

“Have you learned any real magic at all?”

“... I don't think so?” Mark said.

The sun slanted in from the giant windows of the archmage's superhero-like suite, at the top of his tower, located in the city of Enchanting. Various plants abounded in planters here and there, and some of them looked like cleaner plants to Mark, but he wasn't sure. He hadn't really studied the plants at all.

Mark sat on one side of a grey marble dining room table and Archmage Steve Blackthorn sat on the other side. In the kitchen, blueberry pancakes made themselves, the archmage's magic spell working even when the archmage wasn't paying attention, which seemed like something the archmage did a lot. Pay attention, that was.

Mark wore nice clothes; professional. The archmage wore a bathrobe and boxers, his chest showing between the flaps of fabric. He seemed like a rather non-serious person, but Mark was probably wrong about that... a little. Addashield had been about as laid-back as Blackthorn appeared to be, but Addashield had never truly been laid back at all. Blackthorn was currently high, though, and Mark was pretty sure that Addashield had never gotten high on the job... or at least not when he was around Mark.

Archmage Steve Blackthorn hummed, and then he waved a hand in the air and flew some blueberry pancakes over to the table. Syrup, plates, forks, and knives soon followed. With a flick of his hand Mark's latte refilled, and three homemade pancakes sat before Mark, while Blackthorn got five.

With a knife in one hand and fork in the other, Blackthorn started cutting into his pancakes, saying, “Have some. They're pretty good! I don't adulterate food unless it's clearly marked as such, so there's no enhancers in these.”

“... I could eat,” Mark said, as he looked down at the food. He picked up a fork. “Thank you for the meal.”

Blackthorn grinned. And then he started chowing down.

Mark soon followed.

Neither of them spoke, though Mark kept expecting Blackthorn to start talking between bites, or something like that.

They were really good pancakes. The blueberries were a little tart and the syrup was the good stuff, and Mark relaxed as he ate. Blackthorn smiled as he watched Mark eat, and then he smiled wider halfway through eating, savoring the flavor in his mouth, his eyes closing in an almost rapturous way. He looked truly happy.

The meal passed quickly, and Mark felt better with a full stomach.

Two new nude girls and a third one, the same one Mark had seen before, and also a nude dude, got some pancakes for themselves, chatting a little as they got their food. They shushed each other and giggled, though, so they were 'trying to keep it quiet'. They were doing a terrible job of keeping quiet, which Mark assumed was the point. The girls winked at Mark and grinned a lot, and the guy grabbed one of the girls' asses while he winked at Mark. Soon, the four of them took their pancakes back into another room.

Blackthorn grinned a little as Mark watched the people walk away, but he said nothing.

As Blackthorn was finishing off the last of his stack of pancakes, he started talking, "So I'm not sure how much magical education you've gotten at all, but you say you've never heard anything, which is pretty true for *almost* all people. Noble kids from Daihoon and those who have been raised around mages usually pick up one or two things. I'm pretty sure you don't count as nobility *yet*, but it has been 6 months since your Tutorial, or something like that. And you've been around Addavein?"

There were questions in there and a whole lot of statements, and it was a little difficult to parse what, exactly, Blackthorn was getting at.

Mark decided to respond with, "Well... Addavein gave me an archival-type of Shaper manual. Just some basic stuff to give to anyone who Awakened a Shaper Talent... Though it was probably something that would have been given to a noble's kid, yeah. I don't think I got much other magical training?"

Blackthorn nodded. "And the Color Drop and knowledge of Key Word alchemy."

Mark frowned. "... Okay?"

Was Mark supposed to talk about absolutely everything that he had learned between then and now?

Because most of what he had learned was that 'adults' and 'the people in charge' were all muddling through life just like people half their ages, or less. That didn't seem like magical knowledge at all, but it very well could be.

Blackthorn chuckled to see Mark's expression. "A lot of stuff counts as magical training. A lot of people don't think what they have seen is magical knowledge, but that stuff is everywhere, and it forms the basis of what sort of magical education is easiest for a person. Here's the big secret to magic, Mark: Every single thing you learn, and are influenced by, forms the foundation for what you can become."

Mark... nodded. "Okay?"

Was that supposed to be a big revelation?

... Maybe it was?

Blackthorn grinned. "It's not a ground shaking revelation until it is." He moved on. "I need you to imagine yourself as a house... or a pond, or a tool shack. A cave with a few crystals growing here and there. Whatever you want. Basically: what you are right now is a bare room with a few intractable pieces of furniture. The bed in the house, the lily in the pond, the chainsaw in the shack, the crystal growing in the corner of the cave. Those pieces of furniture came with your Awakening. You, my tri-Talent young man, have 3 pieces of furniture in your house right now.

"If you want to do more magic then you gotta add more furniture."

Oh shit, they were talking about spellwork right now.

Mark sat straighter.

Blackthorn noticed. He grinned and continued, “The astral body can only be stretched so much, and yours is already very stretched since you have three whole Talents...” Blackthorn paused. “Okay. So. This gets complicated, but I’ll make it simple. You got the house analogy yet? Ask your questions. I want to make sure you understand that part.”

Mark had lots of questions about all that. From the nature of ‘space’ inside of a house, to the sudden question that maybe Mark’s ‘house’ was full already, since he already had three Talents. *Did* it work like that?

Mark asked, “Does having three Talents fill up my house already? No room for a flying spell?”

Blackthorn readily shook his head; he didn’t even need to think before he shook his head.

That made Mark feel a lot better about his prospects for other forms of power in the future.

Blackthorn said, “It doesn’t exactly work like that. That’s not something this conversation is about, but it does bear speaking upon, because a proper education starts from the ground up. To that end:

“You have room for an endless number of spells, but not really, because the spells you *can* learn and *do well* are limited and expanded by your starting Powers. In many situations, a person who starts off with a small Power, like a simple Knack or Knowing about something, is easier able to build and expand toward other magics. Someone with a Knack for growing plants will be able to expand their magics into other plant-based directions rather easily, but they won’t be able to do flight magics very well, not unless they take a bunch of other steps to get there. Someone with a Knowing about the weather might be able to fly a lot easier, eventually.

“It’s all about the base mana that the Tutorial or living life Awakens in a person.”

Mark’s eyebrows went up. “Like adamantium is a type of mana?”

“Exactly!” Blackthorn grinned. “Tell me: What are Powers?”

Mark had already heard this part from Addashield, almost 10 months ago, back before Mark was crashed into a coma by the combined magics of Addashield and Lola. Mark recalled most of those words from memory, but he had to fill in the blanks a little, as he said, “Powers are magic spells that never stop, that never weaken, that are granted by the Tutorial, which used to be called the Thresher. Everything else can weaken and fade, but Powers are eternal.”

Blackthorn breathed deep, looking like a conquering hero for a brief moment.

And then he said, “*Exactly.*”

Mark wasn't sure how that related to him being able to produce adamantium on demand, but he was pretty sure Blackthorn was getting there, and Mark was intrigued anyway. This was real magical learning. Mark was absolutely sure that any baseline from Earth hearing this would spontaneously generate some sort of astral body. A ‘baseline’ from Daihoon probably grew up learning this stuff, though.

Blackthorn smirked, adding, “Powers can obviously weaken, though. But only temporarily. Like an overworked muscle. You can adamantiumkinesis all the time these days, but I bet if you strained yourself in battle and you didn't have Union to support your Kinetics, then you would grow tired, yes?”

Mark nodded. That was a pretty normal limitation of Powers. Overuse always causes a weakening.

The archmage nodded, and then said, “Magics are twists in personal power, using the mana in a person and locking it down into limbs of our own making. When a mage overuses their magic, the tools break. The mage needs to reform the spellwork inside of their soul to use it again. This is why it takes years to learn how to make a spell, because not only do you have to learn how to make the spell, you have to make it perfectly, with all of the side-powers that a normal Power would have. Most every mage falls short in those side-power goals.

“For example, your Adamantiumkinesis allows you to be immune to all adamantium weapons. If someone shot you with an adamantium bullet, you would probably get knocked around some, but you'd be fine. Other people would splat. That is a side-power to your main Power. Some would call ‘immunity to adamantium weaponry’ a Power all on its own. A brawny not breaking their body when they try to lift something too heavy is another side-power. A witch being immune to the toxins of the spells she

makes is a side-power. All of those side-powers are what costs a mage endless headache when they build their spells. A true Power is anywhere from a single great strength to a thousand smaller ones, like facets to a grand gem.

“And when a Powered individual overuses their Power, the ‘limb’ merely falls asleep. It will wake up just fine when it is given time to rest.

“All of that and more are the main differences between a mage using spellwork and a Powered person using a Power.”

Mark blinked. That was... surprising, and not too surprising at all.

Blackthorn waited.

Mark said, “I never heard it like that, but it makes sense?”

“Good! It should, because that is how it works.

“Now that the basic stuff is out of the way, I can tell you this: Your ‘house’ is made out of adamantium. That’s what it means to be adamantium blooded. That is why you are able to produce more adamantium, even at a slow rate.

“Every living thing produces mana of various kinds. Most Adamantiumkinetics actually use unaspected mana that has been aspected in the act of gaining Adamantiumkinesis.

“You do not use generic mana at all.

“You produce and use *adamantium mana*.

“As you live, as your ‘house’ settles in this way and that, and your mana crystallizes in your body. This happens to everyone. Usually the mana simply flows away, or it never settles in the first place. Sometimes people have to clean out their mana channels or else they risk having issues with spellcastings later, and that’s an ordeal, but Powers don’t have that issue. You don’t have that issue,

either, but your specific mana is adamantium, and adamantium is solid. It does not flow away *at all*. To say it another way: What you are doing when you make more adamantium, is that your uncontrolled mana, outside of your active use of your Powers, is turning solid, and being deposited inside of your body in your bones, instead of astrally, in your astral body, where it could cause problems.

“The safe deposition of adamantium in your body is another side-power of your Adamantiumkinesis.”

Blackthorn let that sink in.

Mark’s mind rapidly flashed around as half-understood implications abounded. As he realized what was being said, Mark frowned. He asked, “There’s no way to actively cause this process? It’ll always be a ‘side effect’ of... of what? A natural cycle process?”

The idea that the body made mana was not a new one to Mark, but hearing it laid out like that cleared up a bunch of questions that Mark wasn’t even aware he had.

Blackthorn grinned. “Affecting the natural cycle is an easy thing to do, because the goal here, specifically for you, Mark, is to grow your house. The more house you have, the more deposits you can make.

“That’s what we’re going to do.

“Astral body stretches, primarily, and condensation focusing on adamantium creation, as a side effect. These are the things I will tell you about, and which you will follow through on your own, later.

“Usually mages do *something* like stretches all the time because they want more mana, too. Everyone’s mana is different, though, so everyone has different techniques. Every skilled mage I know crystallizes their own excess mana on their days off so that they can spend that mana on big spells later. Usually they crystallize that mana in their *astral* bodies, ‘storing it away’ *properly*, like a piece of furniture in their house, so that they can use it later. Improper storage leads to problems, though. That sort of is an application of this technique is not something we will be going over. That lesson is outside of the scope of this lesson, because you don’t need that lesson.

“The primary lesson is you, manifesting your mana, as adamantium.

“Most mages start off manifesting personal mana crystals and then they figure out how to make them ephemeral so that they don’t have to carry around the crystals. Mostly, though, crystallized mana is useless to people other than the creator, so most mages try to transition into ephemeral mana crystals in the astral body as fast as they can.

“All of the magical biometals are mostly usable in their manifested form, though.”

Mark was absolutely sure that he was missing a lot of vital nuances to Blackthorn’s words, but he was getting most of it. Enough to understand.

And it all felt too simple.

Were these *basic* magic lessons? Perhaps very basic, actually. ‘Making a resource to use later’ seemed like magery 101...

Or maybe not?

Mark found himself scrunching his face in annoyance as he asked, “Is this basic magery? Like one of the very first lessons a person would learn in the process of becoming a mage?”

“More like second year arcanaeum stuff. It’s stuff that almost every mage eventually learns, though. For you, and for other biometallic people, adamantium blooded or otherwise, it’s the first and pretty much only lesson that they’re taught. It’s my understanding that making ephemeral adamantium for use in the soul is nearly impossible, and the base mana is more useful as a metal, anyway.” Blackthorn said, “I’m throwing a lot at you, I know. It’s not important for you to know all of this, but I want to give you a taste of what lessons with me will look like. I imagine you will research all of this later.”

“... Oh.”

So he was giving more than necessary, huh?

That was... That was good, right?

The part about ‘the only lesson they needed to know’ was concerning, though. Mark imagined that the powers-that-be of the Old World of Daihoon would find adamantium blooded people and train them to make adamantium, and nothing else, as they locked them into a menagerie to farm them for their metal. The exact nature of that... sort of thing, was probably both better and worse than Mark imagined.

Blackthorn continued, “When we broke those people out of captivity in the Reveal, this general lesson spilled out into the greater world. A lot of mages got a lot better at being mages back then, now that they had the resources to actually do big magics all on their own. It won’t be a magic resource for you, though.”

Mark nodded a little. He wasn’t sure what he’d do with mana anyway. He had no spells to cast, right?

... None of this entire talk had been about actual spellwork at all, had it? Nope. No magic here. Just basic stretching exercises.

Huh.

Mark wondered if Mom and Dad did this sort of thing.

Blackthorn kept going, “Basically: I’m gonna tell you how to grow the house of your astral body, which is made entirely out of adamantium mana. In doing so, you will have a larger range, and a greater ability to use the various tools inside of your house to induce your Healthy Body to start growing adamantium with both Union and Adamantiumkinesis. It’s a bit complicated to actually do that process, but not overly so.” Blackthorn asked, “Understand everything so far?”

“I make adamantium mana and I use it in every part of my Power. I can induce growth... somehow. By stretching?”

“Correct. Now, all of that? That’s just the base idea, and we’ll go over how you do that in a bit. This next part is the real secret; the one that they don’t usually tell the biometallics.” Blackthorn said, “You need to

get some pellets of osmium, gold, and platinum, in roughly equal quantities, and you need to eat them. Just a small amount. Not much at all, really.”

Whatever Mark had expected Blackthorn to say, it had not been that.

Mark... nodded a little. “Okay?”

“Once you have eaten the metals, you will focus on Union and Adamantiumkinesis and expand yourself as far as you can go, *while also focusing on various goals in life*. That will be enough to start the condensation of adamantium in your body.

“Adamantium is manifested purpose, Mark, but the ephemeral mana can achieve a physical grounding in gold, platinum, and osmium. Mostly osmium.

“Once you do that, then growing mana deposits in your body, for you, is specifically the process of focusing on one goal, and *then* focusing on another, while stretching your astral body wide. This gold-switching and stretching causes your mana to condense around those metals. If someone had a fire-aspected soul, then they’d focus on flames and on different sorts of crystallization techniques. If they had a dark-aspected soul, then they’d go hide out and grow their mana in a dark cave. You just need to focus on your goals that make you adamant about something. Anything at all, really.

“So to grow adamant mana, you must mentally pick up a goal, put it down, pick up another one, and cycle your focus.

“I imagine that Union and Healthy Body will be a great help in bridging a lot of gaps in your understanding of what will happen when you line up all of these little exercises. With Healthy Body, you might be able to direct *where* the adamantium manifests, instead of just gathering like tumors in your gut, or wherever. A lot of people in those adamantium zoos grew adamantium in their guts, but some people replaced their nails and hair with adamantium growths. Addavein grows it out of his spine spikes, for instance.”

Blackthorn went silent, looking at Mark.

And Mark's mind raced. The part about eating metals was... completely unexpected. How would anyone even figure that out?

Mark asked, "I suppose the adamantium needs a starter seed, or whatever it is called, to start crystallizing? And that's what the heavy metals do? Why those metals? Does it have to be those metals?"

"Who knows! Probably demons?" Blackthorn said, though it was kind of a question. He shrugged. "That's just how it is. All the biometals use those three elements. Adamantium is mostly osmium-derived. Mithril is mostly platinum-derived. Orichalcum is mostly gold-derived. Alchemical silver is a process that takes place in a flask and which uses silver, so that's not the same as the Big Three... and that's a complicated topic with a lot more to it than that. Alchemical silver doesn't last very long because it's a treatment that tries to mimic the true nature of biometals, but fails because most people making the stuff are just following a recipe and they have no idea what they're actually doing."

So that was interesting.

Mark nodded. "Okay, sure." Mark thought. He asked, "And all I have to do is eat some... toxic metals?"

"They won't be toxic in the quantities you will eat. It's five grams of each of all three metals. That'll last you a decade..." Blackthorn paused. And then he said, "Do you know who did your Color Drop treatment?"

Mark blanked at the change in topic. "Not at all? I assumed it was some big time alchemist in Aluatha. Maybe in Crytalis? Addashield was based out of there..." Mark thought. "I don't know anything other than that?"

Where was Blackthorn going with that?

Blackthorn looked deep in thought.

Mark waited.

Blackthorn put on a smile. “Eh! No matter!” He said to Mark, “So that’s the whole thing. Now you know about the nature of your mana as adamantium, how it relates to your Powers, and to gold, platinum, and osmium, and how to get more adamantium. All that’s left is for you to go out and buy some osmium, gold, and platinum, eat it, and figure out the rest. I suggest pellets. Not powders. Your astral body will absorb them so you won’t poop them out, but, if they need to come out, or if they’re not what you need them to be, then you can remove pellets a lot easier than you can powders. Osmium is pretty hard to get, and most of what you get out there might be fake.

“One warning, though. When you start making adamantium it might come out of weird places. Keep in mind where it comes out and don’t force it to come out beyond a normal rate. It’s *probably* gonna be painful if you start growing metal in your veins, and you’ll need to rethink everything before you continue. If you start growing adamantium in your guts then you just poop it out.” Blackthorn stood, saying, “Figure out a question for next time, and then come with a kilo of adamantium as payment.”

... That was it?

That was it, Mark supposed.

Mark knew a dismissal when he saw one. He stood, and said, “Thank you for the lesson, and the food.”

Blackthorn looked ready to say something... but he paused.

Mark decided to wait.

A moment stretched—

Blackthorn grunted a little, then began, “When you get to be in my position, Mark, you see a lot of plots that don’t involve you. I see one right now. Whoever made your Color Drop did so knowing you were adamantium blooded. Maybe Addashield told them, or not. Maybe Addashield was surprised that he had managed to make an adamantium blooded boy, and that he was going to take advantage of all the metal you could make in the future. Or maybe some other party knew what they were doing when they helped make you.

“Or maybe not.

“I don’t know your whole story beyond what the public and a few other sources know, and I like it that way.

“So I’m just going to give you a professional warning: Someone could dose you with platinum, gold, and osmium, and you’d never have known it, but you also never would have dosed yourself. Osmium in particular is very hard to source. You really don’t have to eat much of the metals for a long-time benefit, either. 5 grams of each would last you 10 years.

“From that first dosage, you’d start producing adamantium at 100-times your current rate. For you, with Union and Healthy Body, too? A thousand grams every 6 months, instead of 10; no problem. That is *well worth* a Color Drop treatment. Whoever is behind the plot probably would have shown up and tried to get on your good side beforehand, and then you’d just ‘coincidentally’ start making more adamantium due to whatever shit they told you, or whatever. And then they’d sweep in and tell you how to make *even more* and they’d turn you into an adamantium farm and... and I’m not sure what their goal was, or is. Maybe they just wanted an adamantium producer for the benefit of the world, but then Addavein happened and all the expected plots were ruined.

“Anyway.

“It’s a plot,” Blackthorn said, “Keep an eye on it.”

Mark felt a certain kind of weight upon hearing all of that. A tension. He had no idea what to make of Blackthorn’s words, but they seemed to be a reasonable extrapolation of circumstances... Human experimentation was pretty much what had been done to Mark, anyway.

But no one had shown up to take advantage of Mark... except for Blackthorn himself, right here and now...?

Hmm.

No.

That's crazy. Blackthorn wasn't plotting around Mark except for the normal amount.

Mark relaxed. Mark said, "Thank you for the warning."

Blackthorn looked at Mark. He seemed questioning, in some sort of way. And then he nodded. He lifted a hand and a shiny black bag floated out of a pantry, near the kitchen. "I'd give you some metals, but I don't have them. I have this instead. Have fun!" He handed the bag over, saying, "It was nice to meet you again, Mark. I have an open door policy to all superheros and supervillains to come on by when they want to get fucked, and get fucked up. *I invite you over, whenever you want.* The door is open!"

Mark held the black bag and kinda froze, but a chuckle escaped him.

Blackthorn grinned.

... He was waiting for an answer.

Mark said, "No thank you."

Blackthorn smirked. "Hey now! The last meeting went horribly, but this one went a lot better, and the next one will be even better. Just make sure that you have a good question to ask, and that you come with a kilo of adamantium." He patted Mark on the shoulder. "There's not much off the table when it comes to a trade like that."

Blackthorn turned and went into his house, toward the hallway where the other people in the back were making certain *noises*, all their vectors were tangled upon each other. The archmage's robe fell off, along with his boxers—

And that was all Mark needed to see.

He got out of there.

On the ride down the elevator, Mark thought a lot about what he had just learned.

It wasn't until he was in his car that he looked inside the black bag.

It was full of drugs, mostly pot-derived, though there was a small jar of white powder with a warning on it about consuming too much. Mark closed the bag, sat for a while, and then looked up at the tower. Was Blackthorn looking his way right now? Probably. The drugs were going in the can as soon as he got out of the archmage's presence. Maybe 20 miles away?

Nah.

He probably had far-sight magics.

The drugs were still going in the can sooner, rather than later.

Mark turned on the car and soon pulled out of the parking lot.

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Steve stood by the window, smoke drifting around him as he watched Mark drive away.

Planty was there. Steve's demon was always there.

She curled in the smoke, in the shadows just outside of sight, in the way light played upon the leaves of plants, and in the whorls of wood. When Steve was absolutely wasted, she was here, in the full flesh, and Steve liked it when she was here in the full flesh. But right now she was just in the smoke.

And on Steve's flesh, like a gentle warmth. Like the smoke caressing his own body.

She ran her smoky fingers through Blackthorn's hair and brushed under his robe, tangling her fingers in the fur of his chest. And then she was a flesh and blood woman, before becoming a wash of colors that only Steve could see, her voice a sultry whisper,

"I will try to protect you, but I can't protect you from Addavein, Love. Not if he gets serious."

Steve easily said, "It's enough that you'll try."

"Getting too involved with that boy will spell your doom and I'm not ready to stop my vacation yet, so you must be careful."

Steve redirected the conversation, "There's going to be a lot more opportunities for fun when we can pop back and forth between Daihoon and Earth without having to rip the Veil ourselves." He caressed Planty's colors, smirking as he said, "I hear the plays of Western Okuana are wondrous, and I've never been there before."

It had been Planty who had told him about those plays.

Planty grinned. With a trilling laugh, she asked, "You wish to leave the house? The city?"

Steve chuckled. "Not too far, you know. I'm not getting involved in any plots unless they are small." And then he smirked, adding the words that he had shared and been shared by Planty at least once a month, "You're on vacation, after all."

Planty turned into soft golden woods and clear water with green emeralds for eyes and rubies for lips. She became color as she moved to stand on Steve's other side, a playful finger or a warm hand never leaving his flesh, her voice a soft thing as she hummed, saying, "We could get involved in a *small* plot... if a really good one comes around. Something small. Since you're already breaking your son's decrees and gifting spellwork lessons to others once again... Maybe it's time for some superheroes to expand their capabilities?" She waggled an eyebrow. "We could set out some tomes and let some mischief commence?" She demurely added, "Nothing to *actually* upset your son, of course. No Curtain Breaking."

Steve liked a little bit of good mischief. "What spells were you thinking?"

“These ones,” Planty said, pulling leather-bound tomes of magic out of the air, making them real in that action. She floated them in front of Steve, asking, “I could go deeper, but each of these would be beneficial for Memphi.”

Twist The Veil.

Atomic Knife.

Dragonwreck.

Steve looked at the three of them, and thought all of them too strong, but all of them were also too useful. “You pick.”

Twist the Veil and Dragonwreck vanished, which was for the best. Both of them were spells far beyond the level of most people, and would have long lasting complications upon the fabric of Memphi’s society. Twist the Veil was going to be disseminated anyway, as these things often were, when one major magic went from being outlawed to regulated. They were planning on Memphi becoming a Twin City, like Tokyo, after all.

Dragonwreck was a much simpler issue. It was simply too dangerous to put out there. It was putting a target on someone’s back. The dragons didn’t like mortals to have Dragonwreck. The dragons didn’t like a lot of things, though, so fuck them.

Still better to not have that plot happening.

This happening with Mark and thus Addavein was going to take up enough of Steve’s capacity to care as it was.

The Book of Atomic Knife settled fully into reality, into Steve’s hands.

Planty said, “There was this girl and her adopted father who tried to see you before Mark showed up. They had an appointment, but it didn’t happen.”

Planty implied that she wanted the girl to have it, but not directly.

Steve knew enough to say, "I'll hang on to it and see where it goes."

Planty grinned, and then she said, "I do love small surprises." And then she asked, "Do you think Mark will tell people about crystal cultivation?"

"... Ah. I didn't directly tell him *not* to... Oh well. I'm sure it'll be fine."

Planty was a wash of watercolors in the air, and then she was back to being smoke, curling up from Steve's pipe.

Steve stared out the window at the skyline of Enchanting, and of Memphi in the distance. With a bit of focus, he watched as Mark turned on to the street outside of his house, over in Shady Acres. He was almost home, but he had also dumped his goodie bag off in some trash somewhere, which was something of a disappointment. Oh well. Steve mentally marked down 'don't give drugs to Mark; he will waste them'. It was a marking he needed to make for a lot of people, so Steve wasn't too offended.

Soon, Mark turned onto the driveway of his house, passing through an anti-scrying barrier set up by Eliot Cybersong. The boy vanished beyond that obscuring. Steve *could* have penetrated those defenses and looked inside, all without alerting the Cybersong boy about the intrusion, but that was unnecessary.

Steve went on with his day.

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Mark lay in bed, scrolling through the internet, trying to corroborate Blackthorn's words through independent research. It was not going well. Quark wasn't having any more luck finding these things out than Mark had had.

Quark's main housing and screen glowed silver on the desk, the readout saying, 'Research in progress.' It had been 'in progress' for the last hour. The most Quark had been able to find was a bunch of public-access forums where they spoke about magic and which were filled with theorists trying to make sense of the magic they saw out there. The site was called 'Armchair Mage', and it was the biggest resource Quark had been able to find, and it was also blacklisted by the Mage Guild. But Mark didn't care about the Mage Guild, so Mark had been scrolling down those forums for a while, finding everything that Quark had found for him, and then finding even more that probably wasn't true at all.

'Mana crystallization' was a known technique that went by a bunch of different names, but mostly there were a bunch of warnings not to attempt the magic outside of a school setting, because the most common side effect of attempting to hold more mana in the body than the body usually held was monsterization. There were warnings for spell creation itself, too. The most common side effect of badly-done magic was failure to cast a spell correctly and the spell would violently unravel inside of the astral body. This usually led toward internal injuries that cascaded externally.

But there wasn't a whole lot on those forums.

Mark had only really been able to find out that different people made different mana, and that the process of going through Tutorial with the System imposed structure on a person's astral body so that they could use that mana all the time in the form of a Power. Normal people, when they Awakened outside of the Tutorial, either through breaking the Curtain or other such means, usually ended up with a 'natural imposition' in the form of a Knack.

Mark had *also* managed to corroborate that creating a new spell always took at least a year of careful study and personal crafting of one's own astral body *into* that new spell. These smaller-than-a-Power twistings, which is what spells truly were, could be undone and then redone into other forms of power, giving a mage a variety of skills available to them, depending on how fast they could twist and untwist themselves.

Also, yeah, the side effects of improperly made 'Powers' were always the most dangerous parts of creating a new spell. Like, making a speedster spell would usually tear a person apart.

As for how to actually make a spell? That wasn't on the forums at all. The mods crushed all sorts of talks about actual functional magic.

That was all Mark had really understood after reading for a few hours.

Honestly, Mark wondered if he should disregard everything he was reading and never look online for answers at all.

One particular post was all a bunch of ranting in capital letters and smaller fonts about how there was an infinite number of Earths, but this slice of reality was locked away from all the other ones because the demons wanted a playpen for themselves, without the rest of infinity encroaching.

"The internet is full of liars," Mark said to himself as he flipped to the next search.

Eventually, Mark felt a vector enter his sensory range, entering from the front of the house. Soon, Mark heard the front door open and felt someone who had to be Isoko walk into the house—

Mark heard grocery bags crinkle and great weights settle down in the kitchen, so he got up and walked out to help put the groceries away.

But then Mark entered the kitchen, and plans changed. Mark saw the platinum fading away from Isoko as she opened up some bags and Mark realized that he needed to tell her... a lot.

"Hey!" Isoko said, grinning. "You saw the archmage today, right? Got some questions answered?"

Mark made a decision, and said, "I got a lot of questions answered, yes. We barely talked about any of it, though. He made a declaration that there's a 20% chance that what Leash said is true, that separating a dragon into the person and the demon can be done, and that the elves and their resurrection magics exist, and..." And there was a lot more, but Mark cut himself off there.

Isoko had frozen, her breath still as she looked at Mark, her eyes going wide.

Mark realized something else about the talk that he hadn't realized until now. Mark added, "And he stayed away from the topic of perma-killing demons. He steadfastly refused to interact with that question. And there was... other stuff, we talked about. He just *told* me about the resurrection and dragon-splitting possibilities. We didn't actually discuss it."

And then there was the other big issue of the day.

Mark's adamantium secret.

Mark had never told Isoko or Eliot about how he produced adamantium in his bones. He wasn't sure how to broach that talk, either, but he wasn't going to do it twice. If he decided to tell them, he'd tell Isoko and Eliot together, when Eliot got back home later. Lola, David, and a few others at Citadel Freyala already knew that Mark was adamantium blooded, but if they knew what that was, exactly, was an open question. Had Lola known what Mark was called? Maybe. So the secret was out.

Maybe the secret should be out to his friends, too.

But for now he watched Isoko, as Isoko broke her stare. She turned and regarded the groceries, and then she put her hands on them... just holding them, not taking anything out or truly looking at what she was touching. Her vector was so far from this moment that she practically wasn't even here. She was thinking deeply.

Mark began putting away the groceries and Isoko nodded a little, silently, before she went into the dining room and sat down at the table, still thinking.

When the ice cream went into the fridge, Isoko stood up and started helping Mark put the rest of the groceries away—

"A 20% possibility is enough for me to go to Endless Daihoon... You know. *Eventually*," Isoko said. "Even a 5% chance is enough if I can get Riku back. How about you?"

“Yeah. I’d go on that low of a chance, too,” Mark said, as he put the chips into the pantry. Isoko had gotten all three of their favorite types of chips; cheddar for Mark, vinegar for Isoko, and barbecue for Eliot. Isoko cared, and it showed. She was a good friend. Mark added, “And I’d want to go with you.”

Isoko breathed deep, and then she set down a bag of meat and turned and held Mark, hugging him. She pressed her face against Mark’s chest, and Mark held her in turn. With his arms around the smaller woman, Isoko sobbed, just a little bit, and Mark held a little tighter, ignoring the tears in his own eyes.

Several moments passed.

And then Isoko chuckled, pulled back, and rapidly wiped away her tears even as she smiled brightly, saying, “It’s a completely crazy idea though, right? Endless Daihoon is impossibly large and filled with kaiju. Even if resurrection magics exist out there, then they’re... they’re too far away, yeah?”

Mark smiled softly. “Yeah. But it’s a nice dream, isn’t it?”

Isoko chuckled again, then she resumed unpacking the groceries and putting them away. She was silent. Mark was silent, too, thinking of what it would mean to walk up the north pole, or the south pole, into the auroras that led to Endless Daihoon, and then *keep going*, instead of turning back around and exiting onto Daihoon. Even that small jaunt into the twists that led between worlds was fraught with danger. They didn’t send convoys between worlds without those convoys being super fast and invisible the whole time, or absolutely packed with high-Powered people, able to defend the larger shipments. Actually going into Endless Daihoon was an *ordeal*.

An ordeal that most people never survived.

Soon the bags were unpacked and Isoko had popped some fried chicken into the oven to heat it up, while a big salad sat in the fridge. According to a text from Eliot he should be back in 10 minutes, just in time for dinner. The food would be hot by then.

Isoko went into the living room and turned on Super News while she waited, and Mark joined her.

Amid the background talk of heroes and villains and monsters from around the world, Isoko said, “It’s crazy to risk everything for a 5% shot at resurrection, right? Even if it worked, getting back home with Riku and your parents would be impossible. We’d be kitted out to survive it all, and probably spent the last 10 years... doing something. So we would —*ideally*— be able to make it back. But they would be resurrected at their death, right? So 18 and dead in the Tutorial for Riku, and however old your parents were. And exactly as they were when they died.”

Mark hadn’t even thought about that.

Was the dream dead on arrival?

It was supposed to be impossible to traverse Endless Daihoon, and almost all the stories about the place corroborated that fact. Addavein had spoken about really exploring the place, now that he was a dragon and not an archmage, but he had admitted that even now he would still have trouble with the more dangerous parts of the place.

What would a dragon consider dangerous?

Something that would absolutely murder Mark and most humans, no doubt.

After a silent minute, Mark said, “It’s probably not a reachable goal.”

“Yeah,” Isoko said, nodding. After a moment, she asked, “Is it selfish to want to resurrect them? Heavens exist, right? Or at least that’s what they tell us at church. We’d be pulling them out of heaven.”

Mark’s eyebrows went up. “Is there a way to contact them and *ask* if they want to be resurrected?”

Isoko shook her head—

She paused.

Isoko said, “There are Spirit Callers. It’s a Power that exists. It’s a Soul Power... Well. I mean. I’ve never thought about *calling up* and *asking*... I don’t know enough about this topic *at all*, Mark. Except I do

know that you can't even do that... not really, anyway." All of the fight seemed to go out of her. She sighed. She said nothing.

Mark didn't know much about this topic, either. But he did know that 'Necromancer' was a rare, yet normal-enough Power for a person to Awaken in the Tutorial, and that souls did exist, and that you couldn't contact most souls at all because... because reasons. Mark had no real idea why contact with the dead wasn't more talked about, or whatever, only that he didn't know about it at all, outside of stuff he had seen on shows and movies, of course. That stuff was all fantasy dressed up as reality, though, and firmly draped in Curtain Protocol.

Mark said, "Maybe they have movies and shows about soul magics on Daihoon. Maybe they just *know* about that stuff more over there, than over here. There has to be a reason why we don't contact the dead, looking to bring them back all the time, right? If resurrection magics exist in myth, then I am sure that people have tried to replicate that power in reality. I'm sure we can find out more on Daihoon."

Isoko sat up straight, suddenly asking, "Is that why Blackthorn told you it was a 20% chance of being real? Maybe he knows people who have tried to replicate resurrection magics? Maybe he knows all about all of that stuff?"

Mark opened his mouth to say something, but a hovercar landed outside the house and a person stepped out of the vehicle. It was probably Eliot, since they walked right up to the house and opened the door. Mark said to Isoko, "I have no idea, but now that Eliot is here, I'd like to talk about... something closer to now."

Isoko said, "Oh. Right."

Eliot walked into the living room, asking, "Something happen with Blackthorn?"

Mark said to both of them, "So I have a secret that I haven't shared yet..." Before the two of them could start thinking the worst, Mark continued, "I make adamantium. Like... I *make* it, somehow, and I learned how to make more of it today, thanks to Archmage Blackthorn. So I'm gonna be making adamantium and telling the world that I get it from other sources, and I don't want to hide that secret from you two, because I'm pretty sure it'll be impossible to hide soon enough, as soon as I verify what Blackthorn told me and then I start making adamantium.

“I’m not selling it, though.

“Soon as I can make enough of it for a weapon for you, Isoko, and for something for you, Eliot, I’ll be making enough to use myself and then spending a kilo of it at a time to get comprehensive answers about any topic I want from Blackthorn. That was the main deal today. He wants adamantium and he’s willing to break mage secrecy to secure a constant source of adamantium.” Mark added, “I’m pretty sure there’s some blackballing stuff that happens between the Mage Guild and mages who go outside of secrecy, but Blackthorn either doesn’t care about that, or he’s too influential to blackball. We didn’t sign any contracts. Just a verbal agreement. The first thing he taught me was what I need to do to start making more adamantium.”

As Mark spoke of producing adamantium Eliot’s eyebrows went high and Isoko sat rigid, but then Mark kept talking and they relaxed, and now they were speechless, and sitting with Mark in the living room. Mark hadn’t known how either of them would have reacted. People got weird around large sums of money, but more than that, people got weird about resources being hidden from them when they were on the same team. He had hoped for the best, though, and the best required honesty.

So he had decided to tell them.

Isoko instantly said, “That can’t be a good deal. It seems like he’s taking advantage of you.”

Eliot said, “There is no going rate for lessons from an archmage because there is no way to buy such a thing. It’s *literally priceless* information. Adamantium is priced at like 40 million goldleaf a kilo, though. It used to be a lot higher.”

Isoko asked, “How much adamantium do you make, Mark? How fast?”

Mark felt warm and good inside that this was their reaction. Mark said, “I don’t know. I need to do some things, first, like corroborate the information he gave me. Might be a kilo every month.”

“Holy shit,” Isoko whispered.

Eliot told Mark, “You could buy a real mage education. That would make the answered questions from Blackthorn a lot more valuable for you. Did he try to point you down that route? Does he want to make you an apprentice?”

“I don’t think so— You two can’t tell anyone. You know that, right?”

“Of course not!” Isoko exclaimed.

“Never,” Eliot said— He gasped. “Oh my gods. You’re an adamantium monster! Like they keep in those zoos!”

Isoko’s face contorted. “The fuck, Eliot?”

Eliot backpedaled, “I didn’t mean it like that! I didn’t know people could make adamantium! But they try to keep adamantium monsters alive if they could and they keep them in zoos. I saw pictures and I even made up some mock zoos because that’s a thing that every city has if they can get it…” Eliot paused. He looked at Mark. “It’s usually only mithrilkinetics who make mithril, right?”

Isoko paused. “Mithrilkinetics can make mithril?”

Mark said, “That was one of the first things Addashield told me, when it turned out I could make adamantium. Mithrilkinetics usually make mithril. Adamantiumkinetics almost never make adamantium. I assume orichalcumkinetics can maybe… make orichalcum? I’m honestly not sure what orichalcum does, though. Never seen it and barely ever heard of it.”

Isoko sat there, thinking.

Eliot sounded like he was asking, “Orichalcum is used in mage light enchantments? Artifact work?”

Isoko said, “I have no idea. Why bring up orichalcum?”

Oh.

Because orichalcum was part of the trifecta that Blackthorn had spoken about, when it came to that gold, platinum, and osmium stuff.

Mark said, “Maybe I wasn’t supposed to talk about that part.”

Isoko stood up, and said, “I think dinner is ready, and then, yeah, I want an adamantium-edged sword. Eventually. We don’t have to talk about where it comes from ever again, but thank you for trusting me with this secret.”

Mark smiled and felt warm inside. Isoko was already in the kitchen pulling out the chicken from the oven. Mark stood and moved a bit slower than her.

Eliot was saying, “I don’t need any adamantium... Unless it actually counts as human-made? I never tried to Manipulate your adamantium, but I know from other experiments that I can’t manipulate magical metals at all. Someone else needs to work with those and then slot them into the systems I make.”

Mark handed Eliot a small cube of adamantium, saying, “Test it out.”

Eliot raised his eyebrows... and then he held onto the cube. He stared at it, and then frowned, and handed it back, saying, “Not happening— That’s Addavein’s metal anyway, isn’t it?”

“Oh. Well...” Mark slipped the adamantium back onto his wrist, saying, “The stuff that Addavein gave me got mixed all up in my own adamantium, so yeah.”

Isoko looked a little uncomfortable, and then she said, “Let’s not talk about big secrets too often, okay? People are listening all the time.”

Eliot scoffed, “I put up anti-scry wards!”

Mark chuckled. “Can you keep out archmages already?”

“... Probably not,” Eliot admitted.

There was no more talk of adamantium over dinner, because Eliot had his own announcement.

“We’ve got a start date! The first week of January for final arrangements, and then we leave on the fifth!” Eliot said. “What we all expected, you know.”

“Shit.” Isoko sat back in her chair. “I’m still a few tests out of my hover license.”

“You can still get those done,” Eliot said.

“Maybe...” Isoko said, “I’m going to Tokyo for Christmas, though.”

“You can get those licenses done *at the settlement*,” Eliot elaborated.

“But what does it mean to start, though? What *exactly*?” Mark asked.

Eliot nodded. “It means the shipments of stuff from Memphi are getting loaded up at the settlement airfields starting on the first and getting sent off toward the South Pole on the fifth. I’m leaving with that first flight, probably on the 5th of January. It’s 20 days to fly to the settlement site and then probably 5 days to secure it so I can start building there while the settlers secure the location. If you guys need anything just let me know, okay? I plan on us being in one of the main buildings in the middle of it all. We’re still going for that plan, right?”

Isoko nodded, but her vector was elsewhere. She was thinking and making plans.

*Ahhh... There’s so much to do. Quark’s AI housing, go meet Sally at her parent’s new house after Christmas, and I need to get some metals, too... Hmm.*

Mark asked, “Can you get me 5 grams each of platinum, gold, and osmium, Eliot? And not ask questions about any of it, while knowing that it’s probably a very big tell for that particular information to get out?”

Eliot caught on fast. “Oh shit? You need actual metals to grow adamantium?” He thought. He said, “The osmium is tough.”

“Yeah. I looked it up and I couldn’t buy it anywhere.”

Eliot frowned. He stressed, “*Nowhere?*”

Isoko’s eyebrows went up. “That’s a known quantity of metals, isn’t it. Platinum and gold are easy enough to get, but osmium... osmium is rare. And if all adamantium blooded need those three to grow... Oh yeah. That’s tracked.”

Mark said, “Mithrilkinetics need to eat the same stuff to grow mithril, so it might not be *that* tracked.”

Eliot shook his head. “A trio of metals? Known to enable biometal growth? That is absolutely tracked by... someone, for sure.” Eliot grinned. “But don’t worry. I can get it, and without tracking. Not an issue. 5 grams of each, you said?”

“That’s what I was told.” Mark was a little surprised. “Where can you get it?”

“The *last* resort is that I can get it from my family. We’ve got weird resources and that includes metals of all kinds.” Eliot waved a hand. “But I *should* be able to refine some of it from one of the testing mines I’ve been working in, to see how far I have been able to stretch my powers. That’ll be my first test, and I’ll see if I can get it to you by tomorrow, along with the platinum and gold... And that’s it? 5 grams each?”

Mark smiled. “That’s all I was told. Thank you.”

Isoko asked, “Have you tried taking in those metals from your surroundings, Mark? Breathe in the osmium, breathe out the... carbon? You have lots of excess carbon.”

“... I never tried?” Mark had a thought, then shook his head a little, saying, “I wouldn’t breathe out carbon. If it’s just an intake of something small, then I can take it in, relax, and let the Union fade, without the backstroke.”

Isoko asked, “But what about—”

“No no no no,” Eliot said, “You two talked about Union all yesterday. Let’s talk about Castellan!”

Isoko clicked her tongue and said, “Fine fine!” She said, “So you’re a miner, now? When did that happen?” She rolled her eyes and tried not to grin even as she made her voice drip with sarcasm, “Are you filthy rich, yet?”

Eliot grinned. “I’m working on it!” And then he began a story, “A few weeks ago I began lessons on trench and city wall creation. It was part of the whole underground segment of the Hearthswellian construction lessons. Grandma always told me never to dig down too deep and to always over-engineer everything I build underground because collapsing rock walls are a Big Issue. She was, and continues to be, correct. Collapsing walls are horror stories of trapped people in holes in the ground, crushed to death and unable to move at all. Kaiju bunkers need to be built at *least* 5-times stronger than basic underground structures, and even something as small as a two-meter-deep, meter-wide hole is enough to trap and kill someone, if the walls collapse upon them...”

Mark and Isoko listened to Eliot talk about building stuff and the horrors of bad construction over dinner, and it was nice. Oh yeah, it was horrible to hear about that stuff, but Eliot had grown up wanting to be a bard, in the classical, Daihoon-sense of the word. A historian tale-teller. Eliot clearly had training for that sort of thing. Telling a story in person, off the cuff, wasn’t what he excelled at, since what he usually did was publish edited videos, but he was still good at it. He had a nice voice.

Mark liked his friends a whole lot.

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Mark sat cross legged on a pillow, in an extra room to the side of the house. The sun was just rising over the horizon, and Mark was awake and ready to try some weird Unions.

The first thing he did was open his blood to adamant and weakness, his heart beating strongly, black veins pulsing outward from his heart, across his chest and over his shoulders, down his biceps and around his forearms. Everywhere that his blood beat underneath his skin, it also broke off from his body, escaping into the air, black veins pulsing up from pale skin.

Mark let his mind wander, as he looked at his skin.

He used to be tanned from being outdoors and running and learning how to fight in class, but ever since he Awakened his skin had turned whiter. It was a common affliction for most people who Awakened as a Brawny of any sort. Tanning became impossible.

But then again, Mark figured his skin was too white. He never imagined he was quite this pale, and he blamed Addavein. Mark's hair had turned absolutely pitch black, too, which was definitely related to *some* part of Mark's situation. He wasn't sure why he had physically changed so drastically, but it had happened... Might have been because of the Color Drop treatment, too. Who knew!

Mark liked the muscles and the power, though.

Mark's heart continued to beat with adamant and weakness, which was not his usual Union. Usually he did resilience and weakness, so that he could judge the powers of others as strong, or weak. Some monsters could actually resist a normal Union of resilience and weakness, and when Mark came across those ones, he knew the foe he faced was truly dangerous. If Mark opened with adamant and weakness right away then he would overpower every single monster he ever encountered, and if he did that, then how was he supposed to learn how to gauge threats?

So Mark stuck with resilience/weakness until he learned what he needed to learn from a monster, and then he usually killed it fast with a Union of adamant/weakness, and swipes of adamantium.

Mark meandered through his meditation for a little while, and then he opened his eyes and watched the sunrise beyond the window. Snow lay upon the ground outside of the meditation room, and the morning was overcast. Grey, but not too oppressive. More snow would fall soon enough. Mark could barely see the sunrise beyond the bare trees, like gold glints hiding between shadows.

And now Mark focused on going the distance.

Mark pushed his Union as far as he could go, enmeshing with the fabric of the world. He felt the cold birds in the trees, where they tweeted tiny cries that curled into the cold like smoke from a pipe, fog heavy in the morning light. Squirrels cuddled inside burrows. Mice and rats huddled here and there. A raccoon family turned in for the morning.

Eliot slept soundly in his room, while Isoko's vector began to stir, to wake.

With his consciousness expanded over a hundred and fifty meters in every direction, Mark focused downward, into the ground, into the crust of the Earth where precious metals and all sorts of things lay there, dispersed. He had really liked the idea of pulling metals out of the ground, if he could, but Mark wasn't sure he could. Was there even gold down there, at all? Platinum? Osmium? There was a lot of gold in the ocean, so there had to be metals in the very land under the house. Trace metals? It would be enough if Mark could make it work.

Perhaps it would never work.

He was going to try, anyway.

Mark breathed in *platinum*.

Just one breath!

And... And...

Mark looked around. He looked at his skin, at his body. Nothing looked different. Nothing *felt* different. Mark hadn't breathed out anything at all, and he was still holding his breath, so his Union felt kind of... not much different at all, really.

... Was his Union picking up anything at all? Maybe not.

Better test it to make sure it was still working like it should.

Mark breathed out a normal breath, then he breathed in *good*, holding his breath at the apex of his inhale.

Instantly, he felt bloated. Just a little. It was a familiar bloat.

When Mark breathed out normally, and did not actually breathe out anything ‘good’ or ‘bad’ at all. He held onto the good. Holding this sort of Union-load was akin to holding an astral weight. Mark breathed in ‘good’ a few more times, and breathed out normally, not exhaling bad at all; just exhaling air. He felt like he was holding in a fart, now, except he was holding it in with his entire body.

Yeah.

So that still worked.

Mark could do one-sided Unions. It just hurt to do so.

Mark exhaled the bad—

Like uncapping a boiling pot of water, filled with gloom, a minor blast of miasma billowed out of Mark’s mouth and nose. With practiced threading, Mark filtered the bad into the world, beyond the scope of the small meditation room. Some of the miasma was too thick, and it filled the room with a bit of a stench. An exhaust system in the corner of the room helped to get rid of that stench. Fresh outside air flowed into the house, through some filters and some heating elements, and then entered the room, while exhaust fans kept the ‘bad’ air flowing right back out.

Mark felt bloated as he continually exhaled, but soon the miasma coming out of him was practically nothing and easily dealt with. The stench vanished. His astral body was balanced once again.

“That’s still working normally...” Mark mumbled.

He switched to breathing in platinum.

One breath inward, followed by a holding, and then an exhale of normal air.

Mark felt no bloating at all on the first inward pull, nor on the second, third, or fourth. Mark ended up breathing in platinum for a full ten minutes and he felt no change at all, which was probably confirmation that he couldn't breathe in platinum, or any other weird sorts of metals.

Just to be sure, though, Mark tried gold next, followed by osmium, and nothing happened. He felt no metaphysical weight, no bloating of his astral body at all.

So this wasn't working, at all.

Mark hummed and watched the sun rise above the treetops as he thought.

"Maybe... Maybe I need to be less exact? A broader category?"

... What would that even mean, though?

"Ah! I need to check and see if I can take in *anything* at all with this method."

Mark tried breathing in 'carbon', and five minutes later, he still felt fine. No bloating at all.

"So maybe this method is completely flawed, and it just doesn't work this way."

Maybe he couldn't target individual elements?

Mark tried breathing in 'water' next, that worked just fine, though now he had to pee. Mark breathed out impurity and the pressure in his bladder vanished. Taking in water was a rather normal part of solving the issue of survival in the wilds, so that still worked fine. Mark had a good grasp of that sort of pulling-of-resources.

Water was pretty special metaphysically, though, according to Lola. Water could be targeted like that. So could 'air' and 'heat' and even weirder things, like colors and gravity. Perhaps elemental metals simply could not be targeted? It was a question that Mark needed to ask Lola. He hadn't had one of those questions in a long time, but he usually found a way to go hang out with her once a week...

He needed to visit her to talk about what he was doing right now, anyway.

Mark thought about metals.

Well... The birth of adamantium occurred in Mark's blood, in his bone marrow, so maybe he needed to use Union of *Blood*...

But that seemed like a good way to really hurt himself. Sure, his Power wouldn't hurt him, but depositing a bunch of platinum in his bones seemed like a good way to get heavy metal poisoning... And yet, Mark could just purify that away, couldn't he? Yeah, he could.

Mark pulsed his heart with platinum, taking in the metal—

Instantly a headache loomed and Mark rapidly switched to purity/impurity, like he had touched a stove and he needed to yank his hand away as fast as he could and run it under cold water. The headache faded, but it remained in the background until Mark switched to resilience/weakness.

“... So that had worked?”

He had a think.

And then Mark did something reckless. He continued with this methodology He did a Union of Blood for gold—

The headache came on slower this time, but it was still there. Mark cut the Union and let the headache naturally fade... And he wondered, as he let the headache fade on its own, if he had purified away all the platinum in his body when he had run his purity/impurity Union. And now he had no platinum.

Mark did a single heartbeat of platinum and eased off before the headache could loom. The headache still loomed.

“Welp! Time for osmium, which is the only one that really matters... maybe.”

Mark beat his heart a few times, drawing osmium out of the ground. Or at least that was the idea. Nothing seemed to happen and Mark's headache was getting better and better, so was he really doing anything at all?

Mark kept drawing in osmium until he actually started to feel bloated, which was strange. The headache was almost completely gone, too.

... Maybe he had done it?

Mark released his Union of Blood and waited for the bloating to go away, as his astral body released the tension it was holding. It was like Mark had thrown a bed sheet over a bed, trapping air in a bubble, and now the bubble was slowly deflating.

... If it worked, it had worked, and that would be great.

It seemed like it hadn't worked, though.

With his sense of adamantium, Mark felt out his body, looking for the usual grains of dust that appeared now and again. He only had a few today. Mark breathed out adamantium and collected those few grains of dust to add them to his collection, and then he set his adamantium to the side. With a twist and a dropping, Mark released the black metal to clatter onto the floor, and now he was completely free of all adamantium.

It was time to start stretching his Union again, to try this crystal cultivation thing.

Mark beat his heart with adamant and weakness, drawing in strength while black veins threaded into the world, ridding Mark of every unwanted thing. His core felt warm like it usually did when he did this sort of meditation. Mark was primed to do some real meditation, to grow his adamantium...

Maybe.

Blackthorn had told Mark to focus on his goals and cycle through them, picking them up and putting them down, to prime his mana for purpose and then let it go. In this way, his mana, which was really

adamantium, would condense inside of him. Mark imagined the whole process was sort of like making a supersaturated solution, and then tapping it to crystallize out a precipitate. Or something like that. Mark had passed the science courses like everyone else in high school, but only enough to complete the exams. He was too busy practicing for the Tutorial, and then everything went to shit with that coma, and Mark couldn't finish school. That was almost a year ago, by now...

Mark looked out the window to the snow. He recalled his parents, and the last Christmas they had ever had together. Winters in Memphis had snow. Winters here were a lot different here than winters in Orange City, in the Floridas.

Mark wanted to resurrect Mom and Dad. To bring them back.

It was a nebulous, long-ranging goal.

Mark couldn't even begin to fathom it as a real goal that was able to be pursued.

Resurrection? Impossible.

But Mark wanted to bring his parents back. Maybe then he wouldn't hate Addavein so much.

Mark also wanted to kill the dragon, but in the way that didn't make any sense at all. Why was Mark still so mad at a dragon that wasn't even responsible for a demon's actions? It was an unhealthy emotional response, for sure. Tutorial training with Instructor Gravel back in high school had knocked a lot of sense into Mark, before all of his issues, and then Mark's time at Citadel had done even more for him, but Mark still... did not like the dragon.

And yet, Addavein had once spoken about going to Endless Daihoon, now that he actually could. Now that it wasn't a death sentence. Because that's what such a trip would have been for Addashield and most other people, too. Endless Daihoon was full of monsters of all sizes. Only a High Dragon could even hope to survive it, and maybe not even then.

Super-kaiju ruled Endless Daihoon.

Or at least that's what Mark had heard. Mark had no idea what 'super kaiju' actually were, only that he had heard the term in a few different places.

Did Mark want to go with Addavein to Endless Daihoon?

Yes.

Probably.

And wasn't that fucking weird.

If his parents and everyone that Addashield had killed in his near-Fall were brought back to life, then would Mark have any reason to hate Addashield at all? Not really. If everyone lived again, then he could forgive the archmage and he might even enjoy being Addavein's 'brother'.

... Yeah.

The more Mark thought of it, the more he realized that his nebulous plan for the future, for becoming a kaiju killer, a superhero, and to make a real home for himself in a city on Daihoon, the more he realized that a trip to Endless Daihoon with his talzarki, Addavein, was a good goal. One of the Big Goals, for sure.

Mark smiled at that realization.

... What was he going to tell the dragon when Addavein came back and started asking why Mark was talking about splitting him back into Addashield and Kanda.

... Well. In that case, Mark would just tell the truth.

*'Oh come off if. Of course tiny humans want to know if there's a way to fight a dragon without actually fighting a dragon. Addashield would have jumped at this whole vein of thought if he were still alive.'*

... Mark would come up with something more poignant in the moment, he was sure.

For now, Mark set aside that Big Goal and focused on the 'smaller' goals.

He needed to get a housing for Quark. A livium core, for sure. That was going to run him 150k goldleaf, and it would be one of his bigger, first purchases when they got to the settlement.

And then there were other artifacts he needed. A hoverbelt, Shaper training to allow him to surpass his astral/physical body limitations, learning how to do Unions that don't involve his personal self...

Mark thought of his goals, picking them up and putting them down. He did that for a good half hour.

He was sure he was doing this correctly, but no adamantium grew anywhere. Not out of his spine, like Addavein grew adamantium, or in his black hair, which was another option, or in his guts, or in his bones. Mark pulled back his Union and thought.

Isoko opened the door to the room, saying, "Any luck?"

She had been awake for the last hour, working on hovercar homework and finishing with breakfast. The smell of bacon and eggs filled the air, along with the scent of rich coffee. Eliot was awake in his bed, doing something on his phone, perhaps. Probably checking his social media feeds, according to Mark's Unionsense. Mark was pretty sure that Isoko had waited till Mark stopped with his Union work to open the door, and that had been nice of her.

Mark got up and shook his head, saying, "No luck. I think the metal-grabbing didn't work... or maybe I was doing something wrong. I'm not sure."

Isoko said, "Well breakfast is ready. I'll go poke Eliot."

Mark smiled a little, reaching out to grab his adamantium and slip it back against his skin, as he put a shirt back on, saying, "Thanks for making breakfast."

Isoko smirked and walked away, saying, "Your turn to make dinner tonight!"

“Of course! So I was thinking I can make pizza again. I can do it better this time.”

Isoko chuckled as she knocked on Eliot’s bedroom door, saying, “Breakfast, lazybones!”

Eliot grumbled behind his door, but he started moving anyway—

Isoko told Mark, “Your previous pizza was perfectly *edible*.”

Mark laughed. “It was burnt and shit and you know it.”

“Only burned in good ways! Charred pizza is a delicacy in some places, I’m sure. Can you make it with corn this time, though?”

Mark was aghast. “Corn on pizza?”

“Of course! And potato wedges, too.”

“What!”

The conversation meandered about pizza toppings around the world as the two of them ate breakfast in the kitchen. Eliot eventually joined them, asking about if Mark had managed to grow any adamantium yet.

“Not yet! I think I got the process figured out, if it does indeed work like Blackthorn said it worked, but my attempt at drawing metals out of the ground only left me with a headache.”

Eliot nodded as he squirted hot sauce all over his eggs and toast, saying, “I’ll get some metals today. It’ll be easy. No one will know.”

“Thank you, Eliot.”

“No problem. But you’re gonna tell that Sally girl about it eventually, right? If she’s going to be joining us?”

“When is she getting in, anyway?” Isoko asked, and then she almost said something else, but she stopped.

Mark wondered what Isoko had wanted to say, but he felt too great about finally seeing Sally again to ask Isoko what was up. Mark said, “She’s going to be visiting family over Christmas and I *cannot wait* for you two to meet her! We’ve been friends since we were little kids—”

Mark and Isoko’s phones blinked to life on the kitchen table. Isoko’s phone flashed a warning that everyone focused on—

But Quark spoke up, announcing the full truth of the new emergency, “An all-hands quest has been issued by Memphi and picked up by Slayer HQ, the Wall Guard, and many other local hunting agencies, for the Northeastern Memphi area. A Low Green monster has been identified that meets your selected criteria for kill credit toward advancement toward Green Slayer. Memphi is offering a hovercar ride out to the monster zone, which has now spread over 2 square kilometers. The monster is a duplicator cow that infects other monsters with its own astral body, and replicates, not unlike goblins. This is an all-kill quest. The duplicator cows have the same intelligence as a normal cow, but they have a penchant for blood. They infect their targets with a stab of their long tails...”

What followed was a thorough description of the monsters’ various physical appearance and capabilities, but Mark and Isoko had already shared a look and made a decision and promptly scarfed down whatever they could eat as fast as they could eat, to get ready to go out. Soon they rushed into their rooms to put on their gear, while Mark called out for Quark to accept the kill quest, and Eliot said something about cleaning up breakfast while they went on a hunt.

“You want to come?” Mark asked, though he already knew the answer.

“Nope!” Eliot said. “I’ve got plans today.”

Mark had waited for Eliot to say ‘no’, but as soon as he heard that word he was racing out of the house, calling out behind him, “I’m gonna keep asking! You’re gonna say yes someday!”

Eliot chuckled.

Ten minutes later a hovervan, flashing with yellow warning lights, dropped down onto the street to pick them up. Mark and Isoko hopped inside, joining four other people in a mad dash through the sky. Everyone in the vehicle had on armor, but none of them were 'random hunters', like Mark and Isoko. They were professionals. They were all part of the Wall Guard, with black and yellow 'M's painted on their uniform chestplates. They were all called 'the Guard', technically, but colloquially, they were—

“A bunch of bees!” Mark said, smiling as he greeted them, his faceplate still lifted, showing off his face. With one hand on the overhead bar, Mark held his other hand forward to the lead guy, who was wearing a black and yellow shoulder cape. “I'm Mark.”

“Isoko,” Isoko said, as she shook the guy's hand, too. “Union users.”

The lead guy greeted them both, saying, “The AI said you were paladin-adjacents, so you're both on backline healing/protecting duty. The snakes cannot be allowed to bite anyone.”

“Aye aye, sir!” Mark said, and Isoko copied.

And then Isoko asked, “So it's a serious case? We're not free-for-alling?”

“Absolutely no free-for-alling,” the leader said, and then his phone jangled, or something, because he looked away from Mark and Isoko and started reading his phone. He nodded to a woman in the group, almost as an afterthought, as he read the alert on his phone.

The woman said, “They were cows for eating but they mutated hard. We're not sure how they got so far outside of the gate, or any shit like that. The cows have chimeric-like tails that are snakes that bite and pass on the transformation, while the front end just eats everything it can eat. If you got long range Powers then you can throw them at the monsters, but we don't want anyone getting near them. *I repeat:* The cows' snake-tails have a range measured in 10 meters, and they bite everything all around them all the time, spreading the infection. It's an *active contamination zone*.”

She seemed like she had to deal with mavericks a lot.

“I got long range offense,” Mark said. “100 meters in every direction, 200 for distance. Shaper with decent movement.”

Isoko said, “I’m on heals.”

The woman nodded and looked to Mark. “What’s your Power?”

“Offensive Union and metalshaper. Inquisitor-type in training—” Which was only sort of true, but the shorthand worked well in most situations, “—Villain name: Blackvein.”

The woman and two other guards were surprised by that, but it was hard to know which part surprised them the most. And then the woman said, “Inquisitor! *Okay!* We don’t know what happened out there but we don’t suspect, uh, malfeasance—” She rapidly moved on from the idea that humans were doing bad things to each other, adding, “But if you see anything, then kindly report it, please.”

Mark said, “In *training*. I’m not cleared for that sort of work yet. I can still drop monsters easily, though.”

The bees all relaxed at that. The woman gave a nervous chuckle.

The leader got off his phone as they crested the northern wall of Memphi. He looked to Mark, saying, “The AI has labeled you as a party leader, so we’re doing that.”

The bees were surprised by Mark being ‘casually’ labeled as a leader in the field, but Mark wasn’t. This had happened twice before. The bees rapidly fell in line, though, and this leader guy seemed to do the same. Mark wondered if they were all just brawnies. After asking them about their own capabilities, they all sounded off as brawnies. They all expected to be on the backline today, but they’d be headed forward with Mark at the lead.

Mark would lead them well.

Mark happily said, “Then let’s get out there and kill some monsters!”

And that is what they did.

The bees didn't know Mark before that day, but they certainly made note of his name when they saw him 'fly' and send 'black lightning' into a herd of charging cows with snakes for tails, and drop them all, making them bleed out from the inside. The bees were on cleanup, right alongside Mark, who went around clipping off tails with swipes of metal to make killing the cows a whole lot safer. Mark couldn't drop the whole herd at once because a lot of people were out fighting the cows, and the infection was already a herd 5,000 strong, but it wasn't long till Mark's progress outstripped most everyone else's. Mark, Isoko, and the bees they picked up along the way, led the charge against the herd.

Mark entered the flow, and everyone else did to, right alongside him. He did not lead so much with words, but instead with a Union of Action, joining with the others out there, fighting the good fight.

Soon, the battlefield was dead and humanity stood triumphant, and Mark was talking with others who had been there, making connections and having people notice him for other reasons than what had just happened. More than one person called him 'dragon brother', and Mark kinda just smiled and nodded.

With the battlefield under control, pyroshapers came out and started burning the bodies, making sure that whatever caused the dupli-cow infection could not restart from a corpse. Someone had identified that the meat was poison, though not before a few people had almost succumbed to a transformation. Some Hearthswellian paladins were on the case, though, and they cleared the infection better than anyone else could do so.

And now Mark stood with Isoko, looking over the fires. He sniffed the air.

Isoko said what he was thinking, "It smells good."

Mark nodded. "I can almost see wanting to eat some of it myself."

Isoko laughed.

Mark grinned.

Isoko asked, "So what are your theories?"

“Thrashtalon mutated a cow and someone ate the cow and transformed out here. Or someone did something along some of those lines.”

“Going straight for the big explanation, huh?”

“What do you think happened?”

“I’m thinking someone’s Power got out of control. Maybe a husbandry Power? A witch Power.”

Mark raised an eyebrow. He gazed out at the burning fields of corpses. “... I’d prefer it to be that, but I think this was a Thrashtalon Wilding.”

“It’s the snake tails,” Isoko said, nodding.

“The *chimeric* transformative *venomous* snake tails.”

“Yeah...” Isoko sniffed the air. “I think the smell is *too* good, too. Like... Someone was crafting something good to eat, and they wanted it to affect all of their cows and the magics got away from them.” She added, “Magics can do some weird things.”

“I could see that.” Mark looked around at the groups of bees and hunters standing around, watching the forests and cows burn under the steady flow of fire from many, many pyromancers. “They all look hungry, don’t they?”

“Shit, Mark. *I’m* hungry again, and I’m pumping sustenance and deprivation right now to kill that hunger.”

Mark admitted, “Me, too.”

Hours later, Mark and Isoko got home, along with a bunch of fresh groceries.

Mark put some steaks into the fridge, smiling a little. He was going to cook them up for dinner, and it was going to be *fantastic*.

“Better than pizza,” Isoko said, nodding.

“Much better than pizza,” Mark agreed, adding, “And I know how to cook a steak!”

Isoko rolled her eyes, laughing.

Later, as Mark was cooking the steaks, Eliot showed up with a small bag for Mark. Mark opened it up there in the kitchen and saw three smaller paper bags, each of them labeled. Platinum, osmium, and gold. 99.9% pure.

“You just *walked around* with those?” Isoko asked.

“I was circumspect!” Eliot said, scoffing.

Mark was going to be circumspect and he was rather sure that Eliot had been, too, but the cat was already out of the bag as far as Mark was concerned. “Thank you, Eliot! How difficult was it?”

Eliot said, “No problem, and it was easy. I made a whole refinery today to push myself, to extract everything I could from the mining site, but what really did the dead was going to the Mississippi and setting up a filter system there. The whole thing gummed up with colloidal stuff like silica and iron. It was a lot easier to filter out of the Mississippi, though! We might be doing something with that on the Shine, over on Daihoon, in order to get metals and such. Aurora and Iliandra are in talks with the miner guys and the fishery guys right now. Whatever happens, they’ll decide.” Eliot smiled. “But that’s for them to decide. So! Are you going to eat them?”

Isoko asked Mark, “Down them like pills, or something?”

Mark held three small pellets in his hand. Two of them looked mostly the same, both platinum and osmium being white-silver in color, while the gold was quite beautiful, like a drop of sunshine. Mark put

them back into the bag and into his pocket. “I’ll ask around about this a bit more before I do it. Thank you though, Eliot.”

“Anytime! So how was the cow hunt? I heard from Aurora that they thought Thrashtalon was involved.”

Mark laughed once, then told Isoko, “I was right!”

Isoko waved a hand, saying, “Just because he’s the usual suspect when it comes to monster issues doesn’t mean he’s always the one responsible. There was that series of explosions last month that turned out to be someone’s Explosion Power detonating secondarily when they were upset. Despite the claims of his cult, Thrashtalon is not responsible for *monsters themselves*.”

Mark smirked. “It’s Thrashtalon this time. I’m sure of it.”

Isoko waved a hand. “We’ll probably never find out, anyway.”

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Mark looked through the door of Lola’s new office and saw Lola hanging paintings up on the walls. Her small library of non-fiction histories rested on her new bookshelves, while her desk itself was up against the other wall, and half of her office was a giant window with a fantastic view of snow-covered Memphi. They were on the second floor of a local branch of Collective Temple, north of Enchanting, the ‘mage city’ of Memphi.

Lola was focused on her paintings. She had already hung up a view of the bay of Orange City, with its pillar wall, before Addavein had replaced a few central spires of the span with pillars carved in his own likeness. Another painting was a gold and blue landscape of the French countryside.

Mark knocked on the open door, but it was just to be polite. Lola already knew that Mark was here. She had probably clocked him when he walked through the big entrance downstairs.

“Hello, Mark,” Lola said, smiling a little bit as she turned toward him, and then back to the painting of the bay. “Do you think this one looks good here? I’m not sure.”

“I think your whole office looks great.”

Lola smiled a little, and then she turned professional. “You’re here to talk about whatever you learned with the archmage. Come on in and shut the door.”

Mark entered, shut the door, and the words started pouring out. Lola asked clarifying questions every now and then, but mostly she let him get out everything he needed to get out. It took some time and Lola had to dismiss someone who knocked on her door halfway through Mark’s words, but Mark eventually finished.

After he was done, Lola said, “I’m glad you told your friends. I doubt Eliot was as circumspect as he imagined he was, but probably through no fault of his own. Osmium is *not actually* regulated at all, but it is tracked most heavily, because, as the archmage told you, that is one of the major materials for growing biometals.”

Mark’s eyebrows went up. “So you *did* know that it worked like this?”

“Yes, though I was hoping that wasn’t what your conversation with Blackthorn would have been about, though it was one of the possibilities.”

Mark suddenly felt... weird. “Were you ever going to tell me that I could get more adamantium on my own?”

Lola arched an eyebrow. “No. No one from the Church of Freyala would have told you.”

Mark felt adrift. “... Why not?”

“We know a lot about what you might eventually be able to do, and producing adamantium was just one of those eventualities that you don’t need to rush into as fast as you are rushing. More adamantium would have just made you a target, as you have already experienced once before.”

“... Oh.”

Lola nodded. Lola added, “You don’t need to worry about any Color Drop plots, though. We do know who did your treatment, and they will not be an issue.”

Mark wasn’t sure how he felt about that. “... You were hiding this from me?”

“Among many other things, yes.”

Mark *extremely* wasn’t sure how he felt. Some combination of betrayal, but also comfort, and knowing that some people out there had his best interests in mind, but then again how could Mark know that he was being protected, or *babied*, unless he was told about that, and yet, Mark wasn’t an Inquisitor, so of course they would keep important information away from him. Mark had keep himself separate from Freyala of his own volition, after all, and that meant that he was outside of the Collective, the loose association of Inquisitor-ranked paladins from every church and clergy that worked together to kill Fallen mages and demonic threats of all kinds, and who dealt with the worst of humanity, killing cultists of Thrashtalon and... and all of that.

Lola waited while Mark had a think.

Mark eventually looked at Lola, and asked, “If I were an Inquisitor, would you tell me about these sorts of things?”

“There’s a lot to learn about magic and mages and demons and all the nuances of the War for Life. It takes time to learn those things, and you are not currently enrolled in any sort of formal education system. But before that time of learning, before schooling can happen, it takes a Calling to become a soldier in the War. Do you feel Called to rid the world of its problems, in ways that are too permanent to be called anything but murder?”

Lola had always been way too solid in her expectations of Inquisitors and what it meant to be a hunter of demons. Here she was, talking about straight-up killing people. It always freaked Mark out. He still wasn't over killing that one woman, Mary Getty, the Mind Controller cultist of Thrashtalon who had tried to kill him first, and who had demonized herself in order to do it.

Mark found himself faltering.

"No," Mark said, "I'm not Called to war against other people like that."

The War for Life Itself was not something Mark needed to step into. Not now, hopefully not ever.

He just wanted to kill monsters.

"Then there will be a barrier to what I can tell you, and how we interact. I greatly care for you, Mark. You were harmed, and I harmed you, and I don't want to harm you ever again, and knowing something as... as *deep* as how to induce a biometallic to make more biometal is one of the secrets that can harm a person. There used to be a great many menageries in the Old World. The dragons kept those people as pets and they had breeding programs, though they dressed their programs up with nicer words like 'bloodlines' and 'bloodline purity'. Even in a lesser way, learning about the biometal-metals can lead to heavy metal poisoning in people who eat the things thinking they'll get rich if they can condense adamantium, or otherwise." Lola said, "There are horrors in every shadow of every nation of Daihoon and otherwise. Learning about them takes a decade and then a lifetime."

Mark decided right then and there that he didn't need that concern in his life, so he said, "You know what? Let's just not talk about that sort of stuff. Thanks for looking out for me. I'll probably be selling the adamantium to Blackthorn for some good secrets. Got any suggestions?"

"How to kill demons permanently," Lola said, without hesitation.

Mark blinked. "... I kinda figured you would already know that? And I just haven't asked about it? It seemed like a smaller concern next to resurrection magics, elves on Endless Daihoon, and turning Addavein back into Addashield and Kanda?"

Lola said, “Demons are basically unkillable outside of certain scenarios. Killing a Fallen mage just sends the demon back to Arakino. There’s only *one* scenario we really know *kinda* works, and that’s when a demon becomes a dragon and we kill the dragon. Or at least that’s what we *thought*, until Leash showed up with those words of his. Some people never believed that killing a dragon was the end for any demon at all, and those people are suddenly gaining a lot of voice in the Collective. Your talk with Leash revealed a few things that may or may not have been true.

“I will give you a basic primer on souls, now.”

Mark breathed in sharply. He had spoken about souls and death and resurrection and necromancers when he told Lola about his talk with Blackthorn, but he had never expected to go further in that direction of talks with Lola. Mark just didn’t know what he didn’t know, though, and that included what sorts of topics were the truly interesting ones, to those in-the-know. Perma-killing demons was apparently a *very* interesting topic.

“First, regarding the existence of souls and soul manipulations. Some Powers can work with the dead, and people who die in service or devotion to Freyala move on to Freyala’s heaven, so we know souls exist. But they don’t come back from death, not ever. When a necromancer raises a body, if the body is intact enough, then the person inhabiting the body can gain some memories from the body, and superficially resemble the person whose body they now inhabit. That’s called ghost-calling, Mark.

“Any soul work that works off of impressions left in the body or in the air is called ghost work, or ghost manipulation. Ghosts are figments in the weave of the world, left by the depth of souls that have passed on. They are not the real souls that used to live in real bodies.

“Some very strong, very niche Powers are able to call back the original soul into the body, but only in certain situations, like recent death. We’re talking within a minute, Mark. It’s more healing magics than soul magics at that point. Those same Powers act as necromantic Powers beyond that minute-long time window, which is not always one minute long. Sometimes it’s 10 seconds, sometimes it’s 10 minutes. There’s leeway with that number, because souls are slippery.

“Sometimes you can catch a soul with a soul crystal, though. If you ever see someone with a soul crystal then you need to be wary, Mark. They’re dangerous people, and they probably deserve death, because they were probably trafficking in people because soul crystals are used to kill a person and then harvest

the soul and keep it intact until you can make a body for the person once again, making a slave or other sort of horror.”

Mark felt his skin prickle.

Lola continued, “But anyway, this means that souls leave upon death, and go somewhere else. We believe that souls move on to Endless Daihoon when the body dies. And that’s the basic truth of souls.”

Mark felt a *focus*. “Holy shit. Maybe some elves out there *can* resurrect people?”

Lola nodded. “Either a mythical people, yes, or something else that functions the same. That’s probably where Blackthorn’s 20% figure was coming from, though I have absolutely no idea how he arrived at that 20% figure. That seems like a wild guess to me.”

Mark almost asked something else, but he forgot what he was going to ask when Lola continued—

“So back to dragons and making people out of them. Dragons have souls, and dragons can be killed,” Lola said, “Dragon souls are massive. They’re huge things that can be captured by certain sized soul crystals, and then those artifacts can be used to power very large enchantments. It’s soul magic, and it’s dangerous. But, regarding dragons and demons...

“Killing a body that holds a demon just sends the demon on its way, back to the Demon City Arakino, to the Moon. Demon souls are a lot stronger than mortal souls, though. A *lot* stronger.

“Dragon souls are rather strong, too. Not as strong as a demon’s, but similar in nature.

“We thought that killing a dragon ended the demon inside.

“But Leash revealed that he wanted to pull Addavein apart and kill Kanda himself.

“So it’s highly possible that, if Addavein were to die, that his soul would flow along into Endless Daihoon, up to the Moon or wherever else it might go, or perhaps it could be summoned directly by the demons, and in such a case... Well. The current, extremely unsettling theory passing around the

Collective, is that perhaps *all* dragon souls get summoned to the Moon and the former demon gets extracted and the archmage is discarded. That's all theory, though. The demons aren't talking. Not like Leash spoke to you.

"So maybe, all the demons we've ever 'killed' as dragons have *never* actually been killed at all." Lola shook her head. "That's a rather bleak way to view all the accomplishments we've made in this War for Life, in transforming this world into one where humans are dominant. It is a theory that most people are not willing to accept."

That was big.

Too big to really think about.

Mark had his own issues, so he filed that information away for some other day... And yet, he looked to Lola, and asked, "Do you believe that this 'War for Life' is all a farce that the demons allow to continue for... for some reason?"

"Because they enjoy tormenting people? Yes. That is the commonly accepted reasoning that this might be true," Lola said, adding, "And in that sort of way, yes. Yes, this fate of all dragons is believable."

Mark sat back in his chair.

Lola added, "But we still have a lot of hope, Mark. A demon tried to tempt you with big information and bigger conquests. With information we have never heard before, but perhaps some mages have heard before, and yet they just never shared this with anyone. The fact that Leash spoke about all of this so openly does give us good hope, though.

"This means they're scared.

"They're *scared* of Addavein becoming a true stabilizing force. With the power and history he has, Addavein could become a true dragon emperor. Addashield was one of the main forces that allowed Malaqua to become the Demon King and Jailer, after all, and that is only one of his major accomplishments. He was a true Hero of Humanity, even if he had a lot of innocents in his ledger. If that

dragon comes out of this nap with the same attitude as his father, or even the attitude he had going into his nap, then humanity is on track to figuring out how to perma-kill demons and maybe tame Endless Daihoon, or at least allow us to navigate it with some modicum of true safety.”

That was big, too.

Mark made a decision, “I’m going to focus on making a life for myself, and none of these big issues. I hope that Addavein can be a real talzarki. That would be best for the world, wouldn’t it?”

Even as he said the words, he felt a weight fall off of his shoulders.

He realized that he wanted Addavein to follow in his father’s footsteps of becoming a Hero of Humanity. Which was a strange desire. A strange feeling.

Where had the need for revenge gone?

Simply put, revenge paled in comparison to the life he wanted to live, and to the future that a truly good dragon emperor could create.

Mark wanted family, friends, a home he made himself, to rescue people and kill monsters, and to live a life strongly, in the open. He wanted to be a superhero. He certainly didn’t want to be a villain. Trying to kill the dragon or work against Addavein, except to ‘keep him in line’ (which seemed like a fool’s task), would be the act of a villain. And sure, Mark was still a literal card-carrying villain, but that was just for show and to help Addavein fit into the role of ‘hero’... Which was Mark being manipulated, yet again.

And the thought of being manipulated threw water onto Mark’s fire.

The need for revenge smoldered.

Mark scoffed. “But I guess I’m still a villain.”

Lola gave a small smile. With utter politeness that Mark could only tell was teasing sarcasm because he knew Lola, Lola asked, “Are you? You haven’t even done your first show.”

Mark had a surreal moment. And then he laughed. “I’ve been busy!”

Lola chuckled in a small way. “I’m going to be front and center in the audience when you finally make your debut, though I imagine I’d make way for your uncles, first.”

“They are *so* ready for me to do my first ‘bank robbery’, but I haven’t even done a practice robbery from either side of the equation.” Mark grinned— “Oh!” He pulled out his gold, osmium, and platinum pellets from his pocket. They were in a small wrap of paper. “I was going to take these if you corroborated Blackthorn’s story, so... Do you know the rate at which the cultivation will happen?”

“I’m honestly surprised that your Union of metals didn’t work out, but it obviously didn’t, otherwise you’d feel it in your bones. Just take them orally, and expect a month’s worth of growth in 12 hours. So maybe 2 grams per day? That’s normal, unless you do the cultivation technique. I’m not sure how fast you can go in that case. I’m not a mage, so I don’t have the privilege of knowing the exact numbers with regard to cultivation rates, and the Mage Guild doesn’t like Inquisitors up in their business.”

The Paladins and the much stronger Inquisitors had only been around for the last 75-ish years, ever since the Reveal and the creation of the New Pantheon. Before that, the Mage Guild did a lot of its own policing. With the rise of paladins empowered as the fists of the gods, the Mage Guild and the Inquisitors had a complicated relationship.

Lola said, “I do understand that it’s slower for a biometalist to grow metal than it is for a mage to grow loose mana. A real mage usually has enough mana stored away to be able to switch modes at least twice a day. Sometimes three. That means replacing a set of three minor power sets with whole different sets, twice over.”

... Huh.

Mark had not known that.

Mark nodded, downed the pellets and dry-swallowed them, and said, “Well that’s that.”

Lola smiled a little. “We should talk about whatever went wrong with you trying to draw in gold, too, and probably many, many times. Talking about that in the open is easy enough to write off as you trying to make money directly with your Power.”

Mark smiled. “A common occurrence.”

“The most common of all occurrences, truly. I cannot do this myself, but Freyala has given guidance in this arena. The issue there is that you needed to focus on depositing gold into something that was not yourself. A plant, for instance. Do you know why we call currency ‘goldleaf’?”

Mark gasped. “Oh shit! The goldleaf tree!”

Mark saw everything lay out before him, instantly, with the mention of the goldleaf tree.

Before the Reveal, Earth had used a fiat currency system that had hundreds of variations with every country having its own currency, or something like that. Daihoon was on goldleaf standard, though, meaning trees the sizes of mansions that produced normal enough green leaves, but when the trees were exposed to metals in the soil, they started depositing those metals into their leaves and then shedding those metal-imbued leaves. The leaves themselves were not actually gold, but they were gold-colored, and they did have small trace amounts of gold in them. When the leaves were dried out and pressed flat, they made a fantastic form of currency, since the leaves didn’t break down.

A ‘goldleaf’ wasn’t a whole leaf, though. A single goldleaf was a 2 cm by 5 cm strip of leaf, and could be made by pressing pieces of leaves into the proper shape. Nowadays a ‘goldleaf’ was pretty much the same as a cred.

The thing about goldleaf trees was that they produced ‘goldleaf’ at a rather normal rate.

The trees had been used as a currency system by the nations of Daihoon for as long as anyone there could remember, and they were all heavily regulated and secured by the banks of Daihoon, which were all offshoots of the empires and the nobility of the bigger cities.

After the Reveal, Earth ended up on the goldleaf standard, somehow. Mark wasn't sure how, exactly.

Lola admitted, "It would be impossible for you to actually get access to a goldleaf tree, of course, but you could have tried using a cleaner plant and including it in a Union of gold and sustenance on the intake, and deprivation on the exit. I'm not sure how it would work, *exactly*, because this is not a normal application of Union, as gifted by Freyala, but we can discuss various theories and you can try them out. Perhaps you merely need to have a special version of 'sustenance/deprivation' that includes the idea of intaking the three metals. Those metals, after all, are a rather unique necessity of your specific biology, though we won't be speaking of *that* particular fact too loudly." Lola added, "Using that sort of ideology of 'sustenance', outside of yourself, only, would be considered an offensive use of Union, though, Mark. It would probably greatly hurt other people. Heavy metal poisoning and all that."

"... I hadn't considered that at all. Huh."

Lola grinned. "Let's go grab a coffee, and talk about gold accumulation. Maybe even take an early lunch? I'd love to talk to you about less-serious issues, like the settlement project. There's a nice French bakery and cafe across the street."

Mark readily agreed to lunch.

The cafe was cozy, and talking with Lola was informative and also simply nice. Mark heard stories of Lola working as an Inquisitor to find mages that had taken demonic contracts in order to become fabulously wealthy, and how it always worked for a time, but then it always ended poorly. Lola was not shy about breezing past the final fates of those people she had needed to hunt down and end, nor was she shy about the ways in which those people wronged others.

"Demonic-backed financial crimes are not my department, of course," Lola said, "I'm more in the educational sector for arcanaeum students. But making money is a not-surprising use of Powers and small magics that many people try at least once in their life. Most money-making Powers and magics make their money through the simple act of paid-for-labor, though. It's always easier to use your Powers to make money the legal way, than it is to make money directly... Mostly."

Mark smiled as he said, "I hear Eliot is pulling gold directly out of the Mississippi."

“He would be the most poignant example of a Talent that directly makes money, yes.”

Mark wasn't going to become an Inquisitor, and Lola didn't push for it, either.

By the time Mark got back home he already felt some new adamantium growing in his bones. It was a diffuse dust in his spine, and a fog inside his femurs and pelvis. Mark went to his meditation room and sat down to focus on his goals, to pick them up and put them down, and grow his adamantium. It was a weird sort of methodology, but Mark could sort of see the sense in it.

“I wonder if Mom or Dad did any ‘crystal cultivation’...”

Probably not.

They both had only attended a single year of arcanaeum. Crystal cultivation was year 2...

Mark sighed as he slumped forward, bringing his knees up to his face and holding his legs.

Resurrection might be possible.

Resurrection wasn't going to happen for a long time, if at all.

Resurrection was a big fucking deal. Too big. What would Mark look like if he managed to find that sort of magic in Endless Daihoon? How would he change along the path to the sort of power necessary to enter and survive that nightmare? What would his parents think, when he stood there and pulled them off of the ground, back to life? Would he recognize them?

Would they recognize him?

No. They would not recognize him.

Mark had no idea who he would become as the years unfolded, but it would not be the same person today who was frightened about killing other people. When Mark had killed Mary Getty, he had made

the decision to do it in a flashing instant, and it had been the right decision... And Mark hated that it had been the right decision.

Eventually, Mark uncurled from himself.

Adamantium had been growing this entire time.

Soon, Mark breathed the metal out, like expelling dust from his lungs. The powder instantly fell under his kinetic control.

He got back to meditation.

By the time Isoko and Eliot showed up for dinner Mark had managed to gather 75 new grams of adamantium, though he felt like he could do a lot more. The overall size of Mark's newest cube was only about 4 cubic centimeters, which was a little over a tenth of the size of his current reserves. Mark already felt elated. This was working. This was going to work very, very well.

But first! While keeping those 75 grams separate from everything else in Mark's possession, Mark handed over the small cube to Eliot.

"Maybe you can Manipulate this one," Mark said.

Eliot stared at the metal in his hands, surprised and joyful, his face breaking into a wide smile as he said, "Gods above! You actually managed it?"

Isoko's eyebrows were high on her forehead as she said, "I gotta say, I was not trusting Blackthorn... But I guess Inquisitor Lola came through with some truths?"

Eliot was too focused on the cube to participate in the conversation.

Mark said, "I think she knows more about magic than she thinks she knows. Every time I talk with her about something serious I learn something new... I think I need to learn a lot more, though."

“You thinking of doing some arcanaeum?” Isoko asked.

“I was always told that you could either have a Power through the Tutorial, or you could make your own magic in Arcanaeum. I think the truth is a lot more nuanced than that, and I think... I don’t want to do arcanaeum right now. But Eliot was right yesterday about how if I went to arcanaeum I could actually learn what questions to ask Blackthorn. *That’s* a big draw. Bigger than I thought possible.”

“Yeah...” Isoko was quiet for a moment. “I went with Eliot today to the Settlement Project. Did some research. I found out there’s going to be a mini-arcanaeum at the settlement,” Isoko said, and Mark was already going wide-eyed before she even finished. “I’m gonna do that.”

“Oh my gods, *how?* Are you gonna sign up to be the underling of some... some mage there? Or something?”

That was the usual way mage training worked. You had to sign up under a mage or a training center and sign contracts about not spilling secrets to outsiders. Outsiders who were able to learn whatever they could were still outsiders, and they sometimes got blackballed by guilders, by people in the Mage Guild, so that those outsiders couldn’t progress at all in their magic. But sometimes outsiders got ‘accepted’ by the Mage Guild, when they took down all of their outsider knowledge and swore secrecy. When that happened, they could get real training.

It was a *whole big thing*.

“Is that what you were thinking of?” Isoko asked.

“I mean... yeah, actually. I guess? I hadn’t really thought about the specifics of it all, but... yeah?”

Isoko said, “I attended a talk with the leader of the Mage Guild expansion for the Settlement Committee, Grand Mage Rekaró Solari. He’s going to be running the mini-arcanaeum, for promising students. The whole talk was all about how, since we all signed up for 5 years minimum time there, that of course there would be mage training for people who were either starting off there, or continuing their education. Apparently there’s a bunch of professors from arcanaeums all over Memphi coming over to Daihoon. And yeah, you have to do the secrecy clause stuff.”

Mark asked, "Can you actually learn new magic when you already have a Power?"

"It's harder, for sure, but yes."

Mark hadn't expected that, but... Yeah. Addashield was an adamantiumkinetic before he became an archmage.

Eliot was still grappling with the cube of adamantium, his face tense with concentration, but the cube wasn't changing. Eliot glared at the cube, the air distorting around it in a weird way that sometimes happened when Eliot was truly focused, but then Eliot breathed out and relaxed. He sighed, and handed it over to Mark, asking, "It's really made by you? No contamination at all?"

Mark held the cube and transformed it into a ball, a spike, a star, and finally he put it with the rest of his adamantium, saying, "Yeah. But I just mixed it with the rest of it. No undoing that! So! How do you two feel about adamantium daggers? Christmas is coming up!"

Isoko laughed. "No thanks! I can't carry it around. Too expensive."

"None for me, either," Eliot said

Mark paused. "... Aww! No! You can have one... Right?" Neither of them changed their minds, so Mark asked, "You sure?"

"Yup!" Eliot said. "So let's talk plans for Christmas. You're still doing the trip to Tokyo, yeah Isoko?"

Mark rolled his eyes. He wanted to give his friends stuff, but they weren't having it, which was fine, he supposed.

Isoko said, "The hoverbus leaves tomorrow night. I'll be back before New Years..."

Mark had plans for Christmas with his uncles and then visiting Sally after the holiday, since her whole family had moved here already. He said as much while he started making dough for a pizza dinner.

Dinner was great, with talks of plans for the holidays and what came later.

Mark didn't bring up the knives again, but maybe a nice mithril knife would be more realistic? Accepted, even? More common, too. Everyone had one of those if they could afford one, and Mark was pretty sure that neither Eliot or Isoko had gotten one, yet. They were like 500 goldleaf, or something close to there. Mark could easily afford that and it wouldn't break any banks at all.

Yes.

Knives for Christmas. He would go out and get them tomorrow, and then inlay them with some adamantium. Just a little bit! Probably jump the price up into the tens of thousands, but that level of cost was pretty normal for a person at their power level to wear in a casual setting. They were all hunters, after all.

Mark decided he'd get one for Sally, too, even if she probably already had one. She had been on Daihoon for over half a year already. Mark hadn't seen his best friend in person since before his coma, but they had talked a bunch. He was excited to see her.

Dinner was soon over.

Mark had somehow created another 10 grams of adamantium in his bones before bed.

When he woke up the next morning, he had somehow grown 19 grams of adamantium in his sleep.

"... ohhh boy," Mark muttered to himself. "Fast rate, huh?"

Another thought occurred.

"I'm *never* going to be able to hide that I can do this. Not for very long."

A pause.

“... I’ll still *try* to be circumspect.”

He could blame his ‘brother’ for the extra metal showing up all the time. That would work, until it didn’t.

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A great black orb rested upon the bottom of a lake, like a pebble in a pond, located between mountains that were ten times the size of the lake. The mountains curled overhead and the sky was rainbow fabric. The sun was somewhere in the sky, sitting right beside the moon.

The black orb rocked back and forth, like something rolling within a soft shell, the black distending just a bit here and there. That arc of black looked almost like a tail slithering through the dark. Something like the sails of a ship pressed out here and there.

A snout nipped at the interior of the shell.

The shell broke and reformed into the spikes of a dragon. Ten thousand small monsters, each the size of one of the dragon’s claws, darted away from the darkness, from the vast release of air that bubbled upward. The dragon looked small compared to the lake because he was small compared to the lake.

The dragon was a kaiju. The lake was the size of the entire North American continent.

The dragon shook itself off, breathing in the water and snorting out light—

The dragon paused.

The dragon looked at itself.

“Oh fuck, what did I do?”

The dragon looked outward.

“Oh fuck. I’m a dragon.”

Sloane Addashield shook his head—

And the dragon was awake.

Addavein flashed his wings out, chuckling like an underwater earthquake. He had still been asleep, dreaming he was a human, but he wasn’t a human at all. As Addavein floated up out of the waters of the lake, he wondered what had happened while he was asleep.

Perhaps Mark was still alive! That would be nice.

No big deal if he wasn’t, but hopefully Mark was still among the living. And if he wasn’t... Well.

Addashield had already planned to truly explore Endless Daihoon for a bunch of magics that he had never managed to find in life, and he couldn’t do that alone. If Mark was dead, then he could leave to search for his brother, and when he returned with Mark and thousands of other people in tow —all the ones he killed over all of his long life and even during his near-Fall— then there would be no one who could have called him a stain upon humanity. Addashield could clear his entire name, and—

Addashield gasped.

He could bring back Yunthal Brightwind, too. His true talzarki, from when he was a kid and he had come out of the Thresher and gotten Kanda, right alongside Yunthal, who acquired Adank, the both of them ascending to archmagics. It was the perfect plan. He could get back *everything*.

Of course, there would be rashes of copycats trying to become a dragon like him, but Addashield could...

Wait.

Addashield?

He was calling himself 'Addashield', wasn't he.

Addashield blinked his large draconic eyes, and swam through the waters with wings held close and his tail swishing particularly hard, propelling him forward. He looked at himself again, and he knew his name once again.

*Addavein* shook his head. He was Addavein. Not Addashield.

But...

Was he?

Perhaps it was getting harder and harder to pretend he was Addavein, when he remembered nothing of Kanda's life at all. Now, in the wakefulness of a fresh sleep, Addavein recognized that he did not have any of Kanda's memories at all. Not really. Vague impressions did not count. He was Addashield in all but form...

Sloane Addashield, as a dragon, rose out of the waters of some random river in Endless Daihoon, and turned his flight toward the human lands, once again.

He would be able to pretend he wasn't Sloane after a few weeks of being awake... Probably. If he pretended well enough, it would become the truth, and Sloane could avoid thinking about all of the horrible things he had done to survive.

... Maybe the elves had some body transformation magics. Something that would allow Sloane to regain a human form, for at least a short while. The ancient dragons, the ones from history that seemed more myth than real, in that ancient world that had once been whole and unbroken, before the Magefalls that

caused Daihoon to become little more than scattered empires and hovels in the ground, *those* dragons were supposed to be able to transform into humans for short times. Not a single, true High Dragon like Addavein, was able to become small. Only the malformed dragons, like the Fates and the Guardians, were small things, and they had always been small things. Addavein wasn't a malformed dragon, though. He was power incarnate.

Power incarnate had a way of getting murdered when put into smaller boxes, though, which is why that ancient magic had been lost. Or at least that's how the story went.

Addavein would have to go exploring to find out the truth, and it would be nice to have some partners to explore with...

Sloane missed Yunthal.

They had used to go exploring all the time and get in trouble everywhere.

Sloane fucking hated Kanda. That damned demon had made him kill Yunthal, and also many others. So many people.

Sloane could never let anyone know that he was still here, still alive. There would be so many copycats trying to become dragons like him. There probably already were.

... He hoped the world hadn't burned too much while he had been gone.

... Sloane turned some adamantium into giant propellers and steering fins and began *ripping* through the waters, sending shockwaves of pressure out as he swam faster and faster. He needed to get back, to make sure the world still existed. It probably did! He had left it in good shape!

Hopefully.

