

The base was 3 stories tall, maybe 10 meters square, with merlons rising around the top like square teeth. A few different scanning towers rose here and there upon that roof, all of them covered in glass and stone to make them harder to destroy. Basic gun turrets, that were more like rock slingers, held on the edges of the tower, all of them with clear lines of sight to ground, to the kill zones that Eliot had set up in the dry moat that surrounded the place. Every square foot of space out there had tall, sharp pyramids of stone, for 10 meters in every direction.

“Why pyramids?” Mark asked. “Why not spikes?”

Eliot said, “Because goblins will break stone spikes with a hammer, or just kick them over, thus removing the purpose of the trap zone, which is to keep them slow and injure them. The pyramids are 2/3rd’s as tall as they are, so they’re a good hindrance, and people only do spikes when they have no time or ability to make real defenses. I have the time and the ability to make real defenses.”

Isoko asked, “They’ll just sacrifice comrades to make a bridge, right? And that’s PL0 stone. They won’t give a shit about it?”

Mark said, “I can *make* them give a shit about it?”

Eliot breathed in, and said, “All true.”

David just watched.

The north and south towers that abutted the main tower each had laser turrets that could blind and disorient the goblins. They were pretty basic, though. Nothing special.

“I have no real power sources, either, so I can’t do more than blind them with some automatic targeting software,” Eliot said. “Not *much* more than that, anyway.”

“They’ll recover fast, since it’s just light?” Isoko asked.

“Ultraviolet light, so it will burn out their eyes while keeping their eyes dilated with the dark,” Eliot said, “If I could support a lot of those, I would. They have good track records against monsters in the dark that can’t see ultraviolet. Goblins can see ultraviolet, but not very good. Basic spotlights will also be used to disorient.”

Eliot had taken down the bridges leading to the central tower, as well as part of the wall that led to the south, leaving the northern sides covered by the tree. Perhaps the tree would not like the goblins getting close? And be a good killer in that direction? Hard to know!

And here, in the tower, in the center of Eliot’s defenses, was a detailed holomap rising from the stone, in full color, with blue dots everywhere. Those blue dots were goblins.

Mark could *not* feel everything out there through Union. Not yet.

But he could certainly connect to stuff he could not see. To the weeds and small trees growing in the buildings all around, the monster tree over there, the monster fish in the crater lake in the other direction, and even the goblins hiding out in the nearby buildings. He didn’t have the range to get many of them, for there were hundreds out there and they were staying back, but he was able to reach out and touch some of them, now that he could tell where they were.

He knew he missed some.

He couldn’t tell where things were out there. Not yet.

Mark looked at a nearby clump of 120-ish blue dots, and then at the other clumps out there. “They’re planning how they’re going to attack, aren’t they?”

Isoko was quiet. She looked frustrated. All she had was herself and her Platinum Body; it was barely any use at all against the goblins. She’d still be upstairs throwing rocks. Between her and Eliot, they had decided that she was not going to be throwing steel, because they needed that steel, and they didn’t want the goblins to have it, to use it against them.

Eliot was concentrating on making power sources for his various electronics. Batteries came together below, in thick stacks, beyond a pane of thick glass that allowed Eliot to look and focus on what he was doing. He was up to battery tower #4 now. The other 3 towers were all lit with lights, alongside a computer bank that would run the automated defense systems.

David said, "They're doing more than planning how to attack. They're also organizing themselves into tribes. This happens when the goblins get advanced. Looks like we have at least 4 or 5 goblin leaders now. One of them is the corrupter goblin." David pointed at the largest clump of goblins, far back from the rest, almost inside the toxic yellow slime area of the Vatican. "Probably that one." David continued, "The goblins were watching us for a while, probably using hive mind capable goblins to communicate what they know about us to other goblins. Not everything, though. Goblins are monsters, but they're also a people. They will communicate with each other just enough so that what they learn fighting us is not lost, but they want the Powers that we have for themselves. They want to be the ones to get to us, now their fellow tribesmen.

"Near as I can tell, some of them are hive mind capable, and high level blending capable. Those two Mind Nudge goblins that I killed likely went through the Monster Tutorial. They had actual Powers. There might be another 2 or 3 mind goblins with the same sorts of Powers, a bunch of Hive Mind goblins, then there's the corrupter goblin at the heart of it all.

"How these things usually go is that the people in this situation here, even if they have defenses like we have here, will be taken by the goblins. It's just a matter of time."

Silence.

Contemplation.

Mark said, "Their unwillingness to tell the other tribes our strategies is a weakness that we can exploit for a while, but not forever. All of our tactics will eventually get found out."

David did not answer.

Isoko said, "Yes, but we still have more Power per person than them. We only die if we get overwhelmed."

Eliot spoke up, “They’ll come at us in waves, throwing 50% of their forces at us while the other 50% go hunting monsters to make more of their kind. Those that die will teach those that survive, and eventually they’ll commit to an attack that they believe they will win.”

Isoko said, “That is the reason that normal city defense tactics are turrets on the walls *and* roaming groups of monster hunters out in the wilds. So... we need to funnel them. The spiked ground is good. I need to be out there with a weapon, and protected by you, Mark, while I fix problem spots in our defenses and defend the turrets.”

Down in the melee?

Mark frowned at that, but it was the probable best way to do this. He looked at Isoko with his scanner glasses, as his heart beat with a Union of resilience and weakness. With a tap to the button at the side of the glasses, the scan changed from goblin recognition to human scanning. Isoko glittered with an outline of a high tier 3 Body, and everything else. Mark focused more, and Isoko’s base scan glittered stronger. High tier 3 became low tier 4.

Isoko stood a bit straighter. She looked to Mark, and her Platinum Body practically shimmered as it strengthened, and she became high tier 4. Almost tier 5.

Mark asked, “How you feel?”

Isoko said, “I know I can’t keep this up forever. Can you?”

“For a while, but not forever. I need to constantly breathe in and out sustenance and deprivation, too, otherwise you’re just going to faint of exhaustion; we all will. And you don’t have a good weapon to go against the goblins. Steel will bend.”

“I need to learn better Tactile Telekinesis, anyway,” Isoko said, as she looked to Eliot. “The mace is too hard to work. Too big. I need a sword. Thin and strong.”

Mark said, “You need a radio, too.”

“And a radio, too,” Isoko added.

Eliot crafted a radio out of a headset and a new pair of scanning glasses, as he asked, “Katana, longsword, rapier?”

“Rapier, probably,” Isoko said, as she put on the new scanner/radio. “Can you do an estoc? It’s the same but a bit thicker. And a buckler.”

“I know estocs,” Eliot said, pulling out steel from a hole that led to the first floor. Within several seconds, he had two thin swords, a belt, and a small, round shield that could be braced onto an arm. “That’s the best I can do with normal steel.”

Isoko strapped the shield on and started waving around the sword, as she said, “Thanks.”

Eliot said, “I’ll make extra.”

Mark asked Isoko, “You want me to leave the goblins around you alone? Or down them so you can stomp them and move on?”

Isoko said, “Stomping. I’m hoping to poke brains and that’ll be enough to kill. Some goblins can heal when they eat the dead, but the dead can’t heal themselves at all, and that will have to be enough.”

Mark breathed in, preparing to say something he really didn’t want to say. “I’m gonna kill goblins through Union. Lola told me a few different ways, but I haven’t done them yet because...” Mark didn’t want to say that it scared him to kill with Union, that it scared him to take something good and protective and that he used to help people all the time, and to use it as a weapon. So he didn’t talk about that. He asked, “Where do you want me to kill them?”

Isoko and Eliot were silent. They were probably having similar thoughts... Or maybe they were thinking of something completely different.

David just watched.

Isoko said, “The stragglers. We don’t want anyone running and regrouping— Better than that, the hive minds. If you and Eliot can figure out where the hive mind goblins are, then kill them from afar.”

Mark nodded. “Okay. Then...”

He looked to the holographic display of the nearest 500 meters, and the blue dots circling and moving in. A lot of them were already within range, but Mark wasn’t confident he could kill them from here and he didn’t want to start the attack early. The nearest group was stopped about 30 meters outside of the wall that surrounded the tower. They were inside a building near a road that led straight to the tower walls.

They were going to start.

Planning time was over.

Mark said, “Then I think we’re as ready as we can be.”

Eliot said, “I’m almost done with battery 6. I’ve used up most of our supplies, but I can repair the eye-burning turrets a few times. The stone slingers will mostly be a deterrent, and not much of one. We’re set for power and defense... but when they get here I won’t be able to change the land out there at all. Not after they touch it. Anything the goblins touch falls out of my ability to Manipulate.”

Mark had an idea. “Can you adjust this holo display to highlight which turrets upstairs are burning eyes? I want to be able to weaken those goblins specifically, so you can actually burn them.”

Eliot frowned as he looked at the holo display. “... I think I can. Yeah. Should be able to. The systems are on automatic targeting, but I can feed the automation into the display.”

Isoko asked, “How about sound makers, too?”

Eliot laughed suddenly. “Yeah. I can do directed sound attacks. I can’t believe I forgot about that...” He lost his mirth. “I’m probably forgetting a lot.”

A quiet contemplation filled the room, as Mark stared at the holo display, feeling out the world with Union, Eliot's fingers hovered over an invisible keyboard, and Isoko held her rapier tightly, as she poked the ground. Mark glanced over to see Isoko poking the tip of the sword into the stone, like slipping a knife into hard-packed dirt, except the dirt crinkled and broke into tiny stone shards. It made a grinding sort of noise. With a flick of her hand, she drew half of a line through the stone, but then the rapier caught. The steel scraped and broke off at the tip, and Isoko frowned.

She had been testing her TT, and it had failed somewhere in there.

Eliot reached out and silently fixed both the stone and the rapier.

Isoko looked frustrated that her attempts at tactile telekinesis were... not great. But she was ready for battle.

David startled them as he spoke, "My professional opinion is that this plan is going to work, until it doesn't. When that happens I will rescue all of you and pull you out, away from this location, and then we will begin a counter assault, or flee. That final outcome depends on your personal choices between now and then."

Isoko asked, "What do we need to change to make this a stable plan?"

David said, "This is a learning experience and the goblins are about ready to attack. I'll give you tips later."

Mark winced. They were forgetting something painfully obvious, weren't they.

What was it?

Funneling the goblins? Check. There was one main path from the south and they'd probably come from the north, just because they wanted to avoid the main path. But that was by the tree. The goblins were avoiding the tree, though, because it was obviously a monster tree.

Trap the land? Check. The stone pyramid ground wouldn't last forever, but it would hinder them.

Turrets? Check. They wouldn't last forever, either. The lasers could fire forever, though, as long as they weren't targeted by monsters, but Eliot had set up ablative glass enclosures for them that would stop simple rock throws, and those could be removed and replaced by Isoko, or even Mark if Isoko was busy.

Weapons? Check. As much as could be checked, anyway. Mark didn't have more than a grain of adamantium inside of his body, so he couldn't use that against the enemies, and even if he could he wasn't strong enough to wield it. He needed to be practically tier 8 to pick up more than the few grains of adamantium inside his body, to use them, and he wasn't anywhere near that.

All they had was steel and Isoko's unrealized tactile telekinesis—

Wait.

Mark felt a cold sweat as he thought about weapons made of monster parts that had naturally high Body ratings, and otherwise. His adamantium was grown inside his own blood and it was a fantastic magical weapon. They used monster parts all the time as weapons over on Daihoon, too!

Mark blurted out, "Should we have grabbed those wyvern bones to use as weapons?"

Isoko's eyes went super wide—

Eliot said, "No. Monster parts make good weapons over on Daihoon, but on Earth they rapidly degrade due to soul-leaving the body or some shit like that. It's a Veil-thing. We similarly don't have to worry about monsters making weapons out of bones, or anything like that." Eliot chuckled. "Gods. Could you imagine if monster parts worked like that over here?"

Mark had a surreal moment. "But—"

Eliot snapped, "*We don't have to worry about that!*"

Mark paused.

Isoko looked at Eliot.

Eliot breathed, then said, "Sorry. I... I hate mind monsters."

A moment they didn't have stretched a bit long.

David said, "You don't have to worry about monster-part weapons here in this scenario, Mark, Isoko. They're actually really rare. Even on Daihoon. You need to prepare the monster before you kill it in order to make weapons out of it. Most stuff, even on Daihoon, degrades down to somewhere between Power Level 1 to 15. On Earth the degradation is all the way to PL 0. There are some big exceptions to this, most notably the magical metals, certain stones and crystals, all elemental-core-touched items, and most heartwood from monster trees. Wyvern dog bones and most monster parts would not make good weapons unless heavily treated, and the goblins here will be dead long before they progress to industry."

As David spoke, Mark felt more secure. Isoko looked calmer as well.

Eliot said, "Yeah. All that."

Isoko said, "I've decided to get on the ground. Mark; You can defend the turrets. Eliot; Can you turn the slope at the base of the tower into something thicker, with a flat surface a few meters wide at the top that I can fight on? I don't want them tunneling into the stone and I need a surface down there to fight on."

Eliot said, "Sure." He looked to Isoko. "I'll make a switchback at the north tower that you can guard, and use to come up and down."

Isoko nodded—

She glanced at the holo display. Everyone did. The blue dots at a southern group were moving this way. They were moving toward the big gap in the wall that Eliot had left, on purpose.

Isoko steeled herself, which was really just platinuming herself, and said, "I'll deploy from the roof and prepare to meet the enemy on foot." And then she asked David, "Am I immune to the goblin curse? Or does Mark need to do something special to clean that away?"

David looked to Mark.

Mark was already saying, “Purity/impurity breathing with a focus on astral body tainting. It cleans up *rea*/fast, but it piles up fast, too. If you take a wound say something, otherwise I will be cycling purity/impurity every few minutes. They shouldn’t be able to touch you except through exhaustion, anyway, and they can’t hurt you through normal weapons. They have to *bite* you, Isoko. They’re PL 25, at the most, going up against PL 35, at the least; teeth and claws against bio-platinum, so... You tell me if you’re safe or not.”

David nodded.

Eliot nervously looked at the goblins coming from the south.

Isoko was looking more and more confident by the moment. She grinned. “I can fight all day long with a good healer at my back.”

Mark smiled a little. He was already breathing in sustenance and breathing out deprivation. “You got one of those.”

Eliot made himself smile, and then he stood up and hovered some cameras around them, saying, “So here we are! On our training mission! Gonna kill goblins that wouldn’t accept peace talks; you know how it goes. Platinum Princess is getting ready to break gobbo skulls and Blackvein is getting ready to make hearts explode! Let’s get this completion!” He held out a hand, straight ahead, palm flat and down.

Mark rolled his shoulders, ignored the name Eliot had named him, and put a hand onto Eliot’s. Isoko was there, too. It was a nice moment.

Eliot raised his hand, saying, “Go team human!”

Isoko said, “Go team human!”

Mark grinned. “Go team human!”

Mark stood off center of the base, toward the south. A wall held at his back and the holo display of the area floated in front of him. It was a mockup of the whole area.

The tower was at the center, at around 10 meters wide. A stone ring encircled the tower, giving Isoko 4 meters of space to fight goblins upon, while the edge of the ring sloped toward the pyramidal-spiked ground. Ten meters of that rough terrain continued along to the walls, which were only 3 meters tall themselves. An entrance in the wall stood open at the south.

The goblins hunted through the city just out of sight, just to the south. They spied from the windows of ruins. They lurked around broken corners, and under vines and bushes.

The sky was golden with sunset, and deep blue on the eastern edge. The night lurked, like the goblins, their reflective eyes resembling faint stars in the gloom.

On the holo display in front of Mark, the goblins looked like blue dots.

On the night vision cameras, Mark saw them clearly.

Big ears, big eyes, big teeth, tiny bodies. They looked almost like humans, but shrunken and violent. Some had noses, most did not. Mark had heard that some goblins cut off their noses so that they could bite better, so their noses would not get in the way. It probably wasn't true.

... But some of the goblins were dripping blood from their nose areas.

Mark had a great range on Union; 160 meters, if he was only going in one direction. 80 meters if he had to go in multiple directions at once. He easily covered the entire base. He easily reached the goblins, who were only 40 meters away. He didn't want them to think he had that good of a range, though.

The goblins looked like they were talking.

Mark turned up the volume on the sound sensors that Eliot had built on the roof. He heard goblins for the first time. Mostly, they were monsters. The goblins snarled. They chirped. They snapped and spat. They slapped at each other and giggled like gravel mixed in with the sounds of children.

One of the blue dots behind the walls commanded, in full English, “Go. Brats! Go. Get dinner!”

Mark felt a chill.

And then the smaller goblins in front started hissing, chittering, clicking. It was a horrible, nightmare sound, full of promised death and hateful, snapping teeth. It was also a laugh. A chortle. A good humor held in surety at the expectation of a good meal.

The first goblins snuck forward, darting past bushes and under broken rocks that Eliot had scattered out there to give the goblins known approach vectors. That guy truly did study base construction, didn't he? Mark hadn't known exactly how good Eliot would be at all of this, but he showed his stuff, for sure.

Eliot said, “Entering blinding range. Auto-lasers activating.”

The goblins peeked out into the night and were met with invisible light, slamming into their eyes.

It was not impressive.

The goblins blinked. Mark saw one or two rubbing their eyes, but they kept coming forward and—

It was a delayed reaction.

The goblins started to huff and blink hard and shield their eyes from a sun that wasn't there. That seemed to help them some. They chattered at each other.

One goblin behind the big rock poked at the ones in front of him, and when the ones in front just shielded their eyes and slapped behind themselves, not wanting to move forward, the one behind shoved those two forward, into the invisible light. Overhead, at the top of the base, the blinding, ultraviolet lasers tracked the exposed goblins perfectly, burning their eyes. One went down, screaming, covering his

eyes. The other walked around, eyes wide, trying to see where he was going. He opened his eyes wider in the dark, in the gloom, and he went blinder faster. Other goblins laughed at the blind ones.

And then they tried coming forward, shielding their eyes much better than those first two.

Mark applied a Union to them, draining their resilience, imparting them with weakness. Just a little. Just to see what happened.

Soon, any goblin who even partially looked up at the tower, at all, went blind almost instantly

The first goblin wave of 10 attackers ended before it got near the wall at all with every single goblin trying to rush forward and all of them going blind. They were all still alive. Mark kept them as batteries of resilience while feeding them weakness—

David told Mark, “Kill them with Union, Mark. You need to make sure you know how.”

Eliot whipped his head toward Mark. His flying cameras mirrored his movement.

Mark winced, as he whispered, “Fuck.”

This was part of his training from Lola, that she had told him in secret and swore him to further secrecy.

It was truly easy to kill something with Union, especially if you overpowered them in body size, or resources. Using the ideas of ‘life’ and ‘death’ did *not* actually work that well for killing something, but that’s where most people went when they considered the idea. You *could* use ideas like that, sure. It just took a while to kill someone with that idea. Minutes. Days, sometimes, if they were big enough. You could kill a dragon by draining it to death, but it took a week. According to Lola, anyway, who had gotten that information from historical records on the fact, and who had no personal experience with that matter.

There were other ideas that Inquisitors used when they truly needed to kill something, and those ideas worked way too well.

‘Vein integrity’, and ‘vein decay.’

Mark breathed in ‘vein integrity’, taking all of that from a few of the goblins at a time, and then he breathed out ‘vein decay’, shoving that idea into them, into their veins.

Goblins gasped and drowned in their own blood as it spilled out of every vein in their body, bruising them from the inside out. Some died seizing on the ground as aneurysms burst in their brains. Others gasped and coughed up blood as their lungs filled. Some lasted longer than others.

It took two minutes to kill 10 baby goblins, but they were incapacitated long before that.

All died, all went still.

Mark frowned.

He hated how easy it was to kill. It felt so wrong—

“Good.” David nodded. “You won’t be able to do that against most enemies, but these ones are weak enough. Maybe a 5 in every category, across the board? You can make it more effective in the ways that Lola likely told you, and which I will not be repeating anywhere near cameras.”

Eliot whispered, “What the fuck did you *do*?”

David answered, “Freyalan Secret.”

Eliot shut up and looked away.

Mark knew how to make it more effective, for sure. He needed to drain their Body as far as it could drain, and he knew he hadn’t been focusing on that, so that was an area that he could improve. He also could have—

Isoko spoke up on the radio, reminding Mark that she was still ‘in the room’ if she wasn’t actually in the room at all. “How difficult was that?”

David tilted his head; Mark was free to answer that one.

Mark said, “I could have been a lot more effective with that one, in multiple ways. I didn’t include you two in that, and I didn’t include the big tree in it, either.” Mark went back to breathing in sustenance and breathing out deprivation. “I also could have...”

... And Mark should probably stop talking about it. Those goblins were weak; like David said at 5 in every category, or something like that. That was the only reason Mark had been able to kill them so easily.

Mark had been at PL 33 in Union, tier 3, when he came out on this mission. He had likely gained some strength in that already. So maybe he was PL35. Union was already hard for people to notice when it was being used on them. All of that meant that those goblins had no way to truly notice *or* overcome his Union. So of *course* he could kill them with a simple weakening of vein integrity.

It was pretty easy to accidentally kill a baseline with a Power use of any invasive kind, because baselines simply didn’t have any astral body at all, like Mark, back when Lola put him in a coma at his and Addashield’s request—

Mark shook his head a little. He said, “Anyway. That’s the first little group dead and killed. I can do that pretty easily to newborn goblins, Isoko. You’ll have to contend with the full grown ones...” Mark caught movement on the map that wasn’t just goblins milling around. One goblin started coming their way, and then another three followed, and soon the entire group was moving. Mark said, “Here comes another group, this time from the south west.”

Eliot stared at those blue dots as he typed at the air. He said, “Two streets down, one house west. They’re coming through the broken buildings.”

Isoko asked, “Can I get a heads up display of distant goblins, Eliot?”

Eliot was surprised for a moment, and then he started typing furiously. “Working on it right now. Let me know when you can see it—”

“There,” Isoko said.

“Good,” Eliot said, “I added another button to the side of your glasses. It will toggle between distant and near, and automatically revert to close when a goblin is within 20 meters.”

“Thanks, Eliot.”

Mark knew they were forgetting things. Eliot and Isoko knew it, too. The problem, Mark suspected, was that Eliot had a vast, vast library of knowledge to pull from for base defense, but he had never really done this before. Not in person, and certainly not with only a few hours of prep time. There were probably better ways to defend a location that would completely solve their problems, but all they had was Eliot and his limited, yet vast, ability to make things, and the restriction that as soon as those things were touched by monsters, they became unchangeable, or they simply broke.

But a glut of resources and options was a better problem to have than a dearth of the same.

Mark studied the holo display, watching as the goblins crawled through the buildings. It was a whole pack of them, a whole little tribe. Maybe 25 of them—

Eliot said, “Movement in the northwest, too. They’re coming down that street, too. 27 in the south, and 34 in the northwest.”

Isoko asked, “Can you get a scan on them, Eliot? Actual Power Levels?”

Eliot said, “They’re pretty much the same; newborns at tier 1 and a few older ones at tier 2.”

“I imagine I should go to the north?” Isoko asked.

Mark said, “Wait to adjust location, Isoko. Let’s see how many they send for us and that we can take out before they reach us. I’ll go after the northern one first.”

“Understood,” Isoko said, sounding a bit relieved and yet tense in a completely different way.

The goblins came in twos and threes, skulking through the twilight, and the deepening night.

Mark saw them all, but only because of the scanners, and the display, and the camera feeds to the side. Gradually, imperceptibly, he connected to them all. It was not easy. Mark stretched his astral body to the limit, to try and connect to way too many individual beings at once. They all had different heart rates. They all had different breathing rates.

But just as Badaira had shown Mark at Sparring Club, when she had the entire Healing Club start to fall into rhythm with itself, as a whole, instead of all breathing or beating together, Mark fell into sync with the whole advancing goblin tribe from the north. In a flash of insight, Mark realized that the goblins and the humans were two halves to a whole, both sides aimed right at each other. And Mark connected.

If they noticed him, they didn't alter their movements or their approaches.

In those small groups, Mark breathed in all of their vein integrity, and gave them all vein decay in the return breath, while simultaneously beating his heart with a Union of resilience and weakness. He could not affect them all. He could not stretch himself that far. But it was enough to start.

Burst veins in heads and lungs did a number on anyone.

The small ones, the young ones, took 3 breaths each to falter and fall, but even just one breath was enough to inflict a young one with hacking, blood-filled coughs.

A very large goblin, with strange blue coloring, located in the back of the northwest group, took 13 breaths to kill, which was nearly 25 seconds, but it was the most important one to kill, Mark assumed. This proved to be maybe-true, for the northwest group fell apart as soon as that one died. They blinked, they looked at each other, and they started splitting off from the fight, snapping at each other as they yelped/roared.

Mark had killed a Hive Mind goblin, and he realized it instantly both in the way that the group fell apart, and how his Union frayed here and there. The Hive Mind goblin had been gathering up his people into one group, and making it easy to bring them into a Union.

Mark reconnected, but the goblins had reached the wall by then.

The southern goblins had already reached the opening in the wall, where the stone-spike-pyramid moat began. The lasers kept them behind those walls, and behind those boulders that Eliot had put out there, but they were already learning to shield their eyes—

Mark realized he should, instead of using just the 4 of himself, David, Isoko, and Eliot, to overpower the groups, he should use the biggest life out there, the monster tree, to truly *crush* the goblin packs...

But that might wake up the tree, turning it from sedentary and sentient to active and sapient, so Mark put that idea to the side, for emergencies, and decided to use 15 of the northern goblins to kill the other 15.

Mark switched gears, and the results were instantaneous and dramatic. Like switching a car from neutral to forward.

Mark realized something very deep in that moment.

Goblins worked together, but they were also in vast competition with each other, all the time.

That innate competition was probably the only reason why Union was able to take the 15 Mark had grabbed and use their nature to crush the smaller group with the extra draw, the force of 19 bodies working against 15 bodies. Mark, his people, and 15 goblins, took all of the resilience and vein integrity of the other 15 goblins, and gave them back weakness and vein decay.

One particularly weak goblin practically melted into a puddle of blood, all of his integrity leaving him, all at once.

The goblins panicked, and then Mark switched the division of Union again, using 7 goblins and his own people to kill the other goblins. Rapidly, Mark went through the entire northwest grouping, killing them all to a goblin, destroying them before they even reached the walls.

Half of the southern goblins had already raced across the stone pyramids, most of them able to navigate the pyramids by standing on the sharp tops and race across them, grinning and baring fangs all the while. Some faltered and fell, struck by lasers and missing a step on the pyramids, to fall, crashing and bleeding to the ground. The ones that stayed up laughed at the ones that fell, all while they shielded their eyes from the lasers.

Isoko was fighting two big ones, her rapier slashing. She had already killed one big fuzzy-ish one, with big spider eyes.

Mark fully switched to the southern incursion, ripping out their resilience and giving them weakness, focusing on the ones standing by Isoko first. Those ones faltered hard and Isoko rushed in with her rapier, stabbing the enemies in their brains and then kicking one body across the incursion, making it smack into its comrades.

The southern incursion had a Hive Mind goblin, too. It was big, with blue markings, hanging out behind the boulder, outside of the wall, watching the whole fight and coordinating the whole thing.

Mark left that one alone to make the killing easier.

Mark focused half of the goblins in the back on the half that had passed the pyramid moat, popping them one after another, each breath making one of them spill out, into their own body and out of their mouth, nose, and even anus. Each kill took 2 seconds of inhaling and 2 seconds of exhaling. Mark kept eyes on the Hive Mind goblin most of all, and when that one looked like it was going to bolt, Mark switched to him, focusing everything on that one.

The blue-striped goblin took two steps and fell onto his face, bleeding out internally.

Cleanup took another minute, with Isoko cutting down three goblins before her rapier snapped and she cursed the blade.

Mark switched to sustenance/deprivation breathing after the battle. The black veins coming from his body and filtering into the air never stopped beating with resilience and weakness.

And then it was over.

Mark sweated, so he breathed purity and impurity, making sure Isoko was okay. Had she taken any wounds at all? Mark didn't think so—

“Holy gods,” Eliot exclaimed, as he surveyed the battlefield, making sure everything was dead. A drone dropped a new rapier to Isoko and she caught it as Eliot said, “You killed most of them, Mark. That was amazing. Can you do more?”

David asked, “And yes; is that the extent of what you can do?”

“Thanks for the purity,” Isoko said, over the radio, as she flicked her new rapier through the air, testing it. “They didn't get me, though.”

Mark said to Isoko, “Better safe than sorry.” He told his team and David, “I could do more, but I don't want to involve the monster tree. I could wake it up. Other than that, I am stretched thin, here.”

Isoko hummed in thought, on the radio.

Eliot went wide-eyed, looking worried.

David said, “It's an okay limitation for now. You should expect to use the tree later. For now, stress yourself until you don't need to use the holographic crutch. I suggest you glance at the hologram for but a moment to find the general locations of the goblins out there, and then focus on the exterior to feel out how many bodies are in an area. Count the bodies you connect to, and then look at the hologram again. Learn how to find things without your eyes. I believe you've tried to learn scouting in Healing Club.”

Mark nodded. He had tried to learn how to scout with Union in Healing Club, yes, but he had never gotten far with it. It had never been this dangerous before, either.

David moved on, looking at Eliot. “Eliot. I suggest you consider things like frictionless coatings to make the environment more hazardous to the enemies. It’s not a method that is useful most of the time, but carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen is everywhere out there, and hazardous terrain is always sometimes useful.”

Eliot was already typing away at the air, focusing on the first floor below them, even before David finished. He muttered to himself, “Fuck! I forgot about that! Would sticky bombs work— No. I don’t have enough materials for that. Ultraslick guns it is— I should do acids, too, to clear up the bodies... Acids that turn bodies into frictionless slime?” He looked off into the air, asking himself, “Does such a thing even exist?”

David was already speaking to Isoko on the radio, saying, “Isoko. You’ve done a fine job. Have you been able to feel that your Platinum Body can extend to your weapon? This is how you should be envisioning your tactile telekinesis.”

Isoko said, “I’ve gotten glints of that, but not much. I feel like I’m missing something basic, and important.”

David nodded. “Consider that Platinum Body boosts all aspects of the 6 categories. Perhaps you might have an easier time thinking of your Body skill as less of a Body skill, and more of a ‘whole being’ skill.”

There was a tiny breath on the other side of the radio.

And then an, “... Oh.”

Mark glanced at the camera that was trained on Isoko. He saw the moment when Isoko’s rapier flickered to full-platinum, just like her skin.

Isoko whispered again, “Oh.”

And then suddenly Isoko faltered, her skin fading to grey as she had to catch herself, almost fainting.

Mark rapidly infused her with as much resilience as he could, taking away her weakness in turn and giving it to the world.

Isoko breathed deep and righted herself, blinking out exhaustion, her skin turning back to full platinum.

For a moment, Mark thought about a ‘Union of Blinking’, and then he filed that away for just a different type of ‘dance’ to use sometimes.

Isoko whispered, “Holy shit, that was... A lot.”

David grinned. “I am a little surprised that no one told you about that yet, though.”

“Grandmother said the same thing but...” Isoko said, “I never really *got it*. But I think I got it—”

“Found it!” Eliot announced, laughing. “New turret being made! I’m going to dissolve those bodies out there and turn them into slippery goo.”

Isoko asked, “It won’t affect me, will it?”

“I’m making the anti-slip goo, too. I’ll deploy that in sprayers near the tower; for use if needed— Shit. Incoming from the west.”

Mark watched as three more groups of goblins began to advance in from the west, all of them coming together, and yet separately. Maybe 50 goblins total in packs of 18-ish a piece. He started to focus in that direction, closing his eyes, ‘seeing’ if he could target them before they got close—

David told them all, “Good first showing, everyone. Good improvement on designs. Keep it together. There’s about 1,300 of them out there, but that number will only grow. It will never get smaller until we go out and start killing them directly, and it will only get worse when they decide to truly attack, in full force.”

Mark cracked open his eyes and looked at the holo display.

There was a lot of blue out there.

David said, “They will expect you to break, because everyone always does. If they came at us all at once, we would fall. But you *can* win this. You won’t win this in a tower, but you’ll figure it out. The nights will be the worst.”

As new turrets went up on the roof, and plastics moved upward—

Eliot said, “Oh shit fuck me. I should be using atmospheric CO2 condensers for more material.”

David nodded. “As I said: there is lots of carbon, oxygen, and hydrogen out there.”

Isoko flicked her sword outside of the bunker tower, the whole length of it flickering solid platinum with every stroke, and then fading back to plain steel after the cut. As she did that, she asked, “Can I press buttons to make it count as ‘human made’, Eliot? I need something to do while waiting for them to show up.”

All the blood drained from Eliot’s face. He muttered, “Ah. Yeah. Fuck. That helps a lot, too. I should have... thought of that.”

Isoko said, “City defense is a topic that takes 20 years to truly learn, Eliot, and you’re new at this. Don’t beat yourself up that much.”

David grinned at that.

Eliot relaxed. “Yeah... I guess... Thanks, Isoko. I’ll put some buttons out there for you now.”

On the cameras, some buttons appeared on the wall near Isoko.

She pressed it, asking, “That helps, right?”

Eliot said, “That helps so very much, actually. It always counts as more ‘human made’ when other people make the stuff. Just... hit the button whenever you want, please.”

Mark looked to the sides of the room, on the third floor, where clear, foot-thick tubes were filling up with some sort of thick, honey-like clear-ish liquid, and frosting over at the same time. Mark wasn't sure what was going on with that, but those were probably the condensers condensing stuff from the atmosphere. That frost up there was sending clouds of vapor down to the first floor—

And then a barrier of glass appeared between the floors, blocking off this second floor from the top floor. Vents appeared in the walls, and cool air billowed through.

Mark almost chuckled at that. “I forgot to ask you for good ventilation. Thanks.”

Eliot nodded.

Mark got back to feeling out goblins.

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Eliot was overwhelmed, but he wasn't in this alone, and he certainly never would have gotten this far without the others. He had been feeling overwhelmed for the last 4 hours, though, and the goblins hadn't gotten past any of their defenses, except for the outer wall.

Watching a cohort of 120 goblins rush the walls, just out of sight, and dig into the base of the wall like it was nothing but particularly thick packing foam was a nightmare. They took down that wall like they were kids digging through dirt. And then the wall fell on top of them and Mark finished sweeping through them, dropping them one after the other. Eliot's slippery acids were already striking them, like

grenades shot from turret guns, to splash everywhere and burn the bodies. It didn't work at all against the living, because the goblins were all PL 5 to 25 and the acids were PL 0, taken from the atmosphere and turned into materials to fire. But as soon as the goblins died they became PL, and the acids started to work. Goblin bodies began to turn to slippery, black sludge.

It was midnight, now.

The pyramid moat was absolutely filled with slippery black and clear fluids, the pyramid moat poking up like uniform stepping stones upon a black ocean. That ocean flowed outward in every direction, into the crater lake down the way, and all the way to the tree. The lake was dead now. The few monster fish inside of it had already flown off, back into the main Tiberranean river.

Stray acid wouldn't have killed everything out there, if Eliot had been throwing it out there in normal quantities, but Eliot was practically raining acid out there. The tree seemed to love the slippery black goo, though. It was biodegradable, and would, in fact, become just a sludge of slippery polycarbons that became fertilizer after a few months.

Some bones were more resistant than others, though, and those bones floated on the mess of a battlefield like white sticks in tar.

And the goblins kept attacking.

Sometimes the bigger, stronger goblins made it all the way past the turrets, past Mark, the oils not slipping them up at all, Mark unable to touch them for he was dealing with tens of goblins on his own, only to crash into Isoko.

Eliot knew that they would have been lost without her, out there, in the thick of it.

She danced when she could, killing monsters left right and center. Mostly, she rested, and she talked, and Eliot loved her suggestions, and her attitude.

Isoko pressed the button on the wall next to her station out there, her platinum touch making all of Eliot's machinery work a whole lot better, as she asked over the radio, "Flammable sticky napalm?"

Eliot shook his head, though Isoko couldn't see that. "No. That's the same problem as most of the suggestions."

"Well yeah. It's still tier 0. But fire still hurts and also blinds."

Mark spoke up, "It changes their breathing patterns too much."

Isoko said, "Ahhh... Not that one, then. I'll come up with a new one that works! Just you watch!"

Eliot grinned— And then he eyed the map, and saw a horde. "Horde approaching from the west again. Looks like... HOLY FUCK. 230?! ... Wait." His stomach dropped as he saw the movement of the dots, and he made some connections he did not want to make. "Are they *flying*?!"

Mark had his eyes half-closed, as he said, "Mostly babies. They hit up a wyvern nest. I'll take out the fliers first."

Isoko looked to the sky, saying, "I can't do shit against those fuckers." She smiled, pressed the button faster, and said, "Good luck, team!"

Eliot refilled his machines as best he could.

Isoko stood glittering in the spotlight.

It was a very fancy spotlight, and Isoko looked very tempting under that brilliant light. All the goblins watching from the distant, dark rooftops, only had eyes for her. This was by design. Eliot wanted her to look good for the camera, and also so that the goblins would attack along a vector, aiming at the target left out in the open.

As far as strategies went, it was a good one.

Goblins were incredibly dangerous monsters, but they were also rather predictable based on their hierarchy of needs. They needed to reproduce, most of all, and so, they went after anything that might offer their next generation a good leg-up.

Isoko was pretty sure they imagined platinum-skinned babies.

Let them try.

Isoko was not the one killing the most tonight, which was not how she envisioned her life as a hero, when she was a kid. Back then, she had thought she'd be like grandmother, shaping the sky into blades to kill and rend on vast scales. Tornadoes. Storms. Minor hurricanes. Maybe lightning if she could get really good at sky shaping. But that's not what happened. Isoko had Platinum Body instead of Sky Shaper.

She had hated Platinum Body.

Looking back on it, on the months she had spent at Citadel, trying to get Chosen by Freyala, always wondering why she had not been Chosen yet, even though she was already tier 3... She knew, now, why she hadn't been Chosen. She had not loved her Power. She had been resentful, hateful.

Freyala didn't want that from her people.

But here? Now?

Isoko was starting to love Platinum Body.

Isoko waited in the spotlight, pressing the button on the wall, as goblins fell out of the sky and dissolved in the ocean of clear acid, becoming black sludge. Other goblins raced across the tops of pyramids, aiming right for her. Many of those died, too. Mark was working overtime, doing The Most, as was his lot in life.

And Isoko was taking out the trash.

She stopped pressing the button for two seconds and the lights in the area flashed wide, illuminating her battleground stage up ahead, like a platform sticking out of the ground by just a meter. She slid down a short runway to that platform, her platinum feet skidding on the stone, and then sounding out tap, tap, tap, as she walked to the center of the platform.

She awaited her enemies.

Isoko hadn't really gotten in touch with her Platinum Body before tonight, before this trial, before Inquisitor David had reiterated a lesson from Wandering Sage, from grandma, that Isoko hadn't really understood until that repetition. Platinum Body encompassed the entire spectrum of Powers; Body, Kinetic, Mind, Natural, Soul, and Arch. It was still very much a Body Power. But it gave her strength in every single category. It meant she was able to defend in every category, but it was more than that.

She wasn't sure how much more.

But she was learning.

The goblins came for her, leaping out of the black moat of pyramids and acid, slobbering and salivating with maws open wide.

Isoko danced.

She wasn't sure why she danced, but it was probably due to Mark. He was here with her, right now, coordinating the entire battle in his Union. She was herself, but she was also an instrument of death. This is probably what it felt like to be truly Chosen by Freyala, and Isoko absolutely loved it.

She spun, decapitating a goblin and then kicking its body into another, sending them both into the acid.

She twisted, her empty hand carving through fangs and face alike, sending the body spinning outward.

She leapt and carved, her sword flickering full platinum, bisecting two goblins without stopping at all. It was like cutting through air.

She landed on a goblins head, smashing it, breaking its neck and body.

A twist and a spin completed the dance, killing four more goblins who seemed to leap right into her sword, right where they needed to be.

And then the battle was over.

Isoko kicked the dead goblins on the platform into the acid, where Eliot promptly targeted them with more of those acid guns of his, and they started to dissolve much faster. He also sprayed the platform, and Isoko, and Isoko's button-pressing area with anti-acid stuff. It tasted terrible, but Mark was on the job, and soon she was purified of all possible problems, and that included the taste in her mouth and the orange oils on her body.

She walked up the stairs, not slipping at all.

Isoko got back to her button and started pressing it again, smiling, as she checked her visor and found all the enemies dead and dissolving in the clear acid that rested atop the black ocean. "So that was really good, wasn't it!"

"It was good, yes," Eliot said, "The waves are getting bigger, though. There's 400 massing about half a kilometer to the north."

Isoko said, "You've made a getaway plane yet?"

Eliot said, "I got the parts. Assembling can take a minute. I'm clearing off some stuff that got damaged by fliers now."

Something loud crashed to the right, and Isoko nearly jumped, but she saw the splashdown of a turret and she laughed at it instead. She breathed a bit, and then calmed.

Isoko gestured at the turret with her sword. "They got past you both, huh?"

"Two of them did," Eliot said, "It was enough to ruin one machine. I won't put the parts up there for them to get destroyed in the same way.

Isoko nodded. Soon, the real battle would start.

Mark said, "It's a group of 418, but it's also 40% of what they have left. We will survive this."

Isoko grinned as she pressed the button on the wall and looked up at the night sky.

Beyond the spotlights, and the lights trained on the sky, and all of the illuminated land around them, the sky was black and dotted with stars. The moon positively glowed up there, in the sky; a ball of platinum inscribed in glowing gold. The Demon City of Arakino.

Isoko thought, for a moment, about demons, and what demons could do for a person.

As one of the demon's lesser-regarded, but still important abilities, when a demon linked to a person, that person gained an astral body that was strong in all respects.

Just like Isoko's Platinum Body.

Isoko had never really thought about her Platinum Body in that way, but maybe... Maybe she *should* have thought about it like that. Like she was truly strong. She flicked her rapier through the air and it turned platinum in a down stroke, easily carving several inches into the stone at her feet.

She grinned as the gash in the stone healed over.

Eliot was on the job, and Mark was, too.

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Mark abandoned all pretense at careful killing when 418 goblins came for them from every direction, except for the slice of the north where the big tree grew.

With eyes closed, he sifted through the sky, linking to every heartbeat out there, and swaths of goblins died. The weakest first. The strongest next. The fliers fell from the sky and the strong ones faltered into acid baths. Blood turned to slick and goblins rushed over their falling fellows to get traction, to reach the base.

Mark became the wind, held to his body with the barest of tethers.

He tapped into the big tree and pulsed with life, drawing in all the goblins near the tree, and then elsewhere. The tree groaned as it grew fast on the lives Mark reaped from the horde. Bark healed over, and goblins died faster and faster.

The horde died and the tree gained half as much height as it already had, twisting into the sky with roots flickering out into the waters, into the goblin horde, grabbing them and drawing them deep. It even started to grab the living goblins. The north became a death zone, doing A Lot to protect the tower, but soon the tree would encroach on the tower, and become A Problem.

Mark cut off his connection to the tree when the tree started to grow directly toward the tower.

418 goblins had been reduced to 65 by then. They had reached the moat. They were aiming at Isoko. Isoko stared back at them from her platform where she danced, cutting them down. Mark was one with the air, with the Union of it all, and the goblins died. He helped Isoko when he could, but mostly he killed goblins, which was exactly what everyone was doing as much as they could.

Ten minutes after the combat started, it was over and the humans had won.

Mark blinked as he came back to himself, though he couldn't hear very well and he couldn't see very well, either. He breathed in the good, and exhaled the bad, his astral veins pulsing hard, black miasma threading away from him, like shadows clearing, and soon he could see again.

Mark blinked some more and looked down at the holo display, and at the world around him. The bunker was safe, right? Yeah. All the walls were intact, and the lights were on, and David was there by Eliot, who was fixing up some machines that had turned red on the display. Some goblins had gotten through, onto the roof.

Mark looked out at the cameras and saw Isoko on the roof, kicking a goblin away. For a moment, he thought he should have felt panic, but he was too relaxed right now. Too worn thin. He asked, "So some goblins got to the machines? We still okay?"

Eliot looked at Mark strangely.

Isoko chuckled. "You sound kinda threadbare there, Mark. *You* doing okay?"

Mark said, "I think I am. I think I woke the tree up, too." And then the truth of that statement slammed into his mind, as he fully woke up, as well. "Oh shit. I woke up the tree. Is it growing toward us?"

Eliot said, "Yes, but it stopped. I don't think you can use it again, Mark. It's already tapping at our base." He changed the holo display to show the red roots of the tree. Two really big roots were already growing this way. "Those two roots weren't there half an hour ago. It knows we're here."

Isoko said, "They're down to something like 500 goblins, right? Should we counter attack before they can replenish their numbers? Will they attack with only 500 left?"

Mark wasn't sure about any of that. He said, "If they come at us with newborns I can kill them without using the tree. The problem is the older ones who get up to a higher Power Level. It takes concentration to kill those ones."

Eliot said, "I could rebuild away from the tree in the morning... Though maybe not. Look."

Eliot flicked the map, and the map changed.

Everywhere nearby was tainted with some sort of color. Mostly goblin-blue. A bit of red for the wyverns. Green for the tree and to a remarkable distance, far beyond the underside of the tower and even a good hundred meters to the south. That thing... Mark had mostly awoken it. Damn.

Eliot said, "There's almost no place to build, inside of a kilometer. If we leave the base then we risk getting caught out in the open, and it won't be a small attack like before, that David saved us from. The goblins are all out there now, securing the land."

Isoko said, "We can defend this spot. You're still not using your Blood Union to inflict that killing, are you, Mark?"

Mark had considered that option, but he had dismissed it, because, "We need to keep up our Powers, and Blood Union is the best way to keep you in Full Platinum mode, and Eliot able to work his machines so well. Breath Union doesn't do that nearly as well, and all these other possible Unions I'm looking at in every battle are kinda... less solid than blood or breath. Good for moving around general ideas of combat, maybe some control of combat, too, but not much more than that."

Maybe if Mark was out there himself, in the thick of it, he could more accurately get into the flow of battle, and truly orchestrate the fight. But he was here, inside a bunker, feeling out goblins with ephemeral tendrils of Union, and working his astral body in disconnected ways. It was probably better this way, though. They needed big-killing power, and Isoko was doing well as bait. If Mark had to be bait, too, then he would have fucked up somewhere, he was sure.

Things were looking good, though, as long as the other goblins didn't attack.

He had achieved two big things tonight.

He was able to feel where creatures were with his Union, and he was able to move combatants around, like how Badaira and Lola had told him he could. Grand Healer Badaira wanted him to become a

commander of armed forces and city defense for good reason, while Lola wanted him to be an Inquisitor for other, just-as-good reasons.

Isoko said, “Try doing the death-think with blood Union, Mark. This is a training mission. We’re not going to die. We’re just going to fail if you can’t live up to your full potential.”

Mark winced... but yeah. He couldn’t use the monster tree anymore. It was already too close for comfort.

David spoke up, “I agree with Isoko. Though failure here will not be a simple thing to recover from, I am still confident I can get all three of you out of here should the need arise.” He stressed, “I would rather not do that. Please take this seriously.”

With a strong voice, Isoko said, “I am taking this extremely seriously. Thank you, Instructor.”

David didn’t comment.

Eliot said, “There are some things I could try. They’re more experimental than actual, though. Nuclear reactors with lightning dischargers can kill small goblins, but they’ll only paralyze the larger ones. That’s kind of... ambitious, though. Or perhaps a better idea...” Eliot said, “I can make a flying platform with the oils and plastics I’ve collected, and the plane parts I have stored upstairs. Maybe more of an offensive vehicle than an escape vehicle. We could go hunting.”

Mark liked the idea, but there was a problem—

Isoko spoke of it first, saying, “The actual, big wyverns will spot us if we’re not fast, and we won’t be fast, hunting from the air. You can’t make a real hovervan, can you?”

“I cannot,” Eliot said, “Those require special materials from Daihoon. Levistone and gravcrystal and a bunch of smaller things. There are lab-created alternatives, but I can’t make those, either, since we have no magical materials to start with, and I cannot turn monsters into magical materials, either. I can make a hover platform with some masking sound-makers and holographic mirage displays. It won’t be a fast

or strong vehicle. You won't be able to go Full Platinum, either. I'll be straining weight requirements, as is."

Mark asked, "How about a sometimes-flying platform? Something with spider legs that can set down anywhere?"

Eliot glanced at the holo display as he thought. Mark looked at the display, too.

The goblins were out there, but they weren't coming this way. Not yet.

Isoko spoke up into the silence, "I like that idea?"

Eliot started saying, "It's the same problem as power armor. I know David said something about that earlier in all of this, but all of this stuff is Power Level 0. Earth is Power Level 0. All of this steel breaks unless it's empowered by a person, and my stuff specifically cannot be empowered by me unless it's fully human-made.

"So me getting into a power armor is just asking to be trapped in a tin can that I cannot move, and which is eventually crushed against my body, as soon as the monsters touch it." Eliot looked to Mark, saying, "A flying platform can be taken down with rocks thrown by monsters, or by webbing cast through the air. Those spider goblins have webbing. The flying goblins can hold onto the spider goblins. We already saw that once, and they're not dumb. So a spider-like transport with legs that are in reach of the monsters? That's just asking to get those legs chopped out from underneath us.

"There are reasons why I haven't suggested a flying platform yet, and... And those reasons are myriad. And yeah. There's the actual-wyvern problem, too. They're out there. The long range sensors have picked up on them. But they're mostly day hunters. I'm sure we'll have to fight them once night is over, but Mark can probably kill one of those on his own... Might take him a while, though. They're strong. Body 6. And there won't be wyverns to use against other wyverns when we're fighting those."

So that was a lot.

Isoko paused pressing the button on the wall as she went, “Ahh.” And then she continued to press the button on the wall.

Mark asked, “So how about a spider with legs that are like... pillars that you can extend from plastic tanks that you keep on the platform, to continually make new legs?”

Eliot frowned a little as he thought.

Isoko said, “That’s the weight problem again, right?”

Mark asked, “Big jumping spider platform? Only stays aloft long enough to get to a location? How about parachutes that you aim fans at, like those paraglider things? Ever been in one of those? I went once with my Dad for...” Mark frowned. He shook his head. “Does that help with planning?”

Silence, save for the whir of computer fans downstairs, the burble of collecting oils beyond the plastic layer that separated floor 2 from 3, and the low droning of the air conditioning units blowing air through the space. The air smelled clean, and fresh, and Mark made sure that everyone felt that way too, even Isoko, who was outside of the space.

Eliot had added a few cooling fans to Isoko’s space out there, but it was a pretty nice night, all things considered, so Isoko had shut those small fan vents herself.

More silence.

Isoko asked, “How about just drones? A drone army? You said something about the spider goblins dropping lines, but how about you do that? Can you make mono-molecular kill-lines?”

Eliot said, “Those are banned for use on Earth and other places, and I *can* make them, but I’m not going to. They stick around forever, so they’re a war crime. I’ll do expanding degradable foam on bomb drones, instead. Should be able to trap up some gobbos for a little bit. Delay tactics.” Eliot smiled a little bit. He said, “Actually. Yeah! This is good.”

Mark glanced upstairs as a vat of the oil burst and then began transforming into plastic parts as Eliot's eyelids fluttered, his mind focused on his astral body control of his magic. In the corner of this second floor, a clear tube that led from the first floor to the third floor filled up with little metal bits, traveling on their way to the drones up above. Some camera drones and stationary cameras angled upward to watch the show.

Mark asked, "Are you running out of metals?"

Eliot said, "I have enough for one more big push and a get-away vehicle. We will need to go out and get more in the morning. It's kind of truly hard to go out and gather more metal through drones, or else I would be doing that. There're problems of efficiency in automatic systems all over the place, that I can only truly bridge with my Power, and car-cutting drones cross that line. Sending out car-cutting drones is nearly impossible. Sending out drones that can drop exploding foam bombs? Easy enough— Oh shit. They're sending that last 500 at us, aren't they?"

Mark whipped back toward the holo display. At 200 meters out they were surrounded by goblins on all sides, except for the direct north where the monster tree grew tall. They had been milling around at that distance for a while now. But now, they advanced.

Rapidly.

Running.

Mark's heart sunk a little.

And then Mark prepared himself to become an agent of death—

Eliot rapidly crunched numbers and said, "The big Power signatures are stopping at 190 meters! All the rest are advancing!"

Isoko chuckled, teased, "They figured out your max distance!"

As Eliot commented, "They figured that out on the third push."

Mark said, "I'm doing the blood kill, this time. It'll be hard to protect you from stray shit, Isoko, and your mind protection is going away when I do this, Eliot."

Isoko said, "Heard and understood!" She hefted up a big steel shield that was sitting to the side, saying, "Shields up!"

Eliot stared at the display, whispering, "Shields up."

Mark became one with the world.

Weeks ago by now, Mark had once seen the threads of the world when he was stretched thin on the first day of Healing Club, and when he had first connected to those cleaner plants, in that training room with Lola. In the first real goblin push, the first 100 goblins they sent after Isoko, Eliot, Mark, and David, Mark had caught glimpses of the world again.

Of the threads that bound them all.

Thinking of them as threads was incorrect.

Mark had figured that out fast once he got a real, gut need to figure it all out.

The threads were connections to the world, to each other. Force vectors, perhaps. Except they were more airy than that. Kinda ephemeral. Perhaps it was the stuff of astral bodies, or physicality, or everything all at once, taken together in a cacophony that could not be delineated, only described.

Mark was a weight upon the world, and so was everyone else, and so was the tower, and the tools that Eliot had made, and the tree under the ground, and the ground itself, and the goblins headed this way.

Mark could not feel the goblins right now. Not directly. They were too far away.

But they were focused on Mark, and his people, and his whole general existence in this tower.

He did not need to see them, to feel them.

Mark was like a kid, wrapped in blankets, hiding from the world, pretending that the monsters in the night could not get him if they could not see him. But they could still get him. The monsters in the dark pulled at that fabric, little hands pulling at threads in the black. Mark felt the *pressure* of their *need* long before they entered his range. They pulled at Mark with their desires.

Mark waited with the covers tight around his face, knife in his heart, for the monsters to appear out of the dark, to dare a single finger toward him, to step into the light—

There.

A thousand claws pulling at the fabric surrounding Mark, yanking his blanket away, revealing all the knives he had hidden under the covers.

Mark opened his eyes, and he saw the threads of the world.

Everything moved in slow motion.

Eliot wondered why they were out here, and if he could nap yet. He was already being affected by the nudges of the mind goblins.

Isoko spoke at Eliot through the radio, telling him that he needed to listen, and he needed to stay awake, and he needed to turn the lights back on, because Eliot had turned off the lights because, in his own words, it was time to sleep, right?

Obviously it was time to sleep.

The monsters wanted their prey asleep.

They were already attacking.

Mark saw those attacks in the air, in the threads. The mind magics of the mind goblins. Those attacks were not threads, but maybe more like clogs.

Everything moved so slowly.

But David moved in a normal timeframe as he stepped around the room, looking at Mark. He had picked up Eliot and moved him to the side, like a man moving in a normal time frame picking up frozen frame. Eliot was still sitting, half asleep, even though David had a hand on the wiry guy's shoulder, and Eliot was in the air.

It was freaky.

The goblins were there, at the edge of Mark's range.

There was no blue on the holo display, though. Eliot must have shut it off, strangely enough.

Mark didn't need the holo display, or the cameras, which were also off.

Mark realized a lot of things at that moment.

He was a part of a dance. The dance was in the breath, the blood, the very movement of life itself, and even in the mind, in the directed thoughts of himself and the mind goblins out there. Mark wondered, for a moment, if there was a 'Union of Thought', because if there was, then the goblins were certainly in a Union of Thought right now. They all wanted one thing.

The humans only wanted one thing, too.

Just from different directions.

The monsters wanted to live, and they wanted the humans to die.

The humans wanted to live, and they wanted the monsters to die.

Mark said, “But I am the arbiter of that sort of thing, in this place, in this time.

“And so,

“The humans will live,

— resilience, good, vein integrity

“And everything else will die,

— weakness, bad, vein decay

“Life to the humans, death to all monsters.”

- - - -

David watched a miracle and he tried not to run from it.

Mark sat on a stone bench in the dim lights of the stone room, and his eyes glowed white, while his heart beat black as night. Veins of utter miasma shot through the world itself, connecting David and

Eliot and Isoko to Mark in a moment that would forever be etched on David's memory. Perhaps he was the only one capable of truly appreciating what happened, since it happened so fast, Eliot was incapacitated, and Isoko was outside.

Eliot's cameras caught it, for sure, but it was over in a flash.

Black lightning extended out of Mark in every direction, touching everything, coiling through the ground, instantly killing the monster tree, and then passing on into the distance. David watched the lightning spread beyond cameras that could not capture it fast enough, well enough, so David punched through the wall and stepped outside.

He stood under the light and watched a sky of black lightning skitter throughout the goblins on the rooftops and the goblins flying in the air. Black lightning crashed into bushes and the normal trees and the fish in the lake and the grasses on the ground. It started in the north, since Mark had correctly deduced that he had needed to kill the tree, and then he swept in a counterclockwise manner, using his full, directional range to grab and kill. In a flash of thought, Mark had completed an entire circling of the sky. Mark's Union was a fast thing, moving at the speed of thought, for he had realized one of the truer powers of Union; the ability to connect to the dance of electricity in the brains of monsters, and life itself.

Perhaps, if Mark hadn't been tutored so well then it might have taken him a year to get here. Or maybe he never would. Mark seemed rather capable, though, so of course he would get here.

David watched as black tendrils touched goblin minds and eradicated those minds from existence. It didn't take much to kill a goblin if you were truly powerful, and Mark was already there. The problem with goblins was that they were tenacious, and Mark was not getting the distant ones, and he was already faltering from astral body strain.

David wondered if Freyala would command him to kill Mark now.

It was not outside of possibilities, but David hoped not. He liked the kid. David had doubted that Mark would get here this fast, but Lola had told him that Mark was going to get here faster than any of them were ready, and that he needed to make peace with that. The Collective already knew what was going to happen, and they had given their tentative approval.

Lola certainly wanted the boy alive. She felt way too much guilt over what had happened with Addashield.

David felt some guilt, too, but the Collective had already decided that she had no guilt for her part in the shitshow that was the end of Addashield's life, and now that the dragon was around, the Collective was 'very happy' with the outcome. They were definitely looking for ways to take out the dragon should the need arise, though.

And Mark was already pointed that way.

David suspected that Freyala would be truly happy with this outcome, with this much advancement from Mark, this fast. And if not, then she would tell him.

At full speed, fast as he could go, David watched the sky for a full 5 minutes of personal time; the threads of black woven among the dark, and the light.

He could *almost* see the world as Freyala must see it.

David grinned at that thought.

Gradually, but also rather quickly, David rejoined the normal flow of time, slowing down so the world could speed up. Rapidly, Mark's black veins faded away, and flying goblins began to fall out of the sky, while the monster tree's trunk cracked, its branches fell, and it finished dying, having never really lived. The leaves of the thing were already twisted and broken black things, and the trunk was not far behind. David nodded at that; the tree was useful, but it was a monster, too.

Mark collapsed from strain, of course. David saw that coming from a while away.

Eliot freaked the fuck out, screaming about a hole in the wall and why was he laying in bed and all sorts of things that it was normal to freak out about when confronted by mind monsters.

Isoko calmly asked, "What happened?"

David was already standing next to Mark, healing Mark from his small, internal wounds. He was healing fast; it was mostly just astral body strain, and Mark had Healthy Body. Mark would be fine after a while.

David said, "Mark cleared out almost all the goblins then he fainted from overstrain." He glanced down at the holo display that Eliot was frantically trying to reestablish. It looked like Mark had killed almost everything out there, which was good. David said, "You have two choices. Wait for Mark to get back up, which looks like it might take a day, or risk going out there to hunt down the remaining goblins right now, which looks like about... 30-ish. The corrupter goblin is surely among one of those. Probably a mind goblin, too, and neither of you have a way to truly defend from that without Mark. But if you let them go, then they'll come back stronger than ever.

"Because they won't marshal forces against you three like they did tonight, with only 1300 goblins. They'll go out on a biting spree, biting everything they possibly can, spreading far and fast and then coming back here with an army of *thousands*."

Isoko stepped through the open wall, saying, "We relocate while we can."

Eliot flinched when Isoko appeared like a shadow in the hole in the wall, and then he chuckled, sighed, and said, "I'm checking the scanners. The goblins scattered in every direction. David is right; they're going to just start biting monsters and recouping losses as fast as they can. Every historical record of something like this happening only makes the goblins more eager to kill whatever hurt them this much."

Isoko asked, "We relocating, or not?"

"Uhh... ! Well..." Eliot said, looking at the scanners, tapping away at the air to focus himself. "It appears... Oh. Mark killed everything in the whole area. There's... oh. No life except us within 150 meters in every direction. Further?" Questioningly, "He killed the grass, too?" He looked up to David.

David grinned. "It was a miracle of his own making."

Eliot paused.

Isoko stared at Mark—

Something loud crashed outside and Isoko whipped around. It was just the monster tree, further breaking apart. Isoko stared outward for a little while as she looked out at the black sludge ocean, the slippery acid on top, and then she said to Eliot, “Make a mobile base that we can move elsewhere and set down before the sun comes up and the wyverns turn active.”

Eliot said, “I don’t think we can. Some of the goblins are in place out there, watching from far away. They’d go after us if we ran.” Eliot looked to Isoko. “We can stay here but I need metals, Isoko.”

Isoko made a decision, then said, “Anything in the nearby square?”

“Four streets to the north, past the tree,” Eliot pointed at the holo display, saying, “Here. It looks like a collapsed garage. You and I can go after it while Mark recovers—” He looked to David. “A full day?”

“Maybe 18 hours,” David said.

Eliot told Isoko, “We can survive here if we get more metals, but we can’t wait for Mark to wake up.”

Isoko looked to David. “Odds on us dying out there without Mark’s mental defenses?”

David said, “Depending on how fast you go, then it's anywhere from 80% survival rate, to 20% if you go slow, at all.”

David almost spoke of using holographic cloaking fields, but they were learning fast, and—

Eliot pulled some drones up and they flickered with holograms. With a grin, Eliot stood up, saying, “We can increase those odds by sending holograms in every direction, and going fast.”

David heard something spraying outside, so he took a quick peek to see what it was. Eliot was spraying all of the nearby oil/acid slick with orange neutralizing agent. With the orange drops almost locked still in the air, for David was moving fast, David took a wider glance around the space, walking briskly to check on the goblins he knew to be out there.

They were watching, but mostly just the young ones, left as hive mind tethers; not any real dangerous ones. If the kids triggered the goblins to chase them, then he would rescue the kids, but hopefully the goblins would go after the false trails, and hopefully Eliot would remember to make the oil out there splash with some downdrafts from the cameras. Those goblins had very, very good sight, and they weren't stupid.

He stepped back inside and rejoined the normal timeframe.

Eliot said, "Soon as the neutralizing agents are done, I can send the false trails out at the same time as us. They'll even tap the ground like us if we were really running. Should make those goblins out there think we're actually running."

As the two kids made final plans to run for it, David almost spoke up about how Eliot was only making flying drones show Isoko and himself, and not including Mark in the false trails, or as a fake image in their real dash across the kinda-slippery ground. He should have included Mark, because they would have recognized that Mark was the one who did the black lightning death, and if he wasn't there, then they were extra vulnerable.

But this was a learning experience, and sometimes action was better than explaining everything to each other, and yet, in a kind of expected way, the goblins saw that Eliot and Isoko had dashed off to the north, and they had seen that Mark was not with them. The goblins decided to attack, but they were still far away.

David moved back and forth between Isoko and Eliot, as they crashed into the car park and started bashing shit and gathering metals, and the scanner in the base that showed goblins converging on their locations. They had correctly figured out that Isoko and Eliot had 'lost the member of their team that had killed all the goblins', and now they were circling back, all of them, to try and kill Isoko and Eliot...

Hmm.

David looked at the scanner, and saw that... nope.

The big goblins were staying away. They were continuing on to the normal goblin plan of killing and transforming anything that moved in order to recoup losses. The goblins going after Eliot and Isoko were opportunistic killers. One mind goblin did go after Eliot and Isoko, though. Just one.

If all of the goblins and the corrupter goblin had turned, then Eliot and Isoko would have had a confrontation with them. But as it was...

David watched as Isoko sliced a diving goblin in half with one hand and grabbed a suddenly-sleeping Eliot with the other, throwing him into the cart full of supplies and then pushing him fast, back toward base.

Isoko was immune to the mind monsters now, which was good for her...

The mind goblin, and most of the goblins with it, decided to turn around and return to the 'recoup losses' plan.

Back in the base, Eliot slammed awake and Isoko chuckled, talking about risks and rewards.

Eliot tried not to freak out, but he was freaking out a lot.

David thought it a good lesson.

Eliot should not be out in the wilds at all. He was too useful to humanity and his power was directly countered by all the monsters of the world. It was good that he was scared. Perhaps he would forget his whole bardic career thing and go back to Citadel, or maybe to some city somewhere. Anywhere, in any human place, would be better than out with the goblins and the monster trees and all the rest. Humanity needed Eliot bored and successful in a city more than it needed Eliot out there in the wilds, dying.

Isoko would do very well out in the wilds, though.

She was smiling as she spoke of goblins raining from the sky.

At least they had gotten a bunch of metals.

Eliot started sorting through it, but he had to throw half of it out as monster-touched.

Mark slept soundly.

Mark woke up all at once and violently, his heart slamming in his chest, beating out a drum of Union, drawing in resilience from the world and giving it back weakness in return. He felt Eliot and Isoko and David before his eyes registered their presence.

And then he saw they were eating soup around a table, and Mark had woken up on a bed sat to the side of the room.

No goblins.

No danger.

Just... soup.

Isoko grinned. "Soup's hot!"

Mark groaned and then tried to breathe in sustenance and—

He started coughing as some foul *everything* invaded his lungs. He hacked out dark sludge and switched to breathing purity/impurity, and that worked just fine.

Mark coughed a few times as he said, "Fuck. Did I blight the land?"

"You did," David said, and then he sipped his soup.

Isoko said, "Eliot managed to make a fishing drone so we're having fish soup while the goblins are running everywhere out there, biting everything in a mad dash to get strong enough to overwhelm us. We've had to fend off a few small attacks since then, but just the roaming kind, from second generation goblins that don't know who we are in this tower." She handed Mark some soup with lots of flaked fish floating in an oily broth.

Mark took the bowl. It smelled good while it felt warm in his hands. "Thanks."

"Thanks for the purification," Isoko said. "And here I thought I was gonna need the shower Eliot made!"

"It's a fine shower," Eliot said, eating his soup. "It's got jets from four angles. *Great* shower, even. I could sell shower enclosures and make good money."

Isoko laughed.

David tried not to grin.

Mark was confused for a moment. "How long was I out? I see the sun is up."

Eliot looked at the clock. "Almost 11 hours. It's just past noon and there are 3,500 goblins out there and counting."

... Mark loudly went, "Uhhh-huh!"

Isoko said, "We have a plan."

Mark felt his hackles lower. He asked, "Good plan?"

“Workable,” Isoko said, wagging a hand like she was unsure. “It’s the hopping-flying-spider-fortress plan. Basically, we just go around, hopping and flying from goblin location to goblin location, and you kill things while Eliot navigates and I pilot the thing. If a wyvern comes, then we kill that thing, too., but hopefully we can duck down below the buildings fast enough that the wyverns don’t see us. Other than that! Kill everything that moves. Maybe if it’s not moving, too.”

Mark sipped his soup as he thought about that, as he opened himself astrally to the world. He couldn’t really see the threads right now, but he could half-see them. Mostly feel them, in a way that was not sight at all. What he *saw*, was Isoko, Eliot, and David sitting around a table. What he *felt*, was the presence of the three people he was focused on, and a near-absolute absence of all land outside, and everywhere within range.

There was no life out there at all.

Stuff still moved, though.

Mark looked up, with his actual eyes. Eliot’s machines burbled oils into vats, while computer screens and holo displays showed the local area, and cameras showed a whole bunch of black sludge covering most of the land out there... Oh. And a few blue goblins in the far distance. Maybe a kilometer away in most directions—

A few were only 300 meters away, though...

Hmm.

Mark extended his Union in the direction of the nearest one, to the North—

There it was.

In the north, on a tower of its own, stuck to the side and looking this way. Mark couldn’t see it at all, but he could feel it. Sense its general orientation. It was pulling in this direction, looking at this tower, trying to get to the people in this tower.

Mark killed— He stopped.

He *almost* killed the goblins looking at them.

Mark asked, “So I think my range has increased a lot. I hit a few goblins 300 meters out to the far north and west. Should I kill them? I think we could pretend to be weak, right? Make them come to us?”

Eliot raised an eyebrow. “I’d like to get it done today, if we can. Not sure if we can, though. Some of the goblins just *took off*, you know. That’s their whole thing. They go up against strong opponents and if they win then they progress, but if they fail then they scatter to the wind, running and running and biting along the way. It’s like a genetic, instinctive switch. Some of them won’t stop running and biting until they die to some monster out there.” He added, “If we move at a slow rate, based on previous kill rates, it’ll take 2 days to track them all down, based on average estimates and what long range scans picked up.”

Mark nodded. “That doesn’t sound good.”

“It’s not,” Eliot said.

David said, “We’re close to the point that this is a failed training mission and real authorities get involved.”

Isoko said, “I’d like to get up and running in a few hours, and if we can do that, then we won’t fail the mission, but you’re the only one that got any sleep. Can you do the no-sleep stuff again? Then we can all wake up?”

Mark rapidly said, “Of course! I think... I think the sludge out there is biodegradable?”

Eliot said, “Yeah it is. Makes great fertilizer after a few months out in the sun, but fungi can digest it right away.”

Mark focused on a Union of resilience/weakness, focusing on whatever plant life might be out there, along with whatever fungi might be lurking as spores in the wind, or on the—

There.

That did it.

Just by being connected to a larger system, the spores in the area began to grow like a wave of change upon the black ocean of sludge... which was more like 3 inches of black, extending out about 200 meters in every direction.

Mark glanced at the cameras in order to see what he could only feel.

Life sprouted from death in a panoply of shapes and colors, like a mat of hair stretching through the sun-baking black and then popping up with buttons and ridges and horns of mushrooms of every color, shape, and size. Some of them rapidly ate the other ones and grew taller, before bursting into spores of their own, to spread on the wind and rapidly decay the world into other sorts of nutrients.

Eliot added spore filters to the air conditioning in the tower, and Mark didn't grow stuff inside the tower.

But outside, Mark grew mushrooms while he ate fish soup, and talked about what had happened while he was out of it. Soon, a few stray grass seeds that had been buried wherever, sprouted, and grasses colonized the mats of dead mushroom land. Dandelions sprouted and seeded the air, spreading far, and that's when Mark started breathing in sustenance and breathing out deprivation along with Isoko, Eliot, and David.

David was fine, because he was keeping himself active and whole.

But Eliot and Isoko instantly started to look better.

Eliot sighed out, "Oh that's the stuff."

Isoko asked, "Spider legs up in an hour? Half an hour? How long do you need, Eliot?"

"The parts are mostly made," Eliot said, eyes half-lidded, as he typed away at an invisible keyboard. "I need to put them together and finish out the various internal systems. Half an hour."

Isoko walked over to a bed, saying, "I'm going to lay down for half an hour, then. Mark! You're on watch!"

Mark said, "Absolutely. Thanks for watching out while I... er... I crashed out on a mission, didn't I? That's not good, actually. Sorry."

Isoko waved an arm. "And you killed most of the problem before you crashed. It's good." She laid down and was out like a light within moments.

She must have been running truly hard.

Mark told Eliot, "I can watch over you for half an hour, too."

Eliot smiled, eyes still half-lidded as he tapped away at the air. "Thank Freyala. I *will take* that offer, but when I'm done here... 10 minutes. Maybe 5 if I hurry... Oh gods no. I'm just gonna lay down."

Mark chuckled. "Sleep well."

Soon, David was the only one still awake with Mark.

Mark glanced over at Eliot and Isoko. "They ran hard, huh."

"They did," David said, "You all learned news tricks last night. Let's talk about what you learned, though."

Mark recalled a conversation he had with Lola one time, about what sorts of people in Freyala's church get what sorts of Union Powers.

Mark said, "Life has rhythms, and Union uses them like a flow controller. The main versions of Union Freyala gives out are Breath, for almost all acolytes. Then comes Blood, for priests and most accomplished people. But last night, I think I touched upon the one that Inquisitors get. The main flow. The ability to connect to the electrical signals of the brain; a Union of Brain." Mark asked, "Is that it? Union of Breath, Blood, and Brain?"

David smiled softly. “Lola will want to tell you a lot more about that last one because I think you have it right, but also kinda wrong. I’ve always thought of it more like the Union of Life. Life, itself, is a flow. Your method certainly concentrated on the lightning-like aspect of it, though. Do you remember much of what you actually did?”

Mark had a lot of little, unfinished thoughts about David calling what Mark had done a ‘Union of Life’. He still thought of what he had done as electrical dancing in the brain.

But anyway, Mark said, “I remember veins reaching out and stabbing through... everything. What I took from them seemed to make the attack stronger, in turn, too.”

David nodded. “You can’t really do something like that unless you focus on the brain—”

“Ah ha! The brain was correct!”

David chuckled. “Again. Lola would want to talk to you about that. *But...* That’s your trump card, Mark. Try not to use it too much on other people. On monsters? It’s fine, because you can’t kill yourself with it and monsters you want dead. But try not to use it on other people too much. It’s too easy to have stray thoughts enter your mind while using Union of Life, and you might accidentally kill someone. Stray thoughts are deadly.”

Mark... understood where David was coming from, but he thought David was wrong. It had not been easy to use Union of Brain. Mark said, “I’m pretty sure that it would be hard to kill an enemy with Union of Brain if the enemy wasn’t wishing so much for our own death.”

David raised an eyebrow. “... Maybe you’re right. But you blighted the land 250 meters in every direction.” He added, “My point is: there are a lot of reasons why Union of Life is only given out to the most trusted people in the clergy. It’s all about action speed.

“Union of Breath is slow, taking 5-ish seconds for one cycle. 2 seconds if you want to get fast with it.

“Union of Blood is your usual use of the Power. It’s a cycle per second. 2 cycles when you get really going, your heart beating fast.

“Union of... Brain, is incredibly fast, functioning at the speed of thought. That speed is deadly fast. I think the quikipedia articles call it a Union of Life, too, but yes. It’s fast.

“You should grow used to always having Union of Blood active with that half-healing-half-protective thing you got going on, while using Union of Brain against monsters, only. That’s how Inquisitors are trained in it. Union of Breath is something that you switch up and use as needed, all the time.” David added, “I guess what I’m saying is... When you start experimenting on your abilities, Union of Breath is what you use to test out a new way to use Union. Union of Blood is for something that you know how to use well. Only ever use Union of Brain when you know —*truly know*— what you’re doing.”

Oh.

That was a good way to think of it, huh?

Mark could actually start doing experiments with this stuff, too, couldn’t he?

Mark had another thought. “What if I wanted to use Union of Brain more? Make it just a third vector for casual Union work? Like the resilience/weakness thing?”

David raised an eyebrow again. “That takes incredible mental discipline, and I wouldn’t recommend it for any non-Minder people. If a Minder chooses to get Chosen, then they usually end up as an Inquisitor, or they’re not Chosen at all. Any sort of additional brain power makes Union truly strong, Mark... Or maybe you need to think about signing up for the Advanced Healing Club. Do you want to be a Grand Healer, like Badaira?”

Mark was a little surprised where that answer went. “I’m not sure about being a Grand Healer... But healing is good, yeah?”

David grinned. He nodded. “Healing is good, yes.”

“You know? I’ve wondered something about Unity. It’s True Healing, isn’t it? Or is it not? De-aging healing, I mean.”

David didn't know what to make of that question for a moment, and then he shook his head. "No. The True Healers of the world are all— Are *mostly* all on a list, and not many of them are actual Union users. Very few. There's always a few new True Healers that come out of Tutorial every year and choose to stay off of the list, but then they're always found out and abused for their Power. When that happens an Inquisitor of some variety is usually called on to rescue them, and then they get rescued and asked if they want to go on the protected list. They usually choose to get on the protected list at that point in time."

Mark was surprised again. "I didn't know the Inquisitors did that."

"We do a lot of the cleanup of humanity. The dirty work, outside of city walls and sometimes inside city walls, too, when we get clearance from those cities. Usually Hearthswell Inquisitors work the healer list, though, unless the healer gets taken out into the wilds, and then a Freyalan Inquisitor usually steps in. Freyalan Inquisitors are only called on to do those rescues and whatnot in the first place if we already have contacts with those True Healers."

Mark thought about a lot of small things.

He had always heard that his Uncle Alexandro, Dad's brother, was a True Healer, but the last time Mark had seen the guy, Alexandro he looked, well, 45. Which was his real age.

Mark asked, "So what is Union classified as? Not True Healing?"

"Union is High Healing," David said, "No aging or crippling side effects. A lot of different cultures use different words that end up overlapping a lot and confusing people. High Healing, Supreme Healing, Ultra Healing. Those are all the same sort of category I've heard of for Union. We do try to stick to using 'True Healing' to mean perfect, de-aging healing, though."

"I'll just ask— Is my Uncle Alexandro a True Healer, then? I always heard him called that but I'm wondering, now."

"Yup. He's on the list. He switched over to Freyalan oversight two weeks ago, actually, so that we would give him more information on what's happening with you. You should call him again."

Mark laughed. It was just so weird having people up in his business... He smiled. "Yeah... I should..."
Mark frowned a little. "Why is he 45 then?"

And why did he live in a normal house?

Uncle Alexandro was rich, yeah, but not stupid rich, like a True Healer should be?

Actually.

Forget all of that.

Mark had more questions than answers right now, and they were in a battle zone.

"I don't know why he's still 45," David said, shrugging. "Why is Holy Mother Garin 95-ish? *That's* the one I don't understand. Glorious Man has been 35 for a few years now, but he's probably going to stay there for a hundred years or more. He'll probably be the first human who gets a demon-touched lifetime without being demon-touched. Nova Nexus has been 36 for 40 years, and Echo has been 35 for 30-something. Maybe your Uncle likes being 45? I haven't inquired that deeply into that matter."

The room fell to a silence, except for all the noises of normal things.

Mark asked, "How likely are you going to need to call in the big guns for this training mission?"

David said, "I'd have given you guys a 50% chance of success in the beginning, but Eliot is really coming into his power and Isoko is proving to be an unstoppable object when she really gets going. Both broke tier 4 a few hours ago. You broke tier 5 while you were sleeping."

Mark was surprised. He looked around, grabbed a pair of Eliot's scanner glasses, and looked at himself. He flicked through the buttons and soon he arrived on a personal tier scanner.

Tier 3 Body, 4 Shaper, 3 Mind, 5 Natural, 3 Soul, 2 Arch.

Mostly in the middle ranges for each of those, too.

“Huh! Healthy Body got up past tier 2?” Mark asked.

David nodded. “Tri Talent expectations aren’t always in line with what actually happens, as evident by Healthy Body getting above PL25.”

“... Could I eventually get Tactile Telekinesis with it?”

“Now *that* would be unexpected. TT comes about from a brawny being able to expand the scope of their natural enhancement; the 2.5x strength multiplier for most normal brawnies. The higher that multiplier, the easier it is for a person to gain TT. You have no multiplier at all.”

Mark nodded as David confirmed what he already knew to be within expectations.

Mark still tried to bend a spare steel spoon sitting on the table. It bent, sure. But not easily. Mark was not that strong!

Mark moved on.

He touched a part of his Power that he hadn’t gotten to use, but at such a rapid increase to every part of his astral body, his Shaper Power had also skyrocketed under new strength, so...

Yes.

There.

Mark felt grains of adamantium in his bones. One grain was in his left shin. Two were in his spine, near the top. Four little grains were in his rib cage. A whopping... 7? 8? grains were in his pelvis.

That was a lot of adamantium, but also, not much at all. It would take a full year of growing the biometal in his bones before it reached even a fingernail’s size worth of material; maybe 15 grams of the stuff.

David added, “Tier 3-ish for most other things. Give you another half a year and you’ll fully grow into your Power, as far as Power Level goes. Or you could go lift that vial of adamantium you have in the Vault and build some stronger astral muscles that way, and a lot faster.”

Mark grinned. “Gotta get those gains!”

David smirked. “Getting to the peak of your astral body is only part of the process of growing as a monster killer, though. The main half, the larger half, is actually killing monsters, and learning how to do that better and better. Learning how to use Union is the work of a lifetime.”

Mark nodded; he understood what David was saying.

Mark wasn’t going to try and use his adamantium now; not here in the field, where Eliot was recording everything. He would have needed to explain where he had gotten the stuff, when it wasn’t normal at all for a person to grow the biometal themselves— Well. Mostly. Mithralkinetics often grew mithral themselves, but adamantiumkinetics did not naturally grow adamantium, most of the time. That ability was in the realm of monsters... And one dragon that still hadn’t chosen a name for himself.

... Mark ignored that part of his life right now, and focused on the present.

Mark continued to breathe in sustenance and breathe out deprivation, using all the life he had helped to grow out there on the black goo slick from all the dead goblins and the tree, while his heart beat with a Union of resilience and weakness. He also finished up some more fish soup. It was good to have something in his belly.

David ate another bowl himself.

Mark asked small questions while Eliot and Isoko slept, like, “How is it, moving so fast? Do your clothes burn up?”

David said, “I learned how to get real good with tactile telekinesis, real fast.”

Mark laughed.

David grinned.

It was 2 in the afternoon by the time Eliot got his 'citywalker' completed.

By 2:36, he had made a version that didn't break when it walked.

Mark regretted his suggestion to build this thing.

The whole thing rocked like a mother fucker as it moved, its 10-legs snapping into the ground, into the buildings, and especially when it ducked down low and turned on the big fans overhead, to stretch out the big parachutes. It did that right now, and Mark held on tight as fuck to his chair, his stomach dropping into his pelvis as the whole citywalker dipped down real low—

A spring clicked.

Legs, spread wide, came together under the vehicle.

Mark exclaimed, "OH FUUUUUU..." his voice trailing away, as everything suddenly weighed so much more and the citywalker leapt into the air.

The citywalker pushed itself in the air with its own fans and parachutes.

Isoko laughed maniacally as she gripped the steering wheel, her platinum feet locked into the machine and her waist strapped into a holder that kept her at the controls. “What are you scared of, Mark! We’re just traversing the city!”

Mark sat in a heavily cushioned and protected chair at the back of the control room, surrounded by plastic that hid a bunch of gears and engines and a lot of stuff that he only barely understood. Eliot sat in a chair beside Mark, fully strapped in, keeping the machine together, his eyes half-lidded. A big holo display in front of them showed off the world around them.

Mark could see through the plastic overhead, and the plastic in front of them. The city looked like a ruin, and they were so high up, and everything was so light-feeling, and he couldn’t see all the stuff behind them, and there was a *lot* of stuff behind them. Eliot had packed up everything that he could from the tower, except for the stone itself—

The citywalker hit the apex of its jump, a good hundred meters above the city, and it started descending. Slowly, and then way too fast.

Mark’s stomach was in his throat now.

Isoko laughed, “Prepare for landing!”

Mark held on tight as overhead giant fans billowed out the parachutes. They were not enough to paraglide at all, and Mark was pissed at that. “Isn’t there some sort of ballooning thing you can do, Eliot?!”

And then the citywalker did a controlled crash onto the ground, some of its legs snapping off inside of a building, and the others pressing down onto the street, the whole thing balancing as fast as Eliot could make it balance. Shock absorbers did their best.

Mark refused to vomit.

The only reason they weren’t all paste was because Mark was heavily working Union right now.

Eliot grinned as he fully opened his eyes, saying, “We did better that time!”

Isoko rapidly pulled down some levers and then pushed up some more, making the ‘spring gauge’ to the side rapidly rise, as she cackled, “Here we go again, boys!”

Mark looked out the side of the main viewing window.

David was out there, standing on a roof, watching them. He had refused to get into the citywalker.

Mark tried not to be jealous.

Mark reiterated, “How about a balloon, Eliot!”

“What? Like a hot air balloon? No no,” Eliot said, “Balloons are so slow!”

“Stable, though!” Mark tried, just as the spring gauge got full again. Mark steeled himself, rapidly checking the holo display and also the weft of the world. He found 36 odd goblins nearby, all of them coming their way, and 2 wyvern dogs, running away as fast as they could from the giant mechanical spider thing. They all fell, dead, and Mark refocused, saying, “We need to be less jumpEEEEEEEE—”

Isoko had pressed the button, and Mark’s stomach went back into his pelvis.

Isoko laughed as she directed the fans overhead to push the parachutes toward some direction or something. Mark barely cared about directions. He was on a different mission.

Isoko announced, “Big clump up ahead! Let’s get ‘em!”

Mark refused to vomit.

Mark stepped out of the wreckage of the citywalker, brushing blood out of his eyes. A few breaths of purity and that went away. Behind him, a platinum hand shot out of the plastics, and then a moment later the plastics began to melt and recombine, as Eliot groaned.

They had killed two wyverns, 2000 goblins, and a thousand other smaller monsters since they started hopping all around Rome. The smart goblins ran from the citywalker, though. They'd all come flooding in tonight, for sure. Maybe they could have caught up to the smart goblins, but the walker had the *most fucking awful* steering that Mark had *ever* fucking experienced in his *whole* fucking...

Mark took a deep breath and tried not to be mad.

Isoko said, "Welp! The third wyvern had been too much, I see!"

Eliot happily said, "It breathed fire! But I can do better on the parachutes next time!"

The third wyvern had eventually gotten them; yes.

Mark had eventually killed it, though, while Isoko did a whole lot of dodging and Eliot shot some ineffectual sticky glue at it. The stick glue had blinded it, at least! So it hadn't done *exactly* nothing.

And now the wyvern rotted on the ground over there. Blood drooled from every orifice; not spurting anymore. It had taken a full 3 minutes to kill the fucker.

They were lucky to be alive.

David stepped near them, saying, "You're lucky to be alive."

Mark burst out laughing.

Eliot said, "I had faith in Mark! We were fine!"

Isoko said, “The steering could use some more work, Eliot. I was thinking bigger parachutes. Maybe some actual wings on the spidercrawler, too.”

“I’ve been thinking about the wings again,” Eliot said, “They didn’t work so well—”

As the sun started to set in the distance, Mark said, “Can we *please* try the hot air balloon now? Please?” Mark had already suggested it once, when they first got into the half-flying death trap, but they had shot him down. He had thought of a better argument in the last half an hour, and maybe it would work, this time. “You could even paint the sides with advertisements for your channels.”

Eliot went from dislike to deeply interested in a flash. “OHHHH!”

Isoko rolled her eyes. “I’m still piloting. That shit is fun. I think I want to get a proper pilot’s license. Can you make the balloon *fast*, though?”

“There are many things I can try,” Eliot said, thinking.

Mark smiled as he said, “And here we are, learning things about ourselves and the world. It’s just so grand.”

Soon, as the sun started to set, and as Mark killed the constant waves of monsters that came their way, before they even saw the monsters, Eliot smashed a plastic bottle full of bubbly oil on the brow of ‘Citywalker Mark 5’, and the whole thing lifted off with them inside. With a balloon that over matched the size of the carriage by 20 times over, and looking like a proper dirigible, Citywalker 5 floated in the air like an unmaintained hovercar.

It rocked. It swung. It had problems.

It was loads better than before.

The outside was even layered with holograms, shining brightly upon the world, taunting all the goblins who could see it, which was a lot. There were even words spoken through loudspeakers. It was a display of cartoon humans shaking hands with cartoon goblins, and, at David’s suggestion, Eliot had the cartoon

goblins voluntarily remove their fangs after the handshake. It was a particular insult among most goblins to call themselves fangless, apparently.

This had the desired effect among the goblins.

The city positively boiled with them, all of them racing their way, some through the sky on wyvern-like wings, most across the ground.

Eliot added 'successful' goblin attacks to the illusionary display, having the fliers 'get into' the dirigible and disrupt the display, and having the dirigible 'drop down' to 'crash' into a tower so the goblins on the ground could 'get in'. But, in truth, Mark dropped them all before they got close and Citywalker 5 never crashed at all. Eliot shot acids at them, and some fast-growing mushrooms began to pile up on the corpses very quickly, which was enough to hide the truth of the assault from most eyes.

Isoko pressed a big blue button that was labeled, 'I'm doing my part!'. Little lights flickered every time she did that, and a ticker ticked up. Every hundred button presses was a dinging bell, and she was nearing 20,000 presses. She smiled.

Half an hour of killing later and there were only a hundred goblins left.

They looked to be holding back, though. Reevaluating.

Mark said, " 'Repair' the ship and have us 'crash' into that big empty space over there, by the toxic slimes in the Vatican. They'll think we're running. I think they'll take the bait if Isoko drops out and runs away from the ship, too. You and I can stay in here and pretend to be dead. Isoko... you can kill all of them, right? I'll keep you alive, of course."

Eliot asked, "Can you deal with the toxic miasma in the air?"

"Oh yeah," Mark said, 75% confident.

They had already ventured close to the Vatican space, where toxic slimes ruled the world. The ones at the edge were tier 3 Shaper-Power slimes. Mostly acid-like toxins, according to Eliot, so Union could

clear them up easily enough. Venturing into that space would be a last resort to get away from the goblins, though, so the goblins should believe that they would crash into that space to get away.

Isoko smiled brightly. "Let's do it!"

Ten minutes later, pretending to limp through the sky and with goblins trailing in the distance, hanging back in the night, the ship crashed into the big empty circle in what used to be some sort of parade ground in the Vatican area. It wasn't far into the space at all, and the slimes here were pretty sparse.

The area was a white road-like space surrounded by a ring of stone buildings that were all half ruined. There were four toxic slimes nearby. Most of the slimes were in the surrounding buildings. That made this space one of the few that could be considered 'safe' in the area.

The slimes rested in the bottom of small craters here and there, and all throughout the buildings, like rounded pools of glowing yellow gelatin the size of cakes. They tainted the night air with deadly yellow fumes. There was no green life. The slimes were pretty much immobile, too, resting only where they were, and barely moving at all. They didn't need to move.

They filter fed on ambient mana. They didn't even eat organics, or multiply all that fast.

Mark kinda wondered why they were everywhere around here, if they were so bad at multiplying and eating. The only thing they were good at was killing anything that came near them, which, Mark supposed, was good enough.

Mark felt the toxic miasma in the air even before he connected to it with Union. He winced.

David winced, too. "That's a strong toxin."

Eliot read out a few different things, "Ouch. They're tier 5 up in here, but they're Kinetic-based, so it shouldn't be that hard for you." He looked at Mark and pointed at the readout, saying, "You need to kill this one and this one. Isoko can fight there if those ones are dead. Keep this one nearest to us alive, though. It might make the goblins not approach us."

Mark said, "Sounds good to me."

Mark focused.

According to Lola, subduing a miasma-based creature that poisoned the air and made Union truly difficult to use, was rather easy, once you knew the trick. Actually killing a miasma-based creature was a lot more difficult, but these particular slimes were Kinetic slimes, which made them not-so-strong against Union, which was a Natural Power.

Mark focused his Union upward, into the air above, away from the toxins on the ground. He breathed in purity from the world and breathed out impurity into the world, into the air above the miasma, cleansing himself and his immediate area and sending impurity toward the slimes.

The slimes wiggled. They did not like that impurity.

The usual next stage was to attack the slimes directly, but they didn't have heartbeats or anything, really. They just sat there, gelling. They didn't even have any active thoughts, so Mark couldn't use his new Union of Brain on them. So Mark had to find a different avenue of attack.

Mark sat perfectly still, mimicking the ways the slimes sat there, filter feeding on the world.

It was pretty easy to mimic that idea, actually, now that Mark was using Union to do something very similar to them, and that's how he envisioned his heartbeat. That, right there, was more than enough to actually connect to the slimes.

Black veins extended outward and power flowed back to Mark, and he almost coughed, so he sped up his breathing of purity and impurity, keeping his area clean, driving away the miasma of the slimes.

Mark drew on the resilience of the slimes and gave them weakness in turn. This was enough to connect to them in truth, and eventually, after a minute, the two slimes that Eliot had designated started to dim and die. With a concentrated-enough weakness, and the removal of all of their resilience, the slimes' bodies could not sustain themselves, so they simply popped, releasing clouds of miasma into the air that expanded like yellow mist.

Mark finished off the expanding problems with some more purity breathing, and soon—

Eliot said, “Confirmed battlefield clear. Isoko, you’re clear to go through the airlock and pretend to be wounded. The goblins are picking their way here. They’re only 5 minutes out. I’ll turn on the spotlights —”

“No spotlights,” Mark said, “She has to sell the death of both of us.”

Isoko grinned, then said, “Yes; that.”

“... Mood lighting with the remains of the holograms, then.”

- - - -

The corrupter goblin howled with jubilation as the silver one burst out of the wreckage of their vehicle, as fires started in the wreckage and light illuminated the night. They had crashed into a land of killer slimes, but they had picked the worst spot for them to crash; an open area, away from the majority of the slimes. That decision would lead to their deaths.

The lead scout goblins were already attacking the silver one.

The blackvein thing had died, otherwise the closer goblins would have died already, and the ship wasn’t coming together again, so the tinkerer had died. It was a great loss for their people not to transform those two, but they were too hard to take together. They would be content with just getting the platinum one. Maybe the other one, too; he never seemed to do anything except for that one time. He was obviously training the young ones, but he was not going to save them from their own deaths, not really.

The corrupter goblin looked upon the silver one, and he wanted her. To bite into those legs and stomach, and watch a new generation spill outward.

She killed and she killed, but she was slowing down—

A nudge goblin raced forward, saying, “MINE!”

A hive goblin rushed forward. “MINE!”

What! No! She was his! Not theirs!

Corrupter goblin yelled as he ran for the kill, “Blackvein should have killed you all, you stupid stupids! Silver is mine!”

Young goblins died to the yellow haze in the air, falling into slimes, but the older goblins were past the yellow clouds and already aiming for the bite of creation.

Corrupter was in the middle of the pack now, racing forward. He kicked a stupid youngling out of the way, launching them into a pool of yellow death. It screamed. Corrupter would make more from the silver one’s corpse. A lot more. A lot better ones, too.

Soon, they would overwhelm the silver one, and corrupter would come in for a bite. He was 20 steps away, and the silver one faltered, almost getting bit by the nudge goblin, but she slapped his face away with her sword, almost casually. The nudger bled, hissed, and went in again—

Corrupter’s heart beat hard.

Black expanded in the air, like cracks of death, drawing them all inward.

Ah, he thought, as black veins extended out of the crashed ship, and as the lights of the crashed ship flickered and changed. *They were not dead at all.*

The corrupter goblin fell to the ground and watched as the fancy lights of the downed ship showed all red, and then brilliant white, with letters, and the downed ship showed itself as not downed at all. Merely hidden behind illusions. Those illusions became letters. Became a celebration.

The corrupter goblin almost felt bad for what he was reading. He had learned to read the language for this? For this much of an ending?

A silver blade flashed, and the last thing the corrupter goblin saw were the words ‘Mission Complete!!!’ in bright, shining, human scribbles.

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Mark looked down at the holomap which was stretched out for kilometers upon kilometers. Nary a blue dot in sight. He still asked, “That’s really all of them, then?”

Isoko smiled as she marched back onto the ship, blood and guts falling away from her platinum body as dust, as she said, “Can’t you read? It says Mission Complete out there!”

Eliot grinned as he rolled his eyes, smiling for the camera, saying, “Mark Careed can’t read!”

Mark laughed as he pushed Eliot away, saying, “Ha ha ha.”

“Say something for the camera, Mark!” Eliot said.

Mark smiled and roared, “DEATH TO ALL MONSTERS!”

“DEATH TO ALL MONSTERS!” Isoko shouted.

“DEATH TO ALL MONSTERS!” Eliot proclaimed.

It was a nice moment.

And then Eliot smiled as he said to Mark, “So you heard the goblins calling you ‘Blackvein’, right?”

Mark had an instinctual reaction to say, “NO.”

Eliot laughed.

Isoko chuckled.

David grinned.

Soon, they were back in their seats, with David standing with them, and the ship lifted off into the night sky. Mark smiled as he saw the world descend, as the ruined rooftops of Rome came into view.

Isoko laughed as she spun the wheel, sending the ship twisting.

“Isoko!” Mark snapped—

Right as Eliot said, “Isoko!”

“It’s fun!” Isoko said, grinning, as she leveled out the ship.

Mark closed his eyes and breathed, and then he smiled.

Isoko said, “Let’s go kill another wyvern and do another crash landing! I’m sure I can land better this time.”

Mark burst out laughing—

Eliot said, “FUCK no. I’m already calling Citadel for transport.”

Mark laughed even more as Isoko spoke about having a bit more fun driving, and then she took control and gunned it. Mark held on to a chair, chuckling now.

David smiled and said, “I had complete faith and we’re going back now, but we can certainly meet the hovervan closer to Citadel. If you want to kill some wyverns, you should, but with caveats.”

“Yes!” Isoko said.

Eliot piloted a drone camera as he moved up to speak to Isoko, asking her questions about the whole experience, framing it as an ‘exit interview’ or something like that. Eliot told Mark that he was next, and Mark accepted that, he supposed.

But for now, Mark sat down in his chair, and watched the night sky and the dark city of Rome flow by—

“Wyvern!” Isoko shouted.

Spotlights whipped to illuminate the beast, off the right side, coming in from the river.

Mark launched out of his seat and looked out the window where Isoko was pointing. It was a pretty small wyvern, but it was still a fucking wyvern. Mark switched all of his Union, from breathing, to blood, to brain, to taking in vein integrity and giving back vein decay.

Black miasmatic death slipped through the world, bouncing between threads of reality and crashing into the approaching wyvern. It was a good 300 meters away, but Isoko’s early warning was enough for Mark to latch on to it—

His threads doubled in thickness when he hit the target.

The wyvern flew on, approaching like nothing was wrong at all. It was a strong one...

But then it faltered. A hundred meters away it roared. At 50 it simply dropped. It lay on the ground below them, dying. It would not die for a while, but it was on its way. The ship flew on, but Mark connected to the wyvern for a good while. Half a minute.

They left the wyvern behind before it died.

Mark frowned as he blinked, adjusting himself back to normal operations. He said, "It's not dead."

Isoko happily circled back, the cabin under the dirigible swinging outward as the whole ship turned fast. "We can't have that now."

Mark glared at Isoko for a moment, while the ship settled back to hanging under the balloons, and Isoko just grinned at him.

Mark killed the wyvern after another minute of concentration. "Dead."

Isoko nodded. "Good kill."

In a much more relaxed manner, Isoko turned the ship back north and continued on.

Mark chuckled as he sat back in his sea—

There was a *presence*.

A vector pointed at Mark.

At Mark, *specifically*.

His heart beat hard.

Sweat broke out across his body.

A primal sort of fear took hold as though he was being stared at from every corner of existence. As though he was being unmade by some sort of unseen sight. There, in the cabin of Citywalker 5, Mark was the only one not relaxed.

Isoko happily drove, testing the waters with questions about extending the training mission. She wanted to fly over the Tiberranean and kill more wyverns.

David, unaware of what Mark was feeling, said something about how they needed to leave certain monsters alone, because if they killed every large monster in an area then what came next might become a plague. Stable ecosystems were better than unstable systems.

Eliot said something about how, “Speaking of that! I did some poking at the internet, asking about the weird toxic slimes at the Vatican. Mark said how they were so immobile and practically sterile with their reproduction, ya know? And that is very true! They’re specifically bred to be that way. They’re ‘Vatican Slimes’. They were bred and placed there to keep the site mostly untouched! The slimes do a very good job of that, while leaving the location itself mostly undisturbed. The poison slimes to the north of the Vatican are a subspecies of the toxic Vatican slimes that... Uh.” He looked at Mark. “Uh. You look... really pale, dude. You... Okay? No. No, you’re not okay at all, are you.”

Everyone looked at Mark.

Mark still felt the presence.

It was out there, watching them.

Mark said, “Something is out there. It’s watching us. It’s... It’s close. Holy fuck it’s clo—”

Words failed Mark.

In the dark of deep twilight, all of the lights of the entire ship flashed to full, to illuminate the world out there, to find whatever was hiding in the night.

It appeared, but only because it wanted to.

The world ahead of the ship turned into silver scales like layered breastplates. Black spikes along a spine, each the size of a car, drank in all light, resembling voids in the dark. Wings the size of streets. A face that was as large as the cabin of the flying ship.

The *thing* eyed the cabin of the dirigible.

It eyed Mark.

All other concerns fell away as Mark recognized the dragon who was Addashield, and yet not.

The dragon cheerfully said, “I wasn’t sure if I wanted to appear, but you sensed me anyway. Perhaps we are talzarki, Mark Careed. Wonderful news.”

The dragon unmade the flying ship and suddenly Mark was standing alone in the sky on a bit of wreckage, while everyone else was rapidly descending to the left, down to the ground.

The dragon seemed to smile.

Mark hit it with black veins.

The dragon raised a very large silver arch of scales over its eyes, and then he chuckled a few times, vibrating the world, and Mark’s power simply didn’t touch the dragon anymore. He grinned, showing off car-sized fangs a little.

“Good first try but I’m a bit beyond you, my happenstance brother,” the dragon cheerfully said, “Let’s talk!”

