on to the team? She was 19. Three years younger than him, Lenny, and Shawn. An outsider with a grudge against a man who shouldn’t be on the front line at

all. Tartu had hoped, originally, that he could have convinced Mark to not be a warrior, if Tartu had aimed his wand right.

But Kardi wanted fame, and honestly? So did Tartu.

He had 87 million Looks on his Crystal Tower hero profile right now. That number was going up fast. Fame opened a lot of doors. Not as many doors as money and power, but still, a good amount of doors.

And somehow he had gotten caught up in everything.

And Lenny and Shawn were in a medically induced coma and Tartu would probably have knee problems for a week or two, depending on if he could get some better healing or not. The guys would have issues for years... But they'd be back in Daihoon, soon, and...

And Tartu hoped he hadn't fucked up things too badly with his dad, with the settlement.

Dad and the rest of Mage Society wanted Mark gone from the settlement, but...

Tartu might be done with this particular fight.

He looked away from Kardi, thinking about normal hero shit. Acting, maybe. Of course he would still fight monsters and kill horrors, but he was so much better against known threats than unknown threats. That was one of the reasons he wanted to go into the Hero Program. Reality show fights against known villains were easy wins. Or at least they were supposed to be easy—

“Blackthorn sent out an action alert 20 minutes ago,” Kardi said softly, “Mark did some sort of ritual for power. That's all. I'll get out of your hair now.”

Kardi walked away, though her eyes lingered sadly on the guys, laid up in bed.

And then she was gone.

... Did Tartu *want* to see whatever demon shit that Mark was getting up to? Under the control of another demon, acting through Blackthorn— Okay. Well. Yeah. Tartu picked up his personal screen from the nearby table, muttering, “Mark isn't *really* doing some stupid fucking demon ritual, right? He can't be. That's dumb and...”

Tartu went quiet as he flickered through the recent alerts for the Hero Program, and then the All Alerts, for all of Memphi. It didn't take long to find Archmage Blackthorn's alert. There it was.

Tartu pressed it and a screen came up, asking him for credentials to view the alert.

... Weird, but okay. That made Tartu a bit more worried, but it was fine. Alerts of a magical nature were Curtain Protocol sealed, so Tartu held his Mage Society ID in front of the screen's camera and the alert flickered and faded to options.

Tartu pressed the 'view action' button.

There was a dot in the sky, and the land was broken and breaking, and Tartu was pretty sure he knew what he was seeing, but he wasn't 100% there. So he poked around the cameras for the event, switching view, and he saw... Oh.

Yeah.

That was Mark.

And he was...

Yeah.

It was what it looked like.

“That’s fucking crazy,” Tartu muttered, sitting in a large, comfortable chair, beside Shawn and Lenny, as he stared at a screen in his hands, at utter destruction. He whispered, “Holy shit.”

He was surprised, annoyed, and aghast all at once, because Mark was obliterating the land with adamantium monowire and violating at least 2 international treaties. Maybe 3. Tartu only really knew about the treaties against using uncontrolled powers in a large, open setting, and then, of course, there was the treaty that was actually the big one; the interworld agreement to not use monowire for any reason.

That shit got everywhere.

They were having a hell of a time burning the squirrel kaiju’s corpse because of its tail hairs, which were not monowire, but they were close. That stuff had injured one worker who went out to clear it up, severing his leg, but only because he wasn’t wearing proper PPE. The guy thought —and usually rightfully so!— that he could walk into a kaiju cleaning with PL15 gear. Kaiju bodies didn’t normally retain any sort of PL modifier at all after death, except in the internal bits here and there, like some mana crystals and otherwise. But the *physically* of the *molecularly* strong kaiju hair had been too strong. Some hair had gotten into his basic gear and then cut his foot off when he took the gear off at the end of the day.

And here Mark was throw *actual* monowire all over the place, and flying at the center of it. Adamantium monowire! Holy shit! If he lost any of it then someone was going to die. Multiple someones, too! Adamantium was PL 79!

And the fucking dragonspawn could fly now.

Fucking great.

And! And! He was also obliterating the land and anything that grabbed his attention. Just think of all the moles in the ground and the birds in the trees and... Well the monsters were dying, too, so that was good. But...

Tartu felt small as he moved through several cameras so he could actually see the monowire.

That shit was impossible to see unless you looked very close, which was the main danger of it all, but when you used as much as Mark was using right now then you could see it. Sometimes. And there it was. A grey haze around Mark’s skin. All the rest of it was ‘invisible’, though the AIs watching the event had determined Mark’s range at 1,200 meters in one direction, but most commonly 600 in all directions.

Tartu wondered how much adamantium he was actually using. That much monowire should have a great weight to it. But Mark had basically spread out his weight of, what, 180 kilos? All across all of that space? A strong wind would have moved Mark across the land like a rolling horror—

Tartu's heart slammed in his chest as he rapidly flicked through screens to check the weather, but he didn't need to go far. The AIs watching the event calculated that there was roughly a 0% chance of the wind pushing Mark toward the city. The wind was north-to-south, and Mark was already south.

That was why Blackthorn had taken Mark south of the city—

Mark's monowire slammed out of the sky, into him, and sent him falling to the ground, right before he flickered his adamantium into spherical shape all around him, at about 5 meters out, which wasn't enough to slow his fall at all.

And then Mark bloomed into a monowire menace, yet again, right before he hit the ground.

The ground disintegrated under the dragonspawn, turning to boulders and then car-sized rocks and then gravel where the demon-touched flew.

Tartu muttered, "This is fucking insane. This is..."

This was beyond him.

If Mark could do that on command, instead of under the effect of a Shaper Decouple ritual, then...

There was a reason Archmage Addashield had been one of the strongest archmages to ever exist, to change the world, to rescue humanity from the Reveal. This was one of those reasons. Stuff like this.

... Tartu wouldn't have even seen the alert unless Kardi had come through and told him about it.

Tartu was horrifically worried for the new dragon tyrant growing in their midst, for the warrior that should be disqualified for being a warrior because healers were more important, and for the possible response from the hidden dragonists in the Empire. But he was mostly wondering what Kardi's real deal was...

And then, no.

Tartu turned back toward his own concerns, his own future, as he watched Mark destroy everything around him. With renewed disgust, Tartu slapped the screen, saying, "Just look at this fucker! The physical embodiment of destroying everything around him to get what he wants. You know, Lenny? Shawn? I think I am over the politics of this shit. This is so far out of my power level that it's insane. But no. I'm not stopping here. I truly, honestly, simply, just hate this bastard, and I want to punch his stupid fucking face."

Kardi walked down the hallway, holding her phone in her shaking hands. She held it together for a while, for a long walk, knowing that the AIs were watching her, recording her. This was the Hero's Association hospital, and the AIs and the eyes were everywhere.

But Kardi walked far enough, for long enough, just trying to calm down, that when she calmed down she found herself in a dead zone. One of the cameras was obviously broken, seeing as how it was

sparkling and only connected to the ceiling by a single wire, and though Kardi wasn't sure if this was good enough, she felt Lucky right now. Who broke the camera? No idea. Why did Kardi feel secure? She wasn't sure.

But this felt right.

Kardi said, "I need help."

Someone was surely watching. Probably a lot of someones. But most of those someones would see her prayer as a prayer, and nothing more. If the gods were any help she would have prayed to them long ago. She had *tried* praying to the gods. To Freyala, Malaqua. Verdago even. Kardi would have happily worshiped at the halls of Pluta, the Goddess of Wealth and Prosperity, because Kardi wanted all of that, most of all. She had even tried going to Citadel Pluta, but she came from a poor family and she had no real connections to get not-poor, so she was not welcome at Citadel Pluta.

But she did have Luck.

Luck was all she needed.

Kardi prayed to herself, to her Power—

A twitch of wind.

A feeling in the gut.

Kardi... Stepped to the left. Yes. Now she... stepped to the right. Yes. And then she walked forward—
Turned around. She walked back the way she came— Pause! Stop right here. Where was she?

Kardi was at a crossroads of the Hero's Association.

... She pulled out her phone and she... Opened the phone app.

Kardi stared at the numbers on the screen, from 1 to 9 and then 0.

With her finger hovering over the keypad, Kardi... pressed this number, then that number, then she found the numbers she was looking for and kept pressing them. 17 total— Ah. No. Back up. Delete... this one, and then that one.... And then put them back, but where the other ones had been. Yes. Still a 17 digit number.

It was an Earth connection, according to the first 2 numbers. 22 was for Daihoon, but the 11 at the start of this phone number was for Earth. Who was she calling right now? And why was she specifically using the Earth area code?

Kardi pressed the call button and held the phone to her face.

The phone rang and rang and rang—

The line picked up.

An impatient man asked, "Who are you and why do you have this number?"

Kardi chose not to answer, because that felt like the right—

Kardi felt the urge to answer, so she said, "I'm sorry. Is this not Aunt... Uh. This is obviously not my aunt in Daihoon. I, uh, put the number in wrong. Sorry. I'll try again."

Kardi hung up—

She pulled out the identification card on the phone and she tossed the phone in one trash can and the card in another can, further down the hallway. Act natural. Act natural. Be normal.

Where was she walking right now? She looked up—

Oh.

The Villains In Memphi wing of the Hero's Association. There was Credenza in a large sculpture statue, and Grey Phantom in another, and then most of the rest of the current crew. There were ten pedestals for villains, and on the other side of the Association there were ten pedestals for heroes. The pedestals were to display the top people in the HVP in the city of Memphi, but while there were maybe 200 villains, there were thousands upon thousands of heroes. Not many heroes or villains that actually mattered, though, for Kardi's purposes.

Most of the villains were glorified trainers.

Most of the heroes were people with hopes of getting glory.

Only the top 10 got statues made of them.

The metrics for getting a statue, and placement in the lineup of statues, were heavily influenced by income in the HVP, popularity contests online, and value to the community of Memphi as a whole.

Sentinel and Kraigen Steele were the top two heroes of Memphi, both of them certified superheroes who killed kaiju on their own, and regularly.

Credenza had recently catapulted into the #1 supervillain slot, and she was probably never getting ousted. Her international fights with Glorious Man were some of that good shit, and the public loved her.

Kardi stood in the space and felt the whims of Luck around her, from the school trip with young kids walking down the rows of statues, their teacher telling them all about heroes, to the janitors cleaning the windows and emptying the trash that she had just thrown her old phone into, to the... the cameras in the sign for Villains In Memphi, that were looking right at her.

Kardi waved at the cameras and then she stood there, waiting. Who was going to show up? Who knew. Not Kardi. She only knew that she had waved, and someone had seen, and now she would wait.

When she was young, before she knew anything at all, her grandmother had been alive and she had taught Kardi a lot about a lot. Kardi didn't know anything at all back then, but Grandma's words resonated these days, and everywhere she looked.

Grandma had told her, 'Be careful of what you do to others, Kardi, because what you do will always be returned three fold unto you.'

So far she had worked Mark over to make him impossibly famous, and she had done the same for Tartu and others. She was a little famous now. But she could get a lot more.

A whole lot more.

And then she would be rich! So very rich! She could buy and sell an entire Temple of Pluta, and buy her way into the highest halls of Pluta's halls of power...

So why was she still standing here? It had been 10 minutes so far. Had the person behind the camera up there not seen her? Surely they had. Kardi *almost* didn't believe in herself, in her Power.

And then a grey hand reached up from the floor and grabbed her, dragging her down into shadows, through the ground, through stone, to a hallway far below all of the normal things up there.

Kardi stood in an underground tunnel that looked like a hallway in a training facility, facing an older man of grey hair and a grey suit. Grey Phantom. Father of Sentinel, though not many people knew that, because Grey Phantom clearly had some de-aging work done. Maybe by Mark's True Healer Uncle? Probably!

Kardi hadn't known what was going to happen, but she was good at thinking on her feet, and Grey Phantom was not wearing his mask today. That was good for her. Emotions were easier to play off of when she could see unobstructed faces.

Grey Phantom asked, "What are you doing, Kardi Shale?"

Kardi said, "I need to make a deal to ensure that you don't rescue Mark after Episode 4 is over because he needs to be captured. You see him out there, right? It's all over the alert systems. Mark is a massive liability to everyone near him, and he needs to be taken away by the empires anyway. Just let it happen."

Grey Phantom frowned.

Kardi already had him.

He asked questions of 'why' and Kardi practically saw which words and actions would steer him the ways she wanted him to go, so Kardi did the steering she needed to do. She spoke of dragonists and empire influence and how the HVP was propaganda, and how if push came to shove then the Aluatha Empire would shove, and they would shove hard.

And then Grey Phantom asked, "Why do you hate him?"

Kardi played innocent, "You think I hate him?"

"Don't kajushit me. I deal with Credenza all the time and I know *exactly* what you're doing, but I'm *allowing* it, Kardi. So tell me why you hate him, and tell me true, or else this conversation ends now and I remove you from the program."

Kardi had hit a block. This happened sometimes. Even Lucky shots could still only hit armor when the coverage was complete.

Kardi still felt out her Luck and picked the best answer, her mouth almost moving on its own as she said, "He's got a big secret and it'll hurt a lot of people when it gets out. That's why he shouldn't be anywhere near anyone—" Kardi wasn't sure what she was saying, but dots suddenly connected, and then, came enlightenment. In that moment, as her mouth opened to form the next words, Kardi felt amazingly correct, like she was aiming through clouds, and falling rocks, and bird swarms, but suddenly the sky

cleared and a line of light pointed straight ahead, illuminating the target. Kardi hit that target, “It’s never really been about hate. I played up the hate because it suited me. In truth, I *used* him as much as I could because I am a greedy bitch. And that time is over. It’s time to dump a dangerous animal. I suggest you do the same, *while you can*. It’s all ending soon.”

Kardi stood there, not quite realizing her words until they were done.

‘It was all ending soon’?

What?

Kardi tried not to let her suddenly worry contort her face too much as she raced to think of what she could have possibly meant. Something was ending?

Grey Phantom studied her, but he was also worried. He knew something was up. He connected dots that Kardi didn’t know existed.

Kardi put her internal crisis on hold and waited.

Grey Phantom decided to point up and behind Kardi, and say, “The stairs are there.”

And then he practically got sucked into the ground, his Intangibility pushed hard and specifically to make him zoom through the ground, getting wherever he needed to be.

Kardi turned and saw the staircase...

And then she saw the hallway ahead.

... Feeling another tug of Luck, Kardi walked down the hallway, passing the stairwell and a sign on the opposite wall that pointed in two directions. The direction she was walking in was toward something called Training Servitor Room U-3, CQC; Underground, Close Quarters Combat. Training Servitor Room U-4, Guns, was in the other direction...

Kardi turned around.

She always loved shooting things, at making her power known at as far of a distance as she could. It was just... magical. Plain magical.

Kardi arrived at a gun range with ten shooting booths and a long hallway on the left with stationary targets and a shorter room on the right, but with mobile targets. Several were shooting, but there was room for more.

A servitor floated in the middle of the room, surrounded bunch of guns that were under its control.

Kardi’s hands shook, only partially because of having them regrown so recently. She needed rehabilitation, and she needed it fast. Kardi approached the servitor and pulled her hero card out of her pocket—

She fumbled the card and it fell to the ground, right at the feet of some handsome guy in casual jeans and a shirt who picked it up, smiling. He had dimples, and he was her age. He was really quite cute.

He handed the card over, saying, “You dropped this, Luckygun.”

Kardi's eyes went wide and her heart beat hard. She grinned, and felt *seen*. "Thank you! You know me? Who are you?"

The guy grinned, his dimples intense. "Name's Johnny, but the hero name is 'Fiveguns'. Arcane Power. Multi-Bolt."

Kardi decided that this was a good contact for the future, but not right now. "It's nice to meet you, Johnny. Maybe we'll see each other around again— Thank you for noticing me. I've... I've never been noticed before. Heroically, I mean."

Johnny grinned wide, looking a little embarrassed but also—

Kardi said, "Are you in the spotlight program, or headed that way? Because we got this Attack the Gate thing happening and we need to boost the defenses of the gate, and a good gunner would be a nice addition."

"*Another* good gunner, you mean."

Kardi blushed.

Johnny instantly started talking shop, because this was exactly what he wanted to happen. Kardi easily navigated all the best choices for herself and him, and soon she was waving goodbye to the guy, with plans to have him join the volunteer forces for the gate defense, under her letter of recommendation. And then she grabbed a pair of revolvers from the gun servitor in the middle of the room and got to working on her aim, with her stupid, tingling hands.

Her shots went absolutely wild for a while, but she was getting her feeling back fast enough.

--

A guy in a surveillance room, in the middle of Memphi's main defense center, sat at a desk and typed away at a keyboard. He was rather determined to find out who had called him. Who had bypassed all of the natural defenses of the calling system, and called him, straight up!

His phone number was private, dammit!

The trace put the cell tower at the one on top of the Hero's Association, so that narrowed his search a lot. The phone call had been full of static, though, otherwise the AI voice cleaners could have cleaned it up, but he was pretty sure the guy who called had been heightening his voice to make him sound like a girl. So that was one clue.

But it had been 20 minutes and he couldn't figure it out.

A woman came by with two cups of coffee, one in each hand. She set one down in front of the guy, saying, "Still no solid leads?"

"It's infuriating!" said the man. "The AIs are helping but almost all of them are watching the Careed kid blender the land, trying to get good footage and to make sure he doesn't roll into town on accident."

The woman grinned, unworried about the call. The guy was being way too paranoid, by half. She said, "I was watching that footage, too. He's really cute." She added, "That suit they got him wearing does him the opposite of a favor, though. Such a shame."

The guy flicked through several surveillance camera feeds at once, looking to find guys on phones. None of those calls were from when he had gotten his call, 20 minutes ago. He had already discounted all normal phone calls happening in real time and he had moved on to phone calls set up on phones and temporary AIs. Maybe a recorded message attached to an autocaller? Mmmm.

The guy didn't respond to the woman's regard for Mark Careed.

The woman scoffed. "I'm not going to stop you, but you really should watch for things that are actually important. There was that strike on the gate scryer and possible kaiju-creator four hours ago, and now Careed is having a Power Fluctuation. There are more important things than some phone call from some random person. It might have just been an honest miss-dial and the system let it through for whatever arcane reason."

The guy gave the woman a Look, and said, "I researched the Daihoon number that matched mine. It is not in service, but when it was, it belonged to a male fighter's gym."

"Probably no aunt there, huh?"

"Highly unlikely."

"Well there's your coffee, anyway."

The man got back to searching for whoever had called him... and yeah, he was probably being derelict in his duties, but he was just one analyst, doubled up on the eastern wall alongside ten other analysts. Sure, he might have been the only one doing his job instead of watching Careed learn how to control himself, but he could indulge a personal fascination for a minute...

Or however long it took, really.

"Who *flippin'* called me," the guy whispered to himself, as he flicked through screens.

--

Grax found five different possible embiggen targets and also the Black King.

He rapidly retreated when he saw the Black King.

The Black King was a swirl of dangerous cutting wire, as large as an embiggened monster, which was strange to see. Grax watched, enthralled, for some amount of time. He eventually ventured closer, to actually attack, but the Black King reached him thorough his untouchable light and cut at him.

He cut the light, which made no sense at all, but it was a fact that Grax *needed* to understand.

Grax had first met the Black King in his first home, in the dragonoid canyons, and the Black King had destroyed his people to the last, even killing those of them who hid in the light, in the stone, and in the

water and elsewhere. Grax had never forgotten that. He would always remember the killer who killed his first people.

Grax had thought he was beyond the Black King's touch after winning his Power from the demons, but that was untrue. He was just as vulnerable. Just as dead, if he chose to attack the Black King directly.

But maybe, now that Grax was stronger, and since the Black King was clearly occupied, maybe Grax could learn from him. If the Black King could cut the light, without using light, then maybe Grax could learn how to grasp shadows without using shadows. Maybe he could grasp the Veil itself and rip the barrier keeping him from home, from escaping this awful place.

Grax decided to go and embiggen some targets, to see how the Black King would react to a real monster in his face.

He went around the city and eventually decided that the target on the sunrise-side of the wall was the best, closest one to the Black King. The target was located far away from wall. It was in the frozen hills, in a broken tree with a rotten core. It was a beetle. A bright, shining beetle, made of crystal and with crystal spikes all around it.

Grax knew it was an embiggen target because it had the same sort of aura to it that all the other embiggen targets had. It was covered in whispers. Whispers that spoke words that Grax did not hear, that he did not know.

He didn't need to know what the whispers were saying to use them, though.

Grax reached for the beetle, light dancing around his fleshy fingers, his intensity growing, his fingers plucking the fabric of reality, like thrumming a taut belly, full of brothers just below the surface—

~don't~

A voice that made sense?

Grax stopped.

This was no longer an embiggen target. Grax's fangs *dripped*. This was a Bite target.

"Who speaks to me? Who attempts to command that which they cannot command? I would know your name before I Bite you."

~If you wait a day, if you leave these seeds to fruit when we want them to fruit, then you can get through the city's gate without an issue. They will be too busy to stop you~

"I will Bite you now."

Grax reached in to the rotten tree and grabbed the jeweled beetle—

A violent force slapped Grax across the land. He tumbled and tossed and skipped across the snow before he realized he had been attacked.

Grax roared.

And then he turned fully to light and returned to the beetle and this time he did not use his weak physical body. He was a being of light and he Bit—

His jaws of light were stuck around a very bright sphere, containing the beetle. It was like biting a stone. He had bitten stone before, but this was—

~Let this one go and we will teach you to break the Veil. You are so close. You already touch it when you try to wild these seeds~

Grax bit down harder—

Another slap, but this time Grax was immaterial and the slap only moved him. He chuckled.

~Stupid goblin! Listen to your master!~

“I am my own master, stupid beetle.”

He bit, and the spherical shell cracked—

A man appeared to the side and Grax moved before he even knew what he was moving from.

He ran without looking back, without stopping. He ran and ran and ran.

Gradually, deeply, absolute terror filled his everything, and Grax ran faster.

The man had been wearing a suit. He had looked perfectly ordinary.

But the white handprint on his face had been laced with power. That handprint wrapped around his entire skull, the hair white where the fingers were, the face white where the palm lay. The man had been a cultist of some god that Grax did not know, but which he Knew, in the deepest parts of his mind, in the history of his soul.

Maybe Grax could have won that fight, or maybe not. He wanted to say that yes, he could have won that battle.

But Grax ran away instead.

--

The cultist sighed.

“Damned fool goblins. And now *they* know. Have to scrap... Fucking stupid...”

The cultist vanished into the world again, gone, elsewhere.

--

Mark struggled for 74 minutes before he linked together all the separate pieces necessary to actually stop his runaway Shaper Decouple Ritual. His solution was elementary, but putting together all of the pieces had taken some time.

Mark held out a hand and shaped his adamantium into a ball in his left hand.

He plummeted, falling through the sky.

He released the adamantium into threads at the last few seconds, stopping his fall and turning the land below him into even more sand. With another twist of kinesis, the threads came together into a ball in his left hand, hovering there, holding there. Mark fell again, but only a few meters this time.

Mark cleared his mind as he landed on his feet on the sand, only thinking a few thoughts.

Thought number one: *The adamantium is a ball in my left hand.*

Thought two: *Breathe out the astral energy. Breathe in the astral exhaustion.*

Thought three: *Stay the fuck awake this time, but don't think too much about being awake/asleep at all.*

Gradually, with every beat of his heart, the world calmed, the ball in his hand hovered there, occasionally freaking out into lines that carved the land, but with some mental re-centering Mark turned the thready ball back into a solid ball.

With eyes focused on the ball in his hand, making sure it stayed solid and spherical, Mark breathed out astral energy and breathed in astral exhaustion. The ball wavered, quivering into threads to splash ahead and down and everywhere, some of them slapping Mark in the face like so much rain, but Mark centered himself, and the ball returned to being a ball, and droplets of adamantium flowed through the sky and out of the sand, returning to the ball from whence it came like asteroids striking a water planet

—
The adamantium flashed into an explosion of meteorites and waves, spreading far and wide—

Mark breathed in deep exhaustion, centering himself, and the asteroids and adamantium water returned to his hand, to form a solid black sphere that was also exhausted. Or at least Mark imagined it was.

And that was the final trick.

Mark breathed in exhaustion and breathed out energy, and soon, gradually, his mental slipups did nothing to the adamantium ball. It quivered, but it did not jet around. It splashed, but it did not detonate.

As the world became a dim thing on the edges of his vision, as Mark struggled to stay awake, to even hear the world around him, the adamantium orb fell into Mark's hand and it stayed there and began to weigh him down like an impossible weight. It was like Mark had already lifted to exhaustion and he was *beyond* his final 'one last rep!' rep—

The ball fell from Mark's hand to crash into the sand and Mark's eyes fluttered.

He was so cold. So very cold.

Mark collapsed onto the ground, breathing easy, Union deactivating.

He blinked.

He blinked again, trying to open his eyes.

--

Blackthorn's hovercraft descended and adamantium ball rolled to Mark's insensate hand and stayed there, wrapping around his hand a little bit, forming spikes on his knuckles and claws on his fingertips and scales, all down his forearm.

Blackthorn muttered to himself, “Well that’s peculiar.”

Talzarki magic was very strange, sometimes.

Blackthorn wondered what would happen when the kid denounced getting his adamantium from Addavein, when he told the world that he was adamantium blooded. Would that break the tenuous talzarki happening here? Or would it make it that much stronger?

Getting adamantium from one’s brother was one thing.

Being recognized by the world as adamantium blooded, just like the giant dragon that was also adamantium blooded, was something else entirely.

--

Isoko sat on a recovery bed in Blackthorn’s private hovership. It was a pretty nice bed. Calming. No loud colors or imagery. Not like the rest of the ship with all of its wild colors and angled furniture. This place was just a room with a bed and a viewing screen for the outside.

Isoko had that viewing screen trained on Mark ever since she had woken up from her own induced experience. She had been impressed with the hovering. The flying. Even though he couldn’t control it at all. Even though he was left incredibly vulnerable afterward and Blackthorn was just now carrying the insensate guy into his own recovery room on the other side of the ship... It had been impressive.

He was probably going to get slapped with a monowire fine, of course. Isoko had no idea how expensive those things were, but they involved the forfeiture of a percentage of total wealth. Usually something like 20% or 35%. it was a big fucking fine. Catastrophic, usually, but not apocalyptic. Recoverable.

Would the city of Memphi count Mark’s adamantium as part of his money? Would they go searching out in the field for any potential stray threads, where someone could to a wrong breeze? If it were Isoko, she would make Mark go out and clean up this area for the next few days, at least, but this particular area was probably a no-go zone for at least 45 days.

Isoko kinda wanted Mark to delay telling the world he was adamantium blooded, because then the adamantium had would remain non-tradable, and the fine for a monothread incident would be a lot less. 35% of 300,000 goldleaf in total valuation (or however rich Mark was) was a lot less than 35% of 550 *million* gold leaf...

Memphi would go after that larger number, for sure, even if it were ‘illegal’ to count dragon goods as valid for monetary trade.

Nations were like that; taking what they wanted without regard for the law. They made the laws, after all.

But that was for another day.

Isoko felt out everyone’s vectors around her, from Blackthorn and his pilots, to Eliot and Sally, and finally to Mark, sleeping over there. Sally was *probably* talking about if it was really safe to bring Mark

into the ship and Blackthorn was *probably* saying that it was. Isoko's ability to feel out words and emotions with her Unionsense was almost as good as Mark's... in a macro sense. Nuances to emotions were difficult for her. But the big stuff? The big worry that Sally had, and the calming vector from Blackthorn that then spread to Sally, and then to Eliot, and finally to Blackthorn's girls, was pretty easy to suss out, even if Isoko didn't know what they were saying, or what any of the nuances meant.

Isoko was pretty sure that Eliot was feeling... concerned about monowire? He was one of the few people capable of making that stuff without any help, after all. He also had concerns about illegal fluids, and illegal machines, and junk like that.

Sally was... darkly mirthful? What did *that* mean?

Blackthorn was clearly picking up that Isoko was awake, and that news spread to the others.

Eliot walked this way, while Sally stayed behind with Mark.

The door opened with a woosh, and Eliot was there, his worry vanishing and his face happy as he said, "You're awake! How long have you been awake?"

"Long enough to see Mark be really vulnerable out there. I'm worried about tomorrow."

Eliot nodded, his worry returning but in a different way. He sat down on the chair in front of the recovery bed, saying, "Blackthorn says that Mark's magic is fully solid again. The Decouple Ritual is over."

"Is it? You have more experience with ritual magic than me."

Eliot was suddenly not worried at all.

Oh.

Isoko realized that when Eliot's worry returned, it had been regarding something else, and his words had actually been him trying to reassure Isoko that the danger of the ritual *truly* was over. Hmm. Yeah. Isoko wasn't as good at vector reading as Mark. Not by a long shot. She shouldn't try to read people like that, even if she really wanted to learn how to and be good at it.

Eliot said, "Yeah. It's over. The only reason it lasted as long as it did was because Mark was keeping it going with Union. It should never last that long."

Isoko found herself worried, though. "But it's just a ritual that he can do at any time?"

"Blackthorn and I both ran scans on him. His Adamantiumkinesis and Union are at... Well. His numbers went up. His understanding of himself went up. He might have awoken that button in himself that any Shaper eventually finds, that allows them to circumvent the speed barrier, but he didn't break himself. He's fine, Isoko. He's in control of his Power again."

Isoko almost want to ask for Mark's numbers, but... Eh. She let that go.

Eliot changed the subject anyway, purposefully messing up his words, making them inexact as he asked, "Did the 'Map your Binding' Ritual work... or whatever it's called?"

Isoko rolled her eyes, saying, "You know a lot about this stuff and yet you pretend not to."

Eliot looked scandalized. “What? Me? No. I just remembered Blackthorn talking to you about that, and I’ve heard the word ‘binding’ before, and—”

Isoko rolled her eyes harder.

When she used her Unionsense to read people she always read too deep, but her normal senses were already well tuned to reading between the lines, everywhere she looked.

“Okay fine. I... might have done a deep dive into mage lessons in the last half an hour while everyone was occupied and I have seen some stuff.”

“You know that’s dangerous, right? Binding work and magery and all of that. Duchess Valen told us not to tell anyone about it, ever.”

“You think I’m gonna let my friends do weird shit without looking into it?”

Isoko smiled at that. “I think Sally knows how it theoretically works, too, and for a lot longer than a half hour.”

“... Yeah. She’s not touching it, though, and neither am I.”

“You sure?”

“She and I have been together a lot at the settlement, when you and Mark were out working off your brig time and killing monsters together, and just now. We talked while you and Mark were out of it— Wait! Bad! You avoided the question!”

Isoko *had* avoided the question.

But now she grinned.

For a good moment, she let the results of her own ritual flow through her mind. She hadn’t undergone a ritual nearly as impressive as Mark’s, but she had been guided by Blackthorn into seeing her own Binding, to understand the magic that made her Platinum Body function.

She didn’t understand any of it. Not really. But she had seen herself. Fully.

That was the first step.

It had been like walking through a dream and finding herself standing upon a platinum sphere that was not a sphere, but a small planet, and the planet was her. But then she had walked inward, and she had been in a room that had space everywhere, like stepping into a house that was a sphere. And then there were the connections inside of the sphere, in the room, like twists of spider thread that twisted ever inward, creating the space and becoming the space at the same time.

She knew, intimately, what those twists were, in that moment.

She had forgotten all of the twists in the waking.

Isoko said, “The Mapping Ritual worked, yes. I saw my Binding clearly, but I lost it all in the waking. I know what to look for now, so I should be able to get back to it better.” She thought back to the other day, when she spoke to Grand Mage Alistair Blackwood, the archmage’s son and the leader of the local Mage Society. She said, “I might even sign a real Mage Oath, if they can offer me good enough terms.

Alistair seems like a decent enough guy. All he asked for was oversight into what I was learning from every source I find. I *think* that's about as lenient as I can get, and once I sign the Mage Oath I can read mage books in all those libraries they got—" She added, "But *after* I learn Protect and Fly. I don't need to concern myself with learning all the spells ever. Later, yes, but not right now."

Eliot nodded—

Mark jolted awake on the other side of the hovership.

Isoko said, "Mark's awake."

Eliot looked that way, too, right at a wall. With a small voice, he said, "His adamantium made scales and claws on his left arm. When he was unconscious. He has scales, now. He's not a hidden dragon but... The talzarki stuff, and what that *means*."

"Addavein."

"Yes," Eliot said, without reservation. And then he stood up and went through the door.

Isoko got up and followed him.

--

Mark laid in bed and looked at his left arm.

Scales rested on his skin like black leafs, completely covering the outside of his hand and up to his elbow. The sensitive parts of his skin, like the interior of his forearm and his palms and fingertips, were devoid of metal, but the outside of his forearm, his knuckles, and his fingernails, were solid black with overlapping adamantium scales.

Mark moved his hand, flexed his forearm, and twisted his arm back and forth, and the scales stayed with him, exactly where they needed to stay on his skin.

He wasn't consciously controlling this at all.

That was the freaky part.

Blackthorn said, "Try to shape it normally. Into a ball, for instance." He added, "Also, here's a scale. The measuring kind." Blackthorn produced an electronic scale and set it on the side of the recovery bed. "You know... In case you were wondering how much you have now, for whatever reason."

Mark flexed his adamantium and the scales peeled away into a solid ball that he put down onto the measuring scale.

9.3 kilograms.

Ah.

Some of his internal reserves had gotten out... Maybe.

Mark's internal reserves still felt like clouds in his bones. It was maybe 3 kilos, still? Mark had no idea.

"Can you make it into scales again?" Blackthorn asked. "The dragon kind, you know."

Sally just stared.

Mark picked up the black ball with his Adamantiumkinesis and started making scales and putting them on his skin—

The whole ball of adamantium kinda fell apart into scales, joining to his skin. Mark definitely did that himself. He had turned the adamantium into scales and now they rested on his skin in the exact right way to form overlapping scale armor up to his elbow.

But it had been an almost natural sort of Shaping.

As though he did that all the time. A rote repetition.

The thinness of the scales and their overlapping nature seemed like this was maybe a bad way to make armor? But it also felt very secure. Mark wasn't sure how he felt about this. How did overlapping scales compare to solid, single-layer armor? Worse? Better?

Probably worse, right?

But... scales felt so natural.

Blackthorn asked, "How does that feel?"

"Easy. Weird." Mark stood up and moved his arm around, and the scales flexed as though he were controlling a brand new muscle. And then mark took the adamantium off, reshaped it into his helmet, caltrops, and knives against his skin, and that felt more normal. Quark maneuvered out from below his shirt, back up into his remade helmet, and Mark said, "Different."

Mark floated a blade of adamantium to the side as he turned the blade into a tiny propeller, and then he started to spin that propeller. Sally and Blackthorn watched. The prop moved at Mark's fastest normal speed, and Mark could tell that Blackthorn was ready to cast some very big magic, very suddenly, if needed. Probably escape magic. Sally was ready to simply run away.

Mark was in control, though.

Probably.

Blackthorn asked, "Same max speed?"

"... Well."

Mark 'held' on to the center of the propeller and he sort of... 'let go'... of the rest of it—

The prop suddenly sped up as Mark held it looser than before in almost every way. He never really held adamantium like this. It felt vulnerable to theft to not have the whole thing under his direct control. But this worked. The prop spun way, way too fast.

There was a breeze, and a bit of a pull in the direction of the fan. It sounded and felt like an unbalanced fan. Wobbly. Mark hadn't crafted a very good propeller. He would need to get better at that.

Mark stopped the spin. He was very happy, but experimentation would come later. He needed to get a better prop shape, too.

Blackthorn calmed as Mark didn't go out of control.

Sally's eyes went wide, and then her frown turned upside down. She grinned, saying, "Good shit, Mark."

Blackthorn nodded. "Put it away now, and please understand this: Do not attempt a Decouple Ritual unless you are about to die and so is everyone else, because it will kill everyone around you. Once you get some real capability in you, in several years or a decade or two, that 'around you' radius might be several kilometers. This warning I have given you will never go away. Do not Decouple yourself unless you are sure you want to kill everything and everyone around you."

With a twitch, Mark turned the propeller back into a blade to sit against his forearm, as he said, "I understand, sir. Thank you very much for your help."

Blackthorn grinned. "I promised you some basic magical training to supplement what you're getting from Duchess Elaria Valen and I feel I have delivered 80% of that promise, for all four of you kids. I assume that incidentals over the next few days will take up the remaining 20%. Now I'm sure you'll want to experiment, so I'll let you figure out how you want to do that." He walked away, calling out to the girls in the cockpit, "Girls! Take us to dinner somewhere! Eliot requested Nigerian, and I haven't had that since..."

The ship effortlessly began to move, rocking Mark in his seat a little before the inertial dampeners took over fully.

Eliot and Isoko were waiting outside. Eliot had wanted to walk in, but he had figured out that Mark was playing with adamantium so he kinda stopped out there. Isoko remained with him out there for much of the same reason. And now, Isoko was holding Eliot back from coming in for a different reason.

Sally was with Mark, and she wanted to talk to her alone, because Blackthorn had interviewed her about her desired path in life while Mark was out of it. She had some things to say.

Mark began with, "It seems like Isoko got a good outcome from her ritual. She's happy. Eliot is meeting with Sentinel later, and that's what Blackthorn is doing for him. But what are you getting Sally?"

Sally grinned, and then she was worried. And then she blurted out what she needed to blurt, even though she didn't want to say it, "Possible size changing magic."

Mark paused, and then he smiled. "Okay! Good? Great! Very good!"

Mark did not bring up the fact that Sally hated magic, or that she didn't trust Blackthorn, or any of that demon-touched stuff.

"... Yes, good," Sally said, after a moment of studying Mark's reaction and finding it good. Better than good. Sally sighed a little, grinning a lot. "I can't get big like Titanfist, but getting small is supposed to be a lot easier. That's years away, though. But! It looks like I'll be learning magic right alongside you all, but not in the same area. I'm signing the Mage Oath with the Executioners of Drakarok."

Mark blinked. "Oh, shit. That's big. Uh... Okay! What does it... uh. Require— You looked into this before?"

Mark felt the slight sting of being untrustworthy. Of being the last to know something.

But that was untrue.

Sally hadn't told anyone about this before, and now she was telling Mark. She almost didn't need to tell him, though. He had figured it out fast, now that the two of them were here, at this topic and crossroads.

She had looked into magery before.

Of course she had.

She'd been on Daihoon for something like 9 months before Eliot, Isoko, and Mark had gotten there. She and her old team had been targeted for exploitation by the demon Leash, who was targeting Mark to get to Addavein, to the demon Kanda who still 'lived' inside the dragon, like a drop of red in a bathtub of normal water.

Sally knew a little bit about magic, she hated it, but now she wanted to learn more.

She had changed her mind.

"... Yeah," Sally said. I kinda... Had issues with the whole mage stuff after the... incident. I spent a long while with the Church of Drakarok and they told me a lot of things and I got... more difficult about it. But magic is the only true path to power, isn't it. The demons laid the tracks, and there are no tracks outside of demonic eminence. They built the System that even the gods used to attain divinity, and all of us are steeped in their power already. To forgo that power is to 'Break the Binding', which is generally bad, and which Drakarok is telling me you have already heard about."

Mark did not notice the shift in vectors, in the world itself, until Sally spoke of Drakarok talking to her.

And then all he saw was gold.

Sally stood before him, flickering on the edges with spiky gold, her voice overlapped with a man's voice, as she said, "We've dicked around enough with dangerous magics for today, Mark. There will be no Binding issues. And so, we should prepare for the Attack on the Gate. Meet the players. Meet the field. Did you know that Grey Phantom is Sentinel's father? I didn't know that. There's a lot of overlap between the heroes and villains of Memphi! Titanfist is literally both."

And then the golden light went elsewhere, moving on.

And Sally smiled, asking, "You think you can fly with that adamantium yet?"

Mark wondered what had happened, but not really. He had seen paladins be visited by their gods before. Usually they commented on their visitations a lot more than Sally just had. Also, an actual contact was usually a Big Deal. The imparting of important information was Reason For Contact #1. Helping a paladin deal with some shit was reason #2. Sally had just rattled off about seven big topics to talk about, though she didn't seem to care about any of them. Not really. She didn't seem to care about being contacted, either.

She was talking around a very big topic that she did not want to touch, but which she was approaching anyway.

But first: Mark had never seen Sally be contacted before.

Mark asked, "Sally? Were you contacted just now?"

“Uh... Yeah. I guess.”

“... I would have thought that a contact would have been a bigger deal for you, but from your, well, everything, I guess it's not? But then why haven't I seen it before, Sally?”

Sally kind of grinned, trying to brush it off, saying, “It happens a lot, but I try to not do it when I'm around you or Isoko or... or anyone who could tell, actually.”

Mark knew she was holding back. Like. A lot a lot. Mark knew this already, but...

Mark directly asked, “Sally.”

“Okay! I'm... already on the track to become an Executioner— But I haven't killed anyone!” Sally looked embarrassed. “Drakarok hasn't Called me to a target.”

Mark felt a deep exhaustion that almost sent him laying back onto the bed under his ass.

Mark took in Sally's words.

Sally watched.

“You're already an Executioner, aren't you. It's just not official until you kill someone in the War For Life.”

“... Potato patahto— Hey! So! You want to, uh... try to fly with your adamantium? Do the Attack The Gate scenario prep? Go... uh... subjugate a deplorable part of the world? Anything at all but talk about this and how I lied to you for so long... again.”

Mark got up off the bed, saying, “Absolutely yes, but we're not done talking about this, Sally.”

“I know... But Mark...” Sally breathed deep, then softly said, “I might not be able to kill whoever needs to die in the next 36 hours. So... That's why Drakarok contacted me right now. Everything else is... I'm... I don't know. I think I'm gonna need a lot of help, and soon.”

Mark felt an uncomfortable weight upon him. He focused on the important fact. “Thrashtalon or demon?”

“Both, probably.”

“Do you know who it is?”

“No. Drakarok cannot see everything at all, and he's not proactive. He's strictly reactive.”

Mark considered another uncomfortable question. The biggest one, really. Mark breathed in, and then—

“Yes,” Sally said, gold light fluttering through her vector, as she anticipated his question and gave the answer in one. Sally elaborated, wanting to come clean, as she said, “I was here to kill you if Leash got into you. We don't think that will happen, though, so... parameters have changed.”

“... Please walk away, Sally.”

Sally nodded, and then walked away—

Mark got up and followed her, ignoring all of the hurt he was now feeling, because there was obviously a job to be done and it was only partially HVP related because both Isoko and Eliot were experiencing their own divine contact in the middle of the ship. When rained it hurricaned, apparently.

Gold flowed away from Isoko's platinum skin, while glimmers of something shiny left Eliot looking pensive.

Blackthorn stood in the back, near the cockpit, with his girls. All three of them were looking their way.

And just like that, all personal problems were swept away for the moment.

Mark commanded, "Tell me what you know."

Eliot said, "High alert. Prepare for events and don't stop the program. This is deep Curtain Protocol now. We cannot upset the grand order of things because then the Unawakened start to monsterize when that happens, and the Attack the Gate program has become the focus of the whole world."

Sally added, "There is a traitor in Memphi. Possibly a lot of them."

Isoko looked directly at Mark as she said, "Addavein might show, if he is called for, if the need is great enough. Union will bring him to you, if you demand it. Freyala will help if the moment comes."

Mark nodded, taking all of that at face value. "And so we focus on what we can do." Mark looked to Blackthorn, who had a look of fear to him, and said, "We'll be at the gate, of course, and as soon as the real problem shows we will be joining with the Collective and fighting those real problems. But according to Hearthswell the show must go on."

Blackthorn breathed in and out once, and then he allowed himself to be here, making big decisions, saying, "If you're receiving notices then ever other major power is receiving war orders, too. The Collective will be directed elsewhere. This means that you will have very little support at the Gate. Perhaps just Tartu and his people, yourselves, the untested gate security people, and Titanfist. Someone else might show, but this is doubtful. I know Titanfist wants to be around you because he wants more healing, and you can support him well, and that's a whole sector of the city protected with just the two of you. Other heroes will be quietly seeded elsewhere." He looked to one of the girls, almost incidentally, and the woman pulled out a mass of wires and LEDs and electronics from *somewhere* and she held it to her head, the mass turning into a headset with a visor and microphone. She started typing on an unseen keyboard. Blackthorn continued with Mark and his team, saying, "This sounds like a full scale attack, so the churches are likely calling parishioners to church to pray and a lot of things are going to start happening behind the scenes, under Curtain Protocol. The main thrust of the War for Life will probably happen here tomorrow, but these things do not happen locally. They happen globally.

"I'll be taking you to the gate, now. There's a prep space that you can stay at. I imagine Tartu and his team will be moved there soon, too. I imagine Noel will want to get some footage before it kicks off for real. Maybe you'll get through the whole scenario before the event starts. I hope so. You should train your new ability while you can, Mark. I imagine you will need it."

Mark bowed a little.

Blackthorn's girl with the techie helmet softly said, "Confirmation of multiple divine contacts. The Collective is moving en masse. Mayor Ramirez is calling an All Hands Under Curtain Protocol. Nothing overt, or else there might be monsterization when the walls fail and the kaiju get in."

Oh.

Holy fucking shit.

That's why people would monsterize.

They're *expecting* the walls to fall.

Mark felt himself shudder when he heard about breaking walls and kaiju getting in. Memories flashed, of the broken Bay Wall, of the roaring hurricane, and of the kaiju and the dragon. He could almost hear the explosion of nuclear fire that blasted across the land, while Mark, David, and Orissa were in a hover car at the bottom of a crater, watching it all pass overhead.

But there was no sound.

Just a memory.

A terrible, terrible memory.

Blackthorn dropped the team near the gate, near Titanfist in his Punchman gangster suit and Lawful Goose in his warden costume. The HVP crew was getting ready by a big building, far away from the actual structure gate. The gate loomed in the golden light of the late afternoon, like grey and black towers with an arch connecting them. It was large enough to be called 'kaiju sized'.

The HVP crew were all bustling around like they didn't know what was really going to happen.

Mark saw people laughing, and he was about to talk with Titanfist and Lawful Goose, but JJ, the costumer, ran up to them, to talk to all of his team about costumes and ask them to come for a fitting.

Mark said, "We'll be there soon, JJ. Thank you."

Titanfist and Lawful Goose stood there, waiting to speak of things that should not be spoken of too loud.

JJ knew something was up, as he looked from the superheroes to Mark and his team, so he decided not to push anything. He said, "Whenever you get a chance. I'm glad you showed up early but there is always more we can do with costumes when we have the proper time to do them. Everyone always thinks we can just *make* these things..." He stopped himself there, judging that something was happening and that he should be elsewhere. "Catch you *soon*," he said, hopefully, and then JJ walked back to the prep building.

When he was far enough away—

Lawful Goose said, "It's too early in your relationship with your costumer for him to tell you like it is, so I will tell you: Do not treat him like he is the help. Apologize later. He'll realize why you were curt with after whatever goes down goes down, but that does not excuse bad manners. In fact, manners should be even better in times of great stress."

Titanfist said, "Lawful is a morality bastard. Ignore him. JJ is fine." And then Titanfist said, "We're trying to keep this all Under the Curtain but we expect big events, and soon. I might ask you for a weapon, Mark, if the one I have waiting for me near the gate isn't close enough."

Mark easily said, "Sure." He asked, "Do you two have experience with this sort of thing? Blackthorn told us that this is all sort of... happening across the world. But we didn't get much more than that."

Titanfist, shrugged. "It's a major attack. It'll be kaiju. Usually a place like Memphi wouldn't rate a major offensive, but we have the gate, and the demons don't like us messing with the Veil at all. That's why the kaiju show during a gate opening. But fuck the demons." Titanfist had deep, serious anger to him, as he softly said, "This is *our* world. Not theirs. *Kill all monsters.*"

Lawful Goose nodded. "Kill all monsters."

Mark felt some amazing kind of way. And then he said, "Kill all monsters."

There was a moment.

And then the moment gave way to normality.

Lawful Goose said, "Nothing should happen until it all happens, so you four need to do final prep. Order something for delivery from a place you really like." He looked to Mark. "Train with your new weapons and try not to think about how the city is probably going to sue you for monowire-based activity."

Mark grinned.

Lawful Goose said, "Not a joke."

Mark chuckled. "I know."

Lawful Goose nodded.

They kind of went their separate ways.

Eliot said, "I'm ordering from that nigerian place and getting lots of suya and jollof and whatever else you guys want."

"I want bread," Sally said. "A lot of bread."

"Agege bread by the bucket," Eliot said, nodding.

"I want mexican," Isoko said. "Quesadillas. Chicken and steak. Guacamole and salsa and chips."

"Easily done," Eliot said. "Mark?"

"Whatever you guys are having is good by me. Just get a lot of it, and also dessert of some kind... Key lime pie." Mark didn't actually care for key lime pie, not really, but it felt like a good thing to get, if some place around here even made it. "I haven't had that in a while." And because everyone was looking at

him with equal parts knowing and concern, Mark rapidly added, “And get some stuff for the viewing party at 9. Episode 3 airs in something like 4 hours and we’re going to be staying here for a while.”

Eliot nodded, and then his mind was halfway elsewhere, his vector distant, as they all walked toward the production building.

Isoko and Sally had their heads on swivels, looking at everyone, judging everything.

The land around the gate was mostly empty, flat open space, except for the clump of buildings right here, and also over there. *These* buildings were the future airship terminal for ship and cargo and warehouse storage. The other buildings over there was the airship terminal for normal passengers. HVP was using one of the warehouse buildings because it was ready. The other buildings were partial skeletons.

And people walked around, some laughing and drinking with each other, others inside the building focused on editing footage, while others debated scenes and scripts. Noel was in the center of it all, way up there in the middle of the main building, talking through his servitors about the show with a bunch of other people.

With disbelief in her voice, Sally said, “They have no idea of the coming shitstorm.”

Isoko said, “Some of them know. Those three Memphi Guard guys over there in the yellow and black are in full combat gear, and they know, but the gaffer walking by in the shorts and shirt does not know. Him and a lot of guys wonder why all the increased security, but they’re all explaining it to themselves as Collective interference, and they’re ignoring it.”

Eliot came back— His flicked his eyes toward the gaffer, appalled. “Shorts and a shirt in the deep winter? There’s snow on the ground, man.” He wanted to change the subject.

Mark grinned, and went along with the change. “Does the snow still bother you?”

“Not at all! But it does mean I can wear nicer clothes without worrying about being too hot. Does the guy *like* shorts or something?”

“I like shorts on guys,” Isoko said, grinning. “Legs are great.”

Mark smiled... and then he said, “So I need to go play with my adamantium for a little while.”

“Yeah yeah. Playing with yourself,” Isoko said. “Got it.”

Sally grinned.

Mark asked, “What are your plans right now?”

“Hurry up and wait,” Sally said.

Isoko nodded. “Same. Maybe watch you play with yourself if you don’t mind.”

Mark snorted. “I wouldn’t mind sticking to the buddy system.”

Eliot said, “Sentinel will be here shortly and I’m going to talk to him about a lot of neat stuff. We can stick to the room there—” Eliot pointed to a room at the side of the big building they were walking to, on the third floor. “It’s empty. You guys can stay out here in the snow if you want!”

Sally said to Eliot, "I'm going with you."

"Sure! I mean... you can sit there and be bored."

Sally grinned. "Nothing new there."

And the team split, but just a little.

Aurora had told them to stick together no matter what, but plans changed.

And Mark got to 'playing with himself'.

He started off standing in the snow, kilometers from the gate, with Isoko watching, with three propellers of adamantium in his loose grip, one in the front and two in the back, like a tripod. He spun the one in front, and then he kinda let himself go, and suddenly the propeller spun a whole lot faster. A gentle breeze blew downward, brushing away the snow that had gathered on the ground in front of him. The pressure revealed simple concrete.

And Mark was pushed backward, just a little.

He grinned—

Isoko called out, "You're gonna have to do a lot more than that to get off of the ground!"

Mark chuckled.

Yeah. He would have to do a lot more than that.

Over the next hour, Mark managed to carve into the ground accidentally, cut his shoes up, send chips of ice flying, and fall on the ground in many different ways. It was easy to hover off of the ground on caltrops, because the ground supported his weight. It was *almost* as easy to propeller himself out of water, and that was before he had gained this untethered speed. He'd need to see how good he could move in water now that he had been untethered.

But air was an order of density less than water, and this was...

"Well this is just fucking difficult!" Mark said.

Isoko said, "Break time anyway! Food drone is here."

"Ohh!" Mark said, whipping his attention back to the main building. A drone was coming in for a delivery, and Mark was hungry. "Break time."