

## Vein Cutter 1: Origin Story

Humans help other humans. That is how we survive the monsters.

- Glorious Man, and many other heroes

Honor is just as important as knowledge and power.

- a common saying of the Settlement of Xerkona

If violence isn't solving your problems then you aren't using enough of it.

- popularized during the Reveal

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Prologue:

Dan Clover held onto the edge of the cliff over an open abyss. Searchlight golems prowled the plateau above. The patrol was active, accidentally, and now he had to wait for them to settle down, or else they'd rip him apart.

His arms were already tired but he had trained for situations... sort of like this. He could hang from a cliff all day.

Or at least for 20 minutes.

It had been 10 minutes so far.

Archmage Sloane Addashield floated ahead, wrapped in magics that shielded him from the eyes of the Tutorial. He was actually here, inside the Tutorial, but only Dan could see him. Only Dan could hear him. If the man unshielded himself then he would invalidate Dan's Tutorial, and then Dan would Awaken some terrible, baseline power. He'd probably be a fucking brawny, like almost everyone else. And then both he and his master would get kicked out. It was a bad outcome. The worst outcome was death, but that wasn't going to happen. None of the bad outcomes would happen today.

Dan had trained too hard, ever since he was 8, to just become some fucking *brawny*.

Dan didn't want to be a brawny.

He wanted to be an adamantium mage.

Archmage Addashield could make that happen.

And so, Dan endured, holding onto the edge of the cliff, out of sight of the patrol, sweat dripping in his clothes and his sword weighing upon his hip—

The archmage said, “The golems are still there. You have to hang on for another few minutes.”

Dan’s arms were tired.

He tried not to think about it.

Grunts and scrapes clanged across the air, like rocks striking rocks. Feet stomped. The searchlight golems were moving all over the place. Lights glanced out across the cliffside onto Dan’s fingers, and then the lights kept going. They had ‘seen’ his fingers a few times, but not really.

The golems searched, and they failed to find.

Dan endured.

The archmage didn’t need to tell him that the golems were still there. This far into the Tutorial the monsters got smart. Not too smart, though. Not too powerful, either. *Baselines* were meant to clear this ordeal.

Another full minute later and Dan was still hanging out on the edge of the cliff. It was mostly a sheer cliff, without any sort of handholds or otherwise on it, but it did have an angled ridge that Dan was able to wedge against, but Dan didn’t trust that rock that well. It wasn’t an actual step, but it alleviated some of the—

“They’re gone. Get up.”

Dan whispered thanks to Freyala and started the horrible ordeal of climbing up. His arms were more tired than he thought—

He slipped.

He caught himself on that angled rock even as his stomach felt like it dropped out of his chest. Breathing hard, and then breathing securely, Dan persevered, rising above the edge of the cliff on sore muscles that were just about to give out.

Dan silently crawled, dirty and tired, onto the plateau.

Quietly, Dan lay there for a minute, catching his breath and stretching his arms, all the while eyeing the golems in the middle of the field. This room was a simple room, in theory. A crowd of 5 golems, each the size of an Awakened brawny at 2 meters tall, stood all jumbled on each other in the center of the circular platform, their eyes not really looking in front of them at all.

Their eyes were twinned spotlights; dual circles of illumination that lit up the world in 5 different pillars here and there across the platform. Those patches of vertical light shows slowly moved back and forth across the grassy clifftop. If you stepped into one of them you activated the golems. *All* of them.

This was not a fighting challenge; all of that lay behind Dan now.

The only way to win was to get past them.

Their searching pattern was still a bit frantic, still jittery, with the spotlights zipping around sometimes before slowing down, resuming normal operations. Dan watched as their searchlight pattern went from frantic to methodical. The beams of light began to circle the platform, and Dan was in a relative safe zone in the pattern. The safe zone would vanish in 20 seconds, though, as that pair of spotlights over there entered this area.

Dan got up and got moving.

This time, Dan managed to step through the shadows properly, though he did have to finger his way across the cliff face yet again, in order to avoid the last few golem lights. That part of the puzzle had something of a ledge below that part of the cliff, so it was expected for a person to cross the final distance over the side of the cliff.

Once he was back up on land, beyond the golem search lights, Dan easily made it through a portal of light, into the next room.

Archmage Addashield was already waiting for him on the other side.

In the relative safety of the hallway between rooms Dan almost wondered if Addashield was going to apologize for setting off the golems. *He* had been the one to get spotted, after all; not Dan. His sight-shielding wasn't perfect; it was just good enough to evade Malaqua's sight, and to allow Dan to complete his Tutorial unaided.

Dan looked to Addashield.

Addashield frowned at him. And then he sighed, and said, "Sorry."

Dan felt a little bit of joy at that. He couldn't actually say anything to Addashield, for Malaqua was absolutely looking at Dan, but he could grin a little, and nod.

"Yeah yeah," Addashield said, "If you ever tell anyone I apologized for anything then I'm denying your apprenticeship."

Dan said nothing. Addashield was a prickly sort of bastard, but he was a Hero of Humanity, too.

Dan stood before an archway that led into a sandpit of a room, with stage seating all around. A gladiatorial space, then.

Addashield said, "Three enemies. Two initial, one stealth surprise."

Dan readied his sword and advanced.

Three more boss rooms later and Dan was done.

He was bloodied and bruised and he needed some healing for a bite wound he had taken in the wolf pack back there, but he was done.

He had completed his Tutorial.

Archmage Addashield hadn't needed to help him at all! Dan was proud of that.

Both of them were grinning wildly in the last room, where a pedestal stood in the center of a platform, and all the silver surface of the moon shimmered beyond. The sky was filled with stars, and with Earth, hanging up there, all blue/white/green and lit like a crescent by the sun. Here on the moon, the Demon City of Arakino was invisible beyond the platform, but it would reveal itself soon. Once Dan took his prize; his Ascension.

A shining, bright beacon of crystal held upon the pedestal.

The crystal was the size of a fist, and it was pure, prismatic mana.

The pure value of it simply overwhelmed Dan. Dan had been born to a relatively powerful family on Crytalis, so he knew the value of that hunk of prismatic mana in many different ways. It was the cost of an archmage's services, or the cost of a city wall. It was the reward for the largest of Quests issued by the kingdoms of Daihoon, for killing a dragon, or a leviathan, which were both equally impossible tasks. It was the cost of a nuclear bomb, or a twisted faith.

It was near impossible to get prismatic mana anywhere, except for here, in the Tutorial, where it was *always* the reward at the end. Dan almost wanted to take it with him into the real world, back to Daihoon, but that was just his father's want of money speaking. Becoming Addashield's real apprentice was worth more than that. A whole lot more.

But if Dan touched it now he'd be rolling the dice and probably end up with brawny.

And Archmage Addashield was already fixing that problem.

Addashield hovered around the pure mana, doing some sort of resonance, or something to it. Dan didn't really know. This particular lesson was beyond Dan, for now. All he knew was that the prismatic mana turned bright, burnished silver.

It was no longer pure mana. It was now attuned to what Addashield could do; adamantiumkinesis.

The Archmage backed away from the silver hunk of beauty, saying, "Hurry. Before Malaqua sees the change."

Dan eagerly stepped forward and grabbed the hunk of pure metal mana—

Power flooded into Dan's body, twisting what was already there into something better. Something Dan chose for himself. It hurt. Dan endured—

All feeling vanished at once except for a headache. He couldn't feel his body, but he was moving. His eyes shot open and—

Dan watched as the world went sideways.

He knew what had happened even before his head struck the ground.

Archmage Sloane Addashield's swords were out, looking like sweeping curves of liquid black.

Dan's vision turned away as his head rolled away.

*Betrayal.*

Dan had never considered the possibility that Addashield could ever do this to him, but he knew betrayal long before now. He wasn't some idiot child. And yet, Dan had never thought that Addashield would have been a betrayer. Never!

Rage and impending death narrowed Dan's vision.

He watched from the ground, his head rolled into view of his still-standing body, as Archmage Sloane turned bright red.

Demonic power veined up those floating swords and also Addashield's face, and then Addashield's metals ripped into the stump of Dan's severed neck, up there, on his body. Sloane shoved power into that neck. Metal began to form a head, a face, upon Dan's body, and it looked like him—

Angry demonic light shouted, "He's too strong!"

Addashield's metal exploded out of Dan's body, ripping it apart.

Addashield looked furious.

Dan was furious, too, but seeing that Addashield didn't get what he wanted was a good enough memory for him to let go. To fade away.

Dan died.

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Being a normal human was tiring, and Mark was exhausted.

Mark Careed twisted his grip on his rusted sword, angling the broken weapon to deflect the goblin's cleaver. It was a risk to use rusted shit-steel. It was a risk Mark had needed to take. Clever met rusted sword in a clang that rang down Mark's arm, and the sword held. The cleaver went to the side by fractions and the goblin did not recover fast enough. Mark ignored the stinging sweat in his eyes as he



slipped forward, into the opening he had made. Rusted metal met thick green neck and the beast flinched away, almost ruining the strike. But Mark had hit. The sword's tip broke off in the goblin's neck.

Blood started to flow.

It might have been enough.

The goblin grabbed its neck and red flowed from between its fingers, its roars turning crazed as it lifted its cleaver and tried to kill.

Mark retreated, letting the flowing blood do the rest of the work for him.

Fighting was tiring work.

This was the final boss monster of the False Tutorial, here in this open, sandy arena, where empty stands viewed a trial that was not real, but which still felt damned legitimate. The goblin was a lightshow projection, but it still fought and bled like a real monster. Mark was a baseline human, and he was certainly bleeding from all the trials thus far, but his wounds were all superficial. Maybe in 6 months, when Mark turned 18, Mark could complete the real Tutorial and he would be more than a simple human, faltering and fading after just a few hours of—

Mark tripped on a larger-than-average drift of sand. A wild swing by the goblin almost ended his trial right then and there. But Mark rolled with the fall. Another strike came for him and Mark raised his broken weapon enough to parry, sending the goblin's cleaver out of the monster's grip, spinning wide. The cleaver sailed three meters away and suddenly Mark was the only one with a weapon in this confrontation.

If that would have been enough then Mark would have won this fight already.

The goblin *should* have needed to actually go and get the weapon, but the cleaver vanished from the sand and appeared in the goblin's hand. Mark only had enough time to get up off the ground and prepare for another round. He wouldn't make the mistake of thinking he had actually disarmed his opponent. Not a second time.

Blood still flowed down the beast's chest, thin yet pumping.

How much blood did a single damned goblin have!

Mark kicked sand at the monster and the goblin roared and swiped, pinching its eyes shut as it swiped again, completely missing Mark. The goblin boss wasn't even in the same vicinity as Mark. It could still hear, though, so Mark was careful to walk slowly and quietly.

The goblin took another swipe at empty air, but that one was slower. More of a fending swipe, and not an attacking swipe. It was slowing down. It was dying.

Mark didn't let the near-victory go to his head. Not yet. He controlled his breathing. He made no sudden sounds upon the sand.

The goblin was still alive.

It stepped forward—

The clever dropped.

The goblin roared. Fury. Hate. Death. It wanted to kill Mark. But...

The goblin's roar died.

And just like that, the final boss fell to the ground and broke into a splash of mana, spilling out into the sands of the False Tutorial like so much broken spellwork.

Mark had won?

He took a moment to make sure it wasn't a trick.

... Mark had won!

The entire False Tutorial began to unravel. Sands whipped away from the ground. The empty stands vanished into light shows and broken magic. Mark smiled wide, letting his broken, rusted sword fall to the ground. The sword struck the solid stone under the arena floor, bounced once, and then dissolved like all the other fakery of the False Tutorial. The straps of Mark's broken shield vanished from around his forearm, alongside the boiled leather armor that he wore, that he had found just a few hours ago, as a reward for solving a waterflow puzzle.

Blood still matted Mark's face. Cuts pained his left arm, where his shield had broken taking a blow from the goblin boss in the *other* arena. That other goblin had used a mace with a nail in it, and that weapon had gotten through Mark's wooden shield and broken the damned thing. The goblin with the cleaver had been worse.

But Mark was confident, now.

He was confident that he could pass the *real* Tutorial, when he finally turned 18. And he still had 6 more months to prepare! So much time to get even better!

He smiled.

He read the words overhead.

**Congratulations!**

**False Tutorial Complete**

**Please see <Priest Andrews> for the assessment of your innate mana signature, to see which power, talent, knack, or otherwise, you might unlock in the real Tutorial.**

Mark smiled. He 90% knew what his assessment was going to say, but he hoped, desperately, that it said something other than what it told almost every human living on Earth. The Veil was great about keeping most of the monsters away, but it made most people turn out as basic brawnies.

Mark did not want to be a brawny.

A stone door at the side of the arena opened, leading to a bright hall beyond. The lights of the assessment room began to dim from the outside in, subtly telling Mark to get a move on. He got the message. Mark walked across the stone, holding his head high, and the light closed off behind him as he left the room. When he stood in the hallway beyond, the room behind him was fully dark. And then the dark shifted, and became stone. There was no door; there was simply the wall.

That's how these stone temples were; places of manifested magic, where nothing was as it was, because everything changed at the needs of the people inside.

Other not-doors held beside the testing hall, only visible because they were in use. All of them had screens on those doors, showing the person and the trial inside. Mark only knew one of the people here right now. Sally Wuthers. They had come here together today and they were best friends. They were in the same high school in Orange City, and both of them took all the combat elective classes they could get. They had toyed with being girlfriend and boyfriend twice before, because they were both interested in the same things of saving people and killing monsters. Everyone had always assumed that they were together because they usually were together. They had toyed with the idea of dating once, in a sort of 'might as well try it?' kinda way.

Neither of them liked each other that way.

Mark smiled as he watched Sally spear a mutant otter through the heart, and he was kinda jealous.

"You actually managed to get a spear, eh?"

Mark wished that he could have found a spear. All he had found in his trial were swords and shields. All that was random, so not finding your preferred weapon was always a risk. He looked to the 'percentage done' column of Sally's False Tutorial and rapidly decided he wasn't going to wait around for Sally to finish. She was only 85% done. She had another hour to go, at least. She wouldn't wait for him, and he wasn't about to wait for her; they would talk later. Mark had been too fast; he usually was.

He knocked on the stone wall beside her door, saying, "Good luck."

It wouldn't disturb her combat; it was more for the spirit of the gesture.

And then Mark walked down the hall. He was still bruised and bloodied, but the gentle calming of the Stone Temple of Malaqua was already healing his wounds, using whatever magic it used to do that. By the time Mark made it out of the hallway the only indication that he had been fighting for his 'life' were the rips and tears in his clothing.

He stepped into the main, massive room of the cathedral.

The Stone Temple could change at the whim of the priests. Right now the main room was an empty space with Priest Andrews sitting behind a desk at the back of the cathedral. A floating monitor held above the desk, and Andrews intently watched a show. There was no one else here besides Andrews.

And now Mark was here, too.

Mark waited beside the desk.

Andrews didn't notice him. He was focused on his show. It looked to be at an exciting part with spells flying and people proclaiming their undying love for each other on a battlefield.

Mark waited. He watched with Andrews for a moment—

Andrews glanced his way, his eyes going wide—

“MALAQA FU—” Andrews collected himself, taking a deep breath. He glared at Mark.

Mark tried a little grin.

Andrews sighed, and then he put on a smile. “You scared me.”

“Sorry about interrupting your show. It looked neat.”

Andrews chuckled. “Ohhh. Yes. I’ll get back to it— Wait.” And then Andrews realized what was happening. “Oh! You finished so fast!” He paused. Then he paused his show. “Did you...” He left the question unasked.

Mark had tried the False Tutorial twice now, and this time he had passed.

He didn’t like to think about the previous time.

“I passed, yes,” Mark said, practically beaming, delighted that he could say that.

“Congratulations!” Andrews got up out of his chair, happily smiling, saying, “I know you worked so hard to get there. You and your friend Sally. You’re absolutely going to make it in the real Tutorial, for sure!”

“That’s the hope!” Mark said, and then he stopped there. Andrews was a great guy, but he was kinda discombobulated. Mark decided to add, “I hope that my readout is a good one.”

“OH! Yes yes. Of course.” Andrews began fumbling around under the desk— “Ah ha!” He pulled out a paper and held it against his chest, making sure that neither of them could read what it said right now. And then he entered lecturer mode. “You were very fast in there. I hope when you take the normal Tutorial that you decide to go slower. Promise me this.”

Mark nodded. “I know I went fast. I saw opportunities and I took them. I took no more risk than what was expected, though.”

... Andrews frowned a little. “Perhaps.” He continued, “The False Tutorial will not end in your death, no matter what happens. The real Tutorial has no safeties on it at all, for the dangers of mana are unending. Mana is *not* safe. When the Veil broke in 1969, hundreds of millions died to monsters, but just as many died to mana exposure. When you take the Tutorial, you are stepping out of the safety of Earth’s Veil. It is *not* safe.”

Mark listened to the condensed sermon, and nodded at the end of it like he needed to nod. “Thank you for your concern, Priest Andrews.”

Andrews continued to hold Mark's readout hostage as he spoke, "What happened here today was a False Tutorial, gifted to us by the New Pantheon so that people can test themselves and decide to opt out of the real Tutorial, or to plow ahead and Awaken their true selves. For several years after the Reveal, people *didn't* get the *choice*. *An entire generation of children died. You should go slower.*"

Mark nodded, trying to be respectful but all he wanted was that paper and he had heard all of that before. "Yes, sir. I understand."

"And you understand that what is on this paper is not the whole truth? Even brawnies are useful. They're the most useful classification of people, in fact. Easily able to stand up against any basic monster, they're always the ones who survive the most."

Mark's hopes for something good on that paper fell drastically.

Priest Andrews noticed.

He handed over the paper.

All thoughts of caution went out the window as Mark greedily took the paper—

And then realized that he should be a bit more professional about it, so he calmed himself. He breathed. He closed his eyes and prayed to the New Pantheon for a good readout.

Back when the world used to be normal, 78 years ago, people didn't get Powers, or Talents, or Knacks, or even Whispers. They certainly didn't get mana and the ability to make magic. But then Neil Armstrong had stepped onto the surface of the moon and broken the Veil between Earth and Other Earth, the world of Daihoon.

The moon revealed itself as a lie.

What was once a grey, airless land of dust and rock and craters became a grey, airless land of rock and craters and deep cracks that showed through to the True Demon City underneath it all. The Demon City

of Arakino stood revealed in those cracks, like lightning scars upon the moon, and mana from Other Earth, on the other side of the Veil, began to pour through onto Earth.

Magic returned to Earth, bringing with it horrific monsters that should have killed all of humanity...

Or at least that's what the historians say should have happened.

But humanity was in the middle of the cold war at the time and there were lots of worldly tensions that were easy enough to aim at the dragon trying to make Moscow into a new nest, the leviathan trying to turn the Grand Canyon into an abyssal well, and a whole bunch of other major monsters trying to eat cities all over the Earth.

Some cities did get eaten.

Half the world died in three years. Nuclear weapons and some unlikely archmage allies from Other Earth were a match for most of those monsters, either making short work of the smallest threats or sending the biggest threats back to Endless Daihoon.

In the aftermath of the Reveal, Earth was not stable, and Daihoon wasn't any better off. The people of Daihoon had expended much of their power trying to save the people of Earth, in the brief hope that Earth could help them in turn. Everything *could* have crashed. One or two dead archmages in those early years would have sent both worlds spiraling into True Apocalypse. It wasn't till the New Gods and the City AIs came along in the decades following The Reveal that things started to truly turn around.

But not really.

The ocean rose 23 meters, too.

And now Earth needed real heroes. Superheroes, if it could get them.

Mark wanted to be a hero.

More than that, he *didn't want to be a civilian*.



Mark breathed in and out, clutching his readout to his chest, hoping for the best. If this False Tutorial showed that he would get *anything* close to what he wanted then when he turned 18 in 6 months he would choose to accept the Awakening, to take the Tutorial for real, and unlock whatever innate power lay dormant within his soul.

Mark didn't know what it meant to be special, but he imagined it would be working with friends to better all worlds. But even in the small ways, life would be different. He'd be allowed out of the city walls, into the real world. He could visit the Hero Quarters of the world, where they hid all of the secrets of magic and mana, and where people flew from one building to the other, or they ate ice cream made from ice magic, and where they planned the defenses of the world with fellow like-minded individuals with powers that would compliment their own.

Mark wanted to be a part of a hero team, killing monsters and saving the world.

Could he stop hurricanes like Mistress Storm? Could he kill an entire monster horde with a swing of a sword like the Gladiator? Punch out a kaiju like Glorious Man?

Or maybe he could be a simple kind of hero; the mundane, everyday kind of hero like his own Uncle Alexandro, with his True Healing magic. Healing magic was great! Being a healer would be wonderful. Maybe, if Mark didn't unlock a healing power, he might go to the Temple of Freyala and sign up for the basic Chosen system to get some divine healing on tap, like a lot of warriors did.

Most people born on Earth were brawnies, though. 90% of people.

A brawny with healing magic was still a good option, though, right?

... No.

Mark wanted more than that.

He wanted more than what his parents got, too.

Dad and Mom never went through the Tutorial because they both knew who they wanted to be at young ages and you didn't need to be a brawny or brawny variant in order to raise fish on the family farm, like Dad, or to be a writer, like Mom. Most people were discouraged from taking the Tutorial, too, because it was damned dangerous. It was much easier to go to arcanaeum for a year and learn a spell you *choose* to learn, instead of the one that Awakening awakened. Mom and Dad both choose their power, and—

Andrews asked, "Are you going to read it?"

"... I'm scared."

"That won't change what's on the paper."

"... Yup."

*Anything but brawny*, Mark thought.

And then he looked down at the paper.

**Superpower, unknown type, not detectable. .00001% chance.**

**Talent: Brawn, standard strength growth expected. ~2.35 times stronger than baseline. 95% chance.**

**Talent: Brawn, variant, speedster, 4% chance.**

**Knack: unknown type, not detectable, 1%**

**Whisper: 0%**

**Mana chance: 0%**

Ah.

Yeah.

An average spread.

A terrible normality.

Mark's breath stilled. He remained standing as though carved from stone, but every single thought and feeling in his body had fallen out and landed at his feet somewhere. A house of dreams imploded. Hot tears flowed.

And then Mark breathed out.

He chuckled.

He said, "I suppose this is normal." He breathed again. "Not sure why I was hoping for something different."

With a kind voice, Priest Andrews said, "Most people are brawnies, if they choose to Ascend at all. It's great if you're a soldier or going into any regimented sort of situation... But that's not what you wanted to hear. I'm very sorry, Mark." He adopted a happy tone, saying, "You could always try learning magic the hard way! Lots of people forgo the real Tutorial and learn magic the hard way." He could tell Mark didn't care about that, so he tried, "And then there's the Chosen system."

The Chosen system. It wasn't nearly as bad as making deals with demons for power, but it was close, according to some people. Mark was mostly ambivalent about Choosing a god, and he had even decided that talking to Freyala was a good idea, long before he got here, to this moment in his life.

But he was too furious with life to think about that.

Mark spat at the hated readout, "I don't want to *devote my life* to a god."

“It’s not... hmm.” Andrews paused. “This brawny thing is hitting you a lot harder than I thought it would. I thought we had spoken about the Chosen system before, and you liked Freyala. I’m partial to Malaqua, obviously, but Freyala is pretty good. They all are!”

Mark crumpled the paper. With hateful sarcasm, Mark said, “Not like you need *power* to travel the world, eh?”

If you didn’t have power, then you were a civilian.

If you were a civilian, then you could only ever live inside the walls of the cities, or travel from city to city in armored convoys. You could never explore the world, or get a *real* job, and if there was ever an emergency then you had to listen to the rescuers. You could never be the one calling the shots.

Civilians could never hop in a hovercar and go visit the beach. The beach had to be cleared by the city before any civilian was allowed to visit and the beach was only open to civilians for 3 months out of the year.

And even if you were a brawny you were still ordered around!

Dammit!

Even bawnies were weaklings—

“Mark. Look at me.” Andrews stared into Mark’s eyes, and said, “Brawny is a great option. Most people are bawnies. Construction workers, farmers, wall gunners, soldiers; anything physical in your entire life is made easier by being a brawny. You can do a lot with brawny. Bawnies are still firmly human, but simply stronger in every possible way. Do not denigrate bawnies, Mark, for bawnies are the backbone of every anti-monster team and a whole lot more besides. They survive the hits and keep on living. All other inclinations cannot boast that sort of staying power. Once you pass Curtain Protocol, you’ll find out why.”

Curtain Protocol. Mark kinda hated that he couldn’t just get answers to how magic worked, or how powers worked; not as a ‘child’. It would ruin his Awakening. Everyone knew someone who got too

curious and who developed a knack instead of an actual power. ‘The ability to taste sound’ was pretty shit compared to even the most basic brawny with 2-times human strength.

Mark swallowed fury and injustice and said, “... I guess brawny is better than some things.” Mark looked at the paper, and pretended to feel better. He nodded. “You’re absolutely right. I’m not sure what came over me.”

Aside from the fact that bawnies were not special at all. Sure, they were the bulk of the world’s might against the magic, but they couldn’t do shit against the real threats and...

Mark had hoped that he was *special*.

Andrews softly said, “This same thing happens to most people when they find out they’re brawny. Everyone wants something better, but you were born on Earth, and the Veil does many things to keep us away from the horrors of Endless Daihoon. A side effect is that most people are naturally bawnies. You knew this. You *know* this. I had thought you were okay with this. Your reaction has taken me by surprise. With how fast you cleared the False Tutorial I would have thought you would have loved being a brawny.”

Mark shook as he sighed.

He had almost said something like ‘Yeah! Who doesn’t love slogging in the mud and shit their whole life!’ or ‘I love taking wounds all the time!’ or ‘I’m a masochist who likes being at the bottom of the power scale!’.

But that would have been petulant.

And yet...

Back when Mark was 8, he saw Glorious Man on the television for the first time. Glorious Man was a brawny with times-250 strength. If that’s the kind of brawny that Mark had been, then he would have been truly happy. But by 9, Mark knew that Glorious Man was an outlier.

Mark's own estimated 2.35-times brawny was almost exactly the average multiplier for a brawny. Most people were somewhere between 2.25 to 2.5.

"Maybe I will love being a brawny," Mark said, lying to himself as he looked at the crumpled paper in his hands. He unfolded the readout and properly folded it back together. He held it for a while. Softly, he told himself, "Maybe this is for the best."

"The best Awakening is the one that is true to yourself," Priest Andrews said.

"... This is what Malaqua sees in me, eh?" Mark asked, "Is this really my true nature?"

Andrews smiled. "Malaqua's power Awakens within people what they are; yes. If you want to Awaken in a specific way, then I suggest you try the Chosen system, or you look into arcanaeum. Mages can be whoever they want to be; the rest of us have to muddle along." He held Mark's shoulder for a moment, eyes meeting eyes, as he said, "You will love being a brawny. Most every brawny does."

"... Yeah."

Mark stared at the ground for a moment longer, Andrews' hand an uncomfortable weight upon his shoulder.

And then he walked out of Andrews' touch and walked out of the Stone Temple, into the afternoon sun. It was a balmy summer day in Orange City, in the Floridas, and Mark felt too hot. He was still angry. He had not wanted to be a brawny for... for *many* reasons.

There was one big reason he didn't want to be a brawny, though, and that was because—

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“—Brawnies are *required* to enlist in the army for a year,” Mark said, over dinner. “A whole *year*. I got no problem with that, but I... I *wanted* to go to a hero school. Maybe even the Endless Academy. I think I’d even take arcanaeum and forge my own mana pathways instead of this brawny shi— stuff.”

Mom spooned potatoes onto her plate, saying, “It’s not ideal, I know, but arcanaeum is expensive, and you’ve been preparing for the Tutorial. There’s no way you won’t pass the real Tutorial. I can at least be safe in knowing that much, even if I don’t like the idea of you Ascending at all.”

Mark had no idea why Mom was talking like that. Like it was some sort of *small thing* that just *happened*, and not like the horror that it was. Like this wasn’t the end of Mark’s dreams.

Mom didn’t understand. That was her problem.

Mark didn’t know how to explain it properly. That was his problem.

“I just wanted to be... special,” Mark tried.

Dad took the potatoes next, saying, “You don’t *have* to Awaken. There’s nothing wrong with working for a living, but the government payout for defense of the city does pay a lot more than most other jobs. The money I pay Devon and Trace for helping with the fishing is just a side-gig to them. You’d be set if you wanted to work for the city, though you do have to drop everything for them when they ask you to. I can’t tell you how many times I needed to pull up early when either of them got called in for whatever.”

Mark’s stomach dropped.

Oh gods.

Mark had known life would be different as a brawny. But he didn't expect... his whole life, devoted to the city? No. That was the *opposite* of the freedom of being Awakened. Awakened were supposed to be able to go anywhere and everywhere they wanted. Not be tied to the city!

Dad was exaggerating, for sure.

... Mark had taken classes on what was expected of him.

"It's not that bad?" Mark asked, unsure and praying in the same sentence.

Dad hummed, wagged his head, and said, "It's kinda that bad."

"Your father is exaggerating a *little*," Mom said, "But! If you don't want to Awaken as a brawny..." She paused. She looked to Dad. Dad got a quizzical look to him, as Mom said, "We could move."

"What?" Dad asked, dumbfounded.

Mark was dumbfounded, too. Move? From home? From *this* house? What a weird thing to say!

Mom told Dad, "Your brother and his husband moved to Memphi last year. It's a tier 4 city so it's a lot bigger than Orange City, and it's a lot more lax around simple brawnies. Mark wouldn't have to sign up with the city if we moved to Memphi."

Mark's eyes went wide. She was serious. Mark asked, "*Move?* I didn't think... Uh."

He didn't expect to start a conversation like *that*.

Dad frowned a little, asking Mom, "You don't like the Floridas?"

"*I*like the Floridas," Mark said.



"I *love* the Floridas," Mom said. "I like Orange City. I *don't* like the East Coast Union, and the ECU is what will force Mark to become a soldier in the collected army." Mom said to Mark, "I know what you want out of life, honey. You want to run all over the place, getting into all sorts of trouble, and that's fine, because I know you're a good man. But the ECU has these restrictive laws about all supers and you're *going* to run into those laws, no matter what you manage to get in the real Tutorial. You want to go to the Hero Quarter, yes? Well if you Awaken you'll be restricted from coming home, here to Gladegrove. And so, maybe we should move."

Dad said, "That restriction about living here is not a real one. We can do the paperwork, and Mark is *literally* grandfathered in."

"Yeah?" Mark said, and maybe asked at the same time. "I thought there wouldn't be a problem?"

Mom said, "I'm just saying that Mark will need to watch himself around everyone once he passes the Tutorial—" She looked to Mark. "And you might not *want* to live here at home anymore, too." She said to both of them, "And so, now is when we talk about moving."

Dad frowned a little, thinking.

Mark silently thought, too. He had read the laws. He had taken the preparatory Tutorial classes. "I heard the laws weren't that bad? It's just reserves in the army, isn't it? I don't understand what you're both talking about."

Dad and Mom went silent.

"... What?" Mark asked, "I really don't understand? Like. I took the classes. It's a weekend of service every month for almost everyone?"

Dad eventually said, "It's a Curtain Protocol thing."

Bah!

Mark let the point go. There was only so much he could push to get his questions actually answered, and he had edged that line.

Mom changed the subject, "Have you ever considered mage work? Avoid the mana baptism of the Tutorial altogether? Make your own mana baptism?"

No. Mark had never considered that, because that... Uh.

That cost too much money...

Uh.

... Was she saying what Mark thought she was saying?

Dad must have thought so, too. "Honey?"

Mom said, "We could afford a *single* year of arcanaeum and Mark could avoid brawny entirely. He could make his own mana baptism. Get a spell or three. That's all you really need to succeed in life. And he's young! He could do it. I got cleanse. You got fish-yank."

Dad corrected Mom in a rote sort of way, "Telekinesis."

"Fish yank," Mom repeated.

Mark felt a weight descend upon his shoulders. They *could not* afford to send him to arcanaeum. They were on basic income and even so, Mom and Dad both worked full time, too. College was free, but arcanaeum was not free at all. They had both managed to get a single year of arcanaeum themselves, years ago, but both of them were barely competent with their spells because they weren't mages. Dad's telekinesis was pretty much 'fish only', since that was how he had grown that power, even if unintentionally, and Mom's cleanse could only work on water, making the water cleansing.

Dad had a lot of sudden doubts, saying, "We can't really afford that."

Mom said, “We could afford it, Markus.”

Dad was having doubts, too. “The fishery is... We’re hauling out as much as we can. We’re already skirting monster attacks with how much we haul out. We’d have to hire another person if we hauled out more, and that would just cost us more.”

The family fishery was a series of metal cages out in the bay that belonged to the family, and which Dad had been in charge of for twenty years so far, ever since grandpa turned it over to him after grandma passed. Dad made good money hauling fish out of the cages and bringing them into market for mass sales, and he kept two other jobs in jobs, but it wasn’t a rich sort of life.

Mark was happy with the life he had here but... But he wanted *more*.

He wasn’t sure what ‘more’ really meant, but he knew he wanted it.

“I know it’ll be tough, honey. But we could try it, right?” Mom said, “Maria has been asking me about helping her clean houses. I can do that and cut back on my editing work.” She looked to Mark, saying, “You might have to go to work with your father at the fishery for some shifts after high school, but you can live here at home, of course. You won’t be able to attend classes on arcanaeum campus, so it’ll have to be tele-class, like your dad and I took, but you can do it. You can make your *own* magic in life, instead of being satisfied with what your earth-soul says you have.” She said to them both, “*Or* we can move to a better city, where they have a better basic income, like Memphi at tier 4 instead of Orange City at tier 2. We can ditch the car payment. We can sell this *massive* house for a nice new start and we can live in public housing for a few years, or maybe we’ll find a nice place by your brother. I can clean houses anywhere and Memphi has fisheries, too. Not ones we own, but these ones here? We can rent those out to other people for good money.

“Those are the options.”

Silence.

Give up the family fishery?

The family house?

Mark *loved* this house—

Dad said, “Or Mark could become a brawny.”

“Gotta say,” Mark admitted, “Brawny is looking good right now. I... I love this house.”

It was a two story house with 10 rooms and four bathrooms that had been in the family for three generations so far, and Mark was looking forward to making it four. He didn't know who he was going to find and love, and honestly the entire idea of being with another person just did not interest him, but he knew he wanted to raise kids of his own in this very same house. You know... theoretically.

Today was a big day of decisions, and Mark did not like it at all.

Mom said, “I'm laying out all the options. I want you to be happy, Mark.” She smiled, saying, “I'm already happy as long as I have you two boys with me. That's all I care about.”

Dad smiled wide.

Mark had nothing else to say about anything.

They ate dinner in silence, and in thought. Mark was fine with the lack of conversation. He had a lot to think about already.

And then Dad leaned over and kissed Mom on the cheek, and Mark looked away, ignoring whatever small words Mom was whispering to Dad.

Mark was glad he had chosen to live on the other side of the house. That was one of the first things he had done once he was old enough to recognize the noises his parents made at night.

Being far away from Mom and Dad's rooms made it easier to sneak out of the house, too.

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Mark sipped his beer, staring off into the waters far, far beyond the low walls of Orange City. The ocean beyond the walls shimmered with silver moonlight, the many islands of the Floridas looking like black marks upon the waters. Mark wanted to be *there*. *Out* there, among the empty places. He wanted to be everywhere *except* stuck behind these walls of humanity, where he was protected.

He wanted to do the protecting.

He did *not* want to be a brawny.

At least Sally was right there with him.

Sally sipped her beer, saying, "I think I'm going for it. Brawny."

Mark raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

She had gotten 'brawny', too. Most everyone did. Mark had hoped that she would have gotten something special, and she had hoped the same for him, but both of them ended up on the same track in life.

Sally said, "It's also the bare minimum to be able to walk into the hero side of town, so yeah. I want to be out there, and that's how I'm going to get out there."

"... yeah," Mark said, nodding as he stared at his beer, like he was staring down the barrel of a rifle.

And then Mark stared at the world ahead, knowing that he'd never get to go out there as a basic human. Even partial mages like Mom and Dad weren't given all-world-access, so if Mark went the arcanaeum-one-year route, he'd still have to do... something else? He wasn't sure. Go the full 4 years and get actual-mage accreditation? Shit. Probably have to sign up with a god in the Chosen System, too.

Dammit.

Maybe he should just be brawny, too.

"Dammit," Mark softly said, "Maybe brawny isn't so bad."

Sally smiled wide, flashing her brilliant white teeth in the moonlight. Her golden hair shimmered as she took a sip of her own beer. She was beautiful, and she was a complete lesbian, so it was actually pretty good that Mark felt nothing for her besides as a best friend. Mark was pretty sure she was asexual himself. He still noticed beautiful people of all genders, but not really.

Sally confided, "It's kinda terrible of me, but I'm glad you got brawny, too."

Mark burst out laughing. "What! You wouldn't have wanted something good for me?"

"Yeah... I did say that earlier, but. You know. I'd have been insanely jealous."

Mark chuckled.

Sally smiled.

Mark confided, "I'm glad we got the same offer."

Sally smiled wide. "We can be brawnies together. You can be my wingman, and I can be your wing girl, and maybe we can have little houses next to each other and our kids can be friends. Not in Gladegrove, though. Fuck this tiny town!"

Mark chuckled at that. “What’s wrong with Gladegrove!”

“Oh please. You don’t like it here anymore than I do. Besides! I can’t find a girl in this town! I’ve tried.”

“Oh please yourself. Trying to land a girl takes some guys years and years.”

“Yeah, but boys are icky, so that makes sense!”

Mark laughed, and then he pretended to be offended for his entire gender, “What’s wrong with boys?”

“What? You found one you liked?” Sally asked, teasing.

Sally had been making a ‘joke’ like that ever since she told him she was gay 5 years ago, when they were both 12, and Mark had been kinda ambivalent about the whole idea of girls. Mark had a usual response to that sort of joke, though.

Mark smiled and thought of the guys he had seen lately, picking one. “Have you seen Adam after practice? Those arms of his are *great*.”

Sally laughed.

Mark smiled.

And then Sally sighed. “Shit, man, this kinda sucks. I was hoping for *anything* but brawny.”

“You got a 7% chance at a martial variant. 3% at defender. *That’s pretty good odds.*”

Sally countered, “Your own 4% speedster is... Okay I can’t lie that much. Sorry. 4% sucks.”

Mark chuckled.

His chuckle faded fast.

He had a 4% for speedster. 1% for some unknown Knack. Knacks were shit. They were 'know where a book is in a library', or 'be able to play cards really well', or stuff like that. People with knacks were relegated to civilian status just like all the baselines.

For a while, neither of them spoke. Both of them just stared out at the night sky, at the islands beyond the wall, and at the shining light of the moon upon the waters. It was a beautiful night. The moon was looking particularly sparkly tonight, too; all the golden light in all the cracks spilling out into the darkness.

Sally said, "I *wanted* to be able to stand on the front lines under *my own power*."

Mark commiserated, "Not many brawnies can do that."

"Barely any at all! And I *know* I didn't get True Brawn. I'm not that lucky."

Mark said, "Back-line support for us."

"The *most basic* of back-line support."

Mark sarcastically said, "And not even good support. 'Carry this here!' 'Carry that there!'"

Sally grinned. "You gotta carry stuff if you're going to keep any sort of proper musculature. Gotta go to those special gyms, too, or else you waste away to a skinny brawny."

"At least you're healthy!"

Sally laughed. "So very healthy!"

"I wish I had real numbers. Real stuff to go on. Real ways to plan."

Sally frowned at the air. "Curtain Protocol." She fell to silence.



Mark finished off his beer and sat there, just thinking.

Sally did the same. “So yeah. I’m doing the brawny thing anyway. Even if it is bad. How about you?”

Mark said, “I like Dad’s telekinesis thing. He can’t mana baptize me, or whatever it is they do, but an arcanaeum could. Just gotta go for a year, and then I can fish pull right alongside him…” Mark stared out at the shimmering waters of the Floridas. “Grandpa would have liked that.”

Grandpa would have preferred hydrokinesis, but he had always loved Dad’s fish-pull in a unique sort of way.

Sally asked, “Your dad ever let slip why he can’t do a normal telekinesis?”

Mark shrugged. “No. They don’t talk about that stuff, not for real.”

And Mark wasn’t about to spread rumors of magic, either. He wasn’t going to ‘injure’ Sally in that way. Curtain Protocol was very real.

He certainly had his guesses, though. Dad had used his telekinesis too much against fish and the power mutated to only let him use it against fish. Arcanaeum-granted spells were like that; they mutated some times. It was the same problem Mom had with her cleanse. She used it in too many different situations, and now it only functioned to keep water clean.

Sally didn’t expect, or want an answer, anyway. She was just nervous, just like Mark.

Sally looked out across the dark world, saying, “I think I would have liked a *real* kineticist power. *Any* of them would be good. I don’t think I could ever do the mage-thing. But the kineticist thing? Sign me up.”

“Maybe I *should* do telekinesis.” Mark said, “It’s generic kineticism, so it’s less powerful overall, but it’s still good.”

“Maybe if you had the actual telekinesis *Talent* I’d agree with you, but just the spell? It’s weak.”

That was true. Spells imprinted on the soul were weak compared to real Awakened power. And yet...

Mark said, “Dad’s magic is... Okay. You know what they call 1-year-arcanaeum mages over on Daihoon? ‘Halfers’, if they’re being generous. ‘Quarters’ if they’re being more honest.”

Sally said, “Not even half a real Talent.”

Mark added, “Not even a quarter, most of the time.”

More silence.

The air smelled of salt, even all the way up here on this bare building overlooking the ocean. Bugs buzzes in the trees and in the dark. Mark stared at the world beyond the Wall that he would never get to see in person, and Sally was right there with him.

Sally sighed. “I want to see Daihoon.” Sally asked, “If we both become brawnies, you want to go travel to the Other Earth with me? As a *team* we might be able to swing a gate pass.”

“We’d need to find a healer and a ranger.” Mark said, “They wouldn’t give two brawnies a gate pass.”

Minutes passed in silence.

Sally stared at the moon, and Mark stared at the moon right with her. The city of Arakino on the moon was rather active tonight. 100 years ago the only light on the Luna was the reflected light of the sun. But then the Veil broke, and then Arakino stood revealed. It had been a broken city back then, but humanity—mostly the God AI Malaqua and the Stone Church—had rebuilt a lot of the under-surface and overworld up there. Glittering silver roads shimmered on the sunward side of Luna while golden lights glowed in the shadows, in the cracks, like ever-sparkling fireworks.

It was magical.

Sally asked, “How about the Chosen system?”

Mark said, "I'm thinking about that, too. Freyala for healing."

"I might go for Drakarok."

Mark breathed deep. "... The god of war and assassination?"

"And the killer of monsters. No one messes with a Drakarok priest. I could even get war-healing; inflict wounds and get healed and heal others, too."

Mark went with it, saying, "You'd have to be a pretty awesome priest of Drakarok to get that one."

"Ha! You don't think I'm awesome?"

"You could work on your footwork some more."

Sally laughed, and then she sighed, saying, "Yeah. I probably could."

Mark went silent for a long while.

Sally was about to say something, but she yawned suddenly.

Mark grinned at that. "I guess it is getting late."

Sally nodded, unable to say anything through another yawn.

Mark chuckled, but he held back his own yawn, saying, "You're going to make me tired now, too!"

"I'm *exhausted!* I can't believe you're not tired."

"I want to see the sky whales. They should have been here by now, and yet the sky is still empty." Mark checked his phone. The illumination of the screen brightened Sally and Mark's dark little corner of the world with a warning yellow glow. 'NON-AGGRESSIVE KAIJU IN THE AREA.' Mark checked the

radar. All he saw was... an empty sky. "They *should* be here. Kaiju watch is still on." He turned off the screen and shoved the phone back in his pocket as he looked up, asking, "Where are they?"

"Well I'm done waiting." Sally got up, saying, "They probably got diverted."

"Probably." Mark got up, too.

The two of them had been at the top of a paintball site, at the top of an old construction project. The place looked abandoned, but it wasn't abandoned at all. It was closed at night, though; especially at this hour.

The two of them walked down the dark stairs, through the bowels of the paintball range. It was made to look abandoned. Dangerous. It wasn't really that way at all. It still looked creepy, though, with the lack of light and with walls splattered in all colors, a lot of them looking like blood.

They reached the bottom and Sally headed left, headed home in the dark. She only lived a minute away from the paintball range, and the two of them had been walking in the dark in Gladegrove since they were both ten. Even though they were close to the city wall, there was no danger of there being monsters in the dark. Maybe some gators in the ponds here and there, but no monsters.

Mark lived a bit further away from here than Sally, and in the other direction, but he had taken his bike, so he hopped on that and was soon sailing down mostly-empty streets. He took a detour into the woods to get around a guard station at a major intersection up ahead. He didn't want to deal with guards asking him why he was out at midnight, and they didn't want to bother giving him the 50-questions. It was a hassle if they caught kids out after curfew, so they had told him, years ago, to not get caught. If they didn't see him, then they didn't need to talk to him.

Mark hopped back on the main street after he passed the station and headed home.

As he was putting the bike away in the garage, the rear tire popped.

It just...

Popped!

Just like that!

Mark stared at the popped tire.

He found himself weirdly furious at every single damned fucking thing in life and he took his bike, lifting it high before he smashed it onto the ground. Plastic shattered. A pedal went that way. The chain broke. Mark stood over the wreckage, feeling empty.

“... Fuck. Why did I do that?”

He left it there, for the morning.

... And then he went back down to the garage and tried to fix what he had broken, cursing at himself for breaking it like he had. It was his only real form of transportation. He got as far with the fix as he could, replacing the parts of the chain that had burst, and unbending the wheel. It was kinda just fucked up, though. By the time he got around to putting new tubes in the tires it was almost 3 am, and it was as good as it was going to get.

Mark went to bed exhausted.

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Mark woke up feeling drained, but he was okay. He could do 3-hours-of-sleep nights every now and then.

In the kitchen, one of the stories on the television was about the missing sky whales. Orange City had needed to divert them hard since they were coming straight for the city instead of to the side, like usual.

Dad was making pancakes as he watched the news on the kitchen screen. “Well that’s a shame.”

Mom looked up from paperwork. “What?”

“No sky whales,” Dad said. “I bet a lot of people were out last night trying to see them.”

Mom smirked at Dad, saying, “I remember how you and I used to go sky whale watching.”

Mark focused on his math homework. He was still in high school and he still had homework, even if the last year was always filled with kids prepping for the Tutorial, like him, who had a much-decreased workload compared to everyone else. Life still went on past the Tutorial, though, and grades still needed to be up high enough to graduate.

But if Mark would have gotten a superhero rating in the False Tutorial then he would have abandoned high school completely and filed for a GED later. That’s what all the real heroes did.

Brawnies still got math classes.

... Maybe he *should* really go for mage. Like Mom and Dad. That would require a true commitment, though, which meant... Well. What did it mean? Funneling all his money into arcanaeum? Get a job and spend *years* paying for school? Mark wasn’t sure, actually.

“Mom? Dad?” Mark asked, “How much is a real mage education? Like, actual accreditation? The full four years. The kind of education that would let me walk anywhere in any city in the world— except for the noble districts of Daihoon, I guess.”

Both his parents looked at him, their eyes going wide.

And then they looked at each other.

A moment passed.

Mom started with, “It’s a hundred thousand goldleaf per year at Orange Arcanaeum. That price is set by the citystate. It’s more like 425,000 for four years because of incidentals. The *actual* price is 350,000 *per year*, but the citystate pays that, and only because that’s what it costs to get a real mage to teach real magic to a lot of people. Almost no one pays full price, though, because there are scholarships everywhere. If you want to take a full-scan from the arcanaeum to determine what magics you might have affinity toward then you might be able to get scholarships in those directions.” Mom said, “But even before all of that... The second you burn your *first* spell into your mana veins... When you get your first magic you’re no longer eligible for the True Awakening of the Tutorial.”

Dad said, “You can put off the Tutorial indefinitely if you don’t learn magic. That’s why they don’t allow mage-learning outside of the arcanaeums; so kids can have the Tutorial option when they turn 18. There are lots of places where Curtain Protocol still exists long after 18, like here in Gladegrove. Most residential places in the ECU are fully Protocol’d.”

“But if you want real mage learning then we’d have to sell the house and probably the fishery to afford it, but...” Mom said, “Your father and I talked about that... and...”

Dad said, “And we decided last night that we won’t do that. You’re going to have to get loans. The easiest loan is a 4-year semi-servitude to an accredited mage. It’s a common arrangement. You work your magics at their discretion and you get paid for it, but you would have to move and live with them wherever. Maybe even on Daihoon.”

“Or you could get loans from the citystate, and go into the wall guard!” Mom said, “That’s more common than the mage service option.”

Dad spilled more ideas out there, “Or you could get a normal job and save up and go to arcanaeum later. Years later. It would take a few years of saving to get there, and you’d still have to take out loans, but you can do that. You could even take 10 years to do 4 years of classwork, working all the while, and live in a place like Gladegrove here.” Dad said, “That’s the long-term option, but it’s better than having 25 years of loan payments.”

Mom eagerly added, “Or you could go to university, for *free*, and get a *common education* and become a lawyer or some other high-paying job and outright pay for arcanaeum in your 30’s! That’s a great option, too. And then you can be a lawyer mage, and become one of those people who work with demons and make the *real money*.”

Okay.

That was A Lot.

Mark’s head was spinning.

He had never put too much thought into magery, but his parents had. A lot of thought.

And then Dad added another option, “Or there’s the Chosen System, and you can do the god-thing. I hear at the lower tiers it’s basically standard hero stuff; report for duty a weekend every month sort of thing. Keep a temple clean while living in accordance with the god’s ideals. Some low level powers are even available to those who live under Curtain protocol, so you could take some power and responsibility and still have the Tutorial open for you later.”

“Freyala is all about healing and protection and if you go for her you only need to work 5 days a month at the local hospital.” Mom said, “And then you get *healing magic*. I know you want healing magic! She’s the best way to get that.”

Dad eagerly said, “And with healing magic you can be almost as physically strong as a weak brawny, but you gotta work hard for that muscle and height and everything and heal yourself up all the time.”

Mark smelled smoke.

“The pancake is burning,” Mark said, wonderfully thankful for the distraction.

Mom and Dad had just thrown out a mountain of information to mull over, and Mark... Mark would have to take some time to think about all that.



Dad rapidly reoriented back to the stove to flip the pancake. It was mostly black on one side. “That one can be mine.”

Mark asked, “So? Uh. Let’s go back... Uh... Lawyer Mage? I, uh, like money, I think? But *demons*.”

Mark didn’t want to be anywhere near demons, and yet, all of the truly powerful people in the world used demons. Archmages were famously contracted to demons. That’s how they got all their archmagery powers.

Mom said, “Demons are incredibly dangerous, but they’re what allow us to survive the dangers of mana.”

Dad added, “They’re what cause all of the major dangers of mana, too.”

“Well yes, Markus,” Mom said, to Dad, “But that’s a far off thing anyway, and...”

Mark tried to pay attention, and he mostly did. He was a pretty good learner. But this was not learning; it was decision making, and all the paths open to him were so very wide.

None of them were what he actually wanted.

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A few days later, during dinner, Mark made a decision that was not fully thought out.

Mark said, "I don't want to go into debt or sell anything or do the Chosen thing..." He frowned. "Not fully, anyway. But... I could work to save up, right? For real mage accreditation, I mean?" He looked to his parents. "... Is it really okay to take 10 years to do 4 years of learning?"

He'd have to live under Curtain Protocol, but that was pretty normal for most people. He couldn't go to the Hero Quarter or out beyond the walls... Not for a while, anyway. But was that really okay? Was that really an option?

"Absolutely!" Mom said, struggling to not be too happy.

Dad said, "It's a great idea!"

Mark felt a little bit better about everything.

Yeah.

Okay.

This could work.

Dad added, "And winter break is coming up, right? Want to go visit Orange Arcanaeum? We can pay for a year for sure, and maybe you can get a scholarship, too, but you should expect to pay for 3 years on your own, son."

Mark breathed deep. Here was the moment of truth, though. He asked, "We can... We can really do this?"

"It'll be tough," Mom said, and then she paused, not sure how to say whatever else she needed to say.

Dad said, "Now son, you don't *have* to do this, but you could quit rugby and all of your Tutorial training and even quit school to take the GED and graduate *next month*. You're smart enough. You can cram for the test and just get it done, because as soon as you get your GED you're eligible for Basic Income. With

that in your pocket, then you can start looking for a job before all your friends do. A lot of kids are going to graduate from high school in six months, and you could get the drop on them.”

“But you don’t *have* to miss out on high school,” Mom said, firmly. “That is absolutely *not* what we’re saying. It is an option, though, to get more money *now* for less hardship *later*.”

The world felt smaller.

Mark said, “I... hadn’t thought about that.”

“Just think about it,” Dad said. “Anyway. Winter Break is coming up in a week or two, right? We can get you an arcanaeum full-scan and see your latent mana dispositions. If you get a good one you could get a scholarship and an even *better* Basic Income if Orange City wants you to stay here. Any inclination toward mancercs of any kind, kineticists, anything at all that isn’t brawny, and you could get *money*.” Dad added, “Spellwork isn’t as good as inborn-power, but if you end up with *anything* telekinetic-based then you might be able to be a halfer instead of a quarter like me. Either way, you can stack a *lot* more spells into a person than you can Talents.”

Mom happily added, “Maybe even multiple spells!”

Mark easily said, “I want that; yes. Let’s do that.”

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Two weeks passed in a breeze.

Christmas day was all string lights on the cabbage palms and fake snow sprayed on the windows and a whole lot of food. Mom, Dad, Devon and Trace from the Fishery and their families, and Mark, celebrated the holiday in their big house. There wasn't much under the tree because the family was already trying to save money in preparation for Mark going to arcanaeum, but there were a few gifts.

Mom and Dad got him a new bike. He had needed one and his repairs on the old one were falling apart. Mark hadn't asked them for a new bike at all, but here it was anyway, and this one was made of composite steel. It would take a monster to break it, or maybe just a brawny, and it weighed 2 kilos. It was light.

It was too expensive.

"It's too expensive," Mark said, later, when it was just the three of them.

He was still embarrassed that he had broken his bike. He had taken care of that bike for 5 years. He *still* couldn't believe he had smashed it like some uncontrolled... Well. Brawny.

"It's not too expensive, honey," Mom said. "And besides! You need a good one for getting around a campus full of mages."

Dad smiled, saying, "Those guys like to be bastards to us Basic Income people, so they'll probably break it anyway."

Mom scoffed at him. "That's just on TV shows..." And then she said to Mark, "But take care not to get on anyone's bad side."

Mark felt his chest tighten. He said, "Thank you."

They hugged.

Mom put her head on Mark's chest, holding him tight, saying, "You've gotten so big, honey."

Mark laughed. "I'm still shorter than Dad!"

“I meant...” Mom teared up. “You know what I mean.” She looked up at him, and her next words were choked off by a happy little cry. She hugged him again, tighter, murmuring, “You’re going to do great at arcanaeum. I just know it.”

Dad wiped away a manly tear, saying, “You’ve gotten so tall, son.”

Mark was only 5’7”, directly between Mom and Dad, so Mark joked back, “Maybe you two are shrinking.”

Mom laughed. Dad smiled.

The next day Mark and Dad went to the tram station. They hopped on a graffiti-marked tram and rode all the way into the city, and then further north, to Orange Arcanaeum.

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Orange Arcanaeum was an homage to another world that never existed, seen through the lens of mages from Daihoon who had researched ancient texts that may have been more fiction than reality, and done up using modern-Earth building techniques.

It was all concrete towers the width of coliseums and a little bit taller than that, with major structures made of 10-foot-thick walls of solid stone. There was probably magic inside all of that construction, too, but Mark didn’t really know.

Thick barrier walls surrounded the entire place, 100-foot thick at the base and a fraction of that width at the top, with the exterior surface like a cliff and the interior like a steep hill. This was to keep the monsters outside, but to allow people to escape the inside in the case of an emergency.

Here and there around the tops of buildings inside the walls of the arcanaeum, and on some of the coliseums themselves, jutting out from the sides, were twists of stone like mid-air bridges, ending in open spaces. Those were mage platforms.

Mages would gather at the ends of those juts of stone up there, with the open spaces in front of them, all in order to link their powers and cast great swaths of destruction upon whatever might be outside the walls, or attacking from the air. With lines of exploding light, they would cut down monster hordes... though not really. Sure; that worked. This place was built in that sort of style. But kaiju erased all defenses so this kind of architecture wasn't even the style over on Daihoon. It was 'end-times castle' style, and it was mostly mythical, rather than realistic. Actual city walls were still straight up-and-down things, wide as a city block, and twice as tall. More minor mountains than 'wall'.

The walls of the real city were far away from this place.

If there were places like this that existed for real over on Daihoon, then Mark didn't know of them. According to what Mark knew, modern day defense on Daihoon (meaning the last 1000 years, of course) was all about roving bands of elites, actively going out and ending threats *before* they were found. Modern day Daihoon cities—even as 'modern' as 100 years ago—were more like New Tokyo or Buenos Piedra; defenses pushed out a hundred kilometers away from the main cities.

When the Veil broke and the worlds of Daihoon and Earth were once again joined 80 years ago, there was an information and assistance exchange. Nuclear bombs went from Earth to Daihoon to help them clear out the big threats of Daihoon, the ones that constantly threatened to ruin their world. Nuclear bombs were widely deployed here on Earth, too. Thanks to the mages, the usual nuclear fallout that would have ruined both worlds was instead cleansed away.

Soon, people were in control once again. There was turmoil, of course. But then the New Gods arose. Those gods and the reestablishing of the System on the moon were what really allowed humanity to retake land, and then keep it.

The archmages and the army generals and especially the superheroes of Crystal Tower did a *lot* of the big work, but every day mages and warriors were the ones who did most of the work to keep the world safe. Most problems were better solved without nuclear weapons.

Mark wanted to be one of those people, on the front lines, making the world safer. He wanted to be one of the powerful, who could go anywhere and never be in danger and help others in his presence.

But for now he was stuck in the waiting area of Orange Arcanaeum, looking out the window at the lands beyond, waiting for their appointment to come due. He stared at the Arcanaeum and looked at all the people to pass the time. Dad passed the time reading a novel on his phone.

Orange Arcanaeum was absolutely filled with students walking between coliseums and chatting with each other. All the students wore little orange shoulder capes over their blue school uniforms. Professors wore grey shoulder capes and ties and tweed, or full grey robes. Mark only saw two professors walking around. No one in black robes at all; no archmages out in the open. Of course there wouldn't be any archmages here, though. That'd be *nuts*.

... Still would be nice to see one. It'd be like seeing Red Thunder or Mistress Storm flying in person, but weirder, because archmages were rarer than superheroes. Which archmage could Mark even hope to see?

... He wasn't quite sure. There were a few, right? Erketu was the most famous one. The 'technoarchmage'. He worked mostly with City AIs, though. He was a Crystal Tower 'native', too, and that was all the way over in Japan, so he probably wouldn't be here.

Mark sighed and turned back to sit in his chair.

He read the warning sign up ahead for the tenth time.

*'WARNING: For those who have not foregone the Tutorial, Orange Arcanaeum is OUTSIDE OF CURTAIN PROTOCOL. Beware your curious eyes and ears, lest you burn your mana channels and thus be ineligible for the Tutorial. WARNING: Do not study magic if you plan on taking the Tutorial.'*

The signs were etched into the stone walls and painted red. They were permanent warnings; not something that could be easily taken down and changed. Mark was pretty sure that *some* mage could change them. A stone-kinetic, probably. Not most mages.

... Mark was 80% sure of that.

... 25% sure.

Not too sure at all, actually.

He didn't know how magic worked, and that was by design. There were prohibitions about sharing magical knowledge absolutely everywhere. Curtain Protocol is what it was called. That was one of the reasons that baselines couldn't go into hero towns, or anywhere on Daihoon. Not without specific clearances from the local governments, anyway.

And then there was Dad. Dad was —and Mark loved him anyway— kinda bad at magic, and he purposefully never talked about it at all aside from saying 'I have bad habits so don't watch what I do at all'. Mark always thought he had been bad on purpose, but as he grew up Mark lost that naivety. Dad's Telekinesis was definitely more of a 'fish-pull', while Mom's Cleanse was a 'clean this water' or, when she really pushed herself, a '40% dust cleaner'—

"What ya thinking about?" Dad asked, softly smiling as he looked at Mark.

"I'm annoyed at Curtain Protocol."

Dad nodded. "I was that way, too. Trust me, though; it's for a good reason. You either want to be a brawny, or an arcanaeum-trained mage. Tiny Knacks are not going to save you from a monster break."

"Yeah yeah..." Mark admitted, "I wonder sometimes if you've been hiding your True Power from me for my entire life."

Dad laughed. "Nope! Your mother and I never got far with our studies and—"

The door opened to the side of the waiting room and a woman stepped out. She wore a grey half-robe, and she called out, "Mark Careed. Markus Careed."



Mark was already up and out of his chair, feeling nervous. It was kinda odd that the Full Scan process would want to scan both him *and* Dad, but Dad had shrugged when that's how they told him it was going to happen, and Mark just accepted it.

And now Mark was going to get tested.

Hopefully the scan found something good. A scholarship would be just about the only way he could afford this place without taking out some major loans or signing his life away for 5 years, or putting his mage training on hold until he was 30 and had saved up for a decade. He absolutely did *not* want to do that. Curtain Protocol till he was 30? No thank you!

The teacher of some sort smiled at him, saying, "Right this way, please."

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The walk was short and ended in a large chamber that was sort of like an x-ray room, but without the x-ray machine. Instead, there were some metal plates on the ceiling and floor over there, a wall with a window that separated the room in half, and with a bunch of equipment sitting behind the wall.

An archmage stood beside the window.

Mark was too stunned to do much except for look at the guy, because archmages were the literal defenders of the world.

There shouldn't be one here.

Mark was absolutely sure he knew the guy's name, but it escaped him at the moment.

The guy was young-old and in a black suit with a black-and-gold-trimmed half-cape. He looked almost like a superhero, and Mark didn't know how else to think of him other than in that way. He had salt-and-pepper short hair and a trimmed beard with no lines on his face, but he wasn't young at all. Ageless, maybe. Or maybe he was just a well-kept 65 year old guy with a lot of work done. But no. Archmages were beyond age. They were contracted to demons and his demon made him as old as the demon wanted him to be. This guy could have been 50 for the last 500 years.

He might have been there to help drop nukes on the big monsters during the Reveal.

*What the FUCK was he doing here?*

Mark wasn't the only one stunned to see the archmage. Dad was kinda stunned, too.

The woman who led them here smiled and walked toward an archway where a control room sat behind some thick glass. She said nothing.

The archmage spoke, "Hello, Mark Careed, and Markus Careed. We'll be scanning your father first, Mark, in order to determine if his magic has limited or enhanced you in any way. You can step back. Behind the wall in the control room, if you could. Mister Careed? Please step onto the scanner."

Dad was stunned for a moment still, but he just nodded and walked over there, touching Mark's shoulder briefly, saying, "I guess this is how they do it now."

Mark went behind the wall of the control room.

The archmage said, "Sometimes magics cast around the young have a way of passing onto them in ways that a trip through a normal Awakening would simply obliterate, and which can only be brought forth through actual effort. That is what this big scanner tests for. If Mark had come alone, then we would have had less of a chance to see what miracles he might contain."

As the archmage spoke, Dad made it to the center of the 10 foot wide silver platform, onto a small circle in the center. Dad stood there. The archmage nodded.

A light flashed.

“That’s that,” the archmage said, “You can step off, Mister Careed.”

Dad looked around for a half moment, then he stepped off of the platform, saying, “That was fast.”

“Quite fast, and painless,” the archmage said, smiling, “We only had to go through a few tens of human trials to stop people from turning inside out. You can get on the platform now, Mark.”

Mark halted, one step toward the machine.

Dad and Mark both stared at the archmage.

The archmage smiled, chuckling, “They still have humor here on Earth, yes?”

Dad chuckled nervously.

Mark... hesitated.

The archmage assured Mark, “It’s perfectly fine, Mark. This sort of magic has been perfected for a thousand years. Updating it to modern tech took some doing, but the tech-version works even better than the old stuff.”

Mark felt his ears burn and his face heat with embarrassment. Had he really thought that the archmage had been talking about human experimentation? Mark rapidly moved onto the platform, saying, “Sorry, sir.”

The archmage smiled softly. “No worries, kid. Good luck on getting something useful.”

Mark steeled himself and stepped onto the center of the platform into the circle engraved on the silver. He looked up. Small variations in the metal looked like symbols made in different grains in the silver,

appearing briefly as iridescent sheens. The same sorts of magic runes, or whatever, held on the ground, all around him—

The entire formation lit up above and below—

Mark held in an abyss of white.

—and the light retreated. Mark once again stood in the center of the platform, but the iridescent circles and words and flows all around him were gone. Mark looked for the markings in the silver, trying to move his head a little this way or that, trying to see—

The archmage said, “You can step off, Mark.”

Mark took some steps toward the edge of the platform, looking around all the while, trying to see anything... But there was nothing. What had he seen? Whatever the case, the scan was done. Mark stood a few yards from the archmage—

Oh. Shit.

He was really getting his readout now, wasn't he?

In the flashing lights of the moment and in the presence of the archmage, Mark had completely forgotten that he was here to get another sort of life-changing declaration. The archmage had a piece of paper in his hands, too. When had he gotten that paper? Mark had no idea. But Mark saw the paper and his gaze locked onto that.

The archmage read the paper, saying, “You have an average readout.”

Mark's hopes fell.

The archmage continued to stomp on Mark's soul, “No more than 5% deviance for any particular magic. A standard scholarship demands at least 15%. You can't really change this with anything short of massive emotional trauma, and we don't like to do that to anyone anymore. Now *that* wasn't a joke.

That's how it used to be done, back before Integration. Give a kid a puppy to raise and then make them love it and then make them kill it in specific ways; a standard method. That's what I went through. Of course all of that is pretty much overkill. You could achieve the same thing by dropping a kid into the wilderness and letting them try to survive the monsters." He handed over the report, saying, "Sorry, kid."

Mark took the paperwork, his voice a fragile thing as he said, "Thanks, mister archmage."

The archmage never moved from where he stood, he just nodded.

In a daze, Mark followed the woman out of there, out a different door.

Dad touched Mark's shoulders and hugged him and said some words, and Mark made some sort of response, but he didn't remember what he said. He didn't know what his dad had said, either. It wasn't until he was back on the tram, headed home that Mark regained something of himself.

Mark said, "So that went horribly."

Dad put an arm around Mark's shoulders.

Mark sighed, and then he made himself smile, and it actually felt like a real smile for a brief moment. "I guess I'm too well-adjusted. Not enough trauma! It's all your and Mom's faults."

Dad's worried face broke into a wide smile. He laughed, and then grabbed Mark fully around the shoulders, hugging him, saying, "Archmage-level proof that we raised you right! Your mother ain't gonna believe it!"

"Not going to believe it?" Mark asked, laughing. "What's that mean!"

"I've seen you on the rugby field, young man," Dad hugged tighter, saying, "You're vicious out there."

Mark smiled at that, and then he let go of his Dad. A moment of calm happened. After that moment, he whispered, "No trauma in this household."

Dad went silent. Mark looked up at him, and saw him wipe away quick tears. And then Dad hugged him again, holding him tight, saying, "I hope that never changes."

"Me, too," Mark said, holding his dad.

And yet, for some stupid reason, he wished for something exciting. Mark scowled at himself the very second he had that thought, for having such a stupid thought. And yet...

No.

Mark would not try to sneak out of the wall and fight some monsters, for real. That was just asking to die.

Mark pulled away from his dad, changing the subject, "Who was that archmage, anyway?"

Dad sniffled a little, hiding a tear, as he smiled and said, "I got no idea! Check your phone? All the archmages are known."

Mark pulled out his phone and did exactly that. He found the guy fast enough.

The archmage was 'Sloane Addashield', his demon's name was Kanda, and he was a metal archmage. Specifically, adamantium. Which. Ya know. Impressive. He used giant flying blades of that magical metal to slice apart mountain-sized monsters as he flew around them, dodging attacks. He was a true Hero of Humanity, and he was around 350 years old.

He was also one of the normal archmages to be seen around Orange City, for he was based in Crytalis over on Daihoon, which was about where Mexico was located on Earth.

Mark found himself saying, "I knew I recognized him!"

Dad read over his shoulder. "Oh man. Me too. He is stronger than Red Thunder."

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“Archmage Sloane Addashield!” Mark proclaimed at dinner. “He looked like a normal guy!”

Dad said, “He looked ageless, actually.”

“Ageless, yeah,” Mark said. “That’s the demons, right?”

Mom dished out the potato salad, unimpressed by any mention of any archmage, saying, “I’m just glad we managed to raise you happy and healthy.”

Mark rolled his eyes.

And then Mom asked, “Are you going to go for mage training, anyway? Are you going to try for the GED and get a job, or what? What’s happening here, Mark.”

Mark was suddenly lost again. “... I... I don’t know. I...” He didn’t know much right now, but he knew he wanted to keep playing rugby... and going to school, he supposed? Maybe he *would* do the Tutorial and go for brawny? That was the cheapest option... He said, “I don’t know.”

Mom said, “You got time to think. You have time to make mistakes. Certain paths do diverge, though, like doing the Tutorial or getting mage-based magic. Your father and I are both happy with our magics, Mark. It is *not* a mistake to forgo the Tutorial. Most people forgo the Tutorial. 95% of people, in fact! I know you could do it, but... It’s still a... A big risk.”

People died all the time in the Tutorial.

Mark had already had this conversation a lot with his parents, though. He had been planning on the Tutorial for a long time, and they hated that, but they couldn’t stop him. Once that prompt came up, if Mark accepted it, then he was whisked away, and there wasn’t a force on Earth or Daihoon that could stop it. Many people had tried over the years, and especially on Daihoon, where the thing-that-came-before-the-Tutorial used to take a person at age 12, and it took *everyone*, regardless of capability or

personal choice. Over there, before the Reveal and the retaking of Arakino and the installation of the System and the ascension of the AI god Malaqua, 60% of people died at age 12, to the previous-Tutorial.

Mom and Dad were terrified of the Tutorial, so they opted out of it, and fast, and they had been against Mark doing it his entire life. But Mark wanted actual power to live in the wider world, and that meant taking the Tutorial.

Mom and Dad had mostly come to terms with that, and besides! Mark had passed the False Tutorial, and that was usually a lot harder than the real thing.

The only thing that would stop Mark from taking the Tutorial was if he chose it for himself, and he kinda was, due to the brawny-thing. If the Full Scan would have worked out at all, maybe Mark would have picked that route if he would have gotten a scholarship, but holy fuck. Debt or years under Curtain Protocol or indentured servitude to a mage to learn real magic?

Fuck no!

And now Mark was back to needing to be convinced to go to arcanaeum.

Mom tried to do that convincing, “You could take a week off from school with your dad at the Fishery to see what it’s like for simple halfers like us? Your father has fish-yank, but Devon and Trace are there as brawnies, too. You can see what life is like for all of them, on the job.”

Mark had done that before with other people, with the guards on the walls and with working mages as a part of the school’s extra credit systems. He already knew what life was like for a brawny, or a mage, or any of the other Awakened or powered people out there, and he even knew what Dad did at the fishery.

But Mom was scared and Mark kinda needed to think for a while, anyway.

“Sure, Mom. I’ll go fishing for a week?” Mark looked to Dad. “Sounds like fun?”

Dad smiled. “I think it sounds great!”



- - - -

Later, when they were on the docks and Mom wasn't around, Dad said, "Thanks for doing this for your mom. I know you've done all this before, but she's worried. She doesn't want you making life decisions based on the crushing realities of life."

Mark groaned.

"There are so many crushing realities," Dad said, nodding in approval as Mark groaned, like it was some lighthearted thing.

... Maybe it was some lighthearted thing?

Mark didn't think so right now, though.

Devon, a big brawny with a 3.5-times Awakening, hauled a net over his shoulder that weighed about 500 pounds, laughing as he walked by, saying, "Little Marky is an old hand at this crushing work!"

Trace, a smaller brawny with a 2.7-times Awakening, worked the machine that angled the ice crane over the ship's hold. With a simple button press, ice began to stream into the hold, rumbling loud, crashing. Trace called out over the noise, "Bah! I'd rather be in here than out there with the monsters. And the people ain't that great either!"

Dad and Devon laughed. Mark did not.

Trace smiled. "Brawny is a good life!"

Dad chuckled as he held up a handful of very strong, but rather small metal clips that were shaped like fish. With a deep breath, Dad kinetically lifted the fish into the air and grabbed onto the other net, picking the net up here and there while other metal fish pressed down into the docks, providing leverage. He lifted the second net onto the ship, counterbalancing himself with a few different metal plugs stuck here and there into fulcrum points.

Mark didn't know exactly how kinetics worked, but he did know that Dad's fish-centered telekinesis was more like an extension of his body, using 'mana muscles' and 'mana bones', and Dad was more 'physically picking up the net' than he was magically moving stuff around.

But that was just Mark's layman understanding of it all.

Devon saw Mark looking at how Dad's fish-clips were indenting into the wooden dock, and laughed. "Fish-pull is shit magic!" He kicked the net he had already moved into the ship, saying, "It took me 20 seconds to load my weight, and now I'm just waiting for your dad to pull his own weight!"

Dad moved the net into the ship just fine, calling out, "Don't listen to him, Mark. Telekinesis is great!"

"Fish-pull!" Devon called out. And then Devon made a double bicep pose, showing off, saying, "Look at this brawny power! All the ladies love it!"

Trace chided him, "You get more men looking at you at the gym than women."

Devon nodded seriously, saying, "I have a following online and it pays some bills, for sure!"

Dad smiled as he defended his power, "I'm the one that actually hauls in all the meat. All you do is look pretty and stand around waiting to club the overeager sharks."

Devon stood tall and proud, grabbing his club from where it was stowed on the ship's deck, saying, "All the mages are jealous of us bawnies, Mark. Look at his fishy tricks! Look at how he has to gather small powers to mimic the strength of a *real* man!"

Dad scoffed.

They eventually got onto the boat and it was a pretty normal day.

Mark got to drive the boat between fishing tanks. Usually Trace did that, but he foisted the job off to Mark.

“You know how to read the readout, yeah,” Trace asked, as he stood to the side.

Mark adjusted the throttle and held onto the wheel. Yes, he knew how to read the readout. It was dead simple. Scanner screens sitting in holders around the captain’s seat told him everything that was happening below the waters, while imagers scanned the waters for anything and everything. But saying that would be petulant, and could actually be truly dangerous, so instead, Mark said, “How does it work?”

Trace said, “See that blue on the screen? That’s the water. The black is the bottom. Green stuff is moving stuff, like fish and such— Oh! See that one. That *big* green one. That’s verging on red in the middle, which is how you know it’s actually a monster. That red indicates a positive mana signature. I’d say that is a half-woken beast, so not a real monster at all. It’s a small one, too, and we’re not food up here, so it doesn’t care.” He smiled. “Just don’t go swimming.”

Mark rolled his eyes. “*That* much is obvious.”

Trace smiled wider and chuckled, and then he pointed to the map readout. “We got the tanks marked on the other side of the bay. Just pilot to the nearest one.” He slapped Mark’s shoulder, adding, “And I’m gonna help with the nets.”

“Sure sure.”

Trace spoke seriously, “But for real, though. If you see a red monster of any kind, you yell out, and fast, you hear?”

“Heard and understood!” Mark said, equally seriously.

Trace nodded, satisfied.

Mark drove, and Trace went down to the deck with Dad and Devon to organize whatever it was they were organizing. Mark looked down and back to see if he could see... Ah. Dad was repairing holes in the nets with some spot welding and new wire, and Devon was saying that he didn't see the breaks in this net, otherwise he would have gotten the other one. Mark turned back forward—

He heard Dad call out, "Who's dri—! Oh. Mark is driving."

And then Dad's voice was lost to the rumble of the engine and the whistling of the wind. The boat didn't go fast, but it sure did plow through the smooth waters of the bay.

Soon enough, they had crossed out into the middle of the bay, and the scanning readout started to show some pink-bordering monsters under the waves every now and then. They were deep down, though, so that was fine. Trace didn't tell Mark about which *size* was dangerous —just the color— but Mark already knew. Anything actually-red needed to be warned. That's why there was a big red button among all the scanning equipment that would send out a warning chime across the boat that a big monster had been sighted.

Mark ended up pressing the button twice, but just short bursts. Everyone raised their heads and looked around. Mark called out what he had seen, including depth and size and he even tagged the scanners to focus on those threats, but after a minute of the monsters just going on their way, Mark told everyone that, and then turned off the alarms.

Devon, Dad, and Trace seemed good with that.

Everyone went back to doing whatever.

And Mark drove a boat.

It was kinda nice. Mark loved being out here because this was as close to the real world as he could get, and yet, even with the monsters down there, all of this was pretty artificial.

When the oceans rose 23-ish meters in the years following the Reveal, most of Florida had been drowned. People rebuilt, of course, and now it was 'The Floridas', with Orange City being the main city,

because Orange City had a great big bay. Largest bay in the world, even! Biggest producer of fish foods in the southern half of the East Coast Union cities, too.

Mark looked out across the waters, to the largest bit of architecture on the water.

The Bay Wall.

The 'Guardian of Orange Bay' was hundreds of 25-meter-thick silvery pillars, each with a half-meter of distance between them, set like a ribbon of high-rises across the entrance of the bay. It gleamed in the morning sun. It was the most patrolled part of the entire city wall, because the waters of Orange Bay were some of the most productive fishing spots in all of the Floridas.

Kaijus had sometimes threatened the Bay Wall, but that was a rarity. Just like the sky whales that Mark had failed to see this year, Orange Bay was proactive about turning away threats before they got close enough to threaten actual damage.

Mark couldn't remember the last time he actually worried about monsters inside the bay, but actually looking at the Bay Wall reminded him that there were still dangers out there, and he was still just a baseline, out here on the waters with his dad and dad's employees, on a very, very small boat.

He didn't want to be baseline anymore.

Soon enough, they reached the fish tanks.

The individual fish tanks that grandpa's dad had commissioned were pretty much like the bay wall.

The pillars of the fish tank were meter-thick silvery-metal bars that ended in domes. Each pillar was a good 30 meters tall, with most of that buried into the bottom of the bay, and only 3 meters sticking out into the open air, above the water. There was lots of living space inside that area, for the pillars formed a ring wall a good 100 meters across. Each pillar had some very basic runic enchantments on them that literally 'could not go bad', according to what grandpa had once said, so they'd last forever, and they'd always let in the good fish and deter the bad fish. Most fish hung out inside of the tank for that reason,

and when they grew too big and they couldn't escape, those were the ones that got harvested, like they were going to harvest them today.

Mark was not allowed to know how the tanks' magic functioned before he went through the Tutorial or chose magery, because that would be learning magic, otherwise he'd be curious about all that stuff. (He was still a whole lot of curious.) As it was, he just parked the boat next to the first tank, next to a platform that had been attached on top of the tank wall later, while the guys started lashing the boat to the tank.

He glanced at the monster scanner and saw nothing strange except for the solid black vertical lines of the fish tank barrier, sticking out of the solid black line of the seafloor way down below. Green dashes flitted back and forth inside the barrier, indicating a lot of fish. Not much fish outside of the tanks. No monsters, either.

Dad telekinetically hauled a net off of the deck, and positioned himself on top of the fish tank platform. Once positioned, he used his little fishy clips to grab the net in a few locations, and other fishy clips to cement his solidity upon the fish tank platform. And then he tensed his body. The fish net, which was a bundle tied onto a cable, went flying out into the tank, opening up as it flew, like a parachute deploying. The net opened to maybe 20-meters-across of strong netting, before it crashed into the water like a sudden rainfall, moving a lot faster than gravity could make it move. Dad was forcing it to move fast.

Devon held on to a harness that Dad had tied around his waist and chest, and Dad kind of fell forward a little, but Devon was there to hold him secure. Devon wasn't secured to anything, and he didn't need it. Devon had to hold onto Dad's harness so Dad could *stop* holding onto the platform with his fishclips and fully extend out into the waters, with the net itself.

Mark wasn't aware of *everything* Dad was doing, but he could tell more than enough. Television liked to lie about what magic could do, but this was real shit right now, and Mark could tell Dad only had so much 'telekinesis length', or whatever they called it.

Mark glanced at the scanning screen and watched as the net sailed through a whole bunch of green dots. Dad had his own little scanning readout on a wristwatch, so he was probably watching the whole thing. Trace had one, too, and he was certainly doing the same thing—

Trace called out, "Enough!"

Dad focused on the waters ahead, and Mark watched as the screen showed a bunch of green dots all gathering together. Dad winced, and Devon gripped his harness, preparing to pull. Dad nodded, and Devon pulled back.

It took a stressful few minutes, but Dad got the fish-filled net back up to the surface, and then Devon grabbed the cable for the *very-full* net and started brawny-ing it up and out of the waters. Devon didn't have Tactile Telekinesis, not really, but he secured the net better than Mark imagined he should have been able to secure it. Mark tried not to think too deeply about whatever Talent Devon probably actually had.

Trevor helped from the deck.

All the while, a large variety of fish wiggled, splashing. Water got everywhere. Some blood, too, but that was normal. They tried not to damage the fish but incidents happened.

The whole fish platform was set above the ring of tank pillars to allow for what Dad and the others were doing right now. Devon and Dad pulled the net up most of the way, all wriggling with fish, and then angled the opening of the net against the platform. Dad opened the net with his fish-clips and then the fish started *pouring* out of the net, down a slide, right into the ice-filled storage in the middle of the boat.

There were a *lot* of fish. Most of it was just plain silver fish, but there were some colorful varieties in there. They'd probably get picked out at the market and tossed...

There were a *lot* of fish.

Mark actually wondered if it was too much.

Monsters sought large sources of gathered life to eat. The larger the gathering, the more tempting of a target it made. A bunch of fish in a school wasn't a tempting target, but a bunch of fish laying on each other in a boat's hold was another matter entirely, not to mention that there were four people already on the boat... it was a little concerning.

From the looks Trace was giving Dad, and the small words Devon was saying to Dad, on the fishing platform, maybe this many fish had been too much.

When the fish dump was over, Dad plucked the last few wiggling fish out of the net, washed off the net, and, with a cheerful voice, 'suggested', "Let's go dump this load at the market and *then* make a second run at the next tank."

Trace acted like this was a fine idea, and not a matter of life and death to dump this many fish as fast as possible. Mark saw that the tank was half full just with that one dump. Devon 'joked' about how Dad would have to pay them overtime for the extra travel time, and Dad responded with words about salaries and how they'd be getting more money based on *hauls*, too; not 'overtime'.

Trace politely kicked Mark out of the driver's seat and took over.

Mark looked at them all and said, "So that's a lot of fish and we're monster targets now. How *much* of a problem is this?"

Silence.

Trace said, "It's fine. We're close to the market. We can dump. There won't be a problem."

Dad smiled again, saying, "Trace is right!"

Trace ended up right. There wasn't a single incident at all.

The rest of the day ended up with smaller catches, and two more trips to the market, because Dad didn't pull as deep as he did that first time.

Fishing was fucking *boring* when it was done right.

Mark took it as a heavy reminder that he did not want to pick the safe route at all. He *did* not want this life that Mom and Dad wanted for him. And they knew it. Dad didn't bring that up, though.



He also didn't talk about how this fishery had been in the family for three generations so far, not including Mark, and that it had provided them with a good life. They weren't rich, but they had a great house and everything they wanted. And wasn't that good enough?

It was a good day of 'fishing', and that's what they called the job, but it was really more like 'catching' when done professionally and in curated waters.

On the final ride back to dock, with everyone knocking back a soda and sitting around the pilot's seat while Mark drove, Dad told his guys, "We *can* haul in fish like that first catch. The tanks let more fish go than they catch, and we always grab shallowly, but I can *absolutely* make big grabs if we get more men to help guard the catch." He glanced to Mark. "And if Mark wants to join us as another brawny after his Tutorial that's another guard for the pot, but if you want to learn telekinesis and take over the family business, that's just a one-year course at arcanaeum and it's easy money to work this job. Safe money, too."

... Ya know? Mark actually considered it, for real.

Those little fishclips could be pretty deadly, though Dad hadn't used them like that at all.

Yes. This was a boring day on the water and they all smelled like fish now. But... But Telekinesis was pretty damned good. And a backup plan of working the family job? Well...

Mark really considered it.

The guys watched.

Mark countered, "But what if I want *telekinesis* and *not* fish-yank."

Dad smiled wide and truly happy. "Then that's a 4-year course."

Mark instantly tried to temper Dad's enthusiasm, "I don't think I'd be able to come home for a long time if I did that, Dad."

Dad was still grinning. "I know. No plans need to be made yet, anyway..." He looked to the guys, "But maybe we can make plans for bigger catches?"

Devon wasn't sure. "I need to think and monsters are no fucking joke at all, Markus." He said, "Let's talk about it tonight."

Trace said, "I don't need to think. I know we're doing enough. We could do more, but we're doing enough."

That put a bit of a damper on the whole thing.

Mark asked, "Couldn't you enchant the boat with anti-monster enchants, or something? I know there's something like that on the fish tanks... Eh. Curtain Protocol. Nevermind!"

Devon shook his head. Dad said nothing.

Trace deigned to say, "That's not how magic works."

Mark mumbled, "I saw it work that way on television."

Devon burst out laughing, and so did Dad.

Trace smiled as he drove the boat back to home dock.

When they pulled up to the pylons that led into their canal, Dad swung his badges at the guards, and the guard pressed a button behind their booth. Mark was pretty sure the guards didn't even look up from their television show to see the badges. The pylons just sunk deep into the canal, and they waved the boat on through.

Mark was the only one who watched the pylons go back up after the boat passed.

Soon, Trace locked the boat next to the dock, and everyone got out and started final cleanups. It didn't take long. They had made everything ready to take off or stow away while they were driving back to dock. Dad used his little fish clips to grab the nets they had used, putting them into the lockers by the dock, but he left one out. That remaining net had gotten eaten through by something in the third fish tank. No one saw what it was, or maybe Dad killed it with his fish clips and no one thought that Mark needed to know what had happened out there, but that didn't matter. The net needed repair.

Dad held the torn net up, asking, "Devon? Your turn, right?"

"Shit. I guess it is. Give it here, Markus."

Dad floated the hundred-kilo thing into Devon's arms, saying, "Thanks."

Dad locked up the boat, while Trace waved and walked away, carrying a cooler of fish, and Devon walked the other way, holding on to the net over one shoulder while holding a cooler of fish in that same hand. It looked like it was too much to carry, but Devon was a brawny, and he had strength to spare. He probably had a *little bit* of tactile telekinesis, too.

Mark tried not to analyze the magic he saw, though. He'd do that later, when Curtain Protocol wasn't hanging over his head.

Mark held on to a crate of fish for dinner using both hands, and it was pretty heavy. He almost set it down onto the ground, but Dad was almost done with final boat checks, so Mark just held onto it.

As they walked toward the old truck, Mark said, "I think I *do* want to do the telekinesis-thing, Dad. I'm going to call the Arcanaeum tomorrow and start looking into scholarships for that. They said I didn't qualify for any based on the readout, but I'm going to look more. Really do some digging."

Dad was exhausted from working all day long, sweat coating his shirt and both of them smelled like fish and the ocean. But upon hearing that, Dad turned almost radiant with joy. He smiled, and Mark felt so much better about his choices now that he had actually made one. And then Dad pulled back a little bit, trying to be serious.

Dad said, "If you want to explore the world you're gonna need the *actual* telekinesis spell, and that means 4 years of hard work. It won't be as good as Awakening to Telekinesis, though. With some hard work you might be able to do half-magic. Be a halfer. You can certainly be stronger than me, though. I only did it for a single year. I..." He paused as the words backed up. "I really wish I could talk to you about that year, but... I can't. I know you can do better than me, though. I think you'll do really well in arcanaeum."

Mark smiled as he loaded the cooler full of fish into the back of the truck, saying, "It's just like college, right?"

Dad paused. He wanted to say something, but he didn't. He pulled back, saying, "I can't tell you anything about magic."

Mark rolled his eyes, saying, "You can't even tell me if it's *like* college?"

Dad smiled again and grabbed him in a hug, slapping his back, saying, "Your mom is going to be so happy!"

The perfect non-answer, then. Mark chuckled on Dad's shoulder, and then they broke up, and got in the car. Mark smiled a lot on the way home.

Mom turned out to be very happy with Mark's decision, just as Dad had said.

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"Administration for Orange Academy. How may I direct your call?"

“Hello. My name is Mark Careed. I took a scan there a week ago to see if I had any latent magics that would enable me to have a... a scholarship, or something.” Mark kinda lost it there at the end. He rallied. “I was given a...” He *mostly* rallied. “I was given a negative on the scholarships. I was hoping I could get that decision, like, reversed, or something. I really want to learn Telekinesis like my dad sort of has to take part in the family business and explore the world. Uh...” He lost it completely.

... Was that enough?

Mark added, “Can you help?”

The woman on the other end of the phone call said, “... Okay. I’ll direct you to Scholarship Aid. One moment, please.”

“Sure!” Mark said, enthusiastically, completely unsure why he was so enthusiastic.

He wasn’t sure about a lot right now.

He held his phone to his ear and paced around his bedroom. It was 10 am and it was raining hard outside. No fishing today, and Mark decided that he didn’t need to go back to school at all, and though the rugby guys were mad at him, Mark needed to think about the future and it wasn’t like he was the star player on the team, anyway. The star player was Adam, and Adam had gone away for Winter Break and never come back, because he was training for Tutorial now, too.

A lot of people ignored their senior year in high school. It was pretty normal. People still got mad about it.

Ignoring his senior year was one of his many decisions Mark had made in this past week, along with his future plans for magic and all of that... stuff. Gods. Mark was freaking out. The music on the phone was so placid, blahblahblahing in his ear, and yet his heart was racing, his palms sweating. Mark had taken the practice GED last night and he had easily passed. He was going to take the real GED next week. Once he did that, he’d qualify for Basic Income. Then he could actually go to work full time with Dad so he could start saving up money. He couldn’t actually go to arcanaeum until he had that GED, either, and he needed money—

The music stopped, and Mark's heart stopped with it.

"Hello. This is the Scholarship Aid office. Miranda speaking. How can I help you?"

Mark's throat was dry. "Uh—" He took a breath, and said, "Hello. My name is Mark Careed. I showed up for a full-scan a while ago, to check for latent powers or inclinations. They found nothing— Ah. Archmage Sloane Addashield read the readout for me? I know that was the evaluation I received, but I want to continue in the family business of a fishery, and that requires Telekinesis— or any solid-state kinetic power— magic. Uh. Grandpa had hydrokinesis..." Mark was losing it. He found it again, saying, "I don't want to be a brawny. I could do the Tutorial and get that. I easily passed the False Tutorial." 'Easily' was subjective. "I don't want brawny. I want... Telekinesis."

"Okay then! One moment Mister Careed. I'm pulling up your file now."

Mark quietly said, "Thanks yo— *thank*. Thank you."

Silence.

Mark paced in his room, one hand on his phone, holding it against his face, the other grabbing his neck, massaging his own neck, trying not to panic about how he might have fucked up already. And he looked at the readout the archmage had given him. It sat on his desk in his room, the few pages of it splayed out and visible. It was a bunch of numbers and graphs, and all of the numbers were in the single digits out of 100, and all the graphs were wavy lines running along the bottom, just above the X-axis.

An eternity later, the lady's voice returned, "Date of birth?"

"May 3rd 2030."

"Mark Careed! This is you, yes. So yes. The archmage's declaration was correct. You don't qualify for any normal scholarships."

Mark was crushed all over again. "... Okay."

The woman's voice asked, "Could you tell me a bit more about your situation, though? You said something about a family business?"

Mark wasn't sure where this was going, but he said, "Uh. My dad is the owner of a third-generation fishery. Grandpa inherited the place from great-grandpa. Grandpa had hydrokinesis. I think great-grandpa did, too, or something. Dad went to the arcanaeum to get something— Not sure how he ended up with telekinesis, but he did... Though he uses it mostly to catch fish and work little metal charms that are shaped like fish, to grab the nets that grab the fish. We pull in a few tons of fish per day from our fish tanks out in Orange Bay. We've been doing that for a *long* time. I was kinda... I was going to abandon the family business but I'm checking all my options... I hoped to get something... good. You know? I studied for the Tutorial and I've been handy with a spear for the last few..." Years? How many years? Numbers escaped Mark right now. "For years now. but I can use any weapon. And my False Tutorial readout has me at 95% Brawn, 2.35x baseline.

"I *won't* do brawny. I... I *can't* be that.

"That happened a month ago. It's been a confusing time since then.

"So I circled back to the fishery option, and it's looking appealing. I want *more* than that, though. I want to be able to actually kill the monsters when they appear, and I want to be able to walk into the hero-only parts of Orange City or anywhere else. I want to be able to walk onto Daihoon and not worry about dying to slimes, or whatever normal things are over there. I'm still under Curtain Protocol and I know my mana channels are still untouched, as much as they can be.

"And so that's where I'm at.

"I want to be able to actually haul up multiple tons of fish all at once, and be able to swing a spear hard enough to discourage any monsters, and not have to worry about my safety. And I want to be able to protect others. That's what I really wanted before this... disappointment. I wanted to be a..." Mark said quietly, "A hero."

Without missing a beat, the woman said, "I can already tell you that you likely qualify for a family-line scholarship. I'd need to get some details, but that's easy enough to do. I can also tell you that it appears Archmage Addashield did *not* give you an exit interview, otherwise you probably would have already

known this. I'm glad you called! You definitely qualify for *something*, Mister Careed, for almost everyone qualifies for something. We just need to figure out *what*."

Mark felt the world turn lighter, and easier.

The woman asked, "As long as you're not wealthy enough to afford arcanaeum on your own?"

Mark laughed. "Ah. No. Not rich at all. Mom and Dad were talking about selling stuff in order to pay for arcanaeum, or I'd need to work for a year or two and save to go to arcanaeum for a year, and then repeat that process for the four years of arcanaeum. Or maybe save up for a decade and go to arcanaeum in my late 20s."

The woman said, "All of those are bad options because once you break Curtain Protocol and learn magic you need to go *all the way*, as far as you can as fast as you can, and then you can take your time. You need to do this to settle your mana veins in the proper configurations, and you certainly don't want to try to learn this stuff beyond Tutorial age. If you waited 10 years then you'd certainly be exposed to thoughts and magics that would inhibit proper solidification. What *I* would have you do is let me help you find some scholarship money or a work-release program for a mage that you would have to do *after* arcanaeum. That way you can get your proper learning done and solidified and you can actually participate in adult conversations where people talk about magic all the time in casual ways."

Mark steeled himself. "Okay!"

"The conversation I want to have with you is going to take half an hour to an hour, and probably closer to an hour, and I need to do some research before I can have this conversation with you. Can I call you back tomorrow or the next day for that hour-long interview?"

Mark instantly said, "Sure! I'm free— Wait. Uh..." He looked out the window. "I'm not on the boat today because of rain, but... Uh. In two days? At 3 pm? Or something like that? On the weekend?"

"I'll pencil you in for Friday at 3 PM, if that's okay."

"Yes! Thank you so much! Thank you... uh. Sorry. I forgot your name?"



“Miranda Chase, but you can call me Miranda, Mister Careed.”

“Uh! You can call me Mark. Thank you so much!”

“Call you then, Mark. I should have good news. I usually do!”

“Thank you.”

“Good bye.” She hung up.

Mark stared at his phone for a little while, smiling. “Thank you.”

Eventually he went downstairs to the garage, where Dad was repairing a fishing net, and told him the good news.

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“Gods, Sally,” Mark said, sitting on a log next to Sally, overlooking the swamp near Sally’s house. “It was *embarrassing* how happy he was.”

Mark was kinda happy with how happy Dad was, though. Mom, too.

Sally and Mark were sweating hard and exhausted, their wooden swords propped up against the tree of their little practice area. The two of them had been coming out here for years for some serious practice that neither of them could get out of the other people in the Tutorial prep programs.

Sally chugged from her water bottle, her hair all messed up. When she stopped chugging, she said, “Of course he was happy! You’re gonna be a fishboy, just like him.”

Mark laughed. “I am not! Just sometimes, you know?”

Sally smiled. “It’ll be good for you to have a backup plan for when you fail out of being an adventurer.”

Mark scoffed and threw his empty water bottle at her head. She deflected it right back at him and Mark let it strike his chest and roll off onto the ground. He’d pick it up later.

“You *better* not turn into some crazy adventurer while I’m away at arcanaeum,” Mark said.

Sally just grinned. “I’ll miss you, when I’m out there—” She turned dramatic, “Saving women from *monsters* and then *bedding* them! Sometimes twice a night!” Mark laughed as Sally acted sad, “And you’re with your books that you never got to read, losing your muscle mass and gaining brain wrinkles.”

“Hey now! Brain wrinkles are good!”

“Bad for your skin, I’m sure. Wrinkles mean wrinkles, I’m sure! Have you seen a single young mage that isn’t demon-touched? No way!” Sally grinned.

Mark just smiled.

Sally went quiet, thoughtful.

Mark said, “I’ll still get out there... eventually. But neither of us is going to make it to old age without injuries, and magic will be good for a backup plan. If I end up with any level of Telekinesis that approaches the real thing, then it’ll join you out there and fly circles around you.”

Sally scoffed. “Holding yourself up by your magic limbs is not flying.”

“They have those self-propelled gliders. I could strap one on and spin the rotors all myself.” Mark said, “That’d be flying.”

“Nope! Not flight!”

Mark laughed.

“Now the Chosen system, and *Drakarok*. That’s gonna give me everything I need, including flight, and I aim to take it.”

Mark’s eyes went wide as he looked at Sally, and he realized she wasn’t spitballing this time.

Sally was coyly looking at him, wondering what he was going to say.

Mark, unfortunately, exploded, “*The god of War and Murder?* The ***fuck***, Sally!”

Sally rapidly said, “Yes! Yes. I know. I’ll be focusing on the war part, against monsters. Less-to-none on the murder part. Have you thought of Freyala more?”

“No no. No switching the subject like that. Let’s go back to how you’re *throwing in* with *Drakarok*. The God of War and ***Murder***.”

Sally breathed out, frowning a little. She looked away. Eventually, she said, “You were talking about Freyala as a booster in power, and I tried her first. Didn’t like what she had to say about me, and what she wanted from me. She’s... she’s *defensive*, Mark.”

Freyala was the goddess of Protection and Healing, so yeah. That was Freyala—

OHHHHhhhh.

Mark said, “And you want to cut down your problems.”

Sally sighed. "I am 3 inches shorter than you. I am 50 pounds lighter than you. Both of us are 5 years from our peak as warriors, but those numbers ain't gonna change much. Becoming a brawny in the Tutorial will even out *some* of that discrepancy for me, but it'll take *extreme* measures to stand on any front line with *any* guy at my own level. Extreme measures that Drakarok can give me. In a lot of ways, becoming a brawny will just put me firmly at the *bottom* of a pack of all the other brawnies out there out there." She looked at him, softly declaring, "I'm not going to be at the bottom of *any* pack."

Mark understood.

He really did.

He was only 5'7" himself, but he was 180 pounds of solid muscle. Sally was 5'4" and 120. Both of them were solid shorties. They had been friends for a long time, but they had turned best friends because of that... as well as them living so close to each other.

Becoming a brawny of any sort usually made a person taller and stronger, too. If Mark was honest with himself, that was the only real reason for him to go brawny himself, and it was not good enough of a reason, either.

Mark said, "Okay. Yeah. When you put it like that. I understand... Mostly. So you decided to go for the Tutorial, then? All the way?"

Sally relaxed. She grinned, and said, "Yeah. In a few months I'm going to take the Tutorial, and get brawny. I don't want to bother with whatever book shit they teach you in arcanaeum anyway. I'm gonna leave you so far in the dust."

Mark laughed. "All I'll have to do is stand on top of my telekinetic tendrils and most of the monsters couldn't even reach me. I'll be catching up so fast you'll be wondering what the fuck happened."

Sally smiled warmly. She looked at him, saying, "I hope you do, Mark."

Mark down, and away, and then beyond their practice court. His words choked out of him, "D— don't go dying to some slime or wolf, Sally."

Sally laughed once and got up, saying, “You forget! I’ll be a priest of the Murder God. I’ll be the one *doing* all the killing. I’ll be great!” She grabbed her wooden sword and slapped her helmet back on, saying, “Show me what your devotion to Protection can actually accomplish!”

Mark got up and grabbed his wooden sword, grinning as he slapped his own helmet back on, saying, “I haven’t actually gone to Freyala at all yet, so this shit talking isn’t doing anything for me.”

“It’s doing wonders for me, though!”

Mark was about to square up, but he stepped back and looked at Sally. “Is it, actually? Like is Drakarok looking right now?” He got suddenly concerned. “Sally! Did you break Curtain Protocol!?”

Sally gave a large smile, saying, “Nope! I did pledge myself already, though. Don’t go easy on me, Mark. *Bring it!*”

Mark squared up, saying, “I’m not going to hurt you...”

Sally was about to complain.

Mark added, “Much.”

They fought, perhaps harder than they had ever fought before, but maybe not really.

Mark ended up getting pushed back almost instantly, having to angle his sword so that Sally deflected to the side, and then he cut inward with a counter, but Sally slapped his attack away with her buckler and then they backed off each other. Mark almost asked her what the fuck was that, because she was being way more aggressive than usual, but then she continued her aggression and came at him again, her buckler leading the way. She tried to slap his sword to the side and come in with her own, but Mark was ready for that and he did have a lot more reach on her just by virtue of his size, so he used that advantage.

His buckler went at her face and her wooden sword struck his shoulder.

They both came away from the exchange hurting—

Sally spat out a tooth.

Mark exclaimed, “Shit! Sorry! Let’s—”

Sally advanced, and Mark defended. Strikes came high and Mark defended with counters before twisting into a strike that almost hit Sally, but she evaded at every blow and then she came around with strikes that were harder than ever. Mark deflected.

Breathing evenly, pacing himself, Mark entered the flow, and Sally did, too. They had fought each other hundreds of times. Neither of them was a good partner for each other anymore, because neither of them improved each other anymore, but it was good practice anyway. But today, Sally was different.

She stepped stronger. She struck harder. She moved faster than before.

And something was building up on Mark. Pain. Simple pain was going to knock him out of the fight before it knocked out Sally—

Sally swung at his legs and Mark failed to realize that she could actually hit him with her attempt. She struck a clean blow. Mark went down, his leg seizing up at the pain, and Sally backed away, cheering.

“I got you! I got you, Mark!”

Mark lay on the ground, breathing hard, grimacing, willing the pain away. Soon, he chuckled. “Good fight.”

Sally laughed, whooping and hollering.

As Mark lay on the ground, hurting everywhere and bleeding from his hands, he took off his gloves and looked at the damage. He wasn’t quite sure how, but he was bleeding from the hands. Cuts had opened up everywhere, like paper cuts. It looked worse than it was, but it was already seriously stinging.

Sally sat on her ass beside him, smiling, though she was missing a tooth. “You fought well, Mark.”

Mark almost sat up to look at her, but he decided to just lay there instead. He put his gloves back on, stinging the whole time, but he needed to wear them just so he didn’t bleed everywhere on his way to Freyala’s free healing clinic. “You already declared for War, then.”

“Phhhh!” Sally exhaled. “You don’t think I could kick your ass without a god’s help?”

Mark looked her straight in the eyes and talked shit, “Nope.”

Sally laughed. She smiled. She said, “I don’t know what any of that was, but... I think it was a taste. I haven’t actually declared yet, but I’ve had a few talks with his priesthood. He wants me to kill monsters and I already decided I want to do that long before I went to him, so it’s a good fit. The only difference is that I’ll be declaring a kill for him once a month, and in exchange... I’m not sure what he’ll give me, but Warriors of War are the frontline fighters against monsters, and I’m going to *be there*.”

“There are *so many* types of frontline fighters...” Mark ended that thought before he could really articulate it. Instead, he sat up, aching all the while, and told Sally, “Congratulations.”

Under the cuts on her face and her broken front tooth and split lip, Sally looked happy.

Happily, she said, “Thanks, Mark.” And then she slapped her knees and stood up, saying, “And now! Holy fuck! I’m in a lot of pain! Let’s go to Freyala’s Healing House.”

Mark held up a hand. “Help me up.”

Sally grabbed his wrist and he grabbed hers. “Always.”

- - - -

“You can sit in the Healing Room, Mister Careed. Miss Wuthers will need looked at, following by a stay in a Healing Room.”

Mark said ‘see ya later’ to Sally at the intake for Freyala’s House of Healing, with him headed right and her headed left. It had been a fucking *chore* to get here on the bikes first, and then on a stop on the tram, but both of them were here now, and soon they’d get healed.

Mark crashed onto one of the empty chairs in the Healing Room and closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, he took a glance at his surroundings. This was pretty much a waiting room like at any doctor’s office, but with Freyala’s ‘iconography’ everywhere. Almost none of it was professional iconography, though, so did it even count as such? They must have thought so to have so much of it up there.

Hand-drawn art from kids done in crayon and colored pencil, thanking Freyala for healing them, or their parents, hung everywhere, some of it layered on top of each other. A lot of it was the same line drawing, printed on cheap paper and then crayoned over by small, inexact hands. A full stack of the same coloring papers rested on a low table in the middle of the room, along with jar-fulls of wax crayons. There was even blank paper for kids to draw their own works of art, to pin onto the walls. The walls had so many pins on them; they must be made of corkboard.

Many of the drawings had little notes of thank you on them. ‘Thanks for healing daddy!’ or ‘Mommy is better! Thank you!’ or the like. Many of the letters were inexact, but some of the kids had obviously had coaching on what to write down. There was a ‘Thank you for fixing dad’s broken back!’ that was particularly well written. Maybe it was just a smart kid, though. Mark had been a smart kid. Or at least his parents had told him that. He had made up drawings like this when he was that age, ten years ago.

Mark smiled at all of it.

He liked Freyala the best because she was simply *good*. There was nothing untoward in her messaging. Just ‘heal everyone and protect everyone’. Simple stuff. Freyala had risen in the Reveal, like pretty much



all the gods of the New Pantheon (the only still-existent Pantheon). Her story was one of healing plagues released by the reunion of worlds. Big magics, done 75-ish years ago.

Freyala was at the forefront of healing everything, really. Hearthswell, the other god(dess) who provided healing magic, was more about cultivating civilization.

Sally's choice of Drakarok as a patron was... an unorthodox choice, to be sure. Apparently the guy had a great reputation over on Daihoon, but on Earth, *before* he was a god, General Alexander Volkov was most well known for the murder of 4 different world leaders and 250 staff, all at the same time, as well as preventing World War 4 *because* he had murdered those people. World War 4 still happened, but they called it World War Not, because it was mostly just the complete dissolution of many of the normal governments of the world failing to stay together; Civil wars *everywhere*. Not many big cross-country wars.

To say that Drakarok was a controversial figure on Earth would be underselling that fact by a *lot*.

To say that Drakarok was lauded on Daihoon would *also* be underselling it.

He was still in the Pantheon, though. He was still a main god—

Oh.

Mark relaxed, as the full-body sting he had been experiencing ever since his bout with Sally, was gone. Something had flicked and relaxed inside his body, and now the pain was partial sting, mostly confined to his hands and his left leg. Mark's ungloved hands were still bloody, but it was dried and flaking away, vanishing under godly might. Some sort of cleansing magic, really.

Mark smiled at how fast he was being healed.

Mark almost wanted to draw Freyala a little picture of something as thanks... And maybe he would!

He glanced around and saw he was the only one in the room, so he grabbed a clipboard, a piece of paper, and a blue crayon, and drew a little picture of an angel in a blue dress. It was a pretty normal

depiction of Freyala. Mark finished it off with a ‘Thank you for the healing!’ and then he tacked it onto the wall, in one of the emptier spaces.

By the time he was done with that he was fully healed.

Mark wasn’t sure how they healed him, exactly, but he knew the mirror in the room was actually a one-way mirror, and people behind that glass were watching him and casting spells, and maybe that would be him one day, if he chose to ask for Freyala’s help in life. She’d tell him ‘report here for these many days per month and heal people!’ and Mark would do it.

Drakarok requested one monster kill a month from his people, which was normal for him, but Freyala and Hearthswell, the two healing gods, required that they heal others with the gifts those gods bestowed.

Mark was rather on-the-fence regarding a divine patron, but...

“It wouldn’t hurt to ask what the actual requirements were, right?”

Mark always liked the idea of not getting hurt in battle, too, so Freyala was the better choice of healing gods, since her other thing was Protection. Hearthswell was more about making homes and families and communities.

Mark stopped at the front desk again, saying, “I’m interested in getting Freyala as a patron for warrior stuff out in the world, but I’m not actually doing any of that right now at all, and maybe not for years. I’m still under Curtain Protocol. I think I’m asking about the Chosen system, becoming a devotee to Freyala, but not sure if that’s what I want, exactly? Who can I talk to about that?”

The person behind the counter was just a secretary, so she tapped away at her console in front of her, and then looked up to Mark, asking, “If it’s a general questioning, how about an appointment for a meeting in a week with a Priest? Next Wednesday some time?”

“Sure!”

“Morning or afternoon?”

Mark made his appointment, and was soon out of there.

As Mark was on the tram, not waiting for Sally who had already texted him that she had left, he smiled.

So! The Tutorial was a bust.

This secondary option was shaping up to be a whole lot more what he wanted. Healing and Protection — if this Freyala thing worked out— and also Telekinesis. That was, like, a perfect combination, right?

As Mark stared out of the tram window, a thought occurred.

*Could* he even do all of that?

He had no idea how magic *actually* worked, but he *did* know that people who entered into the Chosen system under a god usually got minor divine abilities in exchange for doing work, usually called quests. So, theoretically, he should be able to do both Telekinesis and Healing and Protection... Or maybe just Telekinesis and Healing and maybe protection...

“Or maybe just telekinesis and healing, all minor like; not capitalized,” Mark mumbled to himself, as he pedaled his bike toward home.

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The phone rang at 2:51 PM, and Mark was not prepared for it, but he answered anyway, “Hello?”

“Hello, Mark Careed, yes?”

Mark's heart skipped a beat. "Yes! Hello! Miranda, yes?"

With a professional, nice tone, Miranda said, "Yes. This is Miranda calling from Scholarship Aid at Orange Arcanaeum. I had expected today's conversation to last a good 50 minutes, but it's actually going to be a short one, because I am pleased to tell you that I sent your information up the chain and it came back with Archmage Sloane Addashield on the hook! Isn't that wonderful!" Miranda said, all excited. And then she slyly added, "That's a little fishing joke."

Mark chuckled because he had no idea what Miranda meant by any of that.

... And then he realized he didn't understand anything.

"What does that *mean*, though?" Mark asked. "I met the guy briefly but I didn't even know his name until I researched it afterward." And then Mark recalled more of that moment in time. "He seemed rushed? I didn't want to actually say anything to him about... what had happened."

Miranda got right into it, saying, "Addashield has suffered a large loss. It's news in all the noble circles. He was here at Orange Academy to try and drown himself in work, which is why he was there at your full scan and why he was so curt. Please forgive him. Long, involved story short: Archmage Addashield is looking for a new apprentice because his previous apprentice failed the Tutorial. He died."

Mark breathed deep. "*Oh.*"

"Yes. Dan Clover will be missed, but the archmage still needs an apprentice due to various agreements, and if Addashield hadn't been so distraught he might have read your readout more carefully. That is just what he told me, just yesterday. He wants to speak to you directly. Can you be here at Orange Arcanaeum by midday tomorrow?"

Mark had *no idea* if he could be there tomorrow, but it was Saturday tomorrow, so he could probably—

Mark was being an idiot.

"Absolutely. I can *absolutely* be there."

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“And, uh, that’s my history. I guess.”

Mark barely remembered the first fifteen minutes of meeting the archmage, alone, in an office in Orange Arcanaeum. He had been here, he had answered questions, he had mostly talked about schoolwork and Tutorial training and various certifications, and he had mentioned his family business. Had he been too modest? Should he have talked himself up? Archmage Sloane Addashield was looking rather quiet right now, and to the side. Not directly at Mark at all.

Oh gods.

Mark had fucked up.

Here was this great big opportunity and Mark had f—

“I have a demon that requires I raise apprentices that might decide to become demon-contracted themselves, using the same contracts that I have with my own demon. It’s a good contract, but this stipulation for apprentices is always a hassle. That’s why I’m doing this. That’s why we’re talking again.

“I have to do this.

“I would rather not, but needs must.

“My apprentice died in the Tutorial.” Addashield looked away. “It has been difficult. Dan Clover was to be a real apprentice. *You* will be a fulfilled obligation. I have needed to do this many times before, so I expect no real trouble in the process, but...” He frowned. He turned back toward Mark. “You’re barely a

fit for my needs, but you do fit, in the way that you can shove a square peg into a round hole if you shave off the corners.

“The first thing you need to know is that if you want to take my offer, then it’s gonna hurt. I will be giving you a mana flavoring to attune your channels in the proper directions. After that, you’ll have to go through the Tutorial in a few months, and when you do, I will be there with you to finish the process and get you fully attuned to my desired needs, which means metalkinesis of a particular flavor. You can still do the healing thing from Freyala if you want. You’d probably need to do that anyway, because a forced mana shift is... It’s a lot more dangerous than people think it is. It’s what happened in the Reveal, and it killed so many of Earth’s people. The Veil restored the barrier, but people born on Earth are...” He frowned, and then he allowed, “Not something to be discussed in full with a person under Curtain Protocol, I guess.

“Anyway.

“Your recovery time after flavoring your mana will be a month. Your recovery time *after* Tutorial will be measured in *months*, if not a full year. This is not a kindness I do to you. This is rough surgery, and you’ll live, but you might not want to for a few days.

“If you *don’t* take my offer, then I’ll clear the path for you to inherit your father’s business with a full Telekinesis scholarship ride. That means between 4 and 5 years of arcanaeum, and you might not even get the full spell. Most people never do. Your father never did.

“So those are the options.

“Take my offer of enforcing your future development down a path of adamantiumkinesis, unlocked at Tutorial-level strength, or a full ride for Telekinesis training at arcanaeum, which might make you a halfer, if you’re truly skilled. Or maybe more than that! Who knows.” Addashield added, “You might pick up a few other magics at arcanaeum, too, if you opt for the arcanaeum route. Hard to know.

“Some people you’d expect to do remarkably well in arcanaeum fail out completely, and some that you think will fail in their first month turn into archmages. Such is the way of life.”

Mark was almost 100% sure he wanted Addashield's offer, for *any* sort of kinetic magic was at the absolute top of his list of Wants. Telekinesis was generalized kinesis and not nearly as strong as specialized kinesis. Mark had often suspected that Dad had specialized into 'fish-pull-kinesis' just for the power boost that specialization brought, but he honestly did not know.

He didn't know a lot.

Mark asked, "Can I ask questions?"

"The first part of attuning you to metalkinesis is talking about magic. This is the lowest level of mana flavoring." Addashield said, "I'll actually answer questions if you want to accept my offer, otherwise I will not."

"I just have one sideways sort of question, then, to start," Mark said. When Addashield didn't deny him, Mark plowed on, "What does it look like, after I succeed, to have this thing done to me? Or for me?"

Addashield paused, grinned just a little, then said, "The aftermath of a full success looks like me introducing you to my demon's kin, you telling them to fuck off, and you then getting on with the rest of your life." He sat back in his chair. "I've done this 30 times before, once every 10 years. Only twice have people contracted with the demons I introduced them to. Both of those people were true apprentices, and not obligations. Most of all of them died in monster incursions, but I still keep in touch with their next of kin..." His voice drifted away. He shook his head. He breathed, and his eyes turned solid. "Your choice, please."

"I choose adamantiumkinesis, obviously!" Mark said, thrilled to hear himself say it. "The strongest metal in the world! YES!"

Addashield smiled, almost sadly. "Your majority is in 4 months, you said?"

Mark was confused for a moment—

Oh!

He asked, "Tutorial? In 4 months, yes. May 3rd. My 18th birthday. Yes."

"That's a close timeframe, but I can make it work. I will be working with others, obviously. You're just one of a few that I hope to use to salvage this tragedy. You will *not* have access to me, but I will have access to you, at times for probably the next two years. You understand?"

"Sir yes sir!"

Addashield nodded. "You said you wanted to do a Chosen power through Freyala?"

"Yes! ... Uh. Unless I can't?"

"You can do both, and maybe at full power, too, so we're going to attune you to both at the same time. Some healing magic will make the real Awakening that much easier, and it's not like it'll cause too much more pain or recovery time."

An emphatic thought echoed in Mark's mind,

*Oh my gods.*

Followed by,

*Wait what?*

*What does that mean? **Two** Talents?! Or just some godly... what?*

Mark didn't know what he didn't know, but Addashield was a Hero of Humanity, so Mark trusted him implicitly. Except... Pain? Mark was elated and a little scared.

"Err..." Mark found himself grinning a little, even though he really didn't think he should be grinning right now. A nervous chuckle escaped him. "Uh. You make it sound... Er. Bad—" He rapidly added, "I've broken bones before. Is a... a 'flavoring' worse than that?"



“Yes. Think of it less like a body pain and more like an ‘oh gods everything is on fire forever’ sort of *soul* pain. You’ll only be burning badly for a few hours during and after each session. Not actually forever, mind you. It will merely feel that way. We might only need to do one session, too.”

Mark steeled himself. “I can handle pain.”

Addashield said, “That’s the spirit!” And then he stood up. “Let’s go get you burned from the inside out.”

Mark tried to stand but he fell back onto the seat upon hearing ‘burn from the inside out’.

Addashield was trying not to smirk.

“Oh,” Mark said, realizing something. “You’re fucking with me.”

“It feels more like *knives* than *burning*, yes. Though some people have called it ‘burning like’!”

Mark had no words.

Addashield nodded.

And then the archmage led the way, his black half-cape swishing a little on his shoulders. He truly did remind Mark of a superhero, and Mark wondered if he was being too informal with the man. Was that why Addashield was fucking with Mark?

Would it really hurt *that* bad?

Mom and Dad had both told Mark to be on his absolute best behavior, to pretend like he was talking to the nobility of Daihoon (because he was!!!), and Mark had tried that at first, but rapidly he had devolved into simple politeness and solidity. Perhaps he should have researched more of that sort of stuff.

Grandpa had a Xerkona/military background. Did that sort of thing count as polite?

If so, then Mark was already doing some of that.

Mark analyzed his own actions in his short interview over and over again, as Archmage Sloane Addashield walked down the hall of the administration building. Addashield didn't have an office here, or at least not a permanent one, but they had given him a temporary office in the back, and now Mark was walking behind the archmage, on his way to... To do something?

To get burned from the inside out?

Right now?

In this here building? At this here hour?

*Right now?*

Mark was feeling a lot of emotions.

- - - -

Somehow, Mark found himself stepping into the full scan machine that he had already used the last time he had been here at Orange Arcanaeum. The machine looked much the same. Two big metal plates, one on the floor and one on the ceiling. A wall with a window on it, like in an x-ray room, held to one side of the full scan room. Computers and junk lay separated from the machine by the wall.

Somehow, Addashield had told Mark that this was happening *right now*.

And Mark was somehow agreeing to everything. To a sort-of apprenticeship. To having his mana veins... burned out, or whatever it was they were doing. And now some woman rushed into the room,

and that woman was wearing white and gold, and she was arguing with Addashield in the most polite way she could that everything was happening too fast.

“I’m on a time crunch, Lola,” Addashield said, like a normal person in a time crunch, and not like an archmage who could rip apart the entire school if he wanted, “And the boy qualifies.”

Priestess Lola Turner (How did Mark know her full name? Had it been said somewhere else?) was an actual priest of the goddess Freyala, who had gone as far as to take the goddess’s mortal last name as her own last name. That meant she was up there in that clergy. Pretty high up, actually. Mark had no idea how high up because he seemed to know less and less as the day went on, but he knew Lola Turner was high up in the ranks.

Priestess Lola held herself still, her hands in her sleeves as she regarded Addashield, acting like so much more of a Daihoon noble than Addashield seemed capable of acting. She spoke softly, “And I must *insist* that the goddess requires an interview with Mister Careed in order to participate in this sort of action.”

She had danced around her insistence for a little bit, Mark was sure, but he was currently freaking out that all these big decisions were happening right now, so Mark didn’t really catch her insistences until they were plainly stated.

Addashield frowned at her. “You’re *really* not just going to *go along* with my request, are you?”

With perfect poise, Lola did a little curtsy, saying, “I will gladly go along with all of your reasonable requests, Archmage Addashield, defender of humanity.”

She didn’t even put any stress on the word ‘reasonable’.

Mark was pretty sure the stress was there, though, even if it was just implied.

Mark was impressed, and a bit envious. The archmage had made it pretty clear that if Mark passed all of this, then he’d be a pseudo-apprentice, and though Mark had no idea what that really meant, he knew it meant connections. Connections were a power all their own, but mostly they were yet another terror. Monsters were fun to fight and kill! Mark loved his life plan.

He was rather terrified of all of the parts surrounding his life plan, like dealing with other people.

But it was a terror that he was excited to experience.

He imagined taking tea in ceremonies in noble houses on Daihoon, in meeting enemies and making them into friends, in killing the biggest monsters around and saving villages. Daihoon seemed so mystical and cool, but it required the best sorts of magic to thrive outside of the cities, and that was where Mark wanted to thrive most of all.

So that's why he spoke up in the middle of the Archmage and the Priestess, saying, "I want to be able to see the world and save everyone who needs saving. I would greatly appreciate Freyala's assistance in this matter, Priestess Lola." Mark bowed, holding his stomach to keep his guts from spilling out of his mouth.

Maybe bowing wasn't the proper thing to do, but it allowed Mark to look at feet instead of faces.

He saw Addashield's black robes swish this way and that as he said, "See! The boy wants this. Freyala would want this, too."

Lola's lower half barely adjusted in any direction at all. "The boy has no idea what he is asking for. He will be in so much pain—"

Mark stood straight, saying, "I know what I want, Priestess Lola, and I will walk through fire to get it."

Perhaps it had been a mistake to stand up, for Mark saw Addashield's eyes regard him in a way that he hadn't regarded him before, while Lola looked... completely calm. Was calm bad? Calm seemed bad. Had Mark overstepped?

Yeah.

Addashield said, "Step outside, boy. We'll call you back in shortly."

Mark got gone.

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Mark threw up in the bathroom down the hall and then he washed his mouth out a few times as he stared in the mirror. Had he really interrupted Priestess Lola? Had Addashield called him 'boy'? FUCK. Oh fuck he had fucked up so ba—

Mark made it back to the toilet just before he puked again. After a steadying moment, he went back to the sink and washed his mouth out. Again. He was the only one in the bathroom, and he was glad for that.

With a stare into the mirror, Mark settled his nerves as best he could. A few water splashes on the face helped clear away the redness in his eyes, and then he dried his face with scratchy paper towels and walked out into the hallway.

The door to the full scan room was over there, to the right, while the hallway ahead of him had a few benches sitting against the wall, facing the windows. Mark sat down and looked out across the campus. Anything to take his mind off of what was happening behind that door over there.

Orange Arcanaeum was a whole bunch of coliseum-sized towers, set here and there, with grass hills and stone walkways scattered between them all. The curtain wall in the far distance looked more like a steady rise of grass than any real wall, but that was just the inside-view of the wall. The outside of the wall was an overhang of a stone cliff.

Beyond that lay the city, with much more normal high-rises and otherwise.

Mark imagined taking classes here.

Of becoming one of the students that walked between classes, robes on their bodies and chatter with their friends surrounding them. Addashield had said that if Mark didn't want his full adamantiumkinesis Talent option, that he would get a full arcanaeum scholarship due to his family history with a family business that was dependent on specific magics.

"I suppose that's not a bad consolation prize," Mark said, feeling giddy about a full ride.

Mark definitely wanted the metalkinesis option. A full Talent was better than a whole bunch of different, 10% strength magics. Or at least that's what common wisdom told him. A full Talent in metalkinesis *and* healing magics, through Freyala? That was the stuff of *dreams*. That was the stuff upon which the *center* of an adventuring team could be founded.

Did people with two Talents even *exist*?

They must!

*Holy shit!*

If Mark ended up getting this Addashield option, then he could party with Sally, and the two of them could go see the world together. Sally would probably try to find a girlfriend to bring into the team, and that was fine, but Mark would need to get a fourth person just so he didn't feel like a third wheel.

Sally would probably make good decisions about a girlfriend, and she wouldn't take just anyone, so what would that girlfriend's power look like? What would best support the team?

... What would they already have going for them? Sally would be a brawny with War magics, and Mark would be a kineticist with Healing magics, so a third person would be... Some sort of support? A technopath? Or a telepath? Or maybe—

Oh!

Mark would make some contacts through this Addashield-business, for sure, so maybe some noble that wanted to tag along and who fell in love with Sally? Sure. That seemed reasonable. So maybe that increased the available level of possible third persons. Maybe the third person could be, like...

*A Seer.*

Oh oh oh! A Seer! YES!

Those were pretty rare and very useful. *Incredibly* useful.

So yeah. A Seer as a third person.

Who would Mark get as a *fourth*, though?

Mark stared at the ceiling, thinking, and so very desperately trying not to think about how he might have screwed up absolutely everything, and how Addashield might deny him his full ride as a second option.

*Focus on the possible good, Mark!*

A while later, Mark wasn't quite sure, the door opened to the full scan room.

Mark's entire world focused back to the present as he once again saw Priestess Lola and Archmage Addashield standing there. He hopped to his feet and stood ready for whatever.

Lola said, "Do not be charmed by the words of demons, spit through the mouths of archmages, Mark Careed. This will hurt. It will change your entire life. You will not have other options after this. Do you still choose this path of metal and healing?"

The world condensed down to the only path that Mark wanted to walk, and then all the rest that he cast away.

Mark resolutely said, "I choose the path of Metal and Healing, roused through pain and solidified through the Awakening of the Tutorial."

Mark had thought those words were pretty good.

Addashield seemed to approve, since an eyebrow ticked up a little.

Lola was more reserved. "Your resolve, while commendable, will harm you. You are aware that Archmage Addashield, though he is an avowed Hero of Humanity, is using you? That he needs to fulfill a contract with his demon, this year, in the next five months?"

“I am aware of that,” Mark said.

“You are under Curtain Protocol. This will rip some of that, then repair the Curtain, seeding the stage for what Addashield wants. That ripping is *dangerous*. With *great luck*, you will go into the Tutorial merely *weakened*, your body *mostly* healed from the mana alignment that Archmage Addashield wishes done today. You will *not* be at your best, and Addashield will not save you in the Tutorial, should you need saving. His agreements with Malaqua to enter the Tutorial space do not allow him to rescue the people he accompanies.”

Mark let her say what she needed to say, but both of them knew she wasn't swaying him at all. When she was done, Mark still stood resolute. The fact that everyone knew what Addashield was doing was dangerous and improper, but that they were still letting it happen, let Mark know that this was okay. On some level, this was okay. This letting some country bumpkin sign his life up with the Archmage was an acceptable level of risk to all involved.

Mark wasn't naive, thinking that the people above him in the social pecking order were saints, or anything. People in power were just as likely to fuck him over as anyone else, really. Or at least that's what the stories said.

But he trusted a Hero of Humanity.

Mark said, “I trust that at the end of this, when I complete the Tutorial, I'll get Adamantiumkinesis and Healing magics, or just Metalkinesis and some Chosen duties required of me by Freyala. I don't really care about whatever political things are happening past that.”

Lola looked ready to say something—

Addashield spoke up first, “And you'll visit the demons I show to you, and you'll deny them, or make your own pact that mirror's my own. *That's* what I'm doing this for, Mark. *That's* what you have to ultimately agree to do for me. If we get to the end of this and you succeed, then I'm *dragging* you in front of them and you won't like it if I have to drag you.”

Lola's eyes remained on Mark, though she was giving Addashield a pretty stern side-eye.



Mark asked, “I assume it takes a lot more than a meeting and talking to do the demonic-pact thing that archmages do? I really don’t know anything about that.”

“It’s a summoning circle sort of thing,” Addashield said. “You have that sort of idea in your shows over here, I know you do. What I do is open the portal with a binding agreement circle, using the same wordings and otherwise of my own Contract, which is on record in Archmage Hall in Temple— I think you have it on the internet over here. The demons gather in the circle, begging you to take them, and unless you cross the circle of your own, purposeful initiative, the demons cannot bind with you. Demons lie about everything to get a physical body, and— And we’ll go over all of that closer to go-time. It’s a *whole big lesson*. One of many I will be giving you and three other applicants, so far.”

Lola bristled. Her calm demeanor shattered, her eyes glinting gold. “*Three* others?!”

“Yup,” Addashield said, unrepentant. Lola seemed about ready to say something unkind, or furious, but Addashield glared in the lightest, darkest of ways, and Lola pulled back, as though she had been slapped without being actually slapped. Addashield’s tone changed to something filled with warning, “I have needed to do this before and I do not doubt I will need to do this again, but I would prefer this kid to have an anchor in his life that is not me, for when this is over and my duty is discharged, he will need some sort of guidance that is not me. What better guidance is there than Freyala? Now! Do you want a possible High Paladin in this boy? Or should I contact Hearthswell?”

Lola was still, quiet.

Mark was breathless. A *paladin*? The centerpiece of all adventuring teams out on Daihoon? The killers of *kaiju*? And even some dragons? That was so much better than an adamantium mage, or whatever it was he was going to be, thanks to Addashield. That was *amaz—*

Addashield looked to Mark. “Pick a different god. This one isn’t helping us—”

“Freyala will do this,” Lola said. “I.. I just need a minute to pray.”

“That’s fine. I need a minute to explain some things to Mark.” Addashield thumbed at the door while looking at Mark. “Inside.”

Mark went inside the room and Lola went somewhere else. Maybe he could have seen where she went, but he was kinda nervous again.

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Mark sat on a chair in front of Addashield, who stood two meters away. Because of Addashield's instructions, Mark had his knees slightly open, with his hands on his knees and palms facing upward.

"I'm going to teach you a bit about magic, and you are going to listen, and then I'm going to close the Curtain again and let the seed lay in fertile soil," Addashield said, as he pulled back the sleeves of his black robes.

Black metal bracers held on his forearms, like solid wraps of darkness. Mark could only tell they were metal because they reflected the lights of the room in small ways when the light hit them just right.

Mark had read up on Addashield before this meeting. Exact information beyond the public sphere was rare, but Addashield's Powers were documented and categorized. His magic was rather well known, too, but all of those internet searches had come up with the standard warning for magic-learning; don't read any more if you're under 18. Mark had been so very tempted to read more, but he pulled back from that edge.

So all Mark really knew were Addashield's lists of accomplishments. He routinely eradicated kaiju-level threats against Orange City and other cities all across this world and Daihoon, and he regularly chased off dragons, which were like kaijus but with a brain. His magic was esoteric and varied, but he was primarily a metalkinetic, and his preferred metal was adamantium.

Adamantium was a hard black metal. The hardest, blackest metal in the two worlds, actually.

Black adamantium swirled upon Addashield's left bracer and the tiniest drop lifted up, forming a fingernail-sized marble. Addashield hovered the marble over his open palm, and the marble shifted into a star, then a wireframe box, then a circle, and then a needle. It shifted endlessly, into shapes and bubbles and abstract burbles of strange geometries. Mark stared at the burbling, at the shapes, and felt weirdly entranced.

"Tell me the first thing you know about magic," Addashield instructed.

Mark thought as fast as he could. "It's limited."

"Incorrect. Tell me another thing you know."

Mark struggled under that first fact. Magic wasn't limited? What? Perhaps he would have continued to think about that, but Addashield's eyes burned into him, drawing Mark's attention away from the geometric designs of floating metal, and Mark tried to think again.

Mark said, "Using magic weakens you."

"Incorrect. Tell me another thing you know."

Mark breathed in sharply. Using magic didn't weaken you? What? *No*. Dad always looked weaker after using his fish-pull too much, and even the strongest brawny out there, Glorious Man, couldn't go full-strength against a kaiju all day long. He took breaks, too.

Addashield didn't like letting Mark think about anything at the moment, and his floating drop of metal was turning into weirder shapes, like spirals and bone-hands, so very small and yet perfectly articulated and grasping. Shouldn't making little bone hands have cost him a lot of attention? Apparently not. His eyes were focused on Mark.

Insistent.

Flickering with depths that Mark had never seen in a pair of eyes before.

Mark said, “Uh— The normal categories of Tutorial-granted Powers are Brawny, Shaper, Mind, Spiritual, Arcane, and Arch.”

Addashield didn't simply dismiss Mark's words. Instead, he said, “Mostly correct, but only because that is the world as you know it, ever since Malaqua ascended to godhood in his capture of the Demon Moon City, Arakino. I was there. I helped him capture Arakino.

“Before the Reveal, before the meeting of the two worlds, the smash of Earth into Daihoon, no child was named before they turned 12 and finished the Thresher. That's what the Tutorial used to be called; one of many, many different names. Many children died from it. It was the greatest horror of our world. It was the greatest boon we could hope for.

“The dragons controlled us, the monsters always threatened, and the demons preyed upon our dependency in order to survive at all.

“The only way through all of that was with power that never stopped. *That* is what the Thresher granted us. It did not give us the *limited* power of mana and magic. The Thresher, the Demon City of Arakino, gave us True Power. *That* is what you reach for when you reach for the Tutorial. You, who have lived a life of simple ease of fishing and schoolwork and being *allowed* to go into the Tutorial at 18, instead of being *forced* into it at 12. This is all thanks to the sacrifices of your elders. You, who were born into this world of plenty, have no idea the depths of the sacrifices made so that people like you can live on in this world of plenty. You do not know the sacrifices we continue to make.

“But you will.

“For you are now called upon to continue the chain of thankless help, so that people you will never know will be able to live a life better than the one you were granted by your own elders.

**“Will you take up the sword, as millions have before you?”**

Mark felt as though his eyes were open for the first time. He looked upon Addashield, flicking that adamantium magic into shapes before him, and he saw a hero.

Mark said, “Yes.”

“This is going to hurt, and healing will not stop the pain.”

Addashield’s adamantium droplet shattered into a hundred needles, all of them instantly driving into Mark’s body, slipping into his clothes, slipping into his skin. He closed his eyes, and what he felt was like a cold breeze. He imagined the pain was going to come any second now, so he relaxed into it—

His bones locked in place.

Mark did not struggle against anything at all. He didn’t even breathe.

Mark just sat there, his bones feeling like someone was grabbing onto him from the inside, in a way that he hoped to never feel again, waiting for pain.

... Waiting for pain.

... Where was the pain now?

Oh god oh god Mark fucking *hated* the anticipation...

And yet, the awaited pain never came.

Slowly, surely, Mark started to breathe again, and he could move his ribs just fine.

Mark breathed, and... there was no pain?

Mark opened his eyes.

Addashield was studying him from afar, like a professor might study a student’s homework, wondering what to make of it all. He looked at Mark’s legs, then shoulders, then chest, and finally Mark’s eyes. Curiously, Addashield asked, “No pain?”

“I felt cold for a second?”

Addashield grinned, chuckling, as he said, “Good! That’s very good! Stand up and walk around some!”

Mark tentatively got to his feet, and he felt... fine? He moved his arms around and walked around his chair, feeling... “Completely normal?”

The archmage giggled a little, saying, “Amazing! You’re a— Have you told anyone about this sort of arrangement yet? About you coming here?”

“Uh... My parents, my friend.” Mark was wary. “Uh. Others?”

Addashield nodded. “That’s fine. *Tell them that today was painful.* Do *not* tell anyone that this was painless. What I just did to you was imbue your bones with adamantium— Do you know what adamantium is?”

“Er... I have no idea what *any* of that really means, but I do know about adamantium.”

Addashield hummed, and then he explained anyway, “Adamantium is one of the strongest metals known to man and monster. It’s also a bio-metal. Long tale shortened: your body will naturally produce adamantium from now on. Maybe a fingernail’s worth per year. That amount of adamantium is enough to produce the edge of one tier 7 sword-edge per year. The biometal you make will form the basis of your metalkinesis, limiting you most severely in the amount of metal you can control —you likely won’t be able to control anything but adamantium for decades— but even a needle of adamantium will allow you to hit *far* above your tier.”

Mark looked at his hands, and wasn’t sure what to say, other than, “Neat!”

Addashield laughed. “Yes yes. You have no idea what any of that *really* means. That’s fine. You’re a true Blank Canvas.”

“Uh? What?”

“Well you’re not a Blank Canvas *any more*. I overcame your natural resistances quite handily, and now your resistances are all different; I buried the seed behind the Curtain, in common parlance.” Addashield easily said, “Anyway. What I was saying was this: Don’t tell people that today was painless. Those who know about these things will know that you produce adamantium now, and in rather good quantities. Enough to line two normal swords per year, or half of a kaiju blade. This is NOT NORMAL for an adamantiumkinetic. This happens a lot with mithrilkinetics, though. Cities in Daihoon need a lot more than a single adamantium-edged sword to survive, but one adamantium sword is enough to start, and you are now a farm for the stuff. Good news / bad news; you are literally priceless as a living person.”

Mark’s eyes were wide. “Oh.”

“Yup!” Addashield smirked, saying, “Now we just gotta get Lola back in here and doing her job. I’m going to go find her. You stay here.”

Addashield went off to find Lola.

And Mark looked at his hands in the meantime. A smile came to his face as he imagined holding up a needle of black metal and floating it around like Dad did with his fishclips, like Addashield did with that drop he had stuck into Mark’s bone marrow. If all it took was one edge of adamantium to coat a sword that could defend a city...

Mark grinned.

He hadn’t known any of that at the start of today, before making the decision to accept Addashield’s offer just an hour ago. But it was all good news, wasn’t it? The part about how he was somehow producing a metal in his bone marrow that was worth more than gold was a bit concerning, but...

Er.

Did Addashield expect to be paid back? He had stuffed some metal into Mark’s body and now his body made metal, so... Did Addashield want his goldleaf back?

Er.

No, not really, right? Mark was paying him back in talking to the demons after this was all over, yeah?

... And mages had that whole ‘apprentices are indentured servants’ thing, didn’t—

Addashield came back into the room with Priestess Lola, saying, “You can sit back down, Mark.”

Lola looked resigned and yet perfectly poised. Mark wasn’t sure how she managed to pull that off, but that’s what she looked like. She had some pretty strict Xerkona training, didn’t she?

Lola said, “Please sit.”

Mark sat back down.

Lola said, “Hands to your knees and palms up, in the normal manner.”

Mark rapidly complied.

Lola said, “I am glad to see you passed through Addashield’s flavoring with minimal damage. But this will hurt.”

She breathed in—

Mark passed out from the pain.

----



For a long moment, Lola Freyala stared at the boy's slumped body, laying on the ground. And then she continued to breathe, her focus completely diverted from imbuing Mark to healing him. As she breathed, he breathed, and pain abated.

Addashield smirked to the side, the absolute bastard of an archmage looking way too smug. "Hit him again. It didn't take well enough and he's unconscious anyway."

Lola glared, breathing for both herself and Mark right now. She said nothing.

Addashield quirked an eyebrow at her. "What? He's not *that* injured, is he?"

Lola judged Mark healed through breath enough, so she switched to blood healing, her heart beating in rhythm to Mark's own beating, and he began to heal at a steadier rate. As the repair of Mark's body began in truth, Lola allowed herself to use her breath for speaking. "How much did you do to him before I got in here?"

"The normal amount. He took to it quite well. Barely any pain at all. *As you saw.*"

The old bastard was lying to her, somehow.

Lola was a priestess of Freyala, but she was also an Inquisitor, and she had seen too much shit go down between demons and unwary mages and uneducated kids to feel comfortable around Addashield. He was *absolutely* taking advantage of Mark Careed in ways that Mark had no idea he was being used. Mark probably didn't know what a 'paladin' truly was. All he knew was what the popular media told him. He didn't know about the archmage hunts, or the true nature of dragons, or the real duty of the 'paladins' against the Fallen. If he had, he would have glanced between her and Addashield and looked worried.

The boy was clearly uneducated in the finer points of nobility, so it wasn't that he could school his features to nothing. He simply didn't know what he didn't know.

It was just her luck that she was on duty today instead of any of the others in her order, here at Orange Arcanaeum. It was just her luck that her prayers to Freyala had resulted in Her Goddess telling her to

follow the archmage's plan, and to prepare as the Inquisitors always did against demon mages of all sorts.

She had already contacted the Collective and verified that they knew that Addashield was on a backup plan, and that they were fully on board his backup plan. In the grand scheme of life here on the Two Worlds, it literally didn't matter if Addashield ended up killing some kids in the pursuit of this backup. Addashield with an intact Contract with his demon was preferred in so many different ways.

Addashield's previous apprentice's death was unfortunate in so many different ways.

And now Mark was suffering from that tragedy.

Lola continued to link her healing heart to Mark's, the boy's body repairing itself in small ways, as she breathed for both of them at the same time, thinking.

Addashield waited.

And then Addashield frowned a little. He sighed. "Please get on with the rest of the imbue ment, Paladin Lola, otherwise you're just torturing the boy."

Lola did *not* glare at Addashield at the mention of 'torturing the boy'. She put away her personal feelings and did as her Goddess commanded.

She opened her mind to the boy, to the spark of electricity that danced inside her soul as Freyala made it dance.

Mark's insensate body writhed on the floor.

-----

Darkness.

Voices in the dark.

Someone complaining. A hand on his hand. Yelling.

Something stank.

Wet cloth on his body, wiping him down. Cold, warm, then cold again.

More washing.

Repeat.

Repeat.

Repeat.

----

Mark woke up with the worst headache he had ever had. His eyes were crossed. His hands shook. His body felt wet. Why did his body feel wet?

A machine beeped beside him, and each beep was like a knife driven into his skull over and over and over again. Every moment of being awake was yet another knife in his flesh, a punch to his brain. His eyes hurt.

He started to say something, to scream, perhaps. People rushed around him. Someone said something soft, and yet those small words split Mark in half and then stomped on the pieces. He screamed. That time he screamed, and he knew it. Someone yelled something about morphine and Mark wanted all of the morphine ever.

Perhaps he even said as much.

Oblivion closed in.

- - - -

Darkness.

Voices in the dark.

A hand on his hand.

Television shows playing. Laughter. The smells of good food.

A hand on his hand, holding him.

Wet cloth on his body, wiping him down.

Something stank.

More washing.

Repeat.

Repeat.

Repeat.

Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

Repeat. Repeat.

Repeat.

-----

Mark woke softly, to the annoying buzzing of a television that was on, but also muted.

It was an electrical noise.

Mark felt soft.

... and then he began to wake more. He remembered some sort of pain, but there was no pain right now.

He couldn't really move at all, but there was no pain. Just lethargy.

He was in his room at home, with the carpet and the sky blue walls and the window with the big oak tree outside, but stuff had been moved around. A hospital machine sat beside him on a stand, tubes connecting to his arm, and to his wrist. His bookshelf was shoved to the side—

Archmage Addashield was in the room. He was sitting on a chair to the side, reading a book, but he looked up when Mark looked up. He grinned. "Ah! Welcome back, Mark." He put his book away. "There's good news and bad news. Are you able to hear it all?"

Mark blinked out and sat up—

He couldn't sit up. He remained laying down, and now he felt winded.

Groggily, he said, "What?"

And then he realized he had some sort of thing in his... He felt something down there. He didn't want to think about it.

There were tubes.

Mark was tied up to tubes on his own bed, but one hand wasn't tied up. That free hand was pale. Blue veins were visible under the skin.

“... What?”

“You've been through a lot, Mark,” Addashield said, “Good News: the most recent full scan, as of two days ago, revealed that you'll Awaken with a dual metalkinetic and healing Power, as soon as you go through the Tutorial. Pretty strong ones, too. If I wasn't in a time crunch, I'd want to take you as a true apprentice, because I won't have to do anything to you inside the Tutorial to make that happen. You'll get there all on your own. Maybe I'll catch up with you in a few years and teach you a few things, if you're not too furious with me.

“Bad News: I am in a time crunch and you've been in a healing coma for the last 107 days. Your birthday is tomorrow, and you need to be conscious *now* so you don't wake up and accidentally accept the Tutorial in some sort of delirium *tomorrow*. You really could stand to be in the coma for another month, at least, but that would be inadvisable, and so, I asked to be here for when you wake up, so I'm here.

“I'm taking my other 3 apprentice options and hopefully one of them gets metalkinesis. Maybe adamantiumkinesis, too, but I'm not 'holding my breath', as you Earthlings say.

“Other Bad News: You'll be a year healing from what we did to you. Turns out you lucked out hard in some ways, and failed a lot in others. Don't let that discourage you.” Addashield set an envelope on a small table beside Mark's bed. “I wrote it all down there. Good luck, Mark. You'll do well. Just gotta get back up on your feet. Take the time to get your GED. Train your body again. When you're ready, if this hasn't overly injured you, then take the Tutorial and be the best version of yourself. This is just a minor setback. Good luck. Goodbye.”

Addashield got up and started to walk—

“Thank you,” Mark said, as strongly as he could, which was still rather weak. He wanted more time to know what had happened, but Addashield was busy and... And Mark understood enough. “Thanks for trying.”

Addashield smiled softly, and then he floated a small cube of black metal onto the counter next to Mark's bed, saying, "I know paying you for your injury doesn't make it right, but I've always found that bribery at least softens the sting of loss, and your parents weren't taking the bribe at all. Maybe you will? Good luck on your Tutorial, Mark." He stared at Mark. "Don't attempt the Tutorial for at least 6 months. Probably a lot longer than that."

Mark mostly stared at the ceiling, nodding. "Thank you for trying."

Addashield nodded and walked out.

Minutes later Mom rushed in, followed by Dad.

Mark tried to smile as he held his parents, both of them sobbing, but while Mark's parents were happy he was awake again, Mark was disappointed in himself. Nothing felt real in that moment, and especially not the loss of 4 months of life. Had that much time really passed? Why was Mom crying so much, and why was Dad trying to smile so much through his tears. It had only been a half a day since Mark had seen them last.

Except no.

He knew how long it had been.

The darkness had been filled with half-dreams that were not dreams at all, and the oak tree outside was laden with the bright green leaves of Spring. Those leaves should have been dark green, or even partially discarded. But no. Those were bright green Spring leaves.

Mark found himself muttering into Mom's shoulder, "It's really been a hundred days?"

Mom was loving and furious as she held him, spitting, "That fucking *Addashield* shouldn't have pushed you into this! He had no right! He had no—"

"But I wanted it, Mom," Mark said, "I wanted it."



Mom said, “Oh baby. You didn’t know—”

“He told me what would happen. I didn’t know it would be this bad but...” Mark was feeling tired again. He had only just woken up and he was already closing his eyes again. “He told me something like this could happen.” He almost told her that he was still going to take the Tutorial in 6 months, or as fast as he could get back up to full strength, but he knew that would lead to a fight. So with a strained smile, he asked, “What’s for dinner?”

Mom started laughing and Dad did, too.

Mark said, “Or maybe I can try walking around some, first.”

It turned out that Mark could not, in fact, walk around *at all*. He couldn’t even sit up in bed.

He still tried.

He gave up after five minutes. By then, Mark recognized a lot more of the room, and how much it had changed. There was a feeding-tube-thing sitting unused in a corner of the room, and then a breathing machine with a billows, or whatever it was, sitting under a glass case on top of the cream-colored box of lights and buttons. The lights and buttons were off, but Mark vaguely recalled the sounds of beeping, and he felt a rash on his face and a soreness in his throat that was unfamiliar. He had missed the soreness until now, until all the other weakness in his body was cataloged and set aside as not-important-right-now.

And then there was the catheter in his dick.

It was the least of his indignities. Mark felt dirtier than ever before. His hair was greasy, his body stank, and he suddenly remembered grandpa, sitting in a hospital bed just like this one, down the hall outside of his bedroom, hooked up to machines just like the ones sitting in the corner. Grandpa always tried to be independent, even toward the end. Mark remembered him talking about ‘indignities’ most of all. Of how he had needed help to get into the shower every day, before it got really bad and he couldn’t get into the shower at all.

Remembering that was when Mark started to cry.

Mom and Dad were there, but Mark still felt alone.

By then, something weird was happening with his lips and his mouth. He couldn't speak anymore. He kinda just lay there in bed, feeling his body like it was a horrible heaviness. Mom called for someone else; Mark barely heard her, but he saw her turn and call to someone.

A nurse was suddenly there, though Mark was sure she didn't just teleport. That would be crazy. She was a big woman, with big arms and a stern, yet kind face—

Mark blinked, and it was the afternoon, the spring-green oak turned to purple under twilight—

It was night and the stars twinkled beyond the branches of the tree—

The lights were on, and Mom and Dad were there with the nurse. The nurse breathed deeply, and then exhaled more, and for some reason it was truly odd to watch her work her big chest like a bellows. She calmed, and then said something small.

Mom stood in Mark's view, saying, "Honey, can you hear me?"

Mark nodded, quizzically. He tried to move his lips, but he fumbled everything.

Mom said, "It's 8:12 AM, May 3rd. We're about 10 minutes from your 18th birthday. The Tutorial will come for you and you *must deny it*."

Mark wasn't an idiot. He still had his mind, somehow. He knew to deny the Tutorial.

But wasn't that a private nurse? Weren't those expensive machines over there? How much did she actually cost—

"Mark. Mark!" Mom said. "Can you hear me?"

Mark nodded, and that hurt to do. Everything hurt. They must have given him the good drugs to talk to Addashield yesterday.

“The Tutorial will be here in 3 minutes,” Mom said, her voice as solid as she could make it, her eyes crowded with tears. She begged, “I need you to deny it, honey. Mark. Please listen to me.”

The nurse said something and Mom had to restrain herself from rising in a fury. Mark could see that rising fury, he could hear it, too, though he couldn't make any sense of it.

And then Dad was there, saying, “Mark. Deny the Tutorial. You'll have time to heal and take it later—”

Mom said, “NO! He can't do it! Not *ever!*”

Suddenly, there were words floating in front of Mark.

**Mark Careed of Earth.**

**You are 18 years of age and eligible for a pure mana baptism.**

**Will you join the ranks of those who fight against the dangers of the Two Worlds?**

**Will you take the Tutorial to awaken your power?**

Mark chuckled, or at least he tried. He seemed to be breathing fine, but breathing was outside of his control.

*Not yet,* Mark thought at the floating words.

The message changed.

**You will remain eligible for the Tutorial for as long as you remain baseline human.**

**The Demon City of Arakino will call again in 30 days.**

The words vanished.

Mark sighed out, closing his eyes.

He heard his mother speaking softly, thankful, and the warmth of her hand gripping his. Dad said something about how fast Mark would heal once he started physical therapy.

Mark wanted them to know that all he wanted right now was a bath, but that wasn't happening.

A painful sleep claimed him.

----

Mark woke, ate gruel, and tried to move some.

He managed to get out of the bed on the second day, but only because Dad was there to help him get up and around. It was mortifying. Mark wanted to take a shower, but he couldn't stand up in the enclosure on his own, and he didn't want Dad in there holding him up. They had needed to do that for grandpa when he was getting bad, and Mark was having nightmares about that happening to him.

Mark got a sponge bath instead, thanks to Mom and her cleansing waters.

Mark tried to complain, but Mom shut him down.

“Oh please. I cleaned your bum when you were a baby and for the last few months! Ain’t nothing I haven’t seen before.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Mom.”

Mom just laughed, and then she said, “Lift the arms!”

Mark couldn’t lift his arms.

Mom lifted them for him.

Dad moved a television screen into the room, along with two chairs, so that they could all watch television together in the evening. It was nice. They had apparently ‘watched television with him’ a lot, like this.

Mark mostly fell asleep through the shows, though.

- - - -

“I was so *present* with the archmage, though,” Mark asked the nurse, on the third day, as she was sitting with him. “How come I’m like... like this?”

The nurse’s name was Molly and she was a healer for the Church of Freyala, so ‘sitting with him’ was more like ‘actively healing him’. Mark still didn’t understand what she was doing, exactly, and he tried not to think too much about it and thus ruin his chances at a good Tutorial. He still wanted actual power, perhaps now more than ever, though none of this felt real.

Molly spoke without looking up from her book, “The Archmage demanded we heal you well enough for a good talking, and that’s what we did. He’s a right bastard for doing this to you, but I guess you forgave him, eh?”

“... I didn’t... tarnish his reputation, or something like that, did I?”

Molly raised an eyebrow and looked at Mark. “He did that himself, and yes, there was a... tarnishing. What he did fell under baseline-meddling anti-experimentation laws. The fact that you agreed to it doesn’t matter...” She sat back in her chair. “But it does make it easier on him that you dropped all charges. Or at least that’s what he told everyone, and they believe him.”

“Did one of the other...” Mark lost his words. “One of the other... student people? Make it? Tutorial?”

Wow, Mark’s words were fucked up.

Molly said, “Not to my knowledge. I can find out if you want.”

“Please.”

Molly took out her phone and started typing away.

Mark whispered, “Thank you.”

Mark closed his eyes.

News of the other pseudo-apprentices escaped him.

Addashield had another month before he needed to put people through the Tutorial though, right?

Maybe.

Mark’s memories were fucked up right now.

- - - -

A week after waking, Mark managed to stand in the shower himself, though he did have to hold onto the rails that they had installed for grandpa, and he had to sit on the thick bench that was there for much the same reason.

He got to relax under the warm water and feel it wash away the grime from his body. Sponge baths were a stopgap measure. *This* was where real cleanliness began.

As Mark felt the water wash down his face, he felt almost human again.

He stayed there for a while. Eventually, Dad called into the bathroom, asking if he needed help. Mark couldn't shut the bathroom door because he was a fall risk, so Dad stood just outside of the door to talk to him.

"I'm good, Dad. I'm just enjoying the water."

Dad's voice sounded happy as he said, "Good! Let me know if you need help."

"I'm good for now, Dad. Thanks."

It was a struggle to raise and lower his arms, and to bend over to clean himself up, but he managed well enough. A sponge on the end of a stick could solve a lot of problems. When he was done, he tried to dry off, but that simply wasn't happening.

That's when he called for Dad.

After some more moments of embarrassment, Mark gripped his walker in his hands and shuffled down the hallway, to the living room. It was too soon for physical therapy, but maybe next week. Mark was eager to get back to it, but he wasn't sure what 'it' was. Rugby season was gone and so was school; Mark had missed almost all of it. Half of his classmates were either studying for finals or they had taken their GED tests and either gone through Tutorial or went right to arcanaeum.

Sally was already on Daihoon, and Mark still hadn't been able to contact her properly.

The split between childhood and adulthood was the largest divisor in the world. On one side, you had the Curtain Protocol, intended to give kids the best chance at making a good future for themselves, and on the other side you had the Open Magic policy, which was where people didn't guard their words for fear of ruining their children's futures with mana impurities. That split wasn't so solid over on Daihoon where it was impossible to keep magic from kids, but it was an entrenched policy here on Earth, and Mark was very much a child in the eyes of society.

Sally had moved on.

To hear Mom talk of it, Sally had shown up a few times when Mark was in a coma. She had written letters for him to read when he woke up, too, and Mark had read them, but Sally was firmly an adult now and Mark was still a child. Mark needed to catch up before they could share anything real, ever again.

He missed Sally.

He missed rugby, too. Adam, Chase, Voshon, Cody. The other guys on the team.

Gods damn, he missed running, and picking up his spear, and grabbing the ball. He missed training. He hadn't bothered to look at the Tutorial statistics for this year, but he wanted to... And yet he didn't. Only 10% of the student body went through the Tutorial, and the survival rate was *not* 100%. Mark didn't want to know who had died this year.

Mark sat at the dinner table, looking down at a pile of mush that was rice and finely chopped vegetables and meat, and wondered about his life choices.



He was not invincible.

Mom had told him that many times before. It had been drilled into his head by his Tutorial instructors, at the school, mainly Instructor Gravel. Mark had never believed it, though. Not until today.

Dinner was good.

Mark managed to keep his emotions in check as he hobbled back to his room, gripping the railing in the hallway and his walker, feet shuffling and his body not moving how it should move at all.

He crashed into his bed, his legs still on the ground, his body sprawled on the side of his mattress, unable to rise and get onto the bed itself.

That's when he lost it, truly lost it.

Mom and Dad were there and they helped, but not really. The healer, Molly, was gone now; they couldn't afford to keep paying her because the boat had needed big repairs and all of the rest of Mark's treatment was costing them too much money. Mom had refused to use Addashield's drop of adamantium to pay for anything, and Dad had agreed. So it was just Mom and Dad and Mark, and Mark was inconsolable.

"I'll do the Tutorial eventually and pull adamantium out of me and pay for things," Mark said, through the tears and the sorrow.

This was the wrong thing to say.

Mom held him tighter, crying, saying, "No no. Honey. *No*. Don't do that. No—"

Dad was at Mark's back, saying, "We'll sell Addashield's cube."

"*No*. We *can't* take that bastard's—" Mom began.

Mark said, “*Sell it, Mom.* Just do it. It’s enough adamantium to save lives. Do it.” He didn’t have the energy to tell her how it could save lives, but it was enough.

Mom let the argument drop.

Three days later, at dinner, Mom and Dad sat down with Mark, like usual.

Mom said, “We can’t sell the cube. We’d be kicked off of Basic Income and become ineligible for it for the rest of our lives, because that will be a \$4.5 million windfall. What we can do is donate it to the city and we’ll be upgraded to full citizens, eligible for free-everything from the government and a bunch of assistance in... in a whole lot of ways.”

Mark said, “Love it.”

Mom kept explaining in an attempt to get Mark more on board with the idea, or maybe to rationalize it to herself, but Mark had already agreed and he could tell that she and Dad had talked at length about this. Mom continued to talk about about free physical therapy and boat repairs and even assistance with fixing up the house, but eventually she ran out of things to say.

Mark said, “Love it. Let’s do it.”

Mom frowned a little, saying, “It’s a whole lot less money than what we could have gotten.”

“The important thing is that the adamantium gets to people who can use it,” Mark said. “That tiny cube is enough to coat...” Mark struggled with the words for a moment before he found them. “Enough to edge a sword that can kill a tier... tier 6? Monster? Not sure what that means. Addashield said something more about a half of a kaiju-blade or something, but I forget.”

Dad breathed deep, his eyes going wide. “Holy shit.”

Mom breathed out, “Okay.” She was resolute within a moment, adding, “Okay. Yes.” She turned to Dad. “Can you take it to the Hero’s Quarter tomorrow—” She changed her mind, “*Tonight?* Not tomorrow.”

“I kinda want to make it into a fish—”

“No!” Mom said, “Absolutely not!”

Dad raised his hands, saying, “Okay okay! I was trying to make a joke.”

Mom calmed down as much as she could. She was stressed, though.

Dad ended up going on his own to the Hero’s Quarter with the little cube of adamantium tucked away in his shoe. Mark had never been to that part of Orange City, but he had hoped to go there after his Tutorial was done. Wherever it was Dad went, they were open 24 hours a day.

Mark went to bed before Dad got back.

When he woke up in the morning, Dad was there to help him get out of bed.

Mark asked, “It’s transferred, then, or whatever you did to it?”

Dad smiled as he helped Mark stand with his walker, saying, “We’re now first class citizens, and you’re already signed up for physical therapy. It’s gonna be great, Mark.” He whispered, “I haven’t told your mom that you’re signed up for PT yet. She’s going to freak. You gotta help me with that.”

Mark nodded. He stood as solid as he could, holding onto his walker. His task of the day lay ahead of him now; don’t freak out Mom too much.

Mom freaked the fuck out.

“You *can’t* go to therapy yet! You can *barely* walk!” And then Mom got *furious*. “As soon as you’re good enough you’re going to try the Tutorial, *aren’t you?* Fucking hell! We almost lost your father in the monster attack and—” She froze.

Mark's eyes were wide. His breath shallow. "Monster attack?" He connected a few dots. "The broken boat-thing while I was in a coma?"

Dad was quiet.

Mom was quiet, too.

Mark asked, "Trace and Devon are okay, right? I saw Devon but... I haven't seen Trace yet?" Mark rationalized, "But I never see him around the house outside of holidays anyway?"

Silence.

Dad said, "Trace lost a leg and an arm, but now that we're first class citizens I signed him up for reconstructive magic, through the employee benefit program."

Mark felt dizzy—

He realized something profound, and yet normal as fuck.

Mark said, "It's almost June. Kaiju season starts on June 15th. I need to be better before that, at least. Just in case."

Mom and Dad were silent.

And then Mom said, "Physical Therapy is a good idea but... but only if you're ready for it, honey. Orange City has survived decades of kaiju seasons so far without us needing to evacuate, and we can survive one more just fine."

Mark had another concern. "Addashield was always one of the archmages present for kaiju season. Has he finished with his apprentice obligation yet?"

Dad shook his head, saying, "I don't know, son."

Mom restrained her anger. “I’m sure... he’s fine. He’s a 300 year old archmage. He’s fine.”

-----

Sloane Addashield was not fine at all.

Sloane Addashield stood before a small council, in a small room in Fate’s Veil, the capital city of the Settlement of Xerkona. He did not want to be here.

He was here anyway.

Before him stood the Three Fates. Each of them was dressed in white, with white masks, gloves, and full-body shawls. Beneath those thick, white fabrics, lay dragons. They were shaped like people, but they were dragons, with scales of finest ruby, emerald, and sapphire. But on the surface, on the outside of the cloaks and fabrics, each of them looked the same. Each of them had risen together, thousands of years ago, back when Daihoon had more cities and yet it had been losing cities for years due to a Magefall Collapse.

The three draconic fates rose up during that time, three archmages joining with their demons to become new existences entirely, to guide the world out of that Collapse. Dragons were sometimes the result of a demonic contract. These three dragons here were, perhaps, the best possible outcome for such a sacrifice of personhood.

They were the prime force behind the Settlement of Xerkona’s stability.

Sloane did not hope for his contract failure to have nearly as nice of an outcome. He expected to die long before he would ever see his life end. Maybe there was a way out of that fate, though. That is why he was here.

Sloane settled himself and went down to one knee, one fist pressed against the floor, head bowed.

The Fates watched. They waited.

Sloane said, "I have failed in the upkeep of my Contract. I request now the full weight of Fate to keep myself, myself, or to somehow succeed in my Contract in the 9 days I have left."

The First Fate pronounced, "The steps you have taken cannot lead you to success."

The Second Fate pronounced, "There is nothing to be done but mitigate your Fall."

The Third Fate pronounced, "Leave the world on your own terms, or have your terms dictated to you in the sweep of a paladin's blade."

Sloane sighed, the proclamation of the Fates slamming into him like a feather that weighed as much as a world. He fell to his ass and sat there for a long moment, thinking.

The Fates let him think.

Sloane asked, "What is my future as a Fallen?"

The First Fate pronounced, "Just as you have used your demon to enact your will against monsters and magic, your demon will use you to enact its will against humans, and civilization."

The Second Fate pronounced, "The destruction of 25% of all cities in the Americas, either in totality, or partially. Those which you have assisted personally will suffer more than those who you have barely touched. Expect to see much of Earth fall as you Fall. Your demon will not try to go against Crytalis or any land that can actually harm you. Expect to die a second death within a year."

The Third Fate pronounced, "If your Fallen self survives 331 years, the line between the demon and yourself will vanish, and you will become a dragon."

Altogether... as expected.

Sloane sat on his ass, cross-legged, thinking.

The Fates let him think.

Sloane asked, "How can I best mitigate the failure of my Contract, without killing myself or letting myself be killed?"

The First Fate pronounced, "You have a history with your demon that is better than most."

The Second Fate pronounced, "Talk to them. Bargain for more time. Take what is offered and do not mind the cost. It will be a steeper cost than you wish to pay, and yet they were the cause of the Contract failure in the first place. You can get concessions."

The Third Fate pronounced, "When your near-pupil heals from their physical damage, you will have another chance to fulfill your Old Contract. Your near-pupil will hate you forever. They will try to kill you, as is their right. You might want them to succeed."

Sloane breathed deep.

Near-pupil? So Mark Careed, then.

The Fates looked at him, their masks as impassive as their statures.

Sloane asked, "What is the best way to reshape my Contract to prevent any sort of Fall?"

The First Fate pronounced, "Your demon has been denied the worst experiences, and now there is no escape."

The Second Fate pronounced, "You must divest yourself of everything."

The Third Fate pronounced, "With all contacts burned, with all eyes looking to kill with no one to help you, you will run, and you will be rightfully hunted."

The Fates pronounce all together, "*There is no way to stop your Fall. Your demon has assured as much. You can only hope to control what you hit on the way down, and even that hope is a foolish wish.*"

Sloane faltered.

He thought.

And then Sloane left.

He talked to his demon.

He began burning contacts the next day.

----

Mark had ignored his body as much as he could, but no longer. Today was day 31 post-coma. He had denied the Tutorial a second time earlier this morning, when the word appeared and woke him from sleep. And now, Dad had driven him to physical therapy for the first time.

Kevin was the name of his physical therapist, and he was calm and understanding.



Mark, on the other hand, was frustrated beyond understanding. He was currently lifting bright pink 2-pound weights in both hands, and he couldn't do it. Fucking 2-pound weights! He had been benching 240 pounds! Squatting 300! He had been 180 pounds of muscle on a 5'7" frame, so he had had a *lot* of power. But now he was 95 pounds, and weak as fuck.

Mark shuddered, breathing hard, lifting the 2 pound pink weight as hard as he could.

"That's it!" Kevin said, "You got it! Lift that weiiiiight— yes! Let it down gently a—"

Mark's left hand faltered, the weight falling out of his grip and onto the ground. The loss of weight on that side sent him rocking in the other direction. Kevin caught him before he fell off of the bench. With a deft hand he took the weight out of Mark's hand.

With a smile on his stupid face, Kevin said, "That was great!"

Mark spat, "That was awful. Gods, I'm so fucking..." His eyes blinked for a long moment and everything felt floaty. He came back to himself with a vengeance, saying, "Weak."

"I know it's difficult. I was a coma patient too, when I was 12. I was only out for 2 months compared to your 4, but I know it's difficult. It's difficult, but *you can do this*, Mark. You had a rough time, but *you can do this*."

Mark had only been a patient with Kevin for half an hour so far, but he liked the guy.

Mark steeled himself, saying, "Okay. Yeah. I can do this."

Kevin smiled. "It's not about perfection, just progress."

Mark chuckled at that. He said, "Not perfection, just progress."

Kevin smiled, asking, "I'd like to get you walking around the track today. Can you do that?"

“I can do that. I want to try it without a walker, too.”

Kevin grinned, saying, “Let’s try it! I want to be there to walk with you, though, if that’s okay.”

Mark almost laughed.

Oh gods, he felt so helpless.

Turned out he could not walk on his own at all. He almost fell twice, Kevin stopping his fall both times. It was Mark who had to ask for the walker, which he appreciated. Kevin didn’t judge him at all. Soon, Mark ambled along like an old man with feet that didn’t work right, who lost his breath every ten steps.

He tried his best anyway.

That night, as he stood in the bathroom, Mark really looked at himself in the mirror for the first time since waking up. He had avoided the horror of the bathroom mirror as much as he could, but he could avoid it no longer if he wanted to measure his progress, for real.

Mark was a skinny white boy at 102 pounds, and it showed. The forced healing while in a coma is what really ate through all his muscles.

His ribs showed through his skin. His skin was pale as fuck. His hair was buzzed and brown, and his eye sockets were sunken and a little purple. His eyes were bloodshot, and what used to be nice blue eyes seemed more muddy brown, but maybe that was just the light. His arms were twigs. His thighs were thin. His skin sagged around his belly, which was only possible because he had lost everything.

He used to have abs and nice arms, and he used to weigh 180 pounds, back when he could play rugby and swing a spear and—

Mark ignored his past as much as he could.

All he had was his future.

“Not perfection, just progress.”

-----

By the end of the first week of PT Mark managed to stand by himself on the track painted onto the floor of the PT room, without his walker. He even managed to walk the track, though he was the slowest one there. Old men who had suffered from strokes, or people in wheelchairs using their arms to wheel their chairs, all moved faster than him.

Kevin saw Mark judging himself. He said multiple times, “Don’t measure yourself against others. Just go at your own pace. You’re doing great, Mark.”

By the end of the second week, Mark was able to walk without a walker, but it was slow, and he was uncoordinated. It was still better than the week before.

Three weeks in and Mark was lifting 10 pound weights over his shoulders and walking the track at a normal walking pace.

At the end of his first month of PT, it had been 2 months since waking up and Mark was able to start doing pushups again. His appetite was back in full, and he was putting on weight. The scales read 115, and Mark was determined to get back everything he had lost. He’d need it in the Tutorial.

“Real talk, Mark,” Kevin said, kneeling beside Mark as Mark held onto the shoulder press machine, still recovering. Kevin helped Mark lower his hands to his sides, and then looked him in the eyes. “You’re not going to be ready for the Tutorial in under a year. It might take you *four* years to recover enough to take the Tutorial. The healing did a number on your physical power. You *might* be able to walk around like an uninjured person in a year.”

Mark shook his head. “I can get back to Tutorial in a year. I know I can.”

“... I can help you with *realistic* goals, but you took the Tutorial training. You passed the False Tutorial. You know what it takes. You are *not there*, and you will not be there in a *long* time.”

Mark felt the weight of that truth try to settle upon his shoulders.

Mark threw off that weight, saying, “That’s what you believe. But I know what I believe. I’m going to do this in 6 months.” He looked to Kevin. “Can you help me get there?”

“... I’ll help you as much as I can, but...” Kevin breathed in, and then out, and said, “I’ve been doing this for 20 years, Mark. You are *not* the first kid I’ve helped who has suffered an accident before their Tutorial date. I’m telling you that even 4 years is *not* enough recovery time.”

“I’m still going to try. Not perfection, just progress. Up and up and up.”

Kevin looked in Mark’s eyes for a little longer, and then he said, “Okay.” He stood up, and said, “Then I’m going to start pushing you more, and you need to eat a *whole lot more*. You’re at 115 pounds. You’re skinny as shit and you can’t do more than 3 pushups before failing. You can’t hold a sword and you can’t even run a 30-minute mile. If you want to do this, I am going to push you hard, and you need to start taking nutritional supplements.”

Mark felt a flame start to burn in his chest. He said, “Yes. Yes to all of that.” He added, “I’m already taking some supplements.”

“More. Protein shakes. Creatine. Muskleaves, fish oil, and branched roots.”

“I know... some of those. What are muskleaves and branched roots?”

“The leaves aren’t entirely necessary, and you probably can’t get clearance for them while under Curtain Protocol, but we can ask. Rich noble kids take them after serious injury in order to regain functionality throughout the whole body.” Kevin said, “Branched roots are just branched chain amino acids from that Aluathan Empire company... I forget which. Everyone calls them branched roots these days. You can get those for sure, too. And then there’s fish oil, but you eat a lot of fish, right?”

“Yeah. I could eat more?”

“Yeah. Eat more. You’re not scared of getting fat, are you? Some people worry about that.”

Mark smiled. "I can get rid of it later."

"Good." Kevin slapped the side of the shoulder press machine, saying, "Come on, Mark! Give me 10 more!"

Mark gave him 5 more. 6, if he wanted to lie about it. That was as much as he could do.

Kevin put in the orders for supplements and Mark's First Citizen designation paid for all of it, through Orange City. That system was how Kevin was getting paid in the first place, but this sort of order of stuff was beyond what Kevin could do for Mark on his own. Mark had to talk to a woman on the phone after placing the order, to make sure that this really was something he wanted, and that it was medically necessary.

It was more than medically necessary, in Mark's opinion.

- - - -

Two days later Mark got a massive delivery at his house with a whole bunch of stuff. He couldn't lift the giant containers of protein out of the cardboard box, but Dad could do that, so Mark focused on grabbing the smaller things.

Mom sat at the kitchen table and read off Kevin's dietary plan schedule, saying, "He's having you eat... a whole lot more, honey. And these supplements... You sure it's okay for you to eat these... What are these? Muskleaves? Do you *eat* them?"

Turned out muskleaves were fine for Curtain Protocol people, when used in moderation and properly.

"You make tea out of them," Mark said, as he pulled out the small box of leaves. He opened the box. It was packaged weird, but Kevin had already told him about how it would come and what to do with them. Mark pulled out a single clear plastic bag that was pretty much flat, except for one bright red leaf that had been dried and pressed and slipped inside the bag. "Each one is individually packaged. One leaf per day, crushed in a tea-cup-style mortar and pestle until it makes a paste, and then the mortar is filled with hot water and you drink it, refilling it with hot water until all of the paste is consumed as tea."

Mom took the plastic bag with a frown. “Looks like drugs.”

Mark chuckled. “Yup.”

Dad laughed, too. “It is drugs.”

“Good drugs!” Mark said. “I can take 3 months of it and not have any adverse effects, so that’s what I’m going to do. It’s supposed to massively increase my appetite, too.”

Dad pulled the teacup mortar set out of a box on the table, saying, “I’ll make the tea for—”

“Nope!” Mom said, plucking the teacup mortar away. “I want to! You’re already making dinner almost every night, Markus. I’ll make tea.”

“Sure, Donna,” Dad said, grinning as he started to break down the first box.

Mom took the box of muskleaves from where Mark had set them down and grabbed the preparation instructions from inside. With quick hands, one small white square of waxed paper unfolded into one rather large sheet of paper with a whole bunch of drawings on it. “Uh,” Mom said, looking over all the little drawings. “That’s a... a little more complicated than I would have thought.”

Dad grinned. “Good luck!” He said to Mark, “I can make your protein shakes. Want one now?”

“Yeah, I do,” Mark said, even though he wasn’t that hungry.

Mom said, “Let me organize the pill boxes.” She discarded the muskleaf preparation instructions onto the table as she went back to Kevin’s dietary plan and other instructions, saying, “You’re supposed to take... Uh... Looks like a ‘branched roots’? With your powder? You’re putting ‘branched roots’ in there, Markus?”

Dad was already scooping nearly-white powder into a blender, saying, “Yup!”

Mom shuffled through instructions fast, mumbling about ‘redline pills’ and ‘mana-channel cleaners’, both of which would counteract the mild mana flavorings that the muskroot would cause Mark. They were pretty basic pills that the noble kids of Daihoon would take when they needed intensive magical healing before their majority, so that they could keep their Tutorial options open, and Mark had qualified for them, somehow. It was that First Citizen stuff, for sure.

Mark didn’t do much aside from watch his parents work. For right now, Mark sat there, smiling softly, watching Mom figure out pills and Dad add some berries to the blender. It was love in action—

The blender started going, whirring loud, drowning out Mark’s thoughts.

Dad stopped the blender. “That’s pretty loud!”

Mark laughed.

Mom and Dad smiled at that, and Mom said, “I’m glad to hear you laugh again, Mark.” Her chin trembled, and then she went and hugged him, already crying. “We’re going to make you better. You’ll get better. I know you will.”

Mark teared up.

Dad was there with a hand on his back, just being there.

It was Mark’s first really good day since he woke up.

It was almost a month into kaiju season, the height of Summer, July 8th, and though no storms had developed off of the coast of Africa yet, it was only a matter of time.

- - - -

Knees on the ground, blood everywhere, Archmage Sloane Addashield wept over the corpse of his oldest friend, Yunthal Brightwind.

Yunthal had fought alongside Sloane in the Reveal, helping him to forge bonds of companionship between Earth and the Empires of Daihoon. Yunthal had been there with Sloane *long* before that, though, in the Red War against the dragon Bloodmaw, in all the thousands of conflicts they had fought against the sects, and the cults, and the Worshipers of Dragons. Yunthal had been there with Sloane all the way at the beginning, in their childhood in the Orphanage of the Dawn Sun, in Lower Crytalis. Yunthal had been a brother in arms, with a twin Contract to Sloane's own demonic Contract.

Sloane's demon was named Kanda, and Yunthal's demon was Adank.

And now Yunthal was meat, scattered upon the ground and the walls.

Kanda cackled in Sloane's shadow, calling through the gloom, "I won, Adank! I knew I would win! You were always too weak!"

Sloane wanted to say that Yunthal didn't fight like he should have. He didn't kill like he could have. Yunthal had walked into his death, putting up a feeble resistance, because Yunthal had become a merchant in the last 50 years, and he saw that Sloane wasn't fully Fallen. Yunthal had let himself be murdered, because he knew that Sloane would have done something else, if he could have. The only reason that Sloane was here to kill Yunthal was to avoid an Infraction...

Killing Yunthal had been easy.

*Why didn't he fight more?*

"Yes! That's what I want. You cry so beautifully!" Kanda yelled into Sloane's ears, their malevolent power wrapping through Sloane's body, taking all of Sloane's emotions away. She felt them all, instead, and she began to cry in his place. "Oh no! What have we done!"



Kanda cried demon tears upon Sloane's own face, and Sloane felt nothing.

Demonic crying filled Sloane's ears, but soon all of that transformed into laughter. Peels of laughter, like dragon claws rending castle doors.

Sloane's emotions regarding Yunthal were suddenly gone, as though he had spent a lifetime in mourning.

Emotions could only ever hold up for so long, after all. The human body simply couldn't feel sad all the time with a demon draining all emotions away. Even with demonic healing, and his brain fully ready to feel more emotions, every deep experience was less than the one that came before, especially when Sloane wasn't allowed to *actually* heal between each horror.

"Burn it all down," Kanda commanded. "Slice the survivors to pieces, but not all at once."

Sloane started a fire upon the stone and the stone caught flame. Soon, Yunthal's main house was a conflagration and Sloane floated above it all, wires of adamantium slicing apart everyone who tried to escape the burning building. Every injury he inflicted was designed to cause pain instead of merely death, and Sloane hated himself for all of it.

It was one of the worst crimes that Sloane had ever done.

He would need to do worse, soon enough.

Kanda felt everything that Sloane felt, her soul vibrating in sorrow, inside Sloane's soul. "Oh this is so terrible! Why did you kill that poor woman down there! Why— Yeah okay. I'm bored now. You can have these crying emotions back. Let's go play in someone's innards! That one down there! The one you killed just now. I'll shave off a year of your downtime if you do *unspeakable things* to her."

Killing Yunthal had shaved 100 years off of his time. A full third of his 'penance' for denying Kanda the full breadth of human experience for their 331 years of partnership. Kanda wouldn't be satisfied until... Until anything, really. Kanda would never be satisfied. Even if Sloane paid off his full 331 years, they

would resume their Old Contract, but the world would never be the same because of what he was doing  
—

Kanda whispered, “You’re he~si~ta~ting, Slooooooane~”

She spoke directly into Sloane’s ears, directly entangling with Sloane in a way that could be turned into torture at the demon’s slightest desire. Endless screaming. Endless noise. The only way to stop the noise would be scooping out his own ears, but Kanda would just regrow those ears and make them more sensitive. The Old Contract made sure she was only able to speak through the use of Sloane’s left hand, but he had been a fool when he made the Old Contract.

He had allowed her too much leniency, but at the time of the Old Contract, it seemed reasonable.

Sloane had even granted Kanda more power in the bracers of adamantium on his wrists, and usually she took out her desire for pain on appropriate enemies.

But Kanda had inscribed her dislike of Dan Clover into his body, during the boy’s Awakening, killing the boy. Dan had been studying demon contracts since he was a boy, sitting on his father’s knee in the Judgment Hall of Upper Crytalis. He would have made such a good Contract with any of Kanda’s relatives, erasing all the problems of Sloane’s own Contract with Kanda...

Kanda could not have that.

Demons preferred Contractors to be stupid, like Sloane had been when he was young and stupid.

Kanda had used Sloane’s left hand and bracers to murder people in the last 331 years of their joining, of course. Just people that Sloane let her murder; criminals and such. But she had *never* done such a thing to a Contract candidate. She had been planning to kill him all along, though. She had never said anything. She had sprung the trap in the last possible moment, and now Sloane was here.

It was a direct violation of the clause in their Contract to never willfully cause the Contract to fail, and it was the only reason he hadn’t Fallen already.

“I’m waiting, Sloane,” Kanda said.

“Give me a moment,” Sloane said. “I’m preparing myself.”

Sloane had gotten lax, and now so many more people were paying for his old Contract, made centuries ago by a stupid kid and his stupid friend, who bargained with demons thinking they came out on top. But that’s how it always was with demons. They always wanted you to think you had come out on top, but you never did. Not in the end.

And the New Contract he had made in the wake of Kanda’s violation and his own inability to secure the Contract had made Sloane even more vulnerable.

If only one of those three damned kids would have survived their Tutorial!

Just one!

And none of this would have happened!

Sloane wouldn’t be here—

With acid honey for a voice, Kanda asked, “Want me to drive you to kill one of your family, next? I am particularly fond of Ruridana. I would like to see what her head looks like after you crush it with your own hands, of your own volition, and what her brains taste like when you eat them. She’s young. She wouldn’t understand anything at all. Not like Brightwind understood. All Ruridana would know is that greatpappy Sloane’s fingers were closing around her face, and then her little skull would cra—”

Sloane descended to the ground and started defiling the woman’s corpse.

Kanda rejoiced in sensations that Sloane had been denying her for 331 years.

Scrying orbs and farsight familiars watched from far distances.

Sloane was not Fallen. Not at all. Being Fallen would be much, much worse, and maybe even better in some ways. The people watching would be able to kill a demon-controlled Sloane, as Kanda would make mistakes and fall to her own madness rapidly. But he wasn't Fallen, yet. Despite all layman appearances to the contrary, this was a controlled collapse of Sloane's entire life. Or at least that's what he told himself—

“Check the weather on Earth,” Kanda said, “I want to herd some kaiju to some unprotected cities.”

“I'll soul-kill myself right now, Kanda.”

“Bah! Fine. I pushed too far, I see... Eh! I'm not in any hurry to take over your body just yet, and you *do* provide a useful shield against your fellow mortals... I know! You need more fun in your life. Let's go whoring.”

Sloane rose from the ground, blood dripping. “More whoring, then.”

“Find a kaiju!”

“... The Largest Kaiju brothel in Grovehall? Sure.”

“That was not what I meant, but I'll take it! I wonder why they call it the Largest Kaiju!”

Sloane flew off to the east, taking his time, feeling the wind on his face and otherwise. Kanda liked that feeling, so she did not mind the slow pace. Soon, the slow flight provided Kanda with a distraction.

Kanda spotted some beautiful feathered tails by the coast, where they were sunning themselves and doing mating dances, their long tails swishing prismatically. Kanda wanted them dead and turned into monsters. Since that was just about the simplest request she could ask for, and since every request was a minimum of 1 day off of his 'repentance', Sloane murdered feathered tails.

Kanda was soon distracted by the next shiny thing and Sloane proceeded to render that thing into meat, too.

It took a month for her to remember that she wanted Sloane to go whoring.

The Largest Kaiju in the city of Grovehall was evacuated long before Sloane arrived, along with the entire town.

“You warned them.” With deadly hate in her voice, Kanda said, “That’s an *infraction*, Sloane.”

“How?” Sloane said, with a scoff. “You distracted yourself from your own goals and I let you do it. I didn’t warn them we were coming at all. I did not work against you. You have no ground to stand on in calling this an infraction, Kanda. Do not throw illusions in my face and call them valid.”

Kanda grumbled horribly, and then exploded, “FINE! Yes. I allowed myself to get distracted, and you are following my desires well enough... Fine.” Kanda went silent. Then they shouted, “Find a survivor!”

Sloane made a suggestion, “Remove all the years of my penance, and I’ll do that kaiju herding toward a city that you wanted.”

Kanda hummed, mumbling incoherent words in open thought. And then she declared, “Bah! No deal. They’d see us coming and lay traps for you and then all my fun would be over.”

Sloane hung in the air above Grovehall, waiting.

There were only three ways out of this new horror.

He could give in to Kanda and Fall, allowing her to destroy his soul and take over his body.

He could die to someone, and the same thing would happen, with Kanda taking over his remains.

Or he could follow his New Contract through to the end, either hitting enough Infractions and slamming into the Joining clause, where he and Kanda would become one entity, one dragon, or getting through his Penance, and returning to the Old Contract.

He didn't want to destroy a city, but if the choice was between a city versus his eternal soul and the creation of a dragon that could do so much worse, then there wasn't really a choice at all. Falling wasn't a real option, either—

Kanda's voice came to Sloane, as deadly as ever, dripping poison as she asked, "Tell me, Sloane. Why am I making you do these horrible things?"

Sloane gave her the answer she wanted, "Because you think I'll deny you overmuch, and you want to be a dragon with you in charge rather than go back to the Old Contract."

"Yes, but even if we go back to the Old Contract, you'll still have eternally disgraced your image. Once that happens, we can start over from the bottom once again." Kanda added, "And if *that* doesn't happen, then I will have changed you in other ways. Are you aware you aren't fighting me on my suggestions anymore? That you denied my kaiju-herding last month, but here you are, suggesting that we do that very thing?"

Sloane was ready for this rhetoric. "I know the costs of life here on Daihoon. Everyone does, including you. If I can pull back to the Old Contract, there will be rebuilding, yes, but humanity will survive. And you *want* humanity to survive, Kanda. You like it when I am praised by people for saving them, or for killing a monster. You like the feasts held in my honor. You revel in the love and the simple joy, too."

Kanda's voice was distant, "Maybe I do."

"Why did you kill Dan Clover?"

"You'll find out that answer and so much more if you agree to become a dragon with me."

"No thanks," Sloane said.

"I'll give you 25% of the resulting personality! That's more than you're going to get right now at 15%. A lot more."

"95%-me and I'll do it."

Kanda laughed, a trilling sound. “No!” She continued to laugh for a little while longer. “Ah...! But that was a joyful diversion. How about 26%?”

“No.”

“Then we’re at an impasse and we will revisit this discussion some other time,” Kanda said, “For now, go find some person remaining down there in Grovehall and brutally murder them while their family watches.”

Sloane descended to the deserted city of Grovehall, hoping that the Inquisitors had gotten everyone out of the city, like they appeared to have done.

But, of course, there were always people unwilling to evacuate in the face of an oncoming disaster. Sloane hoped that the people he found would be old. Not a family, or anything like that. A pair of old people would be fine to kill.

- - - -

Mark hung up and stared at his phone for a little while.

He had just gotten off the phone with Sally, and it had been...

It had been like talking to a stranger. All the kind words were there, and Sally was happy that he was back and healing, and that he had read her letters, but it still felt like talking to a stranger.

Mark got off of his bed, steadied himself, and walked out of his room without the use of his walker. He had surpassed the need for a walker just last week, but he still grabbed the railings on the walls and on

the staircase to make it back to the dining room. Mom and Dad were still eating dinner, but they had paused while Mark had answered the phone.

Dad said, "You could have talked to her for longer. You didn't have to come right back."

Mark shook his head and sat down at his plate of fish and salad. "Sally didn't have much time to talk this time. She had to... go. She was just... checking up on me."

Mom reached out and held Mark's wrist, saying, "I'm sorry, honey."

Mark put on a happy face. "It's fine." He picked his fork back up, moving Mom's hand away, saying, "Sally joined some organization she couldn't tell me about but apparently it's rather prevalent over on Daihoon. She says she looks forward to me joining her... but I think she was just being... kind."

"You're doing well, Mark," Dad said. "Very well. Don't let high expectations ground you before you even get a chance to soar."

Mom said, "Eat your dinner, honey. You gotta build your strength back up so you can take on the Tutorial next year."

Mom had done a 180 on her stance on the Tutorial in the last month, since it seemed to be the one thing that truly got Mark motivated. It got him motivated this time, too. But still, staring down at two massive flanks of fish, breaded and fried, and a salad that was twice the size of either Mom or Dad's, was still intimidating. It was also a little cold, but Dad had taken a glass cover from on top of the stove and covered his plate while he was talking to Sally, so it wasn't too much colder.

Mark dug in, Mom and Dad got back to eating, too, Dad started talking about the weather and the boat and fishing—

"And oh yeah!" Dad said, grinning. "Trace's regrowing is going well, and he's going to be back on the boat with us tomorrow, because tomorrow is the flyby." He asked Mark, "You want to come out with us? See Mistress Storm and Red Thunder from the water!"



Mom scoffed, saying, “You *can't* be out there for a flyby.”

Mark almost scoffed, too. “Yeah, Dad?”

“We’ll head to the haulout an hour before the flyby, of course,” Dad said, “Trace really wants to see it, though, and we’ve been out there before. So? How about it? Mark?”

Mom hummed, but there wasn’t any real disapproval to her voice.

Mark thought for a second and said, “I can’t go. Tomorrow I get to start learning how to swim again. Is Trace doing PT, too? How much of his arm and leg have regrown?”

Dad moved on in the conversation, too, saying, “They’ve got him on a full-heal plan and he’s a brawny with no lingering damage, so he can regrow pretty fast. He’s up to his knee and elbow and his liver grew back just fine.”

Mark was curious about what sorts of magics they could actually use on an Awakened person to heal them faster, but that was obviously Curtain Protocol stuff.

Dad asked Mark again, “You sure you don’t want to come?”

“I’m sure. I want to do all the aquatic therapy I can.”

Dad said, “Rest is important, too.”

Mark smiled at Dad’s care. “Those muskleaves are enough to qualify as resting and therapy on the same day, and I mean to take advantage.”

Dad accepted that.

And then Mom began, “You’re going to be at the dock before the flyby, right?”

“Of course, Donna,” Dad said, smiling softly.

“Good,” Mom said.

The conversation moved on.

Mark ate everything on his plate. He was the last to finish dinner, by far, but Mom had her glass of wine and Dad liked talking about the news and so dinner took a while, but it was nice. Mark had never wanted to get messed up like he had, but he liked his parents.

But Mark knew that if he didn't get out there, if he didn't take up the swords that his forebears had dropped in battle, like Addashield had said, then this sort of easy life behind the walls of Orange City was just one monster attack away from shattering. Humanity only existed because strong people were willing to put their lives on the line, to be heroes and superheroes, to protect everyone who could not protect themselves.

Maybe it hadn't been like that before the Reveal, before men had landed on the Moon and revealed the Demon City and shattered the Veil, but that's how it was now. That's how it had always been on Daihoon. In Addashield's letter to Mark, that he had left with him the day before his 18th birthday, the archmage had hoped for Mark's good health and good future, and to take his time to heal right before he attempted the Tutorial, because he had known that Mark was not going to stop. Mark was going to get there, and stand strong. Mark wasn't going to disappoint Addashield, and he wasn't going to disappoint himself.

He'd get back everything he had lost, and more.

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Mark stood on the scale and marveled how he could simply stand and not need to grip the railing.

Kevin smiled at him, saying, “You’re standing all on your own, now.”

“I know!” Mark said, grinning widely. “It’s the small things, huh!”

Kevin grinned, too, as he looked at the readout. “125! That’s pretty good! And it looks like— Stand up straight?”

Mark stood up straight as Kevin read the height scale.

“5’8. Which is...” Kevin tapped away at his pad, entering numbers, and his eyebrows scrunched. “Ah. Hmm.

Mark was already scrunching his own eyebrows. “5’8?” He looked at the scale in front of him, and yeah, maybe he was at 5’8? “I thought I was 5’7?”

A pretty fucking jacked 5’7”, too, before the coma.

Now, Mark was fine with gaining some height, but... This was a problem, right? Or maybe he was just developmentally delayed— No. Mark knew this was a problem.

Kevin hummed, then said, “Yes. You were 5’7.2”, to be exact. Hmm.”

Mark already knew what needed to happen. “They need to check me for mana impurities.”

“Yes.” Kevin poked at his screen, saying, “I’m signing you up for a scan... and that’s... Now? Ah. They have an opening in an hour. We can take you down the hall after your swimming lessons. You can use the small scanner.” He tapped a few more icons on the screen and then swiped his key card across the top of the pad before putting it into the slot on the wall, beside the scale. With a smile, Kevin said, “Let’s get you in the water!”

Mark ambled off of the scale and almost stumbled, but Kevin was there to grab him.

Soon, Mark was in the water with a bunch of grannies and old guys. Most of the old timers were wearing floaties and paddling on boards, but Mark was just moving in the water, stretching, finding out his coordination was still shot and that swimming at all was harder than it used to be. He did as much as he could.

An hour later, Mark was able to undress and dress himself now, so he did that in the locker room before rejoining Kevin for a scan on the machine.

The scanner at the physical therapy center was an older style, with a metal band that went around Mark's head and a jacket/pant-like thing that Mark stepped into, like a onesie, that Kevin helped to close up. Kevin and the technician working the machine stepped behind a glass wall, and one flicker of light later, they came back out with a readout.

Kevin didn't say anything as he helped Mark get out of the scanner, though he did have what appeared to be a genuine grin on his face. Mark wasn't too worried.

But Mark still rapidly asked the other person in the room, "What's it look like, doc?"

The technician was a woman with a badge that named her Emily.

Emily smiled softly, saying, "I'm just a scanner technician; not a doctor. However!" She handed Mark his readout. "I can read your readout. It's not as good as a full scan, but it says you're still baseline, so you can still take the Tutorial, and you don't appear to be in danger of breaking baseline."

"I still wouldn't advise the Tutorial for a few years," Kevin added, as he hung up the scanning suit.

Mark eagerly read the graphs and saw pretty much exactly what Emily had said, though none of the graph was exactly readable. All of it was behind Curtain Protocol, which meant unnamed, unlabeled axes and bars and readouts.

There were the six unnamed bars of the graph, along with a series of numbers which had other numbers near them. It was all obfuscated. But for Tutorial-based ease, there was a whole column of the number readout and a red line on the bar graph that told Mark what he needed to know; he was below the red warning area, and by a lot.

Most of the numbers in the number readout were all marked with a 'negligible'.

At around 25% and 60% down the list of numbers, Mark's numbers read something other than 'negligible'; they read 'acceptable'. Mark *assumed* that those were the parts of the scan that pinged off of his metalkinesis and healing affinities, since the readouts before his coma were all straight nothings.

The bar graph had larger bars in the second and fourth category, but those bars were still nowhere near approaching the red line. They were *halfway* to the red line, though. Those larger bars were twice as large as all the other bars. The only other bar that was even *visible* on the scale was the first bar, but that was just a bump; a fifth of the size of the second and fourth bars.

Mark didn't know exactly what the readouts were, but he couldn't keep his curiosity *that* contained. "So this height growth is in the first category and it's some sort of brawny thing, and that's what the first category is?"

Kevin's face went unreadable. He lied, "I don't know."

Mark inwardly cursed at himself.

*Don't break Curtain Protocol, Mark!*

Emily took her cue from Kevin, her face going blank, as she shrugged. "Good luck!"

Mark got scheduled for a full scan in a week, but generally...

Mark said, "I'm just worried."

"It's nothing to be worried about," Kevin said. "Keep doing what you're doing. Anyway! We've got an hour left. Want to go to the roof and see the flyby with everyone? It should be starting soon."

Oh yeah! That was happening soon. Mark said, "Yeah, I do."

- - - -

Mark managed the walk up the staircase by himself, though Kevin was there to help. Many other debilitated people were also headed up to see the flyby. Mark turned out to be one of the faster movers, which was a big change from just last week, but he happily walked slow anyway. They weren't in any rush. The flyby was still several minutes away, and it wasn't like they'd actually miss it; not with them being within 20 miles of the bay.

Old people stood with walkers and canes on the roof, many of them still wearing their swimming clothes, but a few, like Mark, were in workout clothes. Aides and nurses were everywhere, easily knowable by lanyards and tags on their necks, or by their general physical health.

The space outside of the physical therapy center was a bunch of palm trees growing to the left and the right, and some oak trees in the parking lot up ahead. Beyond all of that stretched the city. The physical therapy center was several stories of glass, steel, and gym equipment, so their roof was pretty high up there. Mark got a good view of the city, and of the land beyond. He could even make out a strip of blue beyond some trees, though that might have just been a canal.

A lot of people were up on their roofs, in the rest of the city. Some neighborhood cookout was happening over on a nearby roof, with a dad at the grill and kids running around, while uncles, aunts, or

maybe just neighbors and parents, all ate cake or burgers under umbrellas. Big hats were out in force, keeping the sun off of older women.

Some people stood in the parking lot, looking up. Waiting around.

Kevin checked his watch, and he was not the only one. “About 2 minutes to the start, and they’re usually on time. You good to stand?”

Mark smiled. “I’m good to sta— oh.”

It was starting. A bit early, but it was starting.

The sky darkened, all of the blue above rapidly replaced by misty white, blocking out the sun with clouds. The clouds deepened, but really only toward the south west, directly ahead of Mark, where the bay was located. The bay was hundreds of miles large, though, so pretty much all of the world in that direction turned deeply cloudy.

The clouds were all thanks to Mistress Storm. She was a skykinetic, and she could bring the rain like few others. Soon, Red Thunder would get involved. He was a lightningkinetic. He could do a lot with that, if he had help, and he would be having a lot of help today, which was pretty normal for him, and his situation.

Mistress Storm and Red Thunder had been married for the last 10 years or something like that, but they had been working together for the last 30 years, ever since the two of them met each other in a battle against a kaiju in like, Japan, if Mark remembered correctly. Maybe not. Both of them lived in the Floridas, though, so they had rapidly gotten the bright idea to combine their powers and start an annual monster clearing event.

‘Flyby Day’ wasn’t a real event; it was just a thing that happened because two superheroes were superheroes.

The sky darkened further. A chill wind blew.

Kevin had out his phone, focused on the southwest. Mark looked at Kevin's phone and saw he was zoomed in and looking for the fliers, but he didn't see them yet. Mark kept his eyes on the sky. Someone would see them soon. Someone in this group of old people must have had some sort of eye-enhancement—

"There they are!" said an old woman, pointing to the west.

She wore the thickest glasses on her face that Mark had ever seen. Everyone looked where she was pointing—

People gasped as they saw them, saying how they saw them now, too.

Mark smiled as he saw them. They were so far away that he would have missed them, for sure.

A dot of red held in the sky like a spark of sunlight, almost too small to see. Next to it was a thick fogbank. Red Thunder was inside that lightning, and Mistress Storm was inside that cloud. Mark couldn't see much of anything beyond that. At these distances Mark was surprised he could see anything at all—

Kevin had his phone in his hands, so Mark saw as Kevin's phone flashed with a yellow alert, the entire thing turning from a camera view of the distance into a brick of bright yellow.

*'Superhero Action in Orange Bay taking place in 1 minute.'*

A countdown started, and Kevin started poking at the screen to make the warning go away.

An older woman next to Mark spoke to her husband, "One minute! Ha! Kids these days can organize things so fast, can't they?"

Someone else piped up, "I'm sure they spent the entire day clearing out the bay of stragglers."



Mark was pretty sure of that, too. Dad had probably only gotten half a day of fishing with the guys and then someone probably landed on his deck and told him to clear out, like, an hour ago, or something like that. Dad, Devon, and Trace were probably watching from safe harbor right now—

Red lightning shattered across the sky, like the cracking of light into the dark, illuminating everything red with a branching, searching crackle of power that spread and spread among the clouds. The air *boomed* with thunder and the wind picked up fast, sending a chill all across Orange City.

Mark's heart beat hard as his arms prickled with bumps, as an echoing thrum of power broke the sky.

A light drizzle began to fall.

Mistress Storm and Red Thunder were both pretty basic superheroes. Sure, they were on the high end of what was possible, but neither of them could have pulled off what Mark was seeing all on their own. They had to work together; them, and a whole lot of other people. Tinkers for coordination. Seers for more coordination. Maybe some... power boosters? Did those sorts of heroes actually exist? It was theorized that they did, but Mark was behind Curtain Protocol. Mark had no idea how magic *truly* worked...

*But he wanted to know.*

*Soon, Mark told himself. Soon. Just get better, get through the Tutorial, and you can go anywhere you want, and learn everything you want to learn.*

The yellow alert on Kevin's phone flickered on again, to color his phone orange and then bright red. He dismissed the alert with a flick and got back to his camera, zooming in on the heroes in the sky. A warning ping crackled across the top of Kevin's phone, beeping loud, and also beeping every other phone in the area, like a ripple of warning.

Kevin focused the zoom on the distant forms of the superheroes. Red Thunder, in his lightning cage, and Mistress Storm, in her gale cloak. Each of them wore dark, skintight clothes. Each of them had some sort of tech wrapped around their heads. They nodded at each other, and then they raised their hands toward each other, toward the storm above.

Mark had seen this a few times before, but it was still inspiring.

Each year for the last 10 years —and this would be year 11— Mistress Storm would litter the sky with clouds, focusing 90% of her power on charging the atmosphere. Red Thunder would come through, following Mistress Storm's wind, collecting the charges. With the help of some technomages back in headquarters, they'd spot monster targets throughout the entire bay area, all 1800 square kilometers of it. And then the lightning would fall in a gridwork pattern, upon every single monster out there.

The whole effort would take four hours, lasting well into the night, and when it was over the superheroes would throw one of the biggest parties in Orange City. In one single afternoon, they would do the work of an entire year's worth of monster hunts. In four months, they'd repeat the process for Memphi, and then for a few different bay areas and mountain regions in the Eastern United Cities and elsewhere. They'd help people, and then celebrate the small saving of this or that part of the world with a party. Their parties were legendary, and everyone was always invited.

Every *Awakened* person.

Mark had only ever seen pictures of the party, heavily censored by the Curtain Protocol AI installed on his phone and in his house, but maybe next year, when he was Awakened himself, he could go into hero town and party with the heroes.

Mark felt his heart soar on the wind as he watched the storm build in the sky.

He imagined himself being up there, one day... Or maybe not up *there*.

Let's be realistic now.

Mark would be helping at the sidelines, or maybe staying in reserve to kill kaiju, or something. Adamantium was what they used to kill kaiju, according to Addashield, and Mark was going to be an adamantiumkinetic.

Mark smiled at that thought.

Lightning and wind crashed overhead, blooming between Red Thunder and Mistress Storm, becoming a sudden swirl of power that stormed into the sky like a twisting tempest, red lightning spreading, spreading, spreading. Mark watched the sky as the rainy darkness illuminated from within, red and sharp. On Kevin's phone, there was a closer view. It was amazing to see all that red flickering strong and —

Silver-edged black-light cracked the sky near the two superheroes, and the twister of red storm that they had been raising to the heavens suddenly broke. They released their power? No.

Wait.

Mark wasn't sure if he gasped, or if everyone else gasped, and maybe both had happened at the same time, because whatever had happened was not supposed to happen. Mark saw it all happen on Kevin's phone.

Mark's mind refused to process what he was seeing, but he processed it anyway.

A man in black robes, edged in gold, stood in the sky before Red Thunder and his lightning cage, and Mistress Storm and her gale cloak. The man was an archmage, with salt and pepper hair. He was Addashield. Mark couldn't see him clearly, but Kevin zoomed in on him, and Mark knew who he was looking at. Kevin whispered the archmage's name, too, as he stared, wondering what he was looking at.

And then Addashield raised his right arm. It was a gesture that Mark recognized from all the kinetics he had ever seen, on any show, on any news broadcast, in any story. He couldn't see it from this angle, and the sky was dark, but he knew what was going to happen. Addashield brought his arm down.

Adamantium blades, each ten meters long and edged in silver light, swept through the two superheroes.

Red Thunder managed to shift left. His red lightning shifted right. He lost his entire right side. Red lightning struck adamantium and sucked into the silver light around the metal. Red sparks washed across Addashield, but they touched flickers of silver light as well, and probably some adamantium inside that light. Mark couldn't tell. The happening was too far away and Kevin's hands were shaking his phone, though Kevin was desperately trying not to shake.

Another sweep of metal blades tore Red Thunder apart.

Mistress Storm's gale cloak hadn't afforded her any protection at all from the archmage's blades. She didn't get a followup strike. Addashield didn't need it.

People screamed. Some asked what was wrong. Some people called out hatred and rage, at this complete affront to humanity itself. The old woman with the thick glasses shouted 'traitor', and worse. This only caused more confusion.

Mark found his balance failing. He held onto Kevin and Kevin's phone slipped out of his hands as he grabbed onto Mark. The phone fell to the ground and Mark followed, crashing to his ass.

Kevin was on his knee, having guided Mark to the ground, eyes wide, whispering, "What the fuck what the fuck what the—"

The woman with the thick glasses cried out in horror, her wail filling the stormy sky.

Rain started to fall hard, as all of the water that Mistress Storm had condensed out of the atmosphere began to either tumble down, or turn back into water vapor. The darkness of the storm began to pass.

The sun came out.

Chaos.

For a long, short while, people fell all over the place in their attempts to scramble to get to cover, or due to the rain under foot and blinding everyone, or due to just falling to their knees. Some people managed to keep their feet under them, but Mark was pretty sure he just heard someone fall down the stairs inside, in a hurry to get down and out of the rain.

Mark stayed there, on the ground. Kevin stayed with him—

And then a warning blared out from Kevin's phone.

A few other phones all across the rooftop started blaring at the same time.

Orange warning lights in the rain all shifted to brightest red, flashing white.

Words that Mark had never heard before blared into the air.

**!!Dragon Alert!!**

**Shelter in place.**

-----

It wasn't a real dragon alert.

It might have actually been worse than that. And yet...

The alert lasted an hour.

Nothing happened in that hour. No buildings exploded under archmage magics. No nuclear bombs lit up any horizons at all. That is what everyone expected. None of that happened.

In that entire hour, Mark rapidly went from confused, to furious, and then to helpful. He found himself in a way he had thought he had lost, when he lost his own faculties, when he lost his hope for a future.

He helped people.

"Hello, ma'am," Mark said to an old woman who was flop sweating, as he handed her a water bottle.

"They're handing them out over there and I saw you could use one."

Mark had a few bottles in his hands. He was one of the people 'handing them out over there'.

The old woman was frazzled, but at the appearance of a water bottle in front of her face she came back to herself. “Oh yes. I could... Ah.” She took the bottle and was about to open the cap, but her hands weren’t working right. Her fingers were locked in weird positions. She asked, “Can you be a dear and open it up for me. My hands aren’t... Arthritis, you know.”

Mark was sweating a little as he walked around, helping to hand out water bottles and talk to people who were losing it, so he was glad to spend another minute with the older woman. But he wasn’t sure if he *could* actually open the bottle. He took the bottle and tried anyway, saying, “Here goes! I’m not sure if I can— Oh! I did it.”

The old woman chuckled a little bit, wondering why Mark was having trouble, and then her eyes went wide. “Oh! You’re a patient, too! What brought you to the PTC?”

“A coma.” Mark handed the bottle back. “It’s been something like 75 days since a 4 month coma, and I can finally open water bottles again.”

The woman breathed out. “That’s a tough one. You take care of yourself now— Have you heard about the phones yet?” She looked around the room, and then back to her phone. “It’s not working yet.”

Mark had wanted to call his parents and they had probably wanted to call him, but the phone lines were all telling everyone the same thing, every time they tried to access exterior services. ‘Dragon Alert is in place. Think about your own life right now.’ Anytime anyone opened up their phone, that is what they saw when they tried to access the calling system. Texts didn’t even work.

The City AI was overloaded, for sure. All of its efforts were probably focused on whatever was going on out there.

Mark said, “I don’t know about any of that, ma’am. I guess the City AI is busy. But I heard people talking about it, and if it isn’t letting us call out or do anything like that, then we’re as safe as can be. It’s devoting a lot of resources to helping others right now. Whoever needs the help is getting the help, and right now we don’t need the help.”

The old woman sighed. “I... I suppose so.” She began drinking the water and staring off into space.

Mark nodded a little, but he was pretty sure the woman didn't register that. She was still drinking her water and looking better by the moment, though, even with all of the emotional trauma happening to her right now.

Mark went to help someone else.

He handed out blankets.

He helped an old man get to the bathroom when all the other nurses and therapists were busy, and the man simply had to go.

Mark almost faltered, head dizzy from exertion, as he carried around a basket of candy bars from the vending machines to hand out to people who wanted one, and a lot of people wanted one.

The physical therapy center had been packed for mid-afternoon classes and therapy, so there were lots of people. 197 people, according to some number Mark heard touted somewhere along the way. Only 50 of the people there were in actually-good shape, and only a few of those people had actual powers at all. Aside from a healer of Hearthswell, the only large powers present in the building were in the form of four brawnies and one technomage. Everyone else was baseline, or baseline-adjacent. This was a Curtain Protocol therapy center, so that made sense.

Mark passed the office where the technomage was getting yelled at by some older man who wanted to know why the phones weren't working. Mark couldn't help the old man. The old man was furious and possibly suffering from dementia, and his handler was trying to get him to leave the technomage alone.

Mark might be able to help the others in the room, though.

Mark stuck his head in the room and held up his basket of candy bars, trying to defuse the situation. "Candy bar, anyone?"

The angry man stopped yelling, confused for a moment—

The man's nurse rapidly hooked into the distraction, saying, "Perfect timing, young man! Gerald. You need to keep your blood sugar controlled until Marty can come pick you back up, Gerald. So how about you take a candy bar—" The nurse spied into Mark's basket, saying, "Ah! That's a dark venus. You love those bars, right, Gerald?"

Mark grabbed the bar out and held it forward.

Gerald scowled heavily, but he looked around, saw what was happening, and he pulled himself back. He snatched the candy bar from Mark's hand and then stormed out of the room, complaining, "Gods damned AIs got jumped up powers we never should have voted in that shit in the 90s nothing good ever comes from..."

The man's complaint vanished into all the other voices in the hallway outside the technomage's office.

The technomage said, "Thanks. That was..." The technomage shook his head, asking, "Got something with granola?"

Mark fished out one of those and set it on the man's desk, asking, "We're not in any danger, right?"

"It's a fucking dragon attack!" The man said, as he threw up his arms. The rows of servers at the back of the room all glittered with lights at that emotional motion. "They're smart kaiju! But at the same time..." He frowned. "It's a fucking archmage, ain't it. Not a dragon at all... But we don't... We don't have an *archmage alert*. I don't fucking know..." All the fight went out of him. "Sorry, kid."

Mark did not react to the outburst, merely nodding, saying, "Thanks for keeping the phones active at all. A lot of people are reading books they have saved and playing games. Solitaire is remarkably popular. That is you, right?"

The man sighed. "Yeah. That's me. I got a few processes going on, allowing that much. The City AI ain't fighting me on that."

"Is there any way I can help?"



“... If you want...” The man returned to his computer, tapping at his keyboard, text in black boxes flashing across the screen. A few things flashed. The ‘!!Dragon Attack!!’ box appeared, the red and white striped alarm still happening. But a new box appeared, and what looked like a simple messaging system flickered to life... And then the messaging system died, overtaken by the warning box yet again, along with another message to shelter in place. The man flickered through text boxes again, trying to get something to work as he told Mark, “If you want to help... I’ve been trying to get texting back up for the last hour. If anything comes back, that will come back first. For now, I think I can set up a queue system for all the people in the building. They can send out texts and those texts will be captured by the queue and be sent out when we’re not locked out of the system. Just tell people to be patient.”

Mark smiled a little. “That’s gonna be hard to explain to people and seems like it would cause more confusion than not, and so I will not tell them that. I will instead tell them that you’re working on it, and making some progress with the texting messages, and to not bother you. Want me to put a note on the door?”

The man frowned at the beginning of Mark’s words, but then his eyes went wide. “Yes! And lock the door again. I think one of the patients has a Knack for opening doors and making them stay open; I’ll just put a server in the way this time.”

Mark grabbed a piece of paper from the guy’s desk and wrote ‘working on it! texting will come up first’ on the paper, and then he taped it to the front of the door. “Good luck!” he told the guy, as he locked the door and closed the door on his way out—

He was one step from the door when the door clicked and then swung back open.

“Fucking hell!” said the technomage, who was named Jim according to the nametag on the door. Jim got up and shut the door and shoved a chair in the way. The door still unlocked of its own accord, but the chair blocked it from opening. Jim stared at the door, which was trying and failing to open. He declared, “Whatever!”

Jim let it be.

Mark continued down the way.

An hour of waiting for something to happen turned into two hours of waiting.

And then, 3 hours after the death of Mistress Storm and Red Thunder, all at once, every phone in every hand and pocket flickered. 'Dragon Alert' changed to 'Dragon Warning'. Phone calls started happening, and everyone was talking at once on any phone they could reach.

A panic that Mark had been ignoring, was suddenly *there*. Right in his face. Demanding to be noticed. Mark's heart beat hard as he grabbed his phone from his pocket right as a phone call came through from Mom. He answered, "Mom! You're okay?"

"Oh thank the gods!" Mom exclaimed. "You okay, Mark?"

"I am! We're here at the center. Stuck, sheltering in place. You?"

"I'm at a client's house, was cleaning. Stuck here, too. I have to call your dad, now. Love you!"

Mark was about to say he could patch them into a multical, but as he looked at his phone, he saw a popup; a call from Dad. "I have a call coming in from him right now." He answered it, patching them all together. "Dad! You okay?!"

"Markus?!" Mom asked—

Right as Dad said, "I'm here! Donna, too? You're all good? You two together right now?"

And just like that, the panic that Mark hadn't allowed himself to experience, was both there, and then drifting away. Mom and Dad probably experienced the same sort of thing, their voices going from worried to accepting, right alongside his own. Mark wasn't sure exactly what was said, but he had to sit down to finish the rest of the call—

"It was Addashield, wasn't it?" Mom asked, bringing Mark back to the moment.

Mark's heart beat hard. "It was. I recognized him. I think other people are already talking about it but... It wasn't a sure thing, right? It could have been an illusion?"

Mom said nothing.

Dad said, “When they let us leave the dock to come back home, I expect to see enforcers there.”

Mark made sure no one could directly overhear him as he asked, “What *happened* to him?”

Mom hissed, “I don’t know and I am SO MAD I—” She cut herself off.

“I don’t know,” Dad said, “We’ll find out more than the public, I’m sure. Don’t talk to anyone yet about this. Ignore it until we’re back home.”

“I was already ignoring it, so that’s fine by me,” Mark said.

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Dad turned out to be correct about the enforcers.

The house was lit up with the steady lights of police cruisers, and not just the normal kind. A hovercar waited in the front lawn, its sleek silver exterior looking positively Xerkonan in sterility. It didn’t have any visible exterior windows, but it did have a rotating hologram on the top that read ‘POLICE’ over and over again in a ring, in bright white glows.

Mom and Dad were there, waiting on the front porch.

Mark got out of the autocar and tried to rush across the lawn, into his parents arms. The police nearby let it happen. And then Mom and Dad were asking if he was okay and Mark told them he was worried

about them more, and then Mom said something about it was the parents' duty to worry about their kids, not the other way around. Mom had gotten home first, according to her. Dad had gotten home a minute before Mark.

A detective in a brown coat and a paladin wearing bright white armor waited till Mark had had a moment with his parents to descend upon that meeting. They came in with measured words and requests to speak that weren't actually requests at all.

The Paladin of Freyala introduced himself as David Turner. With Freyala's human last name as his own that marked him as a member of the elite in Freyala's church. The detective was just a guy, high up in the ranks of Orange City, who called himself John Smith. It might have been a fake name, but he had a business card, so Mark assumed he was legit. Paladin David was eyeing John Smith a whole lot, though, along with Mom and Dad, so John was probably very high up. Maybe even a hero for the city.

There were a lot of those that Mark simply didn't know about.

Mom cut through the meet-and-greet, "What's wrong with Addashield?"

Paladin David and Detective John weren't quite sure how to answer that.

David said, "I'd like to talk to your son separately."

Mom was about to object—

John said, "Mister and Misses Careed? Can we speak in a different room?"

Mom and Dad looked at each other. Acceptance came a moment later.

And that was how Mark found himself in a relatively unused room on the first floor, on his side of the house, away from Mom and Dad.

Paladin David got right into it, saying, "Sloane Addashield killed Red Thunder and Mistress Storm today. The news has already broken across the world. Do you know why he could have done this?"

Mark understood that he wasn't really asking for Mark's knowledge of why; they had to know *why* Addashield had done this. They probably talked to a lot of people already...

Because this had to have started 60-ish days ago, or something like that.

Addashield had failed his Contract.

Mark hadn't even known. But that's what had to have happened, right?

Mark said, "He failed his apprentice Contract thing, and you think he's Falling... or he's already Fallen?"

Mark hoped he hadn't Fallen, but... It was a foolish sort of hope.

"He's Falling right now," David said, standing upright, like he had confirmed many different things all at once. Mark could only guess at what could have been going through the man's mind. David continued, "We're not sure what he is after, but he is responsible for about 9,100 deaths as of 61 days ago. Most everyone who had an important connection to him was warned off 70 days ago. Most of those went into hiding. Addashield has found some of them already, and killed them most gruesomely. You're far, *far* down on the list of contacts Addashield had ever touched, but because this whole thing started with a failure of a stipulation in a Contract that *you* were slated to help him fulfill, you are near the top of Orange City's concerns right now. Addashield hasn't fully Fallen. It is possible he might come after you to do a Tutorial-accompaniment. That was the original plan, wasn't it?"

Mark had to sit down, so he sat down.

David waited.

Mark said, "It was the plan, yes. I don't know how he would have done it. I've never heard of anyone slipping into someone else's Tutorial, but Addashield could have done it... I assume? He had this history of doing this with apprentices, he said. He said he was one of the people who helped Malaqua tame the Demon City, and so he had leeway with the System in weird ways."

David was sitting in a chair in front of Mark, as he said, “Addashield is a Hero of Humanity. He has done a lot of good. Many of the systems we use to safeguard this world were built by him. He’s a metalmage. You know those big pillars that guard the entrance of the bay? He *made* them. Decades ago. He made them. Your family’s fish tanks are modeled after them. He removed four of those bay pillars after he killed the two heroes.”

Mark’s heart thumped hard. He knew about the Hero of Humanity, but he hadn’t known about the bay pillars, either that Addashield had made them, or that he had removed them.

David continued, “He ripped out our automated defense systems all across the entire south wall, slicing turrets off of the walls. He killed our main mass-killing heroes. We’ll get the turrets fixed in under 20 days. We won’t be able to fix the pillars within four years. We put up stopgap measures, and they’ll hold, but we can already tell the shape of what is to come. The bay is going to flood with real monsters, and Orange City might have to be completely evacuated.”

Mark went beyond panic, circling back into a comfortable battle-flow that he usually entered when he was fighting for his life, or sparring deeply.

With a calm voice, Mark asked, “Why are you telling me this?”

“I’m giving you information on the full problem. I hope you give me some information back. If Addashield should show, we don’t want him to be able to lie to you to get you to do whatever he wants.”

Mark said, “He *was* a good man. A Hero of Humanity. I went into this apprentice thing full-knowing that it would injure me, though the extent of it was unknown at the time.”

David quirked an eyebrow. “... You still defend him?”

Mark faltered. “... I suppose I shouldn’t. But... None of this feels real? Addashield...” Mark tried, “People don’t kill each other. It’s unthinkable. It’s all *us* against the *monsters* so why would...” Mark wasn’t sure what he was saying. He went back to normal territory, asking, “You said he *hasn’t* Fallen? His demon *hasn’t* replaced his soul?”

“Demon-replaced people act differently than Addashield is acting right now. Do you know about that psychological theory? Id, ego, superego?”

Mark’s brain felt like spinning mush. He recalled, “Id is the feeling/acting part of a person, with no regard for conscious thought at all. Superego is the moral center; the part that guides us, like the words of a god or teachers or whatever. Ego is the self; the mediator between the pleasure-seeking, pain-avoidance Id, and the guiding-principles Superego.”

David was a little impressed. “You just *remembered* that?”

“It’s on the ‘understanding demons’ part of the Tutorial prep, under the prep they give you for understanding things beyond the Tutorial... Which isn’t all that much, really.” Mark added, “And I read up about it after this whole Addashield-thing started. He has a demon. He wanted me to meet with demons and deny them. It was important to study.”

Mark had studied for the GED, too, and he had passed that a while ago.

David nodded, though he regarded Mark a bit more critically. He said, “Demons are Id personified.”

Mark said, “They do everything possible to get what they want, and what they want is pleasure in all forms, including stuff that humans don’t consider pleasure at all, like pain.”

“Slightly incorrect.” David said, “Demons want *experience*. Living experience. Addashield’s demon wants experience. If you see Addashield and you have to deal with him, you can play along in some ways, and Addashield might even try to help you in those ways, but his demon will only care about experience-feeling, and if Addashield doesn’t do as his demon wants, we think he will be slapped with Infractions. If he gets too many of those then Addashield will either fall... or we’ll reach a worse outcome. He and his demon will become one person, and that Dragon Alert that went out today will be a *real* Dragon Alert.”

“... Okay?” Mark said, half desperate, half wondering why the fuck David was telling *him* this. He tried to think of what to do next. “What do I do next? What happens now? Since Addashield tore out parts of the Bay Wall and that other stuff, that means that he’s planning on coming back, or letting a kaiju get Orange City?”

“You don’t have to worry about the kaiju.” David said, “You do need to worry that we fully expect him to come after you when you’re healthy enough to undergo the Tutorial, as you had planned.”

Clarity came in an instant.

They knew a lot and Mark barely knew anything at all.

Which was pretty normal.

They had plans.

Mark said, “You want me to... to go through with that?”

Mark had a lot of sudden concerns, from being completely unprepared for Tutorial, to... to a lot, really.

“We *do* want you to go through with that,” David said, “Addashield has given us some hints as to what we can do to help him, to prevent this mess, and to allow him to take up his Old Contract. They might be false hints; ploys of the demon. But we see a way out of this with a good outcome on the other side, and we want to take it.

“To that end, we’re going to give you the same body treatments that Daihoon nobility gives their children before the Tutorial. It’s intense magic and it should fix you right up. We’re also shipping your parents to the other side of the country to put them out of harm’s way as much as we can.” David said, “That’s what John is telling your mother and father right now, but they are *not* being told any of these specifics. Share what you want with them, but know that information can be a curse sometimes. Do they have any place they’d like to go in particular?”

Wait.

Mark ignored the specifics of what David had just said.

David was talking like Mark’s participation was implicit. Expected.



Mark made some quick decisions, then asked, "To make sure... I get no say in this?"

"You could say no. And then you would be dooming the world to a Fallen Archmage, at least."

"Okay."

So no real option at all.

And they would be giving him some sort of body treatment... Okay.

Okay.

Mark thought for a second longer. He wanted to help Addashield regain himself, didn't he? Yes. He did.

And then, when Addashield wasn't under the influence of a demon anymore, then...

Then what?

Then it was out of Mark's hands. Not his problem.

But his problem right now was the choice between helping a Hero of Humanity come back to humanity, or to let him Fall to the demons.

Mark made a decision.

"Okay. I'll do it."

David studied Mark for a moment, before saying, "Our hope is that if we pump you full of enough perfect-grade cultivation herbs that you can fully recover in under a week and still be eligible for the Tutorial. Addashield will find out in whatever ways he finds these things, and he will make plans to fulfill his Contract with his demon. To be clear, this is just one possible scenario for how we deal with

him, most of our efforts are located elsewhere, and this is not safe *at all*. You are being put in danger for the greater good. We are sorry about this.”

“Okay.” Mark said, “So you’re going to clear out the neighborhood, right? I’m not too sure on how any of this works, but I know what kaiju can do, and dragons are smart kaiju, right?”

“... We’re clearing out the neighborhood,” David said, wary about Mark. Probably with how fast Mark had agreed. David stood. “I imagine you’re going to need to convince your parents to evacuate.”

Mark rose on wobbly feet and then steadied himself. He looked up at David. “I imagine I will.”

David regarded Mark a little. “You’re rather easygoing for a baseline in the middle of trauma recovery. I expected a lot more yelling.”

Mark said, “You came in here, told me that you’re going to pump me full of ‘perfect grade cultivation’ herbs that will heal me in a week, and I might get to help rescue a Hero of Humanity from their demon. *Of course I’m on board with this.*” Mark added, “I barely know what I want to do with my life and talking to people worries me more than it probably should, but here’s a clear goal in front of me? Yes! Give me all the clear goals. Clear goals are *fantastic*.”

Paladin David regarded Mark in what seemed an easier, better manner. It reminded Mark of what happened when his Tutorial instructor, Gravel, saw the depths of Mark’s conviction for the first time. Or, to a lesser extent, like when Mark had asked Kevin to go harder on him, and Kevin ordered all those new supplement supplies.

David said, “It’ll be hard.”

“Of course it’ll be hard.”

David smirked a little. “Let’s go see your parents.”

Mark walked down the hallway toward the kitchen, lightly gripping the railing that they had installed for grandpa years ago, and simply never removed. David walked behind him. Mark listened to Mom yelling at Detective John.

There was a confrontation that went back and forth with small words and loud words and Mark was there, and Mom slapped Paladin David, and then stormed away. Mark barely understood what had happened, but he said some things to Dad and everything seemed easier. Dad gave Mark a quick hug, telling him this wasn't over, which could have meant many different things, and then he followed Mom out into the night, where police lights illuminated the swampy air, and moths crowded the globe-lights of the porch.

Mark stood with Detective John and Paladin David in the kitchen, and asked them both, "So we never did introductions, for real? Is this some big East Coast Union operation? Or something smaller? I can't imagine that Addashield doesn't have better things to do than worry about me... Or rather, bigger enemies for his demon to kill."

Detective John easily said, "Listen up, Mark. I'm going to tell you this once:

"If you're on board with this, then there will be no more information given to you about anything at all. A House AI will be installed in this location to monitor and assist you with your special medicines. You'll get drop shipments, and you'll be expected to do most of the prep on those medications yourself." John stressed, "*Anyone* we leave here with you will be in danger of being murdered by Addashield in order to get you to do what he wants, even if you're already on board with this whole crazy idea. You might be here for a week, which is the minimum timeframe for complete rehabilitation, or you might be here for 25 days, at which point the medications you'll be taking will push you past the point where you can take the Tutorial.

"The first part of this plan was getting you on board. We passed that. Thanks for agreeing.

"The second part is making sure that Addashield is aware that we're making this offer open to him. Since he's been angling for us to do this, in small words caught here and there on camera, then we expect him to agree.

"When we *know* that Addashield is going to take this offer, then you'll get your first drop shipment.

“Maybe Addashield will show up and stay here for a week to try and influence you to do what his demons wants, which is to make more demon mages. That is the best possible outcome for all of this, and we will simply leave you all alone if that happens. Justice can come in whatever form it needs to come after the real danger is over.

“Are you on board?”

Mark instantly saw some holes in the plan, but the biggest one was there at the end. ‘Influence you to make more demon mages’. If Mark became a demon mage in any capacity then some Paladins would murder him, for sure, and they’d be right to do it. A demon couldn’t force Mark to do anything under duress though, right? Mark was pretty sure he had read that part right in the demon studies he had done while getting his GED done.

But other than that, Mark was pretty sure he was good with this plan.

Heroes did weird plans to save the world all the time, right?

But there was so much left unsaid. From ‘Detective John Smith’s’ real name, to the level of organization behind this action, to the exact nature of the threat, to Mark’s personal worry about being alone with a near-Fallen, almost-dragon. And Addashield was still an archmage. He had killed a lot of people already.

But before that, for the last 340-odd years of Addashield’s life, he was a hero. He deserved to be brought back from this edge.

Mark decided it was better that he didn’t ask questions; that he *didn’t* know all of the evil that Addashield had done while Falling.

Mark repeated what he had already said before, “Let’s do this.”

He saw the moment when both David and John —if those were their real names— considered Mark already dead. David was first, his smile remaining, but his eyes going blank, staring out past Mark.

John managed to keep up appearances more than David, his eyes smiling right alongside his mouth, as he said, “Orange City thanks you for your effort! And hey! Let me be the first to congratulate you on your full recovery. It’s a week early, but you’ll get there faster than you realize. And then you have your whole life ahead of you!”

Mark was pretty sure he disliked ‘Detective John’.

The paladin was okay, though.

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Mark stepped out onto the porch.

Mom sat on the bench on the porch, crying into her hands. Dad rubbed her back as he sat next to her.

Dad looked up first. “You don’t have to do this, Mark.”

Mom shuddered. She did not look up.

Mark had a lot of thoughts bouncing in his head for the last few hours. He put some of them to words. “I have a chance to help a Hero of Humanity come back from the brink. In the worst case, it’s one life given in pursuit of a higher calling. In the best case, everyone gets what they want and more people don’t have to die to a Fallen archmage or dragon, and Addashield can stand trial for what he has done already. *I have to do it.* I hope you can forgive me if the worst should...” He teared up. “But if the worst should happen, then it’ll happen to *me*, and that’s fine. Grandpa would be proud, and we should all be so lucky to be able to spend our lives helping others.” He held back a sob, and said, “You’d do the same if it was you. Humanity helps each other. *That is what we do.* That is how we survive.”

Dad shuddered, tears flowing freely, quietly. He looked upon Mark, and his words failed him. He was proud, terrified, and bereft all at once. He could only nod.

Mom breathed in, sobbed once more, and then sat up. With tears streaming down her puffy red face, she said, “You’re taking on too much responsibility, Mark. You can barely walk without wobbling. You’re still a year away from being able to train with a weapon again and Addashield is a *monster*. Even with these... these dangerous drugs...” She stood up, looked Mark in the eyes, and said, “Promise me that if you need to, you will take the Tutorial teleport and escape him, and then use the option to appear somewhere in Daihoon.”

Mark easily said, “I promise.”

Mom hugged him tight, and Mark fell into the embrace. Dad hugged both of them.

Mom softly said, “Demons can’t be reasoned with, Mark. Don’t try to reason with them, and never believe what they say.”

Dad added, “You’ve seen the movies, Mark. Those movies are not far off from the truth. Demons are *not people*.”

Mom whispered, “All they care about is what they can get out of a person. They don’t actually need anything at all. They...” She stopped. She breathed.

Mark held on to both of them.

Some time later, Detective John spoke up behind Mark, “Pack up your essentials. We need you two unfindable, because Addashield’s demon will *absolutely* use you to force Mark into accepting a demonic Contract.” He told Mark, “Addashield’s demon will probably use a *lot* of people to try and force you into a demonic Contract with one of her brethren. *You don’t have to accept a Contract you don’t want*. Demons don’t respect humans as anything other than diversions, but they *do* recognize other demons, and there’s not a single demon that will accept a Contract made for them by another demon at spellpoint. Whatever lies and truths you might hear in the future, believe that, Mark. You don’t have to accept a Contract you don’t like.”

Mark let go of his parents to hear the Detective, but Mom still held onto one of his arms while Dad held a shoulder. Mark said, "I understand."

Mom tensed. Dad's grip firmed.

"Good," Detective John said, "I want Mom and Dad cleared out in an hour." He turned to the police and other people standing around in the night, by their cars, by the street, all of them wearing dark colors, some with wind floating their sleeves, others with headgear with a lot of lights, and some who seemed not there, until Mark noticed them, and then they were gone again. A lot of active heroes. Detective John called out, "Wake the neighborhood! We're evacuating everyone, as planned. Red line to 5 kilometers out, orange beyond that. Move!"

People got moving.

Mark kinda stood to the side, in the living room.

Mom and Dad already had some go-bags packed, because any sane person would have those packed. But they were going on an extended vacation; not just an evacuation. Most people would expect to be gone for a month, at the earliest. Maybe forever. Or at least that's what Mark overheard as people moved.

Some technomage came in and did some stuff to all the electronic devices in the house, sparks flickering from her fingertips as she moved throughout the property. The last thing she did was install a bread-box-sized silver cube into one corner of the living room by plugging it into a socket and then doing some sort of magic to it and the walls. The silver box grew into the wall with a bunch of silver tendrils. The power flickered, and then came back.

"House isolated and AI installed," the technomage announced to Paladin David.

David nodded. He had stood near Mark this whole time. Mark wasn't sure why David stood by him, but when Mark stepped toward the hallway to see whatever someone was doing to his room down the hall, David said, "Please stay here for now, Mark."

"... Sure."

Mark stayed put.

Brawny soldiers came in, looking like normal people, but they left the house carrying suitcases that were absolutely stuffed and moving furniture around everywhere. Someone asked Mom about accommodations for an archmage and Mom said something about grandpa's bedroom being the best one, and that they had never really done anything to the room except clean it up. It was across the hall from Mark's room.

The officers went into that room and did stuff.

"Will this actually work?" Mark asked Paladin David. "The whole... bring him back to himself, thing?"

"Probably not." David looked down at Mark, his armor seeming to shine in the mundane light of the living room. "But it might."

Mark asked, "Paladins are demon hunters, aren't they? Have you ever killed an archmage before?"

"No one has killed an archmage in a non-compliant Contract in 550 years. It simply doesn't happen. Killing a Fallen is a more realistic goal. We kill Fallen of all types, all the time. The last non-compliant archmage was 77 years ago, in 1970, in the middle of the Reveal; the breaking of the Veil. We couldn't do a damned thing to him, either. His non-compliance cost your world much of India, and was responsible for Malaqua rising from those ashes and becoming a god. In the end, that archmage turned dragon, rather than simply die, rather than become Fallen. The dragon was much easier prey. Our previous generations killed the resulting dragon in under a week."

Much of the Reveal was a time of great upheaval across the Two Worlds. Mark had only ever really learned North American history in high school and middle school. He didn't know exactly what Paladin David was referring to, but he had heard some of Malaqua's history, just as he knew all of the other gods of the New Pantheon.

Mark had one question, though, that burned brightly in his mind.

"You said 'your world'? About Earth?" Mark asked, "You're from Daihoon, then?"



Mark had never met someone from Daihoon before. Not in person, anyway. David looked like any other sort of human, and he was. Probably. The Veil had gone up an estimated 5,000 years ago, though, splitting humanity from itself. Not much had changed biologically between people, but, now that Mark was looking, David's eyes were a bit purplish-blue, and his blond hair was a bit reddish here and there. The guy looked in his 40s, and maybe he was.

But he was a paladin, and the gods didn't come back until after the Reveal. That's why Mark didn't recognize that he was daihoonian. Paladins were a thing over here, on Earth. They had yet to catch on much over on Daihoon. Too much culture over there that didn't believe in gods.

Maybe David had parents from Earth? That happened a lot. Or the other way around happened, too.

Or maybe Mark's understanding of the world was limited, which, ya know, was the most reasonable explanation.

David said, "Any other time I'd tell you about it, but I can't right now. Informational security."

... Oh.

He didn't want Addashield learning of people from Mark and then going after those people.

Mark privately vowed to watch his words as much as he could... Which was just a normal thing to do around an archmage anyway, right?

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Mark hugged Mom and Dad once more on the porch.

Detective John interrupted the moment, saying, "If we stick around any longer, someone could get killed. We need to leave."

Mom held Mark close, saying, "I love you, Mark."

"Be safe, Mark," Dad said, "And in a month you'll be Awakened and we can go on vacation somewhere, or something. I love you."

"And you'll be big and strong again, too!" Mom said, trying to smile through the tears.

Mark said, "I love you, both."

This neighborhood of Gladegrove wasn't too crowded with houses, but Mark heard people down the roads yelling at officers about how they didn't want to move, while other people were already packed in their cars and driving away as fast as possible. Lights were on in every single home.

Some cop muttered to her friend about how it was ridiculous that they weren't evacuating faster.

Mom and Dad both heard that, too. Mark hugged them tighter, and then he let go.

They let go a second later.

"Bye, Mom. Dad. See you later."

"See you, son."

"Love you, honey."

“Love you.”

Mark watched them get into the hovering police car, and then take off down the street.

It had all happened so fast.

Holy shit, that had happened fast.

That thought struck Mark like a punch to the gut.

Mark stuck around on the porch for a little while longer, in the night, under the globe lights of the porch. Moths flew everywhere, casting wild shadows this way and that. Mark felt cold. He was still vastly underweight compared to what he used to be, though for his height of 5’8”, 125 pounds wasn’t that bad.

He shivered in his gym clothes.

Paladin David stood there with him for a little while, before he went into the house and found some hot cocoa and made Mark a mug. They sat on the porch together, and Mark felt less cold by the minute as he cradled the mug and sipped the cocoa.

Soldiers called out that their neighbor Jandon’s house was clear, and then they strung red and white warning tape across the pillars that led up to their porch. They did the same thing to the Williamson’s house down the road. Mark assumed they were doing more to other houses.

David said, “They’ll eventually get all of the area evacuated, but it won’t happen till tomorrow. I’m leaving now, though.”

Mark chuckled. “You couldn’t stand up to an archmage, eh?”

“No. I can’t.”

“... Well thanks for telling the truth, but fucking hell that’s depressing.”

David grinned. And then he put his grin away. “This is probably going to work out exactly as we want. You’ll get your first shipment of drugs by drone tomorrow, along with ready-to-eat meals. I’ll make sure it’s all labeled for you. The House AI will be able to help you organize further, if needed, but it shouldn’t be needed.” David stood up. “Demons won’t work at the behest of other demons, so no matter what you are told, know that you don’t have to accept a Contract forced upon you by some other demon’s actions. They actually hate it when a mortal is predisposed to welcome them into their soul.”

Mark stood, and he wasn’t wobbly at all. “Detective John Smith said the same thing... That’s not his real name, is it?”

“It’s a fake name. He’s someone high up. I couldn’t tell you who.”

Mark breathed. And then he said, “So all of this is predicated on the idea that this will actually work to get Addashield back to civilization. I got a House AI now, and drugs that I assume cost a fortune, or which are gated behind knowing the right people, or having the right connections.” Mark asked his question, “What has Addashield said out there that makes you think this is going to work how you want it to work?”

“I can’t answer that one. Good night, and fair travels, Mark Careed.”

After a moment, Mark nodded. “... Fair travels.”

David walked down the porch stairs, into the night.

Mark blinked, and somehow David was gone.

“... Maybe a speedster?” Mark openly guessed. “Teleporter?” And then Mark stepped out into the night, holding onto the railing of the porch, calling out into the sky, “You can come over tomorrow if you want, Addashield!”

Was it stupid to call out to a near-Fallen archmage?

Yes.

Was Mark being stupid, or was he being smart about the chances to make this work out right?

He had no idea. He felt *honorable*, though. Maybe that was more important than being smart or dumb. Smarts and stupids only mattered when you knew all or near-all of the forces in a system. Mark knew nothing about anything right now. And so: Honor. Honor could get you through the unknown, and if you died, then at least you didn't hurt others on your way out.

Mark went back inside the house.

- - - -

Mark woke up to an empty house, which was fucking weird. He had no idea what to do except lay in bed for a little while. Dad wasn't making breakfast, and the scents of bacon and bread did not fill the air. Mom wasn't doing laundry, so the machine downstairs wasn't rumbling the walls gently at all.

Mark got up strongly, because he knew what he needed to do.

He needed to make his own breakfast and see if the supplies were outside, and then he needed to take whatever he needed to take before he trained for the day. On habit, though, the first thing he did was check his phone.

The phone blinked as Mark picked it up.

A stylized orange eyeball appeared on the screen and a masculine voice said, "Greetings, Mark Careed. I am your new House AI, advanced model Q-6580. Would you like to name me, or shall I name myself?"

Mark took a moment, then asked, "Are you a True AI, with a soul?"

"I am not. We expect Addashield to obliterate this house and everyone in it if things don't go his way, so Orange City has not devoted living people to the task of assisting you. I am a basic House AI."

Mark said, "Name yourself."

The phone beeped.

“ ‘Quark’ is my designation, until you state otherwise. I am here if you need help. Entering observation mode.”

Mark was still alone, which was fine. He was able to get around the house on his own, now, and so that is what he did. The fridge was half-full of junk; Dad was supposed to go to the store tomorrow, or rather today, but that didn't happen. The pantry had pastas and canned goods. That was fine. Mark's protein powders were there at the top shelf, and he managed to get one down by himself mostly fine. At least he didn't drop the thing and have it spill everywhere. His strength was nowhere near where it should be, but he wasn't that weak anymore.

The porch was empty of deliveries.

He looked left and right, and saw nothing except the normal porch. There were warning stakes stuck in the ground all around the property, each of them holding a red-and-white-striped dragon-warning flag. Some of the warning flags even read 'DRAGON' on them.

There were no deliveries.

Mark asked the House AI, “Hey, Quark! Am I getting a shipment today of fancy and expensive medicines?”

His phone in his pocket said, “The shipment is delayed. It will be here in approximately an hour and 30 minutes.”

“Plan's still on, then,” Mark said to himself.

Mark went back inside and soon he was smiling a little as he scrambled eggs and put them into the pan, while chopped potatoes airfried in the oven. Hot sauce, mayo, and cheese made a great binder for a breakfast burrito, and with all of that rolled up, Mark got to enjoy a really great burrito.

As he sat back in his chair, holding his belly, he grinned a little.

It was easy to pretend that everything was going to work out fine, so that is what Mark did and what he would continue to do, until proven otherwise. Eventually he'd be able to make his own decisions in life, but for now, he was still injured, and he was ready to be uninjured. Back to full strength!

And then further beyond!

Mark waited to make himself his usual muskleaf tea because whatever he was getting today might not be compatible with the stuff he was already taking...

... Actually.

“Quark? Is my dietary schedule going to change with the new supplements?”

“Yes. Do not take any of your old supplements.”

“Ha! Glad I asked.”

Mark could still get on with the rest of his day, though.

Mark did most of his physical therapy at the center, but the garage had an old multi-station gym with a pulldown bar, a shoulder press, a curls and leg raises area, and a chest and back thing. An actual bench press station and a bar sat to the side, while a few 5 kilo weight stacks sat behind that, all covered in cobwebs. Mark used to use this thing all the time, but he hadn't used any of it in over half a year. It was too high-spec for him right now.

... Mostly.

He could maybe use it now? Had he recovered enough? It was all beginner workout equipment anyway. Welp! No place better to start than at the beginning!

Mark pulled out his phone... and paused.

He looked up.

“Quark? Can you record my numbers for me? I don’t want to record them myself if I don’t have to.”

“Certainly,” came Quark’s orange voice from his phone. “Your current height is 172 centimeters. Current weight is 57 kilograms. Last recorded max bench press is 20 kilos, deadlift is 30, squat is 25.”

“... I guess metric is fine?” Mark rapidly decided that metric was fine, and then he said, “Bah! I only did two reps at those numbers! That doesn’t count as my current max! We gotta pump those numbers up!”

“I have been installed with a Physical Therapy Module and thus I must inform you that you are showing good progress, and injury could have you backslide. And you performed *three* reps at those levels, so they are your accepted max ranges.” Quark added, “Also, your delivery is being delivered at this moment. The time schedule moved up for reasons that are beyond my knowledge.”

Mark happily ignored the rusted weight machine and the bench to the side, eagerly running toward the front of the house—

Mark almost tripped, but a half-fumbled grab on the side of the house was enough to save him a fall. He steadied himself and he *walked* out of the garage and onto the driveway just in time to see three drones fly down from the sky; two large and one small. The small one dropped a small box on the front porch, being very careful about it. The two larger drones dropped two identical office-chair-sized boxes onto the concrete in front of the porch. They were less careful about their cargo.

The drones flew away, zipping back into the sky and out of sight.

Cracking the first big box open, Mark saw that the larger ones were filled to the brim with high-calorie food bars. With a whole lot of huffing and puffing, Mark managed to get the 100 pound boxes into the house. They didn’t need to be refrigerated, so getting them into the house was far enough, and that took a good 10 minutes anyway. Mark was huffing and puffing by the end of it, so that was as far as they got.

And then he turned his attention to the small box.



He tried not to be too excited, but how could one not be excited by their salvation sitting in a box on their porch? That was why Mark had left that one for last. He knew that as soon as he opened it, he wouldn't care about leaving the calorie bars in the sun for a while. With careful hands, Mark picked up the small box and held it tight.

Mark opened the smaller box on the kitchen counter, and it was like Christmas, but so much better.

Inside the cardboard was a white polystyrene box, and inside that was an ice pack and four smaller boxes, each looking like colorful blobs under bubble wrap. Mark carefully unpacked the boxes from their smaller protections and set them out in front of him. There was a blue box, a green box, an orange box, and a white box. A set of instructions came with them; a thick book, tucked into the side, with many pages to them. The front of the book read:

'FOR MARK CAREED. Balanced for his physiology only. OTHER USERS MIGHT SUFFER GRAVE CONSEQUENCES'.

"Well that's neat, I guess?" Mark rapidly decided, "Actually, that's... incredibly cool. Quark? Do you know how expensive this medicine set is?"

"That information is not part of my database."

Mark flipped through the instruction book for half a minute, not really understanding what he was reading. It was a whole bunch of medical stuff, though; that was easy enough to see. Seemed like a bunch of warnings, too. He set the book aside and opened each box to see what he was dealing with.

Each box contained a small glass bottle of colored liquid with an eyedropper applicator for a cap.

"So back to the instructions..." Mark mumbled at himself.

There were a lot of instructions.

Mark asked, "Quark? Can you help with telling me about this medication?"

Quark obliged, “One drop of each color liquid with every meal. You might be eating as many as 6 meals per day. A full half-kilo calorie bar counts as a meal. You have enough bars to last 30 days. They will last longer if you have real food occasionally.

“White drops if you’re feeling nauseous/tired/restless or unable to focus, which will happen after the third colored dose, on average, at your body weight. When you gain more weight the necessity of the white drops will go down to every four meals. I will be monitoring your status and might tell you to take more white drops as necessary.

“Occasional slips of too *much* colored liquid is okay, but do not make it a habit.

*“Missed color doses are unacceptable.”*

“When you are a day from entering the Tutorial then you will discontinue the colored drops and spend that next day eating 1 white drop with each meal.”

Mark nodded along. He decided, “You keep track of that, please.”

“I will do this.”

“Can I have a second meal then to start? Or do I need to wait? What about exercising?”

“Once you start on the colored drops your appetite will soar and so will your energy. You can work until you get hungry, which will take about 2 hours. You can eat and take drops and eat again with more drops for a maximum of 10 hours per day. Eventually you will reach a point where you are tired and then I will tell you to take a white drop and go to bed.”

Mark smiled at that. He looked at his skinny arms, and at his thin thighs, and at the flabbiness of his gut. He used to have a 6 pack, but now he was flabby because he had lost a lot of muscle and he was eating a lot to gain it all back, and fat came along faster than abs. All of it was slow going, though.

But with *this*..

This would change that, right?

Mark asked, “And this will fix my body, for real?”

“Yes. This is dangerous medication. Do not make emergency services come out here to rescue you. Addashield might be nearby and watching right now. Follow my instructions for eating and medication, please.”

“Heard and understood, Quark! Thanks for being here!”

Quark beeped in acknowledgment.

Mark grabbed one of the calorie bars, smiling as he tore it open and revealed... boring brown. Not even, like, a chocolate brown. Just an even grain of brown stuff, stamped into a bar. He took a bite.

... He took another bite, to try and see if, yes? There was a taste.

Mark was tasting what he was tasting.

There was *a taste*.

Mark looked at the bar as he chewed. He swallowed and asked Quark, “It tastes like brown? Or like... Well. The texture is good? There is a taste here. I cannot describe it.”

It was kind of a ‘brown’ flavor. ‘Dark brown’. Sunset brown?

Quark supplied, “ ‘Food Bar’ is the accepted terminology for the flavor you are experiencing. It is a specific mix of many different counteracting agents meant to nullify the flavors present, because the flavors present are technically bones of many magical beasts, insects of many sorts, grains of many sorts, and various vegetables. The base flavor is terrible, and sugars and such cannot be added without compromising the nutritional matrix. What is left of the flavor produces an item that often is remarked upon such that people would eat it second-to-last over anything else.”

Mark grinned as he looked at the bar. “Insect! I never got to try any of that stuff. Mom won’t let it in the house, but they do that all the time in Daihoon, right?”

“That is beyond my knowledge.”

Mark rolled his eyes. “Monster bones, though? There isn’t a magic-influence problem there?”

“Carefully treated to remove all traces of magic.”

“That explains that.”

Mark set the bar down and then carefully unscrewed the top from the bottle of ‘blue’. None of these things had names, but they sure had a lot of warnings in the instruction booklet. Mark kinda felt bad for all of the stuff that Kevin had helped him get, but this stuff was the *good stuff*, and it wouldn’t mix with any of the normal drugs that you’d take to recover or build strength.

With a precise dropping, one drop of blue fell onto the leading edge of Mark’s food bar.

He put the blue away and then picked up the bar—

“All three colored drops at once onto the bar, neither of them touching. Eat those parts fast when you are done dropping,” Quark said, “The white can come later.”

Sure?

Sure!

Mark put a drop of green and another drop of orange onto the food bar, and then he dug in, making sure not to spill anything, and to fully consume the drops and their ‘sunset brown’ tasting bar. With the drops, it now tasted like a brown sunset with an herbal thing going on in the background.

Mark found it surprisingly easy to eat the entire food bar, even though he had just had breakfast.

“Second breakfasts are good. Great, even!” Mark got up and started putting stuff away, asking Quark, “So what about all of this protein powder and real food? Can I eat that? How about the creatine?”

“Protein shakes are acceptable. Eat the drops of color in the first sips of food. Creatine, branched roots, muskleaves, and your pills, are not acceptable. You can safely store those; you will not be wanting to use them, for they will throw off everything else.”

Mark started walking toward the garage again, with all the training equipment, as he asked, “Is this medicine regimen addictive at all?”

“If you do it wrong, yes. You will not be doing it wrong. If you need to be cleansed of this routine, then you will drink the entire bottle of white.”

“Good to know,” Mark said, as he entered the garage. He looked at the bars, and decided to do some stretching, first.

Stretching went great! He moved on to calisthenics. Half an hour later Mark was pushing off of the ground in his seventh pushup in the set, and then getting up off of the ground to go walk around the house again.

Another half an hour passed quickly.

Mark was doing lunges when his stomach growled at him—

He was *hungry*.

And that was when Mark realized he was sweating buckets, but feeling better than ever, and he had just done an hour of basic body work without getting winded at all. Mark looked at his pale palms, and then he turned his hands over to see his heartbeat in the thumping of the veins on the back of his hands.

“... I really just went through an entire hour of hard work... and I feel great?”

Quark spoke up, “You can take more drops and another food bar.”

Mark laughed happily. “This is amazing! Have I gained any weight yet? Height?”

“You have lost 2 pounds of water weight. You need to drink more. Would you like me to inform you to drink more water occasionally?”

Mark smiled. “Yeah sure. Help me as much as you can, please.”

“Understood.”

And then Mark went and had third breakfast, along with a few glasses of water.

Fourth breakfast came around noon, followed rapidly by lunch, second lunch, early dinner, and then dinner. Mark never stopped pumping weights, or doing lunges, or pull ups, situps, some light jogging, push ups, and more. Quark told him to take a drop of white at second dinner, and when third dinner came around, Quark told him to take two drops of white instead of the colored drops and then take a shower and finish for the day.

Mark ended up zonked out on the couch, only getting to watch ten minutes of a show that he had been watching with Mom and Dad. Halfway through the first act, his eyes were too tired to stay open anymore and he decided to just sleep there. He pulled a blanket from the back of the couch.

He closed his eyes.

Mark woke up the next day in bed.

... In his bed, which was *not* the living room where he had fallen asleep.

“... Quaaaaark? How did I get to my bed?”

“Addashield was here. He left after moving you to your bed and left me instructions to tell you to go to bed in your actual bed. He also refilled the fridge and the pantry with real food.”

“... Okay!”

Mark sat up in bed for a moment.

“He’s gone again, right?”

“Yes. Addashield left. He did not inform me when he would be coming back, except that he would be back eventually to take you through the Tutorial, as originally promised, when you’re capable of doing such a thing.” Quark added, “Accordingly, Orange City and several other parties to which you are unaware, all urge you to proceed safely and with speed. They thank you for your service and are calling you a hero.”

Mark laughed.

A hero, eh?

... Nah. This was just doing his duty as a human being.

Mark got out of bed while Quark was talking. Walking was easier today than it had been in a long while. Mark ended up in the kitchen before he realized he was in the kitchen. It never seemed that hard to get to the kitchen before his accident, but it had been hard afterward. Mark *had been* only *just* getting back his strength, though his coordination was still lacking.

Except he had just walked to the kitchen without any problems whatsoever.

Like it was *natural* to walk so easily!

Mark asked, “So they all want me to go faster, eh? Is that sound, medically?”

“You are already on a fast plan, concocted by old magics and hidden herbs, meant for the children of emperors. There have been a few updates to those old formulae since Malaqua was able to change the presets for the Tutorial, to switch the intake from age 12 to 18 and restore the magics of gods to both

worlds. Those updates make the potions even better. You have nothing to fear from treatment, and you can go for up to 14 hours a day if you wish.”

Mark said, “Okay then!” And then he went to the fridge.

It was stuffed.

Meats wrapped in paper and twine, with pictures of cows stamped onto the butcher’s paper. So beef. The vegetable drawers were filled with carrots and things that were carrot-shaped but not orange at all; yellows, blues, purples, reds. Mark had heard of the many root vegetables that they grew on Daihoon, but he had never seen any, or eaten any, actually. But these were them. Three large cartons of a dozen eggs each were packed into the center of the fridge. They were not chicken eggs at all; they were half again as large as a chicken egg, and there were snakes on the cartons. Mark hummed. Snake eggs might be delicious?

Mark set out two snake eggs on the counter and grabbed out what appeared to be thin-sliced beef. He started making breakfast. Steak and eggs! Breakfast of champions.

Twenty minutes later Mark bit into the snake eggs first and he moaned for the taste. “Oh my gods,” Mark said, smiling wide. “These are amazing!” He rapidly ate another bite and then sat back in his chair. He stared at the eggs. “... *This* is what I wanted. To see what the rest of the world is like. Snake eggs! I didn’t know you could eat snake eggs.”

Mark added the one-drop-each of his Blue, Green, and Orange medicines, and then ate it all up. The meat was fantastic, but Mark had obviously cooked it wrong. It was a little stringy. That was fine.

And hey! If it turned out to be something like human meat, or whatever a demon might want to trick Mark with, then Mark could deal with that later. He didn’t think it was human meat, though.

Generally— Actually, no. Not ‘generally’ at all. Almost *universally* people were good to each other. That’s how Daihoon had survived without gods for 5,000 years, with them always being preyed on by all the monsters and demons and dragons of their world. Earth had massive problems with being good to each other, what with the two world wars before the Reveal (and the third afterward) and maybe they still had problems with that. But Mark had never given a serious thought to the idea that Addashield



would have purposefully harmed him, or that Orange City was trying to screw over his long term health for short term gains with this medicine regimen.

So almost universally, Mark wanted to believe that Addashield, even the one that was under his demon's partial control, was still basically a good man, and so of course the food wasn't contaminated or whatever-bad-thing it could have been. But if it turned out that he was eating human meat or something, then Mark would blame the demon, and when Addashield was better, then Mark could... do something good. Mark had no idea what.

Yell at Addashield?

Eh.

Mark discarded his thoughts of mistrust, because the biggest fact was that Mark only had a very small window in which he could act in this direction or that direction, and that window did not include the overall shape of this scenario at all.

With a full belly, Mark got back to physical therapy, though he did ask Quark, as he entered the garage, "What are my stats today, Quark?"

"At the start of your first day, yesterday, your height was 172 centimeters. Your weight was 57 kilograms. Your max bench press was 20 kilos, deadlift was 30, squat was 25.

"Your current height is 175 centimeters, up 3 centimeters from yesterday. Current weight is 65 kilograms, up 7 kilograms. Last recorded max bench press is 30 kilos, deadlift is 40, squat is 40, for an increase of 10 kilos, 10 kilos, and 15 kilos."

For a moment, Mark felt floaty.

And then a manic sort of giddy joy bubbled up through his mouth and escaped as a giggle that turned into a full-throated laugh. "Holy fuck! Talk about *gains!*"

Mark thought no more of numbers all day long, actively blinding himself to the weights he kept adding onto bars, or how far down on the stack of weights he stuck the pin. He counted reps and ease of pushing, and lifting, and lunging, always making sure to move with good form, like Kevin had instilled within him for the last two months of physical therapy, and which Mark had always tried for in gym, before the accident.

Mark gained in every possible physical way.

The gains came faster on this, the second day of the color ink treatment, or whatever it was called.

It was important to vary the exercise, though, so Mark ran up and down the street. He figured out how to do handstands again, and then he started walking around on his hands. Suicide drills, balancing exercises, stretching, footwork drills, wrist and forearm exercises, more stretching, running around the block with arm and leg weights. Stretching.

In the middle of the afternoon he picked up one of his trainer swords from the rack on the wall, and he held it. Just held it.

He could *hold* the sword again. He could *swing* it again.

He swung that sword around a lot.

More footwork drills. More weight carrying. More stretching. A lot of wrist and forearm exercises, including rice punching. When he felt somewhat comfortable with the sword he switched to his favored spear, and it was like riding a bike in a way that it had not been like riding a bike at all. It was better.

Mark danced with the spear how Instructor Gravel taught him, back when he was training for the Tutorial.

Mark stumbled through the first forms, his balance unfamiliar, his strength not as good as it used to be, but he got through the first forms; the sweep, the stab, the rotate and pierce. Mark made it through one whole set and crashed out onto the ground, exhausted and happy and feeling so very good. He was apparently looking a bit manic, too, because Quark spoke up like he did sometimes.

“Pardon me, Mark. You need to take a white drop now, and eat again.”

“I can do that!”

Mark ate a lot that second day. More than the first day by far.

Eating, eating, and eating some more.

Quark told Mark to take white drops 3 times during the day, in between meals 4 and 5, 8 and 9, and 12 and 13. Mark had no idea how he was eating so much and not needing to use the bathroom except to pee *a lot*, but that’s how it was working for him, and it was *great*.

Mark finished off day two with a big steak and a lot of pasta, a nice shower, and then he took two white drops before laying down in bed. He felt fantastic! He was *exhausted*.

Sleep claimed him within a minute of closing his eyes.

-----

Mark made himself a breakfast of steak and eggs again, but this time made into a burrito.

As Mark chowed down, Quark spoke up.

“Pardon me, Mark. You need to use the scanner that was left in the living room after breakfast.”

“Sure!” Mark asked, “Say, what are my numbers?”

“At the start of your first day, your height was 172 centimeters. Your weight was 57 kilograms. Your max bench press was 20 kilos, deadlift was 30, squat was 25.

“At the start of your second day, yesterday, your height was 175 centimeters. Your weight was 65 kilograms. Your max bench press was 30 kilos, deadlift was 40, squat was 40.

“Your current height is 179 centimeters. Current weight is 71 kilograms. Last recorded max bench press is 50 kilos, deadlift is 65, squat is 65.”

Mark smiled as he ate his burrito. He had looked at himself in the bathroom mirror, and what he saw was amazing. Nothing like what he used to have, because he was also growing taller. But hey! Taller was good! Taller was fantastic! More range with a sword, or a spear, and he was always kinda short, but that had been fine by him. Taller was better, though. As a taller guy, Mark could pack on more muscle and get stronger, too, so this was *all sorts of good*.

Sally had probably grown after she took her Tutorial and gotten brawny. Most people had that happen to them, even if they weren't brawny. Mark had been short and he had accepted it.

But now he was taking emperor's-kids Tutorial-prep drugs.

Mark entered day 3 with gusto.

He pumped those weights! He swung those weapons, moving from sword to spear to shield and axe! He ran those kilometers with those weighted bracelets, vest, and anklets! He stretched, and shadowboxed, and did footwork drills across sand and gravel and grass!

He ate, and ate, and ate.

He got in the scanner twice. It was a basic model, like they had at the physical therapy center; just a full-body jacket and metal head-ring that he could put on himself. Quark read the readout for him.

“Well below the warning area. All of the medicine is being turned into physical cultivation. You are safe to continue as you are.”

Mark would ask about ‘physical cultivation’ when compared to all other types of cultivation some other time, when it wouldn't ruin his mana channels or his ability to enter the Tutorial, and that was all he cared about right now. Fuck taking physical therapy for multiple years! Mark saw the finish line ahead of him, just a week out!

Amazing!

And when this was over he was going to study as much magic as possible. Or maybe just enough to get by, depending on how hard magic turned out to be. He'd probably be spending a year learning how to use metalkinesis, anyway. That would be his first goal. To become a metalkinetic! And he'd use the adamantium his body naturally produced, thanks to Addashield! And Addashield would return to being a Hero of Humanity!

This was going to be *amazing*—

“Pardon me, Mark. You need to take a white drop now.”

“Sure sure! Man, this stuff really gets you hyped up to take on the world, doesn't it!”

“The Color Drops do instill an urge to work, but not this much. This is all you. The white drops mitigate the rough edges that come up when the body goes out of balance from the drops not being fully utilized. You are fully utilizing the drops, but the white drops also balance the whole body, and I am having you take them more as a preventative measure of possible damage than any real need.”

Mark wondered, “But they make me exhausted? You sure they're not stripping away everything the colored drops are doing?”

“When you are balanced, a side effect is imposed rest. That is what you are feeling. Also, you should stay away from this level of questioning for now. It borders on magical training.”

Mark just shook his head and went about his day.

He tried not to look at himself in the mirror too much, but it was fine to be a little narcissistic, right? Yeah. This was fine.

Mark was looking *fine*.

-----

Mark asked Quark to display his gains as a readout on the screen in the kitchen as he made himself breakfast again, on the fourth day.

**172 → 175 → 179 → 182 centimeters tall**

**57 → 65 → 71 → 78 kilograms**

**20 → 30 → 50 → 65 bench**

**30 → 40 → 65 → 80 deadlift**

**25 → 40 → 65 → 75 squat**

Mark cackled at that, saying, “Almost 6 foot tall!” He looked at his night shirt and boxers, happily saying, “I’m outgrowing my clothes again! This is amazing.”

After breakfast, Mark tried to put on his shoes and found them too small.

“So maybe there are some side effects.”

Holding his shoes and wondering what he was going to do...

Welp. There was one solution already available to him. Mark never liked wearing *that* solution, but basic income came with basic amenities even *before* they became first citizens. Basic brown clothes. Maybe being a first citizen opened up better options than brown? That'd be nice.

Mark looked up, and asked, "Quark? Can I get some new basic clothes?"

Quark said, "I will have suitable sets delivered to you as needed. Unfortunately, being a first citizen does not change the allowed styles. Would you like new training weapons as well?"

Bah!

Basic brown was called 'basic brown' for a reason, but even first citizen basic was still going to be brown? Eh! No problem there.

Mark hadn't considered new training equipment, though, because what he had worked just fine, but... Now that the option was out there, Mark kinda wanted to be greedy. At least a little.

"Yes. I will take some new training weapons."

"Understood."

Mark nodded... And then he wondered something else. He almost didn't want to ask, for to speak a demon's name was to make them appear. And yet... Mark asked, "Any news about Addashield?"

"We have had no sightings."

"No news is good news, right?"

Quark remained silent.

Mark trained barefoot until the drones came by with the deliveries, and then he readily put on new shoes, along with new clothes of all kinds. These basic clothes were... Well. It was a specific color that

was kinda white, kinda brown, and kinda sand-colored. People called it ‘basic brown’ but it was more sandy than brown, and it was a fine fabric. Mark hadn’t needed to wear the color for a long time, and it kinda irked him to need to wear it again at *all*..

It was fine.

He got back to training.

-----

**172 → 175 → 179 → 182 → 184 centimeters tall**

**57 → 65 → 71 → 78 → 83 weight in kilograms**

**20 → 30 → 50 → 65 → 80 bench**

**30 → 40 → 65 → 80 → 100 deadlift**

**25 → 40 → 65 → 75 → 90 squat**

Mark grinned as he stared at those numbers on the screen, the final readouts of yesterday, day four, as he ate another massive steak with even more eggs for breakfast. He kinda worried about why he hadn’t needed to use the bathroom for anything other than peeing, but it was fine.

It was the start of day 5, and he had broken 6 foot tall, or rather 184 centimeters.

All of Daihoon used a metric system which was pretty much the same measurement system as the metric on Earth, but they were not *exactly* the same. A ‘Dai’ metric meter was .7 centimeters larger than



Earth-metric. It was close enough for most cooperative understandings, though, and because of that it was hard to tell which metric system people were talking about some of the time.

Quark was using Earth-metric. Mark had already asked.

Most people in the business of monster killing used daimetric.

And then there were the *languages* of Daihoon that Mark would need to learn.

Mark found himself thinking about the future over that breakfast, on the fifth day of training. He didn't think about it all too long, because there was training to do. With the dishes washed and drying on the rack, Mark put on his shoes and got out there, into the garage, and started training with his new swords.

One of them was a kaiju blade.

Mark hadn't played with it yesterday, opting to leave it to the side when he couldn't even lift the damn thing. But now, Mark grabbed the meter-long handle of the 4.5 meter long wooden blade and tried picking it up...

"Ah, fuck," Mark muttered, as he dropped the sword back to the ground. It thudded and twanged as it struck the floor, the wood of it vibrating for a moment from the drop. He had managed to pick it up off of the ground but he was not nearly strong enough to lift the damned thing. Mark told the sword, "Not today, I guess. Tomorrow, hopefully."

He had picked up a practice kaiju blade in Tutorial training, a year ago. It was a real blade, weighing 200 pounds. It had been difficult. Tutorial Instructor Gravel had effortlessly lifted it. Then again, Gravel was a brawny. The strongest of normal people could at least *lift* a kaiju blade, though, and even swing it around some.

"Tomorrow," Mark told himself, as he stared down at the wooden thing.

He moved the practice kaiju blade back to the side of the garage, where he had stored it after a pair of twin drones had dropped it onto his front yard with a great *thump*. He hadn't ordered that sort of weapon, but Quark had, and so it was here for his use.

Mark wouldn't ever be able to wield a kaiju blade *like a brawny*, but that was fine.

He was going to lift it like a metalkinetic, soon enough.

Mark started the day with stretches and lost himself to the thrill of numbers going up. He tried not to gauge himself like that, but here he was, pumping out 10 bench presses at 85 kilos, and then putting another 2.5 kilo weight on both sides of the bar. It was *thrilling*.

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**172 → 175 → 179 → 182 → 184 → 185 centimeters tall**

**57 → 65 → 71 → 78 → 83 → 84 weight in kilograms**

**20 → 30 → 50 → 65 → 80 → 90 bench**

**30 → 40 → 65 → 80 → 100 → 110 deadlift**

**25 → 40 → 65 → 75 → 90 → 100 squat**

Mark stared at himself in the bathroom mirror.

He had gotten it all back, and then some. He was taller now, for sure. That was the biggest change. Over 13 centimeters taller. That was a *lot*. His face was mostly the same shape, but maybe his chin had gotten

stronger, and maybe his eyesight had gotten better, too. Hard to say. He shaved as he did sometimes, with a clipper. And yeah, that was a stronger chin.

And then he looked at himself for a little bit.

From his big shoulders to his arms to his chest and abs —those were really good abs— to further down, Mark had absolutely no complaints about anything at all. The ‘emperor’s kid’ medicine did a *lot* of good work. Really. No complaints at all. What *was* this stuff, anyway? Whatever it was, it was probably hard to make and restricted as all hell.

He even had a good butt! He had a good butt before the coma, too, but he had always been a middling rugby player because he didn’t have the ass for it. But now he had height and weight and he could probably tackle any baseline just as good as the others. Maybe even better!

Mark smiled a little more, doing poses in the mirror because he liked what he was seeing, and then he put his clothes back on and went to the kitchen to make breakfast.

He pulled open the fridge—

“Oh. Addashield came back?” Mark asked, as he looked at the refilled fridge.

And then he started taking more snake eggs and prime cuts of beef out.

“Addashield returned,” Quark said, his voice coming out of the kitchen screen. “He was here while you were asleep. You will have 2 more days of training as hard as you wish, and then you will have 1 day of rest, and then you will go into Tutorial.”

“Oh shit!” Mark said, smiling. “Already?”

Quark continued, “You will succeed and then follow Addashield to be introduced to the demons of his demon’s family. You will do what you need to do to cement Addashield’s return to his Old Contract, and then you will be returned here, to your current life. You will likely face questioning as to the full nature of the events of your Tutorial.”

“So normal plan, then. That’s good?”

Quark replied, “Orange City wishes to impart, again, that they are thankful for you taking this risk, Mark Careed.”

Mark smiled at that. “People help people. That’s how it’s supposed to be.”

“Even so,” Quark said. “That is not how it often is.”

“Of course people fight all the time but we also help each other all the time, too,” Mark said, “I wasn’t raised in a perfect Xerkonan household by any means, but grandpa always loved that tradition and we sort of kept to those ideals.”

Quark said nothing. He was just a non-sapient House AI, after all. A true AI would have gone for a conversation... probably? Mark wasn’t sure, actually.

Mark made another great breakfast, added a drop each of Blue, Green, and Orange to the eggs, and then ate it all. Soon, he was out in the garage again.

This time, he could lift the 50 kilo training kaiju blade by its huge handle. He laughed as he held the wooden practice sword aloft, and then he swung it around for a while, trying to match the forms Instructor Gravel had once shown him. Wielding a 4.5 meter sword was a lot different than wielding a normal sword, and the style was completely different, but Mark could go through the normal motions well enough. With two hands on the meter-long handle, Mark did overhead slashes, down slashes, side slashes and running pierces.

Then he switched his grip and did the whole thing over again from the other direction.

His shoulders burned. His core and thighs burned, too. He tired quickly. The weight of the massive wooden sword was balanced around the handle, with lead weights distributed inside the wood to give it the balance of a real blade, so it was balanced. It was just too big to use for anything other than kaiju. As a result it was, quite simply, heavy as fuck, and Mark’s footwork was all over the place. He didn’t have the brawny strength to use it right, nor the kinetic power to use it in a different, no less proper way.

Footwork and leverage was the real problem, but attack angles were another issue. Mark was, despite his increased height, still just standing on the ground.

Kaiju were all building-sized. From house-sized to skyscraper, Mark, as he was, could never hope to do anything against any kaiju. Running was the only recourse for most people. Even most heroes dealt with evacuating others from the path of oncoming kaiju. It was the rare person that could kill a real beast-of-the-world, which is what some people on Daihoon called them. The term 'kaiju' sort of took off long before Mark's time, due to a confluence of events with the Godzilla movie in the 50s in Japan and the breaking of the Veil in 1969, and everyone on Earth rapidly learning the singular name that the Japanese used to indicate large monsters. The nations of Daihoon were way too fractious at the time to have any one name for the monsters, but 'kaiju' was catching on over there too, as Mark understood it.

Mark rested the wooden blade on the ground, still holding onto the handle with both grips, as he breathed. He was the only one standing outside right now, on the entire street. Probably the only person for 5 kilometers around, actually, if those original evacuation numbers held. They had probably expanded the evacuation zone now that Addashield had appeared twice. Gladegrove, Mark's home, was pretty sparsely populated. The whole place probably had, like, a thousand people? Hard to know. Maybe a little bit more than that.

Over lunch, Mark asked Quark, "How many people were evacuated in the area?"

"1208 people. The evacuation order was given to 6 kilometers out, but they expanded it to 10 after Addashield's first appearance. Luckily he did not attack anyone on his ways to and from this house."

Mark nodded.

And then he finished first lunch and went right back out there to run drills with the kaiju blade. After third lunch it was early afternoon, and Mark knew that his fascination with the kaiju blade was not over, but it wasn't the best possible thing to be training with. Later, he'd get one of these things for real.

He stretched, did core workouts with medicine balls and free weights, and then he went for a run, followed by more suicide drills, followed by more of everything else.

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Mark's numbers had grown the next morning. He also tried a simplified readout.

**172 → 186 centimeters tall**

**57 → 88 weight in kilograms**

**20 → 95 bench**

**30 → 115 deadlift**

**25 → 105 squat**

He didn't like the simplified notation.

Mark asked, "How about a gain readout for an increase over the previous morning's numbers? Add in the previous readout, too."

Quark provided.

**186 centimeters tall, +1 centimeter from previous morning's measurement**

**88 weight in kilograms, +4 kilos**

**95 bench, +5 kilos**

**115 deadlift, +5 kilos**

**105 squat, +5 kilos**

Good enough.

Mark asked, "Does it look like I'm slowing down?"

“Yes. You are reaching a plateau. This is as much as the Color Drop can achieve. Though you would never qualify, you are almost at Olympic-level power.”

Mark snorted. “Best of the bases.” He ate his breakfast and then scarfed down a protein shake. As his stomach and insides started to rev up, and energy flowed, Mark asked, “This is the last day, right? Is Addashield going to be here in the morning tomorrow, or something?”

“I would not presume to know what goes on in the mind of Archmage Addashield, and you should not presume either.” Quark asked, “Please inform me if I am mistaken, but you appear to have some knowledge of Xerkona culture and style?”

“A bit, yeah. Grandpa was in the military. He loved the Settlement of Xerkona. It fit with his military life quite well, too.”

“Then understand this:” Quark’s voice was strong as he said, “You must a perfect adherent of Xerkona, for in the alignment of similar goals and utter politeness, you might find salvation in your work with Addashield.”

For a moment, Mark felt thrust ten years into the past, to hearing his grandfather talk like that now and then. And then some old lessons from his grandfather came to him. To stand straight, breathe softly, and speak clearly without subterfuge.

Modern culture on Earth decried Xerkona sensibilities as too deferential. Too demeaning and hierarchical. But Xerkona’s teachings allowed the armies of Earth and Daihoon to work together well in the Reveal, and then later, when the melting pot of cultures had bleed together and what came out the other side was an amalgamation of militaries and power structures. Grandpa had been military through and through.

Mark wasn’t a military brat, but he knew how to act Xerkonan well enough to not get slapped around by those in charge of this world or any other. Mostly.

With a clear voice, Mark meant it when he said, “We do what we can because we must.”

“That we do, Mark Careed,” Quark said.

Mark put in the hardest day of work that he had ever done before.

He ate until he couldn't eat anymore. He took the white drops every 3 meals, along with giant glasses of water every time. It was almost as grueling to eat as much as Mark ate, as it was to actually put in the physical work, to do the suicide drills and the burpees and the kilometer sprints. The Color Drop treatment made it possible, but Mark was the one that did the work.

At the end of the day, Mark sat in his shower, relaxing under the warm water with a full belly, but knowing he was going to have to go back into that kitchen and eat even more.

Mark did exactly that.

He took 3 white drops before he went to his room to sleep. He almost didn't make it to the bed, his eyelids feeling heavy and his arms feeling like they were weighed down, but he got there in the end, flopping down onto the bed like a ton of bricks.

The bed broke, three of four legs somehow snapping, one right after the other, the bed slapping down onto the floor.

Mark grumbled, face in his pillow. And then he got up and finished breaking the bed enough to make it lay flat as it could.

Mark slept.

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Mark woke to the smell of meat grilling, spices in the air and something sweet underlying all of it. Cinnamon rolls? For one sleepy moment, Mark thought Dad was cooking. But Dad never made anything sweet. Maybe Mom was making something?

And then Mark woke up just a bit more, and he knew who was cooking in his kitchen.

Mark got up, since it was that time, and then he made his way to the bathroom and fixed himself up. Hair brushed, teeth brushed, the usual morning ritual. Still nothing out the back end, which was still weird, but the front end took a while to unload. And then Mark went to his room and got dressed in some clothes that would be comfortable for Tutorial. The simple brown clothes, Mark thought. Pretty standard attire. Was today a day of rest for the Tutorial? Or another day of work? Mark wondered what Addashield would say, or do.

What would the *demon* do?

Steeling himself as much as he could, Mark walked down the hall.

He arrived at the kitchen.

Addashield was there, as expected. He wore simple brown clothes of a sandy color, just like Mark; basic goods. Addashield was making breakfast, which was sort of expected too, but Mark absolutely didn't *actually* expect to truly see an archmage making breakfast. Addashield flipped sausage in the pan, like it was normal. For a moment, it was normal.

Archmage Sloane Addashield turned and grinned. "Hey Mark! You got bigger! Congrats on that. Sit down and I'll pour you some orange juice."

He looked much the same as the last time Mark had seen him, but shorter. And yet, he wasn't shorter. Mark had simply grown taller, so that explained that. Mark seemed to have grown a little wider, too, for as he sat down the chair seemed smaller than usual.

It was easy enough to pretend that everything was okay, so Mark smiled a little and sat down, "Thank you. It smells great, Sir Addashield."

“I try to cook every now and then,” Addashield said, as the fridge door opened on its own and the orange juice floated out. A glass floated out of the cupboard and the juice went into the glass, before the glass set down in front of Mark. It was a casual display of power that Mark knew was anything but, for Addashield was doing telekinesis, as a metalkinetic, and Mark didn’t see any metal on anything he had just been served. “I’m glad you liked the eggs! They’re some of my favorite, too.”

Mark smiled. “Are they snake eggs? Or something else? I’ve never seen snake eggs in any store before.”

“Basilisk eggs, actually. Hard to come by unless you know people, but they’re some of the best sort of foodstuffs that a baseline can eat in order to rebuild strength. That’s because *as eggs* the basilisks are baseline, too, but they have the capability to become highly magical creatures all on their own.”

Mark sipped his juice as Addashield spoke, but he almost coughed a little bit and he had to thump his chest when the archmage just dropped magical knowledge on him like that.

Addashield noticed. He grinned. As the oven opened on its own and the cinnamon rolls floated outward, Addashield said, “You’re going to be in high society one way or another soon enough, Mark. You’re going to have to catch up on every bit of magical knowledge you can possibly find, because people are going to take advantage of you. When this is over, don’t sign up for anything with more than a week’s commitment.”

“What about being your actual apprentice?”

Something touched Mark’s left shoulder.

Mark looked left.

His shirt sleeve was lifted, and a knife stuck out of his shoulder. It was one of the normal steak knives that Mark had been using for the last most-of-a-week, and it was about an inch into his shoulder, positioned with the blade into the thickest part of his meat. It pulled out, telekinetically, and not much blood came out afterward. Not much pain, either.

Addashield said, “You should bind that. Here.” Wound-closure bandages and some gauze flowed onto the kitchen table in front of Mark.

Mark felt his heart racing hard, but he retreated into decorum.

Quark’s talk about Xerkona culture suddenly seemed more important today than it had been yesterday.

With hands that barely shook at all, Mark opened some bandages and dipped the gauze into antiseptic, before sticking the gauze down on his arm and then further securing it with the wound bandages. It would hold rather well, even if it was a bit wet from the antiseptic. Mark barely felt the sting.

Addashield began putting breakfast onto plates, using a spatula to transfer sausage to plates, along with eggs and cinnamon rolls which floated to where they needed to be. As he did that, Mark’s white drop bottle landed in front of him with a gentle plonk. “You don’t want to be my apprentice. Don’t ask for things you don’t know about. Stick to your life. Now take a drop of the white. You’ll be taking around every hour, until I say otherwise. After you eat, you can sit in the living room and turn on some cartoons or something. Whatever kids are into these days. You’ll probably nap. After lunch, you can do those stretches you’ve been doing and then we can go into the Tutorial.”

“Yes, sir,” Mark said, as he took the eyedropper and plinked a single drop onto a spoon. He licked the spoon, and then he sipped his orange juice.

Addashield nodded, and then set Mark’s plate in front of him. In a conversational tone, Addashield said, “I’m kinda mad that it took this level of disruption to finally be able to take a student who was allowed to take the drops. Do you know what those are?”

“No, sir.”

“Do you have a guess?”

In a flash of realization, Mark caught on to the rules of this interaction. They were pretty simple, and Mark almost cursed himself for not understanding them the first time. He had been absolutely terrified to see that knife in his shoulder, but...

The rules were simple, and in line with normal Xerkona Doctrine. Addashield, as the power in the space, could say whatever he wanted. He could do whatever he wanted, really, though common cause made him look out for everyone in the area, to ensure that everything was going as well for everyone in the area as he could possibly ensure. Mark could only speak when spoken to, and to answer questions. Everything else was an infraction. Mark would have thought that asking to be Addashield's apprentice would have been the proper thing to do, because... Well. It was the right thing, right? But obviously that was very wrong. Mark also couldn't ask his own questions at all, unless they were clarifying questions.

And so, the knife in his arm.

Usually infractions were repaid with verbal lessons as to what was done wrong, or, in extreme cases, ostracization. 'Exile' was the most extreme form of ostracization, and that only really happened in Daihoon, though even that culture was fading, as far as Mark knew. Ostracization was usually just a snub and a decline to further speak with a person.

Apparently, Mark would be getting injury-based lessons in civility.

With that in mind, Mark considered Addashield's question about the nature of the drops, and answered, "I believe they must be derived from some sort of herbal thing, as all alchemy is derived."

Addashield said, "You can eat."

Mark began to eat.

Addashield began, "It's not that simple, but in some ways it is. Color Drop, also called Emperor's Child, is a physical cultivation technique done through astral body doping. All of that went right over your head, which is normal for a baseline behind Curtain Protocol, and something I'm glad to see remains true for you. Normally, no one talks about any of this stuff to baselines because to know the words is to begin the process by which a person imbues themselves with directed power. I just said some Key Words, you see, and that unlocked some basic potential. Key Words are words that the demons of Arakino and Stone God Malaqua have imbued with power. Knowing the words is not enough, but it does unlock the potential in a person. Thus the term 'Key Words'.

“Color Drop is an alchemical treatment whereby you take certain Key Words and you put them into liquid form. Plant and animal-based alchemy is a toy compared to the higher orders of alchemy out there, and Key Word alchemy is one of those higher orders. You have been ingesting words these past 6 days.

“As you are a baseline, the words had their full effect upon you, but they did not produce who you are today. That was your effort, and it was a good effort to see. If you would have been born in a noble house, you would have been a prodigy if through nothing more than effort alone. Do you think you can keep up that sort of effort past the Tutorial?”

Mark swallowed what he was eating, and then spoke with deference, “I doubt I could keep this effort going for much longer, sir, but if I saw gains like I did this last week I feel I could go rather far.”

Addashield nodded, and then he started in on his own breakfast.

Mark resumed eating, too, trying to make sense of ‘Key Word Alchemy’ and trying to understand what sorts of ‘words’ he had been taking with every meal. He wanted to ask questions about all that, about ‘astral bodies’ (which Mark was absolutely sure was a Big Key Word, because he had never heard it before then) and physical cultivation and the demons being the ones to do... what? *Decide how magic worked?* But those sorts of questions would be a bad idea. Mark didn’t need another knife in his shoulder to tell him that.

When Mark finished his breakfast, Addashield told him, “Take off your bandage and get some more food. Another white drop, too.”

Mark did exactly as instructed. He was surprised to find that his wound was already gone, leaving behind little more than a faint red line on his skin. Addashield said nothing about that, and Mark didn’t either. Instead, Mark got seconds, along with another white drop.

Addashield floated more food onto his own plate, too, as he asked, “What sorts of words do you think the various colors contain? Explain your reasonings, from top to bottom.”

Mark had been thinking a lot about that; about everything, from his scanning readout that he had done yesterday with its six different bars, all of him still below the red line which was the Tutorial cutoff, to

what sort of words could be used in Key Word alchemy that could do... anything that it was doing, really. He considered the nature of language itself, as well.

And then he set aside his usual choice to never think about that stuff too deeply, lest it affect him, because Addashield was directly asking him to think about all of it...

Oh.

It was, perhaps, Mark's instinct to blind himself to what he saw, read, and felt, that helped him to figure out where to start.

With a measured tone, Mark said, "Words inherently classify the world into things that are understood in certain ways. But words that mean one thing to one person could mean different things to different people, unless there's some sort of underlying meaning to everything, and I guess there must be an underlying, *imposed truth*, if demons and gods can simply *decide* how things work... Which seems completely ridiculous to me, but I guess Curtain Protocol only works because the Curtain is locked behind actual *Keys*..." Mark got back on track, though he was pretty sure he was already on the right track to begin with, if Addashield's careful eyebrow raise was any indication. "So I imagine that each color corresponds to some sort of way that power works under the repaired System that, I think, you created alongside Malaqua... But I don't really know any of that story. Not really.

"I *do* know that I was 'flavored' with metalkinesis and healing magic, which I *think* corresponds to two of the bars on the 6-bar graph that I get with every scanning.

"Every scan I've gotten before this past week has been more or less the same, with the first bar being nothing, the second bar being 3 pips out of however-many the whole graph covers— I have no idea how large the graph goes, but I assume it goes up to, 50? or something? Anyway. The red line is at 10 pips. I have had a 1 in the first bar, 5 in the second, 1, then 5 again in the fourth bar, and then 1 and 1. The exact numbers change daily, and I think the graph readouts are changed, too, to obfuscate understanding under Curtain Protocol, but the overall shapes of the bar graph are the same.

"Nothing in bars 1, 3, 5, and 6, and something in bars 2 and 4.

"But the biggest change came this last week.

“The scanner started to record the first bar in the graph as something other than near-0 when I started the Color Drop program. At first, the readouts were just 1,4,0,4,0,0, or something close to that.

“But Yesterday, my readout was 3, 5, 0, 6, 0, 0.

“And so, I think the colored liquids are doing a few things.

“Firstly, they correspond to a 6-color diagram, starting with Blue, then going to Green, Yellow, Orange, Red, and then Purple. The drops I have are Blue, Green, and Orange. And then White. The Color Drops actually do something, but the White takes it away— Balances. That’s what Quark said, though he wouldn’t tell me anything else and I did not ask. The white drops balance.

“The Blue drops correspond to the first bar, which is why I have a 3 in that bar instead of a 0. That’s new.

“Green is the second bar, which I think is either kineticism or healing, or some broader category.

“Orange is the fourth bar, which is, again, either kineticism or healing, or some broader category.

“That’s the only information I have, aside from the fact that I healed and got even better.

“Which is another bit of information, I guess. So the first category likely has to do with the body healing.

“Since brawnies heal easily and largely, and they often get bigger, I assume that the Blue is for brawny flavoring. Maybe brawny flavoring is the best way to heal a person, because it works on the base foundation that Malaqua forged out of the System of Arakino? That *seems* correct, and seems to explain some of my, uh. Increase in everything physical.

“So words like ‘power’ ‘strength’ ‘fortitude’ ‘limberness’ ‘stretching’... More like that? Go into Blue? Not sure.

“And that leaves Green and Orange, for kineticism and healing. I can only guess at what sorts of words go into which, and they are likely wholly incorrect.” Mark paused for a moment in thought, and to see if

Addashield wanted to stop him, but since Addashield just ate his breakfast as Mark talked. Addashield was waiting for more, so Mark continued, “And the white drops do... balancing? Maybe that’s just it. ‘Balance’. Maybe the words ‘balance out’, to purge small problems?”

And that was all Mark had.

Addashield said, “You’re not nearly as nervous this time as you were when we first met in that office, where you bumbled through your words to arrive at your points. What changed, besides everything?”

“I have a goal now, and this is not a nebulous social visit. I’ve also remembered some of my grandfather’s Xerkona training that he held onto from his army days.”

Addashield grinned between a bite of eggs and the next.

Mark resumed eating.

When they had both had seconds, Addashield began floating the dishes around, washing them in the sink and then drying them right afterward, while he also said, “You remember when I spoke to you about people entering arcanaeum, and what to expect from them? I said, ‘some people you’d expect to do remarkably well in arcanaeum fail out completely, and some that you think will fail in their first month turn into archmages.’

“With the brain you’ve got and your sort of work ethic, I’m rather sure that you could be one of the greats. Hard to know for sure, but I’d give you better odds than most.”

Mark simply said, “Thank you.”

This did *not* earn him a knifing, though technically it should have... Maybe. Mark was unclear on the exact rules. It had been a long time since he had taken etiquette lessons from grandpa, and Tutorial training certainly didn’t cover that sort of thing.

Addashield nodded, then said, “You’re going to gather a lot of esoteric information in your life, such as the Key Word thing, and the fact that Word Alchemy exists at all. Yes, people have a small-word



understandings of Key Words and how certain words can ruin a baseline's base line. But they don't know the real truth. You have learned at least 2 truths today, one of them larger than most.

“Outside of teacher-student interactions, or high level person interactions, this information should not be shared.

“It is valuable information. Stick to monetary interactions in your future endeavors if you can help it. If you find a good alchemist— and I mean a *really* good, young alchemist, or someone venturing down that path, then you could tell them about Key Words and Word Alchemy. Do not tell this to baselines at all, no matter how promising they might be.

“I've given this information to well over 50 people, and only 4 people in my life deserved this knowledge. All 4 of them were from Daihoon. All the others, from both worlds, squandered this information, or they caused a disaster that I needed to clean up. You'll be lucky if you could do anything with this knowledge yourself, but if I were you I'd focus on starter magics before anything else. Eventually, you can use these truths as a bargaining chip to get someone good on your side.

“If someone tries to take your knowledge, through coercion or duplicitous means, then you are within your rights to ostracize them, or worse.”

Mark bowed in his chair, “Thank you, sir.”

Addashield nodded. “What sort of career are you looking at after Tutorial?”

Mark instantly added, “I want to be the center of a team. With healing and metalkinesis, I feel that is within my reach.”

“Good.” Addashield said, “If you would have said anything else, I would have discounted you.” And then Addashield said something that surprised Mark a great deal. Addashield instructed him, “Ask me a question.”

Mark almost asked him what he thought he should do after the Tutorial, but under normal rules of Xerkona, and if there was a large gap in station, requesting for direction and then receiving that

direction thus honor-bound the receiver to do whatever the giver told them to do. If you asked for the guidance of a king, you needed to follow that guidance without hesitation. The larger the gap, the larger the honor binding.

Mark didn't want to put himself in that position, and he certainly didn't want Addashield to give him those sorts of instructions, what with the demon clearly in partial control.

So instead Mark asked something similar to his original idea, "What should I know going beyond the Tutorial?"

Addashield sat back in his chair for a moment, then looked back to Mark, and began, "Depending on what happens after your Awakening, your options will be vastly different. If you awaken a true tri-Talent it might be worse for your personal freedoms than if you awaken the bi-Talent that we planned on.

"Three Color Drop is *not* a normal Color Drop regimen. Two Color Drop is routine, and used to give a kid a second Talent. Four Color Drop does not exist, though some people have always been greedy or stupid enough to try.

"Three Color Drop is the one that they give people who they think will be capable of doing great things. People who are capable of doing great things are often used by those above them before those people have a chance to develop their own ideas about life. The powers-that-be of Orange City and probably a few other places gave you a Tri-Color Drop in order to manifest a third Talent. A brawn-type astral body manifestation. Brawny is the most normal variation and you weren't already pointed that way, so adding in the Blue Drops, as you correctly identified, might awaken some sort of physical power within you.

"Politically, you do not want this.

"Personally, more power is always good.

"Hopefully you like whatever you get.

“But because you are being played, politically, as a measure to reach me, perhaps... As I said earlier: don’t agree to any contracts beyond a week’s time schedule. Joining one of the larger, laxer guilds does not count. What I mean is this: Don’t agree to schooling, or to being stationed here or there, or to joining a noble’s house, or things like that. *Especially* don’t agree to something that would put yourself in a position of vulnerability around any sort of Guild or Great House.

“If you awaken a bi-Talent then it should be a lot easier for you to live your own life.

“Either way, go out and fight monsters, if you can. It should be easy for you to do that.

“Even as a bi-Talent, though, you’ll still be recruited heavily...” Addashield looked like he might have said more, but he stopped there and went in a different direction, “The exception to joining organizations will probably be the Church of Freyala. You will have to give them some of your time because they instilled a healing predisposition into you, and they do not normally do this for anyone who is outside of their established family or knightly lines. That said: all of the churches are relatively good people, except for Thrashtalon.

“Kill Thrashtalon’s people on sight.”

The betrayer god? Yeah. That made sense. Mark nodded.

Addashield continued, “Freyala’s church will help you understand your healing talent, whatever it might be, though it will probably be the same as Freyala’s healing magics. You’ll find out about those later.”

Mark almost said thank you—

Addashield added, “Ah. One more thing. This deference you’re giving me in the Xerkona-style is good and proper, but you have no real skill with this sort of thing. Don’t try to be what you’re not, unless you learn how to be what you’re not. You should endeavor to understand this manner of speaking and doing in a deeper way, though. Do not neglect manners when moving through life; culture is all that separates us from the monsters.

“You will probably fit in better with the superhero culture they have going on over here on Earth, but you should still try and learn proper Xerkonan etiquette *before* you venture over to Daihoon, and you absolutely should go over to Daihoon sooner, rather than later. Noble Obligation culture is also fine to adopt, and it fits in well enough with Xerkona. Perhaps go to Europe or China and learn from those places. Xerkona is stricter, though.

“In Xerkona, and if you awaken a bi-Talent, with one of them as healing, *and* if you’re competent at all with both of them, that will put you on the same honor level as a town mayor or a town guildmaster. At that level, you should know how to protect a city of 1000 people, and be expected to carry yourself in such a manner that deserves such honor. There’s more to it than that, with tiers coming into the picture after you Ascend, but that’s a good enough approximation of the honor level a true bi-Talent should experience.

“If you awaken a tri-Talent, you’ll be considered the equal to any city lord, and be expected to carry yourself in such a manner. You will be expected to be able to defend a city against monsters of your tier, and... Well. That arrangement gets complicated.

“That’s only if you actually wear good clothes and stand out in the open, of course. If you present yourself as a power, then you will be *expected* to provide for everyone around you. So don’t stand out unless you want the responsibility for thousands of lives. Just be a rough-and-tumble slayer, or something like that, and you can somewhat ignore common culture.”

Well that was a whole lot of stuff that Mark only barely knew about. He knew of noblesse oblige and how it was sort of like superhero culture, but not really, and how Xerkona was like both of those and also military-flavored, but not really at all. It was a lot to think about.

Mark waited a moment to see if Addashield was going to say something else, and when the archmage did not, Mark bowed in his seat again, saying, “Thank you for your instruction, sir. It has been most informative.”

Addashield nodded, then said, “Take another white drop and go watch some television or read a book, or something. Rest. In an hour, take another white drop. Eat if you want. Repeat until you want to fall asleep, and then do that. Should happen before noon. When you wake up from that nap you’ll eat a small meal, and we’ll be doing your Tutorial.”

Mark took a white drop, bowed, and then left to the living room.

-----

Mark managed to find something to watch in the living room, and then watched it. Even though he sat there, eyes open and on the screen, Mark had no idea what he was seeing. His mind was 100% elsewhere. He did remember to go take another drop in an hour, though.

Addashield was not there in the kitchen, or anywhere in the house, actually... or maybe he was? Mark didn't exactly go exploring. He didn't want to know what he didn't want to know. Not yet, anyway. Not before the danger was over and Addashield was done kowtowing to his demon.

When Mark got back to the couch, to watch more television, he distracted himself by asking, "Quark? Can I get a final readout of the full 7 days of Color Drop physical cultivation?"

The television flickered away from the show, displaying numbers.

172 → 175 → 179 → 182 → 184 → 185 → 186 → 189 centimeters tall

57 → 65 → 71 → 78 → 83 → 84 → 88 → 95 weight in kilograms

20 → 30 → 50 → 65 → 80 → 90 → 95 → 105 bench in kilos

30 → 40 → 65 → 80 → 100 → 110 → 115 → 125 deadlift

25 → 40 → 65 → 75 → 90 → 100 → 105 → 115 squat

Quark provided the numbers in imperial without asking.

**Final numbers:**

**Height: 6'2.5"**

**Weight: 210 lbs**

**Bench: 231 lbs**

**Deadlift: 275 lbs**

**Squat: 253 lbs**

Mark smiled at those numbers.

This might be the only time that he would ever experience such a large increase in physical capability, and he loved it. Seven days to full recovery, and then some! And then some *by a lot*. He was over 6 feet tall now. How crazy was that! Insane, really.

There were a few flies in the ointment, of course. He was pretty sure he had been stronger before, even though he had been shorter. He was only 17 and 8 months before he entered the coma, and those four months to 18 should have been filled with strength and endurance training, so he should have been able to blow past these numbers on this screen. 235 squat? Should have been 300 by age 18, since Mark had been training to be strong. 230 bench? Should have been 275. Deadlift should have been 350, at least. Pure strength wasn't the best way to determine success as a warrior, though, so Mark's current numbers were great, and he was taller, so that would help a *lot* in the Tutorial.

He felt he weighed more than he appeared to weigh. Maybe he was only really 180? Did he have 20 pounds of adamantium in his body? Probably not, really. It'd been around 7 months since Addashield imbued his body with the stuff, so he should have something like a thumbnail-sized piece collecting all across the bones of his body. A thumbnail-sized hunk of adamantium was about twice as heavy as the same hunk of gold, so maybe he had half a pound of adamantium in him? Less? More?

Did the adamantium collect in cell deposits? Or was it inside all of the marrow, like a diffuse cloud?

No way to really know besides asking Addashield, and Mark did not want to step into that danger zone until he needed to, and he did not need to do that right now.

Mark watched television until another hour passed, and by that time he was already kinda sleepy. He took another white drop, had a snack, and then decided to head to bed. Wrapped in covers and feeling too comfortable, Mark drifted to sleep in the middle of the morning.

The sun was shining outside, in a cloudless, blue sky.

-----

Mark woke to the sound of rain on the roof.

As he stretched, Mark yawned and blinked out his sleep. The sky outside of his window was dark with clouds and the rain came down in rushing waves. A shuddering wind blew through the oak tree outside, tossing leaves and creaking the wood.

A big storm, then.

Mark got up and scratched himself as he walked down the hall, yawning again. After a trip to the bathroom, Mark went to the kitchen.

Addashield was still absent.

“Quark? Is Addashield here?”

Quark did not respond. He was probably under interaction restrictions with Addashield being nearby. Mark didn't bother to investigate the archmage's whereabouts more than that.

Mark decided to make himself a sandwich. A light snack before the Tutorial.

He tried not to get too nervous.

He made a second sandwich for Addashield, who was still not there, and then he ate his own. No white drops this time. Just food. And drink. When Mark was done with his own meal he put Addashield's sandwich back into the fridge, and then he got ready for the Tutorial.

His previous shoes were a little small, and he should probably go up another size, but that would be using new shoes in the Tutorial, and that was just bad. Better to use these two-day-old pairs that mostly fit. His clothes got the same evaluation. Once he was dressed in comfortable jeans that allowed for full range of motion, socks and shoes, and a teeshirt and long sleeved shirt, he was almost ready. A belt finished off the prep.

And then Mark did a round of stretching.

The storm outside was gathering strength. The sky was dark. The rain was coming down hard, now.

On a whim, Mark asked, "What's the weather forecast like, Quark?"

No answer.

Mark frowned at that. Had Addashield killed the AI? Maybe.

Mark went to the living room. The silver box that held the House AI box was still stuck to the wall, its silver tendrils burrowed into the wall like roots. Tiny lights glowed in the cracks of those roots and along the edges of the box itself. Lights glimmered under the silver surface, too. Mark couldn't make heads or tails of all of that, exactly, but the lights were on, so it seemed to be working.

"Quark? You there?"

Silence.

Mark ignored Quark's silence

He was getting nervous now.



For a warmup, Mark went down to the garage. With the garage door still shut, he swung around a sword with one hand while he pretended to bash goblins with the shield in his other hand. He didn't want to do too much, so he stopped there. He discarded the shield and sword and he opened the garage door.

The world was a rainstorm. It came down at a harsh angle, whipping around the sides of the house and then flowing directly away, but also down, and to the sides. The wind was coming in from the other side of the house, and almost no rain came into the garage. It was still kinda terrifying to see that much rain.

Mark was just nervous.

Mark sat on the bench press for a little while, just looking out of the garage door, at the rain. The power was still on, so the grid was working. Mark wasn't too scared.

And then the storm came in stronger, which Mark didn't think was possible, but here it was, a river pouring from the sky.

Wind howled.

Lightning crackled overhead, passing this way and that, vibrantly shaking the world into light.

Thunder rolled, and Mark's breath hitched as something much closer cracked and broke; the sound of a tree falling, twisted apart by the storm.

The streetlights died and the lights in the other houses flickered and died, plunging the world into full darkness in the middle of the day. The lights in the garage and the rest of Mark's house stayed on, but only because Quark was still alive and an independent power source. The house would always have electricity, now—

A roar in the dark echoed across the storm—

No.

Not a roar.

That was just a generator turning on. Mark recognized the rumble and then the steady rush of noise. Just a generator, rumbling in the dark. Some lights turned on in the distance, in the dark, far beyond the sheets of rain.

Mark felt a distant fear edge into his stomach like a cold knife that had already been pressed to his flesh for the last hour. Too many bad scenarios played in his mind, each one worse than the last.

If there were monsters out there, then the lights were a beacon to them.

Mark told Quark, “Garage down, Quark. Turn off all lights but the small ones.”

The garage door rumbled down, the noise of the moving metal barely heard above the storm. Mark was glad that Quark could still hear his own voice over the noise. The lights turned off. Darkness consumed all, and Mark could only hear the sound of the rain, roaring and roaring. A light turned on in the hallway leading into the house, beyond a proper door. A thick door.

Mark opened that door and went into the house—

He turned around and grabbed a shield and sword from the garage, just because he... he wasn't sure why. He couldn't take them into the Tutorial. Everything but basic clothes would be stripped from him. But for some reason he wanted a sword in his hands—

Addashield stood under a light in the downstairs living room.

Mark yelped, fear breaking into realization that an archmage was here, and he was safe.

And then Mark remembered that he wasn't really safe at all.

Addashield grinned a little, his eyes flickering with a redness that was not his own eye color at all. He said, “You can't take that into the Tutorial, so you might as well drop it.”

Mark set the sword down against the wall and began taking off the shield, feeling more and less secure by the moment. Oddly enough, even knowing that Addashield had done some horrible things, and

knowing that his demon was in partial control right now, Mark was still relieved to see the archmage. A whole lot relieved, actually.

Mark breathed easy. He calmed.

Addashield noticed. “You were nervous, and now you’re less nervous?”

Mark said, “Big storms are scary sometimes, and you’re here now. Of course I’m less nervous.”

Addashield smiled softly, hummed once in a way that might have been a sign of amusement, and asked, “Ready for the Tutorial?”

“I might have to piss again, but other than that, yes. I made you a sandwich if you want it.”

Addashield said, “Go ahead, and then drink some water. I’m not hungry, but I appreciate the thought. Let’s leave in 2 minutes.”

Mark went and stood over the toilet for a good 30 seconds with his dick in his hands, trying to pee. The storm raged outside and Mark’s stomach was tumbling again. Eventually he managed to squeeze out enough, and then he tucked himself away and had a glass of water from the sink. He splashed his face and then opened the door—

Addashield was standing there.

Mark calmed his second near-heart attack away, and then he stood there.

Addashield said, “I will offer you a handshake. We will grip hands. What I do will sting a little. Only after that will I tell you to accept the Tutorial, and then you will accept the Tutorial. Once we are inside, you are *NOT* to talk to me. This is vitally important. Small infractions of looking my way will go unnoticed. If you *talk* to me, if you *interact* with me directly, then Malaqua might invalidate your Tutorial and you get nothing. *I* will get nothing.

“I will not save you if you look to die. You dying or failing the Tutorial today will mean the equivalent of my own death. Do not expect me to save you for any reason at all.

“I will, however, assist you with scouting, as long as the scouting is not directly a part of that particular testing room. This means pointing out monsters that are obvious. You will follow my instructions when I give them, but otherwise the Tutorial is your own.”

Mark held out a hand. “Understood.”

Addashield breathed deep and closed his eyes for a moment.

He opened his eyes in time to a flash of lightning from outside, or maybe his eyes had actually lit up. Mark could not say. All he could tell was that Addashield was focused, and his eyes were vaguely red and black. Addashield took Mark’s hand.

It was a strong grip.

The archmage’s black adamantium bracer on that arm deformed a little, twirling out into long, thin needles. Needles slipped into Mark’s forearm and bicep. It stung, but not too much at all.

Addashield said, “At the end of the Tutorial, there is a pillar with a hunk of prismatic substance on it. I will approach it first, do some alterations to it, and you will touch it when I tell you to, which will be right after I alter it. There can be no hesitation. When you touch it you will Awaken and Complete the Tutorial, with either a bi-Talent or the tri-Talent that the makers of the Color Drops were trying for. We can talk after you Awaken, in the time between Tutorial end and return to the real world. Understand?”

Mark was giddy and frozen from a combination of anticipation and unease.

Mark said, “I understand.”

“Call out to Malaqua and the Tutorial and accept it.”

Mark felt his breath hitch in his throat.

The storm raged outside, rain battering the world. The sky roared.

Here it was.

Mark was finally getting to take the Tutorial.

Mark spoke, "Malaqua! I accept the Tutorial!"

Words filled his vision.

**Mark Careed of Earth.**

**You are at least 18 years of age and eligible for a pure mana baptism.**

**Initializing teleport to the Tutorial.**

Everything went white.

-----

Mark found himself in a white room.

Addashield was a part of the room, and not quite. Addashield floated, cross-legged, and a flowing wind surrounded him, masking him to most sights, erasing him from sight and revealing him at the same time. It reminded Mark of looking at someone through a window with slatted blinds.

And then there was the goblin.

A young one that must have just been born from the corpse of some monster, for it was still covered in bloody mucus. It was still disoriented from its own teleport, too. It lay on the ground ahead, scrabbling to get to its feet, and it would soon rise to its feet and be ready to eat and spread.

Goblins were nasty beasts. If they attacked a weakened person, or if the goblin was strong, then the person would balloon with parasitic infection and then pop, spilling more goblins into the world. Even with that sort of power, they were on the low end of threats on Daihoon.

They couldn't infect you in the Tutorial, though, but only because they were truly weak here in the Tutorial. They probably could infect a person just fine, even here in this space, but those that they infected never made it out.

Addashield's voice spilled through the air like a hidden wind, "Kill it."

Mark heard those words just fine, but the goblin gave no reaction.

Mark took a step forward, the shaking in his hands, the weakness of his steps, all fading. Nerves stilled. Mark knew what must be done.

Social interactions were tough. Battle? Battle was easy. Theoretically. Mark had never actually killed anything before. Cleaning fish to eat them did not count, and the False Tutorial only *felt* real. It wasn't real, real. This was real, real.

The goblin jerked as it heard Mark's footsteps.

Mark heard that older goblins could talk and interact with people in order to truly harm a settlement, or a city, but the young ones were feral monsters, just like the monster now rising before Mark.

It was about the size of a child and deeply green with lighter green stripes on its head and body. Big ears flicked this way and that, searching for other threats, but Mark was the only threat here, and its big red eyes focused on him. It blinked out the goop in its eyes, and then it screamed and ran at Mark, exactly like a monster.

Mark punted the beast into the far wall.

It had tried to grab onto his foot but it failed completely, its coordination little more than base instincts. The monster slammed into the white wall with a wet splat and a bounce. It struck the ground with no bounce at all, and it barely moved once on the ground.

Mark walked over and stomped on its head.

It was now one very dead goblin.

Blood and birthing mucus scattered as frail bones broke. The goblin died, and Mark stood solid upon what was left of it. And then the body began to ebb away. It was not like the hardlight, holographic constructions of the False Tutorial. This had been a real being. A real life. And now the Tutorial was unspooling its entire existence. Flesh became memory and color that flowed into the white floor, and then away. It had become pure mana. Prismatic mana.

Mark wasn't wholly sure how life worked out past the Tutorial, but he was 18 years old, he watched popular movies and shows some of the time, and he had once been a kid in school right alongside everyone else. Curtain Protocol was real, with most people simply never talking about magic at all in order to keep their children safe, and able to choose their own magic paths in life, but Mark knew some things.

The Tutorial was, at its core, a preparation ritual.

The walker would enter the trial. The trial would gather small resources from wherever it gathered those resources; like plucking a freshly-spawned goblin from its birth and plopping it right here. In the killing or surpassing of those resources, the ritual would turn those resources into pure power. Completing the ritual would allow the walker to Awaken a Talent. Not a Knack or a Knowing, or any weak thing like that. But a true Talent, which some people called Powers.

Or the walker would die trying.

Mark's pants remained bloody and his shoes covered in pink mucus, but the bones and body of the goblin were already gone, turned to mana to empower the ritual to come.

A door opened up on the side of the white room, and Mark strode forwa—

Addashield zipped through the opening first, saying, "Fool boy. I will scout for you. I told you this much." Addashield went into the next room, looked around from his floating, half-invisible shell of a spell, and said, "Monster killing room. Two goblins. Spear and mace."

Mark smiled a little bit and walked through the white arch, into the next room.

The room was about the same size as the previous one, maybe 5 meters by 5 meters. Same white stone, too, with light coming from everywhere. On the left and right were two goblins. Both of them looked older than the previous one. The left one had a spear that had clearly seen better days. The right one had a mace that looked freshly stolen from some poor low-knight, or something like that. Mark wanted the spear to be a good spear, but he wasn't going to go after that weapon at all, not when the mace was in such a better condition.

Both goblins were also trapped in a stasis spell. It looked like ribbons of prismatic light, gently twisting around them, not actually touching them at all. Both goblins looked furious. Both were bleeding from wounds on their heads and other body parts.

And then the stasis spell broke and both goblins continued the roars that had been stuck in their mouths for however-long. They rushed forward, flinching a little as they realized something weird had happened. But then they saw Mark, and advanced maddeningly.



Mark was already aiming toward the mace goblin.

The thing about monsters is that they were always more dangerous than they looked. The mace-goblin proved this instantly. His eyes went wide and then narrowed as he saw Mark coming his way. He was a smart kinda monster. He realized that he was being targeted, and he also saw the goblin on the other side of the room. Mace-boy turned defensive.

Mark tried to reach the mace goblin, but mace-boy backed up, running away.

Spear goblin was a dumb shit, mindlessly running at Mark, roaring, spear gripped in both hands to run Mark through. That spear was not meant for his tiny body. He was half the size of that spear.

Mark thought he had been prepared for a life or death battle, but Mark found himself switching targets with some difficulty. He was absolutely sure that the mace-goblin would attack when the spear-goblin's attack failed. Mark adapted his stance.

With shoes solidly on the ground, Mark waited till the last moment to grab the spear goblin's weapon drove at his throat. Hands on the shaft of rough-make wood, Mark pivoted, swinging the goblin's spear outward, and the spear-goblin held onto his spear, not letting go, because spear-goblin was stupid.

Mace-boy launched forward the very second Mark was occupied, his mace aimed at Mark's legs.

Mark twisted out of the path of mace-boy, slamming spear goblin onto top of mace boy. The mace went wide. Spear goblin held onto his spear for dear life, like a cat clinging to a branch, even as he collided with mace-boy.

Mark kicked the confused mace-goblin and the spear goblin both, sending them away from the mace. They were adult goblins so they didn't get sent far, but it was enough.

Mark dashed after the mace and grabbed it off of the ground.

Mace-goblin was standing over spear-goblin, hand on the spear, by the time Mark secured his new weapon. With a feral, hateful grin, mace-goblin pulled the spear out of spear-goblin's body, and spear-goblin turned to motes of rainbow light. Mace-goblin had killed spear-goblin.

Mace-goblin was now 'spear goblin'.

And Mark had a pretty good mace. It was a rod of solid metal, a forearm long with a tough leather handle. The ball at the end had some small metal spikes. This was more of a bashing weapon than a cutting weapon. Mark smiled. This was a good weapon.

The goblin smiled, too. He said something in a feral tone. Mark didn't understand it, but it did freeze him in his tracks. A talking goblin? Ah. A really smart goblin, then.

He was taught not to care about what he might see in the Tutorial, but it still suddenly weighed on him that this was a real *person* in front of him—

"He didn't actually say anything," Addashield said. "He probably learned that making mouth noises caused people to hesitate. It's a common tactic that is genetically bred into them through various environmental factors, because, as you see, it worked."

The goblin made more mouth noises, upturning the last syllable to make it sound like a question.

"Ha!" Addashield said, "He's a smart one. Probably born from a goblin implanting seeds into a human. Probably from one of the mountain tribes. Enemies to humanity. They mostly fight against others like themselves in the Tutorial. This is probably his last room. If he should kill you, he will Ascend. You'll kill a lot of his kind in the future."

The goblin walked forward while Addashield was talking, spear gripped lightly to the side, eyes focused on Mark, not on his weapon. He said small words that were not words. Mark was ready for the sudden lunge and spear thrust, whenever it would ha—

Eyes alight with desire, mouth moving, the goblin tightened his grip and thrust, digging his feet onto the stone at the same time. Mark knocked it aside with the spear. The goblin pulled back and then thrust

forward again. Mark advanced inward, parrying the blow and then punching the goblin in the face with his other hand, with a fist. The goblin went down, but he turned that fall into a roll, keeping his spear at the ready.

Mark advanced, twice as big as the goblin, the mace giving him even more range. The goblin roared fury, stabbing and stabbing, none of his blows coming anywhere near hitting because Mark had range on him. A lot of range.

Mark swung at the spear with his mace and the shoddy thing broke, the metal tip flying wide. It wasn't even a spear tip. It was just a hunk of metal wrapped with vine-twine around the end of a mostly-straight length of wood.

Now that his fingers wouldn't get cut by grabbing the weapon, Mark did exactly that, grabbing the weapon. The goblin did not let go. He tried to fight. Mark brained the goblin before he could react fast enough to realize he should have let go of the spear. The goblin sprawled, insensate, its red eyes wandering slowly back and forth as it laid on its back, trying to understand what was happening.

Mark advanced.

Thud. Once more. Smack. Again. Crack.

The goblin died, though it had taken more effort than Mark would have expected. The little monster turned to ribbons of rainbow light that flowed into the white stone floor, and the light above.

Mark took a minute, his gorge rising. He breathed hard, pulling back from puking.

He maintained.

The archway to the next room beckoned. Addashield was already through to the other side.

Mark saw a river-like area beyond the archway. Mark walked into that next room and saw a rather standard location-based trial. He had even studied for this one. It was a river, two sandy banks, and a lot of scattered boulders here and there, both in the water and outside of the water, on the banks.

The river itself looked deceptively shallow, but it was deep enough and fast enough to sweep or sink Mark to his death. It was also a transference room.

The proper exit held on the other side of the river, far up the shore; an archway of white that was currently shut. If Mark got to the archway on the other bank then he'd go forward, but if he got swept away then he'd follow a different trial path. A longer one. If he drowned, then he was just dead.

There was probably a monster in the water, too, though not always.

The 'room' was understood.

What was completely outside of Mark's expectations was the 'room' itself, and that's what caused him to gasp a little.

Addashield watched Mark, his eyes peeking out from between the blinds of his invisibility spell.

The room was like the focused part of a much, much larger picture. That's what Mark first thought. The river was 30-ish meters wide. 30 more meters of rocky, sandy riverbank sandwiched the rushing waters. The river itself was maybe 100 meters long. So a rough circle of space, centers on a river. An archway held behind Mark, though the door there was already closed, while another archway held on the other side of the river bank.

Beyond this space was an out-of-focus picture, becoming much, much more unfocused the further one looked. There was no actual wall. The river came into focus inside this space, and left focus when it left. About a hundred meters of river looked like normal waters.

Addashield said, "It's a real place taken out of time and space and used for the Tutorial. The fading on the edges is a result of the unthreading of the space, taken for use here and now. It can be threaded back into position after you're done with the trial. There's a fish monster at the beginning of the river, so don't try getting into the water there. Start in the middle if you plan to swim, and swim fast. I'll let you know if the fish comes after you."

Mark almost mumbled that of course there was a monster in the river.

Mark looked at the river and walked down to the very beginning of the rushing water. A set of boulders sat close to the beginning of the river section. The river was slower behind those boulders. So yeah. Something *should* be living down there. Mark couldn't see it, but he did not doubt Addashield's words.

Mark had some choices, then.

First off, he was swimming. No way around that.

So what to do with the mace? It was heavy. He could swim with it, and defend himself, or not do that, and go for speed. He wanted to keep his mace. Swimming *or* rock-hopping to a better place to start the swim with the mace was a bad idea, because the rocks by the shore were not plentiful enough to allow him to forgo swimming entirely. So he needed to throw it across the river and pick it up over there.

Easy enough. Decision made.

Mark went back to the middle of the river and then he gripped the mace in his hands... in one hand. Yes. A one-handed throw...

Ah.

It would be monumentally embarrassing if Mark missed the 30-ish meter throwing distance, so he didn't just throw it across the river. He had plenty of shore on this side, though, so he did a few practice throws, and he was glad he did. 30 meters was a lot of distance to cover with a throw with a weapon he had never thrown before.

As the mace slapped into the ground, on his first practice throw, Addashield chuckled once.

"Good thing you practiced. That wouldn't make it across at all."

Mark almost wanted to banter with the guy, but he had been warned off of that. So Mark walked the 20-ish meters to the mace, picked it up, and tried again. His second throw was better. The mace sailed a good 35-ish meters before it plunked into the rocky riverbank. He grinned. That was plenty enough to clear the river—

Ah. Wait. His clothes.

Mark took off his long-sleeve shirt and tied it around the mace. He'd keep the pants and shoes and everything else.

He was pretty sure he could make it four boulders into the 30-meter-wide stream, which meant he'd have 20-ish meters to swim, and the shirt would slow him down in the river too much, so he wasn't going to wear it. With the shirt tied up around the head of the mace, Mark gave it another practice throw and found his distance acceptable.

Mark aimed his next throw across the river, took a running start that ended at the water's edge, and flicked the mace as hard as he could. The weapon sailed, tumbling end over end, and crashed into the rocky shore a good several meters past the water's edge. The shirt muffled the crack of steel against river rock. It was safe.

Now. Did all that noise wake the fish?

Mark went to the front of the river and looked at the calm space behind the rocks; the monster's shelter.

Addashield said, "It woke up, yes, but it's not getting out of its hiding hole for anything other than flesh."

... Eh!

Mark surveyed the river once more. Except for at the very start where the rocks formed a shield for the monster in the center, the center of the river was empty of rocks. The sides had some boulders here and there, to about 5 meters out on both sides. Mark found some rocks that led out about seven meters, a little left of center.

And then he went rock hopping.

It was kinda fun, really. Hop onto one rock, then onto the next. And then he was staring at a good 23 meters of mostly open water. Since he was wearing shoes, pants, and an undershirt, he'd be slowed down a little, but it was a price to pay in case the fish was a lot faster than Mark wanted him to be. He'd

given up enough protection in support of speed by throwing his long shirt across the way, with the mace.

Mark breathed deep. The waters ahead were empty of rocks, while the river itself was clear, blue, and deep, with green grasses flowing in those depths. Visibility was great in this area; probably for the monster's benefit.

Mark braced himself, and then he dove forward. The water was cold, but not terribly so.

He swam for it, swimming as fast as he possibly could, arms wheeling, feet kicking, not bothering to take another breath because the fish was probably right there behind him. He scrambled fast, swimming forward but also going with the flow, but not too much, lest he fall out of the river zone. He swam in front of a boulder and kicked off of it to get across faster. Before he knew it he was hauling himself out of the water—

The water churned behind him, bright yellow fins the size of a shark's slapping this way and that, turning the clear water into white water. Mark did not see the fish's face, or maw. He didn't have to. That fish was a fucking *man eater*.

Holy shit.

Mark's heart beat hard.

Mark was already out of the river and back on dry land. The fish monster slapped at the shore, but Mark watched from far away.

He had ended up about 10 meters from the edge of the space, where all the world turned foggy and unclear and the river rolled on into a different path of the Tutorial, so he hiked back to the middle of the 'room' and grabbed his shirt-wrapped mace. As he walked, he calmed. He breathed deep.

Mark took off all his clothes and spent a minute wringing them out, before he put them back on, asking no one in particular, "What the fuck is with a fish like that in the fucking third damned room? My god. That cannot possibly be fair."

Addashield snorted. “It mostly would have harried you enough to throw you down the edge of the river and out to another Tutorial path. It probably wouldn’t have been able to kill you. It’s just an overgrown leech. Teeth more like dull knuckles than sharp and useful.”

Mark shuddered anyway.

Dressed in damp clothes, Mark gripped his mace and began walking toward the archway, sitting between the clarity of this space and the unfocused rest of the world beyond. Mark saw some sort of arena on the other side.

Addashield was already through to the other side. “Oh! Looks like you’re skipping some rooms. This is a boss room already. The normal path was probably down the river.”

Mark flinched in his steps.

Ah.

So.

Hmm.

Mark kept walking forward, wondering about what other gear he could have gotten if he would have allowed himself to be chased down the river, but also thrilled that he could finish the Tutorial faster. No matter what could have been down that other path, he would have been bludgeoned by the fish and probably nibbled, and left bleeding. A wound taken early in the Tutorial could easily spell death later, for any number of reasons.

With sure steps, Mark entered an arena space about 20 meters across.

The floor was stone covered with a thin layer of sand. The arena walls did not exist, instead it was just stone stadium seats about 8 deep, that came all the way down to the sands. Sand was everywhere, really, even on the seating. The world beyond the stadium was unfocused, just like the river scene in the previous room. The archway to the previous room was gone.



There were no people or monsters here. Just sand.

Addashield said, “One enemy.”

Mark saw it quickly, even before Addashield got out the first word.

It was invisible.

The sand scattered here and there as some maybe-bipedal monster rushed forward from the other side of the arena. It was fast.

Mark kicked sand at it, briefly revealing a humanoid shape that sputtered and backtracked, kicking up sand as it flinched backward, to the side. That told Mark a few different things. It had eyes or other sensory organs that didn't like sand getting in them, so it wasn't an elemental. It also had something like two arms and two legs and a body. It might have an invisible weapon, but probably not. It probably *wasn't* an overly smart monster, like the goblin had been; it had attacked instantly.

It was a monster that made itself invisible, or it was born that way, and it attacked directly.

There was also some sort of silence magic happening, because Mark couldn't hear anything. He could barely hear the sound of sand moving as the creature retreated to the stadium seating, where stone rose above the sands and there was no way to spot the creature at all.

Addashield said, “I can't tell you where it is when it's actively hiding. If you know where it is then the god who runs these Tutorials will know I am here. I have a deal that allows me to be here, but he still doesn't like it. He will invalidate your Tutorial. Don't die.”

Mark wanted to argue over the ridiculousness of those two statements taken together; ‘I can be here’ and ‘He will invalidate your Tutorial’. He did not argue, though. He waited for the monster to do something—

Sand pitter-pattered behind him.

Mark turned, eyeing the sand—

There!

Mark waited until the monster was within 4 meters and kicked sand at the rapidly advancing footsteps—

A scream that was half a roar. The monster raced to the side.

Mark raced faster. He rushed and swiped his mace through the space where—

He hit something, but there was almost no resistance at all. A glancing blow.

The monster turned, its feet or whatever splashing sand this way and that.

Mark blindly chopped with his mace and this time he hit something hard. Something shattered, like glass, or like a bubble popping. A creature stood revealed, and yet Mark was even more confused than before. It was a skeleton-like thing, shaped fully like a human's skeleton, but the bones were all wrong and there was some sort of mirage to the whole thing that hid it from sight, that tried to wrap around the skeleton again.

Mark bashed and bashed, and the skeleton tried to defend itself, to retreat, but Mark hit it harder. The skull was bone shards and the arms couldn't move anymore, but it wasn't until Mark broke the spine, behind the ribs, that some vital force died. The skeleton suddenly discombobulated, every bone scattering a little, as though tension had been released.

As the creature started to dissolve into rainbows, Mark caught sight of its lower jaw. That jaw had fangs. The upper jaw might have had fangs, too; it was already gone, so Mark couldn't tell. Other than that the bones were all sorts of fucked up, like they were growing crystals or spurs, or some shit like that. The whole skeleton had some sort of orange slime mold on it, too.

Mark stared at the dissolving monster. "Was it trying to *bite* me? Was that a fucking... I know the name. Not a vampire. Something... Fuck. I forgot."

Mark knew the monster. It was a slime variant. It crawled into skeletons and it puppeted them. Skeleton slime? Sure. That worked.

Addashield was already through the next door. “Looks like waves of monsters next! I bet you’re over halfway through~”

So that was a weird inflection in Addashield’s voice.

Mark followed Addashield into the next room, not quite sure about the archmage’s state of mind, for him to talk all like ~this~

It was a little disturbing.

It was fine.

Mark would save Addashield from his demon and then go on with his own life, into the broad, broad world beyond.

-----

The monster wave room was rather simple but most people died to this one, or at least that’s what people believed. Hard to know who died in any particular room when they all, you know, died, and Malaqua didn’t publish statistics or anything like that. So perhaps it was more correct to say that *it was believed* that most people died in the monster wave room.

There was a canyon road. High rock walls on both sides.

Mark stood at one end of the canyon road. He had just come out of an archway that was now closed, and vanished. What remained behind him was a stout curtain wall made of stone that spanned from one side of the canyon to the other. A closed wooden door held in the center of that wall. It had probably been a sturdy door at one point in time, but it was on its last legs. Someone had propped up what

remained of the door into the frame, and left it there. It could be taken down easily enough, if Mark failed to defend it.

Down the road, ahead of Mark, lay a warzone. Smoke rose from burning carts. Broken bodies, most of them human. Some monsters of a chimeric nature that looked like dogs with exposed wounds everywhere, and extra limbs or faces or tails. Malformations; Mark supposed. Malformations came in all kinds. Most people, when they monsterized, turned into malformations. All malformations were usually pretty weak, but when they happened there were usually a *lot* of them.

A duo of dogs appeared from behind a pair of flaming carts. They looked around, unsure of what was going on, but they rapidly noticed each other. They noticed Mark a second later. They ignored the fallen bodies as possible food because they weren't interested in food at all. They were interested in causing pain.

They howled as they dashed toward Mark.

A shield lay on the ground beside him, on a corpse. It looked like a pretty flimsy shield, but it would do, for now. Mark would have to grab it before the next wave, though. The dogs were already here.

The first one went high, leaping straight at Mark, but a little to his right side. He would have naturally dodged to the left, but the second one was on the left, and he was aiming low.

Mark went right, swinging his mace down across the right dog's slavering maw, cracking its neck and sending it back to the ground. He didn't move fast enough or far enough to the right and the dog partially caught him with its legs. It wasn't a direct hit and the dog was disoriented now, and almost crashed into its partner, so it was fine. Mark repositioned just in time for the second dog to reposition, too. The second dog turned. It leapt at him, its double face open in two hateful barks, roars, bites.

Overhand smash. Crash to the ground.

First dog was there again. Kick to the face. It bit his shoe but Mark had good shoes. Smash smash. The dog let go.

Mark entered the flow.

Second dog was active again. It rotates around Mark, aiming to bite into his legs. Thwack crack goes the mace. Lucky strike to the neck. Dead dog, already dissolving into rainbow ribbons.

First dog growls and backs away. Howls.

Mark has a moment. He goes for the shield on the ground. Grabs it.

Two more dogs reappear out of nowhere at the end of the canyon path.

He doesn't wait for the first dog to get reinforcements, though the first dog would certainly want him to. Mark advances. The dog retreats to its new friends but not fast enough, and Mark had already brained it once or twice already. Thwack! Crack! Strike to the hip and shoulders. Once more the mace comes down and the mutant mutt dies, becoming rainbow ribbons that dissolve out of focus.

Mark controls his breathing. In, out, steady. Breathing is secured.

The next two dogs are there.

The shield helps to make short work of both of them but after they take some hits they howl and two more dogs appear out of nowhere.

Four dogs at once. Two of them injured.

Mark takes a nip to his left thigh. It could have been worse. The dog's jaw was already broken by Mark's mace. Crack crack goes the mace, meaty thwaps against neck and shoulder and head, when Mark can get it. Two more dogs turn into rainbow ribbons and Mark advances on the final two, killing one as he fends off the other with his shield. Once more, raised high, the mace is ready. Mark breathes outward, swinging down. He does not miss. The last dog dies.

There are no others.

An open archway appeared at the other end of the canyon, beyond the burning caravan and the bodies of the other monsters and the people. The burning caravan and the bodies all vanish in that same moment, dropping out of focus.

Mark breathes as he watches all his possible loot vanish.

He didn't grab it while the scenario was active, so he doesn't get it.

It's fine. He has a good shield, and his mace looks great. Really high quality mace. Solid metal. Bit heavy, but heavy gets the job done. The shield is just wood. Thick wood, too.

Mark breathes and breathes, and relaxes. He takes his pants off to check his wound. It's not much of a wound. Pants go back up. This is good.

That was a good fight. Just like he imagined a fight going. Perhaps there had been other ways to solve this room, but a straight up fight was the best way, in Mark's mind, and so that is what he did.

Addashield floats by him, saying, "Really good showing there, Mark. You have a real feel for combat, don't you? I wasn't sure at first, and watching you train didn't really show me anything interesting— Ah. Aside from the fun you had with the kaiju blade. That was a hoot. You're suited for this life, aren't you? Eh. Don't answer that. I shouldn't have even asked any questions. Good showing, Mark."

Addashield floats forward.

Mark exits the flow, his breath a little shaky, but feeling good.

Mark came back to himself, back to life outside of battle. He was kinda happy about what had just happened. That was a good fight. He didn't freeze. He just flowed. Mark hefted his mace in his right hand and his shield on his left forearm, his grip tight on the handle... He adjusted the strap a little, tightening it up. And then he breathed again, focusing.

He walked into the next room.

-----

It was a corridor with tiles, each about a meter square, and all of them were white. They were obviously pressure plates, and the holes in the nearby walls were spear-holes. Those holes in the ceiling could be problematic. They probably were...

And there were holes in the floor, too! Between every tile and at the corner of every tile were spear holes. Mark almost missed those.

He studied the floor of the landing zone, underfoot, and there were no visible holes in this space. No holes on the walls or ceiling, either.

Addashield floated across the entire length of corridor, not touching anything, to float at the end, and say, "Pretty easy. You got this."

Easy for *him* to say so. Mark had to actually walk across the traps!

And...

Mark frowned a little. Something was wrong with Addashield, but Mark wasn't going to say anything. Still, though. He said he would guide Mark. Explaining which tiles were traps seemed... Seemed like Addashield should have done that. Without needing to be asked, too.

Whatever.

Mark had trained for this sort of thing and did not actually need Addashield.

He walked forward, bent down, and reached out to tap the first tile with his mace—

The tile clicked downward the instant Mark touched it harder than a feather's weight. That tile was now a good inch below all the other tiles, which meant that *every single tile was a switch*.

What happened next truly took Mark's breath away.

In the leading edge of the tile, around the entire corridor, a spear came out of every single hole in the floor and the ceiling and the walls. Those spear points *shunked* out of their hiding holes, crushing together in the center of the hallway, just in front of the tile Mark had touched. The entire hallway, in that one thin band, closed off, like an iris shutting. Hundreds of spears, each black and probably-iron, closed off the hall.

And then every single spear pulled back into the floor, smooth as butter.

Mark breathed hard, trying to understand the full nature of the trap room.

This was a fucking *deadly* trap room.

“Holy shit.”

This was too deadly by—

Mark had pulled back once he touched the first tile. The tile remained depressed. And ever so slightly, in the cracks between that first row of tiles, more spears ticked upward, barely showing out of the holes—

Every single spear in the entire first row of tiles collided inward, like ten irises closing down into the space in front of Mark, and then *shunking* back into the ground. For a brief moment that entire meter-length of corridor was *filled* with spears.

Mark exclaimed, “HOLY FUCKING *shit* that's not a fair... one.” His voice had lost some enthusiasm there at the end.

The tile he had tapped suddenly clicked back up, snapping back into position.

Addashield said nothing. He just watched from behind his blinds of invisibility, as he floated at the end of the corridor.



Mark had never heard of this sort of trap before, but he could guess at it easily enough. Running forward fast was a death sentence; the second he touched a tile, the tile would click down and the leading edge of that meter-sized-tile space would fill with spears.

And then he would have to wait for that row to go back down.

But if he waited too long, then he'd get speared by *all the other spears* in that *entire section of tile*.

Mark reached out and touched a different tile in the front row.

Just like before, the tile clicked down, the leading edge of that entire row became spears, those spears went down —Mark counted the seconds— and 5 seconds later, that entire half-meter row of tiles turned to spears. Spears only came out from *between* the tiles, though. Not from the tiles themselves.

The spears went down, the line reset.

Mark reached forward to the second row of tiles and touched the tile.

The same thing repeated, with the front line of the corridor, in front of that row of tiles, turning to spears, and then five seconds later that entire row turning to spears. The spears only came out of the edges of the tiles, at about 10-centimeter distances from each other. Nothing happened in the first row of tiles.

Mark looked around.

He saw no other parts of the corridor changing in response to the testing of the tiles.

Could he disable the trap by smashing the spears to the side? He had a nice metal mace, after all.

But...

If he tried to actively disable the trap by smashing some parts of it with his mace, maybe to keep the whole thing from resetting, then it would enter a chaotic state. In such a state, the puzzle might become impassible, for spears might just start coming out of everywhere, or some shit. In that case Mark would need to keep disabling the entire trap, and then the next room he ended up in would be a harder room. Or rather, more grueling. Maybe. Violating a test usually resulted in a harder room...

Oh.

Shit.

Was he supposed to *escape* the malformations in the previous room? Maybe go through the easily-broken wooden door, instead of fighting them directly?

Ah.

This was a punishment room...

Even punishment rooms were still traversable, though.

... Still, though.

Mark had never heard of a trap like this one. This sort of trap screamed that it was the type of trap you disabled and then you took the longer route to Awakening.

But the problem with attempting to disable this trap is that Mark knew he *couldn't* actually disable this trap, not really. It had too many moving parts. If he started disabling it, then he'd have to continue to the end, ensuring that every single spear was out of its hole and, like, bent and broken and in the hallway, or else it could enter an active-trap scenario. In those sorts of traps, the room would pay attention to him and then lay in wait to stab him when it could.

The final rooms of the Tutorial always included active traps. This one might actually be an active trap, too...

Shit.

... Well.

This trap was meant to be tackled one meter at a time. Each tile was a meter square, after all.

Mark tested the first row of tiles, each one, to see if there was a safe path.

A few minutes later, and after testing the second row, too, Mark knew there was no safe path at all.

But... Looking at the tiles and how the spears only came up from the edges...

Could he just... crouch inside that square meter, and not get poked at all?

Mark activated the trap again, to see if that could work.

The spears came out just like before and they all closed into the center of the corridor, in front of that row of tiles, like an iris closing. The center of the iris was about 2 meters off of the ground, so a bit above his head. Those spears had come out of the leading tile at about every 10 centimeters, so 10 to a tile. This completely blocked the way forward. No way of going through that.

When the spears went down, the spears to the sides of the meter-wide tiles launched into the middle of the room. With a spear around the edges of the tiles, each coming out from a hole in the ground 10 centimeters from each other, there were more spears active, by number...

But there was an entire meter-square space on every tile that was completely open. Mostly, anyway.

If the spears in the walls and in the ceiling all came out at odd angles, or if they came out in a crossing pattern, then the trap was just impossible to cross. But they came out of the walls in an iris pattern.

So, actually. This was okay?

The corridor itself was a good seven meters across, too. There was one row of tiles in the very center leading all the way to the other end of the corridor.

If Mark tried to walk on the tiles to the *side*, then the spears coming out of the walls would get him, since they were aimed at *angles*. But if he walked in the *center*, then he could just... walk in the *center*. The spears would all go up at his sides, and he could just... Well. A meter-sized tile was a lot of space to stand in.

If he stepped, waited for the leading edge to fall down, and then went forward, then he'd never be surrounded by the spears coming out of the sides of the tiles at all. There was that 5 second delay in the spears coming out of the ground, too.

So he just had to step, let the spears go down, and then step, and it would be fine.

"Okay," Mark told himself, "This isn't that bad as it first appears."

Mark stepped onto the first tile. It clicked down. Spears went up in front of him, and then went down.

He stepped forward again. Spears closed off the way forward, threatening to spear him, and behind him 5 seconds had already passed, so the entire corridor filled with spears, on that row back there. This row was still empty. He could actually step back onto that tile behind him and step into open air, between the spears. But doing that would be bad. He'd be crossing the line where the spears would come out at the slightest touch of tiles.

The spears in front of him went down.

Mark walked forward. The leading edge crowded out with spears, irising from the leading edge and closing off in the center. They went down just as the second row of tiles behind him was fully filled with spears, but even then, there was a gap, here, in this center tile. Lots of space, really.

Mark walked forward, not wanting to be in the big gap of spears anyway.

He was calm as could be.

Spears *shunked* in and out of the corridor.

The corridor was 25 tiles long.

It took Mark about 2 minutes to get through the whole thing.

Mark stepped off of the last tile, onto solid ground near Addashield, and he looked backward—

The entire hallway suddenly filled with spears and then the spears undulated in and out, in a wave, like a throat swallowing. The spears went back into their holders, and then rippled outward just once, just barely.

Mark broke out in a cold sweat and sat on the ground for a moment.

Addashield said, “Good work.” An archway appeared and he floated through it. “Next room is a great journey.”

Mark sat there on the floor for a moment longer.

He collected himself, and then he advanced.

----

A Great Journey room was simple in design.

It was big.

Very big.

Mark started at the foot of a rocky mountain. There wasn't much to the place save for rocks, dirt, and a few scattered low trees and bushes. It was not a very big mountain, but it was big enough. The peak of the mountain was visible, and so too was a hundred-ish meter-wide path from Mark's entrance to that

peak, but everything else was out of focus, the very world itself unspooling beyond some indeterminate distance.

The path was clear.

“Climb the mountain,” Mark said to himself. “Simple enough.”

It was easier said than done, but Mark got to it, and Addashield floated in front of him, leading the way.

There was a canyon crossing the path. Mark found a way down and then back up, back into the light.

Cliffs were the next obstacle. Mark was sweating hard by the time he backtracked this way and that way, finding handholds and small paths to lead upward. Some cliffs were larger than others. Those required backtracking up and down a few times. With his mace tucked into his belt and his hands bleeding a little bit, but a grin on his face, Mark ascended the cliffs.

The mountain peak loomed.

Half an hour from the start, Mark took a break. His legs burned. His lungs felt on fire. He had kinda forgotten how fatigue felt this last week, under the Color Drop treatment. Those drops had fixed him up faster than he could break down, but now he was back to a baseline human, all the way.

Addashield looked down at Mark, saying nothing.

Mark got up and trudged on, trying to keep up a good pace.

The only danger in a Great Journey room happened if you didn't finish it in a few hours; if you stayed here past sunset.

When Mark had entered the room, the sun had been somewhere at 2 hours to setting. Hard to know, because the world was unfocused out there.

Mark reached the peak as the unfocused sun was just starting to touch the unfocused mountain range on the horizon. It was maybe 10 minutes to full sunset.

Mark pulled himself over the final cliff, and there was the peak, all rocky and tan. A doorway into the next room loomed just to the side of the rocky peak. Mark chuckled as he hauled himself back to his feet and got going. He had imagined needing to go back down the other side of the mountain, running to get down fast enough, but luckily that wasn't the case at all. This was the end of this room.

Addashield went through first.

Mark followed, still grinning, so very thankful that he didn't need to climb down the other side of the mountain.

----

Mark stared across a chasm.

A single 2-meter-wide bridge led from his landing point to the other side. It was a long, long bridge. White stone. Aqueduct-type architecture with a trough in the middle and lips on the side. It was maybe a hundred meters long? It had no railings. It had battle damage or wear-and-tear damage here and there. A whole section of the middle of the bridge was little more than a line of broken concrete, maybe a foot across. It wasn't a hole in the bridge, but it was close. Holes opened up in other places, though.

The sky was blue and full of clouds and mist, with some of that mist flowing down below the aqueduct like an airy river.

A knight in shining armor stood at the other end of the aqueduct.

Luckily, the knight wasn't a person. Mark could already tell that. He was an animated armor, so maybe calling him 'him' wasn't exactly correct. The armor pieces floated here and there, and it didn't have a helmet. It did have an absolutely huge shield, though, big and rectangular and metal, and a large sword, both of which floated in front of it. The whole thing was kinda discombobulated, floating there. Mark

knew of most of the common monsters out there, but not many specifics, so he knew what he was seeing, sort of.

It was a living armor.

Was a living armor without a helmet better, or worse? Or was it not a living armor at all? Why was it floating like that, all its pieces barely connected to each other? Mark had thought that living armor held itself together with tendrils, or something.

It was clearly waiting for a combatant to try and cross what remained of the aqueduct.

The door to the next room lay beyond the living armor.

“Well fuck,” Mark said.

“If it’s any consolation,” Addashield said, “This is probably your last room and you can take its body parts as loot. Unless those parts fall over the edges, of course. Or if you fall over the edge. That’s death.”

That’d be death alright.

Mark looked over the edge, down into the canyon. Wind blew at his face, ruffling his clothes. Everything down there was misty and unknowable. At least it was a comfortable sort of mist. Mark was all sweaty and hot after that walk across the mountain—

A sudden gust blew up from the canyon and Mark retreated down, to get closer to the bridge, behind the lip of stone at the edge, because that wind was *a lot*. The wind blew *hard* across the bridge, whistling danger. The living armor’s floating body spread apart a little, and then the armor shielded itself with its shield, coming back together behind the large rectangle of embossed silver.

Addashield’s floating blinding spell did a little tumble in the wind, but it came back together rapidly and never really left him at all.



Mark breathed deep, focusing. He hefted his steel mace and his wooden shield, waiting for the wind to die down. Soon enough the rush of air slowed, and Mark stood up. The living armor came back together, floating gently out from behind its large shield.

Mark stepped forward—

The living armor suddenly solidified into a person-shape, feet hitting on the ground and weaponry in its gauntlets. It stepped forward, but just once.

Mark had only taken a single step, and maybe the armor mirrored him? Mark took another step and the armor did the same thing.

“... Huh.”

Mark surveyed the bridge, wondering where would be the best place to fight since some of the bridge was broken. A 2-meter wide section for both of them? To maybe get some of the armor's pieces when he killed it? No. That was probably crazy thinking. Sure, living armor was supposed to be fantastic armor, but Mark would be wearing webweave for any serious monster fights, or once he could afford it. Armor was heavy... Armor was practical, though?

... No.

Not even the sword or the shield. Mark didn't *need* either of them...

That sword though.

Mark *wanted* the sword.

He'd take the sword if he could get it. To do that, he'd need to fight the monster where he would have the most advantage, and that probably meant... just on *this* side of a broken part of the bridge? Make the armor have a hard time closing the distance?

Oh wait.

Mark felt like an idiot.

The monster floated when it was at rest, and walked when it felt like walking. Maybe Mark was the *only one* constrained to the bridge at all, in which case he didn't want to be anywhere near the broken part of it, because the monster could just circle around through the air and trap Mark against the broken section of the bridge.

... Play it by sight? So far the thing was walking on the ground. Might be a trap—

The living armor rushed forward.

Mark stayed right where he was... Hmm. He moved forward a little, to get more in the middle of a good section of the bridge.

The armor rushed across the bridge. There was a gap in the bridge right in front of it, and it did not stop at all. It ran forward and tumbled straight down into the gap in the bridge, like a silver, jangling rock.

... uh.

Mark heard metal banging on metal—

Oh shit.

Mark started running for it, even before he truly understood what he already knew to be true. Legs pumping, arms holding his weapons with as much balance as he could, Mark ran, sprinting down the aqueduct. The jangling of metal stopped, either because of the wind, or because what Mark suspected to be true, was coming true.

The armor had been floating in the air when Mark first saw it. The wind pushed it around. When Mark had advanced a step, it came together and started walking, adopting a normal-ish person-like walk. That had been a misdirection. A trap, trying to get Mark to underestimate it.

Mark reached the first small gap in the bridge; it was a gap he had not noticed before, but he noticed it now. It was a meter of open air, a full split in the bridge. Mark jumped and sailed over the gap, glancing downward just in time to see the scattered pieces of armor flying below, swirling like metal parts caught on a wind, flowing to where Mark had been standing.

Mark landed on the other side of the small gap and turned to see the monster come together where he had been. The sword flashed through the space first, spinning like a windmill, slicing across the stone and the air. Sparks flew. Stone chipped. The shield came up next like a battering ram, held level on the bridge's surface and flowing from the start of the bridge to where the sword had cut. The sword stilled at hand height, right next to the shield that did the same, and then the armor flowed up from the edges of the bridge, to reform the living armor, to grip its weapons again.

No fucking way was Mark tangling with that thing.

Who knew how much strength was behind those blows? This was clearly *not* a fight room. This was an *escape* room.

Mark sprinted forward.

The archway loomed a good 400 meters ahead.

Breaks in the bridge were the first problem, though. The living armor made it dangerous to waste time with fear, so Mark prepared to dance across the—

The wind picked up, *hard*. A hurricane of fog and wind blew through the canyon and Mark lost his shield, letting go of it before it took him off the edge, as he hunkered down against the bridge. Mark glanced back and saw the armor's silver sheen flickering in the wind. Glints in the fog rapidly revealed themselves as the armor's shield, flung a good 25 meters off of the bridge, in the air, and half of its armored body similarly scattered. Its sword lodged into the bridge and the breastplate and some greaves held on that way. Mark wasn't sure if its desperate cling to the bridge was an affectation, or a necessity.

He didn't care to figure it out, either.

The wind died, so Mark raced forward, to the first big gap in the bridge. A single line of mostly-broken bridge held to the left side of the main path. It was just the left lip of the aqueduct. The floor of the aqueduct was gone, as well as the right lip. The 'safe path' was 10 centimeters wide. The width of a parking bumper.

Mark had always walked on those parking bumpers in empty lots when he was walking through, just to have fun. And look! This small path even had a gap in it, too, so Mark would have to jump from one parking bumper to the next.

Simple, really.

The wind died as fast as it had come, so it was probably safe to risk his life rushing across—

Nope. Mark glanced to the right, to the direction the wind was coming from, and saw as the fog in the canyon got whipped into yet another frenzy. The wind was coming any second now...

Could Mark kill the armor and take its sword in the seconds of wind? The armor had already reformed itself, too. But it was light enough to get pushed around, wasn't it? Even though it was running at him now, it didn't seem to be bracing itself for the next round of wind. Could it tell that the canyon was going to blow again—

No. It couldn't tell anything at all, because here came another rush of wind and there went the armor's shield and half of its body. It failed to slam its sword into the bridge this time, and so the whole thing went flying—

Oh.

When the wind died, it was going to come back together right on top of Mark, wasn't it.

In that moment of realization, Mark recognized that the living armor also couldn't actually see him... probably.

Maybe it had some other sort of senses, like tremorsense or metalsense. Metalkinetics were supposed to get that, Mark knew. Dad always had a sense for fish, though it was a pretty low level sense—

The wind died, and Mark made a choice to dash across the thinnest part of the bridge, fast as he could go. Feet on the rock, don't look down too much, Mark raced forward, balanced on a beam for his very life. And then the beam ended. A gap. A jump. Mark jumped, and he did not stumble on the other side, which was yet another balance beam. He raced forward and edged over to the solid ground of the 2-meter wide bridge, not looking back or down at all, though he did make sure he wasn't running *into* any problems. Looking back would slow him down. He didn't have to look to know what was going on back there.

The wind whistled.

That would be the sword, slicing through all of the space behind Mark—

The shield rose out of the mists to the left, right ahead of Mark, rushing over the edge of the bridge and then angling like a door slamming shut on Mark's legs. He leapt as much as he could. It clipped his feet anyway.

It was like getting clipped by a car; impossible to not be moved. Mark tumbled forward, the mace going wide, clattering ahead and then not making any sounds at all. It fell through a gap, maybe. Mark didn't see what happened up there. He was too busy being tumbled onto the ground. Crashing.

Mark lay on his back for a bare moment and the pain of getting clipped passed into obscurity.

Into the flow.

There was absolutely no way to grab that sword. There was no way to grab the shield. Even touching them would be too much for Mark. No fight. Only run.

Mark rose on sharp feelings in his legs, watching as the shield spun into the living armor's left gauntlet, as the sword slapped its hilt into the armor's right gauntlet. The whole monster came back together on

greaves, filled with air, headless with light glittering inside the neck hole of the breastplate. It raced after Mark, and Mark was already running down the length of the bridge.

Mark heard the jangle-jangle-jangle of armor chasing him, and then he heard nothing, for the living armor had fallen down the hole in the middle of the bridge. It was already falling, the jangle-jangle-jangle of it spreading out, disappearing into the wind down below. It was going to come back up on top of Mark as soon as it could.

Air flowed.

Something whistled.

Mark sprinted.

He eyed the right side, the mists in the canyon. Here came another howling wind.

The shield tried to clip him again, lifting off of the right side of the bridge's edge this time, becoming a rectangle of solid metal that spanned the two meters of the bridge, and a meter and a half into the air. Ducking under it was impossible. Mark leapt over it this time, landing in a roll—

The canyon howled with an ocean of wind, ripping from the right to the left.

Mark crawled, scrambled, avoiding the torrent of mist and wind, and then, when the wind died down enough, he sprinted again.

A trick was coming. Mark knew that.

He spared one look behind him when he was within two paces of the archway—

The armor stood 20 meters behind him, unable to run that fast, but its sword was a spear, thrown hard and straight and right down the center of the path.

Mark dodged left. The sword tore through his shirt and nothing else before it soared through the archway, to turn into rainbow light on the other side.

For a moment, Mark knew he was going to die. He had dodged *too far* left, and now he was in the open air. His stomach and lungs seemed to enter his throat as he scrambled without purchase—

He grabbed the edge of the bridge. Safe! He slammed into the side of the bridge, his feet reaching nothing, his fingers holding on for everything—

He slipped.

He grabbed onto a lower ledge, just below the aqueduct lip. The sides of the bridge were heavily carved in floral designs and Mark dangled, but he also slammed a foot into a depression in the stone. Mark saved himself, doing the most stressful pullup of his life.

The living armor slammed its shield onto the rock above him, above his grip. If he had been holding onto the first edge he would have lost fingers—

The wind started to howl again, but Mark was below the edge of the bridge, effectively behind a wall of stone. The armor was above, in the open air, and it could not hold onto anything at all, not with its sword already disintegrated, or whatever had happened to it when it went through the portal to the next room. It wasn't hunkered behind its shield, either.

Silver metal jangled and crashed as it scattered on the harsh winds.

Mark started pulling himself up, even before the wind calmed. He grabbed for the higher lip of stone and pulled up, making it onto the surface of the bridge just as the wind began to die.

Mark rushed for the archway.

Addashield was on the other side already.

The living armor came together on the bridge—

The door closed.

-----

Mark breathed, focusing. Calming.

In a distant sort of way, Mark knew he was injured. Probably a lot. His legs hurt. Might have broken some bones in his feet, too. His left leg was bleeding for some reason, and somehow there was a sword cut on his thigh, right next to his dog bite wound, but both were small; barely touched. He wasn't even bleeding that bad, but there was blood. His sand-brown jeans were dark red here and there. His hands were bleeding, too. His skin was too soft to hold the edge of the aqueduct like he had done.

But he stood on a white circular platform that glowed faintly.

Mist spread across the platform, gentle and fluttering. The world beyond the platform was a star-filled sky, with Earth hanging up there like a blue and green marble, cast in white clouds and illuminated like a crescent. The grey, pock-marked surface of the moon spread out in every direction beyond the platform. Golden, glowing spires rose here and there in cracks in Luna, and roads spread across the surface, though Mark couldn't see a single living person.

This was the City of Demons.

Arakino.

The Palace of Ascension.



Mark's Ascension was here. Right there. In the middle of the platform. A plinth held in the center of the room, like a spear of crystal, with a floating blob of prismatic power shimmering bright, just above the tip. It was magical. Mark's heart beat hard.

Addashield floated on the other side of the Ascension Plinth, most of his body hidden behind his obscuring magics, only his eyes and strips of clothed body visible. With a solid, heavy voice, Addashield said, "I told you that at this point that I would do something to the pure mana, to ensure you rose with adamantiumkinesis. I don't *have* to do that.

"I would have needed to do that to cleave to the New Contract that I made with my demon, but you made it all the way through, on your own. I barely helped. I would say I helped about 5%, and only really because of that fish. Even that wasn't much of a help, because I saw you already saw the fish.

"You can tell people that when they ask about it, later.

"Mark Careed.

"I will not be directing your growth like I said I would. Adamantiumkinesis and healing are already yours. What you will gain without me will be weaker in the beginning, but your end result will be stronger, and I will not harm your future growth by offering you decisions in this matter. You have helped me enough, and I will not be going back to my Old Contract, for you have secured something far better than that, and I must repent for my crimes with my death.

"You will go far, Mark. You will face many troubles, but you will go far. Perhaps, eventually, you can even replace what I used to be, and what I can no longer be at all.

"You have not saved my life, for I will not allow that. You have done something better. No matter what happens later, know that.

"Touch the prismatic mana."

Red darkness swirled around Addashield, furious and terrible, a voice drowning out the weight of Addashield's words with something much more demonic. "NO! I want him! Infracation! INFRACTION! In—"

Addashield spat at Mark, his invisibility not wavering at all, "TOUCH IT NOW, BOY!" And then he yelled at himself, at a clawed, red hand. "By your own words I am taking the deal—"

"INFRACTION!"

"Do not shout *illusions*—"

Mark had no idea what was happening, exactly, but he believed Addashield was doing the right thing, so he rushed the prismatic mana and grabbed it—

Red black hatred filled the air even as Mark's vision turned to rainbows and something took hold within him like a heartbeat that beat reality itself.

"NO!"

A rush of red-lined blackness flickered, visible only as a glimmer, like a sweeping fishing line—

Addashield's silver light grabbed that red and pulled it back, and then suddenly he threw his arms wide and two black rushes of metal scattered far, far away, launched by silver light. The silver vanished revealing red hatred glowing around black bowling balls; his bracers of adamantium.

An impossible fortune rocketed away into the dark of space, above Luna, into the demon city of Arakino.

Mark was sure Addashield was yelling at his demon, but the voices turned indistinct, red warring with silver, or something like that—

But the rainbows all around him changed. The Demon City Arakino briefly appeared as something else. It was not the moon's surface, littered with canyon-sized cracks, filled with golden spires and golden lights. The roads on the surface were not empty at all.

It was a metropolis of flying cars and green hills and tall forests and people on picnics, or flying across the skies, or living in the open and just going about their days. Couples holding hands. Babies nursing at breasts. Children running around, living free and without worry.

It was Mark's dream to give that to people. To heal the broken worlds of Earth, and Daihoon, even though he had no idea about the real size of either. The real nature of the beast.

Mark's mind opened to the truth of his own desire.

It would take him lifetimes to be the person he wanted to be.

And here, now, was the beginning.

- - - -

Mark sat in a chair in front of a desk.

A person sat behind the desk. The person was made of stone. Mark did not know them, but the stone man knew Mark.

The stone man put a piece of paper in front of Mark. "Here are your Awakening results. Read them, and then I have something to tell you."

Mark could do nothing but look down at the paper.

**Body, Healthy Body: 002**

**Shaper, Adamantium: 004**

**Mind: ~**

**Natural, Union: 003**

**Soul: ~**

**Arch: ~**

Mark had some thoughts.

Those thoughts tumbled out of his mouth, “I guess I understand the names of the six bars on the scanning results—”

Mark paused.

The person sitting behind the desk was a god.

It was Malaqua.

That’s who the stone man was. Malaqua, the Stone God, Arbiter of the System, Demon King or Demon Jailer depending on who you asked, The First Artificial God, and a bunch of other names. That’s who sat behind the desk, here in this golden office on the moon.

The Earth hung in the black sky beyond the windows behind Malaqua, and Mark sat at Malaqua’s desk.

This wasn’t supposed to happen.

He should have been sent right back home, to where he entered the Tutorial, or he could have chosen to enter Daihoon at a small place that needed him. People from Daihoon would get the same sort of option after they took the Tutorial. Mark had been kinda toying with the idea of going to Daihoon right away, but he knew he couldn't do that. He needed to go back to Orange City, back home. And *then* he could go to Daihoon, through the normal channels.

Mark gulped.

Malaqua said, "You've got a tri-Talent. That's one of the reasons I'm checking in on you personally. It's a pretty good tri-Talent, too. Healthy Body is always good; you'll be surprised at how a simple, good form will be endlessly useful. Adamantiumkinesis is simple enough to understand. Union is also phenomenal, and you'll need to go to the Church of Freyala to learn of Union, but you don't have to do that. You've got a great synergy here, which you'll have to discover on your own.

"The second reason for talking to you directly is to give you some context to give to others, since this whole Addashield-thing is going to blow up your entire life and a great deal of the Two Worlds.

"This whole Addashield problems starts with the fact that every single person Addashield ever took through the Tutorial went on to either make a deal with a demon and *become* a hidden dragon, or else Addashield's demon, Kanda, ate them a few years after they denied a demonic contract.

"Every 10 years he did this. Every 10 years he led another person through their Tutorial and then he either had them become a hidden dragon through a Hybridization Contract, or they denied the demons and he killed them years afterward, when no one would suspect a thing. He still did all the good he claims to have done, but he was also unrepentant when it came to doing what he needed to do to maintain his life.

"I was only able to see the nature of his duplicity when I became Arbiter of the System 70-odd years ago, after he helped me install myself here, and take over the place. Part of that help was to let him continue guiding people through the Tutorial. At the time, I did not know what he was truly doing, but I learned fast. That is why I always kicked out the people he took through the Tutorial when I found him doing such a thing. I couldn't actually do anything *directly* against him, such was the nature of our Contracts, but I could kick him and his cuckoo out of the System, and so I did.

“That problem is fixed now. Addashield no longer exists, and that deal I made is void.”

Mark’s head was swimming. “Okaaay?!”

“I don’t expect you to do anything with this information. I am already telling others. I am telling you because you are involved in a lot of things happening far, far above your head, and I wanted you to go forward with more information than what you have.

“And now, Addashield’s New Contract, made by your completion of the Tutorial without me finding out anything at all until the end, has come to fruition. It is a Hybridization Contract. It’s a good one.

“Addashield repented some by killing himself, but not enough.

“Addashield was a Hero of Humanity. This much has always been true.

“He also killed at least 1 person every 10 years and seeded the world with an unknown number of Hidden Dragons. There are at least 2; his original True Apprentices. Maybe more. I don’t know that whole story. I do know he hated doing this, but that is little comfort for all the people he murdered in my Tutorial, and long before that, when it was called the Thresher.

“I do know that Addashield made a deal with Kanda before you went into your Tutorial. It was a high-risk bet for both of them, because Kanda expected Addashield to go for the New Contract, which was the same as their Old Contract, but Addashield was aiming for the Hybridization Contract.

“However much help Addashield gave you is how much of the resulting dragon that would be Kanda, because that was the main bet. There would be no more sacrifices to the Tutorial, or Hidden Dragons, or anything like that. Addashield and Kanda would hybridize, becoming a dragon, based on how much help he needed to give you in the Tutorial.

“He only needed to give you around 5% help, and not even then, and only because of the fish, which you already suspected was there.

“Addashield and Kanda are gone.

“Now there is a new High Dragon, made of 95% Addashield and 5% Kanda.” Malaqua finished with, “You don’t know what a High Dragon is, and that’s fine. With luck, you never will. But if you rise high enough, you absolutely will.”

“I cannot answer any questions.”

“Good day.”

And then the darkness closed in.

Mark had just enough time to complain, “THE FU—”

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Mark woke up in a battle zone.

The air roared.

A hurricane blew.

Someone yelled something.

Overhead, wings spread in the storm and rain lashed the world. Bright light shattered the hurricane in a line, evaporating the sky from left to right. Mark felt heat on his face and the rain turned hot, and then someone stood over him with an umbrella as the world turned to steam.

Breathing was hard.

Someone screamed.

A blanket went around Mark and strong arms grabbed him and then shoved him through a space, onto cushions. He couldn't see shit and he could barely understand himself, but then someone slammed in behind him, shoving him to the side, shoving him into the cushioned box. Words filled Mark's ears like cotton and the world lurched underneath.

He was in a car. The back seat.

"GO GO GO!" yelled a person. "GO!"

"I'M GOING!" yelled another. "The shields are drawing too much power!"

"I'm supporting them!"

Mark didn't recognize either voice but he did recognize that the voices existed. He felt his body once again and he worked his arms around his face. Mark ripped off the blanket.

He was in a flying car. A woman sat in the seat beside him, her skin reddened and burned here and there, where it wasn't covered with white cloth. She was bald with a silver breastplate with chainmail spilling out onto her shoulders. She was a paladin outside of her full armor... Or a cleric or priest. Mark wasn't sure. The guy in the front seat, driving the flying car, wore the full set of silver armor.

It was Paladin David, with his blond hair. His hair was half burned away.

Mark glanced at the woman again. He had thought the woman was simply bald, but no. Her hair had been burned away—

David drove the car into the top of an oak tree and the car lurched and tumbled, all the world flowing around the cabin and beyond the sunroof. Gravity mostly maintained direction in the vehicle with down being toward the floor; hover cars had gravity magics, of course. Trees tumbled beyond the sunroof—



There.

In the sky.

Mark saw a dragon.

That could be the only explanation for that *thing* up there, half-hidden in the clouds.

Mark couldn't breathe. He couldn't think. He could only look without seeing.

Wings, wide and silver and backlit with lightning. A tail, dipping below the clouds, bright black. Claws weaving water and lightning.

And then the clouds opened like jaws, like a maw, and the car tumbled more, and the dragon left Mark's view.

He saw another monster, but it was not a dragon. It was a kaiju in the bay. It seemed almost simple by comparison. Big as fuck, towering over suburbia and the water and with one leg in the water and five legs on land. It was a spider-type—

Mark recognized the suburbia.

It was home. Gladegrove. All of it, and more besides. There was the paintball court. There was the trailer park on that side of town. There was the pizza place that had the best pizza around, and the ice cream place by the beach. Everything was either on fire, or broken.

Mark was supposed to appear exactly where he had left, right? In his house, right? Wasn't Addashield, too? But Mark had appeared on the ground, in the rain, right?

In the rain?

... In the rain?

Not inside the house?

Oh.

The dragon was Addashield and the house was gone.

That's when things stopped making any sense at all. The woman beside him yelled at David to go faster while David tried not to fly too high, or else the blaring warnings about the shield overloading would become more than warnings, and then they'd fall out of the sky because they were near two kaiju fighting in the sky and in the bay, and the world turned horrible around those sorts of events.

There was no city down there.

Just blasted trees and houses on fire and craters. So many craters.

David lifted the cover of a switch on the dash, as he shouted, "I'm turning off inertia-control and gunning it! Hold on!"

Mark held on—

Suddenly, he was sucked onto the bottom of his chair, his head slamming into the headrest, and then the car went sideways and David was belted in but no one else was. Mark hit the door, and the door held. The woman on the seat crashed into him, and still the door held. All Mark could see was reddened arm and chainmail and blood but he didn't need to see anything to know that the car was going very, very fast—

And then the car turned back horizontal.

The woman scrambled off of Mark.

Mark looked out the window as a great beam of lightning poured out of the sky, onto the man-legged kaiju, and then *through* the monster—

Mark slammed into the top of the car as the woman near him shouted to put on his seat belt and the car went down into a crater. Out of the sunroof Mark saw *power* flow across the world. Clouds shredded. The storm parted. Trees and boulders flew from left to right.

It was the sound of ten thousand trains rumbling through reality itself. They had barely dodged the shockwave of what might have been a nuclear blast. Mark wasn't sure.

All he was focused on was getting his seat belt on and watching the display in the middle of the dashboard. It was an image of the car, surrounded by a red circle.

Mark had never been so happy to see a red circle in his life.

That was the shield readout, and the shields were near-broken, but they weren't actually broken at all. The rest of the readout showed the car was at half-full of fuel, though they had been at full just minutes ago, maybe. David sighed in relief. Mark was close behind him.

The woman giggled, and then said, "Holy Gods and Monsters! That was fucking terrifying!"

She said it like she was happy.

Mark was pretty sure his home had just been nuked.

A lot of stuff had just happened.

And he was alive, so that was great?

Yes! That was a good thing.

Being alive was very good.

But there was still a dragon up there—

Malaqua had called it a High Dragon.

Mark's panic doubled.

“What the FUCK is a HIGH dragon?!” Mark exclaimed, and the woman instantly lost her joy. David sucked in a deep breath and looked back at Mark, like he was going to ask a question. Mark answered faster than the question could be asked, “I saw Malaqua! He told me Addashield is gone. That High Dragon up there is 95% him, but Addashield is *gone?*”

The world overhead was still rumbling but the major firestorm had already passed. Nuclear fallout came next, but that would descend over the next few days. Faster though, with the rain. There was still a hurricane out there, because Addashield had timed it—

Addashield had timed Mark's Tutorial to coincide with a kaiju hurricane, in the middle of hurricane season, didn't he? He had. He had *caused* the hurricane, hadn't he! He had needed cover for whatever happened after the Tutorial, because he had *always* known that he was going to die at the end of Mark's Tutorial, to hybridize with his demon and become a dragon. And he wanted his High Dragon to survive.

Mark had exited the Tutorial a little dazed.

Addashield probably exited the Tutorial dazed, too.

So of course there would have been gathered forces out there waiting to murder him. That's probably why David and this woman had been there, to grab Mark; they had been there to partake in Addashield's murder, but they ended up rescuing him instead?

How much planning did Addashield put into this—

He had removed 4 of the bay's barrier pillars before Mark started his Color Drop regimen.

And Mark had asked Quark about the weather once, and he had gotten no answers.

Mark felt his eyes go wide. He stared at his own hands, and breathed out, “He planned on all of this.”

The woman looked at David. She mouthed something.

David spoke loudly, “We’re leaving here, Mark. Everyone hold on again. We need to avoid the fallout rain and I’m not turning on the dampeners.”

Mark sat back in his seat, worried as fuck, as David gunned it out of the crater—

He saw the High Dragon again, out of his window, far in the distance. It was like he was seeing the city center from a tram. The dragon was silver, all throughout, except where it was black with stripes and spines. Its wings were wide, its mouth open to the sky. It was huge. Big as the kaiju it had killed.

It roared as it stood upon the body of the kaiju that Addashield had let into Orange City in order to serve as a distraction, while he was briefly insensate from the Tutorial, all so that his High Dragon could survive.

In a distant sort of way, Mark wondered why he had never gotten the option to enter Daihoon after the Tutorial. He probably already had the answer. Malaqua had dictated that Mark would get sent back to where he entered, and thus Addashield would, too. They had been waiting for Addashield here. Who knew where he could have escaped to if he had gone directly into Daihoon, and how much damage the kaiju would have done.

So Addashield had at least cleaned up the mess he had made, then?

... had Malaqua *purposefully* delayed Mark’s entry back into the world, so that he didn’t get dead in the same instance as the dragon’s arrival?

He probably had.

Mark found himself asking, “Is it Addashield at all? He cleaned up the mess he made, right?”

David asked, “Did you get an option of where to come back?”

“No. I just now realized that I didn’t have an option at all.” Mark felt his insides tumble some. He puked — Into a rapidly handed-to-him bag, thanks to the woman sitting beside him. Mark spat into the bag. “... Thanks.” Mark looked out the window, but the hurricane blew in, the brief respite over, and rain occluded everything.

Except for the roar.

Addashield’s High Dragon roared again and again and again.

The woman waited for a break in the roar, and then a full 20 more seconds, to say, “I’m glad we were able to rescue you. Most people were... They were preparing to kill him. But he appeared and the bombs had no effect because he was already transforming. He appeared a full 5 minutes before you appeared, too. We thought you were lost. Freyala spoke directly to David and I and told us to wait for you, though.” Almost as an afterthought, she said, “She told us that *before* the bombing attempts. We *knew* we weren’t going to hit you.”

Mark puked again but it was just bile.

David flipped the inertia control back on, and Mark’s stomach settled quite a lot. The whole flight smoothed out and the shields were already back to green, and double-layered once again. When the third layer appeared, that’s when Mark would stop panicking so much. Maybe. David turned on the autopilot and made it go full-power.

The hurricane seemed to part for the dart that was their flying car.

David turned around and looked at Mark. “We’re going to get somewhere safer, and then we want you to—”

The world rippled.

Mark had no idea what had happened, but he had felt that ripple just the same as the other two people in the quickly-flying car.

The woman sighed and lay back in her seat, saying, “Shit.”

David sighed, “So there goes our chance of killing him.”

“*What happened?*” Mark asked, trying not to be desperate as he questioned everything.

The woman said, “Bastard opened a tear.”

Ah.

Tears were breaks in the Veil.

The tear that happened when Neil Armstrong touched down on the Moon in 1969 rippled all across the planet, creating tears everywhere, and bringing magic to Earth and causing the downfall and transformation of the previous civilizations of Earth into what they were today.

Mark shuddered. “It’s bad to open tears, right?”

David said, “Tears don’t cause big problems these days, but we’ll have to get Menders out to fix it.”

“Other people will do that,” said the woman. “We need to decide if we’re going to keep escaping, or go back.”

David and the woman shared a look— And then David glanced at Mark, and decided, “We’re not going back. We’re heading to the Citadel. Freyala’s mission was clear. Rescue Mark.” As the woman nodded, David told Mark, “You are, unfortunately, a little bit of a prisoner. We hope you don’t mind overmuch. We’ll give you good accommodations and help you learn about your new magics, whatever they might be. But Addashield had a bunch of hidden dragons out there, probably waiting for him to become what he became, and we’re not sure if you’re a hidden dragon or not. When we verify that you are not a hidden dragon, then we’ll let you go. It is our hope that you will choose to stay, though.”

Mark felt kinda numb.

He simply asked, "Are my parents okay?"

Mark watched a quietness overcome David's face, and the woman went still.

It was a horror in small motions, though Mark didn't realize that for half a second. When he saw what he saw, that was when something like ice knives drove into his guts and played around with his heart and spine.

Without preamble, the woman said, "A lot of things happened while you were information-quarantined. Your parents are dead. Addashield told us the demon desired them dead and to use them against you, so he killed them instead. Addashield incinerated them completely in the killing so they couldn't be used against you. That is what he told us. That is all we know right now. The investigation for this will be ongoing, alongside all of the other events of this tragedy, from the involvement of Orange Arcan..."

Mark zoned out. The woman spoke. Maybe she said her name. Maybe she talked about the investigation. David said something about inquisitions. Maybe it might have been important. Probably not.

Mark wasn't sure what happened for a long while.

Rain fell.

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It had been a week since Mark's Tutorial and Addashield's transformation into a High Dragon, and Mark was in bed.

He faced the wall, wrapped in cloth, trying to block out the world.



“It’s not your fault,” said Priestess Lola Turner, of Freyala’s church.

Mark held his covers tight and stared at the wall. “I know it’s not my fault.”

That was a lie, but if he told people that he knew this wasn’t his fault, then they went away and left him alone. So he lied. For a week, he lied when he said he was fine and he told the truth when they asked about what had happened. Some people had gotten angry at him inside those interrogation rooms, with him sitting on the side of a table with a cup of coffee and them sitting on the other side and trying to reach him through words. Mark told them what they wanted to hear, and then they got more angry.

This was all Mark’s fault.

He didn’t need to be warned about the fish in the Tutorial. Addashield could have kept that 5% of himself, and not turned High Dragon. Mark could have made it across that river without the warning.

Long before that, Mark didn’t need to call up Orange Arcanaeum to ask them again if there was *truly* nothing they could do for him, regarding scholarships.

Mark had been the one to make the choice to take Addashield’s offer of Talent flavoring instead of a free ride to arcanaeum. He should have just taken the 4 years of arcanaeum. Apparently Addashield had done that for lots of people; he took his 1 kill every 10 years without fail, but he left a bunch of people with free rides to arcanaeum, too.

Mark should have seen the evil in him. Someone had called Addashield’s murders a cold calculation instead of an evil, and then someone had punched that person. Maybe Mark had even punched that person. He didn’t really remember.

Mark had made the choice to get more and more involved with Addashield, and to even forgive the man for putting him in a coma. In his darker moments, Mark felt that forgiving someone for trying to do right by him and then failing, with Mark ending up in a coma... Now *that* was okay. A Hero of Humanity offers you more than you ever knew you wanted? Yes. You take that offer.

But Addashield was playing demonic games.

Mom had known what was up. But she had also told Mark to ignore the Tutorial. She had always told him to ignore the Tutorial. Mark could have been a fish-yank mage like Dad. Or a cleaner like Mom. But Mark was always going to take the Tutorial, ever since he found out that the people who took the Tutorial were fundamentally stronger than those who did not.

And Mark had wanted power.

He went after the power.

And this is what he got for his efforts.

Lola said, “This was not your fault. You had a perfectly reasonable desire for power, and you went for it. No one expects a Hero of Humanity to use them like he used you. In a war, yes. People are used. But you were not at war, Mark. You were a boy who put his trust into an authority figure, and you were used. It is *not* your fault you were used.

“If Addashield was any sort of reasonable man at all, he would have soul-killed himself instead of following his demon’s desires. He would have simply Fallen. He tried and failed to save himself and it cost the world 10,000 lives and wrecked trust across the Two Worlds. *Addashield* sacrificed others for his own continued existence. *He* is the one that hurt you, Mark. He hurt a lot of people. *You* did *not* hurt yourself.”

Mark wanted to believe that.

He could not.

They had taken Mark to this place, wherever this was. Somewhere in France? Sounded about right. ‘The Citadel’ they called it. ‘Freyala’s Citadel’, if they wanted to be more exact.

Mark had seen a lot of it, but he only really recalled this room here, and the bathroom over there.

He wasn’t in a cell. The door unlocked just fine. Mark could go out there and do whatever. They *wanted* him to walk around. They *wanted* him to see whatever he wanted to see. There was a movie hall down

the way and other stuff. But Mark lay in bed, and that was fine. Soon enough they'd try to get him to do something again, though. That's what Lola was here for. Maybe make him eat something? When was the last time he ate something? He wasn't sure. People had tried talking to him at first, but Mark could only lay in bed, and so that is what he did...

Wait.

Lola?

Mark uncurled from the covers. He looked over at Lola. The priestess was the same as Mark remembered. Blondish. Severely proper. Robes that flowed. But she wasn't severely proper when Mark's eyes met hers. She was worried.

She was the one who had imbued him with this 'healing magic' of 'Union', or whatever it was. She was also the one who put him into a coma, albeit accidentally, and at Addashield's demand, and at Mark's own request...

Maybe *Addashield* was the one who put him into a coma, making him miss his appointment with the demons? Maybe Addashield had been doing him a 'kindness' in that way, because he didn't want Mark to be turned into a hidden dragon?

Addashield was a Hero of Humanity, after all. He did the right thing every now and then. Most of the time, actually.

... Mark didn't want to think about him that way, though.

Mark hadn't seen Lola since that day, almost 7 months ago. Or maybe 8. Mark didn't feel like doing math right now.

With steel in her eyes, Priestess Lola looked at him and told him, "People will try to place blame here and there, and some will look to you as the source of our new dragon problem. You should discount those people out of hand. Addashield did this whole thing, himself.

“By this same measure, if you blame yourself, you should discount those thoughts of yours as well. Those thoughts lie to you. This is *not* your fault. You had *nothing* to do with Addashield’s actions.” She breathed. “The fault lies with Addashield... And with me.

“I hit you with a sliver of True Union, to influence your future astral body, and when Addashield told me to hit you again, I allowed it. This is what caused your coma. If I would have pulled back, refused his orders, for you were already influenced, then... Then you would *not* have fallen into a coma, and needed to be *kept* in a coma so you didn’t die in the waking...” Lola said, “And yet, if that would have happened, then you would have become demon-touched at the end of your Tutorial; Addashield would have forced it. Maybe he did force it anyway and you are a hidden dragon, but there’s not a single person here who truly believes that, and we have already done tests. If you would have gone on to the Tutorial as expected... You would have died in... in so many different ways.”

For a long while, Mark sat there, absorbing that, trying to understand it.

Softly, Mark said, “It’s not your fault, either.”

Lola choked up.

Minutes passed, with Lola looking as stoic and proper as she could, and Mark sitting there on his bed.

Mark wrapped his arms around his knees. “Has there been any news about the High Dragon?”

“He cleansed the nuclear disaster he caused, ate the hurricane to kill every monster within its reach, and then he vanished into Daihoon. We assume he’s in the High Mountains right now, or getting ready for them. Or maybe he’ll be back soon! We don’t know.” Lola showed a rare bit of emotion at the end there, but she pulled it back. She was stoic once again.

Mark had no idea what the High Mountains were.

Lola asked, “Will you leave your bed? Take a shower and come to the hall? We’re serving dinner.”

Mark rolled over and tried to close his eyes again.

He didn't hear Lola move. Perhaps she hadn't.

Mark breathed hard. And then he sat straight. He looked over to Lola.

Mark got up.

- - - -

In a dining hall that Mark had seen before, but which had escaped his sight until this moment, today, Mark sat down at a long table as one of the youngest in the hall. Everyone was already eating, having taken their food from the cafeteria room beyond a pair of double doors. Overall, it was set up like any high school cafeteria.

But this was the Citadel of Freyala, and everything here was of fine make.

The tables were single slabs of wood grown from trees that regularly grew to three meters wide and a hundred tall, and which had a nice reddish sheen when treated. These particular tables were only 2 meters wide and 10 long, with wide benches on both sides that easily supported the few knights in armor scattered among the regular folk, and all the regular folk, in plain grey and white robes. Chandeliers dripped from the ceiling like illuminated spiders on webs, cast down from a cathedral ceiling far, far above. Big stained glass windows let in the evening light of some sunset happening out there, their usual rainbows tainted reddish and orangish, but still showing the scenes of Freyala protecting the people with her paladins and priests.

This was the main dining hall of Freyala's Citadel, or something like that, and as such it had a high table at one end, though not much higher than all the rest. No one was up there right now, anyway.

Priestess Lola sat down next to Mark, sitting a plate in front of him, saying, “Thank you for coming out tonight, Mark.”

Mark was still kinda out of it, but he was mostly here. He said, “Thanks for the invitation, Priestess.”

Across from Mark and Lola, some pair of acolytes, younger men, sat down to eat their own meals. Mark hadn’t even seen Lola grab food, but she obviously had. Sliced chicken with gravy, mashed potatoes, vegetables, and a huge garlic bread roll lay in front of him. The guys across from him had some beef options and extra bread.

Mark was good with chicken. It was the same meal that Lola had gotten for herself.

Mark added, “Thanks for getting the food, too.”

Lola smiled a little. And then she turned to her food, clapped her hands before her, and did a little prayer. It took her less than a second to finish. Mark did not partake. With a smile, Lola picked up her fork and said, “I love turkey night. I used to help in the kitchens when I was an acolyte. We’d thaw and dry 200 turkeys every half month and then I’d set them into the rotisserie.”

She seemed happy at that memory.

Mark ate. It was pretty good. Mark actually ended up eating everything, and quickly, too. He was *ravenous*. They didn’t talk during dinner, because Lola seemed hungry, too.

But afterward, when Lola was finished just a moment after Mark, she said, “I’m glad you could join me for a meal, Mark. You can leave your room whenever you want. You can walk wherever you want, talk to whomever you want, see whatever you want, and speak whatever you want. Citadel Freyala is outside of Curtain Protocol. You should still be a little circumspect with your words, though. Just as a matter of course.”

Mark nodded a little. “Okay.”

“If you wish for a schedule of some sort, we have classes for people who have just Awakened, or who have chosen to forgo the Tutorial and to learn magic on their own. It’s a class called Introduction, and it usually lasts a week, though some teachers try to get it down to 3 days. It’s pretty much a basic overview of everything that you should know, now that you’re beyond the Curtain.”

Mark asked, “I’m some sort of prisoner, right?”

“Correct,” Lola said, without malice or pressure. “For about a year, really. That should be proof enough of whatever Addashield might have done to you to come to light. Some people are arguing for full-life monitoring, but that is simply them being angry. Truthfully, you could leave in 6 months, if you wanted. My hope, and the hope of many others here, is that you choose to stay for a full year. We might not be able to prevent all the horrors that happen out there in the world, but we cleave to Xerkona’s teachings just as much as Freyala’s, and we wish to help you through this trying time, in the hope that you might help others in similar ways, when you can.”

Mark readily said, “I want to talk to people from back home. My dad’s brother and his husband, Alexadro Careed and Gabriel Careed. Devon and Trace; the guy’s on the boat. Sally—” Mark felt tears threaten again, but he held them back. “Anyone and everyone I can.”

Lola said, “Of course. Your communications will be monitored, though.”

“I think you already told me that. I know. I need to know who survived.”

“I’ll have someone drop off a full communication package to your room later, if you desire it. It will contain a phone and tablet and a few other things. You can check up on whoever you want, and it won’t have the usual child locks on it that you likely grew up with.” Lola added, “And your parents recorded messages for you, both video and in letters. We have all of that.”

Mark nodded, numbly.

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Mark sat in his room, hands to his sides, staring at the ceiling.

Letters sat to the side, opened and plentiful in paper and words. Mom had written a whole ten pages, small print with her perfect penmanship, with no mistakes at all. It had been about growing up and seeing Mark hit milestones, and no matter what happened that he should move forward exactly as he had been. He was a good man. She loved his words about humans helping humans. Mom hoped that this thing with Addashield worked out, and that Addashield returned to being a Hero of Humanity, and then Mark could be a hero like he always wanted.

Dad's letter had been shorter, and written by mom, though it was clearly Dad's words on the page.

Mom had probably told Dad to say more here and there, and so Dad had talked about the importance of having a bank account and meeting good people making sure to keep his spears sharp and to practice his magic more than he thought he needed to practice. Dad said that his fish-yank became fish-yank because he only ever used his arcanaeum-granted telekinesis to work with fish, and that is what it became. One day, after an entire summer of realizing that he never used it for anything but hauling fish out of the ocean, of focusing on fish, it just didn't work on anything else. He had needed to practice a lot to get it to work on those fish-clips of his, and even then he had needed to make the fish clips out of actual fishscale over a metal base, and then he had to stick fish bones into the metal clips, too.

In Mom's letter, she had spoken of how she had been scared of cleanse, for how powerful it was, so that is why it started to fail her. She became so concerned with the danger that she became only able to use it in the water-form of the magic, which was the safest by far. And thus, the water-form of cleanse became the only form she could use. She was perfectly fine with the decreased effectiveness, because that meant that she was able to use the real spell in other spaces more easily, without worrying about disintegrating those other spaces.



Growing up, Mark remembered how his bed sheets sometimes ended up with holes in them, and Mom confessed in her letter that she was to blame; her cleanse had gone off-target and eaten the fabric. She got better about that, though.

Mark remembered this whole thing with mothballs and scattering them in every room of the house, because he didn't want his clothes eaten anymore, and Dad had gone along with it, laughing, while Mom just silently, quietly fumed. But then grandpa had gotten in on it, laughing, talking about how they had to keep the moths away, even if the smell of the mothballs gave the house such a terrible smell.

Mark smiled at remembering that. The jokes about mothballs. The threat of moths eating all of his clothes. How he went to school smelling of mothballs sometimes. At the time it hadn't been funny, and Mom had been mad, but Dad had laughed, and Mom just rolled her eyes, and Mark had thought it was all because of moths but no. Mom had done that accidentally, with cleanse.

Mark would be safe from that downfall of magic, because his Talents would be the real deal; not a halfer's attempt at real power that would change with time and failure-to-use-it.

Mark wanted to talk to Mom about that.

But she was gone.

"Ahhh," Mark breathed out. "This sucks."

An understatement if there ever was one.

Mark carefully packed the letters away, being careful of the fresh tears he had dropped onto all of Mom's essay and Dad's 1 page of letter and 2 pages of 'how to be an adult'.

He was going to kill Addashield.

Mark paused.

... Yeah. He was going to kill Addashield. Yup.

That was a decision he had just made.

... Mostly.

It was like saying he was going to kill a demonic kaiju, which was exactly what a dragon was, but worse. Sure, it could be done, but not by him. Not by one person.

It took whole teams of heroes to kill a kaiju, with hundreds of people working in the background on weapons and hit and run tactics and killing smaller monsters to make it *possible* for a heavy hitter like Glorious Man, a brawny with a 250x multiplier, to launch into the battle with a kaiju blade and a gravity stabilizer and four people supporting him. Only then, with the path clear, could Glorious Man kill an average kaiju.

Most people could only ever provide support to the big heroes.

Or, alternatively, one archmage could just kill a kaiju all on their own. Archmages were actually one hero and one demon support, though, so that was still sort of like a team.

Mark was going to be a big hero. No demons.

There. Decision made.

What did he need to be able to become one of those big heroes?

Well. Working on his own powers was obviously necessary...

Mark put away those thoughts, for now, and then he used the phone that Lola had provided him with to call... He stared at the phone for a little while. And then he poked around at a few options until he found the one he wanted.

A bright gold application glowed in the app menu. It was labeled COFR, or rather 'Citadel of Freyala Resources'.

Mark pressed the button.

Golden light spilled out from his phone, along with a feminine voice, “Greetings, Mark Careed. How may COFR help you today?”

“I need to contact my uncle and his husband. They live in Memphi, in the Central Cities Union of America. Their names are Alexandro Careed and Gabriel Careed. Ages... 44 and 42, I think. Can you help me find them?” Mark said, “I... don’t have... anything from home to call them...” His voice trailed off.

The phone dinged and some buttons appeared, one labeled Alexandro and the other labeled Gabriel. The golden voice said, “I have taken the liberty of updating your phone with possibly relevant numbers, from one Physical Therapist Kevin Bash to childhood friend Sally Wuthers, to neighbors, with all those numbers put into folders in your directory, and also listed alphabetically. Here are buttons for the two requested people. It is around 9 pm here at Citadel, so it is 2 pm there. Alexandro Careed has already left a message with Citadel Freyala. I will play the message now.”

Mark almost didn’t want to hear the message but it played instantly.

Alexandro’s deep voice rang out, “Mark. You need to call us. We love you. We need to hear from you. We want you to come to Memphi and live with us. You are loved and...” His voice cracked. “And some people are blaming you for the new High Dragon in the world but we know you were a good boy— a good *man*. And you’d do what any soldier would have done; you just followed orders. We need to talk about... about everything. We love you! *Call me.*”

Mark found himself tearing up.

And then he called Alexandro.

The phone rang twice—

A gruff voice, almost mad, answered, “*Hello?*”

Mark's voice cracked. "Un— uncle Alexandro?"

Alexandro's voice cracked, too. "Mark? Oh gods *Mark!* You're alive! Thank the gods!"

Mark made his way through the conversation as best he could.

It was good to talk to Uncle Alexandro. Mark wasn't sure what he said, not exactly. He ended up talking to uncle Gabriel, too. It lasted a while.

Eventually, though, Mark said his goodbyes and hung up.

He was feeling better, and he had a plan to go to Memphi in 6 months, or a year, but he wasn't sure. He'd live there... or something. A lot of things were up in the air right now.

The fallout was still falling.

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Emilia Ramirez, the 'Mayor' of Memphi, tapped through her daily briefing on her tablet.

Addashield's Dragon was up to something, just like his 'father' always was.

A few days ago the dragon had come back to Earth and then it set to righting the many wrongs its father had caused. Or at least that's what it told people, as those people rightfully tried to kill it. At least it didn't fight back; it just ran. No one quite knew what to make of that; not exactly.

There were a lot of trade deal collapses with Orange City, what with the damage done in the dragon fight, and with the bay wall missing. At least that dragon put the pillars back in that bay, though it did make the pillars look like itself, so that was an issue of a separate nature.

More refugee requests. Emilia rapidly approved those. Memphi needed people, and Orange City needed to vent people, and so, Memphi got more people.

Kraigen Steele was trying to poach Orange City's hero association. Not good, Kraigen. Emilia put Lucy, his wife, to the task of stopping that potential poaching.

With a few more flicks of her finger, Emilia rapidly scrolled through all of the top concerns of the day, as determined by her artificial overmind, her 'True Self', as she considered it. Her true self still preferred to interact with the world through people, though, and that meant her fleshy body.

She finished the day's beginning briefings with a cup of coffee, handed to her by one of her servitors; her secretaries.

And then she looked out her windows. The city of Memphi spread out before her, beyond huge bay windows, giving a great view of the lands she watched over, and of the Mississippi River that split her city in half. The city looked good today. Nothing on fire. Nothing had exploded anywhere that wasn't almost instantly cleaned up by the hero association.

Even after all these years, Emilia still liked looking at all the big towers and suburbia beyond.

Memphi was home to 45 million people, over a roughly circular shape, 105 kilometers in average diameter. It was located in the heart of Old America, back when the United States used to actually be a thing and this city used to be called Memphis. Too many wars and reconstructions happened in the early years of this city, 70 years ago, for this land to ever truly be the same as it once was, so it was called 'Memphi' these days.

Emilia was born here in that reconstruction, and now she oversaw the whole place, and she loved it. It was hers and her people's. No one else's.

... But what would she do if one of her powers like Archmage Blackthorn got in bed with a demon? Well. With a *different* demon, Emilia amended. One that he didn't have under control. His demon merely wanted him to do drugs and have sex, and so that was a pretty easy vice to handle. Big deal!

Addashield's demon had made him plant poisoned fruit every 10 years.

And now he was a High Dragon, and a good portion of Orange City was a nuclear disaster zone...

Emilia frowned a little bit at the window. She asked herself, "What's going on with that boy Addashield screwed over?"

Her True Mind writhed a little bit on the ceiling, like a great glass sphere laden with illuminated lines and many, many roots. It was the great artificial heart of her small empire. Some cities had City AIs, but Memphi had Emilia Ramirez. Maybe, when she died, her True Self would become a God AI, like Malaqua, but for now she was her True Self, and her True Self was her fleshy body, and her True Self spoke in a way that was not speech at all.

*Mark Careed has made contact with his uncle, Alexandro Careed, who resides in Shady Acres. They have made plans for Mark to apply for citizenship in 8 months. I have spoken with Citadel Of Freyala Resources, and they have agreed to this timeline. We have not interacted with the people themselves.*

Emilia nodded and the prismatic lights in her True Self faded to a normal level, the whole glass structure turning quiet; back to baseline interactions, which made it basically a House AI for the entire city. Or for those who didn't have their own, really.

The Mayor of Memphi stared out the window.

Emilia did not want people to meddle with her city, and especially not the other cities and their invasive AIs out there. But *sometimes*... Sometimes she would have liked to have had a more unified voice with the other Central Cities of America, and especially the East Coast Union, regarding resources being taken from them by other countries.

In this case, she was mad that Addashield's pawn was removed from Orange City and placed into 'protective custody' by Citadel Freyala.

A tri-Talent with his Talents was a talent to be nurtured properly, so that they might one day be a powerhouse protecting everyone. Adamantiumkinesis was...

Hmm.

Addashield's Dragon had talked about selling adamantium to whoever wanted to talk to him instead of fight him. Has anyone taken him up on that offer, yet? The dragon was the size of a building with many adamantium spikes all along his body, and they regrew rather fast. So it was no wonder people were trying to kill him.

But that offer though...

She asked, "Has anyone taken Addashield's dragon's offer of adamantium sales? How is that situation looking?"

*Addashield's dragon has talked to Crytalis in an attempt at peace, but if anything has come of that aside from Crytalis shooting him in the face, several times, then we know not what. He gifted an adamantium spine to Orange City as reparations, and Orange City has promised the dragon ten minutes of peace, but no longer than that, and only outside of 100 kilometers beyond the city walls.*

*That spine will see to the bare minimum adamantium needs of the entirety of the East Coast Union for 5-20 years, barring unforeseen circumstances. Orange City is portioning out pieces of the 379.2 kilogram spine already, but they officially and unofficially distrust Addashield's dragon. They did not attack Addashield's dragon, though Glorious Man was ready to try.*

*The Church of Drakarok has harvested five hidden dragons among Addashield's former family lines, resulting in 22 kilos of adamantium gained for humanity. They have put out bounties on seven others. They are using 19 kilos of the adamantium they recovered, while they are selling the other 3.*

After a moment of thinking, Emilia said, “Put a pin on the boy’s name, to be brought to my attention if anything should happen that I need to care about. If he wants someone to help him protect himself against exploitation, then we will do that and grant him a good life here, if he should want it. Write up something to that effect. Send it at an appropriate time. Also I want to buy those 3 kilos from Drakarok’s church. Put me in touch with whoever— Ah. Addashield killed his parents, right?” Emilia didn’t need an answer; she already knew. “Delay that offer of assistance. Let him sort out his own life. He’s going to be messed up and I don’t want that here.”

Fleshy Emilia went about her day, and so did her True Self, hanging on the ceiling.

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Mark woke up and made a decision.

Half an hour later, after sending a text through the system they had here at the Citadel, Mark answered the door to his room. Paladin David and the woman who had rescued him from the kaiju fight, after the Tutorial, stood there. The woman’s name was Paladin Orissa. Both Orissa and David were something like 38, or 45; Mark wasn’t sure. Wherever David was pale and blonde with red highlights, Orissa was very Indian, with thick black hair and dark skin.

“Hi,” Mark said, and then he said what he had already said in the text, “I want to kill Addashield. What do I have to do in order to do that?”

Orissa gave it to him straight, “You’re 20 years away from even attempting that.”



David asked, “You *do* understand that, right Mark? You couldn’t do shit against him right now. You go *anywhere* near him and he doesn’t like it, he’ll kill you. He’s not Addashield anymore, either. He’s a High Dragon.”

“Well what the fuck *else* am I supposed to call him? Asshole? *Murderer?*” Mark tried not to raise his voice too much, but it was raised, and that was that. He calmed some and got back on track. “Where do I star— Wait. ‘Anywhere *near* him?’ You *know* where he is?”

Orissa glanced down the hallway of rooms, some of which were open, and some of which had people standing outside of them stopped in their tracks once they realized what was being discussed. Orissa told Mark and David, “And this is where we need to either go into the room to talk, or go to an office.”

Mark stepped inside his room. David and Orissa followed, with Orissa shutting the door behind her.

She said to the door, “And don’t you listen in, either!” She told Mark and David, “They’re going to listen in.”

Mark ignored that, focusing on The Problem. “You know where Addashield is?”

“A lot of people do,” Orissa said, “Because he’s not hiding like a normal High Dragon. He’s probably more like 99% Addashield, as well. We think he inscribed some power into his body that his demon somehow didn’t recognize, and so he maintained most of his mind.”

“Which is the problem,” David said. “This is no longer just a dragon hunt situation. This is a diplomatic situation with Addashield’s dragon acting as a foreign power trying to make inroads with nations, like Orange City. He gifted them one of his spines out of several hundred. Nearly 380 kilos of pure adamantium. And then he regrew that spine instantly.”

Orissa said, “All the world is debating *how* to write off the nuking of lower Orange City and the 10,000 lives Addashield took before his desecration. *Not* ‘if’! But ‘how’.”

Mark’s rage was too big to handle.

He sat down on his bed, and said, “Ah. Okay.” He pivoted. “So. What do I have to do in order to be there when this goes belly up and Addashield proves to be just like any other dragon?”

Orissa went from concerned, to looking upon Mark fondly.

David said, “You have many options. We’d like you to become a Paladin of Freyala, but you don’t have to do that, and we won’t accept you as a paladin if you don’t believe in Freyala’s message anyway. We’ll still help you become everything you can be, though, because it is the right thing to do, because you are still our prisoner for at least 6 months and we don’t want to impact your future unduly. Smaller, more immediate goals, aside from your vengeance against Addashield’s Dragon, include helping you begin to understand your power, and the world.”

Orissa happily asked, “Where do you want to start? On yourself, or the world around you?”

Mark said, “The dragon.”

Orissa happily said, “We’re not letting you kill yourself! Pick another~”

Mark almost screamed... But he did not. He looked at both of them, stood off the bed, and asked, “I want... I want to know the path. What is the *path* that gets me within evisceration distance of Addashield?”

“So many,” Orissa said. “Pick a starting direction.”

Mark felt lost again. Was there a best direction?

“Actually,” David spoke up. “Every week we have new people coming in off of Tutorial or choosing to exit childhood on their own terms, to make decisions knowing more about magic and whatnot. There is a course called Introduction. The course is pretty much a rotating instructor giving the same set of lectures on a multi-day schedule. Either a week or just 3 days. It’s a neutral introduction to the world at large, but most of the people deciding to take the course are acolytes, so there is a religious bent to it. You’re going to take the next Introduction. Power classes come later, once you know the basics and can actually use your power.”

Somehow, having that decision taken from him made everything better.

“Sure. I’ll do that,” Mark said, feeling better, now that he didn’t have to think. And then he thought about the last few days... A week now? Ah. Shit. It had been a whole, like, 9 days since the... Mark stopped thinking about that.

Maybe it had been 15 days.

David asked, “Have you had a power activation yet?”

Mark shook his head. “I haven’t felt anything... magical? Not sure how it’s supposed to feel. I went through that scanner when I got here, I think... Was my readout bad? *Should* I be feeling something?” Mark felt the blood drain from his face. “Everyone knows what I can do now, don’t they? Addashield warned me that I might be a tri-Talent.”

It was taboo to talk about *exact* capabilities outside of very personal relationships, like war parties and families, but a scanner maybe showed everything anyway, right? And Mark needed to be open about his powers in a general sort of way, or he’d never get help developing them, and he would surely need to tell teammates about what he could do... right?

Mark was kinda lost.

David said, “Once you Awaken properly, a scanner can’t do anything but detect an influence along a general direction. It can’t tell you tier or anything like that...” David seemed like he wanted to say something else, but he stopped. “There’s a lot to know. A whole lot of people were involved in getting you your capabilities, so they’re not exactly hidden. Even the general public knows what you can do; it’s part of the news.”

Mark felt worried for a moment—

Orissa cheerfully said, “You’ll develop hidden strengths eventually! You’ll be ripping through monsters in no time at all, too! You’ve got a strong path paved for you all the way to at least tier 7, so when you get there be sure to hold a hand out behind yourself, to pull up all the ones behind you, yeah?”

Mark realized something important at that moment. He stood straight, and then bowed to both David and Orissa. At 90 degrees to the floor, Mark announced, “Thank you for rescuing me from the kaiju fight.” He stood straight.

Orissa smiled a little. “We almost didn’t make it, but we did.”

David grinned. “You’re welcome, Mark. So how about that starter class?”

“Yes, please.”

- - - -

David and Orissa escorted Mark through the dorms section of the Citadel, down a few flights of stairs, and outside. It was the first time that Mark had been outside since he came here... Maybe. He wasn’t too sure about that. The Citadel had a normal city wall far in the distance. Aside from the coliseum and an airstrip way over there, with cars constantly taking off and landing, most of the place was castle-like churches. Or at least most of *this* part of Citadel was castle-like.

There were people of all ages everywhere, though most of them were acolytes in short shoulder capes and white or grey clothes. This was a working city, too; every Citadel was. There was an entertainment district, kids walking around, iconography of Freyala everywhere with her healing the masses during the Reveal, and even some farms over there with greenhouses and probably greenmages.

It is a non-Curtain Protocol land, so all of those kids were probably going to develop knacks or whatever...

Ah.

And the Chosen System was there, so yeah. They probably planned on *that* power, actually.

Mark’s escorts took him to a university-like building, where the hallways were filled with a bunch of art of bodies dissected and labeled. This was a place of healing magic. Mark briefly saw that the sign outside read ‘Healing Hall.’

Mark ended up entering a normal-sized college-like classroom meant for 100 people, with amphitheater seating and a stage up front for a professor. He was one of 10 people, all of them looking very young. He had also been the last to arrive, and he hadn't sat down yet.

The guy standing up front and going over chalk drawings on the board was a younger guy, maybe 24. He was still in acolyte clothes, and his eyes went wide as he looked at David and Orissa coming in behind Mark. "Ah! Finally! A professor shows up!"

David frowned instantly. "You don't have a professor?"

Orissa already had her phone out, tapping away at it, saying, "On it."

David asked the guy up front, "Why are *you* up there, talking?"

Mark sat down because that's what he felt like doing, and he wasn't sure what else he could have done right now.

The guy up front shrugged. "I don't know. I got a notification from COFR. An extra credit to teach the course. So I'm here. I just started."

Everyone in the classroom was maybe 18 or 17, except for Mark's escorts and the guy up front. Except for those three, they all looked worried. What was going on?

One of the kids in the front row spoke up, "We've been sitting here for an hour and we asked Citadel of Freyala Resources to help. That's what they told us on intake? To ask COFR for help? Was that incorrect?"

Orissa was on the phone now, and the other side picked up. She happily, sweetly, said, "Hello Francis! This is Orissa. Do I need to drag you out of bed? Oh? What for?" Less sweetly, "Introduction duty, fucker." Pause. "No I will not do it for yo... Okay. Sure. I'll do it. You owe me a Big Favo— *Yes I do* get to dictate that you owe me a Big Favor because *I'm* the one picking up your shit." She hung up and then smiled to everyone. "Sorry everyone! I'll start the class myself." She told David. "I got this."

David asked, "I can take day 2?"

"No no," Orissa said, "You got that thing with that girl. I got this, and tomorrow, too." She turned to the class, but she was still telling David, "I bet we can do this in 2 days instead of 3, and *certainly* before the full 5 days that it sometimes takes."

David smiled. "I'll catch you later then." He told Mark. "We're just a call to COFR away. Call me or Orissa anytime you want."

Mark nodded. "Thanks."

David put a solid hand on his shoulder, saying, "See you later."

And then David left—

Orissa smacked a meter stick onto the podium up front, for she was already standing up there with a sparkle in her eye that spoke of cram sessions and too much soda. Mark instantly thought of his time studying for the GED, while he was recovering from the coma. Everyone's attention ripped toward her and she grinned to see all those eyes focused her way.

"I am Paladin Orissa Turner!" Some students gasped. One girl shot her gaze toward Mark— The meter stick came back down on the podium and all attention went back to her. "My record at getting through Introduction is 1 day of lecture. That was with 3 people, so that ain't happening. We can still do this in 2! Everyone! *Pay the fuck attention!*

"I'm gonna show you the world.

"All of you have been lied to all your lives about magic, and all of that!"

Mark had sudden questions, just like everyone else in the room.

Orissa didn't deign to ask for questions, or anything like that. Orissa erased the circles and wavy lines that the older kid had drawn in chalk and then, with an easy arm, she sketched out a rather quick and

beautiful image of Earth on one side of the chalkboard, and then a comparatively thin, almost wispy model of Earth on the other side. The second one was obviously Daihoon.

She pointed to her drawings. “Earth, and Daihoon. Simple enough. But do you know what makes Earth, Earth, and Daihoon, Daihoon? NO! *You do not!* It’s *not* two worlds. It’s not some sort of *dimensional* magics either! The *only* dimensions we know of are the physical, and the astral, and that’s what is happening here. Popular culture says stuff like ‘dimensional magic’ to obfuscate what is truly happening, because to know the truth is to have your future magic capability harmed in that truth. This is known as Curtain Protocol.

*“But even that much of the Curtain Protocol is a lie.*

“You think the kids over on Daihoon can’t do magic? Can’t grow strong as magi? Of course not! They can be just as strong, if not stronger, than anyone born on Earth! And they have no Curtain Protocol at all.

“But they Awaken to weirder talents, by far. A Daihoon kid can Awaken to everything from the ability to speak to bugs, to the ability to kill with a touch. That first one might seem weak, and the second one might seem strong, but that would be *incorrect thinking!* What is a bug? Can you look at a monster, and think ‘ew, look at that bug’ even if the monster is a kaiju? Can you speak to a kaiju, and thus get them to move around as you want? Inflammate them to anger, or whatever?

“What is ‘touch’ and can you touch yourself?

“Yeeesss, you see it now.

“That’s dangerous shit.

“We don’t want any of that.

“We’d rather have simply brawnies.

“And that’s why Curtain Protocol exists, and why 90% of people on Earth awaken as brawnies.

“I see some of you looking pensive. Furious, even. You can be angry if you wanted, but it was decided a long time ago that we didn’t want people waking to the weird talents that a daihoon kid can awaken to, so we instituted The Curtain. It’s an agreement to not teach kids about magic, and to keep our powers away from them, so that they don’t Awaken into accidental killers.

“And then there’s the fact that you can invalidate your entry into the Tutorial, too. That’s a part of Curtain Protocol as well, to keep people from Awakening to truly dangerous stuff.

“On Daihoon, they regularly influence their kids so that they don’t turn out horrible if they should go through Tutorial and Awaken. But if the kid is lucky, they’re too influenced to be allowed in the Tutorial anyway. Most people don’t take the Tutorial anymore over on Daihoon, and almost all of them try to gain enough power to not be eligible for the Tutorial at all, and if they gain enough power, they aren’t eligible. Being able to enter the Tutorial for a Daihoon kid is seen as a failure to decide your own future.

“Because you can’t go into the Tutorial if you’re too influenced. That is still true. Only we earthlings use the Tutorial in any real manner, and even then it’s 1 in 100 kids.

“What is ‘influenced’ in this case? I’m glad you asked! Now let’s go back to the beginning of what I said earlier, with these pictures of Earth and Daihoon on the board here.”

*Oh gods, Mark thought. She’s going too fast.*

“When you awaken your body to magic, to Talents, you awaken your astral body.

“You have your physical self, and your astral self.

“Now I know many of you are probably of the opinion that peoples’ Talents have limits, and this is kinda true, but not the full truth. The full truth is that we humans are physical beings with astral bodies, and our astral muscles are weak, comparatively. So when a person’s power fails, that’s their astral body failing to keep up with the person’s demands on it. And just like any muscle, you can strengthen your astral body through use!

“We’ll get to power growth later.



“For now. Let’s look at these maps of Daihoon and Earth I have drawn! I drew them pretty good, I think. I drew them with Earth solid and Daihoon all line-art because Earth is the physical body and Daihoon is the astral body, which is... You with me so far? You know what this means? Yes!

“Earth is the physical, Daihoon is the astral, Just like people with physical bodies and astral bodies! You got it!

“And just like people with physical bodies and astral bodies...”

Orissa held out her hands to her sides, and the light bent around her entire self, like she was the center of a glittering golden light that haloed her body. It was an overt display of power, and Mark had never actually seen one in person, up close before. Not like this. He wasn’t the only one that gasped to see it.

Mark truly was an adult, then, looking at people, using their powers in public!

Wow.

And then the light around Orissa flickered and turned diffuse, and the dust in the air around the chalkboard began to move, swirling and swishing. When the light went away, softly and then all at once, the chalk picture had changed.

Earth was still Earth.

But Daihoon’s line-art model had been brushed with chalk, the whole thing gaining a large blob of lines, like a nebula or starlight, that radiated from the planet and swirled across the entirety of the chalkboard. Some of those lines came off of Daihoon’s poles mostly strongly. Some of those lines went to a dense pocket of white at the top of the board, behind Orissa, which was only really visible when Orissa stepped to the side, which is what she did next.

With a small smile, Orissa gestured at the chalkboard with her hand, and with a golden glow around her body that mirrored her gesture.

“This is but a small slice of the true nature of the connection between Earth and Daihoon. Earth is the body, and Daihoon is the astral self, and the astral self is *so much larger than the physical*. What connects us both is the aura of it all, which is more Daihoon than Earth, and which extends far, far beyond both of our Two Worlds, all the way to Luna, to the Demon City of the Moon, Arakino.

“If you walk up the right way from the poles on either planet, you will step into Endless Daihoon, which is exactly as its name implies; an endless expanse of land that is not really land, but which is still there. Endless Daihoon is a vast topic which I will not be discussing, but you need to know about it so that you understand the nature of our worlds, and why things are the way they are.

“Because with understanding, you can more easily grow your own Talents, Powers, magics, and otherwise. Now you know why your powers will fail you in the future, and it’s not because of some resource like ‘mana’. Mana is something mages use. I won’t get into mana. What you have, your Talents, are, at its most basic level, the muscles of your astral body.

“Muscles don’t fade or go away; they just get tired from overwork.

“Those of you with Talents gained from the Tutorial have your musculature and muscles set for you. Work them as they were created and stretch your capabilities in varied directions, and your astral body will grow strong.

“Those of you who have forged your own astral bodies must take care to keep them nourished and maintained, through study, proper thought, and magical causes. You can gain just as much power for yourself as a person who went through the Tutorial, but it will be harder. *A lot harder*.

“Both paths lead to similar levels of strength, if you do them correctly, though Tutorial-granted strength will reach higher levels of specific strength a *lot* more easily, and it can’t be corrupted by a failure to keep your astral body healthy.

“I hope you are all satisfied with your choices in life, because now that you know the full truth of many things, some of you are getting messages that you are ineligible for the Tutorial.”

Mark suddenly looked around the room, and he saw two people who were reading the air and looking sick to their stomach—

“You’ll just have to step solidly on the paths you have chosen, kids,” Orissa said, smiling, drawing attention back to her. “There is a lot to be said for small, generalist powers from all of the 6 disciplines, instead of focusing on deeper strength in specific ways.”

Mark had so, so many different questions.

He was not the only one.

Orissa did not ask for questions.

Instead, she said, “Some of you might still have the Tutorial option available to you. Do you want to proceed with that, or give it up? Staying in this room means you give it up, because this conversation is going to get deeper. A lot deeper. The actual conversation about all of this goes so, so much wider than I could possibly hope to cover in a day, or even a lifetime, but we’re going deep today, kids.”

Mark looked around the room.

One woman, the one who had glanced hard at Mark when seeing him come in with Paladins, looked quietly at her hands. She made a decision. She looked up at Orissa, and did nothing.

Orissa let a few more moments pass, looking out across the crowd, to make sure everyone was here because they wanted to be here. And then she continued, “Over the rest of today and tomorrow and *hopefully that’s it*, a lot of things will happen. Primarily, those of you who have gone through Tutorial will start having spontaneous power activation. Depending on the nature of your power, you might not even realize this while we’re in class. But! Most of you will realize when your power activates. It’ll be like a third limb that is waking up for the first time. Maybe you’ll experience tingling. Maybe you’ll accidentally rip off all of your clothes. That’s what I did when I got my first activation, about a month after my Awakening. I had no idea how to make my power actually activate, but then I came and took this Introduction. It enlightened me to what I could do, and how the world worked, and thus, I had my first power activation.”

She flickered golden light into the air around her, and Mark heard the distinctive sound of something sharp whistling across the air in front of Orissa. She was slicing the air with her light. How was she *doing* that? And then she stopped.

“Those who have chosen to go their own way will need to build their astral body first, before they can activate themselves at all.

“If anyone experiences an activation, then you’ll need to leave and take this course again some other time, after you gain some control over your power, or you can just not. That’s a fine option, too.” Orissa said, “And with that said,” she pointed at a few people in the room that were seated next to each other. “Separate. At least 5 seats between you two, and you three. Everyone else looks to be far enough away from each other.

“Mostly, unless you’re really lucky, your astral body is only about 3 or 5 times the size of your real body, so you’re not going to accidentally hurt someone unless you got a weird Talent or you’re unnaturally good at aura control, which is another thing that this introduction isn’t going over.”

She waited till people moved around.

With a smile, Orissa announced, “And now! Questions?”

Hands shot up.

Orissa picked a guy.

“What do you mean by ‘Daihoon is Earth’s Astral Body’?” asked a guy. “I’ve seen pictures of that place and... it looks normal, to me? There are stars in the sky and everything? A planet, like Earth? It’s not a whole new universe at all? They don’t have, like, astral-based biology, right?”

Orissa replied, “You’re getting deep into the weeds right now and conflating several things I said into improper categories. What you are asking about is a deep discussion about the nature of reality itself, and one that we can’t touch upon. Not here. To practically lie to you, though, due to simplifications: there’s crossovers everywhere, and you don’t have to worry about that yet, or practically ever.”

Mark wanted her to say more.

Everyone did, actually.

The guy who asked the question kinda... scrunched his face, asking, "Is that—"

"Moving on!" Orissa said. She pointed, "You."

A woman stammered a little, and then asked, "I got some numbers with my Tutorial finish. What do they mean?"

"Tomorrow!" Orissa happily announced. "Not today. Anyone got a question about the nature of reality that isn't too deep. Something social, perhaps?"

Some guy got to ask, "Why are people from Daihoon eligible for the Tutorial but the least bit of magic told to us gets us kicked out of the running?"

The guy was a bit angry as he finished his question.

Orissa said, "That's simple! They have astral bodies over there. Naturally. We have none over here. Astral bodies are both your ability to affect the world and your resistance to being affected yourself. Daihoonians start off growing strong and in touch with their magics, and they get Tutorials which reflect that. We have just our humanity, and we get Tutorials which reflect that.

"If an earthling child is exposed to mana or knowledge of mana, then they might absorb that knowledge and change. It is that *change* that crystallizes the astral body in both a daihoonian and an earthling, which makes us ineligible for a proper Awakening. It's *harder* for someone with an already-established astral body to change, so they can be exposed to magic and knowledge and as long as they don't study it, they're fine. It doesn't take much for an earthling to change, though, because we start off with almost no protection at all.

"The Veil, cast from the moon, from the demon city, from Malaqua, keeps it that way, because the alternative is populations monsterizing, like in the Reveal. Earth will always be separated from Daihoon, so Earth instituted Curtain Protocol to keep the separation more solid.

"Think of Daihoon as 'humans in Europe sharing diseases' versus Earth as 'diseases being taken to the American Indians during colonization'. We earthlings are the American Indians in this case." Orissa

grinned, her brown skin glowing and her braids swishing a little, because she made them do that. “I’m *India*-Indian, though.”

Mark reeled from that information, so many things in his life making more and more sense by the minute.

Orissa pointed to someone else.

The questions continued for hours upon hours.

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Mark walked back to his ‘cell’ in the main acolyte dormitories, in ‘Building 5’.

Orissa walked with him.

Mark asked, “We’re really under magical *quarantine* here on Earth?”

“Oh yes,” Orissa said, “No one asked about it directly, but you know those stories about millions dying to mana poisoning in the beginning of the Reveal? That was not due to a mana baptism, exactly, but more due to people awakening to weird, bad talents. Thus: Curtain Protocol. We chose not to tell people about what would cause kids to develop touch-me-kill-you talents, and the like, and in doing so, we prevent almost all of those sorts of incidents.”

... Huh.

Orissa smiled. “But enough of that! Did you experience a power activation?”

Mark held his arms out, wiggling his fingers. “... No?”

“Have you been trying at all?”

Mark said, “No. I was... Occupied.”

Still was occupied, really.

“Understandable. Want to talk to a therapist? We have those.”

“*No.*”

... Maybe Mark had said that a bit too roughly.

Orissa smiled and moved on, “Well! When you *do* experience your first power activation, it’ll probably fuck you up a lot. Adamantium is incredibly magically dense, and you have some of that in your bones. We’ll go over this stuff tomorrow, but kinetics... Hmm. We’ll go over that tomorrow. Just don’t freak out if you get an activation and end up falling flat on your face and completely unable to move. That happens *all the time* with baby kinetics, and your experience is going to be worse than most.”

Mark smiled to see Orissa care. “I don’t know much about it, but I do know that overtaxing powers ends up with a person crashing out—” He realized something. “That’s because their muscles are tired, eh? They literally can’t stand up anymore? Or at least their astral body can’t?”

Orissa hummed, then said, “I might have used the muscle analogy too much. I consider my own power more of a blob that fades out when it’s tired. Some people think of their power as the thickness of ice on a frozen lake, and so it works until it fails. Or the heat of water, and it works until it gets too cold. Or a particular sound that they can summon and then they have to let go when it becomes too much of a strain to hold. Stuff like that. Astral bodies do *not* cleave to physics so don’t go ascribing understandings where understanding don’t exist. Astral bodies don’t really get *tired*, either. Once you learn your power and grow some, you’ll *always* have it available at some base level.” She added, “And that’s not even *touching* upon what magic can do. All of that stuff today was just about Powers— or Talents, as they call them over in the Americas. Magic, created from one’s own mana and in a mage’s hands, can do a *lot* of weird shit.”

Mark nodded as he looked ahead, thinking, his mind filled with thoughts of how everything worked.

He found himself walking in silence, and Orissa smiling softly to his side.

She dropped him off at his dorm room and then left to go elsewhere.

Mark lay in bed, thinking.

He held his hand in the air, looking at his fingers...

He made a fist and imagined crushing that dragon.

He grinned—

He thought of Mom and Dad and almost had a breakdown, so he got back up and went out... to the dining hall? No. Mark stopped in the hallway, turned to the right. No. He wasn't hungry. He turned around and went... That way. Down that hall, wherever it might go.

He wasn't sure.

All he knew is that he couldn't be alone with his thoughts right now. Probably not for a very long time, actually—

Oh.

There was a sign on the wall that pointed toward the gym, the pool, and the spa.

Mark went back to his room and put on some gym clothes, trying not to think about how his usual gym clothes were burned in nuclear fire and—

Mark strode down the hallway, feeling fine in some gym shorts, a shirt, and some shoes. His COFR-issued phone in a pocket. He didn't have a wallet anymore—

*Stop thinking about it all, Mark.*



He stopped in his tracks, his breath coming hard, and then he turned around and went back to his room. People gave him some looks, but Mark barely paid attention to those people.

Once he was back in his room he shut the door and asked his phone, “Citadel of Freyala Resources, I need to speak to... to someone—” Ice terror ripped into Mark’s chest as he thought about talking of the Tutorial and Addashield and all that shit. He couldn’t talk about that yet. Mark rapidly changed his mind. “I want something to *do*. Something productive. Can you... help with that?”

His phone glittered gold and the same feminine voice as before said, “Would you like to take Union-power specialized classes and work on healing duty in your downtime? Union is the name of the power that Emily Turner unlocked in her mana baptism, that she used to become Freyala, and as such we can help you begin to understand that power more than most.”

For a moment, Mark recalled the stories he had been told about Freyala, and her rise during the Mana Baptism Crisis after the Reveal, when Emily Turner became a goddess of Protection and Healing. He had never heard of her human-born power be called ‘Union’... and come to think of it, he had never heard her human-born power named as anything at all.

All those stories simply called her a Healer.

Ah.

The Curtain Protocol.

Mark wondered how much truth of the world he had missed growing up in a human settlement on Earth, where everyone was kept in the dark so that they’d turn out brawny, for both their own safety and the safety of all the people around them. To be... fair, Mark supposed... To be fair, brawny was pretty good at just making you healthy and able to survive a lot of problems.

But Mark felt like all the world was different, now.

Like he was an alien in a strange land, that almost looked like home, but not quite. He was in France, true, in a citadel to a god that he didn't believe in, but that only explained part of what Mark was feeling. The shift to adulthood was not supposed to be this... this disruptive.

He needed to call Mom and—

More ice in the gut.

Mom was dead.

After a long moment of sitting there on his bed, in his room, both of which were not his because he was just borrowing them, Mark looked at the phone that was also not his, and he tried to stop thinking about home. About Gladegrove and Orange City and—

Mark stopped thinking about death and lost lives, and said, "Yes. I want to learn about Union."

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Mark walked down the large hallways of Central Citadel like a thief.

That was the only way he could think about it, since every checkpoint he encountered was more manned than the one before and the elevators didn't have buttons; the golden light on Mark's phone got him through all of it. A few times COFR had even told him to show his phone to the guard behind a desk. The guards simply glared at him, wondering what the fuck a nobody in basic brown clothes was doing this high up in Central Citadel, but the golden light let him through.

Mark stepped out of a very nice elevator into an even nicer hallway, high in the tower, and knew that he should not be here. COFR had to be playing a trick on him. The central AI of Citadel Freyala was as no-nonsense as all AIs, but she was clearly having fun with some of these directions. This hallway was filled with plush furniture, and he was pretty sure he had seen someone walk down that hallway back there in bedsheets.

This was a residential area of some sort.

COFR spoke from his phone, “Turn right here and walk into the waiting room. Request some refreshments from the servitor behind the bar. You might be staying here for half an hour.”

The waiting room was not a waiting room.

It was a private coffeehouse/library, with big plush cushions on big couches and big chairs with nice tables, and everything was stone and wood and truly expensive. A rather normal-looking servitor floated behind the coffeebar. Mark had never seen a servitor before, except on television. This one was matte-grey, with spheres for a head, chest, and pelvis, and all the other joints on its body, while the limbs and fingers were made of bright silver hollow columns. It had a glowing light above its head, and its face read COFR.

COFR’s light drained from Mark’s phone and her feminine voice spoke from the servitor, “Would you care for a coffee, Mark Careed? Or perhaps something else?”

Mark had no idea what he wanted, and he didn’t really like coffee, but maybe that was because he had never had a good coffee? Mark asked, “Can you make a good coffee?”

A very old woman walked into the room behind Mark, easily saying, “No need to start on that habit yet, dear.” She said to the servitor, “Milk tea for both of us.”

The woman wore white and gold robes in a simple cut, so she didn’t instantly trigger Mark’s knowledge of any particular strong people, but she was accompanied by a strong man in full embossed silver armor, and *holy shit Mark recognized that guy.*

He was Justicar, the hand of Freyala. Serge Garin. One of the true superheroes of the world.

He wore his helmet on his belt.

Justicar narrowed his eyes at Mark, and then said to the woman, "I would prefer to stay for this, mother."

Oh holy shit.

This was *High Priestess* Julia Garin. The spiritual leader of the Church of Freyala.

The High Priestess smirked as she noticed Mark having a minor panic attack, and then she told her son, "Team Mithril will be here in four hours, Serge. That's not a lot of time."

*Ah*, Mark thought. *Team Mithril, of Crystal Tower. Ah. Big Names all around.*

Justicar harrumphed. "Very well." He turned and walked away.

The servitor floated to a nearby table and set down a tea set that Mark hadn't even noticed being prepared.

High Priestess Julia Garin moved and sat down, saying, "Come join me, Mark."

Mark found himself sitting down across from the spiritual leader of Church Freyala, and now that Mark wasn't dumbstruck, he saw how the world bent around her with a golden light. It was subtle. It was there. She sipped her tea and Mark sipped his, as was obviously customary but Mark couldn't place why he realized it was customary. The tea was probably delicious. Mark couldn't taste anything right now.

Garin smiled softly as she set down her cup. "I have heard you wish to kill Addashield's dragon."

Mark's usual fear of social interaction evaporated entirely. "I do. I heard something about him gifting adamantium in return for... for whatever. Will the world accept him?"

“We will accept him, and we have. We routinely hunt and kill dragons of all kinds, but some dragons are simply too valuable and cooperative to kill, even if they did kill thousands to become what they became. Addashield’s High Dragon is no different. In fact, he might be one of the dragons who can truly go the distance, and become a Hero of Humanity, like 98% of him used to be.”

Mark controlled his anger as much as he could, which was not a whole lot, really.

“*Why does everyone think that Addashield is gone?* He’s still there! He’s still that dragon! He should be exiled and pursued till death for what he did!” Mark lowered his voice. “He needs to die, or else the world simply doesn’t make sense at all.”

Julia Garin mostly ignored Mark’s outburst.

She hummed, then asked, “Tell me... If you take flour, eggs, sugar, and assorted other things, and you mix them all together, do you get a cake? Or do you have ‘flavored flour’?”

Mark instantly answered, “ ‘Flavored flour’ is just as true as ‘cake’.”

High Priestess Julia Garin chuckled. “I suppose in some ways, yes... But in conventional wisdom, Addashield is already dead. He joined completely with his demon, astral bodies merging. The dragon is not even immortal anymore, because it’s not a demon. So many things change in the creation of a dragon, that many nations of Daihoon and even Earth, don’t consider what comes afterward to be the same person that came before. Even memories are different. The creation of a dragon is almost always a disastrous affair, which is why it is very illegal, but Addashield’s dragon is trying so very hard to become a Hero of Humanity once again.

“Among his known accomplishments, he killed 3 kaiju storms, and he has gifted 1,500 kilos of adamantium to several different organizations across the globe. Even with just that gesture of adamantium alone, he would already be considered a Hero of Humanity many times over.

“Your revenge is dead in the crib, Mark, because unless the dragon does something horrible, then no one is going to fight him. It would be too costly, by far; in resources-to-kill, loss of potential future resources, and in lives.”

... What?

Adamantium was important, yes. But... Mark still wasn't sure how important, exactly...

That little cube that Mom and Dad had given over to Orange City for first citizen rights was worth 4-ish million goldleaf, though? So that was... a good approximation of... what 1500 kilos of adamantium would be worth?

A lot. That's as far as Mark got with that math.

... Fuck.

Mark moved on fast, saying what he had said to David and Orissa earlier this morning, "I want to be there when proves himself a horror."

"And I want you to focus on something other than him."

"... Sure. I'll lie about moving on."

Mark had known the words were a mistake the second they left his mouth.

Julia smiled brightly, but there was little kindness in that smile. She had decided that Mark was an idiot.

She said, "I'm going to be mean to you, and then kind, and maybe we'll speak again some other day." She dropped her smile, and Mark felt cold. "It is *unbelievably* arrogant that you think you could do *anything* at all against him, and that you did not do exactly what the world needed you to do. You were in a tough position and you suffered; yes. People died. People *very important* to you died.

"This is still a good outcome.

"You even spoke of your own sacrifice in the name of bringing Addashield back to us. Back to humanity.

*“Your sacrifice worked!”*

“Know this, Mark: I have sent *thousands* to their deaths against monsters, all to save the rest of us, orphaning babies and widowing wives and making widowers out of husbands. Any true leader would do the same. Any true human would volunteer to be the ones sent out to their deaths.

“This time, the person left to suffer is you, and we all thank our patrons that you managed to pull a miracle out of your ass and only cause a 2% demonification of Addashield. That much is *perfectly acceptable*. So take heart that you *did* kill Addashield. He *did* do the right thing and he *did* sacrifice himself instead of allowing the demon to take over, for I highly doubt he was ever going to be allowed to return to the Old Contract at all.

“The man and the demon who killed your parents is dead at your hands.

“Addashield is dead.

“His son works to erase the freshly-known sins of his father, and to stand where his father once stood. He would not be the first dragon to attempt this sort of reconciliation with his birth-people. He will not be the last.”

Mark probably should have withered at all of that. Julia was certainly accomplished at giving a tear down. But instead, Mark found himself asking, “Can you get to the part where you’re kind?”

Julia moved on, saying, “Union is one of the strongest known powers, and you are lucky to have unlocked it without going through the Chosen system. You didn’t need Freyala to give it to you. You have it yourself. This gives you variety unmatched by a normal priest, but you will need to make this power your own *without* utilizing the training wheels Freyala gifts to those who go through the Chosen system.

“The first lesson is still the same, though.

“The first lesson in Union is about linking yourself to the world and then breathing in the good health and breathing out the bad health. It’s all very meditative.

“Breathe with me now.”

She breathed in, deeply.

Mark tried to breathe in, and he felt himself shuddering instead. He was furious, and yet, he was a lot more than furious right now. He was *bereft*. Lost. Hating *everything*, and wanting revenge. But he was also human, and he saw that Julia was trying to help him. Actually help him. In her own way. In the way she knew how; with an iron hand and tough words.

Julia breathed out, “And then you breathe out the bad. Exhale now.”

Mark breathed out, and he shuddered on exhale, too.

Something broke inside of him. Some fragile barrier that he had managed to erect between himself and his sorrow.

The tears came.

He shut his eyes as hard as he could, but the tears still flowed.

“Let them flow, Mark!” Julia said.

And Mark opened his eyes. Tears flowed.

Tears streamed down Julia’s face, too, as she said, “We face so much sorrow in our lives! Accepting it and moving on is the only way to get through this or any other day. Now breathe in!”

Mark tried to breathe in and he mostly succeeded.

“Exhale the bad!” Julia breathed out a lot of hot air, and for some reason Mark found that funny.

He laughed.



Julia smiled a little.

Mark still shuddered as he exhaled as much 'bad' as he could.

"In!

"Out!

"In with the good!

"Out with the bad!

"In again! Out again."

Julia breathed with rhythm, opting to let the sound of her active breathing do all the talking.

Mark breathed with the Head Priestess of Freyala for a while. He wasn't sure when the tears stopped, but they stopped. They dried. Julia looked like a grandmother again, and not the High Priestess that she was. She smiled as she breathed.

And Mark felt better. He didn't understand how he felt better, but he did. It was probably magic. It was probably Union, yes. But it was also just a person talking to another person, trying to help them understand.

Eventually, Julia slowed.

Mark slowed, too.

Julia softly said, "That's the first lesson. Link with the goodness in the world all around you, and throw your badness away into the wind. All the world can handle your tiny problems, and give you what you need to heal yourself in turn. That's the basic truth of it all. This is the basic way to learn this type of

healing magic. It's also one of the best types of healing magic, because this type of healing magic requires you to heal yourself, first.

"A healer of Freyala is never the first to fall, and thus, they can support all the others around them, no matter what horrors assail us all.

"You will eventually be an adamantium rock in the storm, Mark. You just need time for the fires of your forging to cool down. You just need time to heal." Julia asked, "Do you understand?"

Mark didn't lie when he said, "Intellectually, yes."

Julia nodded. "That's good enough for now." She stood up, and when Mark tried to stand, she said, "No no. The tea here is good. Finish your tea. Have more if you wish. I have work to do, but that doesn't mean you must leave. The reconstruction effort for Orange City is already underway, but it starts as all reconstruction efforts do, with monster killing. The Church is helping by sending healers to support the teams in the area. But that's just the least of our daily efforts here, Mark.

"We're also sending healers to Daihoon all the time, fortifying parties so that they don't go off and get themselves killed, and also fortifying cities against monster incursions with healers on the walls and paladins on the front lines. Our Inquisitors routinely hunt and kill Fallen, and those campaigns always cost tens of lives, *if we're lucky*. The hunts for Addashield's hidden dragons continues. We're working with Drakarok's people there, and many others. When Addashield descended he broke a lot that he had been maintaining all his life. All of humanity is fixing everything that we can. I organize much of the higher level problem-solving of our church, Mark. I have to decide which people die where today, spending lives so that civilization survives.

"With luck, and power, most of those people will survive solving the problems I send them against, like how you survived Addashield."

Mark sat stunned at pretty much all of that, but especially the last part.

High Priestess Julia Garin nodded, knowing she had made many points. She left.

Mark sat there, thinking. When he sipped his tea again it was cold.

It was still good tea.

He *was* being very fucking stupid for blaming himself for Addashield's actions, wasn't he. Shit. He had had no control at all over any of that, did he... Mark's thought stilled as he felt ice knives in his stomach and all across his spine, yet again. He didn't want to admit that this was the 'good outcome' at all.

And yet...

He wanted to believe the High Priestess. He wanted to believe that he had done everything he could.

But he missed his parents.

Mark sipped his tea. The servitor refilled his cup while he was staring off into space, and Mark drank the refill too. It was better when it was warmer. Mark breathed. In, out, in, out. The breathing exercises helped a lot, apparently.

Very meditative.

Mark made a decision.

He would hold onto his rage, but he would also set it aside. It would smolder in the back of his mind, fueling the rest of his decisions in life, but he wouldn't let it control him like it had controlled him just now. He had blown up in the face of *High Priestess Julia Garin*. That was simply... simply unacceptable.

She was right about a lot.

Mark was *used* by Addashield to get what *he* wanted, which was complete evasion from his crimes. Was the High Dragon that came afterward Addashield, or not? Was the High Priestess lying to Mark about that, to make him choose a better path in life? Or was she telling the truth, and Addashield truly was gone? And all that remained was 'Addashield's son'?

Mark didn't know.

Whatever the case, Mark didn't matter to Addashield.

The archmage's actions weren't personal. Mark was just a stupid kid thinking he could change the world for the better, and Addashield had used him... And what about the other three people he had lined up for Tutorial? They all died, didn't they? Mark hadn't heard about them at all. They were certainly dead.

Addashield was completely derelict in his duty to the world. He was a Hero to Humanity and Mark thought that meant something... something better than what it had turned out to mean. But Addashield had been using people for a long time, and then killing kaiju and otherwise to... To hide his crimes beneath layers of blinding adoration from others? Or to make up for his crimes? Did he feel guilty at all about what he did to survive?

He had poisoned the world with hidden dragons, all for the sake of his own skin, which he sold to a demon for power when he was young and stupid...

Ah.

Just like Mark had sold his life to an archmage, hoping for power.

It was not wrong to want power, though. Power was how people saved themselves from monsters. Power was the true currency of the world.

Mark laid his head onto the table, muttering, "Fuck."

He sat like that for a little while, and then he sat upright, finished off his cold tea, and asked COFR for guidance out of there, back to his room.

Dinner in the great hall was pretty good.

When dinner was done Mark sat in his room, alone and thinking.

And he breathed; sometimes with purpose and meditation, bringing in the good and expelling the bad, and sometimes just laying there, thinking. Breathing meditation actually helped a lot. Mark wasn't sure if that was because of the meditation-aspects of it all, or if simply breathing was truly the first lesson in understanding his Union Talent.

Mark had never been distrustful of people in power before. Not really. Sure, you hear about bad things happening every now and then, but it's always to someone else. Mark wanted to trust High Priestess Julia Garin, but in the very same talk where she told him breathing was the first step in Union, she also told him that she would be sending people to their deaths today, in order to protect civilization.

Did those people she sent to their deaths know she was sending them to their deaths? Or would they only find out in the dying, what had been done to them? Did they make their own decisions to go out there, like Mark had?

Eventually, Mark decided to take a shower.

It wasn't until he was taking off his sweatpants that he realized he had met with the High Priestess of Freyala in gym clothes.

Mark laughed to keep from feeling mortified.

He smiled as he imagined Mom berating him for showing up for an important meeting in *gym clothes*, while Dad would be saying that Mark couldn't have helped it, because he thought he was just going to meet someone in the School of Healing. Maybe Mom would have allowed that, but she'd tell Mark that he should have asked COFR who he was meeting, so he could have at least blamed his clothes on COFR instead of his own unknowing.

The shower felt good.

Mark went to bed exhausted.

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Mark woke up feeling pretty decent, actually.

He rose, put on some basic sand-brown clothes, and walked out into the dorm halls where other men and women his own age or a little bit older walked around in white or grey. They were acolytes of the faith, and Mark was out of place. A few people looked at him because of that.

They had probably been looking at him for a week, hadn't they?

Ah...

Mark walked down to the cafeteria and lined up with everyone else, grabbing a tray and then grabbing scrambled eggs, sausage, and waffles out of big trays of the stuff, while other acolytes worked the kitchens, constantly replacing trays with fresh food. There was no checkout counter; everyone ate for free. It was pretty much army accommodations.

As Mark sat down by himself at the end of one of the long tables, he realized that he was in the acolyte training halls. He had been here for a while, though he had only come out to get food recently. Maybe his first time was 3 days ago? Mark wasn't quite sure. He didn't remember much of the last 15-ish days, aside from racing away from the kaiju brawl after his Tutorial, and then a day or something ago, when Priestess Lola came into his room and told him it wasn't his fault. He vaguely recalled giving testimony about... stuff. He wasn't sure.

Maybe he should check up on that. See what he had said to the... people. Whoever they were. Mark was pretty sure he had talked to a lot of men and women in bright silver armor, so, paladins. Aside from that... What had he done? Who had he spoken to?

... Some other time.

Mark finished breakfast and put his tray up. With a few taps on his phone, he checked on the schedule for the next Introduction class today, and saw it was in another hour.

Mark decided to go to the gym, to go for a run. He always felt better after actually moving, so after he put his gym clothes back on, he went down the hall to the gym, to the rows upon rows of treadmills. People occupied most of the treadmills already, but there was one that was open in front of a television showing some cartoons.

Mark hopped on the treadmill and he started at 10 kilometers per hour. A slow start. A good speed.

It was surprisingly easy to run. Mark bumped it up to 15 kph and got a good pace going. He had longer legs now, and running was easier. Or maybe not easier, but at least faster. Mark had almost forgotten how good it felt to simply be *moving*, but here he was, running well.

He had missed this.

After the coma, he had worked hard to get back onto his feet, and then he had been given that Color Drop treatment and everything got easier. As Mark upped the speed to 20 KPH, he breathed in and then out, trying to sync his breaths with the strike of shoes against rubber. 20 kilometers per hour felt... pretty good, really. Way too fast, though, compared to everything Mark was used to. It was a little over 12 miles per hour, and that was a lot. That was a five minute mile.

And Mark was running fast and free.

Faster than most other people on the treadmills, actually, but there was a woman four machines down and a man at the other end who were running a *lot* faster — one of them was a speedster, for sure— so Mark didn't feel out of place. Those guys were really focused, though. Mark just felt good running this fast, breathing in the good, exhaling the bad. Fans blew in air from across the gym, making the run breezy and free.

Good goes in, bad goes out. The world can handle problems that a single mortal cannot.

Mark felt good.

Half an hour later, Mark still felt good as he slowed the machine down and gradually tapered his run down to a walk. With a smile and sweating heavily, Mark left the gym to head back to his dorms.

Mark hopped in his private shower in his private bathroom, and almost started bawling again. He had no idea why he cried, but then again, he did.

He breathed some, under the flow of the shower.

Soon enough, he turned off the water, put on more basic sand-brown clothes, and went out to Introduction.

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Orissa had drawn a hexagon on the chalkboard with a bunch of concentric hexagons inside. They had labels, but Mark was still walking into the classroom. He found a seat in the middle front, alongside a few other people who had the same opinion about the best place to sit in class. None of them sat next to each other, though, and Mark probably sat too close to a guy on his right due to the threat of accidental power activation, but this was fine, right? There was a whole seat between the—

The other guy got up and moved a seat away.

Mark said, “Sorry.”

The other guy just shook his head—

“Greetings, students!” Orissa said, walking into the room from the back. She had an exceptionally perky attitude today, and even the light around her seemed to mirror her attitude. She seemed brighter.



Literally brighter. With a wide smile, Paladin Orissa Turner strode up to the professor's stage, saying, "And now we're on to day 2 of Introduction! All about powers, talents, whatever you want to call them! I'm sure you all think you know what the various categories are, and maybe you do! But probably not. You!" She pointed at some guy. "What sorts of powers are there! What are the general classifications!"

The guy blinked, and then he tried, "Body, Kinetic, Mind, Spiritual, Demonic... Err. Sorry."

"No worries! No worries! You got the first 3 correct, but not really, and then I think you went off on a tangent in a way that is both deeply correct and not correct at all. How about this." Orissa looked to Mark. "Give me a number. How many categories of power are there?"

Mark glanced at the hexagon behind Orissa. "Six."

"Correct! There are 6 primary classifications of power, and 2 variations." Orissa gestured at the— She paused, as some other student walked into the room, making noise as he opened the door. The guy stood there in the door for a moment, stunned. Orissa said, "Take a seat, please!"

The guy rapidly took a seat.

Orissa continued, "Now there are 6 classifications of power, and 2 variations. The variations are the most clear-cut and have to do with the nature of astral bodies themselves, so we'll go over those first." Orissa glowed with light, a white blob taking shape in the air around her. "Astral bodies are this sort of shape. Bigger people usually have bigger auras. The size of your aura is the space that you can affect. This is one of the big reasons why monsters like dragons and kaiju are so horrific, because their auras are commensurately sized. Most humans, no matter their size, cover about this much space with their power. When you get really strong, you can cover larger areas, and you can even do this."

Mark mentally noted how dangerous a dragon truly was in that moment.

And then he reevaluated his position in the hierarchy of the world, throwing his evaluation of himself far, far down the ladder, when Orissa shaped her light, somehow, into bubbles that expanded out from her body, her light fluttering far and wide, expanding throughout the entire room like she was blowing bubbles into a glass of milk. The white light filled the entirety of the room, crowding against the ceiling and the floor, filling the entire space.

Everything glowed with color.

Orissa smiled as she held her power out there, filling the room, saying, “This is the exact same volume as before, but I spread it out. This is a high level technique. This is a *normal technique*. This technique makes me very, very vulnerable, and is best used not like this, but like this:”

The light of the room vanished and came back together into a series of layers against Orissa’s skin, like form-fitting armor five layers thick.

With a much easier time speaking, Orissa said, “This is a defensive zone of mine. Pretty simple. Rather illustrative. Same volume as before, too. There’s density-of-power to consider here, too, but we’re not going to go over that today. That’s too complicated and individualized to be spoken of in Introduction.” She dismissed her light, and then wrote in big letters on the left side of the hexagon, saying, “I have the normal form of power! This is called Near! Also known as continuous, solid, or steady.” She stopped writing and said, “This is the power that 99% of people possess. *Usually*, people cannot act at a distance at all. If you see a person using their power at a distance, then you are seeing something like this.”

She held up a hand and a ball of light appeared around it. And then she threaded brightest light, like a laser, off of that orb, into the air on the other side of the professor’s stage. Another light orb appeared at that destination.

“This is how most people *use their astral body* at a distance. It’s not actually at a distance at all! As you can see, there’s a line between myself and the orb over there. But what if I do this?”

The line between the orbs vanished, leaving two orbs of light hanging in the air, one on her hand and the other over there.

Orissa pointed with her illuminated hand at a woman sitting beside Mark. The ‘disconnected’ light orb also pointed at the woman. “Point to where you think I’m still connected to the other orb.”

The woman saw this as a trick, and Mark did, too. She went with the trick, though, pointing between the light orbs, saying, “There?”

“Nope! Thanks for playing along, though,” Orissa said, as a line lit up in the air that went in the opposite direction of her illuminated hand and the orb in the air, circling around the entire room like a line of LEDs around the edge of the ceiling. Orissa dropped her power, and the light went out. “Most everyone in the world has a classification of ‘Solid’. The only reason this part of the lesson is taught at *all* is because the 1% of people who are not solid are called ‘Fars’.” She started writing names on the boards. “Reacher. Ether. Airy. Rares. Every culture on Daihoon has names for these people, but we most know them by their main use and Talent. Every single Far who ever goes through Tutorial always Awakens with the power that we know these people by, and which makes them invaluable and yet arguably the weakest member of any organization. These are the people who make or break operations in the field, and they need to be protected.

“The Seer.

“These are the people who can truly operate their astral body at a distance, and none of them are here in this class at all. All the rest of us just have to figure out how to use our powers at distances through tricks of aura control and astral body workings, and even then we’ll never be able to do what a Seer can do. You can try! But learned-mages — *not* Talent-mages— have a much easier time becoming Seers than anyone who has gone through Tutorial and had their powers set for them.”

Mark instantly wondered, if most people were solid-aura users, then how did healers heal at a distance? Was it a ‘bubbling-aura’ thing, like how Orissa had done? Well yeah. It had to be that, didn’t it?

Orissa looked around the class, noting as people understood what she was saying, and then she moved onto the chalkboard, saying, “And now we’ll go over the 6 classifications of powers.” She started writing down in big letters as she said,

“Here at the bottom left, we have the start of the hexagon! It’s Body! All the physical stuff. Speedster, Brawny, etcetera. It’s typically thought of as blue!

“One up from that, we have Kinetic! Pretty self explanatory. All shaping powers go here. This is green.

“At the top we have Mind! Thinking powers go here. Tinkers, telepaths, etcetera. Yellow.

“Top right, we have Natural! All the weird powers are here, from plant control to healing to witchery. If you’ve got a witch, they’re probably a Natural of some sort. This is the *second* most-varied category of powers. This stuff does not conform to natural laws; only individual laws. Orange.

“Bottom right, we have the Arcane! This is where the mages come from. Everyone with a Mage power, or a specific subset of Mage, like Necromancer or Enchanter, comes from here. Whereas the Natural follows individual ideas of power, the Arcane follows the laws of the soul which have nothing to do with the ideas of humans at all. This is the realm of demons, for they wrote those soul laws long before anyone else came along. You, who mentioned ‘demon’ as a category of power, were thinking of Arcane because of that fact. For those of you with a mind for connecting dots, ‘Arcane’ is also known as ‘Soul’. This is red.

“Three of the main categories are Body, Mind, and now Soul.

“The very bottom of the hexagon is known as Arch. All reality warping powers are located here, in the space between vast physical power and vast soul power. The ability to move the world through pure action is the domain of the Arch. Arches used to be known as Mystics, but that’s an outdated name. Arch is typically colored purple.

“Now, taken all together, we have Body, Kinetic, Mind, Natural, Soul, and Arch. That’s the hexagon. If you think your Power or Talent exists outside of this, you’re wrong. I won’t argue with you. You’re wrong. Absolutely everything you can think of is covered in this space, and if it’s truly weird, it’s probably just somewhere in Natural and maybe a Seer is doing it.

“We’ll save questions for later— Ahh. Maybe not. I see at least two of you are experiencing a spontaneous activation.”

Mark wanted to look across the room, to see who Orissa was talking about, but when he tried to move his head all he managed to do was lay down on his desk in front of him. Everything was too heavy. He could barely breathe through the weights somehow holding him down. He did manage to look left, though, and with eyes still open, he saw a woman floating out of her chair, into the air. She desperately grabbed onto the desk to hold on, but she kept flying upward. She yelped a little, but it was a soft thing. And then she couldn’t hold on to her seat, to her table anymore. She floated up into the air, and then came down like a dead body, right into Orissa’s illuminated light.

Orissa set the unconscious woman down, saying, “There, there. You’re okay.”

Mark couldn’t move.

He was deeply scared, and he hadn’t realized it until then. His heart beat hard—

And then he heard Orissa’s voice from right above him.

“Don’t worry about passing out. You’ll be fine. She’s fine, too. This right here, class, is the usual result of a kinetic experiencing a spontaneous activation for the first time. I imagine the young woman is an airkinetic, and this young man is something else that he’s already touching, right now.

“I’ll go over this phenomenon while they can still hear me, but I imagine both of them will go unconscious soon enough. It’s nothing to worry about.

“A kinetic is attuned to a certain thing, and they can move that thing around like it’s their body. But touching those things weakens them, because their aura automatically latches onto that thing. It’s like they’ve automatically attached a new limb and they’re trying to figure out how to use that limb. Like a baby trying to move around too much; they tire fast, at first. If they stop touching those things, then they don’t have to support the weight of that new limb, but these two, just like me, seem incapable of not touching their designated kinetic material.

“I had to be shut away in a dark room for a week when I first Awakened.

“Many of you will experience a spontaneous power activation during today’s class, if you haven’t already.

“Some of them might be dangerous to others, but none of them will be dangerous to yourselves, because 99.9% of Talents are like that, and we make sure that those who Awaken dangerously do so under much more controlled situations than this.

“When you have an activation, if you can, you will excuse yourself, because that is the official end of Introduction for most people. If you want to come back to another setting of this class with some other

teacher, then you can, but you can just go on to normal classes with normal teachers at that point. But as for this class, here, we're getting through everyone's questions today until they experience a power activation, and then this Introduction is over.

"Falling asleep at your table is fine, though. I'll move you to some cots I'll set up while.."

She kept talking, but Mark couldn't hold on to consciousness anymore.

He slept.

- - - -

Mark woke to soft words from an unfamiliar voice.

"...rk... Ma... Mark. Mark? Okay. Yeah he's here. I need you to listen to me, Mark. You're in a kinetic hole. You're too connected to what you're touching to be able to distance it from yourself, and thus you are always holding that weight. Your instructor, Orissa Turner, told you about this, right before you fainted. Do you understand?"

Mark felt like he was being crushed with weight, so yeah, he did understand. But he couldn't speak. He could only lay on his back, the world looking dark, but his eyes were just closed. All he could do was think. How was he supposed to answer the voice?

"I'm a mind reader so I can hear you speaking as you think. I'm here to help you through this."

Mark was instantly scared. What if he thought of something wrong? Like how he had helped Addashield through the Tutorial, or about Sally and her hair, or about sex, so much sex, that he just didn't

understand the purpose of, and did people actually like each other like that? Was there something wrong with him? What about his bank account! His numbers were—

“Don’t worry about that sort of stuff, Mark. I’m here to help you get out of your kinetic hole.”

Why were they saying ‘hole’! They didn’t have to say ‘hole’ so much!

“Kinetic *depths*, then,” said the speaker, with a bit of smirking to their voice. “Don’t worry about the wordage. I’m here to help you out of these depths. Listen to the sound of my voice. You are currently holding weights on your body. A lot of weight. Adamantium is strewn all throughout your bones, like a fine dust. What you have to do is push that dust outward in order to remove it from your body. This is usually very painful, but we’re going to have someone help you breathe with a magic technique and this will help you expel the adamantium. You have this same power, called Union, but we’re going to have someone else do the breathing for you right now. When you’re ready. Okay?”

Mark wasn’t sure how he would ever be ready, but he was ready as he could ever be.

“Okay. Here comes the assisted breathing.”

And then Mark felt his chest inflate like someone had forced air into him, and then the air came out like a bellows emptying. Mark felt sand or dust blow out of his body, like he was exhaling a desert, and in that action he felt... lighter.

Mark opened his eyes and he didn’t see much besides a hospital ceiling—

There was a woman standing by his side, looking down at him, grinning a little.

She said, “Hello, Mark!” She was the mind reader. “I am the mind reader, yes. I’m Cheryl. Nice to meet you. Cheryl picked up a paper off of Mark’s chest, showing off black dust on that paper. “Adamantium. It’s yours. We’ll save it for you to the side, for now.” She probably lifted and dumped the paper into a container, or something, because that’s what it sounded like. “That’s exactly what I did. And now I put the paper back down on your chest to grab some more. We’ll do this a few times. You okay?”

Mark couldn't see the person helping him breathe with Union, but he was okay otherwise.

"The person helping you breathe is Priestess Lola Turner. I think you know her." Cheryl waved a hand over Mark's face.

Oh! Lola? She's still here?

Lola's voice came from the side, "Hello, Mark." She poked her head into view. "You're perfectly fine. You were out for 5 hours, though, so we got worried. The density of your kinetic-attunement is too large for you. You'd pull through to the other side of this problem with 2 days of strain, but we're doing it this way."

Mark tried to speak, and that wasn't working, so he thought, '*Thank you.*'

Cheryl said, "He said 'thank you'."

*Thanks, Cheryl.*

"No problem, Mark. Ready to go again?"

Mark ended up needing to exhale a full five times to make his sixth exhale come out clean. Each exhale removed more of the weight from his body than the last. When that was over, he easily sat up, as though he hadn't been pressed to the bed with the weight of a world upon him.

Cheryl held the vial of adamantium. It was, like, an eyedropper full of the stuff. "Around a tenth of a kilo. Just this much was enough to lay you out. I can hand it to you, but I want you to lay back down, first."

Mark... lay back down.

Cheryl put the vial onto Mark's stomach—



Suddenly the weight was back. Mark almost blacked out—

The weight went away.

Mark gasped to be free of the weight. “Holy shit.”

Lola chuckled, but she looked worn out. She smiled softly, saying, “It was good to see you again, Mark. I have to go help other patients now, but if you want someone to help you learn Union aside from the Holy Mother, I’ll be here for that, almost every day.”

Mark smiled and said, “Thank you. Yeah. Maybe I’ll... I didn’t know you were still here.”

“I’ll be here for a while as they do all their investigations into Addashield.”

Mark lost his smile. “Okay?”

Lola stood up and said, “When an archmage falls, they hit a lot of people on the way down. Addashield hit more than most. We’ll talk more some other time. It was good to see you again.” She gave a courtly bow toward Cheryl who nodded in turn, and then she walked out of the room.

Mark watched her go.

And then Cheryl brought him back to the present, saying, “Kinetics gain strength by being in contact with their designated substance and being able to lift it as they would their own body. This vial of adamantium is way too much for you, by far. *For now*. Eventually I imagine you’ll be wearing bracers of the stuff like Addashield used to wear.”

Mark suddenly realized how far out of league he was, yet again. “He had, like...” Mark wasn’t sure how much weight of adamantium, actually. He touched his forearms, measuring in his mind, and guessed. “50 kilos of the stuff?”

“Something like that.” Cheryl held up the vial, saying, “I want to put this in storage for you, if that’s okay. It’s still yours. You can make decisions about it all later. You’re not safe to hold it at all right now, and your body is already producing more of the stuff. I have a suggestion for you, if you would hear it.”

Mark didn’t want to let the adamantium out of his sight, but he understood that he couldn’t hold it himself, so he said, “... Sure. I can hear it out.”

“In 8 more months you’ll have this much more adamantium in your body, once again. You might acclimate to having that much in your body by then, because the weight of it all will steadily ramp up inside of you the whole time, and also you’ll have other Powers to grow at the same time. If *all* you had was adamantiumkinesis, then I would suggest you let me dump almost all of this into a separate vial, and you could hold onto a small, *small* portion. But you also have Healthy Body, which you can grow like normal, and Union, which is so incredibly robust that you could only have that Power and you would still never run out of ways to improve.

“So I believe you should let me put this vial into the Vault for you, and you can just gradually grow your own adamantium again, and acclimate to it that way. You are free to disagree. What do you say?”

Mark said, “I want to donate all of that to the church so...” Cheryl tried not to frown too deeply, but she frowned deeply anyway. Mark continued, “So someone can make it into a weapon... that they’ll use for the good fight...” Mark frowned a little. “Why not? It needs to be used. Not sit in a vault. I’ll make more, anyway.”

Cheryl easily said, “Nope. Absolutely not. This is yours. The church won’t accept this.”

“Why not?”

“You’re a prisoner here, so we won’t take anything from you. Anything you make is yours to keep, and this most certainly includes the adamantium that you create inside of your bones.” Cheryl *looked* at him. “More to the point, though, you have nothing to feel guilty about. You were used, harmed, and left with a lifetime of trauma. Don’t go making more trauma upon yourself with bad financial decisions. Now! I’m putting this into storage for you, and it’s yours when you want it.” She added, “Don’t go snubbing your nose at us. We have money. We have resources. We want you to eventually join us here as a

Paladin or Inquisitor. And that means we're doing this relationship *right*. We're *not* taking your money from you. You have had enough taken from you, Mark. You deserve nicer things in life."

Mark felt like Cheryl had wrapped him in a warmth on the inside. He teared up. "Okay."

Softer, Cheryl said, "I'm a therapist, Mark. I'm here if you want to talk to me. But since you don't want to talk, how about joining a club and doing something while you're a prisoner here? How about the Future Paladins club? Monster hunters is a good club, too. There are classes you can take, too, if you'd like some book learning. A club is the active part of the curriculum, but the class is the classroom part of the curriculum. Labs versus classes, you understand...?" Cheryl hummed. "I guess not. That's a college thing, yeah."

Mark shook his head. "Never expected to go to college."

"The classes and clubs around here are on 3-month staggered rotation or more, so there's always something new starting, and you need to be around people your own age, Mark. Ask COFR about clubs. You'll find some fun ones, I'm sure."

"... Sure?"

Cheryl stood up, asking, "Ready to get back out there? It's just about time for dinner. It's everyone's favorite pizza night, too."

Mark had a few mixed emotions. Mostly, he was happy, but also tired. He admitted, "I'd like to stop feeling like a weakling sometime soon. Do you think that'll happen?"

Cheryl looked him straight in the eyes, and said, "You're going to be one of the strongest people on the planet someday, Mark. Not today, though. Not for a long while."

Mark had no idea why that was funny, but he laughed anyway.

Cheryl smiled. "Good luck out there, Mark."

Mark got up, saying, “Thank you, Cheryl...?”

“Doctor Cheryl Appell, but ‘Cheryl’ is fine. It was nice to meet you, Mark.”

“You, too.”

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As Mark walked out of the hospital wing, he felt... Weird.

Like a bolt from the blue, Mark realized what he was feeling.

He hated himself.

That’s what was weird. As Mark walked across the paths between grass fields, among the towers of Citadel Freyala in the afternoon, Mark knew what he was feeling. And it was hate. Too much hate. Hate at himself and at Addashield and at... A lot. He had fallen unconscious and needed to be rescued from his own power, too! What the fuck! Sure, he had known kinetics sometimes had issues, but he wanted to be a kinetic. He didn’t want to be weak! And maybe he would be a strong kinetic in the future... But holy fuck!

He never used to be weak like this.

He never used to balk at anything, either.

He had balked back there at Cheryl, the mind reader. So what if she read his mind! She probably saw weird shit all the time.

But Mom and Dad were dead and home was gone and he could never return, and all the world was different. Mark felt a deep sense of shame, like a coldness along his spine and in his guts, as he thought about how... How people told him he hadn’t failed anyone at all. But Mark still felt like a failure.

FUCK.

And it was fucking stupid to feel like this, too!

He *knew* he had been used! He *knew* none of it was his fault! But his stupid brain kept telling him that everything was his fault! Why? Because Mark wanted it to be his fault, because—

Mark stopped in his tracks.

*I want it to be my fault.*

Why did he want it to be his fault?

*Because that means I can do something about it when it happens again, when the **next** big thing comes into my life.*

But since he couldn't do anything about it...

*It's not my fault.*

... Mark breathed out slowly, imagining that he would be experiencing that particular revelation for a while to come.

- - - -

Mark sat in bed, belly full of pizza, as he flicked through his phone, looking up clubs to join and classes to take.

There were a few easy choices.

He signed up for healing practice with Healing Hall tomorrow, putting his name into the basket as a 'tier 0 Union healer, no proven skill yet' and let the gods take the wheel. If Lola should be there, then

that's who he would talk with, but it was equally likely that he'd get someone else. It was not a class, but a club, meaning active work. They expected a person to not have any skill at all, and they'd learn on the job.

The sparring club was another easy choice. Mark needed to get back to weapons work, and he was eager to go up against others. Instructor Gravel never let them actually injure each other in Tutorial training because injuries could be serious without healers on hand, but that didn't apply here, at Citadel Freyala, where every other person was a healer of some sort. The club even promised that injuries would happen.

Less easy choices were movie club and stuff like that...

Mark eventually decided not to pick any other clubs. He'd meet people in Healing Hall and sparring club and make friends and connections that way.

Yes.

"Good plan," Mark told himself, smiling a little.

... And then he felt bad about smiling.

He thought about everything.

Eventually, he fell asleep.

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Sparring Club 101, for all the tier 0s non-brawny who wished to join, met in a room in a hall inside the coliseum-looking building, in the middle of Citadel. It was an easy hall to find. Down the way, through a twist in the curve of the coliseum, and there it was. Glass doors showed a training hall beyond with a stone middle floor, wooden floors on the sides, and benches and weapon racks all around.

Three people of Mark's own age were in the room, with two sparring and one standing to the side.

A half-giant of a woman stood to the other side, watching. She was the instructor, no doubt. She looked maybe 50, and she was telling the two sparring people about footwork.

Mark watched for not too long—

The big woman looked his way—

Mark steeled himself, and walked inside.

The big woman told him, "This is Sparring Club 101. Tier-0, non-brawny only. You fit that qualification?"

The two people sparring had not stopped at all.

Mark said, "I've got Healthy Body. That okay?"

The woman harrumphed, then said, "A Rank F Body Talent is borderline not-okay, but if you've never used it before, then you're in the right place, for now. You're Mark, right?"

Mark had signed up with the club last night, so yeah, the instructor would know him, and the big woman was obviously the instructor. "I'm Mark, yes. Hello."

The woman pointed at herself, "Instructor Charms." She pointed at the girl standing to the side, not able to spar with anyone because there were only three students. "You two introduce each other then spar. Name and then Power, or category if you don't want specifics. Mace and shield."

Mark had no problem with that. He walked toward the girl, saying, “Mark. Body.”

The girl was Mark’s own age, and kinda short. She was wiry. And she was already grabbing a mace and shield off of the wall. Just wooden stuff.

“Svea. Arcane,” Svea said, putting her shield on and hefting her mace.

Mark grabbed his own set from the wall and smiled a little. “Nice to meet you.”

Svea nodded professionally, her German accent thick as she said, “Nice to meet you.”

Instructor Charms called out, “I got you both protected. Go at it as hard as you can. No head blows.”

Svea exploded into action, launching forward, and Mark fell into a flow.

Battle was easier than thinking about problems.

He parried a strike and then bashed with his shield and Svea countered with a quick reposition but Mark was already there, in front of her, and he bore down with his shield and Svea faltered, and Mark got overhead of her. He crashed down with his mace onto her head—

He stopped and pulled back.

A head strike like that was an automatic win in most circles. He had already won, without actually fighting much at all. Svea sighed even as she pulled back, too. She stopped fighting because she had seen it, too.

With a huff, Svea spoke thickly, “Dammit. You are good at this, too.”

Instructor Charms called out, “Break.”



The two guys who had been sparring broke apart, both of them huffing, both of them rapidly regaining their breath—

Charms said, “Raoul and Mark, go. I have you protected. Jacob wait. Svea, you need to not give up so fast, but yes, Mark is beyond you. It is possible for a girl your size to fight larger foes, for we all have to learn to fight monsters and they’re so much larger, but you were simply too aggressive, and...” The instructor had smaller words for Svea—

But Mark stood across from the guy named Raoul. “Hello. Mark, Healthy Body.”

Raoul gave a tiny bow. “Raoul. Hexer. You have good stamina, yes?”

“I think so. What’s a hexer do?”

“You know a blesser?”

“Oh! Like Seraph? ... Er. No. The opposite of Seraph, then?”

Seraph was a mass blesser. His Talent would raise the overall fighting power of everyone near him, including himself. He was great at kaiju fights.

Raoul grinned. And then he raised his weapons, shield to his chest and wooden sword out in front. “The opposite of Seraph, yes.”

Mark mirrored him and tapped his mace to Raoul’s sword—

Raoul instantly slapped Mark’s sword in a soft parry and then gunned forward with his shield, hoping to get an opening for a real stab with his wooden blade.

Mark bashed with his shield into Raoul’s attack, pushing the guy back, crashing his mace into Raoul, but the guy slipped to the side. Mark didn’t let himself be drawn into what was an obvious opening, and instead made his own opening by stepping back a half step—

Raoul pursued.

Mark rejoined the fight, stepping left and trying to cut Raoul off—

Raoul moved fast and repositioned again.

Mark entered the flow so easily.

Raoul was soon breathing hard, fending off attacks, moving backward and rarely forward. Mark pursued —

And then Raoul started breathing easily, all previous difficulty gone.

Mark knew something was up. He glanced to the side where Charms breathed in time with Raoul, and that was that Union power, wasn't it? Mark smiled at that and just enjoyed the spar—

“Break!”

Mark stepped away from Raoul and suddenly he was breathing hard. He had barely noticed it, but when the flow ended Mark realized he was fucking exhausted. Oh wow. Mark sat down on his ass, onto the stone, laughing, right as Raoul crashed to his ass, too, chuckling.

Charms stood to the side, saying, “Both of you can use real weapons with each other, when I am present and focused on you, otherwise wooden are fine. Mark. You are *barely* acceptable for this club. Healthy Body is Rank F, yes, but you are skilled enough that you would do better in the brawny room, and any Body skill at all means that you can fight physically better than most others. I'll clear you for that if you want.”

The other guy said, “No way! I want to fight him next!”

Charms eyed the guy, saying, “You could move to brawny club 101 too, Jacob.”

“No way,” Jacob instantly said. “Those people are crazy.”

Svea, the girl, said, “Who do I get to spar with if everyone leaves!”

Raoul chuckled as he lay on his back, and then he sat up. “You aren’t ever going to be on a front line, Svea. If you are on the front line then all of your team has failed.”

Svea scowled. “I will not be a babe in the crib, to be stabbed by any passing goblin.” She told them all, “I will get better! Jacob! Fight me!”

Jacob didn’t hesitate. He squared up.

Charms moved away from them, and then so did Mark and Raoul—

And then Svea and Jacob sparred.

Mark was ready to go again, but Raoul still looked tired. Raoul had enough energy to ask questions, though.

Raoul asked, “You’ve been fighting for a while?”

Charms looked down at them, but then she turned back to face the spar in front of her. Svea was short and wiry. Jacob was of average height and body. Svea had so many short ends of the stick that Mark felt bad for her, but he knew not to disparage that sort of thing. She *tried*. That was more than enough for a non-brawny; she’d be using her real powers to fight real battles elsewhere. This stuff here was just basic practice so that a person wasn’t caught unawares out there and they froze up in an unexpected melee.

“I’ve been training since I was 14...” Mark wasn’t sure, but something didn’t add up. “I went through Tutorial all the way, just like you, I guess? Have you *not* been training since you were 14, too?”

“American accent, yes? I’m from Spain. We train to escape and for stamina. Not to combat problems. We only ever get goblins to kill in the Tutorial anyway.”

Mark was a little stunned. “You mean you don’t train to kill *anything* beside goblins? I had to kill a lot more than a goblin!”

“You can escape practically everything, but as long as you take the long path the goblins are the ones you have to actually kill.”

“... I *guess* that’s a way to do it?” Mark thought about the invisible skeleton slime. He *looked* at Raoul. “Really?”

Raoul smiled. “I am glad you showed up. We lost 2 people to brawny sparring 101 last week and you are a good partner! Those people simply moved on after they tried brawny 101, though. That club is full of cra—”

“Break!” Charms called out.

Mark looked back to the bout and Svea was on the ground, breathing hard, her mace laying several paces away from her. Jacob stood over her, breathing a little hard. And then Jacob held a hand down. Svea sighed and then took Jacob’s hand to get back to her feet.

Charms said, “Jacob, Mark. Intro and go.”

Jacob grinned as he walked to the center of the room, saying, “Jacob! Sound Kinetic.”

Oh! Sound kinetic was supposed to be a really good one. That one could disorient a monster very well, for most things had delicate sensory organs for hearing.

Mark took his position, saying, “Mark. Healthy Body.”

Charms commanded, “Go!”

They sparred, Mark falling into the flow, his mace whipping out and cracking against wood as his shield bashed and his feet danced around Jacob, who did his damndest to keep up. Mark wasn’t taller, but he was faster. He pressed his advantage a little here and there, and soon he pressed hard. Jacob faltered—

And then Jacob rallied.

Mark got pressed back—

It happened in slow motion, almost. Mark's shield was out of position and Jacob's mace came in below his shield and turned the shield aside, opening Mark up. Mark's own mace was right there, though, right above Jacob, ready to clobber into Jacob's head. If this would have been a real fight, Mark would have clobbered Jacob over the head, but Jacob would have only been able to poke him with his own mace. And then Mark remembered about no mortal wounds and *no head wounds* and Mark jumbled out of the flow.

He had also won, technically. Mark was in a clear position to win. Jacob could have only managed a body blow.

Mark wasn't sure what happened after that, but the fight continued and then Jacob kicked, Mark's legs went out from under him, and Mark could not recover fast enough to prevent Jacob from stopping his mace right above Mark's head. Mark smiled and slumped to the ground.

Jacob grinned, put his mace in his shield hand, and held out a hand. "Maybe you can stay."

Mark chuckled and took Jacob's hand and got to his feet—

Charms said, "Mark had you, Jacob, mace to the head, dead, but then he backed off. You didn't back off when Mark had you. You didn't even *notice*. That's your bad, Jacob."

Jacob's face went red with embarrassment. He turned to Mark and bowed. "Apologies."

Mark was a little flustered at that. "Uh! No worries! It was a good match."

Jacob stood up and he was still embarrassed—

"Raoul and Svea," Charms called out.

Mark went to the side with Jacob as the other two battled—

Jacob said, “I’m sorry. I didn’t even notice.”

Mark smiled a little. “It’s... Well I guess it’s not okay, technically? But it’s okay. I thought that sparring here was supposed to end with us getting injured more.”

Charms spoke up, “That is a misconception. I am here to save you from accidental power activations and accidental head blows and otherwise. You were cleared for accidental activations, Mark, or else I would have denied your application to this class, though it is a shame for you to lie about your power. You also have Union.”

Before anyone else even mentioned something like ‘dual-Talents’, Mark asked, “Don’t most people use the Chosen system here?”

Charms snorted, not bothering to look at Mark. She was focused on Raoul and Svea as the two students fought.

Jacob said to Mark, “I’m hoping to get approved for Union soon. What’d you have to do to get it?”

Memories flashed in Mark’s mind, of unsensing darkness and then laying in a hospital bed and struggling to walk and then Mom and Dad dying to burning that Mark never saw; dead to an archmage who killed them so thoroughly that their bodies could not be used against Mark. Was that a kindness? To burn them to ash? Or was that Addashield ensuring that Mark went through with the plan, and that his demon didn’t have the opportunity to fuck up the plan?

Mark blinked.

He didn’t say anything.

Jacob got a message that Mark did not intend to give him. After a moment of worry, he put on a smile and powered through the awkwardness, “So you’re a great fighter!”

Mark blinked again and came to the present. He gave a false grin, saying, “Been training since I was 14, though not seriously until... a year ago.” More like 2 years ago, but Mark had lost 8 months to coma and weakness, and did that count as life? Or had he missed that much life? He ignored that question. “I’m from the Americas. Where are you from? You have a... a British accent?”

“South Africa,” Jacob said, grinning. “Close enough, though.”

“Okay so I’m not that worldly. I kinda blinded myself to everything for a long while.”

Jacob got both excited and miffed, exclaiming, “Can you believe that shit with the Curtain!”

Mark laughed. “I just learned about that when I came to Citadel. It’s *wild*.”

Jacob exclaimed, “I’m mad lucky I pissed off a sound kinetic when I was a kid. Tainted my entire astral body so I didn’t end up as a braw... Err.” Jacob pulled his words back as much as he could.

Mark laughed again. “We can craft our own astral bodies a bit, can’t we? I don’t really plan on it, but that’s what I heard, and the Chosen System is right there.”

Jacob looked a bit worried for a moment. He said, “You... Uh—”

Charms called out, “Break!”

Raoul and Svea stopped sparring, though it was mostly Raoul pulling back and Svea breathing heavily until she caught herself.

Charms turned to Mark. “Outside. I need to talk to you.”

Mark froze.

Charms walked out of the room.

Raoul, Svea, and Jacob all kinda pretended they didn't see anything.

... And Mark went outside into the hallway, to where the half-giant woman was already standing off to the side.

The hallway was *almost* empty. A pair of girls Mark's age, both of them covered in sweat and with towels in their hands, were walking down the hall toward Mark and Charms. Charms turned and glared at the two girls and they rapidly shocked and turned around, walking away.

Charms pinned Mark with her gaze and spoke softly. "Don't do that. Don't lie about your capabilities. Some obfuscation is fine, but what you were doing was a major lie."

Mark stilled.

Charms continued. "Don't start off with lies. Don't do that to yourself. Don't do that to others. Tell people the truth and let them make assumptions if they want. Don't hide yourself. You have a responsibility toward the power you will one day wield, and the people you will one day protect, but you are not strong enough right now to warrant hiding yourself. Teams *cannot* function when the truth of powers is hidden. It builds resentment in so many different ways. Most importantly, you have *no responsibility at all* toward the wreck of a person you are now, except to look back kindly on the decisions you make in your grief."

"... I have to go, now."

Charms said, "Please stay, Mark. I'm going to go back inside, and I want you to come back inside, too. You don't have to do it right away, but you should come back inside and just see what happens when you are your true self."

And then Instructor Charms went into the sparring room.

Mark stood alone in the hallway—

The girls peeked out from behind a column—



Mark breathed deep and then went inside the sparring room.

Jacob was saying something quiet to Raoul, while Svea was standing near, looking concerned. Charms hadn't gotten very far into the room. She stepped off to the side, looking down at Mark questioningly.

With the same tone as the first time she had seen him, Charms said, "This is Sparring Club 101. Tier-0, non-brawny only. You fit that qualification?"

"Mark Careed. Healthy Body, Adamantiumkinesis, and Union. Not sure if that counts for the non-brawny clause or not."

Svea's eyes went wide. She whispered something like a curse, or an exclamation. It was in German and said to the ground, so Mark didn't understand it for multiple reasons.

Jacob slapped the back of his hand against Raoul's shoulder, nodding strongly, saying 'told you' with his silent mouth.

Raoul frowned at Jacob and slapped his hand away, scowling.

Charms said, "We'll keep an eye on that Healthy Body. You and Raoul: spar with spears."

Raoul muttered, "Fuck," and then he grabbed a spear off the wall, as Mark did the same. He pointed his weapon at Mark, saying, "You want to kill Addashield, right?"

Mark felt a darkness creep into his everything, his voice dripping with hate, as his hands gripped his spear, "*All monsters must die.*"

Raoul froze.

Jacob muttered, "Holy shit, dude."

Svea went from cautious to near-reverent. "Yes, they must."

Raoul was still a little frozen as he said, “I agree.” He raised his spear in two hands. With a light in his eyes, he looked upon Mark, and said, “I want to go get drinks with you tonight. You, Jacob, and me.”

Svea spoke up, “And me!”

Raoul allowed, “And Svea.”

Mark was stunned now. “... Okay?”

“Good! That is settled.”

Raoul squared up.

Mark squared up, too.

They fought.

Mark was much better with a spear than with any other weapon. In four short exchanges Raoul’s spear went flying and Mark brought his spearhead, covered in cloth, to Raoul’s neck. Raoul held up his hands, smiling wide.

Raoul’s spear clattered to the ground.

Mark pulled back, saying, “Thanks for the bout.”

Raoul laughed. “Holy gods, that was *wild!*”

Jacob wanted to say something, and maybe Svea did too, but—

Instructor Charms said, “No more spears for you, Mark.”

Mark tried not to grin as he lowered his spear all the way. He grinned anyway.

Mark barely remembered the rest of the next two hours, only that he felt lighter. He felt *good*. Sparring was only supposed to last an hour according to the schedule, and it often lasted less than that, but Charms was there with Union and she was powering everyone to new heights, and Mark never really got tired, anyway. And maybe Charms liked having a fourth in the class? Everyone else certainly did.

Mark didn't get to talk to Svea, or Raoul, or Jacob. Not really. Small words were said here and there, yeah. But whenever two people were sitting on the sidelines together, Charms often told them to watch and not speak too loudly. Getting to know each other would come later.

The club dispersed long after it should have.

Raoul ran down the hall, late for class, turning back only to wave, saying, "At the bar we decided, yeah!"

Mark smiled. "Yeah! Black Chess. 7 pm."

"That's the one!" Raoul ran faster.

"See you later!" Jacob called as he rushed along with Raoul.

Svea was dead tired and dripping with sweat as she nursed the water fountain outside of the sparring room. She looked up and said, "Later, Mark. Nice to meet you. Welcome—" She caught her breath again. "Welcome to the club."

Mark smiled. "Thanks for welcoming me."

Charms told Mark, "Walk with me."

Mark gave one final look toward Svea but Charms was already walking the other way. Mark caught up and walked with the very half-giant woman. There were a few other people in the halls, but not many.

Charms said, "Citadel Freyala is the pinnacle of Freyala's church, as are all Citadels for all other gods. As such, there are rules to govern us all, and spheres of interaction which differ from place to place. The

three primary spheres are military, civilian, and religious. You are technically part of the military branch, with a slight overlap with the religious branch.

“In the military, you speak clearly and make sure others interact with you in a true manner. No more lying about your capabilities in any space where your abilities will be tested, Mark. Do you understand?”

Mark easily said, “I understand.”

“*Why* did you lie?”

That was less easy to answer. “... Because I hoped for good things by interacting with Addashield and it ended up... how it ended up.”

Charms nodded a little as she walked. She glanced down and to the side at Mark. “Fair enough.” She continued, “To continue: Is a military mindset how you want to interact with others? You are technically a prisoner here. I’m not sure what you’ve been told, but I researched your case when you signed up for my class. You don’t *have* to be in the military sphere.

“You could be in the civilian sphere, which would make you a normal resident of the place. Go to movies. Requisition stuff for your room in the academy, like couches or better beds, or televisions, and have parties with new friends. There are clubs that are social clubs. There is a lot to do as an adult that was barred to you as a child. You will find that beyond the Curtain, life opens up a lot. But, if you interact in those civilian spheres, you should interact how you tried to interact back there, hiding yourself. Military life requires open communication. Civilian life requires hiding some of the time.

“Do you want to be military, or civilian?”

Mark didn’t have much trouble answering, “Military... But I was warned about... tri-Talents being used.”

Charms nodded, satisfied with that answer. “I bet you were. It’s a good warning when dealing with nobles, or other such people. A military interaction would merely expect you to do what you can do, without reservation or hiding. It is a good life for those who dislike the idea of hiding.” She stopped by the large, open doors leading north out of the coliseum building.

Mark stopped with her. Other people were walking in and out of the space.

Charms said to Mark, “The religious sphere crosses all boundaries. If you want relief from your pain, healing that is more than physical, and purpose in life, I suggest you take Freyala’s hand to help you out of the dark that you have found yourself in. She helped me a great deal through my own darkness. With her, you can talk about anything. She will always be there for you, if you but reach out your hand.

“I do not want you to tell me about your choices. Just think about them.

“You did well today. Usually I have to give a lot more instruction to my crops of students, but the club I have at the moment is all well-versed in the art of combat. You simply need more actual combat. That pleases me.

“Dismissed.”

Mark stood straight and then gave a small bow, saying, “Thank you for the instruction, Instructor Charms.”

Charms nodded.

Mark walked away, out of the coliseum, into the light of the day, feeling... Lighter, really.

He checked on his phone—

25 minutes to Healing Club. Shit!

Mark ran to the dorms to take a shower, and then over to Healing Hall.

Instructor Charms’ words echoed in his mind every now and then.

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Mark stopped rushing to simply walk into the room at the end of the hallway on the second floor of Healing Hall, room 217.

And Mark paused.

The overall setup was a *private* tutoring room with a bookshelf to one side, a large window overlooking the grounds straight ahead, and a table and chairs butted up against the remaining wall. A clock hung over the window, reading 10:29. Mark was 1 minute early.

He was the only one here.

Checking his phone, Mark saw that, yes, this was the right room. Was he the only one signed up for Healing Club 101, for people with Union? Er... He couldn't be, right? Who was the professor, anyway? Er. Not named yet? Err...

Mark walked into the empty room and sat down.

He waited—

Lola stepped into the doorway, wearing her usual prim and proper priestess robes, cut in the Xerkona style. It was rather a lot like a kimono, actually. Ah! Right! She had offered to teach him!

Mark shot to his feet. "Priestess Lola!"

Lola smiled softly, giving a small bow. "Quite right, Mark. And you're here for Healing Club 101 for Union users."

“Yes, but I’m a bit confused?” Mark wasn’t sure where to start. “I thought it wasn’t a... a private club?”

Lola easily said, “Let us sit.” She went to a chair and sat, and Mark took the other chair. “There are two forms of Union in the world. One is the one granted through the Chosen system, from Freyala to her followers. That is an entirely different club than the Union club that you are in right now, which is for people who come to Union on their own, though no one really comes to Union on their own, you understand. I imbued it into you, and you got the full Talent. The one Freyala grants people still demands study, but the original Talent is so much more difficult.

“This was why I offered to teach you about this.”

Mark sat back in his chair. “Ah.”

“It means you have a much longer path ahead of you than Freyala’s Chosen, but also a much shorter instruction path, for what you learn on your own will be more than what anyone can truly teach another person. Furthermore, I do not actually possess the Union Power. I am an instrument of Freyala’s will and she has granted me *full* use of the power, but I cannot do what she can do.

“What *you* might be able to do, one day.

“Tell me: What do you think Union does?”

Mark knew a little bit about Union from simply growing up in the world and having gone to Freyala healing houses in Orange City, and inferring a lot of what he saw here and there, but he had grown up behind the Curtain, like all kids of Earth. So he was pretty damned unsure of everything.

Mark said, “Healing people, protecting them, and that’s pretty much all I know of Freyala’s stories. She cleansed plagues, so... widespread healing? I feel like I don’t really know anything at all, anymore. I didn’t know what Freyala’s power was called until now... but I know they didn’t call it Union— they just called it divine healing, without any specific name... But that was on purpose.”

“Yes; it was on purpose. The name ‘Union’, much like the Talents of many famous people, is mostly kept out of writing, unless you go looking for it specifically.”

Mark huffed a laugh. Everyone knew what Freyala's power was actually called. He asked, "What is Glorious Man's Talent called?"

"Supreme Body."

"... Holy crap I didn't expect you to have an actual answer."

Lola grinned a little, then she put that away. "It might not be 'Supreme Body', but researching these things is rather simple if you know where to look, and 'Supreme Body' is rather the accepted name for Glorious Man's specific Power, even though the man himself is rightfully evasive about such things. When you get to the top, you have billions of eyes on you, and even a fraction of people interested in such things means that someone will uncover the truth eventually.

"Specifically with Glorious Man, his Talent been seen before, a few times throughout Daihoon's history, and that is where we get that name from." Lola added, "That, and Glorious Man's rise through the ranks of the Crystal Tower's Japan division, back when he was still called Renjiru Furusawa, has his Talent on the records there. His military history is sealed now, of course, but it wasn't always."

Mark felt a little floored. "Wow. Okay."

"But we're getting off track," Lola said.

Mark sat up straight.

Lola said, "The primary powers of Union are *best used* for healing and protection, and also corruption and weakening. We will be focusing on healing. Corruption and weakening are the powers of the Inquisitors of Freyala, and we will not be talking about those, though you should be able to put together how those work from what I explain about healing."

Mark said, "Wait... Corruption and weakening?"

"Yes. *I* will show you how to use your power *positively*. For most of these applications of Union the 'badness' is a side effect; not the purpose. You could make the 'badness' the purpose, just as an



Inquisitor does, but you will have to figure that out yourself.” Lola added, “Mind you, active power use on another, outside of accepted actions, is grounds for discipline. Experimenting on animals is also not acceptable. In a month, I will tell you to try some of this stuff on very small trees, and such. Not before then.”

Mark instantly said, “Of course, of... of course.”

Lola nodded. “The first lesson is breathing. I heard that you already had this lesson with Holy Mother Juila Garin, but we will be healing actual wounds today.”

Mark had put together a few things based on what he had seen of Freyala’s healing, since coming here to the Citadel, and especially since Lola removed the adamantium from his body through ‘breathing for him.’ But he had still kinda thought that the High Priestess’s ‘lesson’ on breathing was just a meditative thing.

Mark was rapidly reevaluating that idea, though.

The first part of Union *truly* was breathing... But that felt incorrect?

Lola noticed Mark’s uncertainty. “But I see you have questions?”

“Is breathing *really* how this works?”

“Not at all, but it is what I will be teaching you.”

“... Oh! Well. Okay.”

Lola gave a polite grin, and then said, “Breathe with me, in and out, in and out.” She breathed in deeply.

Mark breathed in deeply.

For a brief moment, Mark saw, more than felt, as their breathing was separate—

And then Lola matched Mark, and the two of them breathed together.

Mark had no idea what he was feeling, or seeing, or the weirdness he was sensing between them, but after several breaths, Mark understood that he was in a... a low area?

No!

A groove.

Lola was making a groove in the world, and Mark was following along in the track she was carving. They were a Union of breathing, with Lola as the lead bike in a race, and Mark following along in the pocket of air behind her. Or maybe like she was the lead duck in a V formation in the sky, and Mark was trailing on her wings. It was easier to breathe *with* her, than it was to breathe *outside* of her actions—

And then the moment was gone, and Lola took a sharp inhale of breath when Mark was only halfway through his own. She finished the bike race before him, getting full of air, and Mark was way too far behind to catch up. The moment broke.

Lola separated their actions.

Mark breathed on his own.

Lola grinned a little.

“That was Union?”

“Yes. A rather noticed example of it, because I was trying to make it noticed, but most applications of this Power go unnoticed. You’ve been to a healing house, yes?”

Mark connected a few dots like a flash of lightning.

The healing houses all had healing rooms. You went into the room, stayed for a while, and you exited healed. Mark had never felt what happened in those rooms at all, but he had gotten cuts, bruises, and even a fractured bone, healed by just going into those rooms and waiting around for a while.

“Behind the one-way mirror!” Mark said, “That’s where the healers would sit and breathe with the people in the waiting rooms, wasn’t it.”

“Correct. Now that you know that is how it works,” Lola said, taking out a small knife from a pocket in her kimono, “We will begin with a small application of active healing.” She dipped the knife into the meat of her open palm and then she set the knife in front of Mark. Her palm welled with blood. “Watch me, and then we’ll talk, and then you will do the same to your own palm.”

Lola breathed in, her chest expanding, and then she breathed out, and the cut on her palm slipped a little shut, a scar appearing along the edges of the fresh wound. Mark wondered what else was going to happen. She breathed again and as she exhaled the wound closed up entirely, leaving just a spot of blood that had collected on her open palm, and a trail leading to a scar.

She breathed in and out again, and this time the scar vanished, her skin tightening up and then loosening to a perfectly normal palm, but with blood on it.

Surprisingly, she breathed again, and this time she blew onto her bloody palm, and the blood flowed away into the air, like dust vanishing into nothing at all.

Lola held up a healed, clean hand, and said, “That was about as fast as a healer wants to go with this sort of healing because there are many things that can go wrong with this.

“The first lesson is to connect to the world with your breath, to breathe in the good, and breathe out the bad. Do NOT focus on anything other than the ideas of ‘good’ and ‘bad’.

“The second lesson is this one, here and now, to actually heal yourself.

“Do *not* attempt to focus your healing on anything in particular, until you grow stronger and more knowledgeable about what it means to heal. Set aside all manner of ideas of bones needing calcium to

grow, or blood needing iron to move oxygen, or even ideas of oxygen and carbon dioxide. Focus, entirely, on the idea of 'breathing in the good' and 'breathing out the bad'.

"Too many students go way too complicated with this to start, because there is a lot of efficiency to be had if you know what you are doing. But you, Mark, do *not* know what you are doing. So start slow, and small, and only use your breathing to connect to the world, to yourself, to start.

"The *third* lesson will be healing others, and we'll get to that some other day, in a few weeks.

"Pick up the knife."

Mark paused for a moment... "I'm not going to have a weird activation like with kinesis, am I? It's not going to knock me out?"

"You activated Union with the Holy Mother when you visited her. I believe you activated your Healthy Body when you went running yesterday." Lola said, "Apologies; your movements are being tracked."

"... Oh. Okay! Well... Sure. Uh. Is Healthy Body going to interfere with this?"

"Yes. You'll learn to work around it. I imagine your ability to heal others will be vastly improved from a baseline person's abilities. We get lots of brawnies in here, as you can imagine, and they always make the best sorts of healers because they have extra depths of good that they can share with others," Lola said. "But that's a lesson for another day. For now, cut yourself on your palm. It is a very sharp knife. Shouldn't be too painful."

... Mark picked up the knife, and... Well. He held it to his left palm, and he... He froze.

And then he breathed, focused, and poked the knife into his hand.

It was a very sharp knife.

Mark pulled the knife out, having barely felt it go in. It hadn't gone in deep at all, but— Oop! There's the sting. Ouch. Okay. Mark set his pain aside as much as he could, and then he breathed in and out. He stared at his hand, and he breathed.

In with the good, out with the bad.

In with the good, out with the bad.

In wi—

His wound itched a little as it started to close!

Mark smiled—

“Keep going,” Lola said, also watching.

Mark breathed in and out, and what was maybe 15 breaths later, or maybe something like a minute and a half later, his wound was gone and so was the scar. The blood was still there—

Lola pulled a tissue out of the box on the table, handing it to him, saying, “Don't try to do more than this right now. We'll go over cleansing breath another day, far from today.”

Mark cleaned up the blood.

Lola said, “Some suggestions: The amount of air you breathe in and out correlates to how much you heal. You were breathing maybe at 70% capacity. That is a good amount for general applications, but you were trying to actively heal, so I want you to do it again and this time breathe in and out *fully*. We'll practice short and constant breathing methods later. Perhaps you will find you can use one method better than the other, but for now, do it again, in and out all the way.”

Mark stabbed himself with the knife again. It was easier the second time. A good minute and a half later, with only 11 breaths, Mark's fresh cut was gone and he wiped up the blood with a tissue. Mark smiled wide to see his healed hand, saying, “That's amazing.”

“Looks like you got the basic hand of it. That’s good. I estimate that if you didn’t have Healthy Body then you’d have to do an extra 10% breathing. Healing the cut on your hand would have taken you 12 or 13 deep breaths to fully achieve, instead of 11. You’ll get better with time and experimentation.

“As for that experimentation, I have some warnings.

“Do **not** breathe with anyone else.

“Do **not** take in the bad and expel the good.

“Do **not** focus on anything besides basic healing, for now.

“Do **not** breathe in confined spaces that have no ventilation. Smoke is especially bad for this technique, but you can get through that problem by rolling up your shirt and breathing through it, using it as a filter for the smoke.” Lola said, “Now repeat that to me.”

“Don’t try to breathe with anyone else, don’t reverse the flow, don’t get specific, and always breathe in a ventilated area.”

Lola nodded. “Very good. Now let us continue. We’ll go until you can’t heal anymore, and then I’ll finish healing you, and then we’ll go to the full scan room and you can get a private readout of your Power Level. It should be a few numbers higher in each category now that you are Fully Awake.” She gestured at the knife. “Now stab yourself again. Meat of the palm. If you don’t like that, then you can slice on the top of your forearm. Put your arm onto the table if you want to do your forearm, so that I can clean up the blood more easily. Let’s not get any on the floor if we can help it.”

Mark chose to put his arm on the table, to slice on top of his forearm, for damaging his hands seemed like a really bad thing to do, in general. The knife slipped through the meat of his arm like a pizza slicer; fast and mostly thorough. It took a moment for the pain to happen. That was when Mark realized he couldn’t move his middle finger. Mark’s eyes went wide as he looked at the five inch cut in his flesh, as blood slipped out, onto the table.

His arm spurting.

“Oh shit. I went too dee—”

“Breathe, Mark,” Lola said, putting tissues down to slow the spread of blood, like surrounding a house fire with a moat. “You’re *fine*. Just *breathe*.”

Mark started breathing on purpose. A good five minutes later, with blood on the table sticking his arm to the wood, Mark looked down at his perfectly healed flesh. He lifted his arm out of the mess and looked at it, flexing his fingers and feeling... great? Just fine?

“It’s good?” Mark asked, but even as he asked that it felt weird to move his fingers. “Or not?”

Lola put down a few more tissues, wiping the side of the table where some blood threatened to fall down, as she said, “You have some lingering damage. Continue breathing with purpose.”

Mark did so.

Lola set down a few more tissues, her hands bloody now, as she asked, “Has anyone talked to you about the various magical metals?”

“No,” Mark said, “I heard of them... You know. Before. But that’s about it.”

Lola nodded. “Have you heard of the tiers yet? And how they are used for injury calculations? It’s usually on the second day of Introduction, but you might have fainted before that.”

Mark said, “Never got that far.”

Lola thought for a second, and then said, “Power Levels and tiers are important to know in a general sort of way, but also not really. Did you ever hear about how adamantium is tier 7, when you spoke with Addashield, or anyone else?”

Mark was suddenly unmoored at the mention of ‘Addashield’... And then he came back. “Yeah. I think I heard that.”

Lola paused, and then she asked, “How about the mohs hardness scale for gems?”

Mark grinned. “I used to collect rocks. I stopped when I was 16 but I had a whole collection...” Mark stopped talking.

His collection was gone.

Blasted away by nuclear fi—

“Glad you know about it!” Lola said, her voice insistent and ripping Mark back to the present. “You know how a piece of glass can’t scratch a diamond, but diamonds easily cut glass? That’s what the tiers mean. Tier level actually goes from 0 to 100, but that is the Power Level rating. People usually just use ‘tier’ to indicate something like... Tier 2 is actually between 20 and 29 PL. As you increase in the correct tier, it will be harder to cut you with baser metals, but metal will always have an easier time hurting you because you are still made of flesh.

“Adamantium is naturally a tier 7 material, with a mostly physical form, so its rating is mostly compared against the rating of the Body number. Adamantium is also Kinetic and Arch... But that is complicated, and not necessary to know for now.

“Adamantium is really a 079 on the Power Level scale that goes to 100. The scale ends at 100; just as diamond is ranked 10 on the Mohs hardness, astral bodies can only get up to 100.

“You can only increase in tier by working against harder and harder enemies, or harder problems for your power. Unless your astral body is stressed, it cannot grow.

“This, by the way, is why you are completely incapable of handling adamantium right now. Adamantium is PL 079. You’re at, what, 004? 005? Whatever the case, you’ll get there eventually. You have a clearer path to power than most. Once you’re strong enough to actually pick up that weapon and train with it...” Lola thought for a second, and then she said, “I’ll stop there with that. It’s not something you have to worry about too much. Power levels aren’t everything, after all. They’re just...”



“Well. We use adamantium swords against kaiju because kaiju bodies are all at Power Level 95-ish, and you need a hard material to even begin to affect them. That, or a whole lot of power. A hammer made of glass might shatter a diamond just as much as the careful application of pressure from another diamond.

“Anything at Power Level 50 or above will begin to affect a kaiju’s astral body alongside its physical body and...

“It gets very complicated, very fast, with number-versus-number calculations and all sorts of things going on behind the scenes. Kaiju battles are a quality game just as much as they’re a quantity game. You don’t have to worry about that right now. I’m just telling you now so you can keep it in mind. People want you to be able to battle kaiju in the future, Mark.” Lola asked, “Is that something you want, too?”

Mark was enthralled to hear all of that, though he was pretty sure he didn’t understand some of it. Even so, Mark strongly said, “*I want that more than anything.*”

And he always had.

If anything, he wanted that capability more than ever.

Lola nodded. And then she gestured at the knife. “That’s a mithril knife. Tier 6. Power Level 065, if you want to get technical, but anything more than a 10s classification is kinda obsolete out in the field. If you’re within a tier or two of an enemy then you’re good to go for basic tactics... Hmm. For you, that is true. I have seen how you train...” Lola paused. “I don’t want to give you any weird ideas about the true concerns of battles against monsters, so I will leave it there.” She grabbed a small wastebasket and swept the bloody tissues into the basket.

Mark watched her do that, like she had done it a hundred times before. “Should I get... uh? A towel?”

“Unnecessary.” Lola started putting down more tissues, saying, “You’ll have replaced your blood through your healing breath, so don’t worry too much about blood loss, but try not to cut up your veins that much. You would have died of blood loss had you not healed yourself. Aim for the meat, *not* the spaces between the meat.”

Mark felt himself pale.

With deadly seriousness, Lola said, “Yes. *This is dangerous*. I will add another rule to this training: Do **not** practice like this on your own. I’ll show you easier ways to practice later.” With an easier tone, Lola tapped the table as she said, “Knife up! Again.”

- - - -

Most of the mess was already in the basket, the bloody tissues looking like someone had done some amateur butchery. Some tissues remained on the table. It had been a good half an hour of breathing, until something ephemeral gave way inside Mark and he was fine to breathe, but nothing was changing in his wounds. He had hit his limit.

His ‘astral fortitude’ was expended, and likely for a good ten minutes, at least.

“Only ten minutes?” Mark asked.

“Think of Union like this: If you run at as quick of pace as you can, how long of a down time do you need to recover so you can start walking, and then how long do you need before you can run? Other powers might have smaller or larger down times, but Healthy Body, Adamantiumkinesis, and especially Union, will always go the distance, Mark.”

Mark smiled at that.

And then Lola breathed for him, sealing up his wounds.

Mark rubbed his arm as Lola breathed across the table next, turning blood into dust that scattered on the air, becoming nothing at all. Lola blew against her hands, and all the drops of blood on her fingers and on her dress evaporated.

Mark watched, saying, "Neat trick. Reminds me of—" He stopped suddenly. He was about to say 'Mom's cleanse magic', but the words stuck in his throat. He tried, "Didn't know Union could do... Other magics."

"Union can do a lot, but even so, I cannot spend my strength cleaning up every mess. I will tell you how to do this someday far in the future," Lola said, smiling. With an easy countenance, she plucked out the plastic liner of the trash bag and tied it up, as she stood, saying, "Let's go get your Power Level readout."

Lola led the way, dumping the trash into a chute in the wall, labeled 'incinerator'.

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The scanning machine was pretty simple. Mark was glad that it wasn't in a big scanning room, like the one where he had first met Addashield. Instead, it was a silver plate on the floor, a silver plate on the ceiling, and the whole thing existed in a room about the size of a closet.

Lola asked, "Ever used one of these?"

"Not as such... no," Mark said, looking into the small room.

"You just go inside and stand on the plate. The lights light up and there's a projection in the air, and you can choose to get a printout if you want." Lola pointed to a slot in the wall, to the side of the silver disks. "That's where the printout comes from. Everything is holotouch."

Mark nodded and... walked into the small room.

Lola shut the sliding door and the lights went on in the room at the same time.

The silver disks glowed gentle gold.

Mark took a small breath and then stepped onto the silver disks—

The air chimed and then chimed again. Numbers appeared rather quickly.

**Body, Healthy Body: 005**

**Shaper, Adamantium: 005**

**Mind: 1**

**Natural, Union: 005**

**Soul: 1**

**Arch: 1**

“... Huh,” Mark said.

He was pretty sure Malaqua had given him a readout like 2, 4, ~, ~, 3, ~, the first time.

So this was good, right? The numbers were higher? A lot higher, actually. Probably pretty low compared to others, but this was good?

Yeah sure. This was good! Always good to track progress.

And all the base numbers were at 1 instead of a ~, too.

For a brief moment, Mark felt anchored.

He loved progress.

This meant that he was getting... Somewhere. Mark wasn't sure where that 'somewhere' was, but he was getting closer to it. Mark brushed away the numbers in the air as he stepped off of the platform. The numbers went away, and the lights dimmed.

Mark opened the door, looked to Lola, and asked, "When will I be able to fully use my power?"

"Adamantiumkinesis needs you at Power Level 80 to fully use it. That will happen within several months. It will happen sooner, if you go to the Vault and pick up that adamantium and stress your astral body by trying to pick it up. Union is an SS Rank Talent. Learning and using Union properly is the work of a lifetime. Expect to reach 100 in Union. Healthy Body will Power Level up to 20-ish without much need to stress it in about 2 months."

100 in Union! Holy crap!

Mark smiled at that. "Are there work release programs, or something? You must have ways for people to get experience out in the wilds fighting monsters? I want to do that."

Lola took a moment, and then she spoke diplomatically, "I *think* we can arrange something like that. However, Orissa and David are overseeing your actual case and would have something more definitive to say one way or the other. For now... I would speak of other ways for you to practice healing outside of these dangerous lessons. I've sent you some homework through COFR. You can do that on your own time, and we'll have another lesson in a week, or sooner, if you wish. I expect you will be very busy, though."

"Oh. Uh... Sure." And then Mark realized he was addressing his teacher, and also the woman who had given him Union in the first place. Mark's eyes went wide. He stepped all the way out of the room and bowed, saying, "Thank you for the instruction!"

Lola did a tiny bend at the knees, saying, "Raise your head, Mark."

Mark did so.

Lola looked upon him with care. “You are set for greatness, but this talk of hunting monsters already worries me. You must train more, raising your skill and capability, lest you die to the weakest of monsters. They’re tougher than you think they are. Usually, we don’t send anyone out with less than 10 in Body. That’s the bare minimum to not get your throat ripped out by a baby goblin’s passing claw swipe, or parts of your body consumed by the mere touch of a slime. You’ll still get a nasty cut and your skin will still boil off, but you won’t suffer a catastrophic injury.

“For people with your Talents... Well. I’m not sure what the conventional wisdom would be regarding that, but you should stay in safety until you reach 20 in Body, since you have an actual Body Power, and you have previously expressed a desire to be a frontliner.”

Mark nodded. “Okay. I can... I can do that. I guess?”

“Good. You should also learn how to passively breathe in the good and expel the bad at all hours of your life, and especially when you’re exercising. This is so that you can exercise more strongly, and eventually run it all the time in the field, when you are out there. Eventually, you will be running the Talent full time, never turning it off, and learning how to actively ensure that even miasma-based attacks cannot be used against you.

“Longer term plans include learning your way around nobility and kids your own age.” Lola said, “I cannot stress this enough, Mark, and perhaps it is too early to be thinking about these things, but people like you don’t get as much recovery time as you should have. You’re a tri-Talent, with a high synergy and a high minimum floor level of expected power. Most people cap out at tier 4, unable to safely pursue higher power. Imagine if you were just a Healthy Body. Most Healthy Bodies only make it to tier 2. You will go *so much higher* than that.

“You will also be pursued as soon as you leave the Citadel, and probably while you’re here, too. I suggest you take Xerkona Etiquette classes, or the club, when you can. Maybe in a few months. The club is basically high class parties every weekend, hosted by various noble families.”

That was a lot.

Mark's head swam, as he did what he thought he needed to do, and he bowed to Lola again, saying, "Thank—"

"Stand up, Mark."

... Mark stood up.

Lola looked him in the eyes. "I want you to be strong."

Mark went still.

"*That* is where my instruction comes from; not from me *trying* to be your instructor. Don't bow to every professor or person in authority, and *especially* don't bow to me. I put you in a *coma*, Mark. No matter what happened afterward, I still wronged you. I wronged the world by not... If you hadn't ended up in that coma, maybe... I failed so many duties." Lola turned distant, vanishing behind propriety. "I owe you a great deal of recompense, and do not deserve your obsequiousness."

"... I don't feel that way at all..." Mark fell silent.

Lola did not respond.

"I guess it's complicated," Mark said.

"Most things are."

A moment passed.

Lola said, "I am sorry for your losses. I don't believe I have said that yet. Or maybe I have. I forget. I am sorry."

Mark teared up but he did not break down. Softly, he said, "Thank you."

“I’ll see you next week, Mark. Your homework should cover a lot of small ways for improvement. Please do the lessons. Please do not purposely injure yourself outside of supervision. It was good to see you again, Mark.”

Mark nodded.

There was a silent moment.

Mark walked away.

- - - -

Inside of his bedroom, Mark read over the breathing exercises.

The exercises went from simple to complicated *fast*.

Breathe while running; 30 minutes. Sure. Easy enough. Mark was kinda tired from all this morning and then the hour of breathing exercises, though, so he would leave this for later today.

Breathe while fighting. He’d have to leave that one for tomorrow at sparring club in the morning.

Feel the breath in your lungs connect to the spirit of the world itself with each push and pull of your existence. Mark wasn’t even sure where to start with this one. He tried opening his lungs to the world and breathing in and out and nothing felt different at all. Was he doing something wrong? Maybe he needed to be in other locations than simply his bedroom in order to ‘feel the spirit of the world’. He had no idea how ‘push and pull of your existence’ related to breathing, though. Perhaps Mark needed to go out onto the grassy hills outside and try this? Maybe tomorrow.



What does 'good' mean in the context of breath? What does 'bad' mean in the context of breath? Can you imagine truly good things? How about truly bad things?

... All of that was a mental hurdle to overcome. Something Mark would need to think about. All the rest of the list was even more complicated.

Do trees breathe? Well yeah, but not like people.

Are you breathing with your lungs, or your aura? The lungs... but was he?

Can you breathe with the ground? Err...

Can you breathe with the wind, and does the wind work for, or against your efforts? Uhh.

Mark ended up crashed out on his bed for ten minutes as he tried to wrap his head around all of these weird ideas—

“And also the weird idea that Union isn't even about breathing at all!” Mark exclaimed to himself, staring at his ceiling. “Union-through-breathing is just how Freyala does it... To start? I guess?” Mark thought. He asked himself, “Union is really just about sharing... something... with something else, right? I mean. It's in the name, right? 'Union'.”

Mark stared at the ceiling and thought for a while.

And then he went and got lunch.

By the time he got back to the room he had another plan.

Mark opened his phone and started searching for classes of all sorts. He needed more magical education. Just... Just general stuff, really. In all sorts of ways. How does magic work? How do astral bodies work? Mark rapidly discovered that there were lots of options, but most of them were for graduate studies, and he was not eligible for them at all. He'd need to go to college, first.

There were lots of options for basic education, though.

“Okay. Well... Maybe... ‘Understanding Curtain Protocol’ seems useful? And maybe... Maybe Etiquette Club— Err... Not that one. Not yet... But this one...?”

Mark had no desire to play dress up with nobles or noble-adjacent people right now, but there were lots of other options available.

A few signups later and Mark was good to go for Understanding Curtain Protocol, Geography and History of the Two Worlds, and Xerkona Culture. All of them were classes, which meant classroom time, but it also meant books. After his signups, Citadel of Freyala Resources pinged Mark with a message that his books were available for pickup at the local bookstore, and to please keep them in good condition because they would be used by whoever came after him.

All of those options were rotating classes, though, because everyone came off of Tutorial at different times. So Mark would be doing most of his learning for those courses on his own, and then he would join the actual class later. If he wanted more school-like learning, then that was not done here, at Citadel Freyala.

Mark started his studies on World History—

The first warning in the texts was to take Understanding Curtain Protocol before attempting World History.

“... Well okay then.”

So that is what Mark did.

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By the time evening rolled around, Mark was pissed at the world again and ready to talk to people about it, so he was very ready for this 'get together at Black Chess'.

This was his first real time walking throughout Citadel, though, so he was a bit distracted by that.

The Citadel of Freyala was divided into a few different parts, sort of like a sliced-up cake, with the center carved out for its own purposes. Central Citadel was actually off-center, toward the southwest. Mark roomed in the dorms further southwest, in Building 5 of 20-ish total. Healing Hall and most of the 'academy' was nearer Central Citadel, though only some people called it 'the academy'.

The technical name was the Ecclesiastical Centers of Freyala.

People just took classes and clubs in that area. There was an *actual* Academy Freyala, located in southern France. That place was an arcanaeum and university both. Here at the Citadel they just had practical clubs and classes to help people with introductions to the world beyond Tutorial, or to help them in their active choices to become adults. This was a 'starter zone' of rest and military might, and people choosing where they wanted to go from here.

The Curtain wasn't enforced here at the Citadel. All information was open for all to see and know, to make choices about where they'd go, now that they knew more about the real world.

It was mainly a place of powers, of recruiting, and of life decisions. Many of the classes were overseen by volunteers in the faith, which could either mean paladins on downtime, on recovery, or noble houses that had people that wanted to teach (and recruit).

And so, Citadel had everything. There was a coliseum on the north side where exhibition matches were held on the main field. The east-ish side of Citadel was all residential and religious; mostly noble houses and shrines and the like. Between the academy area and the coliseum, to the far west, lay the air field.

The *actual center* of Citadel was all business and nightlife and recreation.

Trams ran pretty much all the time between the various centers, and through them, too. Almost no one had cars but there were some out there, especially hovercars. The Citadel was pretty average for most walled cities in the world. Maybe 40 kilometers in diameter? Something like that.

As Mark got off of the tram at the southwest side of the city center. Black Chess was a bar for students, located far from the academy and at the other side of the city center. Mark could have taken a tram closer, but he wanted to walk through the center of Citadel Freyala.

It took Mark half an hour of walking to get to his destination, which was okay by him. It was nice to walk through a big city, because he had never been allowed into places like this back home. Back in Orange City, this sort of place would have been called 'the Hero Quarter', and kids were strictly not allowed.

Mark *understood now* why he wasn't allowed here as a kid, and that understanding pissed him off. Or maybe that was just his background feeling these days. How long would that last? Forever? Maybe.

Mark watched a waiter at a restaurant set down food between a man and a woman. That food *glowed* with mana. Literally. The steak was bright, like a white spotlight was on it, while the veggies and potatoes were green and yellow. It was mana food, and, based on the color, the steak probably fortified everything, because it was white, while the veggies and potatoes fortified Kinetic and Mind, because of the green and yellow hues to them.

Even the smell was magical, and it made Mark feel stronger, somehow, just to smell it. Eating it would probably grant a whole host of special enhancements.

A lot of the people at the restaurant were eating things like that, and the restaurant's name was 'A Colorful Feast', so maybe they hyped up the whole color theory of astral bodies? Through Talents? Or preparation? Mark didn't know. The price tags on the menu by the door told him that he could not afford to eat here, though.

25,000gl for a steak dinner. Who had that much goldleaf to spend on food? No one!

... But apparently a lot of people did.

Over there was a gadget shop with signs that read about deals on astral shields. '15% off on all our tier 2 shielding stock! Guaranteed to boost all aspects to at least 20!' That was impressive. Mark did not understand exactly how impressive it was until he thought about it for a little bit, though. Curtain Protocol would have denied him all understanding.

If Mark were to put on one of those shields, his scores in Body, Shaper (sometimes people said 'Kinetic'), Mind, Natural (sometimes people said 'Spiritual'), Arcane, and Arch, would all be Power Level 20, meaning he would have a tier 2 level of astral body resistance against all incoming attacks, as if he had a 20 in those attributes. That wouldn't do shit for his ability to use his own Powers, but it would allow him to shrug off a goblin's claws, which had damage ratings of between 0 and 10 for most of them.

At 20 Power Level, skin was still skin, but against a PL 0-10 set of claws, the goblin would have to get lucky or have very sharp claws in order to do anything against his skin.

Power Level wasn't the end-all-be-all of deciding factors in a fight, but it was a very good start.

A book shop over there was called 'Intro Books'. It was a small bookshop. Reading any of the books in there at all would have caused a mana baptism, for sure. They had a sign out front that said as much.

Coming to any of these places as a kid would have assuredly done a number of things to his astral body, which meant Awakening him early. Most of those possible outcomes were the development of a Knack, or a Knowing. The *lowest* of innate magical powers. Incredibly random, too. Having one would knock Mark out of the chance for Tutorial and almost all of them were simply... bad.

Everyone knew a kid growing up who ignored the warning of adults and sought knowledge he should have not sought. For Mark, that kid was Tim Shanks. A former best friend.

Tim, Sally, and Mark. Three inseparable kids growing up on Gladegrove near-ish to each other. They met in kindergarten.

In middle school, Tim tried to get them all to go into the Hero's Quarter when Glorious Man was supposed to be there, to see him give a speech about something. Mark couldn't recall what the speech would have been about. Thinking about it, that speech might have been about Red Thunder and Mistress Storm's first flyby. But anyway. Sally and Mark didn't want to go and get saddled with a Knack. They

had heard the horror stories of kids going to the Hero's Quarter and Awakening to a Knack. Or worse. A mana baptism that killed them, turning them into monsters, though that was pretty rare, actually. Overhyped, according to what Mark now knew.

Mark walked through the 'Hero's Quarter' of Citadel Freyala, spotting all the kids with their parents. They were probably born in high-magic households, so they were already 'flavored' to start, and thus not incredibly vulnerable to outside magical forces. Or else their parents had made the decisions to give their kids Knacks and forgo the dangers of Tutorial altogether.

Tim had been raised like Mark and Sally; with parents who never did any magic anywhere near them. Within-sight-of, sure, but not actually near them.

Tim had had no such protections when he went to see Glorious Man's speech.

He managed to sneak into the Hero's Quarter rather easily, too, which Mark and Sally had never understood. Mark and Sally had told each other that the people in the Hero's Quarter would see the kid and stop him from entering. That's what their own parents had told them all the time. 'There's no reason to go anywhere near it. The guards will stop you at the entrance.'

But there was no entrance here, at Citadel, to Citadel's 'Hero's Quarter'.

Mark doubted there were entrances at Orange City's Hero's Quarter, either. Mark knew there was just a street, named Hero's Street, that crossed from one side of the city to the other, and that to go beyond that street was to be put in danger. Mom and Dad had told him never to go anywhere near it, and Mark never did. Sally never did, either.

Tim went across Hero's Street, and straight into Hero's Quarter, to see Glorious Man's speech.

And yeah. There hadn't been any guards. Only the barest of checkpoints. Tim had gotten in and then gone to see Glorious Man's speech, and in the middle of the speech, he had gotten a message from Malaqua, disbarring him from Tutorial. Tim had gotten a mana baptism without even knowing it.

He got a Knack. He was able to distinguish colors by looking at them. Great eyesight, too! But the Knack was just a Knack.

Tim couldn't be their friend after he Awoke.

Mark walked through the night life of Central Citadel, and wondered what sort of Knack or Knowing he would have gotten if he had followed Tim. Mark had stopped himself from thinking those thoughts back in middle school, back when Tim had to move away. But he let those thoughts come to him now.

Mark walked in a vaguely angry daze toward Black Chess.

It was a nice-ish place. Big black chess pieces on the sign, ringed in purple neon, and young people at wooden tables, drinking wine or beer and talking. The walls were wooden and the lighting was ample. A bowl of condoms sat by the entrance and the music was soft techno, which was perfect for talking closely with others.

Mark's vague unhappiness with the world, with himself, with the day, came to a rapid head.

Social anxiety roared in his mind.

Mark turned and walked—

“Hey! There he is!” Raoul's voice came to Mark from behind.

Mark froze.

“Yo, man!” Jacob's voice said, also behind Mark.

Mark was stuck.

He pushed down everything anti-social and turned with a small smile, saying, “Hi...” And then his voice kinda just stopped.

Raoul was there with Jacob, both of them wearing acolyte white. Svea stood up from a table, smiling brightly, in some grey clothes. And there were two other people there in sand-brown; outsiders to the Church, but still welcome, and probably poor or new to this life, just like Mark.

Raoul smiled and grabbed Mark in a half-hug, pulling him inward to the table, saying, "We're glad you showed up!"

Jacob punched Mark's shoulder in a friendly sort of way, saying, "You're late!"

Mark was very, very thankful for how friendly Jacob and Raoul were. For a moment, it felt like Mark was back on the field with the rugby guys.

Raoul pulled away from Mark, gesturing to the other two people at the table. One was a guy with skin so dark it was nearly black, and the other was a woman of vaguely lighter skin. They looked almost like brother and sister. Raoul named them, "Paki and Nala Shehu, brother and sister." And then he named Mark, "Mark!"

Mark didn't have time to feel awkward.

Paki instantly said, "I want to buy you a beer, Mark."

Did they know who he was? Yeah, they did. Look at those eyes, and that caution. They knew Mark was Mark Careed. Mark didn't need to be super empathic to know what he was seeing. With that mystery solved, Mark was left wondering why anyone would want to buy him a beer.

Mark blurted out, "*Why?*"

Paki happily said, "Because you deserve it!"

"And I will buy the next one," Nala said.

Mark was suddenly on edge. "Why?"



Paki's face was solid as he said, "Because it sucks to be used like that."

Nala said, "That's why Paki and I are not going into the military. Staying as far away from those pricks as we can."

Svea added, "They're not the only ones. I want to stay here long enough to satisfy grandfather and Freyala, and then I am leaving to join the Slayers. If I never have to follow orders ever again, I will be happy."

"Freyala is okay," Raoul said, "But I will not be going back to Spain."

Jacob said, "I heard they had mandatory service in your neck of the world, Mark. We have that in South Africa, too. Unless a miracle of Freyala happens, then I plan to serve a year to become a full citizen and then leave for Daihoon."

The talk at sparring club today had been light. Probably because they were being overseen by Instructor Charms the whole time, and she didn't allow for much chatter anyway. If a person could talk, then they could get out there and fight; that is what she said more than a few times.

But this was deep stuff, and fast.

They all just... just laid *that* out there, and now here was Mark, feeling unmoored.

Mark felt a weirdness burble up. "Yeah... Yeah it... It really fucking does suck to be used by archmages."

Paki asked, "So how about that beer, Mark?"

Mark felt more weirdness. He huffed a small noise that might have been a laugh, if one were exceedingly charitable. He sat down. "Yeah. Let's try it."

Paki grinned, and then he got up, and teased, "You're a lightweight, yes? No beer for kids in America?"

“I’ll take a 12% ABV anything,” Mark said. “They have it that strong here, right?”

Paki chuckled and he went to the bar.

Ah. Mark had not meant to make a joke, but he would take it!

Nala leaned toward softly saying, “It goes up to 25% for high-brawnies.”

Mark chuckled— And then he lost his chuckle as he remembered what he was mad about before, and what he wanted to talk with Svea, Jacob, and Raoul about. He said, “I just found out today that over *half* of Earth doesn’t do the Curtain! And that I grew up in a *fundamentalist* nation! ECU is fucking *nuts* about the Curtain. *Gods!*”

Maybe it wasn’t that simple, but the starter information for his Understanding Curtain Protocol class had had some strange statistics.

Jacob grinned and Raoul laughed. Nala chuckled.

Svea spoke with a fresh hatred of her own, “And if you would have been even the *least* bit exposed in the womb, you would have been born with an astral resistance, like they have on Daihoon.”

Mark exclaimed, “Yes!”

Svea said, “Whatever your mother had, even if it was shitty, you would have been primed to develop later in life. You could learn about magic and be around adults with magic like a normal kid and not be doomed to Awaken as a Brawny, or primed to mana baptize with something *shit* through accidental learning.”

Mark said again, “Yes!”

“It’s not *that* simple,” Nala said.

Svea rolled her eyes.

“How is it not that simple?” Mark asked.

Nala gestured to Paki, walking back with a very tall beer. “Our mother is a summoner. She made sure we were exposed to that magic in the womb, even though the village elders didn’t approve. We could have been born monsters.”

Mark said, “But that’s so rare, though. One in a million?”

There were some ambivalent looks.

Paki said, “Ah! We are talking of the Curtain then?” He handed Mark his drink, with a smile. “Congrats on learning that the powers-that-be are shit.”

... And on *that* note.

Mark waterfalled the beer. It took half a minute.

Everyone watched as he did that, and as he got near the end, Paki laughed and Nala clapped, as Svea reminded Nala that she had the next one, yes? Nala got a round for the table, and Jacob started to talk of his time under the Curtain.

“I had one friend actually monsterize!” Jacob said, as he held onto a new beer from Nala.

“No!” Svea said, scandalized.

Mark almost said the same thing, also scandalized. “No way.”

Jacob nodded. “I only ever saw him on weekends, when his parents were home from work and when they could watch him. It was some sort of play date that our parents organized. His name was Ivan and his people were from Russia and they do the Curtain even crazier over there, you know.”

Mark didn't actually know that, but everyone else nodded.

Jacob continued, "It was a failure on... on so many levels. Something happened on the wall at the Cape of Good Hope. Nightgoblins got into the city. Some went undetected and they got into the waterways. I was playing with Ivan by the lake— Small lake. No dangers usually— and then there was a goblin. It came out of the water and bit Ivan, clean through his entire right arm... and... And that was it. He was already dead in that simple touch. The goblin dragged him into the water and let him bloat while it protected his body... Gods, it was so fucking horrible. Ivan was still alive when it was happening. He was dead, but he was alive. He became a few goblins. The *official* count was 3, but I *saw* at least 6. That's probably just a kid's recollection, though. I still have nightmares." Jacob was having trouble talking, but he powered through. "Ivan had no astral body at all. A complete baseline. No resistance. The infestation took him over and then the burbling started. I was lucky. I had no astral body either. I was a meter further from the water. Ivan went closer to the water to... to get something. I can't even remember what it was." He breathed. He said, "And that was when I was 8."

Everyone drank.

In a distant, insistent way, Mark felt that Jacob's story wasn't really a story about a mana baptism turning a person into a monster, and yet... Goblins turned people into monsters; this much Mark knew. Outside of the Tutorial, a natural goblin was as dangerous to a community as any mimic infestation.

... So maybe the bite of a goblin *was* a mana baptism, and Mark had just never understood that before today.

Something began to click in Mark's mind.

Exposure to magic often resulted in mana baptisms. Did a goblin's mana count? Maybe. That would explain why Lola had talked about them not letting people out into the wilds to fight monsters until they had a Body of 20, for frontliners, and 10 for everyone else—

Mark said, "Oh holy shit. A goblin's attack *really is* just a mana baptism, isn't it? The 'Talent' it Awakens is 'goblin'. You need to be Awakened to a 10 in Body to survive that?"

As if Mark had said the most natural thing in the world, Jacob said, “It’s something I’m studying, but I don’t really know yet. ‘Yes’, is the simple answer. Monsters are much more careless with their mana than people.” He added, “I *do* know that even a 1 in Body can make you live long enough to get to a healer to remove any sort of basic monster infection, but *any* sort of existing astral body at all would have saved Ivan. The goblin bit through his entire arm. Blood flowed freely, and so did the infected saliva. Most of the infection would have flushed away with the bite. Daihoon kids have 2 in everything due to womb imbue ment. If we were raised like they do over there then Ivan would be alive today.”

Mark wondered if that was true, though. The part about Ivan still being alive. If the monster hadn’t gotten a victim, then they would have attacked more to get what they wanted. *Both* Ivan and Jacob might have died.

Mark did not speak of that, though.

Everyone took another drink.

Paki said, “Goblins are the worst ones. I can handle wolves and monkeys, but the corruptor goblins are horrific.”

“Corrupter goblins?” Mark asked. “There’s a difference?”

But Svea exclaimed, loud and disbelieving, “You can ‘handle monkeys’?? In the trees! I would just die— Wait. Do you not have slinkers in Nigeria?”

Mark tried to think if they meant anything specific by wolves or monkeys. He knew the general monster classifications, but not any specific ones, and ‘wolf’ and ‘monkey’ were two general categories; ‘Fast moving dog-like land animal’ and ‘tree dweller’. Some people used ‘wolf’ and ‘dog’ interchangeably. Dealing with land animals was difficult, but wolf-types were one of the most common types, and everyone had to train with the idea of killing those types. Monkeys were easier, in that you could *usually* stay away from trees and be fine. A ‘dog’ that could attack and hide up above was called a ‘cat’. Cat-shaped monsters were dangerous monsters. Goblins were technically ‘cats’, in that sense.

Svea absolutely meant something specific by saying ‘slinker’, though.

Jacob answered Mark's question, though, saying, "A corrupter goblin is any strong-transform goblin. Nightgoblins are a classification of that. Not corruptor goblins are nightgoblins."

Mark nodded. "Ah."

Paki was drinking, so Nala asked Svea, "No? What are Slinkers?"

Svea nodded; she understood something now. "Slinkers are a European monster, mostly. They came against a tree like a very large stickbug."

Raoul said, "Very dangerous. We have them in Spain, too."

Jacob, Paki, and Nala didn't know what they were. Mark didn't either.

Svea said, "We got tens of varieties in Germany; all over Europe and parts of Russia, too. Never go into the woods outside of the city, and if you do, only stay in the places where they keep the bottom 2 meters of trees bare of branches. That is where you might be safe. Slinkers look like branches, you see. If you see branches on a tree below the 2 meter mark then you know you are looking at a slinker. They are *easy* to see and kill in maintained woods or if you have a woodswitch with you, but never go into a strange forest outside of city walls in Europe." She leaned forward, a little drunk. "And we are in Europe right now."

It was all so serious and deadly and maybe Mark was a little tipsy, that the whole thing suddenly felt like telling ghost stories. He laughed. Raoul laughed in response to that, and soon the whole table was laughing.

Svea was offended, "I am not lying!"

Mark said, "Sorry! It just sounds like ghost stories!"

Svea said, "Monkey monsters are the worst. Do not disregard them as simple." She asked Paki, "Tell me how you would *handle* monkeys'— Ah shiza. I know." She groaned, and then pressed a hand to her head. "You unfair Naturals. You can just *do* your magic."

Paki chuckled. "I would simply cut all the branches down and a few trees too, if I had to."

"How?" Mark asked.

Nala rolled her eyes at her brother. Jacob grinned, Raoul drank, and Svea looked pissed.

Paki smiled brightly and held up a hand and summoned a dagger from nothing. It floated there in his hand. He twirled it around telekinetically, spinning it, twisting it, and then he shattered it into motes of metal-grey light. "I am a Sword Summoner! The best type of summoner. You and Nala are supremely jealous."

Mark instantly laughed, and he wasn't the only one.

Nala said to her brother, "My golems last more than one attack, you one-shot wonder."

"I'm working on it!" Paki said, grinning. He told Mark, "I can cut through small trees right now. I hope to be able to cut through large trees soon."

Mark grinned a little. "That's a good Talent."

And then something weird happened in the group.

People looked at each other a little bit. They went contemplative.

Paki looked ready for an inquisition.

Svea began the inquisition. "What's your attack range?"

Mark wasn't sure what that meant.

Paki said, "Up to 15 right now. I'm tier 1."

Ah. They were talking about the ability to injure things directly with Talents, based on Power Levels versus Power Levels.

Svea said, "I'm not tier 1 yet. I can only hit 10s with my bolts. More if the target is weak to an element I can utilize. Fire against plants, light against dark."

Jacob, "Still tier 0 here, but Sound Kinetic is never going to be useful for direct injury unless I break tier 5— *when* I break tier 5. Confusion is simple, though, and can hit through all tiers relatively easily."

Nala said, "Tier 1 golem summoner. Power based on materials, and earth is PL 0 or 1. Mostly 0. My golems use swarm tactics to pile onto small monsters and smother them. I am not sure how I will progress higher than just making bigger golems."

Paki said, "Dirt in Daihoon is PL 2 to 5. That will make up enough difference for most things."

"Not really, but I will grow faster when we can go there," Nala said.

Raoul said, "Still tier 0 here, but I can hex monsters to be weaker to everything. That is most of what I do. I hope to be on kaiju teams someday..." For a moment he looked hopeful, and then he crashed. "But that is probably a dream. Affecting a whole kaiju? Ha!"

Mark said without reservation, "I'm going to murder dragons someday." He added, "Demons and Fallen and *all of them and*— And I don't know how, or any specifics... But that is my goal... Still tier 0, though."

They looked at him and they knew nothing of Mark's conviction.

Not exactly. In small, unknown ways, they knew. In larger ways, they did not. They tried to reach out, anyway.

Paki was serious as he said, "What they made you do was beyond the call of duty."

Mark saw nods and otherwise.



He gave no indication of anything, himself.

He wasn't sure what he was feeling.

Svea was quietly furious at something unknown, before she said, "I Awakened as a Mage and they won't teach me anything without contracts making me beholden to them. I'm not going back. I can learn magic on my own if I have to."

Mark's eyes went wide. A real *Mage*! The path for them was supposed to be long, but they were the ones that most often became archmages... But now that Mark thought of it, he wondered if 'Mage' was based on Arcane, or on Arch. What was the connection between Mage and 'Archmage'? No one *Awakened* as an Archmage, right—

No wait. Mark knew the answer here.

Mage was an Arcane Talent. Archmages were only archmages because they Contracted to Demons. It was probably a lot more complicated than that, though, but that was the basic division between a mage and archmage.

Jacob said, "The purpose of those contracts is to tie you to humanity, Svea."

It was a statement that was a lot deeper than it appeared to be, and it already appeared to be pretty damned deep, according to the expressions on the faces of the others.

Svea said, "I'll have connections. I'm not going to be some crazy person out living in a tower, blasting beasts that come round and making them into dinner..." She frowned. "Though that does have a sort of appeal."

Raoul snorted. Svea looked only partially offended.

Jacob grinned. "I heard monster cows are delicious."

Nala said, "It is! Have you never tried it?"

Svea said, "Death to all monsters, so that we can eat them!"

Raoul laughed at that. Mark felt his heart lighten, and he smiled.

Paki raised a glass, "Death to all monsters!"

They all cheered, "Death to all monsters!"

Mark tried to get piss drunk after that, because apparently beer was free for all freshly-Awakened, and COFR had marked all of Mark's group as freshly-Awakened even before he walked into Black Chess.

With a cheerful accusation, and not feeling even tipsy, Mark scoffed at Paki and said, "You offered to buy me a beer but you didn't pay for it!"

They all laughed, and Paki especially.

Paki said, "I'll buy you one someday, I am sure!"

Mark just laughed at that, then he got more beer. Healthy Body did a lot to combat poisons like alcohol, apparently. The guys made fun of him for that; he was going to be an expensive drunk, they said. It was fun to talk to them. It was great to set aside the problems of life and just meet new people.

Mark's social anxiety was nearly non-existent, for some reason.

As night truly fell and the world turned dark, the music in the bar turned louder.

It was a good night.

Time flew, and soon it was 11 pm, and most of the other groups had disbanded. It was time for their group to disband, too. Mark said his 'nice to meet you's and 'farewell's, and then he began the walk back to his room in Building 5. Others went other directions, with Paki and Nala headed off to the residential part of Citadel and Raoul, Jacob, and Svea, walking with Mark for a short ways, toward the academy

area. They hopped on a tram together, and they talked about this and that on the way back to the academy. When they got off at their stops, they went their separate ways.

Soon, Mark was alone, walking at midnight, under shining stars and the lights of night guard. Citadel didn't sleep, after all. Lights still stayed on in most places, banishing the dark as much as they could. Monsters still needed to be fended off, and especially in the dark.

That was when Mark realized that the entire get-together at Black Chess had been an interview.

A group interview.

Mark breathed in deep, absorbing the fact that he was being scouted by others, and that lives and teams were being put together. That's what Black Chess was all about. That's why all those people had been there... Well. That, and sex, Mark was pretty sure. This was the time in a young Awakened-person's life when their whole world opened up before them, and if they wanted to fight the good fight, they needed a team.

Why did they need teams?

Because it was safer that way; that was the traditional reason. It was a true reason, sure. But it was half of the story. The other half was more concrete, and it had to do with astral bodies. Every person had Talents along certain directions. Mark had a Body, Shaper, and Natural Talent. So, at his most basic nature, Mark was naturally resistant to those categories, or at least he would be. He would only really have Shaper and Natural-type attacks, though, but only if he could ever lift adamantium or learn offensive breathing.

But monsters could be of any category at all, which meant that they might attack in any sorts of ways, and be vulnerable to any other sort of power that wasn't their own.

So you needed a team in order to not come up against something that would absolutely body you; you had to count on friends.

Even with 3 Talents, Mark knew he could never go it alone. He would always be a bit vulnerable to Mind, Arcane, and Arch powers. Most people, with only one Talent, were incredibly vulnerable to the category directly across from their Talent, from their main focus of their astral body.

Body was vulnerable to Natural, and also the other way around. Kinetic was vulnerable to Arcane. Mind was vulnerable to Arch.

And so Mark needed a team, just like everyone else his age.

The only people who didn't need teams were archmages with their demons.

Mark would never get a demon, though, and he hoped Svea didn't, either. Would she be a good teammate? Maybe. She was an Arcane, which was one of Mark's vulnerabilities that he needed to cover —

Mark stopped in his tracks. Holy shit! That entire night had been a gigantic interview, and Mark needed to make decisions for the entire rest of his life...

Oh wait.

A building pressure suddenly snapped.

A social weight fell to the side.

Mark was under observation by the Paladins of Freyala.

For at least 6 months.

Maybe a year.

Ah.

No team selection right now.

... Huh!

It was still nice to meet new people.

That made all of that a whole lot easier, didn't it? Mark smiled a bit as he resumed walking.

If he was stuck here for a year, then he didn't need to make any decisions regarding teammates. Most people just went with organization-organized teammates for the first year, anyway. Svea had talked about the Slayers as her preferred organization, but Mark had no idea who they were. Jacob and Raoul were going into the Paladins of Freyala, if they could. Same for Paki and Nala. Whatever the case, and unless they found anyone they truly wanted to party with, they'd probably all get shoved into COFR-assigned groups that would match Talents to skills in the best possible way... Or maybe Freyala made the groups herself?

Mark didn't know about any of that.

Besides! He still wanted to party with Sally...

... Would Sally *want* to party with him?

Mark wasn't sure.

Could two brawnies work together well? Or was that a detriment? Mark wasn't *really* a brawny, even if he did have a Body Talent, but now that he was thinking about it... Earth produced a lot of brawnies, didn't it? Where did they all go? Into teams? Because that would mean a whole lot of duplicate...

Oh wait.

They just turned into soldiers on the walls. Right. Mark knew that. The brawnies got on the walls and then manned the guns or whatever, using their bodies to kill monsters that probably killed them just as much. Mark imagined a Natural-type monster just... just running through the wall guard of a city,

killing everyone they touched, until a brawny got a lucky blow against them and splatted the monster across the wall.

Fuck, that's a depressing thought.

Under the starlight sky, Mark walked to his dorm.

- - - -

Raoul lay in bed, holding onto Jacob, smiling in the aftermath.

Jacob said, "He's too far above us."

Raoul scrunched his face. "Who— Oh. Mark? Totally. Still nice to know him, though. Total downer, but that's to be expected."

Jacob slapped Raoul's chest, but he kept his head there. "Rude."

Raoul chuckled. "We're going with a COFR assignment anyway. If we're lucky we might get him in our party, but I doubt it. He's still under that... Inquisition Watch, or whatever."

Jacob sat up, smiling.

Raoul looked up at him. "What?"

"You and I are partying, right?"

Raoul's heart beat hard. "Yeah. I want to. You want you?"

Jacob grinned softly. "I hadn't actually asked yet... I didn't know."

"Yeah. We're in a party together, for sure. A Kinetic and a Natural is a very good start."

Jacob scoffed.

Raoul smiled as he added, "But most importantly, you're cute."

Jacob laughed.

----

Svea sat on the edge of the diving pool, all the water glowing and all the night dark and starry. She wasn't the only one at the pool, for the night guard was up and Citadel Freyala never slept, even more than most places in the world. Svea loved the night life. She loved seeing the hovercars take off like dots in the night, and watching them circle Citadel beyond the wall; on patrol and guarding humanity. She loved knowing that someone was awake while she slept.

She was going to transfer her status to night guard.

Yes.

She had made the decision, just now. She was going to do it.

She hadn't been sure of it before, but that team selection at Black Chess cleared up a lot of lingering doubts.

All of those guys were day timers. Svea stayed up late and woke up later, and she'd much rather just live at night, like 10% of the population tried to live. That's why she was so scared of monkey-type monsters. Trees were fucking terrifying at night. Even with the night-vision magic she was learning, it was still terrifying to be under big trees out in the forests beyond the walls. Years ago, Svea had been on a camping trip with her parents beyond the wall, in a safe part of the world, but it had not been safe at all.

It was never safe out there, and it was worse at night.

So Svea would just stay up at night from now on.

Since she didn't want future complications from conflicting schedules, it was time to go to the night shift right now. She'd still go to sparring 101 in the morning, though. That was early enough. It would be her last stop of the 'day'. All of her classes had night guard versions, though, and with less people in them. Maybe she'd even get better contracts from the night guard than the ones the day guard had offered her for magical training.

Svea spent the entire night awake for what might have been the hundredth time in her life.

She loved it.

-----

Inside their family mansion, in the great hall, Paki knelt on the plush purple carpet in front of Grandmother.



Nala knelt beside him.

Both of them sought refuge in audacity tonight, and their audacity had been proven correct, no matter what COFR had told Grandmother on that golden-glowing phone she held in her hand. They had met Mark and had a good night! And then they had come home and been summoned the very second they stepped back onto household grounds.

Grandmother had been waiting for them like a spectre in her blue-flowered nightgown, holding onto her cane with one hand and the glowing golden phone with the other, as she stood in the great hall.

Grandmother frowned at both of them.

She would make them sit in silence as she glared at them for a little while longer, but probably not too long. They hadn't done anything disastrous. Just ill-advised.

Grandmother tapped her cane on the carpet, the thud of it breaking the silence of the grand hall. "I do not appreciate official correspondence from Holy Mother Julia Garin telling me to control my family, and to stay far away from an official investigation."

Oh.

That was bad.

Paki started to sweat.

Nala didn't fare much better.

Grandmother told them, "It would not be such a bad thing, what you did, if you had come at Mark honestly. The outcome was done well. But you circled Svea, securing an invitation to a potential team selection meeting you had no part in attending, to meet with the tri-Talent who is under demonic investigation, and you spoke of dishonor to the military to make him see you as something of kin. This is too much. Even if it was a good night, it is too much."

Paki and Nala both kowtowed at the same time. “We are sorry, Grandmother.”

“Pray that the cousins don’t hear of you tarnishing our military...” Grandmother sighed. “Tell me how it went, but first, tell me why those three children even *decided* to have a team selection meeting so early. It might be understandable for those three to speak to that boy about being a team this early, for they knew he would be taken from them and they had to strike, but why did *you* strike now? That is the problem I have. He will be here for half a year! Maybe a full year. Rise and speak. Nala; you first.”

They both straightened.

Nala said, “After hearing his disposition from Svea, and knowing of Svea’s trouble with gaining arcane knowledge, we knew we had to strike. We gave her a small tome and spoke of futures... and some minor events happened and we ended up getting an invitation, since we already knew both Raoul and Jacob.”

An abbreviated tale, for sure. But abbreviations were fine. The minutia didn’t matter much to Grandmother.

Grandmother looked at Paki. “What did you hope to gain by approaching him now?”

Paki easily said, “A long term contact. Something to come to fruition in years. We won’t be sticking around at Citadel for more than a few more weeks, anyway. We had to go now, or nevermore.”

Grandmother huffed. “You have three days to pledge yourself to Freyala, to secure the highest ranks of Chosen Power possible. You will be leaving Citadel for our Okuana embassy in a week. You will not interfere in any more demonic investigations and you will stay away from Mark Careed. If he should seek you out, you will tell him the truth of your family, *if* he should ask.”

Paki wanted to rail against the need to serve, but he knew he had overstepped his bounds already.

Nala crushed down her own rage.

Paki and Nala kowtowed. “Yes, Grandmother.”

“Raise your heads.” Grandmother looked upon them as kindly as she could allow, and said, “That boy will either go far, or fall hard. Pray he learns to accept the things he cannot change, because Addashield’s dragon is already acting to bring forth an age of peace to Both Worlds. He’s up to 2,500 kilograms of adamantium gifted to most large nations in the Two Worlds, 12 lesser dragons killed, 3 dragons killed, and 34 long-problematic kaijus eliminated. He even killed the Eater and gave us an ocean wall, like at Orange City. Four hours ago this happened. He was there and then gone! Too fast. A hundred kilometers of wall, done in an hour! He only requested a kinder outlook to him than what he has been getting elsewhere.”

Paki and Nala both went wide-eyed. Nala even gasped.

An ocean wall?

“Yes,” Grandmother said, “The Niger Delta has been expanded in ways we never considered possible. We do not believe it is a trap, but we are wary. Either way, all the world is changing, children. When Mark finds out that the world is going to crown him a hero for his sacrifices, and anoint that dragon an ally of humanity, Mark will either take it well, or poorly. House Shehu will *not* be involved in that. With any luck, the boy will be a footnote in history, though I doubt a tri-Talent could ever be a footnote.”

Paki’s heart beat hard. This much had happened already? How *fast* was Addashield’s dragon *moving*? Too fast! Way too fast! And the response from the world? To accept these gifts from the dragon?!

*Gifts from a High Dragon?!*

Impossible!

Paki asked, declared, “But Addashield’s dragon is a High Dragon!”

Nala breathed in deeply, agreeing with Paki, but saying nothing.

Grandmother simply said, “I am as surprised as you, but there are certain precedents...”

Paki’s eyes were opened wide that night.

- - - -

Mark sat with Svea to the side of the sparring room, while Jacob and Raoul fought and Instructor Charms watched.

Svea said, "I'm switching to night guard."

Mark blinked a bit. "You like living at night?"

"Yeah, I do. Most monsters come out at night, and the competition among professional teams is just... A lot less. I've decided to go into the Slayers, too. Officially. I spent all last night doing that. They'll help me with spell forms." Svea asked, "How about you? You said you're stuck here for 8 months or something, right?"

"I'm not sure how long, but something like that, yeah. I haven't made any decisions at all, except to do class and club work." Mark looked away, saying, "There's so much to learn."

Svea smiled. "So much hidden! And not equally at all! If I would have been born on Daihoon I would already have ten spells to my name gained from ten neighbors, instead of just Elemental Bolt."

Mark honestly said, "That sounds like a lot, but I have no basis for understanding that difficulty."

Svea paused, and then she laughed.

Mark smiled. "Really though! What is a 'spell'?"

Svea grinned. “It’s like... clipping off your astral body and throwing it. Forced seer-ing.”

Mark instantly said, “*That* can’t be healthy.”

“It’s not!” Svea said, still joyful.

Mark looked at Raoul and Jacob spar, as he said, “There’s so much I never knew. It’s hard to think about sometimes.”

Svea strongly said, “I *hate* thinking about all that, too! What was hidden! I love magic the more I learn, but every mage I talk to wants 10 years of contracted apprenticeship before they’ll teach me anything good! Gods! It’s no wonder people turn toward the demons...” She stopped. Her face turned bright red with embarrassment. She whispered, “Sorry.”

Mark smiled as he said, “Demons and mages can be pretty bad, yeah.”

“... Yeah. Sorry. I kinda... forgot who I was talking to.”

“I’m just some idiot who was used. It’s not quite the same.”

Svea said nothing for a long moment, and then she—

Instructor Charms said, “You can do burpees if you can talk so much.”

Svea shut her mouth.

Mark just breathed.

Soon, Raoul and Jacob finished, with Raoul winning and Jacob on the floor.

Charms pitted Mark next against a tired Raoul.

Raoul grunted as he squared up, sweat dripping.

Jacob held up a hand as he laid on the ground, saying, "He's not that tired, Mark! He's faking!"

Raoul instantly shouted, "Oh come on!" as he righted and stopped breathing nearly so hard.

Mark grinned.

Mark won that bout, and the next one with Svea.

Later, after sparring club, Svea said to Mark, "I'm sorry about... saying that stuff earlier."

Mark just smiled. "Don't worry about it... But thanks."

Svea nodded, and then she went on, down the hall, to wherever she had to go next.

-----

Mark sat on a bench near a park, breathing, but not deliberately. Not yet. The trees were tall. A small, shallow lake held in front of him. The sun shone in the cloud-piled sky and shadows from the trees danced across the grasses at Mark's feet. A breeze tossed the canopies and rippled the water. Ducks quacked. It smelled of good, clean forest, and it was warm. It was the end of summer, and the world was beautiful.

It was nice.

For a moment, Mark looked up in the sky, at the clouds, and he imagined many things. Flying, most of all. He'd be able to do something like that with adamantium, eventually. Not very high, though. Not without mechanical advantage. A lot of shapers flew with glider wings, and Mark was a shaper now... or at least he would be, eventually.

He'd be flying up there, eventually.

Mark thought back to the conversation with Svea, and then to his own hatred of what was hidden from him...

And also to whatever the fuck was happening with Addashield.

Mark had deliberately not looked at the news for the past 15-ish days, or however long it had been since... Since all of that. It had probably been 20 days since Mom and Dad were murdered and incinerated. Mark wasn't sure of the timeline at all. Everything sort of blurred together—

A pair of guys were walking across the path to the side, one of them saw Mark and did a double take, and then he spoke to his friend who also looked at Mark and then both of them rapidly pretended to ignore Mark. One of them turned back and flashed a thumbs up, though, and then he kept walking.

... So that was a first.

Some stranger had just given him a thumbs up.

Mark wasn't sure how he felt about that. People had noticed him before, yeah. He was kinda tall and rather built, and it seemed like Healthy Body was doing a lot for him in that way, like any brawny-type Talent would do for anyone... But that was the first time people actually noticed *him*. As in, they noticed that he was Mark Careed.

And that was a thumbs up.

Mark felt an anger rise.

*What possible reason could anyone have for giving him a thumbs up?!*

Mark had come out here to do some breathing exercises, but now he was fully focused on that damned thumbs up! He almost got off the bench and went to chase the guy down! The fuck?!

... Mark ignored it and tried to think about anything else.

He ended up thinking about his future, and what it all meant post-Addashield, since it seemed that everyone was thinking that Addashield was truly dead, so he couldn't really get his revenge, could he? If he tried to kill the dragon, then he'd be going after revenge on something that 'wasn't actually Addashield', and that was donating so much shit to the people of Earth that humanity was buying into its shit—

Mark picked up his damned phone and started searching the web—

He didn't even get partway through the search before he stopped. He needed to stop. He didn't want to know about that asshole's reincarnation as a High Dragon.

He breathed.

Mark set down his phone and focused on his breathing exercises—

“Nope.”

Mark opened his phone back up and just asked, “COFR. Please tell me what's happening with Addashield's Dragon, and what people are saying about me? Anything new? In the last few days?”

The phone went from blue, white, and filled with a few student apps of various colors, to full golden glows.



Citadel of Freyala Resources spoke in a feminine voice, “Here are some relevant stories to match your queries.” A series of buttons with thumbnails popped up; links to the stories. And then COFR said, “To summarize, “Addashield’s High Dragon has laid out plans for what he wishes to do to atone and then go further beyond that, to make him acceptable in the eyes of humanity. His largest contributions thus far are the creation of working bays for the nations of Nigeria of the African Unity, London of the Britain Nations, Orange City of the East Coast Union, and deterrent poles for various nations around the world, most of which are in the Northern Canadas.

“He has gifted a total of 2,750 kilograms of adamantium to various nations around the world, securing Earth’s anti-kaiju weaponry reserves for the next 20 years.

“He has given speeches about what had happened back before he was Addashield’s High Dragon, and how he apologizes for the actions of his father, condemns his mother, and thanks Mark Careed for being brave and strong and a hero to humanity, to help him be born as he was, so that he can undo the sins of his father as much as possible.”

Mark’s ears rang.

He watched COFR flick through a few images of the dragon on the screen. There was Addashield’s dragon, all silver and black and sized like a minor skyscraper, with black stripes and blacker spikes. He floated with wings spread wide as he constructed bay pillars, in the ocean, dropping millions of tons of permanent metal into pillar shapes that he inscribed with power. There he was with wings folded tight as he stood in front of a tiny podium, surrounded by drone cameras to record his speech, asking for forgiveness.

And then COFR said, “Based on the schedules he has posted, publicly, he has another month of desired fixes to Earth before he goes to Daihoon and begins to work there, if they will have him. It has been suggested that all of this is a ploy so that he can suddenly turn betrayer on Daihoon, at some opportune time, killing complacent and disarmed targets. Daihoon has responded that if Addashield’s dragon appears anywhere near their protected lands, they will blow him out of the sky.

“Considering the nations of Earth already tried that, we don’t think the nations of Daihoon will be any more successful.

“The nations of Earth have moved on from a ‘kill first’ philosophy. They are choosing to reluctantly accept Addashield’s High Dragon.

“Popular culture is already calling him the coming of a new god.”

Mark couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

A new god?

The fuck?

Mark stared at the screen, his voice breathless, “... What about Glorious Man and... and the other archmages? The other superheroes? Nova Nexus? Timeweaver?”

“Unwilling to battle him at this time.”

“... So Timeweaver tried, and failed?”

“I cannot speculate on this.”

“Nukes?”

COFR fell silent.

Nukes probably wouldn’t work on him that much, really. Anti-nuke magic was one of the first ‘new magics’ the archmages developed in the Reveal in 1969, since nukes were used to kill many of the kaiju that came with the breaking of the Veil. Archmages could get nuked directly and just ignore the bombs...

Mark asked, “What is the best theoretical way to kill Addashield’s Dragon?”

“A sufficiently powerful adamantiumkinetic would negate much of the dragon’s innate lethality. From there, gaining a resistance to all forms of Power is the next step. Beyond that, a person would have to

disrupt all of dragon society, to pit all of them against Addashield's High Dragon. Such a person would also need to also be an archmage, which means dealing with demons. Please note that working with demons and dragons is against humanity's best interests, as decided by all signers of the Humanity Accords of 1978, which includes the Church of Freyala. Such a person would need Daihoonian backing, where the Accords do not exist in their anti-demon, anti-dragon state, as they do here on Earth."

Mark stared at his phone, at the golden light of it all, not quite believing what he was hearing.

Was COFR suggesting that Mark go... go elsewhere, to get his revenge?

"... I would have thought that Freyala would try to... to tie me more strongly to her. To you. To her Citadel and her people. I did not expect you to tell me that I *couldn't find* what I needed here."

For a moment, the phone was simply gold.

And then the feminine voice of COFR, seeming more human and more otherworldly at the same time, asked, "What was your plan before all of this, Mark?"

Mark suddenly felt he wasn't speaking to COFR at all.

He knew it was important to be honest.

Mark said, "I planned to do a stint over in Daihoon at one of their expanding settlements, if I could swing it. Work with a team to help make a home base and to find my way to power by killing monsters and helping people. Maybe make a real home. If it didn't work out in a few years I'd come back home and get a normal job doing... something." Mark lost it at the end there. The original plan hadn't been too involved. Maybe he could have made a better plan, now that he was beyond the Curtain, but he hadn't really thought about the old plan at all. "And that was it."

"Do that. If your rage remains strong when you've made a new home for yourself, a new power for yourself, then pursue that rage. I am sure you will find good, positive outlets for your rage long before Addashield's Dragon becomes a problem. But for now, you must grow, and to grow, you must become one with the dance of the world, of good and bad, and yet, you must discover that there isn't anything

truly good or bad, at all,” Freyala said, “All there is, is what we need right now and what we can’t use, versus what other life needs right now and what they have in excess, and the dance between us all that balances the world.”

The voice had not come from the phone at all. COFR was silent.

The voice had come from the air itself. From the breeze.

Mark breathed in, and then out. What he needed came to him in a golden wind.

Mark felt lighter in that moment. Stronger. All the small aches from sparring were gone, and then some. Mark exhaled what he didn’t need, which was all of his pain. A thin black smoke flowed out of his nostrils, smelling of death as it vanished on the wind.

It was like taking a shot of espresso for the soul, or at least that’s what Mark imagined it would feel like. He had tried coffee, but not espresso.

Mark simply felt invigorated. Joyful, even.

Looking up at the cloud-piled sky, where fluffy white towers stacked in the blue, Mark knew he would be flying one day, on his own power, like a real superhero. That day was not today. That goal was long term. Mark would need to be the person he needed to become in the meantime.

Somehow it felt more real to have these thoughts now, as opposed to a few days ago when he finally came back to himself, thanks to Lola’s words telling him it wasn’t his fault. And it wasn’t his fault. He actually believed that now.

Mark had a plan now. It was the original plan, but filled with this detour at Citadel Freyala. They had lots of resources here, which made it a pretty good detour. Mark would use those resources, make some friends, and then go on to Daihoon and become a real hero.

A superhero.

Maybe then, people giving him a thumbs-up and a genuine smile wouldn't feel so weird.

For what might have been a long while, Mark just watched the sky tumble upon itself, white mixing upon a blue background.

Eventually, with a good feeling in his heart, Mark flicked through his phone, to the homework that Lola had given him. He had come here to do breathing exercises, after all. When combined with what Freyala had said —because that golden wind had been her, for sure— Mark reevaluated the homework...

“... Huh.”

From the ideas of ‘breathing with the world’ to ‘do trees breathe?’ to ‘are you breathing with your lungs, or your aura?’ Mark rapidly put together a picture of what was really going on beneath the surface of Union.

He breathed out CO<sub>2</sub> and he breathed in O<sub>2</sub>, and a bunch of other stuff along the way. The trees breathed all the time, Mark knew, but he couldn't really latch on to them... For now? He wasn't supposed to try to breathe with anything at all —Lola had been very strict in that order— but Mark was pretty sure that what he was doing was breathing in the atmosphere that the trees also breathed into, and thus, an exchange of CO<sub>2</sub> and O<sub>2</sub> took place along with... aura? Mark wasn't sure.

Whatever the case, the idea of ‘breathing out the bad, and breathing in the good’ was simplistic, but it was a good starting point...

... Was Union sort of like... actively becoming a part of the systems around you, and controlling those systems? Or... or what?

A ‘Union’ of life?

Is that why Union was so good at healing, while not actually being healing magic? Because it obviously wasn't healing magic. Mark knew some of the Healing Talents out there. Everyone knew of the Perfect Healers; those that could grant limited immortality to people, making them young, giving them eternal

life for as long as they kept getting treated every few years. Union was not capable of that, or else High Priestess Julia Garin wouldn't have looked so old... Or maybe she was old by choice?

Archmages of certain calibers never aged, for sure, but that was more due to their demons.

Mark thought.

The more Mark thought about it, the more he imagined that Hearthswell, the Goddess of Healing and Home, probably had something that was more like 'true healing magic'...

... Or. Actually.

Mark could look that shit up, couldn't he!

He wasn't a child anymore!

Okay. So. No Breathing Practice quite yet.

Mark searched the web on his phone for a bit, seeing if he could find out the name of Hearthswell's specific power—

The top answer popped up on Quickipedia, and Mark almost stopped right there. He had often wanted to search Quickipedia for information about this or that, but almost all of the site was hidden behind Curtain Protocol, and every time Mark went to Quicki he always hit that lock. But now, as his fingers hovered above the link, he wondered if he could actually see what was written.

Mark pressed the link.

A wikipedia page opened and Mark chuckled briefly as he saw a page he had seen way too many times before.

*401 Unauthorized Action – Curtain Protocol*

But then the page flickered gold and the Curtain Protocol lock vanished, Mark gasped, and he was able to read *Quickipedia for the first time*. What he saw was the main page for the Goddess, Hearthswell.

With a quiet voice and wide eyes, Mark said, “Oh. Hearthswell’s Power is called Castellan.”

The article had links at the top that connected to main pages for all the other gods.

Mark instantly clicked on Freyala’s page.

*403, Forbidden Action – Personal Message: Learn it slowly, Mark*

... Mark backed to the previous page.

*Maria Sanchez was a local healer from Mexico who was aged 35 during the Reveal in 1969. She has been called a curandera and a folk healer, but she was mostly a mother of 9 and a leader in her community. When the Reveal sent shockwaves of mana across Earth, baptizing almost everyone at once, Maria gained the Talent of Castellan, and put to rights her land and her people. Most notably, she undid the monsterization of 4 of her children as well as all of her village of 550 people.*

*With the power and personal drive to organize the world, Maria rapidly rose in power, putting the world to rights. She would eventually become Hearthswell, the goddess of domestic harmony and healing.*

Mark had known the basic story of how Maria had gained a Talent for healing that allowed her to reverse the monsterification of many different people. This story he read right now was completely different, and yet, very much the same. ‘Castellan’ probably organized... Well. A lot. What was a Castellan? Put simply, a Castellan was the organizer of a castle. The guards, the pantry, the people, everything. They maintained the health of the castle, and the people inside the castle.

So ‘Castellan’ was probably... wow. A lot.

Union could do just as much, couldn’t it. Even more, really. What was a Castellan but the organizer of a small group. Union could span... very far, probably.

Well shit! What could the other gods do?

Mark found out.

Drakarok, the God of War and Murder, formerly known as General Alexander Volkov, had the Talent of Retribution. That one was pretty darned widespread in applicability, too. Sally was acolyted to him, so that's probably what she would gain, too. She had even gained a little bit of that power before her Tutorial, back when Mark sparred with her that one time. The smallest application of Retribution had to have been grafted on to her by Drakarok even then, because Mark certainly felt how every time he struck her, he injured himself... Or maybe her strikes were even more injurious than they should have been? Mark didn't really remember all that well.

Mark needed to call Sally. He still hadn't done that yet. Not since...

Mark moved on.

Verdago, the God of Fertility and Growth, formerly known as Farmer Daniel Greene, had the Talent of Farmer. Reading that seemed kinda boring to Mark, but then he saw all the known applications of Farmer—he noted he needed to go back and read about the applications of the other Godly Talents—and he read about how widespread 'Farmer' could be. Though it mostly applied to growing things from the ground, it could also apply to growing a family, or growing a forest, or farming monsters for parts and magical reagents, to hunting in the wilds for valuable herbs.

Mark was getting the picture that the broader powers allowed for much further growth.

Healthy Body would probably protect him from a lot of things like poisons and generally keep him strong, while Adamantiumkinesis would give him one of the strongest weapons available to man, but Union, though small now, would be the foundation of his true growth.

Mark went back to [Quikipedia](#).

Pluta, the Goddess of Prosperity and Wealth, formerly known as Victoria Sterling, had the Talent of Prosperity—



The page morphed.

*402 – Payment Required. For a small donation of 99 cents, you can continue to read all about the Goddess of Prosperity!*

Mark moved on.

*Malaqua, the God of Stone and Ascension, formerly the City AI for New Delhi, was born in a conglomeration of magic and tech, becoming the very first true AI, long before anyone really knew what that was. The archmages and mages from Daihoon simply described him a ‘familiar’, though we now know that was both a truth, and wholly inaccurate. Through many different well-crafted demonic contracts, Malaqua became as powerful as any archmage. Through the cooperation of several archmages of Daihoon, including Sloane Addashield and Yunthal Brightwind, they assaulted the Demon City of Arakino, on the Moon, and Malaqua installed himself as the God of the System. Thus, they ended the Reveal, repairing the Veil between worlds, and...*

Mark set his phone down and sort of stared out at space for a little while.

Reading Addashield’s name in an article had knocked the enthusiasm out of him.

Mark had come out here to practice Union, to practice breathing, and he had done some of that, but he was done, for now.

He went to get lunch and to study for a college credit in Understanding Curtain Protocol. He doubted he was ever going to go to college, but he was certainly going to learn about all the ways in which the Curtain had been drawn on his entire childhood.

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A knock came from the door.

Mark startled, looking up from his books and his worksheets. He got up and opened the door.

“Oh. Hello David.”

David the Paladin stood beyond Mark’s door, looking vaguely cheerful. “Hello, Mark. I stopped by to see if you were doing okay. May I come in?”

Mark stepped away from the door, saying, “Sure. I don’t have, like... tea or anything, though.”

David shut the door behind him, and said, “I’m just here to check up on you, to see if you’re adjusting. You needn’t treat me as a guest. So are you adjusting?”

“Uhh...” Mark said, “It’s tough.”

And then he fell silent.

Somehow, in some awkward way, Mark sat down at his desk.

David sat down on a spare chair.

David waited.

Mark stared at the floor and said, “I hate feeling sad. I *hate* that the world seems to find Addashield’s dragon... acceptable. But... Fuck. If this hadn’t happened to *me*. To... to Mom and Dad. To Orange City and Red Thunder and Mistress Storm and *who knows* how many others...” Mark looked up at David. “I wouldn’t hate him so much if it wasn’t so personal. The dragon is *acting* like a Hero of Humanity; like how I *wanted*... like... like that’s the *reason* I went through with all of that shit in the first place! I did

this so that Addashield would come back to himself! And so all sorts of normal, good things would happen! You told me it was happening whether I wanted to do it or not, but I *wanted to do it!* I helped make that happen! So *why* do I feel so bad?! And why... Why don't I hate him *more?*" Mark did not cry. He had cried too much already. "If he wouldn't have killed my parents... If..."

Mark fell silent.

David listened.

Mark said, "It feels wrong to hate, and so I don't, but I really feel like I should, and... And soldiers give their lives every day to save the world... I didn't think... I didn't think I would give up my parents. Would they have signed up for that? To give their lives for the world? Did I... *Did I sign them up for that?*"

David said, "Maybe it would help for you to think of it in this way: You had a task. What happened was a personal 90% success, but a global 99.9% success."

Mark wasn't sure that helped at all, because... He asked, "But what if he goes bad?"

David breathed deep, and said, "I'm not going to lie to you, Mark. He could very well go bad. But we have a lot of resources we did not tap in our probing attempts to kill the High Dragon. We didn't think we would need to tap them. We have plans now, though, to kill him if we need to kill him. You did your part. Let the superheroes worry about the rest."

"Did I really do my part? Did I really do *everything* I could?"

"Yes. Unequivocally yes."

"... Okay."

"Mark. I want to tell you something important."

Mark looked at him.

David said, “This world is full of monsters and problems that need to be killed and solved, and not always in that order. Sometimes, monsters must be *solved*. Like kaiju that plant themselves in parts of the ocean and disrupt shipping lanes, or dragons that hollow out mountains for themselves and take over the land around them, this is one of those times where a monster must be *solved*, and then left alone. Shipping lanes must move. Villages must kowtow, or move. You can’t do anything to him, and the world wouldn’t want you to, anyway. Not right now.

“I know a lot about this sort of thing, Mark.

“I’m a Paladin, specifically an Inquisitor, and we hunt down people who need to be *permanently* solved. But sometimes, we have to let problems go, too. And so, what I do is I put those problems into little mental boxes, and I set them aside. I don’t let them rule my life. I am the master of my own life. Those problems I let go, to be solved some other day, are *not* the masters of my life, at all.

“You *will be* the master of your own life. You will understand the true nature of the beast of being a hero, eventually. This, here? This is just a taste of what it means to be a hero.

“And so, for now, take your rage, your hate, your need for justice against *this one specific situation*, and put it in a box. Set the box aside. You can look at it as much as you want. But leave it alone as much as you can. And when you need to open the box, to let out your rage, you can do that.”

Mark breathed, and said, “... Yeah.”

David was quiet.

Mark said, “I don’t want to think about anything anymore. I want to lay down. Can you come back in like. Two days?”

David stood and said, “Rest well, Mark Careed. It was good to see you.”

“You... you, too.”

David left.

Mark went to his bed and laid down.

----

Surprisingly, when Mark woke the next day, he felt better.

Sparring with Raoul, Jacob, and Svea was actually really fun... Well. It had been fun for the last 3 days, but today was different. Today, Raoul and Jacob *trounced* Mark. Just plain bodied him. It was still fun, though, because it meant Mark had ways to improve.

Laying on the ground, chuckling, Mark looked up at Raoul, saying, "You both improved a lot!" He sat on his elbows, looking at both of the guys. "What changed?"

Raoul smirked.

Jacob said, "We were accepted into the Chosen System yesterday."

Raoul said, "We got tiered up, across the board. Both of us."

"Both tier one!" Jacob happily said. "Power level 15!"

"And Union healing!" Raoul said, smiling wide.

Well that seemed amazing?

Mark had no idea what all of that really meant, though, because he had only vaguely ever considered that option before he went for the option that put him in a coma.

The low levels of the Chosen system all had a low entry bar. Dedicating a few days a month to healing others at the healing houses was a common burden, and the one that Mark had considered taking onto himself in order to get healing magic. That low burden would have given him a set of spells he could use to heal himself and others. But Jacob and Raoul had gotten more than the basic set, and by a lot. A full

tier up, across the board? Like, +10 to Body, Kinetic, Mind, Natural, Arcane, and Arch? That had to require a big demand... Right?

Or were the early levels not a big deal to get?

Mark wasn't sure about any of that, only that it was clearly a big deal to Jacob and Raoul—

“We're *officially* acolytes of Freyala, too,” Raoul said, happy about that. “It wasn't a sure thing before, but we are now, and we're ready to go out in the field.”

Okay! So that's a big commitment!

“Oh wow!” Mark said, “Congrats!”

Svea cheered, “Congrats!”

Instructor Charms said, “Congrats, you two. What's your assignment?”

Jacob said, “It's shipment out to the Good Hope Station; back home for me.”

“Ah,” Charms said, “Soon, then?”

“In five days,” Jacob said. “Raoul and I are going together and we're going to pick up some other Freyalan team waiting for us there. That other duo needs a Sound Kinetic and Hexer to round out their Mind Spike and *True Brawn*.”

Mark wasn't sure how good that was, but Charms and Svea both looked truly impressed.

Raoul said, “It's a *good* team.”

Svea instantly said, “That's a *really* good team!”

Charms was a little wide-eyed, too. “A True Brawn, huh?”

Mind Spike was sort of self explanatory, except not really at all. Mark assumed it was a mindkiller Talent, or something like that. A locator Talent, too, probably; can’t kill the minds if you can’t find them. True Brawn could mean anything, though.

Mark asked, “What’s a True Brawn?”

They looked to Mark like he had asked a weird ques—

“Tactile Telekinesis,” Charms said. “It’s the Talent that most people think of when they think ‘good brawny’, and one of the major reasons why the Curtain exists. True Brawn the most reliable monster killer out there and it’s the only Talent that is reliably reproducible, and incredibly safe for both its user and everyone else.” She added, “Even normal brawnies can achieve it with practice and skill, but True Brawn starts with it.”

Mark’s eyes went wide. He didn’t know that at all.

Tactile Telekinesis was a well known power, like Telepathy, Elemental Control of all kinds, Mage, and Tinker. Tactile Telekinesis was the one that let a guy pick up a sword, and then use it like it was an extension of their own brawny body. It allowed someone to pick up clumps of ground like it was a boulder, and pick up a house from an edge without the house falling apart. Glorious Man was a tactile telekinetic, and he famously punched kaijus away from major cities or other fragile areas. If he didn’t have tactile telekinesis, then he would have simply punched *into* the kaijus instead...

Well.

Glorious Man shot *through* monsters, too, when he wanted to do that. He usually had to punch them a few times to get them away from important stuff and *then* he started punching *through* them.

But more than that—

Mark suddenly wondered if the Curtain was a good thing, now. True Brawn was a good Talent... Hmm. Mark reconsidered. If all of Earth was just playing a numbers game, with 1/100 people Awakening to True Brawn, then they could just as easily play the numbers game with other Talents.

... And yet? True Brawn was one of the safest Talents out there, too... And yet...

Mark said, "I still don't appreciate the Curtain."

Svea had looked miffed at Charms calling the Curtain a 'good thing', but then she nodded triumphantly when Mark said he didn't appreciate it.

Charms said, "Get strong enough and change some minds if you want to change the world. Until then, stand to the side. Raoul! Jacob! Spar."

Mark walked to the side and watched as the two guys squared off, but it was a slow sort of walk, because Charms' words echoed in his mind.

If he wanted to kill Addashield's Dragon he would need to change the entire world, wouldn't he?

Get allies.

Get real power.

Political power, too?

Or just... Mark wasn't sure what he would need at all.

And yet... It was already hard to stay angry, especially with the bastard dragon fixing so many problems. Could Mark maintain his rage for the decades it would take to kill the dragon? After 10 years of peace, assuming Addashield's Dragon didn't turn evil, could Mark roust *anyone* against Addashield's Dragon? Anyone at all?



Like...

Considering—

“Mark and Svea!” Charms said.

Mark got onto the field and fought, but his mind was elsewhere. He almost lost to Svea, but then he rallied and got his head in the spar. The flow came upon him and Mark parried, blocked, and then kicked Svea’s legs out from under her. She went down. Mark helped her back to her feet.

Svea frowned as said to him, “You weren’t really fighting except at the end.”

“Yeah— Sorry. My mind is... a lot elsewhere right now.” Mark bowed. “I apologize.”

Charms said, “Svea and Raoul.”

Svea wanted to say something else, but then she was fighting Raoul and Mark was on the side, thinking.

In order to take down a High Dragon...

Let’s consider the idea of forming an alliance against someone like Glorious Man. Was it a 1-for-1 comparison? No. Of course not. It was close enough, though.

How would Mark go about tearing the top superhero down? Because that’s what Addashield’s Dragon would become, if he kept up these actions of killing kaiju and creating protective walls the world over.

Glorious Man was the captain of the Crystal Tower, the lead of Team Adamantium. Team Adamantium was usually all the captains of all the teams working together under Glorious Man for whatever thing necessitated their gathering, but usually there was Glorious Man and then the other teams all doing their own thing.

So, to kill Glorious Man, one would need to destabilize every part of his entire support structure...

Not an easy feat.

Crystal Tower was the pinnacle of humanity; the big defenders...

Hmm.

So in that case, maybe taking out Addashield's Dragon *wasn't* like taking out Glorious Man at all. Addashield's Dragon had no support structure... Or at least he had no support structure right now. In 10 years? He'd have a *major* support structure. Too much to—

Charms announced, "And that concludes the last meeting of 101 sparring club for tier 0 non-brawnies."

Mark realized the world had gone on without him.

Raoul and Jacob were bowing to Charms. Svea was on the ground, but she got up and bowed as well, and since that seemed to be what everyone was doing, Mark did the same. It was normal to bow to the instructor after the session was over, but this was a deeper sort of bow.

... Wait.

She had said 'last meeting', hadn't she.

Ah, shit.

Charms said, "Rise."

They rose.

"Three of you have been here for a while, and you're all ready to move on. Therefore, you should move on to bigger and better things. Mark, I will speak to you afterward."

They stood.

Charms said, “Raoul. Jacob. Well done on gaining tier one, and becoming true acolytes of Freyala. May she always guide your path to glory, and if you should fall, may she welcome you into her True Citadel. Good luck, and good skill to you both. You’re dismissed.”

Raoul and Jacob both bowed deeper, saying, “Thank you, Instructor!”

And then they walked away.

Charms said, “Svea. You have achieved a great deal of personal growth since I first saw you. More than I have seen from most people. You no longer cower from the sword, and you can lift the shield and parry the blow. You are not afraid of defeat, and you take instruction well. You have grown much. You have much further to go. Walk with Freyala, and may she guide your footwork, and guide your magic. You’re dismissed.”

Svea smiled wide, tears in her eyes, as she bowed, saying, “Thank you, Instructor Charms!”

Svea sobbed a little as she walked away, looking happy.

When Svea was out the door, and the door shut behind her, it was just Mark standing in the sparring room with Instructor Charms. The half-giant of a woman loomed, and yet she was still four meters away, and not trying to loom at all.

Charms said, “All of them are moving on, but you remain, Mark. What are you going to do for the next year?”

“Uh... Train, I guess?” Mark rapidly added, “And get a few college credits and a bigger understanding of the world.”

Charms nodded. “Join the brawny 101 sparring club in 12 days when it rolls over into a new session. Expect to stay in a 101 brawny club for 2 weeks, before most people surpass you. You’ll probably have to sit out the last 2 weeks in every rotation. A lot of people do.

“Do that for as long as you can stand it. Maybe 3 or 4 rotations.

“Healthy Body is Rank F, but you should still be able to get it up to tier 2, maybe around 25/100, all on its own. Adding to that your other Talents, and your Body Power Level will be artificially high, but it’ll still just be Healthy Body.

:A normal Brawn at the average multiplicative rate of power of 2.5 is a Rank C, and that’s gonna be near impossible for you to straight power through. You should still try. Later, when that 2.5x brawny is fully within their own power, then they’ll get to PL 75ish, unless they slack off. You won’t be able to fight one of them with Healthy Body at all, but maybe you will. I don’t know much about tri-Talents.

“Since you’re gonna be here for a while, you might end up reaching tier 2 or 3 before you leave, which would be good for whatever you want to do next, but which will make you ineligible for any beginner class. You can take the 103 series, or maybe even 104. You’re never going to be a direct fighter though. You understand that?”

Mark stood tall, saying, “I know that. As soon as I can actually lift Adamantium at all then I should be able to use some of it to do the heavy fighting for me.”

“I don’t know where you’re going to get any of it, but I know you came in with some, so maybe whatever the Citadel is holding for you will be enough. Maybe they’ll even let you have it back for training purposes—” Charms was suddenly concerned. “They didn’t *permanently* confiscate it, did they?”

Mark realized that Charms didn’t know that Mark was already producing adamantium, inside of his own body. He was suddenly struck between wanting to tell her, and knowing that he shouldn’t, and then he suddenly felt guilty about not revealing himself when Charms had already told him that revealing capabilities was important for group cohesion. But even Addashield had warned him against telling people that adamantium was a biometal, and that Mark would be producing adamantium in his bones for the rest of his life, at a rate of 1 cubic centimeter every 8-ish months.

Charms looked at Mark while he thought, and as Mark remained silent in thought for more than a few seconds, she opened her mouth—

“I don’t know if I should tell you this,” Mark said. “Should I tell you a state secret?”

Charms said, “Ah... I see.” She said, “No. Something like that you keep to yourself. Moving on: If you can get it back, then train with it, but for *Freyala’s sake*, don’t actually carry it around with you like you must have been when you got knocked out in that classroom. Not until you can actually carry it.”

Mark wanted to scoff, disbelieving. He got maybe halfway there, but then he asked, “Would someone actually try and steal it?”

“No. Not *here*. Good habits are still good habits.”

“Oh. Well... Yeah.”

“When you reach maybe 18 in Adamantiumkinesis, or maybe all the way into tier 2, you might be able to walk around with some of the stuff, but it will be like carrying around a 300 pound weight atop all of your body. Carry it around *anyway*, for at least a few hours a day. The only way to grow into being able to use your power is to use your power. If you had something less magically dense, like water, then you could start small, but you don’t, so you can’t.

“Union is outside of my expertise aside from what Freyala has given me, so I can’t help you there and you have a private tutor for that anyway.” Charms stood to her full height as she looked upon Mark, saying, “I’m usually active in the brawny sparring clubs, from 101 to 105, but I got tagged for this non-brawny class a while ago. Now that this one is dissolved I’m headed back to 101 and 105. I expect to see you in brawny sparring 101 in 13 days. Check your schedules and sign up for it. I’m a hardass there, and I do a lot to cultivate that persona, but I’m here for my students, and that means you, too. Good luck, Mark. You’re dismissed.”

Mark felt a warmth in his chest. He bowed, saying, “Thank you for your instruction, Instructor Charms.”

And then Mark walked away.

Non-brawny Sparring Club 101 hadn’t lasted very long at all, just 3 sessions over 3 days, but it had been nice.

He was looking forward to the brawny version of the sparring club.

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To cross another practice session of Union off his list, Mark went to the gym to the treadmills.

Running while purposefully breathing Union was great training, but unfortunately, Mark was fucking up somehow. He was succeeding in some sort of way, but then the fuckups happened, and he had no idea why.

Sweat dripping, pulse pounding, Mark ran at top speed, 24 kilometers per hour. He breathed in and out; in with the good, out with the bad—

He hit a sudden stride for some reason and his pace evened out, it was easy to run—

And then suddenly his breathing fucked up and he lost it and it was difficult to run.

That had happened several times so far. Mark was determined to figure out what he was doing wrong, and to fix it. Maybe it was other people around him breathing with purpose, draining the nearby air of ‘goodness’? Maybe they were breathing out too much ‘badness’ and thus Mark was accidentally breathing in miasma? He had no idea. Maybe he needed to point a fan at himself, to get more air throughput, to wash away the miasma? Or maybe Mark was ‘wearing out’ his ability to use Union? Astral body fatigue, as they call it? That was also highly possible...

Mark huffed and puffed as he ran, and he had a thought.

What was ‘goodness’? What was ‘badness’?

Did astral body fatigue count as ‘badness’?

Well...

Mark mentally added the idea of astral body fatigue to his idea of 'badness', and then he breathed out with purpose—

A gust of black smoke huffed out into the air in front of him, and then came right back in his face, thanks to the fans billowing across the entire row of treadmills. It smelled like something *bad* that he had no basis to understand, and it vanished in the air even before it got—

“Hey!” said the man running next to him, as he slowed down his machine, “The fuck?”

Someone said something in French that sounded like ‘disgusting’, but not quite.

Another person said, “Who did that!”

A few more people down the line complained.

Mark had already called out, “Sorry! Didn’t mean to do that!”

One angry woman pointed at a sign hanging up in front of them, between all the televisions and repeated down the wall several times. “Read the sign!”

*‘Don’t use Talents, Powers, or otherwise, that might impact others!’*

“Sorry! I didn’t know it would do that!” Mark turned off the treadmill and started to walk away, “Sorry! Sorry.”

Mark got out of there fast.

One tram ride later, Mark stepped out at a new running spot.

A track ran all around the entire Citadel, just in front of the wall that surrounded the place. Mark went out there, to where the wall held tens of meters tall and thick as multiple buildings on the right, while on the left lay open ground and scattered farms. Straight ahead, curving left, was a wide road that wasn't a main road at all. It was just an empty space to ensure there was ample area between the wall and the farmlands of Citadel.

He went for a run.

Shoes pounded on hard-packed dirt and the wind whipped through hair.

The road ahead was long, and it went around all of Citadel, but it also had tram stops everywhere. It even had a tram running to the side of the open, empty dirt road, so Mark could stop whenever he wanted.

It was nice.

When the course encountered a main road that exited the wall here and there, it went into tunnels under the road. They were short, brightly-lit tunnels, with cameras and an escape from the hot world above. When the course went back above ground, Mark ran in the open sun, under the bright sky and in the breeze.

Mark ran, and he was not the only one.

He passed people, and speeders passed everyone, running like bullets around the entirety of Citadel. Mark laughed as he caught a glimpse of the same guy passing by twice, for that guy must have run around the entirety of Citadel already. The whole track was a good 130-ish kilometers long, and Mark was absolutely not going to do the whole thing...

But that was a new goal.

For Mark ran, open and as free as he could be, realizing that he was alive. He was alive, and Mom and Dad wanted him to live, and he had so much life in front of him that it was scary and wondrous.



And he was sad. He missed his parents. He hoped that they would have forgiven him for what had happened. He prayed, and he missed them.

And he was terrified.

He was *terrified* of Addashield's Dragon. Only an idiot wouldn't be scared of that *thing* Mark had seen in the sky. Mark had absolutely no way to fight that thing. He had no way to injure it at all. He knew this. He knew he was less than a bug to be squashed by that High Dragon.

So he would have to start small. Like he had always planned.

Friends, fellow warriors. Organizations to join. Artifacts to find, or maybe make. And especially his own, personal power. He needed more power than anyone would *ever* rightly need in their life. He needed the power to kill anything *and* he needed the power to save *everyone*.

Because Mark wasn't going to lose anyone he cared about, ever again.

Union was what Freyala used to become a Goddess of Healing and Protection. Other people had surely had that power since then, but only Freyala had achieved divinity, and only because she had reason to push herself that high. She was forged in the fires of the Reveal. She had lost so much, but still she worked to keep what she had left. It was the same for many people during that time. It was the same for most people who fought monsters.

Sadness was a luxury.

Action was a necessity.

Mark was not a god at all, but he had Union, a reason to rise high, *and* Adamantiumkinesis and Healthy Body.

Union exchanged good and bad with the world, and with others. Adamantium was the strongest metal known to Earth and Daihoon, and even if he didn't have a lot of the stuff, he still could make needles

and cut open veins. And with a Healthy Body, Mark could push himself harder than most non-brawny people.

It was more than enough.

The road ahead was long and winding, but this was more than enough to make Addashield pay, and if not him, then the dragon he left behind, which was still absolutely him, no matter what other people might say. Why else would anyone even be entertaining the idea that Addashield's Dragon was useful at all, that it could be trusted unlike all the other High Dragons out there, unless *Addashield* had survived.

Of course the dragon was still him!

Mark breathed in the good, and breathed out a flow of miasma that flowed away on the wind, vanishing, becoming little more than a distant memory.

He ran faster.

He ran *stronger*.

He tried not to think about the High Priestess, Holy Mother Julia Garin, and how she told him that she spent lives every day, to ensure that civilization survived. If Mark thought too much about that, then what, really, did his personal hatred of Addashield even amount to? If Addashield was accepted by the world, then where did that leave Mark?

Would such a vendetta make Mark an enemy of the world?

... Maybe it would.

Mark scoffed at that thought.

He wasn't going to be some stupid *villain*.