

Isoko looked at Mark with concern, after Mark had said something about something. He wasn't even sure what he had said.

While the sun had begun to dip down to the horizon beyond the large, ornate windows of the Grand Hotel, Mark healed people far out of sight as he spoke with Isoko about Union. It was the perfect thing to do after facing a kaiju and almost dying. Mark wasn't sure what was happening right now, though.

"... What?" Mark asked.

As if she couldn't believe what she was hearing, Isoko asked, "You can use Breath to practice and you haven't been doing weird practices yet?"

Mark sat on the edge of his own bed across from Isoko, feeling kinda on the spot. "I've been working on adamantiumkinesis."

"Union is more versatile, though!" Isoko exclaimed. "It's pretty much the only reason that I'm okay with not being a Sky Shaper. Sure, I can't do much with it right now, but when I can actually advance in Union, I have ideas, Mark. *Ideas*."

Mark chuckled. "Okay. What kind of ideas?"

Excited all over again, Isoko asked, "Can you do invisibility— Or something like invisibility?" She pulled back. "Maybe 'attention-grabbing' would be easier. Can you inhale 'attention' and exhale 'ignorance' and make yourself the center of everyone's sights? You'd become the center for any team like that, for sure, just by virtue of keeping the monster's attention on yourself as opposed to anyone else. Or how about that thing that Credenza does with luck. Can you inhale 'success' and exhale 'failure'?" Isoko had a sparkling sort of look in her eyes as she said, "What about *speed* magics? Can you inhale 'speed' and exhale 'slow'?"

“... Err.” Mark sat up straight. “I can try something, I guess.”

Isoko smiled as she said, “Good! I want you to try and make me faster.”

Mark laughed. “You just wanted a buff!”

“Of course I do, mister Best-Supporting-Supervillain! Gods! Can you imagine if you can do what *Seraph* does, *at all?*”

Mark’s eyes went wide.

No, he couldn’t imagine himself being like Seraph.

Seraph was a rather famous hero who blessed whole armies of people with hundreds of various strengths. He was practically the best support hero on the planet right now, following on the heels of Best Woman and Friendster, both of which were dedicated support heroes just like Seraph. But Seraph was the number 1 support hero because he could single handedly ensure that entire support structures for kaiju fights never fell to even incidental damage. He could also turn Glorious Man into a speedster and flier, all on his own. He could take a thousand brawnies —just normal brawnies!— and power them up with enough agility, strength, and durability, to hold a city wall from a monster wave. Never speed, though, or stuff like smarts, or anything emotional or mental.

If Seraph had been here in Wolf Bayou, there wouldn’t have been a single casualty in the fight with that sky-ice kaiju.

... Now that Mark was thinking about it, was Seraph’s basic function to buff a person’s Power Levels to extremely high heights? Mark didn’t actually know what Seraph *really* did, in a technical sense, but he was called a Blesser almost all the time, and Mark had met a guy who was Seraph’s ‘opposite’ last month, and that ‘opposite’ mostly decreased the Power Levels of whoever he targeted.

That Hexer had been Raoul, in that Sparring for Non-Brawnies Club.

... And now that Mark was thinking about it, if he ever had to fight a Hexer it would be a disaster for him. A really big disaster, too! He hadn't gotten scanned in a while, but his Adamantiumkinesis was likely not more than an 85, so if he was 'hexed' to drop below Kinetic 078, then he would be weighed down by his own adamantium. Adamantium was PL 79, and if you didn't have a PL at least equal to the PL of the item you were Shaping, then you got weighted down.

Mark had spent the better part of a day flattened to the floor, constantly holding onto his adamantium as he struggled to grow his astral body strong enough to be able to—

“What you thinking about?” Isoko asked.

“About Hexers and Blessers and what would happen if my PL with Adamantiumkinesis dropped below 79.”

Isoko narrowed her eyes—

“Oh!” Isoko's eyebrows went up. “That would *suck*.”

“I'll have to keep an eye on it. Never thought about that sort of thing before right now.”

Isoko said, “Union can decrease PL's, too. Not as much as a Hexer can, but probably enough. Want to see if this is an actual weakness? I can 'hex' you.”

“... I'm pretty sure I can actually draw in resilience against that sort of thing, now that I'm thinking about it.”

“Hexers can do 50+ points of Power Level debuff.”

“Oh shit,” Mark said softly. “No. I can't... fix that.”

Mark thought in silence, and Isoko looked away, having ideas of her own.

Eventually, Mark said, “But anyway: I don’t think I’ll be turning thousands of basic bawnies into high-tier soldiers anytime ever, Isoko.”

Isoko moved on, too, saying, “Maybe so, but you can already heal people, protect them, feed them, purify them, and a whole bunch of other stuff. So let’s experiment with weirder applications, because I want to be able to go really, really fast.”

“That’s dangerous though, isn’t it?” Mark said, “Speedsters can avoid the dangers of going fast, but normal people can’t— Wait.” Mark had a thought.

Speedsters protected themselves from the extreme forces of moving too fast through their astral body and innate speedster-type Power. Normal people were often simply ripped apart by a true Speedster who wasn’t careful. Someone like Inquisitor David, who had a times-35 speed modifier, could literally push on someone with a normal sort of push and cave their face in, or do any other horrible sorts of things.

But Mark had seen David move Eliot around in that training mission to get him out of danger, and speedsters moved people around all the time. *Inexperienced* speedsters were practically forbidden from touching people with speed unless they had trained to touch people, and move people around.

And, since they were talking about Seraph and speed buffs, Mark recalled a few things that Seraph had spoken about that he simply never buffed people with.

Speed was one of those things, because ‘speed’ was actually time magic, and not just ‘moving faster’. Or something like that. Mark wasn’t sure, exactly.

But he did know that too much speed, without the astral body to control that speed, would literally rip a person apart in any number of ways.

And yet....

Mark said, “You’re not a normal person, are you. You *have* a speed modifier, so you already have some ability to be sped up without ripping apart.”

Isoko smiled brightly. “That’s my thinking, too! My modifier is only 1.2-times, but it’s a start. It’s enough to protect me from a basic speed-up. And you can buff yourself with speed too, without injury...” She paused. “You *should* be able to buff yourself with speed. Powers have in-built limiters to prevent self-injury— And you can buff yourself with durability and resilience, anyway.”

Mark’s heart beat with resilience and weakness right now, black veins extending out into the air, into the world beyond. Mark said, “Don’t think I’ll be stopping that anytime soon.”

“Exactly! So let’s do some speed experiments!” Isoko held up a hand, turned full platinum, and started tapping her thumb to her middle finger, saying, “There’s not a whole lot of ways to test speed at low levels, but this is one of them. I’m tapping my fingers together as fast as I can. It’s about four taps a second. You’ll be able to tell if I speed up even a little bit. Go for it.”

“... Just... go for it?”

“Any way you want! Go for it. I don’t know what words you’d use at all, but I know I want to be super fast.”

Mark rolled his eyes and then he thought for a moment. Isoko’s gentle fingertaps were a soft sound in the background, as Mark considered speed.

... He could do the basic idea to start, right?

Mark breathed in ‘speed’ for himself and Isoko, watching her fingers tap each other.

... He didn’t see any appreciable difference in speed. Mark breathed out ‘slow’ for himself and Isoko, spreading the slowness into the air, ridding both of them of ‘slowness’. Or at least that was the idea.

Nothing happ—

Oh. Duh. He was breathing for both of them, so of course he wouldn’t see a difference. He was sped up, too, if at all... Maybe. If he was, he seemed capable of handling a little bit of speed? Maybe?

Isoko kept tapping her fingers.

Mark didn't think he was sped up, though.

Mark said, "This is a completely new problem for me, Isoko, because the first thing a Union user does is secure themselves. This problem has me giving speed to you and not harming myself *or* taking speed in myself... Which I am just now realizing that I do not know how to do that. You want me to make you speedy, without affecting myself in any sort of way." Mark added, "And even before that issue, I think I might have mentally blocked off using speed for myself, either intentionally, or as a limit to Union."

Isoko stopped tapping her fingers, as she said, "Oh. Huh."

They were both silent for a little while.

Mark decided, "I'll keep trying, though."

Isoko raised an eyebrow. "Okay?"

"Okay."

Isoko resumed tapping her fingers.

Mark breathed in speed for both of them, and exhaled slow, and that didn't really work. Mark tried 'fast' and 'slow'. 'Vigor' did pretty well, actually, Isoko's fingers tapping faster and her eyes widening, maybe, but when Mark exhaled 'lethargy', which he felt was the opposite of 'vigor', Isoko and Mark both flinched and jittered.

It was like waking up, but ten times stronger. Like getting woken up by a bomb blast going off in the other room. Mark felt scared, exhilarated, and too-full-of-energy all at once.

It was a bad Union. A misfire, somehow.

Mark broke that Union and his Blood Union crackled a bit before he resumed that one, spreading out his black veins to the world, to others out there. Something healed inside of Mark, his fingers jittering a little as his hand twitched, and then calmed. Isoko's shoulders fast-twitched backward and she transformed that movement into a full body stretch, her hands and fingers jittering as she sighed out and got up to walk around the room.

Mark stood up and stretched, too.

Isoko asked, "What was that one?"

"Vigor-inhale, but it was the Lethargy-exhale that really did... whatever it was I did there."

"Felt like ten cups of espresso pumped directly into my veins," Isoko said, as she beat her heart with good and bad, rapidly relaxing back to something more comfortable. "Did you mean to do it like that?"

"Not really. The first part was a breath of 'vigor', which felt pretty much the same as 'good'; basic healing, so not much effect."

Isoko made a cute little noise of annoyance, "Ich!" And then she sighed, and said, "Expelling 'weakness' really is one of the best expellings, isn't it. That whole concept is just so variable and holistic."

... Oh?

A *holistic* approach, then?

Well... Maybe Mark's body couldn't handle actual speed, but how about something similar? How about something softer, with enough diffuse connotations to do... something. Mark wasn't sure.

Mark said, "Let's try this."

Mark breathed in 'alacrity', which was a big-vocabulary word that he didn't really know too well, except he understood as 'quickness and haste in a general sort of way'—

The trees outside waved slower in the breeze, and Mark felt suddenly sluggish, as though he was trapped in syrup. He was *still breathing in* ‘alacrity’, and it took a *long* time to breathe inward. Mark didn’t think he would stop breathing inward for a full minute.

Isoko’s fingers tapped in a normal sort of speed, because she was sped up in a way that Mark was not. She was moving fast in every possible way. She knew something was happening. She stopped tapping her fingers and tried moving an arm, and she moved in a normal sort of speed, her entire body seeming to turn deeper platinum—

It was too much.

Isoko’s arm went too high. She fell off balance. She stepped forward, stumbled, attempted to right herself, and she ended up stepping to the side, right into a wall about 4 meters away. It was like she had been moving in low-gravity. She had been on the floor and then she had tried to step, and then she crashed. The wall had a rather prominent dent where she had landed. She held there for a while, looking too afraid to move.

Mark’s breath reached the end of his breath and he breathed out weakness to rid himself of his Union debt caused by taking something in and thus needing to exhale on a return stroke —he vaguely realized that his brain was going very fast right now— his eyes going wide as he saw Isoko still holding the wall.

The moment of Union broke, and the speed of the situation faded away.

Mark said, “That was ‘alacrity’ and ‘weakness’. I think I was able to handle the thinking-speed, but not the physical speed. You got all of it, though?”

Isoko took a moment, looking at herself and at the floor, saying, “I took a step and moved a lot faster than I should have. Mentally, I was in the flow, but...” She stood up and got away from the wall, walking slowly, testing her rate of movement. After a few paces of the room, she seemed to be in control of herself again. She smiled, saying, “I got rather speedy there!”

Mark chuckled as the wall broke a bit, falling down. “Well then.”



Isoko looked at the wall, too.

The marble facade was broken, but whatever repair magics were happening across the city resumed happening on the wall; the wall began to 'heal'. Mark watched the wall with Isoko. It certainly wasn't an Eliot-ish Man-made Manipulation repairing, but rather a high class repair magic. Probably Hearthswellian-based.

Or at least that's what Mark's previous lessons in his Understanding Curtain Protocol class were telling him.

Mark had always seen construction crews out and about after any kaiju-battle damage report on the news, and they always repaired things rather fast, so Mark knew that people did need to actually repair things and magic didn't solve every problem... But this was on another level from those kaiju-battle repair zones. A much higher level.

But to be sure, Mark asked, "So that's an advanced Hearthswell healing, yeah? Castellan?"

Isoko said, "I've never really seen it myself, but yeah, it has to be, right? And it's just... active everywhere in the city? You think it's active *all* the time?"

"They're probably pumping more power into it to make it work overtime right now."

"Maybe they have some buffers linked to repairers linked to some priests of Freyala."

"Maybe..." Mark paused in thought, then he said, "I have a confession. I have no idea how I actually helped Redwolf do her thing at all. All I did was connect her to other people and take away her weakness and give her resilience."

Mark was still surprised that Redwolf had loudly said 'that's the good stuff!' when Mark had connected to her, focusing on her. Maybe Redwolf's Power was mostly limited by her astral body's strength? And astral body strength faded fast with stronger Powers. It wouldn't be the strangest thing for Redwolf to be astral body limited.

Isoko rhetorically asked, “She complained about headaches, yeah? Body-based strain is common when Power-strains too far. Maybe she could always pop brains that big, but her Power and body stopped her due to limitations, and you removed those limitations by helping her spread out her... I don’t know. Not sure where I was going with that— Maybe her Brain Pop needs a commensurately-sized series of brains on her side to make it work well? I have no idea.”

Mark nodded. “Well that makes sense, too.”

“It’s an Arch Power, isn’t it?”

“Not sure.”

“Could just be a general astral-body-strain situation. I know I couldn’t keep up Platinum Body forever until I got Union from Freyala.”

“That’s what I was think—” A sudden thought occurred. Mark asked, “Does it feel easier to go full platinum when I help you, or when you do it yourself? Is there a difference between Freyala Union, and my Union, is what I’m getting at.”

“Oh for sure when you’re doing it, it’s easier, but it’s the same Power. I think I’m getting closer to the quality of reinforcement you’re doing, but you definitely have a larger breadth of actions available to you.” Isoko asked, “Say? Have you thought about doing weird, magical concepts for Union? Like the words blessing and hex, since we’re talking about Seraph and all that stuff— Oh! Divinity and Demon! Breathe out the demon, breathe in the divinity.”

Mark went, “... Huh.”

He had a whole bunch of half-thoughts that didn’t make a lot of sense. Demons and magic, Addashield and Addavein. Souls and astral bodies and what words actually did. Months ago, Addashield had spoken of Key Words and how they were used to make Word Alchemy and Mark’s Color Drop treatment. He had said that Mark wouldn’t be able to make use of any of that himself, and that he should focus on working his Powers first, whatever those might be. Addashield had said that Mark would need to find someone else to impart the knowledge of Key Word Magic to, eventually, while also extracting concessions of long-term power... or something like that.

But Union was 'Key Word Magic', wasn't it? Though Union functioned more on *ideas* of words, and not *words themselves*, right?

... Hmm.

There was a lot there.

Mark wasn't quite sure where he was going with all of those thoughts, but they were there. It was like he was touching upon something that was just below the surface, unable to be seen.

... Mark would get there eventually.

Mark said, "A better use of my time might be figuring out how to work Union on other people without being directly involved in the transfer of power, myself. I won't be able to bless you with the speed you can handle since I can't handle that speed at all. My mind was going faster, for sure, but my body was just sitting there."

Isoko went, "Ah. That's a good option, too." She grinned as she stood clear of the walls, and everything else breakable, and said, "Let's try!"

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Mark tried to make Unions without him in it, as either a sink or a source. He failed. It was frustrating beyond belief to make a Union without involving himself in the power transfer at all. It was almost as bad as figuring out how to work Adamantiumkinesis beyond his normal limits of physical movement.

Mark worked on that divorcing, too, but it wasn't going well.

Perhaps he needed a Union of more than 3 sources, because all he had right now was himself, Isoko, and the world. He wasn't about to experiment with Union with all the people around him in Wolf Bayou.

So Mark moved on to something else he truly enjoyed, though that experimentation wasn't going great, either. Mark lay in his bed, spinning adamantium in the air overhead, and no matter what he did, he couldn't make it spin as fast as Addavein's shaper-introduction told him was possible.

Isoko had been trying to work a 'divorced Union', too, but she hadn't gotten any further than Mark had. She crashed out on her bed around 10 PM. She had been watching Mark play with his adamantium for several minutes in silence, by now.

Mark scowled at the adamantium, trying to make it spin faster than his muscles could move. It just wasn't happening. He guessed his fastest rotation speed was maybe 8 per second. He would have used Quark to time the rotation, to get a better measure of his speed, but Quark was as dead as his phone—

Isoko said, "That's difficult, what you're doing now."

Mark suddenly stopped, and then he laughed. "Yeah. It is!"

"I mean it. Like. Super difficult. Advanced studies, for sure. But that's how you're going to be able to fly one day."

Mark paused. He looked to Isoko. He put his adamantium away, and asked her, "I saw how you looked at that Wind Shaper when she cleared the air around the bonfire. Do you want to talk about it?"

Isoko raised an eyebrow, and then she seemed to soften in a bunch of different ways. "Thank you, Mark, but I'm good. I really am okay with not having Sky Shaper. But *that woman...*" Isoko clicked her tongue. "That woman was bad at air movement. That's why I looked at her like that. I was *disappointed*. Maybe she has a weakness of trainers, or something, because she was clearly not focused on clarity of intent at all."

Surprise rapidly morphed to a small joy. Mark was happy that Isoko was doing okay.

Mark said, "I thought she did alright. One rip stopped the fire."

Isoko shook her head. “She could have stilled the air, imposing her will upon the air around the fire and then closing inward to kill the fire. That would have been a lot less effort than ripping the fire away.” She added, “Of course, if you didn’t still the air enough, then the fire could restart once you stopped imposing your will, but to stop the fire you’d just have to impose your will deep, rapidly dropping the temperature of the burning wood as well as suffocating it.”

“... Huh.” Mark fell silent in thought as he tried to figure out why Cindy was trying to be impressive. He said, “Well I thought it was impressive.”

“Which was the point,” Isoko said, “She was trying to recruit us.”

Mark chuckled.

Isoko said, “Anyway... I don’t know many tricks with metal, but I do know that separating physical body and astral body speed is difficult. It’s how you’re going to learn how to fly, though. Gotta make tiny, super-fast propellers, and then rise up into the air. It’s easy to fly with Sky Shaper because you can control a large amount of air to support your weight and push upward and outward, so you’re not constrained by the size of your material like a metal shaper would be constrained. Light, wind, and dark are the Shapers that can fly the easiest, but all other Shapers have to learn aerodynamics *and* how to split the astral body from the physical body.”

Mark scoffed, “There has to be a different way to fly than making tiny propellers. Something more efficient.”

“You can use your adamantium to hold onto large props, like an airplane. Or you can get a glider and fly around using those.”

“... Oh.” Mark frowned. “That seems...” Mark wasn’t sure how that seemed.

“Not great,” Isoko provided.

“Yes, that. And also a weakness. A monster could break a glider.”

“Yup,” Isoko said, and then she continued, “Air Shapers can usually make simple tunnels of wind and support themselves on those. Everyone else has to figure it out the hard way— Oh! As for divorcing physical and astral: How about making some gears that allow for mechanical advantage? Mom talked about that once. Having stuff spin really fast and then trying to hold onto it when it’s spinning really fast might help you figure out the actual separation of physical and astral. Complicated parts, in of themselves, might even help.” She waved a hand. “But I don’t know for sure.”

Mark felt enlightened. “That’s a really good idea! Thank you, Isoko!”

Isoko grinned. “No problem. I hope it works! Mind if I check out the internet while you’re doing that? I want to see what the news says about the kaiju today.”

“Oh sure, go for it.”

Isoko turned on the screen to watch the news, while Mark spent a while figuring out gears and mechanical advantage and where, exactly, the limits of his current astral body lay.

You couldn’t push limits without first knowing of them, after all, and Mark had discovered several limits to his Powers already.

Healthy Body didn’t give him any sort of Tactile Telekinesis, and it might never do that. He was doomed to always lose his clothes in a big fight, because they were tier 0 and people struck with Body tier 4-9 in a real fight. That was Mark’s fate in that arena... unless he figured out how to get some TT of his own.

Adamantiumkinesis had a *big* limitation of physical actions limiting astral body action speed. It would take time to overcome that limit.

And Union seemed to have the limitation that Mark needed to be involved in the Union in some way. He couldn’t direct a system without being a part of that system; he couldn’t bless or hex others, without blessing or hexing himself, either along the same direction as his targets, or in opposite directions as his target. As the current battlefield lay, Mark didn’t think he would ever use ‘speed’ in a fight, because Mark certainly didn’t want to slow down himself to speed up someone else. That seemed like asking for a disaster. And yet, action speed was perhaps the strongest form of power on a battlefield.

They were all goals to hit, or hurdles to overcome, and Mark would get there eventually.

As Mark watched news of the kaiju battle over Wolf Bayou today, as he saw images of the destruction and the minutes tick by that the monster was active, he imagined himself slowed down, reacting poorly.

A cold sweat broke out across his body, as Redwolf's words came to him, unbidden.

*'Could have been a lot worse.'*

Which reminded Mark of something else.

Mark suddenly asked Isoko, "What do you think Redwolf was doing when she was talking to me about the kaiju, and how suddenly it was born? Was that... I don't know. A threat? Or something?"

Isoko looked concerned as she stared at the screen.

Mark waited.

Eventually, Isoko said, "She got a weird look when you gave your rundown of the team that tried to kill you, too, especially around the mention of Mind Powers. I think... maybe she's not as secure here as she lets on? Or maybe other Mind Powers are her weakness, or... or something else is happening there. I have no idea, Mark." She looked at Mark. "The woman pops brains, she's over a century old, and she's a contemporary of Drakarok. Maybe you shouldn't go poking into her business."

Mark decided, "That's a whole series of good points."

Mark had a moment.

And then Mark gasped, and said, "Holy shit what if she does have some sort of thing with other Mind Powers going on? What if she knows the Mind Controller and the Mesmer?"

Isoko pointed at Mark with the phone, saying, “Now see? That right there would be poking into her business.”

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It was midnight and Mark was practicing some more weird words while Isoko was sleeping to the side, taking a nap before the party.

They had no idea when the party was going to happen. Both Mark and Isoko assumed it would have already started, but Mark had picked up the room phone to ask the people at the front desk when the party was happening, they had told him that invitations would go out when they went out. They expected a start time of 11 PM, though.

11 PM came and went and Isoko had called a second time, to ask more questions.

They had told her that the party would happen when it happened, and invitations would go out soon. Perhaps 12 PM, midnight. They had told Mark that he could stop his healing Union, though.

And now it was midnight, and still no party.

“12:27, actually,” Mark mumbled to himself as he looked at the clock hanging in the bathroom.

It wasn't like Mark or Isoko could skip the party, either; that was just unthinkable. Not after being invited by Redwolf herself, and after Mark asked for blackened tuna steaks.

So Mark was practicing Union in new, weird ways, with some moss that he was growing in the bathroom.

Currently, the moss occupied the bathtub's bottom, in three different clumps, though it was growing beyond that limit with every experiment. Plants loved being a part of a Union for any reason whatsoever, so this was not surprising. Mark had needed to physically separate the clumps and connect to them individually a few different times already.



He'd clean up the moss when he was done, but what else was he going to practice with? On another person? No way! It had been irresponsible to practice with Isoko and Mark couldn't believe he had actually done that, now that he was thinking about it, but it was done. And so, Mark practiced Union with some moss.

Could he... breathe in green coloring, and breathe out pale tan? To make himself look green and the moss to be tan-colored? Before any possible applications, Mark wanted to know if it could actually be done. So he breathed for a little while, and nothing really happened except the moss grew some more—

It was like a light being gradually, and then rapidly, turned to full brightness. The moss grew tan. Mark's skin remained the same. And then the moss started to die.

Mark rapidly switched to resilience/weakness and watched as the moss came back to life, back to green, and as his own skin got a faint green hue to it, like he was sweating out green.

Mark looked at his skin and wiped off the green... dust?

“... The fuck?”

Was it... dead skin?

A quick breath of purity/impurity cleared away the dust, thankfully, and Mark mentally jotted down that he had done something interesting, but he wasn't sure what. Maybe Lola would know.

He moved on.

Could he... breathe in visibility for himself, and invisibility on the moss? Could Mark take all of the moss's visibility? Several breaths later, Mark had no idea if he had done anything at all. The moss was still there, and Mark felt the same. Maybe he needed a third party to see if there was a reaction to the loss of the moss's 'visibility'.

There was a better word to use for what he was trying to do, though.

‘Aggro’.

He’d certainly need a third party if he wanted to practice with an esoteric, video-game word like ‘aggro’, but Mark *absolutely* wanted to practice with that word, specifically, just to see if he could loop a group of people and a monster into having the monster only attack the person Mark wanted them to attack; to attack the best person equipped to handle that monster. Isoko had touched on that idea a bit earlier, and Mark wanted to try it out.

Now *that* wasn’t in any of the lessons that Mark had gotten from Lola, but maybe only because Freyala, as Emily Turner, had been born long before video games and the tank/healer/DPS trio came about in video game lingo half a century ago. Mark barely played video games at all, but he knew about them, roughly, back from high school when people played them and talked about them in class. He mostly knew that the entire idea of ‘aggro’ was something that a few Tutorial trainers had needed to beat out of kids every now and then.

Monsters did not follow ‘aggro’, like video games had aggro, and to think in those sorts of terms was to get a person killed. But maybe Mark could do a ‘visibility/invisibility’ thing like Isoko had said. What words to use, though?

‘Aggro’ and... hmm... ‘non-aggro?’

That’d be an experiment to do in the wilds—

But wait.

Mark hummed, then said, “By simply by using Union in a group, I can kinda guide people into rhythms anyway. Is a coordinated dance an act of aggro control, or... Or what?”

Mark had no idea what was happening when he got into the flow in a battle and everything came together perfectly, and how much that series of events related to Union’s Power... But Union helped him get into that flow rather easily, and Isoko had remarked how nice it felt to simply be fighting beside him. It felt different to fight with people who you knew how to fight with, as opposed to warriors getting in each other’s ways all the time, and Mark was good at keeping a battle under control, and in their favor.

Something to think about!

Mark moved on to another idea.

The big idea, really.

‘Adamant’ was a word that was absolutely charged with meaning, both in English and personally for Mark. Aside from the adamantium laying against his skin, Mark had adamantium growing in his bones. Mark hadn’t wanted to mess with ‘adamant’ as a word for Union for a few reasons, though. Primarily... He didn’t want to think about Addashield. That particular mental hangup was loosening, though. Mark was still...

Mark was still having issues. A lot of them. But he was moving on.

Secondarily, though, and perhaps even more important than Mark’s mental connection to the word ‘adamant’, Mark had no idea what other words he could use to counterbalance ‘adamant’. It was the same problem counterbalancing the word ‘aggro’.

“What is the opposite of ‘adamant’?”

Mark had no idea what to counterbalance ‘adamant’ with, or where, exactly, the idea of ‘adamant’ fell with regard to... to anything. Was it a healing idea? A protection idea? A growth idea? Sure, ‘adamant’ had a personal meaning that Mark was still trying to understand, which would influence what the use of the word would do in a Union, but words existed outside of a person, too.

Much how the demons designed magic tens of thousands of years ago, and all of humanity and every living thing used magic how the demons made it, the word ‘adamant’ had very specific meanings (more than most words!) and Mark wasn’t sure —*exactly*— what those meanings were. He’d have to talk to a mage about those deeper meanings, for sure. But first, he would need to know a mage who would want to tell him secret magics, which was a big ask.

Most mages were in guilds. Very secretive guilds.

That one girl that Mark had met already, Svea, had the Arcane Power of 'Bolter', which allowed her to shoot bolts of magical energy. It was a mage Talent, and she had a clear path to power in learning more magic. But she also loudly proclaimed that every mage she ever talked to wanted to sign her up with 5 and 10 year loyalty contracts.

Mark probably would have needed to sign one of those very same contracts if he would have gone into arcanaeum.

Mark didn't even want to *think* about asking Addavein for magical answers.

And then, in addition to the magical meaning of 'adamant', there was the added issue of Mark being an 'adamantium farm'. Adamantium was a biometal, and Mark had Healthy Body and also Union, so using 'adamant' and some other, purgative word to counterbalance the Union, would probably be... very good for Mark.

Or very bad.

Addavein produced multi-ton spikes of adamantium from his body.

Would Mark do the same?

... Hopefully not.

Mark got back to thinking about adamant's synonym.

"... I could just try 'weakness'," Mark told himself. " 'Adamant' is clearly a 'good word' and 'weakness' is a balancing word for both the half-healing/half-protection resilience/weakness and also the full-protection durability/weakness... So..."

First, Mark took stock of his body, of the adamantium he felt inside of himself. There was getting to be a lot! Comparatively, anyway. When he focused, Mark felt a soft scattering of dust particles of adamantium inside his bones, spread like a mist in his ribs, pelvis, spine, and upper leg and arm bones. A few nodules were larger than dust-sized, but not appreciably so.

So that was Mark's current reserves of adamantium. If this experiment caused a change in any of that, then he would stop.

Mark prepared to breathe in adamant and expel weakness.

Mark focused, squaring his shoulders, and then he breathed in adamant—

A weirdness.

Mark stopped.

Mark sat there for a moment, trying to understand what had just happened. He had breathed in adamant and felt, like, a tingling in his... bones? Yes. In his bones. The tingling was still there. As Mark sat there with half a breath in him, the feeling gradually faded away.

“What the fuck was that?”

Mark breathed out weakness to balance himself more, and then he breathed in adamant, and this time he did not stop. He felt his bones almost *magnify*, or something. It was like... like a warmth?

Mark tried breathing *out* adamant—

He instantly coughed out blood, his chest hurting, his body aching. With a flick of intent he started beating his heart with resilience and weakness again, healing himself. He stopped coughing and... Well. He looked at the blood he had coughed up onto himself, and onto the bathroom floor and bathtub.

It was a bit... gritty.

Mark kinetically plucked his adamantium from his coughed-up blood. Soon, he kinetically held a tiny black dot of metal a fifth of the size of a grain of rice.

“... Huh. Okay. So... Huh.”

And then Mark realized that he was in a non-secured location, practicing magic, and possibly exposing that he could produce adamantium himself...

But at the same time—

“Oh fuck you, Addashield.”

—Maybe name-dropping that damned archmage would prevent potential spies from thinking they could capture him, or do other nefarious things to get at his adamantium. Would someone try to cut him up to get to his bones? Absolutely. Mark never used to think in that sort of way, but his naivety was wearing off. Heck! He was here in Wolf Bayou looking for people who had tried to kill him *for his adamantium*.

There were apparently lots of shitty people out there—

Something wanted to kill him.

*What the fuck?*

Mark startled, and then Mark *focused*.

He had been casually sensing the vectors all around him, in the background. Mostly, those vectors of attention pointed in unconcerning directions. People in the rooms across the hall, totally focused on each other and probably having sex. People on the streets, walking this way or that, and some of them in hurries to get wherever they were going. A few people had vectors pointing in every possible direction, which made them hard to read, but Mark had figured out that they were probably the Hearthswell people, repairing the city, or maybe other kinds of people, doing other multi-vector things. The people with very small vectors, all pointed in all directions, were sleeping. Not many people were sleeping.

A lot of the city was awake at this hour.

Who had wanted to kill—

There.

Someone was in the hallway outside of the room, walking toward the door to this room, and they wanted to kill Mark. They knew where he was, and they wanted to kill him—

The vector pointed inward, even as it continued to walk down the hall, and it wanted to kill... itself? And then the vector wanted to kill the walls, or something like that. And then the vector pulled inward and relaxed, or some other weird thing, and the desire to kill vanished.

It was as though the vector simply didn't happen...

The fuck?

The much-calmer vector continued toward Mark and Isoko's door, looking like a completely normal vector, only lightly looking at Mark and Isoko's room.

Was that just a casual blip of murderous intent? Or something else entirely?

Mark's heart beat hard anyway, and he focused on himself and Isoko, who was laying down in the other room, strengthening both of them. Isoko's sleeping vector, which was pointed in not many directions at all and mostly silent, suddenly jolted.

Isoko launched to her feet, still half asleep, but she was awake fast. "The fuck was that?! Mark?"

Mark stepped into the living room of the suite, saying, "Someone is coming to our door."

For a moment, Isoko didn't understand. And then clarity came to her. She had only taken off her breastplate to sleep and she hadn't even gotten under the covers, which was exactly because she was worried she would need to move fast. She had been planning ahead, and it helped. Isoko turned toward the door, her hand going for her wooden sword, but it halted.

"Do I need the breastplate?"

"I don't know."

Isoko put the breastplate on, anyway. The whole thing slipped over her head, and then she clipped the tabs underneath her arms—

A knock at the door.

**Knock, knock!**

Mark stood up, getting his adamantium ready. Isoko was already fully platinum. She grabbed her wooden sword and the sword turned platinum, too. The wooden sword still looked sharp. Mark was surprised that Isoko had managed to keep the sword under her platinum Tactile Telekinesis the whole day, but maybe he shouldn't have been that surprised. Isoko had stamina.

Mark looked to Isoko.

Isoko stood ready. She nodded.

Mark said, "Come in."

The door opened and Greenwolf stood on the other side.

Oh! It was just Greenwolf!

Mark smiled. "Oh, hello!"

Greenwolf locked eyes with Mark, below his green mask, and spiked with a desire to kill. And not just to kill Mark. To kill the people down below in the other rooms. To kill Isoko. To kill the people in the streets. Greenwolf wanted to kill absolutely everyone.

Well that was perfectly normal, wasn't it? Who didn't want to kill everyone around them occasionally?

... Mark blinked, his smile faltering as his thoughts didn't make sense.



Greenwolf pulled back his killer instinct and became the calm investigator that Mark had spoken to before. His body language was perfect. His stance was easy going, yet professional. He had mud all over his boots and pants and shirt and his clothes were torn, and then his clothes were fine and Mark ignored the incongruity. Greenwolf was always getting into messes, after all. Or maybe it had been a trick of the light!

Why, ever since Mark had met Greenwolf years ago, the guy was always getting into shenanigans...

... What?

Mark was having trouble—

Greenwolf said, “Greetings, Mark Careed. I’m here with the results of your requested investigation, and to bring you to the after-kaiju party. Would you please cut off your head with your adamantium?”

Mark happily said, “Sure!”

He turned all of his adamantium into a blade and swiped through his neck.

The adamantium deformed—

Isoko lunged with her sword right at Greenwolf, faster than Mark had ever seen her move—

An insistent thought vibrated through Mark’s mind.

*‘Kill Isoko.’*

Phhbtt! The fuck?!

No, he was not going to kill Isoko. Mark would never kill another person, ever, and especially not Isoko

—

Isoko stabbed into Greenwolf's stomach, her sword hitting non-vitals as she yelled, "Mind Controller! Is there a city AI here! We have a murder attem... pt..." Isoko faltered, her platinum skin fading as she shook her head, stepping away from Greenwolf. She let go of her sword.

Mark felt weird.

Greenwolf pulled the sword out of his body with a grunt, and then he handed it back to Isoko, into her guts. The wooden sword shattered but drove rather far into her body, anyway.

... Why was Greenwolf trying to kill Isoko?

Greenwolf's desire to kill spiked and he did not bother to hide it this time. He glared through his half-mask at Isoko, his eyes aflame, red and brown, as he told Isoko, "Drive that sword into your heart, girl."

Isoko gasped, clutching the fragment of wood in her chest, her words coming out strained as she blinked a lot. And then she gripped the sword fragments strongly, breathing deep, pushing it inward.

Isoko collapsed to the ground, bleeding out.

Isoko was injured.

Mark needed to do something.

He healed Isoko, because obviously she shouldn't be dying—

"Stop healing her, Mark," said Greenwolf. "Watch her die."

Mark stopped healing Isoko...

Why did he stop?

No.

No.

This was wrong.

He needed to do something. He needed to think. Something was wrong—

He needed time.

Mark breathed in alacrity, and the world slowed down.

And just like that, Mark disconnected from the normal flow of time, which seemed to be enough to throw him so far out of Greenwolf's perceptions in order to break the mind control, or at least that's what Mark's instincts were telling him.

Because a top-tier mind control effect shattered, revealing Greenwolf as the older Mind Control woman.

The one who had tried to kill him on the shores of the Ohio River.

Beyond the surprise of seeing her, Mark's next series of thoughts rapidly vibrated between securing the safety of Isoko, the realization that as soon as he stopped breathing inward he would lose his alacrity, how to kill the older woman and if he should, and, looking at the old woman, Mark wondered what she had done to herself.

She was all sorts of fucked up.

Pale pink flesh, like hardened sunburns, marked her cheek and ran up her face, looking almost like a handprint. The fingers ran into her dark hair, turning the hair bright white, leaving streaks in the brown locks. Her skin outside of that handprint wound was old. Much older than she had been. One eye was brown. Her handprint eye was bright red. She was *dirty*. Her clothes were tattered, bloody, and soiled. She stank. Mark hadn't smelled her stink until now, until he had stepped outside of her control, but there it was. Did she shit herself? Maybe.

Mark was halfway through his inhale.

He needed more time to think, to figure out if he should kill the older woman or if there was another way. He did not want to kill her, but she was trying to kill Mark and Isoko. This time her attempted murder was going to succeed, unless Mark did something he did not want to do.

Mark needed more time.

He did something that was perhaps very stupid, but he did it anyway. He brain-danced with alacrity and weakness.

Instantly, a monstrous headache loomed and Mark's sense of time divorced itself even more from normal reality. His heart seemed to stop, but it was still beating just fine. The Mind Control woman stared at Mark with hate in her red and brown eyes, looking like she was in the middle of saying something, of yelling at Mark, at being angry. But nothing came out fast enough to control Mark at all. Isoko stopped breathing, but no, Mark was just that much faster than her right now, mentally.

Mark had both a single moment and ten minutes before he passed out. Powers insulated their users from most backlash, but they didn't do the same to others—

Huh.

Mark had a lot of thoughts. Mark had been prepared to find and then talk to this Mind Control woman... somehow. Figuring out how to find her and then what to say to her would have happened later, when he had actually tracked her down and talked to her. But she had found him first, and she had decided to go for the kill. Greenwolf had been assigned to find her, though, and he obviously had. The woman had come to them under the illusion of looking like Greenwolf.

What had happened between Greenwolf taking Mark's information, and then him finding the older woman? Was Greenwolf still alive?

That didn't matter right now.

... Mark had to kill her. He couldn't risk putting her down with Union. Not after her obvious power-up.

Mark had shrugged off her strongest mind control the last time, but this time he was under her influence before he had a chance to realize he was under her influence. Isoko had even fallen to her control, but at least when the old woman focused on Isoko, she had loosened her power over Mark. Isoko had bought them both a chance to live.

Isoko was already almost dead.

She would be, soon, unless Mark finished this fight in their favor.

Mark still tried to think of another way, but he knew of no other way, and the woman was too strong right now.

Perhaps, Mark could have killed her with his adamantium if he had been prepared for the physicality of that sort of action. His adamantium was currently all wrapped around his own neck, though. She hadn't known that Mark couldn't injure himself with his own adamantium... She had tried to kill him a second time already.

Anger loomed.

First, she had tried to kill him in an ambush on the road, in the wilds, thinking him an easy target. Now, she was coming after Mark again, for any number of reasons, and she still thought him an easy target.

She had grown overconfident in her Power.

She probably killed a lot of people who couldn't fight back at all. She had had complete control over him, just as she had over Isoko, who was dying in slow motion on the ground.

Based on the wavy handprint on her face, something big had happened, though.

Demonic power?

The Cult of Thrashtalon?

Those were rare cases, but Mark's mind went right to those as explanations for this oddity he saw before him. Mostly, people got powered-up with temporary magics and the Powers of specific other people. A Buffer could power someone up a great deal, but this woman had walked through Wolf Bayou to get here, so she was displaying power far beyond what she had displayed before, and a Buffer couldn't do that much... right? Before, she had gotten a nosebleed when she tried to force Mark to believe her lies last time, when she had stolen Mom's face.

A flash of rage. A need to kill.

Mark didn't know this woman at all, but he fucking hated her. So goddamned much. So much hate. The floodgates were opening and Mark was furious.

How would he do it?

If he brought the woman into his Union of Brain, alacrity, would she rip herself apart like Isoko almost had, or would she slip back into Mark's flow of time, and take him over? She would take him over if Mark brought her mentally into this space, wouldn't she. Her power probably acted at the speed of thought. Too bad for her that her thoughts were so much slower than Mark's right now.

... Mark was delaying what he *knew* he had to do. His inhale was done, and he was about to exhale weakness again. His mind was still his own, flickering with a Union of alacrity and weakness. His heartbeats had yet to get to the next one—

Ah.

He didn't need to risk bringing the Mind Controller into his Union of Brain, Alacrity.

He switched up a few things, knowing he would survive, and the woman would not.

In the moments of the switch, Mark felt something in the air trying to grip his mind, to rip into his soul and tell him what to do. To stop resisting. Mark wasn't resisting anymore, though.

He went for the kill.

Mark's astral heart pumped out alacrity and weakness, giving the woman all of Mark's own weakness and the *physical* speed, while Mark took all of the woman's mental speed.

She never knew what hit her.

The woman gasped, clutching her chest, her voice cut off in a gurgle and sputter of blood. The air screamed as her voice could not. Instantly, every single vector in the immediate area looked her way, all of them hearing the wordless scream. The woman was focused completely on Mark, but then she was focused on herself, like a black hole forming and drawing everyone else in.

Perhaps, Mark thought, if he was better at controlling the forces of a Union, she would have died and it would have been over.

But Mark wasn't that good with Union yet. He got a lot of physical speed, too.

Mark felt a tenth of what the woman felt, and he already felt like he was dying. Muscles twitched in his back and legs, the same ones that held him upright, and then those muscles tore. His lungs *pulsed* with diaphragm movement. And then his muscles pulled at his bones, and his bones cracked. His heart ripped apart in his chest, but his astral body pulsed that much stronger once it was broken from its organic limiter.

His actual blood veins burst under his skin, casting deep purple lines wherever his astral veins came out of his body, like his black veins were casting purple shadows.

His head felt like it was going to burst.

The same thing happened to the Mind Controller.

Mark had no idea how he did it, but he kept his mind going fast, out of possible sync with the older woman, to stay out of her grip, while his heart beat faster than humanly possible, ripping itself apart. The older woman experienced everything as a normal person, with a normal perception of time. Mark got a ten minute experience of her death.

Her eyes turned violently red as veins burst. Blood pooled like cold syrup from her eyes and nose, and Mark felt his own nasal passages fill with blood, choking out his breath.

The woman's skull cracked open at the top. A rupture of blood broke through her skin on her left arm, like a fissure opening. Her pants turned deep red with spreading death. The sword wound that Isoko had given her suddenly exploded with blood, like a hole opening in a water balloon. She still had a light in her eyes.

She was still standing as Mark watched that light go out.

She was dead, and Mark had killed her. He had killed a person. He had done that.

He was going to be sick.

He severed his Union and started beating out resilience and weakness with every iota of his being.

Time rapidly advanced, from slow motion to way too fast.

The Mind Controller exploded.

Flesh and blood filled the room, warm and sometimes hot against Mark's face, reminding him of the time he connected to those cleaner plants, the tube-like things in that lesson with Lola, when she was teaching him about Union. Hot blood and bony viscera felt a lot different than cold plant goo.

And then Mark realized that Isoko still had sword fragments stuck in her own chest.

Inside alacrity, time had passed slowly. Here, in the real flow of time, ten minutes passed in a forgotten heartbeat as Mark frantically pulled out the sword from Isoko's body and then connected to the embers of her existence, still flickering inside of her mind. He healed Isoko and Isoko eventually gasped as her heart regrew and her blood pumped around too many splinters. But purity/impurity cleared those splinters quickly. Mark cried as he held her and Isoko sobbed a little and held him back. Mark was pretty sure he apologized and Isoko said something about how no, she was sorry, and it was her duty to protect others. Mark tried to tell her it wasn't her fault at all—



“I have the Mind in the 70’s, Mark, and I was Durability as soon as I felt her attack,” Isoko softly said, “*I* should have been the one protecting *you*. I’m so, *so* sorry.”

“That woman was messed up. Something was too wrong. You distracted her and I should have gone for the kill like you did. I faltered.”

Isoko just shook her head.

Mark said nothing else.

They were both alive.

Mark had killed someone.

Mark sat on the edge of his bed. Isoko sat beside him, holding his hand, and Mark wasn’t sure how they had gotten here. Both of them were already clean because they could just do that, but the room was still a mess, and Mark wasn’t sure what to do right now.

Isoko said, “She almost killed me. She made me kill myself.” She whispered, “I should have been practically immune to mind control.”

Mark rapidly realized that Isoko was freaking out, too, and for a whole lot of deep reasons.

Mark said, “You opened the way and I took the shot, and we won. It was messy. We can do better next time.”

Isoko sniffled. “... Yeah.” She straightened. “We’re alive.”

Mark said, “We’re alive.”

-----

Kendrai dreamed of something that she never got to finish for a whisper of her god and former lover came to her, shocking her awake.

*Murder has happened in your city.*

Kendrai shot awake, sitting up in her bed, bedsheets spilling off of the bed as she grabbed her red wolf mask, already calling out, “Whitewolf! Greenwolf! Someone was murdered—”

*The War for Life touches Wolf’s Bayou.*

“... *Shit.*” Kendrai strode out of her bedroom with her mask on, the technorganics lining the walls of her Palace illuminating the hallway as though they were simple lights, and not a whole lot more than that. But those ‘lights’ helped to send her voice to all of those those who needed to hear, as Kendrai called out, “Some fucking *demon* is here!”

The technorganic veins in the palace pulsed red with worry, and then they shone red with flickers.

Mayor Emilia Ramirez of Memphi spoke in the walls, “Is it still alive?”

The God of War and Murder whispered into Kendrai’s soul,

*The demon is still alive in the viscera that remains of the murder it committed against its host, the Mind Controller woman spoken of by the Union boy. The host targeted the Union boy but got caught by Freyala’s Chosen. The demon murdered the host through inaction.*

*It is a demon of Thrashtalon.*

*It has mutated the Mind Control of its host, in death, to Body Manipulation.*

A shock of ice seemed to filter through Kendrai's guts and up her spine. She had sent Greenwolf after that investigation into the local Mind Powers.

Was Greenwolf dead?

... No. Probably not. He probably timed himself out to keep out of danger. He'd be back later. Him timing himself out was always a last ditch effort, though. Usually he timed others out. But against a demon of Thrashtalon, of course Greenwolf would time himself out.

Kendrai started running, shouting orders, "It's a demon of Thrashtalon! All hands to all powers! Prepare to counteract demonic Body Manipulation!"

Fuck, this was going to be a big fucking demon kill.

Mayor Ramirez spoke through the walls, "Containment Crew is on their way."

"FUCK! ... I guess we *have* to box them."

Fuck fuck fuck.

-----

Mark looked at the viscera on the ground, all around the room. Blood and bone lay in piles and in splatters on the walls. Red gore dripped off of a sconce by the door, flopping to a chair and then further onto the marble floor. It splatted. A bunch of stuff was splatting as Mark and Isoko sat there, on Mark's bed, in the only clean spot in the room.

It sounded almost like rain.

Mark stood up, saying, "Should I clean it up? I was thinking that any investigators would want to look at it but... but I'm not sure."

Isoko sniffled, then stood up, looking strong and fully platinum. "If we clean it then they'll think we hid it, right? Standard operating procedure... I have no idea what SOP is right now. But... Grandma told me once that if I ever accidentally killed someone in a training accident to never hide the body, and to always come clean. Running and hiding anything always made it worse." She solidly said, "So I guess we're doing SOP and leaving the remains where they are."

Mark nodded. "That's what I thought—"

Suddenly, the vectors all around Mark paled in comparison to a new vector arising from the ambient atmosphere. It pointed at Mark, and then to Isoko, and then to the room and the dead body everywhere. The pressure of it took Mark's breath away.

Isoko noticed Mark, if not the vectors in the room. "What?!"

Mark said, "Someone is looking at—"

The feeling of being Seen seemed to focus on this space, and Mark almost panicked. It was like standing under Addavein, as the dragon stared down at him... But it was actually not that bad? No. This wasn't Addavein; Addavein was hibernating. This was something with a lot more points to it. It wasn't just one giant vector. It was ten thousand smaller vectors, and they all came from the walls, the... the television? Isoko's phone, sitting on the table between the beds? The wires in the walls. Everything... electrical? They were all looking at Mark, at Isoko, and at the remains...

And then some small vectors appeared among the viscera.

The viscera started to move.

To undulate.

To slip toward each other, like a thousand slugs of various sizes and body parts, from fingers to guts to eyeballs, so many eyeballs, all gathering up into—

A face appeared from the viscera, but without the burned handprint upon it.

The Mind Controller.

She looked older, and yet younger at the same time. Less full of hate. More filled with joy.

She grinned—

Mark rebelled, hatred and terror flowing in his mind as he blasted the pile of viscera with a lightning strike of purity/impurity, decaying it, splattering what remained. He carved with adamantium. He slapped apart with blades of black. He attacked the eyes and the tongues and the fingers and the body parts as they tried to gather, to become whole again, but the piles just came together in other parts of the room.

A voice Mark had never heard before spoke through a hundred whispering mouths, opened up around the room, in the piles of meat, saying, “Tsk tsk tsk! So *violent*—”

Isoko joined in the destruction, slapping the nearest mouth, one of the larger ones, splattering it, even as her own heart beat with purity/impurity, and the viscera on her body evaporated. How had she gotten gore on herself again? Mark had cleaned all of that off! Isoko splattered apart more and more body parts, like she had been doing that this whole time. Ah. She had been killing right alongside Mark. He hadn't noticed that right away—

The body parts laughed.

There were too many body parts!

Mark exclaimed, “How the FUCK is there so much viscera?!”

“It’s multiplying!” Isoko said, as she slapped a large mouth on the wall that was giving her a raspberry.

The larger piles grew legs and dashed in every direction, trying and failing to escape Mark’s slashing adamantium. They laughed and gurgled as Mark killed them. They laughed even more.

Isoko smashed with her feet and slapped with her hands, crushing and breaking whatever she could touch, breaking marble floor and wall as she attacked the whatever-it-was, yelling, “What the fuck IS IT?!”

Mark said, “I don’t know! All I know is it needs to die!”

A massive pile of flesh became a frog-person that launched at Isoko.

Isoko used her forearm and hand as a knife-edge, slashing down at the thing, even as the thing opened up sideways, all the way, unzipping into teeth and tongue and mouth. The taunting body parts had changed tactics. They were trying to kill. They had been running but now they were killing and Mark didn’t have a chance to tell Isoko that she shouldn’t take that frog head on. Mark’s heart beat hard and Isoko was going to get beheaded—

Isoko changed tactics, dodging underneath the thing, and the monster crashed into the wall behind her. She had moved so fast! Mark didn’t have time to think about that right now.

Mark carved the ‘frog’ into little pieces of meat as he zapped it with purity. He should have evaporated the whole thing, but one pile became many, the monster splitting into a dozen small people to laugh and run in multiple directions. The little people were fully formed! Fully formed 5-inch-tall people! How was it—

Oh no.

Holy shit it was getting better at controlling its own gore.

It was getting *better*.

Mark and Isoko were only able to do so much.

Isoko gritted her teeth. Rage filled her face as she struck again, her palms slapping tiny people to death, purity/impurity only partially working to erase whatever the monster was. Isoko cracked the floor with a strike and the floor broke downward, right before Isoko spun and brought her hands together to splatter a tiny person who had been running at her. That tiny person became a splash of gore that painted a wall and became ten different small people, running away in every direction, hopping down through the cracks in the floor and out of the window. They laughed.

Each small person was a copy of the Mind Controller woman.

Mark felt the vectors of each and every tiny person. He killed as many as he could, slicing them down to size and then breaking them apart with purity-impurity. But the monster was playing with them, wasn't it? Laughing and combining and chasing and getting away when it could.

Mark connected to the little shits with a brain-power Union of decay.

Instantly, every single miniature monster-person in the room turned into piles of mush, blood sputtering outside of their tiny bodies. Mark should have done that sooner. Holy crap, he was unnerved.

The laughter stopped, but the piles of mush were still alive. Like slugs, the vein-less slugs escaped through the broken floor and the outlets and the open door, but Mark switched to cleansing them and so did Isoko, and some of them died.

Most got away.

Within 30 seconds of the start of the second fight, the fight was over.

The fight was just beginning.

The reformed *things* had fallen out of sight, into the background. Someone yelled down below. Something crashed in the hallway. A flash of heat burst through the cracks in the floor as someone down there yelled about tiny people—

Someone across the hallway screamed a death scream, their vector going from gentle-sleep to wildly-awake, as tiny vectors invaded their own. Mark couldn't see what was happening over there, but he imagined people climbing into a body, through skin and other places, and ripping the person apart. That's what the vector was telling him.

He hoped he was wrong.

Mark connected to that larger vector, the person, as strongly as he could, healing them while they were being invaded. They screamed even more, and more vectors woke up in that room and got involved. If that encounter would have lasted more than a few seconds, Mark would have done more, but as soon as the other people in that room woke up Mark heard small explosions and the tiny vectors scattered. The invaded person was still screaming, but Mark was healing them and they weren't infected right now.

He heard laughter underneath the screams. The tiny people had been diminished, but they remained.

All around him, Mark felt the tiny people scatter to the wind, their vectors feeling like distant goblins.

“What the FUCK!” Isoko exclaimed, in the broken, bloodless room. She asked Mark, “Can you still feel them? Kill them?!”

“I'm trying!” Mark reached out as he was already doing, trying to feel for the small vectors all around. He caught the most obvious of the small vectors—

A chill ran up Mark's spine because he failed to touch *any* of them. All at once, every single connection he made to the little monsters was rebuffed. He could still sense them in his Unionsense, for they were still actors upon the world stage, pulling this way and that in their own existence and directional desires, but he could not touch them.

For a moment, Mark blanked. He had felt this before, hadn't he? This inability to connect?



He tried again.

He grabbed onto *some* of the small vectors, but others rebuffed him, breaking his Union of Brain and Blood. Were they ridding themselves of their brains and blood, somehow? Maybe that was it?

No.

It was something worse.

“Something changed. I can’t connect to most of them. And some of them are... are too strong to connect too?”

Mark reached for them and he connected, but then the small monsters did *something*. Mark felt it as they did that *something* again and again, every time Mark tried to connect. They broke the connection—

Oh.

Mark recognized what he was feeling. He recognized that ‘something’ that they were doing. It was like a twist. A sideways step. It felt like an astral body slap. Like a *denial*.

Mark knew this feeling because he had experienced it a few times already.

It felt *exactly* like what Addavein did to disconnect Mark, the few times Mark had connected to him.

There was a *strong* mind in those monsters that *knew how* to disconnect Mark’s attempt to touch them; that could *feel* Mark try to connect to them and thus break that connection. It was simultaneously stronger than the mindless crystal-winged kaiju from earlier, and weaker in every other possible way, because the astral bodies of those tiny things were small, yet smart—

Those bodies were a hive mind.

The hive mind knew things beyond a normal hive mind.

It was a demon.

It had to be a demon.

A hive mind demon in an unkillable, growing body.

Mark knew, in every ounce of his being, that the thing that had been the Mind Controller was now a demon—

Isoko was at the door, looking left and right. “They all vanished?!”

“They’re still out there!” Mark said, “It *was* the Mind Controller woman I told you about, but that was *not* the person I remembered. I think that was dem—”

The television and Isoko’s phone, sitting between Mark and Isoko’s bed, turned on. A servitor announced, “Demonic activity in your area. Body Controller small demons. Don’t let them get big. Burning and flesh destruction kills them. Cutting only makes the problem smaller. Greater response formulating.”

The phone and television went silent.

Mark heard the same announcements echo in the hallway of the Grand Hotel’s fifth floor.

A second later, the servitors started saying, “Demonic activity in your area. Kill every small moving thing around you that you don’t recognize. Further instructions to follow once demonic motivations are further identi—”

A stapler sitting on the nightstand gained a vector and began crunching Isoko’s phone, though it did nothing to stop the message coming out of the television.

Mark swiped his adamantium through the stapler, splitting the thing apart at the hinge—

Two small people, one larger than the other, appeared out of the broken halves of the stapler, each of them laughing as they ran in opposite directions.

The little shits could turn into objects.

Mark made cages out of adamantium and grabbed both of the small people, only to find he had captured bits of rock instead. The rocks didn't even have vectors anymore. Oh shit, these things were adapting *fast*.

Mark crushed on the rocks, turning them into splatters of goo.

A single heartbeat of purity and impurity was enough to kill the smaller splatters of goo, erasing them from existence, while the larger splatters turned into a few marbles and tried to roll into cracks in the ground.

Isoko stomped on the marbles, roaring as she did so, saying, "FUCK YOU!" each stomp pulsing with a purity and impurity of her own.

Some of the marbles gained feet and small legs in order to run faster.

Mark crushed everything that moved on its own.

But the problem was everywhere, now, and hidden, vectors turned silent, as monsters melded with the environment, becoming mindless ambush predators that only acted when they needed to. Mark couldn't sense anything in the room besides himself and Isoko and the thing lurking in the electronics in the walls.

Mark was a little worried.

Isoko chuckled wildly, "I think we lost our marbles, Mark!"

Mark stared at her, asking, "You okay? You good? Don't crack on me, Isoko."

Isoko took a breath and calmed. "... I'm good. Sorry. That was weird. Sorry. *But it's a fucking demon!* No wonder it could overpower my resistances! Holy *crap!*" She took another breath, and then she focused. "I'm good. Let's kill some demonspawn—"

The television announced, "Attention, civilians: Do not engage with the demon. Do not attempt to leave the area. A plan has been formulated and is here."

Mark went to the window and looked outside.

The sky was filled with light; hovertrams, heroes flying on their own, spotlights turning night to day—

The spotlights gathered.

A beam, as though someone had opened the sky to a world of light, shot down onto the road beyond the next street over, demarcating a line of brilliant white, erasing the night and highlighting all the buildings. More lights shot down across the other streets, and Mark rapidly realized what was happening. He had seen them do this on television sometimes.

It was a Light Box.

When Light Boxes went up, the outcome was almost always certain death.

Mark said, "They're boxing the area."

Isoko stood beside Mark, watching a wall of light become the edge of their world. "Oh shi—"

The box completed.

The sky was soft white light and nothing existed beyond 150 meters in every direction. The vectors of the world beyond vanished, along with all the vectors in the walls, watching them from the electronics. The world was contained to a cube, centered on Mark and Isoko's room here at the Grand Hotel.

Mark rapidly tried to think. “What happens in a Light Box, for real, Isoko? All I know is that the people inside almost never survive.”

Isoko stared at the light outside. She looked lost, and yet sturdy. “They’re not always death sentences. They’ll send people inside to combat the threat... hopefully. If they’ve sent people inside, then this is a survivable fight. So we fight, Mark. That is all we can—”

A building across the road from the Grand Hotel began to fall apart, like it was soft cheese, melting in an oven, the top of it falling down like soft ice cream onto people who were either screaming or cursing, or something like that—

Mark felt water, heavy as stone, fall onto his back. He almost faltered, but he remained upright.

The ceiling began to rain down on them like liquefied stone, crushing into Mark and then slapping aside, everything turned to liquid that was not liquid at all. It was multicolored. It was stone and wood and nails and wires, turned to melted matter. Everything melted, except for Mark and Isoko.

The somewhat-panicking vectors of everyone else in the light box turned to full-panic, some people flying up out of the melting world, and most falling down into the melted world. But people and living things did not melt.

Mark’s clothes fell apart, flopping down to the holey floor that was itself slipping down in rivulets, the entire Grand Hotel and the whole city melting down into multicolor muck.

Mark complained, “This is another one of those formative events, isn’t it.”

“Yeah,” Isoko said, watching her own clothes fall away. “Could do with fewer of those.”

Mark laughed just once.

And then Mark and Isoko dropped through the melting floor.

- - - -

The Light Box went up perfectly.

Kendrai gave the people inside a 50% chance at surviving this. Better than most odds in this sort of scenario.

Kendrai sat in her control booth, watching it all unfold in her scanners, as she watched the Containment Crew work their magic. This particular Containment Crew came directly from Memphi, and they used the normal artifacts and personal magics as any CC, so Wolf Bayou wouldn't be writing off that huge section of land in the middle of itself. Kendrai disliked having CC here, but today, because of the demon, CC came in with all of Collective Temple at its back. It was more than what she could have pulled in from her own Church of Drakarok, though those guys were inside the Light Box, too.

No one messed around when it came to demon attacks.

Demon, kaiju, dragons. Those were the only things that humanity on this side of the Veil responded to properly, in Kendrai's opinion. Everything else was lax. They didn't treat their criminals hard enough, for example. They always opted for exile instead of execution.

This whole event right here was *because* of that decision to exile, instead of execute.

But it was all going to be over soon, one way or another.

Kendrai hoped that Mark kid made it out of this mess. He was going to be a superhero one day, but not if he got sniped this early in his life. The demons knew that, too.

And so did Thrashtalon.

Whitemask stood tall as he asked, “How far along are we, Crew?”

He had spoken to the main leader of the Containment Crew; the only one who could talk right now. All the rest of them were linked hand-in-hand.

Without turning or looking their way, the lead man spoke mechanically, “ETA 90 seconds to illumination of threats. Melted material has reached 90%. Melting is almost complete. Estimated loss of life for melting is holding true at 0 deaths out of 397 enclosed people. We expect the enclosed people, and the ones we seeded inside, to be able to negate the threat in a timely manner. Estimations of time for clearance is 2 hours...”

All the rest wasn't important. Their ‘negate the threat in a timely manner’ wasn't as helpful as ‘2 hours’, which put this ordeal firmly in the ‘we might be able to rescue all those people’ category.

50% chance of success; just like Kendrai expected.

Kendrai looked at the scanners set up around the containment zone. The zone itself was a giant box of white hardlight, supplied by one of the members of the Containment Crew, and expanded to extraordinary proportions by the shared astral bodies of the rest of the crew. That sharing was made possible by the leader, who was a Seer of phenomenal power. Looked like a different Seer than the one Kendrai used to know. Did Paul retire? He might have.

Kendrai would have to greet this new guy afterward.

She turned her attention back to the screen.

Whatever their faults, at least Earthlings knew how to build a box.

“... And this demon is being rather well-behaved,” Kendrai mumbled to herself, frowning.

Whitemask spoke up, “Reserves are prepared for the real fight, if such should happen, but the predictors indicate that this demon’s true strength is in hiding.”

Kendrai simply nodded as she stared at the screen.

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Mark fought baby-sized humans on a multicolored mud lake under a sky of brightest white.

He was nude and that was not a big deal; not really. Everyone was nude. Everyone was fighting baby-sized monsters, or getting protected from baby-sized monsters, or burning the lake of mud, or trying to get themselves out of mud.

There was no getting out of the mud. The mud was omnipresent—

No wait. Over there, some guys were hauling people out of the mud and onto stone, but the stone was getting overrun by tiny people swimming out of the mud. Mark went over there and blendered some of the smaller monster-people before he Unionized a blast of purity/impurity out into the world, erasing most of the gore from sight and stripping mud from people, exposing wounds that he began to heal.

Some *things* squirmed in some of those wounds, but other people were on the job, actively helping, or ripping the worms out of their own flesh.

It was a chaotic mess.

Some bawnies who could Tactile Telekinesis well were standing on top of the mud, like Isoko, and most of them were able to do that, but some people, like Mark, were stuck in the mud. Someone yelled about support for the sinkers, getting the bawnies to help hold people above the mud, but not many people had ever trained for such a thing, and most people were sinkers.

Fires bloomed over there, burning things. Air pulsed over there, burning even more things. Some plants grew here and there because Mark was supporting their growth, because he was in a Union with every single person in the enclosure and everything else besides. But people were burning the plants.



Mark wanted to tell the fire brigade not to burn all of the plants because he needed those plants to help clean the air, to absorb the impurity that he was putting out there. But then one of the plants turned from a bush into a tangle of teeth-covered vines and started to whip at people, growing larger with every passing second as it sucked up gore from the mud all around. The fire brigade burned that one next.

Someone yelled at someone in the fire brigade, complaining about breathable air, while someone else, much louder, shouted them down, talking about how air concerns were being taken care of.

And then the Light Box flickered. The white light became something more, something different, and the chaotic mess of monsters in the mud and people unable to exit the mud and man-eating trees became intelligible. Red light illuminated everything demonic inside the light-cube, and now some rocks floating on the surface, some mosses growing in Mark's Union-group, and even one of the people hiding among those who were unable to fight, were all illuminated brightest red.

The red illuminated things were the demon.

And the mud began to evaporate into twisting wisps of dust, circling upward and out of the fight, out of the top of the Light Box—

Thousands of little red dots flew up and out of the mud, up into the air, to follow the streamers of dust up and away—

Fire bloomed overhead at the top of the box, bright red and then deep yellow, the heat of it all contained overhead. The red-lined demon bugs struck the firewall and burned, instantly.

Some guy stood up, yelling, "Attention everyone! I'm Inquisitor Jake from the Collective Temple! The Light Box is up and active and we will get through this in an orderly fashion! The mud is evaporating! The fires are killing the demons! The only thing we have to do is survive this fight, and we'll survive the night!"

The demon never stopped crawling out of the mud to get to people, to attack their feet directly above the surface and disrupt their tactile telekinetic hold on the surface, to drag them down. But now there was a plan, and now that Mark looked, he saw that there had been a plan all along.

He saw the people standing tall on the mud's surface, and the people flying just above the surface, and he saw the vectors of everyone gathering into a better formation, a unified whole. Mark joined that Union instinctively.

The fight redoubled but the fight wasn't so chaotic anymore.

There was a flow to it all, and though Mark couldn't touch the demon, he could Unionize with everyone else. Some guy with Telekinesis got the strength he needed to lift himself and several other people out of the mud. Inquisitor Jake had some sort of earth-kinesis Power, so he solidified the stone underneath him, pushing all the small demon-vectors out from below his area, securing a bulkhead against the demons. And the people started to move with purpose, away from the largest groupings of demon monsters and allowing the fire brigade to blast flames and heat at monsters-pretending-to-be-people and monster-monsters who lurked in the mud like jaws waiting to lunge and bite.

And all the world was a melted mess.

Mark's adamantium was fine, though. Apparently the melting 'mud magic' of the illuminated cube couldn't affect his PL 79 metal. Other things with similar high PL's floated in the mud. Mostly knives; small bits of metal. Mark even found some adamantium, floating among the mud that had once been the Grand Hotel and the other nearest ten buildings. One second, he was fighting across the mud, and the next second, he stepped onto something that cut his foot, but he also came away with a ribbon of new adamantium, a good two meters long.

The rest of the thing he had stepped on turned out to be a mithril kaiju blade that Mark handed over to Isoko.

"Aww thanks!" Isoko said, as she slapped the mithril blade at a pair of flying frogs.

Someone, an older man who was currently standing on the solid ground made by Inquisitor Jake, saw Isoko and shouted, "That's Wolf Bayou property!"

Inquisitor Jake told the guy, "She's using it right now."

The guy didn't care about that. He stared harder at the sword, and then freaked the fuck out. "Where's the adamantium edge?!"

Mark sliced through monsters under the mud and above the mud, saying, "I'm using it right now!"

Whatever the older man said beyond that, Mark did not hear.

Mark ripped apart a few dozen small babies that crawled through the mud at him and then he blasted them with purity/impurity. He couldn't actually destroy them at all. The demon only had a moment of weakness when Mark disrupted its bodies. What survived turned to slugs once again and escaped into the mud. Mark didn't bother chasing them.

The fire team was the one actually killing the demon; everyone else was backup or on defense.

Mark called out to the older man, "I'll give it back when this is over."

And then the fire team was moving their way. One fire guy who wasn't getting along with the fire team's program was currently yelling at the fire team's leader, who was some Inquisitor that Mark didn't know, who also had fire powers.

The Fire Inquisitor commanded Mark, "I need you on defensive, Mister Careed! Back up!"

Mark didn't say a thing. He trudged through the muck, back toward the solid land. Isoko grabbed him by the hand and pulled him along, walking along the surface, dragging them both away. They hadn't really gotten out of position at all, but the battle was a constant mobile thing, except for the center where the solid land held and people fought off things that crawled out of the muck at them.

The fire team blasted the ground where Mark had been, and the mud burst with burned babies.

Isoko let Mark go when they were pulled far enough to 'safety'. Mark frowned as he looked into the mud around the island, beyond the people, to the space under them. Tiny vectors flowed in the mud down there, and even under the island. Inside the island, too.

Mark said, “This is fucking impossible. They just keep multiplying.”

Isoko sat down in the mud, saying, “We’re out of immediate danger. This is just a cleanup event now.” She looked up at the box. “How wide is the box now?”

Mark had a good idea of the size of the box, but his senses didn’t extend past the box. It was some sort of truly-solid magic. Mark looked up at the white expanse, and at the walls, sensing what he could, and he said, “It was 100 meters square, or something like that. I think we’re at 80 meters square— No. Wait. Oval, now. I think they’re closing it off faster. When did it become an oval?”

Isoko said, “About five minutes ago—”

“Everyone up!” Inquisitor Jake yelled, “Everyone up! We’re moving the island! It’s got monsters underneath it!”

Isoko asked Mark, “How deep is the mud right now?”

“Like 7 meters, or something,” Mark said, “I can’t exactly tell. Thin at the top and thick at the bottom. It’s still evaporating, too.”

Wisps of stone flowed into the sky, into the firewall at the top of the Light Box.

Some woman Mark and Isoko’s age heard them speak, and cheerfully said, “It was at 10 meters! So 7 is good! Right?”

And the island of rescued people got moved.

Inquisitor Jake made solid land in front of him, into the part of the mud pit that was freshly cleared of monsters, and people walked behind him. He let the land go further behind those people, the solid land turning back into mud, releasing a fresh batch of horrors into the mud. They had gotten themselves wedged into the solid stone that Jake had made, but now they wiggled free, laughing.

People tried not to freak out.

Demons showed themselves and Mark was there along with a few others in the group, cutting them down, burning them, or slicing them apart and splashing them away. The group resettled in another part of the mud flats, with fewer demons underneath it.

The demon takedown had started with complete chaos, with everyone falling into 'mud' and floating on top of that mud, and all material possessions destroyed, but now it was kind of rote work. Mark trudged through mud with others who walked on the mud, the floor underneath the mud not really solid at all, and people killed miniature people, and monsters, and rocks, and anything else that might glow red. The fire teams came through, burning the demons.

And the walls shrunk—

Inquisitor Jake yelled out, "Okay! The ground is 5 meters deep now, and the infection is under control! We're going to start evacuating people now!"

The relief among some of the people was enough for them to cry. Jake called out for volunteers to stay, first, and Mark and Isoko both independently raised their hands to stay. They both grinned at each other.

Jake called out, "Fliers, take these people to the top! One at a time!"

It was more chaos, but Mark didn't need to pay attention to that. He just killed monsters.

A hole opened up in the roof and people started getting evacuated, while 'birds', glowing red, tried to fly out of the place. The demons tried everything to escape, from worming into people who had no idea they were infected (the demons had some sort of Body Control that allowed for numbing venoms) or they tried to hide in people's long hair (which wasn't really working, since the demons still glowed red under the white light), or they tried producing toxins that paralyzed and killed (but that was a complete failure, since Mark and Isoko and other cleaners were on the job).

The rescue at the roof of the white room took out all the elderly or the infirm, first, which wasn't much since only a few people actually lived in Wolf Bayou full time. Twenty minutes after the first batch escaped, the next batch went, which included people who were going crazy from the situation. Inquisitor Jake told everyone that they were NOT free to leave, and that they'd be in quarantine for days, so they shouldn't expect to just be free after this. That warning seemed to calm people down some; this was not

over as soon as they escaped the demon. The next group contained everyone who wasn't contributing to the cleaning.

Mark trudged through the muck, approaching hour number 2, saying, "Somehow I imagined killing a demon to be *less* troublesome and *more* troublesome than this."

Isoko laughed as she walked on top of the mud beside Mark, her edge-less, borrowed kaiju-blade held on her shoulder. She grinned, platinum and reflective in the light, saying, "You could try standing on your adamantium more."

"I am!" Mark said, "I'm still sinking in." He looked to the side where some people were almost swimming in the mud, as the group moved to another area. "I think the mud is getting thinner."

There were only 50 people left in the Light Box by now, and the monster attacks were commensurately greater. Mark was basically blending monsters all the time under the muck, and the demon seemed to be okay with that. Demons were fucking crazy.

The thing was laughing, still, and Mark was pretty sure that it didn't care about actually winning the fight. It just wanted to inflict pain on itself and on anyone else it could reach.

Inquisitor Jake overheard Mark and Isoko, over the increasingly loud laughter of the monster. He said, "It is getting thinner. The magic that made the containment cube is getting denser as the cube gets smaller, so the mud evaporates faster, but we're trying to keep the level of mud about the same. If the monster has nowhere to flee or hide, or people to torment, that is when things get really dangerous." Jake looked around at everyone looking at him, and reiterated what he had said a few times already, "This is going to get a lot more dangerous, and soon. Be ready for it."

The demon laughed. "I can't wait!"

Some other guy, who was deep in the 'water' called out, "I can't do this anymore! Can I be next to leave!"

Jake looked up.

Mark looked up, too.

There was a lot of fire up there.

Jake said, "Soon as the fire clears, that means that the current group is done and more people will be allowed to leave."

The guy treading water, one of the fighters who was killing demons with some sort of tiny bursts of black light happening all around him in the water, complained, "Fuuuuuuck."

Mark asked him, "Are you really having trouble? There is help."

Jake said, "Get on the raft. Now. You're reaching a limit."

The guy said, "I'm fine! I'm just bitching."

The guy was barely holding it together, but he was holding.

"Get on the raft, sir," Jake said, more strongly.

The guy 'relented', getting on the raft. He cried a little, but then someone tried to say something softer to him and he said, "I'm fine! I'm fine. I just had... I had my journals I was turning into a book. It's all mud now."

The guy got a lot of sympathy for that.

Jake told the guy, "You can be on the next trip out."

The guy said nothing.

Isoko said to Mark, "You and I are here until the end, I suspect."

Jake said, "You are. Thank you for assistance with Union, Mister Careed. Paladin Isoko."

Mark felt a little bit better about everything. "No problem."

"Glad to help!" Isoko said.

Everything seemed 'good' right now, except for the attacks from the demon were relentless. The overall trajectory of this event was toward a positive end, except for whatever horrors the demon would unleash once it was truly cornered, once the mud was gone and it couldn't hide anymore.

But what would happen afterward? Was Mark going to get blamed for the demon? The Mind Control woman had contracted with a demon in order to come *after him*.

... Mark carried on.

Soon, the fires overhead faded and the next group got to go. Treading-water guy shouted for joy and started crying when he got to go, to be lifted up with the others.

And the light box got smaller. The liquid buildings, rocks, and dead organic matter, all got thinner. More watery.

Demonic vectors appeared out of what had been harder mud, at the bottom of the light box. Mark blended those demons apart, and he found out something he hadn't gotten a chance to realize quite yet. Something fun, for a change.

Much like how Mark expected to eventually be able to fly by spinning his adamantium fast enough to provide thrust in the air, but which he was incapable of doing right now due to his adamantiumkinesis still being 'body locked' to normal physical actions, normal physical actions were more than enough to push against the hard mud, to rise above it all. Mark realized that he might not be able to fly with his adamantium yet, but he could certainly swim really, really fucking fast.



With enough spinners and the extra adamantium, Mark actually ended up stepping out of the water for the first time in 3 hours. It was not easy, and Mark faltered a few times, but eventually he managed to turn his 'caltrops' into 'propellers'.

Mark shoved his propellers at all the little demon monsters lurking below the multicolored 'waters' of the melted city block, churning up blood and viscera in the shallows the entire time, too.

Isoko grinned as she watched him 'hover', while Isoko merely stood above it all, her bloody sword already being purified by her own breathing. She looked away, still grinning—

Someone screamed about being attacked 'underwater' and the fire brigade was already there, helping the man directly, while Mark and Isoko supported everyone with Union healing and protection. It was not an abnormal exclamation of need. The demon liked to take bites out of people all the time, and leave behind hidden presents inside healed flesh, but Mark and many others in the light box could tell when a person had been infected.

As some specialized healers dug out a worm from the recently-attacked man, the man quietly asked for something from the healers, but Mark couldn't hear what had been asked. The fire brigade burned demons, Jake moved the island across the box, and some healer nodded to the recently-attacked man, and the man looked relieved—

"I have a request!" The Mind Controller woman exclaimed, from where she stood at the far side of the light box, her voice cutting through all other noise. It was not her, of course. It was the demon pretending to be her. To use her body for its own desires.

The fire brigade set upon her instantly. She burned. It was not the first time the woman had spoken.

She was speaking to everyone who could possibly listen, all the time. In small mouths here. In whispered tunnels in the muck there. She hadn't taunted Mark yet... Or maybe she had tried, but Mark was fast enough to kill those beasties before they could speak. Every time an unknown vector appeared within his range, he killed it.

And now the demon was taking form and openly stating the intention to want to talk to Mark, but from too far away. Mark couldn't kill it when it was that far away.

Jake roared over the battle, “Expect the real fight to start soon, and then never stop even after we kill it! Demons aren’t like humans! They don’t live here! This is not their real life! Her real actions are counted in tiny measures over years and decades, and in the words of poison she says to you right now! Do not listen—”

She stepped out of the liquid stone on the other side of the light box, saying, “Five minutes to talk to Mark! And then I will peacefully depart this mortal coil!”

The fire brigade set upon her. She burned.

Mouths began to rise from the liquid remains of the city block, like bubbles, each of them speaking, “I have too many bodies and you’re beginning to fail to remove me fully from those I have infected. You will have turn this entire trap into a death zone, and as soon as my mind vanishes from here—”

The fire brigade and Mark and everyone else with any ability at all to kill the mouths, all acted in concert, all of them burning and slicing and purifying whatever they could. Most people were brawnies, though, so they slapped the mouths, or stomped the mouths, breaking them as much as a slap could. Isoko was one of the few people with a weapon, and she used it to crush and slam into the larger monsters, splattering them when she could.

Mouths began to *boil* out of the mud, multiplying and expanding, eyes appearing, everything lined in red illumination, marked as demonic.

Jake yelled out, “Transition to big fight!”

Oh fuck, here it was.

The mouths continued to speak, “—I will activate the sleepers you didn’t manage to find out there. You cannot kill me. There was never any hope!”

Mark blundered bright red flesh as he floated above it all, and nothing was working well enough. He couldn’t touch the demonic lake with his Union at all. People screamed out orders, and Mark connected to them, everyone supporting each other. The lake opened with jaws and teeth to swallow people

floating on the surface, to bite and chew and then spit out, alive yet on death's door. Mark and Isoko and others frantically healed those people and killed those mouths, but those spitting mouths just reformed elsewhere and laughed.

And Mark's hatred grew.

Or rather, he was facing his hatred he had locked away for the past several months. Over a year, really, since he had first met Addashield and then been locked into a coma, only to come out of it with magics and power that wasn't given to him because it would help him, but because it would help Addashield, and then Addashield went and avoided all responsibility by dragonizing, and then—

It was all too much.

He had put all of his real thoughts about this particular Light Box situation onto the backburner for multiple reasons. The demon was a terror and it had almost killed everyone inside the box ten times over, but the demon was a known entity, and the various combinations of Powers and people in the room would eventually kill it. Already, the 'wood' part of the mush in the 'water' was gone, burned away, and the fire was further burned away and purified as it exited the top of the kill container. All that was left in the 'water' was liquefied stone and other solid, unburnable materials.

All the trees were gone. All the plant matter was ash that already left on the wind.

And they were going to kill it.

But now, it was fighting back, for real, and Mark's Union was stressed to keep everyone alive and healthy, for there wasn't much 'world' to connect to, here in this Light Box.

Mark was stressed.

Even with Healthy Body and all his power, he was in a box with demons. It was almost as though he was inside of the box that he had shoved all of his bad emotions into. It made him grimace to think about that, as he killed more and more demon spawn.

“Never any hope at all!” said the smaller mouths as tongues of razor teeth slipped out of the mud to strike at whoever they could reach, dragging them down into pits of horror. “Die die die!”

But the speedsters in the group were on the ball, and Mark supported those people and their rescue targets, while the fire brigade burned everything they could. Some of the liquid stone became liquid lava. It was still just a tier 0 material, though, so the demon’s bodies only got burned a little when they were inside the lava. Still, the lava further zoned the monster, reducing the space it could freely occupy.

Most of the stone atomized, turning to vapor that exited upward.

The kill box became an oven and Mark sweated as he breathed out impurity, into all the little plants he possibly could. But the plants were all dead under the onslaught of heat. There was no regrowing what did not exist at all.

Mark’s fury tracked with the heat of the kill box. He cut off grabbing hands with his adamantium, slicing through faces that tried to bite him as his hatred grew and grew. He watched as Isoko ripped a guy from a burning maw, kicking away teeth. Snapping jaws opened under her feet to swallow her legs and draw her into the liquid stone, but Jake was there, solidifying the stone under her feet and Isoko got out of the way of those big jaws, and then Mark was there, blendering the jaws to mush.

Some people flew into the air, trying to escape, but they had been doing that every so often and they couldn’t keep it up for long. They weren’t used to running their powers endlessly, and even if they were...

Mark couldn’t keep up with the demand on his own Union, on his own expelling of weakness and bolstering of astral bodies, to keep them going forever. His heart beat with resilience and weakness, black veins extending into the air, into the light box, much further than they usually extended.

Faint black lines connected him directly to Isoko, bolstering her the most.

But there was nowhere for the weakness to go. Not anymore.

Miasma gathered in the burning fires of the fire brigade, everywhere that something died and couldn't be cleaned away. Purity could only do so much, and someone at the roof of the enclosure was already trying to keep the air clear but keep the demon contained. They weren't cleaning the air enough, and Mark wasn't able to stuff more miasma into the air, for the air was already saturated—

Something blossomed at the top of the light box, like an unfurling gold light.

Every single person and even the eyes of the demon turned upward.

Mark wasn't sure how he heard him, but he heard Jake say, "The fuck?"

Power literally rained down like drops of liquid light, falling upon Mark and Isoko and everyone else in the light box. Mark felt rested and whole, and strong. All the miasma in the entire box vanished in a brilliant rain of light, and the demon screamed from every possible mouth as it retreated back below the liquid surface.

The ground began to strongly evaporate, to fall up and away, becoming little more than light that sunk into the firewall at the top of the cage. Here and there small birds and bugs, outlined in red light, tried to escape through the wall, but they couldn't leave that way, not unless they were dead and atomized.

Jake shouted out, "Now we kill it!"

Golden light dropped into the mud and the world rumbled as the lake evaporated, revealing roiling flesh that screamed even as it turned to spikes and teeth and began slamming against the white walls, hammers of bone and nails of teeth all cracking against the white light. All of it lay atop a white light floor, and every person dropped onto that floor.

Mark blended all the flesh he could reach. The fire brigade burned the ground. Isoko slashed with her borrowed kaiju blade, breaking apart the largest beasts, while every other brawny punched and kicked the ground, breathing what they could break. Some of them had managed to find other weapons in the muck of the Light Box and they used those weapons. The Grand Hotel had probably had an armory in its basement. People flew above the mess—

**“No,”** said the demon, calmly, almost too calmly. It did not scream anymore. It attacked the walls, and completely ignored the people killing it, attacking it. **“This is not my end.”**

Mark and everyone else tried to kill it faster.

**“I am not dying here.”**

If only he could connect to it. If only he could break through this damned resistance! Whatever it was that allowed the demon to keep itself separate, untouched by Union, Mark needed to break it.

**“I have too much left to experience.”**

Great hammers of bone rose from the flesh underfoot and started slamming into the walls, and into the people. A pillar of bone slammed into Mark’s right side and sent him flying, his adamantium blenders ripping out of the flesh. Something broke in his own body, in his arm, the flash of being moved so *easily* overshadowing all pain.

He healed his body and carved into the bone pillars that came for him, all the world seeming to fall to chaos and death. People screamed. Despair and rage warred with the need to kill, and Mark found himself lacking. His blades didn’t carve deep enough. The golden light had dispelled the miasma in the air, but Mark was already pumping more miasma into the air, and so was everyone else.

Mark needed to be stronger.

Mark needed to be more than he was, but he would never get there. He was going to die.

He was going to die.

Isoko was going to die.

Mark needed strength... Or, barring some sudden inspiration that wasn’t coming, he needed time. Time away from the battlefield. Time to think.

Mark breathed in alacrity for a moment of peace.

Time slowed, and Mark had a moment when he wasn't fighting for his or another person's life.

The demon wanted to talk to him, right? Yes. It had said that. After a moment of thinking, Mark decided he would allow for a talk later, if he didn't figure out how to kill the thing, first. But first came the fight.

How to fight, though?

Right now, Mark's primary problem was the size of the Light Box and being cut off from ways of dispersing miasma. Whatever the Light Box was doing, it was completely cutting them off from the outside world. The miasma was building again. Mark doubted they would be putting more of those 'golden drops' into the Light Box to clear everything up, because even Jake had been surprised by that. Mark suspected that someone was out there, helping them, in abnormally strong ways.

.... Mark looked at the demon he was fighting.

Eyes and legs and hands and maws. It was like melted people and half-formed monsters, everywhere. The Light Box was the floor and the walls, and the demon was the ground. Mark's adamantium could easily rip apart the monster, and it even did damage to the walls, but Mark didn't want to damage the walls too much.

He wanted to hurt the demon. He needed to weaken the demon and fight it directly, though, and adamantium alone wasn't cutting it. Union wasn't able to touch the demon *at all*.

His adamantiumkinesis was probably PL 082-ish right now, and his Union was somewhere around there, too, but Union couldn't touch the demon for whatever reason. And it wasn't just a Power Level reason.

Demons had Power Levels in the 90s in every category. It was that innate power that they shared with archmages when they bonded to an archmage. So, perhaps, the demon was able to simply flex its Power Level to ignore Mark's Union?

That made some amount of sense.

Why, then, did adamantium still work to harm the demon? Why was adamantium used against kaiju, too? Both situations had the target as PL 90-ish in all categories.

Union could be used against unaware kaiju, though.

There were a lot of thoughts there, all of them coming together, in the moment.

Adamantium was a special biometal. The hardest metal in the Two Worlds. But it was more than that, wasn't it. It was magically special. Unique. It wasn't an element, like carbon or titanium. It was a magical metal.

And Mark made adamantium in his bones, in his blood. Just like Addavein, just like all adamantium-producing creatures, Mark made adamantium. He fucking hated Addavein, but the bastard was strong. All adamantium-producing creatures were strong, in all sorts of ways.

Mark was strong.

He was a vector of adamantium, and would crush all opposition with adamantium strength, in all ways, and not just in the strength of his actual adamantium. But in his Union, as well. In the Union of Healthy Body, Adamantiumkinesis, and Union itself, Mark would break all parts of the world he disliked, and that meant demons most of all.

Before, hours ago, Mark was wondering what 'Adamant' meant to him, specifically, and that's what it meant.

Breaking everything that needed to be broken.

Mark's breath of alacrity finished, the world sped up, blood and viscera and venoms and fire and lightning flying everywhere.

Mark's Union beat with adamant, digging into the gore demon with a shattering of black lightning, breaking its attempt at separation from the Union Mark held in his soul. Lightning spread. The demon



screamed a sonic wail, trying to break Mark and everyone still in the box with it. But they weren't in the box with the demon anymore.

The demon was trapped in the box with Mark and his allies.

Mark tore at the demon with the full power of Union, giving it weakness in turn, and somehow his black lightning spread deeper into the monster, becoming lines of power that Mark used to shred the beast. Bone columns sliced to piles that decayed into Mark's Union, becoming more black veins that broke and cut, just as much as they bolstered every human on Mark's team.

Isoko raged at the monster, splashing apart skinless monstrosities that came for her with claws and jaws open wide.

The fire brigade burned everything as they raced on the clear, glowing white floor, turning monster to miasma, that further flowed into black veins and got shoved into the monster all over again, weakening it further.

Mark was in charge of this space, and the demon was going to die—

“One minute! I'll talk for one minute, and then leave!” the demon begged.

“Just die,” Mark spoke, and every other person in the Union spoke with him.

Mark's black veins pulsed into the demon, rending vast swaths of him into blood.

The demon called, “Become an archmage linked to me, using the same contract that Kanda used for Addashield, and you will have it all!”

Mark raged.

But a cage of teeth and mouths surrounded him, trying to block him off from everyone else. Mark spun black veins and long lines of adamantium through that cage, breaking it fast, but not as fast as the cage reformed, and thickened—

And then spellwork appeared. Giant crystals of blue and black light, spun from eye stalks, shattered out of those 'staves' and carved limbs from human bodies. People screamed—

The attacks stopped as soon as they started, as the demon said, "I can do worse!"

Mark faltered.

"I can do a lot worse," the demon said. "I promised myself I wouldn't, but I can. This Light Box only exists because I'm having fun right now. I'll stop having fun and go for a genocide roll if you don't stop and listen to me, Mark Careed. I came here for you."

Giant eyeballs opened up in gore that stretched to the ceiling, each of them radiant with blue and black crystals, each of them focused on people who were already injured. The message was clear. They were guns pointed at heads. All at once, the entire fight went out of the group.

They saw their deaths.

The 50% survival rate had them on the wrong side of the coin flip.

"One minute, then you die without hurting anyone else, and leave this world behind," Mark said, even as he continued to connect to the people, to heal them.

But Mark didn't fight the demon, and the demon backed away, gore condensing, more and more eyes opening everywhere, though the black and blue spellwork crystals began to fade.

"Contract with me, using Kanda's original contract but modified for personality, and I will help you kill Addavein," the demon said. "I will help you resurrect your parents! I know of the High Elves of Endless Daihoon, and I can show you the path to those places. I know of the true secrets of Godhood and adamantium and demons of all kinds, and I will tell you those secrets. I am the demon Leash, and I would have you become a god—"

Jake yelled, "Don't listen to him! Don't—"

But then the demon's body became teeth that grabbed the paladin and dragged him away.

The demon did not kill the man, though. Jake's vector was still there and Mark still connected to him, keeping him alive and mostly unscratched by those gnawing jaws. Jake would survive. He'd heal.

Isoko whispered, "*Mark.*"

The demon did nothing against Isoko.

The demon continued, "I would have you become a that will remake the world, evaporate the Veil, heal and inoculate people with magic so that Curtain Protocol does not need to exist, and so much more. All good things, too! I would have you become the true superhero that I know you want to be; not this villain that your brother is making you become. I will do all of this and more, and I will not require you to kill people like in Kanda's original contract.

"I would have you kill Addavein, and take your revenge upon him, for I have a desire to end Kanda's line, forever more. And not just him, but everyone who allowed your parents to die, there in that bunker. They should have been better protected! Holy Mother Julia Garin and Detective John Smith and Orange City are all culpable for your parents' deaths, and they should all pay! But most of all, one above all deserves the most ire.

"Addashield!

"I will tell and show you how to *separate* dragons back into demons and humans. Once separated, you will bring back Addashield so that you can claim your revenge upon *Addashield* himself. And I will tell you how to permanently kill demons, so that you can do what I want, too:

"Revive and then kill Kanda. Permanently!

"Ending her astral line forever!"

Mark felt himself shudder; there, in a sphere of gnashing teeth and unseen mouths, everything glowing red and bloody, Mark felt a horror that had nothing to do with the gore all around.

He wanted to say yes.

But...

The demon continued, "Of course you do not trust me right now, but now you know my name. You know my desires. You may call upon me whenever you wish and I will give you tastes of power, Mark. As a start, here is one such taste:

"You, *specifically*, are using your Powers all wrong.

"I was ready to talk to you about using Adamant in your Union, but you figured that one out, though you have a long way to go about that one. So here's a better hint, further along the path. Do you know why adamantium is the strongest metal? Why you expel black veins? Why the metal is black?

"Because adamantium is mana of a certain type, made solid through the actions of life and crystallization, and it is a mana that is in your very soul, Mark Careed! Solid and unyielding! Adamantium is crystalized mana!

"Now ponder the meaning of that for the rest of your life!"

The demon laughed.

Mark had questions but none of them were for the demon, except one. "Who was the woman you killed to get to me?"

"Mary Getty. Adopted mother of the Brawny Peter Getty that you cut the arm off of, and who died to a water tiger monster because he was wounded. Mother of the Ice Shaper, Cassandra Getty, who died to a speedy rabbit when Peter wasn't there, for he was their usual front line. Mother to the Mesmer Victor Getty, who succumbed to the kaiju fall, when Mary and Victor were hiding out north of Wolf Bayou, trying to decide what to do next," Leash said. "Mary survived by a miracle, and then she heard you were instrumental in killing the kaiju, and she went to Thrashtalon looking for solutions to her rage. And now we are here."

Shock.

Dismay.

A rage of his own.

Mark put his rage into a box, and said, "It's been over a minute. Kill yourself and leave."

"Kill me yourself, if you can! It'll even let everyone else leave, first!"

"No. We had a deal. I listen for a minute and then you kill yourself. Honor it and begone, demon."

The walls undulated, and teeth fell away, revealing mouths that laughed and decayed. The mouths laughed and laughed and laughed! And the demon died. Red scanner-light that was marking everything demonic, began to turn off, as flesh turned to black sludge. Mark beat his heart with purity and impurity, erasing the sludge all around him, crashing through the death of Mary Getty's mutated body—

Isoko broke through the black sludge around Mark, exclaiming, "Mark!"

Mark stood at the bottom of a clean space in the black lake that was the demon, his black veins connecting him to everyone, though his power of adamant was fading. There wasn't an enemy to shove the weakness into right now, so Mark's power faded, and he allowed it to fade. He said to Isoko, "Hey, Isoko."

Isoko stepped onto the spot of light with Mark, asking, "Is it really dead?"

"Its vector is gone and the black stuff is vanishing, too." Mark looked around

Paladin Jake was there in the middle of the field, black sludge falling off of him. Everyone stood at the bottom of black-sludge web-like scaffolding, all of it decaying, all around them. The spellcaster eyes were gone, and now it was just cleanup. Jake called at the fire brigade to start burning again, and flames licked into the sky. Black smoke filled the air, but it didn't touch any of the people.

Mark said to Isoko, “Unless it’s hiding and also a liar, it’s gone. Based on it wanting future events if it lied to me, to us, then I won’t believe it ever again, so I doubt it lied. It should be gone.”

Paladin Jake was there, saying, “Don’t ascribe to demons human ideas.”

Mark’s box of rage almost opened.

Mark snapped at him, “FUCK OFF. I am not in the goddamned fucking mood right n—” Other people were looking his way. Mark said to Jake, “Sorry. I didn’t mean...” He stopped talking.

Jake looked at Mark for a moment longer, then he turned and started talking to the group about preparations to leave the Light Box, and what would come next.

Jake was suspicious. He was not the only one.

Mark overheard the fire brigade leader saying, “What did I say at the beginning of this. What did I say? They all even acknowledged it. Don’t go talking to the demon, no matter what.”

Mark continued to Unionize in silence, with Isoko and her giant mithril sword beside him. She was silent, too.

- - - -

Without warning the light box shattered.

Spotlights were on, and Mark and Isoko and everyone else were suddenly standing at the bottom of an excavation, maybe seven meters below the surface. Some people were flying in the sky overhead.

Mark instantly recognized one of the fliers in his bright silver fullplate.

The superhero Justicar; the son of High Priest Julia Garin.

Mark didn't recognize the other guy flying beside Justicar, who was wearing layered robes that fluttered all around him. It was that second guy's strong voice that filled the night.

"Great job! You killed the demon! Apparently we had some demon still outside the box, too, so whatever you all did to get the demon to leave was the correct choice! As long as it wasn't a demon contract, of course! Ha ha! We'll be checking everyone out for demon infections, but I'm pretty sure they're all gone." And then the guy's voice turned softer, more concerned, as he floated down closer, saying, "That was a pretty rough night, wasn't it. We'll figure out the whole story soon enough." The guy set down on the ground and started conjuring blankets, handing them out to people who were slow to take them, but they rapidly sped up. Blankets got wrapped around naked bodies, as the unknown guy said, "Don't you worry! Wolf Bayou might not be a part of Memphi, but against demons everyone is on the same side." He handed Mark a blanket.

Mark took the blanket, his voice a weird thing as he said, "Thank you?"

Other people had climbed in the hole to hand out blankets. Inquisitor Jake had created an earthen stairway out of the hole. That had happened pretty fast.

The robed-guy smiled to Mark. "Nice to meet you, Mark." He nodded to Isoko as he handed her a blanket. "Isoko." He said to Mark, "Superhero Garin is going to take you and Isoko out of here, so please move along."

And then Garin was there, floating a little above the ground, saying, "This way."

Mark and Isoko walked up Inquisitor Jake's stone staircase, out of the hole, and into a softer sort of interrogation by superhero Justicar himself. It was just a few questions, it was just a few answers. And then Mark and Isoko got some basic browns to wear and an escort into a hover tram, where Lola stood, looking absolutely stricken.

Lola softened when she finally lay eyes on Mark. She sniffled. "Hello, Mark. Getting up to trouble again, then?"

Mark felt some of his rage fall away. "Only some. Do you know about the measures that were taken to protect my parents from Addashield?"

The demon Leash had infected Mark in a way beyond the physical when he had spoken of the failures of Orange City and Church Freyala to protect Markus and Donna Careed from Addashield. Mark had gone back and forth on whether he wanted to actually pursue those questions, though. In the end, he decided to give in to those questions.

He needed to know what he had been blinding himself to for months, now.

Lola looked a bit sad as she said, “I have been waiting for this discussion for a while. May we adjourn back to Memphi to have some coffee and speak in a nicer setting?”

Mark felt some odd kinda way. Trepidation? Worry? He didn’t know. He was about to say ‘yes’—

Redwolf spoke up from the side, “I would have a moment before you leave.” Without waiting for agreement, she said to Mark, “You pulled some extra adamantium from a kaiju blade we kept in storage below the Grand Hotel. You can either keep it and come back for a big discussion later, or give it back now.”

“... Oh! Uh.” Mark stood straight. “Of course. It slipped my mind.”

Isoko didn’t have her mithril kaiju blade anymore, but Whitewolf, who stood behind Redwolf, had his grip on the sword. The sword was 3 meters long, so most of it lay on the ground.

... Mark partitioned out his adamantium... and he found he really, really didn’t want to get rid of any of it, and not just because he wasn’t sure what was his versus not-his. His total amount of adamantium had been 7 little balls of adamantium, along with some adamantium dust sitting in the vault of Citadel. What he had here, currently in his astral body, was *over double* what he had had at the start of the night. It was *so* nice to have more adamantium to work with.

Mark almost considered keeping it, since that was one of the offers, and making a promise to come back here later. But he didn’t want that.

He was not a thief.



Mark looked at the kaiju blade in Whitewolf's grip, at the length of it laying on the ground. "How much adamantium is in an... uh, kaiju blade?"

"45 million goldleaf worth of adamantium. Now it's 28 million goldleaf thanks to your brother, but more and more people are using it for more applications, so the price is going back up, and fast. I need that 780 grams of adamantium, Mark."

Blackwolf, who was standing near Redwolf and who had probably teleported both of them to this space right here, brought forth a scale.

"780 grams! Okay!" Mark took the scale and set it on a nearby table, and he dropped off some adamantium, drop by drop. It felt terrible to rid himself of any of his weapons, but... He wasn't about to become a thief. "780 grams is normal for a kaiju blade?"

"Yes," Redwolf said. "Standard size."

Mark dropped off more adamantium until it measured 780 grams. And then he stepped away, feeling lesser. Fuck. That was a lot of weapon he was leaving on the table... But he wasn't a thief. He looked at the blade in Whitewolf's hands, and asked Redwolf, "I can draw it into a blade edge? Save your people some manufacturing costs... I think?"

Redwolf said, "Unnecessary and unwanted. I don't trust new metal mages to make a kaiju blade at all. Please give me thin rods each 10 centimeters long, equaling roughly 2.5 meters of length. More rods are better than fewer."

"Understandable! So lengths of metal, sure!" Mark pulled the pile of adamantium pieces into rods, rapidly making a pile of a hundred long-toothpicks on the scale, and then he stepped away. "780 grams!"

Redwolf took a big brown paper grocery bag from Blackwolf and handed it to Mark, saying, "The blackened tuna steaks you requested for the party. Half cooked, half raw to cook on your own, and a few other foods, but mostly the tuna steaks. Also, the information we found out about those four people you were looking for, but I assume you have learned enough based on what the demon told you. Come by anytime you want, Mark, and we can discuss what we left out of the report about Thrashtalon and the demon Leash."

Mark held the big bag and it felt weightier than it was. “Thank you. Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you, too,” Redwolf said, “Come back sometime for the coliseum matches. Most of them are just to first dismemberment. It’s a lot more real than the fights most Hero Villain Program gets up to. It’s a lot more useful to learn how to fight that way.”

Redwolf walked away into the shadows of Blackwolf, and then she was gone. Whitewolf went elsewhere, picking up the sword to walk with it to the rescue area, where people were being interrogated and picked through for infections.

Mark got into the hovertram with Inquisitor Lola. He startled when he saw that Inquisitor David was in the front seat, driving the thing—

Isoko spoke from outside the door to the tram, saying, “See you later, Mark.”

Mark almost asked what was wrong. Why was Isoko staying out of the vehicle? But then he realized that he wanted to talk to Lola about... everything. Isoko saw that much, too. And yet...

Mark said, “We can go back to base before we start talking, and some of this food is for you. Please come, Isoko.”

Inquisitor Lola nodded a little.

David spoke up, “Come sit up here in the navigator seat. I’ll let you drive to Memphi.”

Isoko grinned, and then she got up into the vehicle, into the navigator seat. The doors closed and soon they were up, into the air, headed back south to Memphi.

There wasn’t much to say right now, so Mark listened to David tell Isoko how to drive the hover car,

Mark gazed out the window as they flew away from Wolf Bayou. The city looked intact, but there were way too many lights everywhere, and emergency vehicles had landed on every nearby street and a few different roofs. White tents populated the town square over there. People casting spells into the dark,

square hole in the ground that had held the Light Box, illuminating the depths of that hole, like it was a quarry, lit up for a rugby game.

The hole in the ground was immense. It was like someone had taken a square punch out of Wolf Bayou. Liquid poured out of sewer or water lines into that square hole in the ground, while lights shone on the deepening water—

Mark gasped as he looked north, to a kaiju, waiting to pounce on the ci—

To the *body* of the kaiju that Redwolf had *killed yesterday*. Mark had briefly mistaken it for a living monster, or maybe a mountain range. But it was dead. Very dead. And they were flying away from it right now. Soon, the tram pointed away from the kaiju, and all Mark could see was the dark of the land beyond Wolf Bayou. The Mississippi River, and the trampled, broken land that had been the northwestern patrol area of Memphi.

The kaiju dominated the north beyond Wolf Bayou like few things Mark had ever seen before.

“Holy shit,” Mark whispered, as he sat down all the way in his seat. “I had forgotten about the kaiju.”

“Life comes at you fast,” Lola said, “Too fast, sometimes. You can start to forget about the events that you wish to deal with as other, newer events demand all of your focus.”

Mark stared out the window. And then he looked at his big box of food from Redwolf. He put a hand on the top of the brown bag, and felt warmth. “I think it’s still hot. Want some food?”

Isoko called out, “Yes I do!”

Lola smiled a little. “I wouldn’t be opposed.”

Mark found the cold box of raw tuna in a white foam container at the bottom of the bag, but all the other stuff was hot food in wax paper containers. There were hot sandwiches, cut meats of beef or pork slathered in barbecue sauce, some salads with all the fixings, and, of course, the big tuna steaks, blackened. The steaks glowed pink and they smelled like heat. They were going to be *spicy*. Mark

handed out most everything, but Lola didn't want much and David just had a small sandwich, while Isoko had a much bigger portion of food.

Mark stuck a fork into one of the tuna steaks and found the meat glowing pink on the inside. It reminded Mark of the glowing demon 'meat' in the Light Box, but of a much nicer pink, instead of that demonic red. He grinned and then he bit into it. It was delicious.

Eventually, they made it to Collective Temple, to the rooms and suites that Lola and the delegation from Citadel Freyala were using while they were here.

Eventually, they talked of Mark's parents, and of the inadequacies and impossibilities of protecting them from Addashield.

- - - -

Mark lay in bed in a side room in Collective Temple, thinking about the conversation he had had with Lola.

The demon Leash had taunted Mark about the lax defense of his parents, when he was on that Color Drop treatment. Leash had mentioned the inadequacies of Holy Mother Garin and Orange City's 'Detective John Smith'.

Maybe they could have done more.

Maybe not.

Mom and Dad had been put into a bunker about 250 miles north of Orange City. It was an unmarked location, but it was a known safehouse in the historical records of Orange City. A new safehouse *should* have been dug for Mark's parents, because, while Archmage Addashield might *not* have known where they were keeping Markus and Donna Careed, Kanda would have known because she was a demon who just collected memories and knowledge. Kanda would have been able to tell Addashield exactly where to search, and how to go through every single option, going through safehouse after safehouse to find Mark's parents.

Which is exactly what Addashield had done, because Addashield knew Orange City. He had been there at the founding of the city, after the Reveal. Kanda knew what they needed to do, and so Addashield had done that.

Addashield's search had resulted in 28 more bodies to his list of murders, including Markus and Donna Careed. It had only been 12 hours at the start of Addashield's hunt to the end of that hunt, and in that time, Orange City did nothing to stop the hunt, because Orange City was still being threatened. If they acted against Addashield directly, then those people who acted against him would be killed.

They had 'cut their losses' and Mark's parents had paid the price.

Mark had no idea how he felt about that—

An unfamiliar ringing and chirping sounded out from the side.

Mark turned.

Oh. It was his new phone making that noise.

He picked up the phone. It was Alexandro, and the time was 8:27 AM.

He answered, "Hello?"

"Mark! I heard a lot of stuff went down! You're coming back home, right?"

"... Uh." Mark wasn't prepared to have this conversation, but he had it anyway. "I was targeted by a demon and also Thrashtalon for some reason. Still don't know what that was about. Some dragon claims to be my brother. I think I should stay away—"

"No," Alexandro said, solidly. "Just no. You should come *home*, because *this* is your *home*." Without waiting for an answer, and sounding a bit mad, Alexandro continued, "If it makes *you* feel safer then you can live in the guest house, Mark. You and Isoko and whoever you want! We still want you here! And next time you go galavanting off to kill a monster wave and a kaiju and then a *demon of*

*Thrashtalon* you should either meet me at the office for a hug and a ‘till-next-time!’ or *wait half an hour before you leave the house*. My gods, Mark! I was almost back home from the workday! Who the fuck leaves to go out to the wilds at 4 pm!” Alexandro chuckled some, perhaps nervously, perhaps in light of the situation, perhaps in the relief of being able to talk about small, no less important topics such as leaving before being able to say ‘till-next-time’. “Cut me some slack, please!”

Mark found himself smiling. “Sorry.”

“Ach! No need. I know kids are always eager, or whatever...” The anger evaporated and Alexandro sounded relieved as he said, “I was so worried, but then so proud! You should see the news! They’re saying you killed the demon’s host yourself!”

Mark chuckled a little, feeling a difficult tension unwind, which was instantly wound back up by a different, easier tension. He wasn’t a hero. Not yet.

“I didn’t kill that thing myself at all!”

“Well of course the news is going to exaggerate. They want to make the people feel safe, and a story about one guy being instrumental to killing a demon is always going to be a white lie. You can tell me how it really happened, though.”

Mark smiled, and said, “Well first of all, something called the Containment Crew was called in because, and I quote —and from one of the paladins I met in the Light Box!— ‘They were complaining about not having anything to do’.”

“Oh yeah. Just asking for trouble!”

Mark grinned. “Exactly. So the Containment Crew Light Box’ed a whole 1.75 city blocks, using a combination of sealing magic, mud magic, light magic, and some guy who was good at color matching, who could somehow see what things were real demons and what were not— Oh. Well actually, it started before that. You know those people I was trying to find? Well...” Mark paused. His voice turned a bit more serious, as he said, “I need to know if I fucked up, Uncle. Those people I was trying to find...”

Mark told Uncle Alexandro what he knew, and what had been discovered, and what the demon had said.

Mary Getty and her family had been exiled from Memphi for human trafficking about 10 years ago. It was a whole thing involving drugs and gangs and heavy violence, but Mary had found a second home in the Cult of Thrashtalon outside of the city. Greenwolf's investigation turned up a whole new branch of the Cult that no one had known about. Those people were all actively being hunted down right now. Apparently, when Mary went after Mark because their wealth scanners went wild, and then when Mark had gotten away, she had kicked the hornet's nest of Memphi, and everything kinda fell apart from there.

All of Mary's entire family had been Thrashtalon Cultists.

There was a lot the investigation did not tell Mark, that he and Lola knew had been redacted, but...

That was most of the story.

Alexandro listened, and then he decisively said, "Look. This is probably gonna mark me as a villain, but those fuckers got what they deserved. Cultists of Thrashtalon? Death is what they deserve."

"They were still people!" Mark said, "I can't believe people would... would go to Thrashtalon like that."

"I would."

Mark hummed, and then he said, "I don't know much about Thrashtalon, honestly. Only that he is the Betrayer God. Everyone has orders to kill those cultists on sight. Why do people go to him at all?"

"Thrashtalon's Power, before he became a god, was Wilding. He mutated people's Powers to stronger versions of themselves. He's the betrayer god because he betrays everyone, including his own cultists. They turn into monsters, Mark. The 'wilds' are called the 'wilds' because of the Power Wilding. He's the god of rejects, monsters, and betrayers. That's why I have no respect for humans who go to him. That's why those people are kill-on-sight."

Mark breathed deep. "I knew... vaguely, some of that." Mark admitted, "Learning about the gods outside of Freyala is the last part of the Understanding Curtain Protocol class at Citadel. Never got to finish that."

"You can always tell his true cultists, because of the handprint on their faces. He burns them when he changes them. Did Mary have a handprint?"

"... She did. Mary Getty was Contracted to a demon, too. Do you know why someone would choose to do both? No one here had any real ideas, but you're more in tune with the higher powers, right?" Mark added, "And they redacted some stuff in the report I got to see."

"I hear things now and then..." Alexandro hummed. "I could only guess... No. I have no guesses." He asked, "You coming home, then? I want to hear all about everything, in person, Mark!"

Mark smiled a little, feeling warm again. "Yeah. I'll... move into the guest house."

"You can still have dinner over here every night!"

Mark smiled some more. "Sounds like a plan."

"Until you do that expedition thing to Daihoon. The Sister City to Memphi. You're still doing that, right?"

"There have been some bumps in the road, but I'm still doing that, for sure."

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End Book 1



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