

A Sheep in Wolf's Clothing

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A Sheep in Wolf's Clothing

by [attentiveanxiety](#)

Summary

All Dream wants is to be a superhero. It's not his fault he keeps getting labeled as a supervillain instead.

“Top hero Illumina is in critical condition after a confrontation with a new, unidentified supervillain. Police don't know who this villain is or what they want, but they warn all citizens and heroes to be alert. This villain is a nightmare.”

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Dream Kills Illumina

Chapter Notes

Superhero AU by beloved. Magic system is inspired by Genshin Impact because I'm obsessed.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The day Dream got branded as a villain was the same day he was supposed to become a hero.

It was also the day he slept through his alarm.

“Clay! Are you in there?”

Loud, heavy knocks thundered against Dream's apartment door, jolting him awake. His whole body felt heavy, and his mind was clouded with the desire to sleep. Instead, he focused on the blurry red numbers on his alarm clock.

6:39 A.M.

“Fuck,” he groaned. “Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck this. Fuck me. In the ass, fuck me.”

Summoning a burst of wind to push him out of bed, he ripped off his clothes and ran to the bathroom. He skipped the shower he desperately needed. His air magic would do nothing for his shitty water pressure; he wasn't a Hydronic like his best friend George, whose favorite prank was shooting toilet water in your face. Hopefully, the agencies won't judge him for having greasy hair.

He changed into a black tank and track pants. It wasn't flashy or eye-catching, especially compared to the prototype hero costumes he knew others would be wearing at the Trial. But, in the words of Dream's friends...he was shit at design. Sapnap laughed so hard he cried the first time he saw one of Dream's costume sketches. Wearing a costume helps get you noticed by agencies, but wearing a bad one could have an adverse effect.

He finished it off by putting on a simple black face mask and sunglasses. He knew he wanted to be an anonymous hero — while it limited brand deals and fan interactions, Dream needed privacy. He knew firsthand the dangers of letting a villain learn too much about you. After what he's been through, only a fool would give out his identity.

Dream yanked open the door. On the other side, Old Mrs. Macey from next door stood there in a nightgown and holding out Dream's cat, Patches. The old woman looked very cross, and Dream knew she was about to give him *another* lecture about keeping his cat out of the ventilation systems.

“Clay. Do you know-”

“Sorry, Mrs. Macey!” he snatched Patches, calling on a burst of air to float the cat over to the couch. Mrs. Macey and Patches looked equally frazzled by the display. “But I'm really late. We'll talk later, okay?”

“Well, I-”

Dream closed and locked his apartment door behind him, lightly shoving the old woman out of the way, and made a dash for the emergency exit window. He jumped out onto the fire escape. His apartment was near the top floor, so he only had to climb a little bit to reach the roof. From here, Dream had open access to the terrain he knew best.

While he sprinted and jumped and leaped from rooftop to rooftop, he glanced at his phone and winced at the notifications. Sapnap and George called him a dozen times each, paired with multiple messages asking him where he was. It was just Dream's luck that he slept in *today* of all days. The day of the Hero Trial. The day he's been dreaming of for years. Ever since that fateful day when an Ender Core Gifted him air magic, and his mom turned to him with a huge smile and said, "*Looks like you'll be in the family business after all!*"

"Sorry, mom," he grumbled. "You always said my sleep schedule would be the death of me. Guess I should have listened."

The Hero Trial happened once a year, and spots were super limited. Pretty much anyone who was Gifted would attempt the Trial, and only a handful would be chosen by an agency to become a hero. Unfortunately, that meant Dream couldn't just try again next year if he missed this trial. Because waitlists started getting too long, the agencies made it so you could only sign up for one Trial ever. They did this since a lot of people who failed the Hero Trial the first time kept coming back, taking the spots of new testers. Only the best of the best could become a hero, and the best was someone who passed it their first time.

The best was also someone who showed up on time. If Dream missed the Hero Trial, then that was it. He could kiss his dreams goodbye.

His phone started ringing. It was George. "Yeah?"

"DREAM! Where are you? The Trial starts in ten minutes!"

"I, uh." Dream grabbed onto a pole with one arm and slid down onto the sidewalk. "Got a little caught up with something. I'm almost there."

George groaned. "You slept in again, didn't you?"

"No! I just..." He called on the wind, picking up his feet and carrying him over a small construction zone on the sidewalk. "Okay, yes, I slept in. It was an accident, alright!"

"I can't believe you. We've been waiting for this day for forever. All that training and scouting, and you slept in?"

"I know, George, I'm sorry-"

"I've pushed off taking the Trial for *years*. We both did because we agreed to wait for Sapnap so we could take it together. That's been the plan, remember? The three of us getting through the Hero Trial as the *Dream Team*? And you're *not even here*?"

He could hear the Hydronic getting more and more upset, and Dream cringed. You can take the Hero Trial as young as fifteen, but no one does. No one feels strong enough to pass the Trial that young. You want to make sure you're as in tune with your Gift as possible first. Most people take it when they're around 20, like Dream, since agencies also aren't as attracted to older candidates. It's not good for marketing. When the three of them made their pact five years ago to become heroes together, they agreed to wait to take the Trial until they knew their youngest was ready.

"Don't worry, George," Dream had said when George lamented his worries about his age. "You're

only 24, so it's not that old. Plus, you're a pretty boy. I bet an agency will take you even if you fail the Trial."

Hell, George was so pretty, he could probably show up late and still get signed by an agency. But that didn't matter because George was responsible and showed up on time.

"I'm like, two minutes away now, so don't even worry about it. We'll still be the Dream Team. I'll be there to carry you through the Trial when it gets too hard."

"I hate you. You're an idiot," George snapped, making Dream laugh.

"Dream! Dream! I just ran into this bitchass Hydronic. His name is Quackers or some shit like that, and I need you to get over here so you can kick his ass with me," Sappap's voice broke through the phone.

"Damn, what did he do to you?" Dream said, ducking through a crowd that suddenly developed on the street. What was everyone standing around for? They were blocking the way to the Hero Trial arena.

"He said my bandana looked stupid and would turn the agencies away."

"Your lucky bandana?"

"Yeah, my lucky bandana!"

"Oh yeah, we're totally kicking his..." Dream trailed off as he pushed his way to the front of the crowd. The street was totally wrecked. Cars were kicked up, windows were broken, signs were knocked over — clear signs of an Airnic fight. But were they a hero? Or a villain?

No. This wasn't Dream's problem. He had less than ten minutes to get to the arena, and he needed to cross this street. That was his only concern.

"Please!" a woman cried. "Please, someone help me! He's going to kill me!"

But maybe a *little* detour wouldn't hurt.

He leaped in front of the cowering woman, pulling her into his chest to avoid an attack from their unidentified assailant. An arrow whizzed straight for them, and Dream threw out his hand to make the wind knock it away. It only barely succeeded. The bow must be Enchanted.

Shit.

Dream's Gift was *strong*. Anyone who saw him use it could tell he was more in tune with it than pretty much anyone. He could manipulate the air to move things, even lift himself for small periods of time. Most people, if they're lucky enough to be Gifted, could only slightly use their element. Even Sappap could only procure a small flame the size of his hand — and that was above average.

But even Dream was no match for someone with an Enchanted weapon.

"Stay down," he said, standing to physically guard the woman.

Enchanted weapons were capable of channeling and enhancing someone's Gift. Swords, axes, bows, tridents, and crystals crafted from fine materials, augmented with complicated, secret enchantments. Agencies produced them and gave them to their heroes, skyrocketing their

capabilities. It was illegal to have an Enchanted weapon if you weren't a licensed hero. However, those kinds of rules clearly wouldn't stop a villain.

Dream ran the situation over in his head. Airnic with Enchanted bow attacking. Injured woman. Crowd of civilians. Five minutes until the Hero Trial started. The odds weren't looking good for him.

The assailant finally appeared, a small hooded figure in purple. Dream could see them notching their bow again, could feel the powerful wind they were summoning behind the arrow. They were going to get blown to the moon.

So, in a split-second decision, Dream pulled on some of that gathering wind — fighting to control it, fighting for dominance — and with the little control he was able to take, he picked up a fallen stop sign and tossed it at the assailant's head. It clipped them from the side, and they dropped like a rock.

“Yes!” Dream pumped his fists. Holy shit, that worked! He overpowered someone with an Enchantment! There was no way he wasn't becoming a hero now. “Damn, that was so badass! Hey, are you okay, ma'am-”

When he turned around, the woman was gone. That was...weird. Still, he couldn't dwell on it. He needed to get to the arena ASAP. He couldn't afford another distraction.

“You! Stop right there! Put your hands where I can see them!”

Oh, good the police were here. They could clean up this mess.

Dream jumped over a pile of rubble, heading towards the massive arena that was just in view. It would be within seconds, but he'll make it.

“I said freeze!” A bullet whizzed by Dream's head.

Or maybe not.

He dropped and took cover. Why...why were the police firing at him? He apprehended the villain! Sure, he doesn't have a license, but he never technically broke the law. He didn't use an Enchanted weapon for vigilantism. It was self-defense!

“What's your problem?” he snapped at the cop that fired the weapon. The man glared back.

“You're under arrest, villain. Come peacefully or we will use force.”

Villain?!

Now Dream was even more confused. A vigilante, maybe, but a villain? Hell no! He couldn't be, *would not* be a villain. He would rather die! Besides, he just saved that woman's life!

“Did you see where Face Artist escaped to?” another policeman asked her coworker. Dream blinked. Face Artist was a Hydronic villain that used an Enchanted crystal to disguise their appearance. The person he fought was clearly an Airnic-

Oh.

The Airnic archer...wasn't the villain, were they?

“I fucked up,” he muttered.

The woman was the villain. And Dream protected her. And attacked the hero.

“This is your last chance, villain!” the police said. Dream glanced between them and the arena. He could see his dream being ripped away, disappearing right between his fingertips. Years of hard work, tears, loss — unimaginable, life-ruining loss that he turned into a promise for vengeance — becoming useless in a matter of seconds. All because of his big-ass hero complex. There was no saving it now; even if he showed up on time, he was branded as the enemy.

So he called on an air tunnel to launch him up, and he ran for his life.

“Top hero Illumina is in critical condition after a confrontation with a new, unidentified supervillain. Eyewitness accounts describe this villain as being dangerously skilled with Gifted magic without a noticeable Enchanted weapon. Police don’t know who this villain is or what they want, but they warn all citizens and heroes to be alert. This villain is a nightmare.”

“Nightmare?” Dream breathed, pulling at his hair. “A nightmare? Today was a nightmare.”

He sat in the safe room his parents created years ago in an abandoned building. He was too scared to go to his apartment because he was convinced the police were hunting him down. Plus, he wasn’t ready to confront George and Sappap yet. His phone sat discarded to avoid the overwhelming texts and calls. He knew he fucked up. Not only did he go and get himself branded as a *villain*, but he also abandoned his friends on the most important day of their lives. What if they botched their Trials because they were worried about Dream? What if he ruined their chances of becoming heroes too?

“You’re saying the villain stole Illumina’s magic from him?” the reporter said, holding a mic out to a clearly distraught man.

“Yeah! I don’t know if he was another Airnic or what, but he didn’t have a weapon or nothing. Just stole the wind Illumina was trying to attack him with. Shit was messed up, man. I have never seen that kind of power from a normal Gifted.”

“So you don’t think this villain is normal?”

“Hell no. I think he’s some kind of escaped government experiment. They’ve always been trying to make Gifted magic more powerful — it’s why they got those Enchanted weapons now. It makes sense they’d try to make an Enchanted person.”

Dream groaned and changed the channel. Every major news outlet was talking about him. Even the national news channels were covering it. Illumina was one of the best heroes out there. He was the top Airnic superhero; someone Dream admired. He should’ve recognized the man, but *no*. He got tunnel vision and bashed Illumina’s head with a pole instead.

It changed to the official Hero Agency channel. Great, this was even worse.

“-finished the annual Trial. There were a number of outstanding moments, especially from our six agency chosen finalists. This year, the agencies in the Hypixel District have selected two Hydronics, one Pyronic, one Naturnic, one Geonic, and one Cryonic. A pretty diverse elemental lineup.”

Just before Dream could change the channel again, a familiar face appeared on the screen. And then another. George and Sappap stood there on the stage, standing next to the other finalists and the agency sponsors. George’s eyes were covered by his huge white goggles, but his lips were

pulled into a tight smile. Sapnap wasn't even paying attention, whispering intensely with the other Hydronic finalist with black hair and a blue beanie.

They...They did it. His friends actually did it. They passed the Trial and got selected by agencies. Dream laughed, feeling hysterically relieved. He didn't ruin it for them. They could still be heroes.

“Of course, any display of magic was completely overshadowed by the appearance of a mysterious new supervillain. This villain is yet to be identified or named, but their displays of element magic were unprecedented. Normally we invite top heroes on to provide insight on the new soon-to-be Hypixel heroes, but tonight, we've decided to analyze this new villain. We want to find out — are they really as dangerous as everyone says?”

Dream groaned. He's always dreamed of being featured on the Hero Agency channel during the Trials, but not like *this*. Not with him overshadowing all of the competitors — overshadowing his friends.

He turned off the TV. His eyes drifted to his cell phone. He needed to call his friends. He needed to congratulate them; he needed to apologize for letting them down; he needed to tell them the truth. If anyone would understand and know how to help, it would be Sapnap and George.

The second it turned on, he called George. He didn't look at any of the notifications. George picked up before the first ring could finish.

“DREAM!”

“Hi, George. I'm so-”

“You're alive!”

“-sorry that I — wait, what? Why wouldn't I be alive?”

“We heard about the new supervillain attack after the Trial and realized it would have been on your route to the arena, so we thought you got hurt! You just hung up on us without an explanation earlier, and then you never showed up for the Trial...we were so worried, Dream. You're okay, right?”

“Yeah, George, I'm- I'm fine. Sorry, I had no idea you guys were freaking out. I've been avoiding my phone all day because...”

Because I made my debut as the next big villain instead of a hero. Because my parents are rolling in their graves right now. Because I'm completely destroying the family name.

“I get it, Dream,” George said, making Dream jolt. He did? Did George *know*? “You've wanted to be a hero for so long. I know this is hard for you. It's not fair. Do you think...maybe your family knows someone who can pull some strings? One of your parents' old friends? Or your grandparents? Or what about your Aunt Puffy? Maybe she can do something? Her adopted son just passed the Trial too, and you know how excited agencies get about hero families-“

Dream sighed. “No, it won't work. Puffy could get in *huge* trouble for that. Anyone would. I missed my chance, George. I fucked up.”

Fucked up was an understatement. A ‘fuck up’ was hitting your mailbox with your car or accidentally shaving off an eyebrow. Today was *way* worse than that.

“But hey. Enough about me. You passed! You and Sapnap! I knew you guys would,” said Dream.

“Yeah.” George didn’t match Dream’s bravado. “It was cool. It wasn’t the same without you, though. It probably never will be. What’s the Dream Team without Dream, you know?”

Dream winced. “It’s...still a team? You and Sapnap can be, like, the next best hero duo! What Enchanted weapon do you think you’ll get? Sapnap’s always given me axe or sword vibes, but I feel like you would be better at long distance, so maybe bow? Or crystal, if you train it right, but I’ve always imagined you as an archer.”

“You really think so?”

Dream could hear the earnest curiosity in George’s tone. It was a welcome relief from the passive disappointment.

“Of course, George. I think, one day, you’ll be the best Hydronic archer in the district.”

“It’s been three months since the debut of the supervillain popularly called Nightmare, and no public sightings have been made since. Police suspect the villain is lying low while attention on them is high. Multiple agencies have joined forces to put the top heroes in Hypixel on the hunt for Nightmare. Emotions are especially high from these heroes, as many of them were good friends with Illumina. Nightmare’s attack has kept Illumina out of commission, and while he is expected to recover, it’s unclear if he will continue hero work.”

“Ugh, they’re *still* talking about that guy? Are there not any more interesting villains to focus on? You know, like ones that actually attack and hurt people?”

Dream glared at the offending TV. Three months, and people were still obsessed with him. Dream thought if he never ‘attacked’ again, that people would forget about the strange new villain that took down Illumina. But *no*. Instead, they gave him a supervillain name! And the name they picked was the biggest slap to the face. He started going by Dream as a kid because he wanted to inspire other kids to dream to be a hero too. It was based on his grandfather’s hero name, Daydream. Now, he was the ‘villain of everyone’s nightmares.’

Sapnap slung an arm around his shoulders. “Hey, be careful what you say about that guy here. This is a hero bar, remember? People get real sensitive when Nightmare gets brought up.”

Dream sighed. “Right. I’m sorry. It’s just- there are so many villains that are actively terrorizing the district, right? Jschlatt’s trying to take control of the government, Ninja almost bombed a mall, Kaceytron robbed three banks in the past month. Yet all anyone talks about is a villain that no one’s seen since the day of the Trial.”

“You’re right, kid. But that’s why everyone’s so freaked. No one’s seen a villain with such raw strength before. Plus, he’s probably the type to only attack on important days. My agency thinks he’s lying in wait for an even bigger attack,” said Puffy. “Also, I bought you another shot. Drink up, birthday boy! I had to cash in three favors with Skeppy just to let you in, so if you don’t leave hammered, I’m going to be pissed.”

“You got it, auntie,” Dream said, throwing back the shot.

Puffy wasn’t actually Dream’s aunt. She was his mom’s old hero partner. She was a Hydronic sword hero, the legendary Captain Puffy, and his mom used to be her first mate. When the explosion happened, Puffy stepped up to take care of Dream. If anything, she was his unofficial adoptive mother, but aunt felt the most comfortable.

For Dream's 21st birthday, Puffy got him into the hero exclusive bar. She was awesome like that. While it sucked that they needed to bribe his way in, it was still awesome getting to experience one of the luxuries of being a hero. Luxuries he used to dream about.

"Dreaaaam." George stumbled off the dance floor and draped himself on Dream's shoulders. He reeked of sweat and alcohol. "Come dance with me!"

Dream laughed. "You know I don't dance, George!"

His best friend pouted. "But it's your birthday. I wanna dance with you on your birthday."

"You can dance *for* him instead," Sapnap said with a smirk. "I bet he'd love a lap dance for a present."

"Shut up!" Dream kicked Sapnap's shins.

George sighed and plopped in the barstool next to Dream. "Fine, if you're going to be *boring*. I'll take another shot, Bad."

The bartender, the well-known 'demon Electronic hero' Badboyhalo, frowned. "I'm not sure that's a good idea. Don't you have patrol tomorrow morning?"

"It's Dream's birthday, Bad. I'll suck it up tomorrow."

Bad sighed but poured the shot. "You muffinhead, you know your aim is terrible when you're hungover. Don't blame me when you can't hit your marks."

George groaned. "Why did I pick bow? I should've gone with sword like Sap. You don't need to think to use a sword."

"Hey!"

"Can you not change?" Dream asked.

"Not really. Branding consistency and everything. Plus Enchanted weapons are usually only manufactured on a need basis for new heroes in order to regulate them. They don't want to have an excess of Enchanted weapons laying around for villains to take, you know?"

"I guess that makes sense. Still, that's rough. What if you pick a weapon to train on but you're not well suited for it? Then what?" Dream used to imagine himself as an axe or sword user, but he could never decide which one he liked more.

"Sucks to suck, I guess," Sapnap shrugged.

"Well..." Bad said. "That's not *totally* true. There's the tournament, remember?"

"Oh yeah! I forgot about that thing! Are you guys signing up?" said Puffy.

"Hell yeah," Sapnap said.

George sniffled. "Eh, I'm passing. Not really interested in the prize."

Dream was lost. "Wait. What tournament?"

Bad froze, looking stricken. This was something he — a civilian (and definitely only a civilian) — was not supposed to hear, Dream realized. Heroes got to be privy to all sorts of secrets.

George, however, was too drunk to remember that.

“It’s the Hero Championship Tournament. You know, the one that gets broadcasted on every channel once a month?”

“The one that Technoblade always wins?” Dream asked. He was (secretly) a huge Technoblade fan. The pig-masked hero was unbeatable, both by villains and other heroes. The Cryonic also used an Enchanted crossbow and a sword when fighting, which was unheard of. Dream used to imagine himself competing in the championship, going up against Technoblade, and earning his respect in combat. Maybe even beating him.

“Yup, that’s the one. And since he always wins, no heroes want to try anymore—” Dream’s face twisted. What he’d *give* for a chance to go against Technoblade. “—so they’re adding a secret reward for the winner. It’s supposedly a super-powerful Enchanted axe—”

“George!” Bad hissed.

“—and get this! Rumor has it, it’s made of Netherite! AKA the rarest material in the world. Like who has the money to make this kind of axe?”

Dream’s jaw dropped. He wondered the same thing.

“Yeah, and it’s supposed to be a secret so villains don’t find out and try to sabotage the tournament to steal it, *George*,” Bad sighed. George shrugged and stole Dream’s drink.

“Please, it’s just Dream. He should’ve been a hero. Kicks Sapnap’s ass still even after he got his fancy sword.”

Sapnap sputtered. “He kicks your ass too, Gogy!”

“That’s not the point.” George rolled his eyes. “The point is, Dream is cool. Heroism is literally in his blood. You can trust him.”

“It’s true, Bad. His mom raised him well. He can keep a secret,” Puffy said.

It *was* true. Dream wasn’t going to blab to the press or contact a villain about this secret prize weapon. He knew how stupid that would be. He knew how powerful that axe was. In the wrong hands, it could wreak terrible destruction. The power boost it would give you — Dream could only imagine wielding such a weapon. It would’ve been a fitting weapon for someone aspiring to be the next top hero. Images of him flying over rooftops and swinging his axe around to destroy anyone who got in his path flooded his head. He could imagine the huge column of wind and air that would back his blade. Every villain would fear it, *fear him*. Fear him in the same way the media feared ‘Nightmare.’

Suddenly, he didn’t feel like partying anymore. The thoughts of ‘what could’ve been’ plagued him, sobering up his mind. Celebrating at a hero bar now sounded like the worst idea in the world — like salt rubbed directly into his wound.

“Dream!” Sapnap clung to his shoulders next. “You’ll be there to support me, right? It’s in a month, so only a week after my scheduled hero debut. My agency thinks it will really boost my publicity early on. Plus, who knows, maybe I’ll gain a kickass axe alongside my Enchanted sword.”

“Sorry, Sapnap, but no way you’re winning against Technoblade,” Puffy said, and Dream agreed. “Not to mention all the other big-name heroes rumored to enter, like Philza, Awesamdude, Punz,

Fruitberries, Smajor — hell, you're entering too, right, Bad?"

The dark-cloaked hero nodded. "I think so. I like fighting with a trident, but a weapon of that caliber...you can't pass that up. I probably won't win, not against Technoblade, but it's worth a shot."

"That's the spirit." Puffy patted Bad's shoulder. "I'll be there too, of course. Sounds like it will be a badass lineup."

It did. It would be fun to watch — but probably way more fun to compete. At least with Sarnap competing, he can try to experience it through the Pyronic.

"Can any hero sign up?" Dream asked.

George shrugged. "So long as their agency gives them the go-ahead, yeah. Of course, you have to go through all those preliminary knockout rounds in order to make the final match. I'm glad I don't have to worry about it. Right, Dream?"

The blonde Airnic smiled bitterly. "Right."

The night went on. George persuaded Dream to get out onto the tiny dance floor for a few songs. He met Quackity, who was the Hydronic Sarnap wanted to beat up during the Hero Trial. They ended up getting signed to the same agency and became quick friends, along with another Airnic crystal user at their agency. (Sarnap said the managers wanted to make them a team, calling themselves 'the Fiancés.' Dream knew it was a coincidence, but...the elemental Gifts of these new teammates hit Dream *hard*). Foolish, Puffy's adopted son, also dropped by to wish him happy birthday. He first met the Geonic when they were kids. Puffy and his mom tried setting up playdates, but Dream was very stubborn about meeting new people. But after the attack, they were raised more like cousins.

Foolish was also at the Hero Trial. He got signed to the same agency as Puffy with the intentions of debuting them as a mother-son duo. Dream used to tease the idea of teaming with them occasionally — outside the Dream Team, of course.

And then, just when he was about to completely destroy Sarnap in darts (with a little help from his Airnic powers. His best friend was too drunk to notice anyway), the bar door burst open and a legend walked inside.

Philza Minecraft.

The whole bar went quiet. Everyone, even the drunkest people in the room, stopped to look at the man. It was eerily in sync; Dream felt like he was missing something significant. Philza was amazing — nicknamed the Angel of Death, the man was an Airnic that found a way to fly with his Gift. To say Dream was a fan was an understatement. But even then, everyone stopping when Philza entered a room seemed excessive.

"What's going on?" he whispered to Bad.

"Philza only comes to the bar after a big success. And he's one of the heroes on the Nightmare case, so..."

Dream's heart *stopped*.

Suddenly, the room felt too small, with too few exits. He stared at Philza, expecting the man to be staring back. To be charging at him with his sword drawn and exposing Dream in front of

everyone. Dream didn't want to go to jail. He didn't want to be a villain! He just wanted to get drunk and celebrate his birthday, dammit. He...he wanted to be a hero...

"What's the update, Phil?" another hero asked.

This was it. The moment Dream's feared for three months.

Philza sighed and took off his iconic green and white bucket hat, shaking out his long blonde hair. "We caught Face Artist."

Everyone started cheering. Dream nearly collapsed.

He waited for Philza to keep talking — to announce that he was here to arrest Nightmare, that Dream was going away for good. His knees shook. His hands trembled. He felt sick; he felt like he might die. George, Sapnap, Puffy, Foolish — all the people he cared about were here. They would all be watching.

But it never came.

Philza moved through the crowd of cheering heroes, accepting the high fives and praise. He settled at the bar, nearly everyone offering to buy him a drink. He never once acknowledged Dream. Like Dream was a nobody — not a hero, and not a villain either.

"I think I'm going to head home," he announced. The anxiety attack was still building, even though he knew he wasn't going to be arrested. The bar felt too loud, too crowded. Every hero surrounding him felt like a threat. He needed to get out of here and sit in a silent dark room and *think*.

"Already? The party is just getting started, dude. George is probably one shot away from starting karaoke," Sapnap said.

"As amazing as that sounds, I have work in the morning. Thanks for getting me in here, I couldn't ask for a better birthday," said Dream. He gave his two best friends a quick hug. "I'll see you tomorrow after your training, alright?"

There's a photo in Dream's house. Hung on the wall, right next to the TV. It shows a beautiful family. A mother and a father, surrounded by four beautiful children. An elderly man stood next to one of his grandsons. The parents and grandfather were dressed in bright-colored uniforms with stunning diamond and metal weapons. The picture was taken the day before the oldest daughter's Hero Trial.

Dream remembered the day well. He was a teenager, just about to start high school. His sister was an Electronic, but barely. The only thing she could do with her powers was give Dream a tiny shock when she touched him — something she took advantage of all the time. She wasn't going to pass the Hero Trial, and everyone knew it. But it was a family tradition. A legacy. Their parents were heroes. Their grandparents were heroes. If they were Gifted, it's what was expected of their family.

He remembered his sister taking his hand and, for once, not shocking him. She smiled and said, "I'm just going to make it so much cooler when you pass the Trial."

His sister didn't pass. She never became a hero. And yet, at the hands of a villain, she died like one with the rest of Dream's family.

Because, at the end of the day, becoming a hero meant more to Dream than being someone people could look up to. It meant more than following his family's legacy, or becoming a team with George and Sapnap. It meant avenging his family and taking down the group that killed them — that almost killed him six years ago.

Being called a villain — being *Nightmare* — it wasn't just a mockery of Dream's goals. It was a mockery of his family's name, of the lives they lost. Dream *refused* to become a villain. But at the same time, he could never be a hero.

It only left him with one option.

A dangerous option, especially without any kind of weapon. Vigilantes were rare, and often they were treated the same as villains. If he was going to become a vigilante, he was going to need a lot more training and equipment. And above all, he needed a damn good Enchanted weapon.

Lucky him, he knew just the Netherite axe that would do the job.

Chapter End Notes

YO I'm so hyped for this fic!!! This idea came from seeing the "it's okay because it's not Dream" mentality online. Even the simple things he does will be vilified by antis. This is my outlet to vent about it.

Also, big thank you to my beta readers, yomiyomi and Wips, you guys are the best!!

Dream Defames Manatees and Sabotages a Tournament

Chapter Notes

For non-Twitter users: the Manatreed thing is just a fun, stupid joke I stole from Twitter. It's not important to the plot or story beyond this chapter, so if you're confused, don't worry about it!

For Twitter users: I'm just clowning. I have no damn clue who Manatreed really is. It might time date this chapter, but I thought it would be ironically fitting in the story with the whole "who is this really" conspiracy haha.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Four months after the infamous Hero Trial (and accidental debut of Nightmare), Dream got the privilege of witnessing his two best friends' debut as heroes.

It's something they've been waiting on for years. So when the day finally came, Dream was there with fan signs and a camera. Sappnap and George even gave him samples for their upcoming merch, so he looked like a total fanboy. He cheered as George shot jet stream-powered arrows at attempted bank robbers. He nearly cried when Sappnap dealt the final blow to a low-ranked villain, his sword procuring a massive wall of flames.

It wasn't what they pictured. Dream was there, but he wasn't by their side, swirling their elements around to cause even greater damage. Creating tornadoes of fire and water like they used to practice on a small scale. George and Sappnap weren't even signed to the same agency. But still, they made the most of it. Dream acted as overbearing and cringy as possible, pretending to freak out when George took a selfie with him.

"You're so fucking sexy, Sappnap!" he shouted the moment his best friend stepped away to talk to reporters.

But as excited as Dream was for his friends, he felt so distracted. Because in just one week, he was going to do the impossible. He was going to get the prized Netherite axe from the Hero Championship tournament.

...somehow.

He didn't have much of a plan. Initially, he was going to steal it. Break into the tournament and take it when no one was looking. But then he realized how *stupid* that was. They were keeping the axe a secret just to keep villains away. They were going to have hundreds of precautions set up to prevent theft. Enchanted weapons were the most sought-after resource on the black market, after all.

So, logically, that just meant he would have to win it.

That's right. He'll have to win the tournament. A tournament exclusively for heroes. Who were all professionally trained and already owned their own Enchanted weapons. He would just have to beat people like *Philza* and *Technoblade* to win the axe.

No biggie.

“Idiot. I’m the biggest idiot in the world,” he mumbled. He was at his family’s old safehouse again, trying not to have a breakdown. He used to come here as a kid whenever everything got too overwhelming.

“This is a safe place for our family,” his grandpa said to him on one of those bad days — when everything felt too loud and bright, and being around people without getting angry was impossible. “Whether you’re running from villains or the bad thoughts in your mind. You can always come here.”

Dream sighed. Oh, if his grandpa could only see him now. He’d take his old fishing rod and whack Dream upside on the head with it. The man was a beast with that fishing rod. Even when he got an Enchanted weapon, he insisted on keeping his fishing rod around. He was old-fashioned like that.

“They have these fancy weapons that power your Gift,” he said. “Now anyone, even people with a weak Gift connection, can be heroes! It’s outrageous! There’s nothing like being in tune with your Gift to be the best. It used to be that weapons were just to assist you — now they use weapons to power you!”

Dream still had that fishing rod. It survived the explosion, and now it was one of the few things left of his grandpa. Mounted to the wall, untouched and unused since the day he died. Below it was a crude crayon drawing done by Dream’s little sister, Drista, when she was six. It depicted a stick figure with gray scribbles for hair, carrying a brown stick that was supposed to be a fishing rod. Next to that was a little blonde girl with a bright purple cape. And then next to that was a lime green stick figure with a big circular head and an even bigger smiley face.

It was supposed to depict Dream and Drista as heroes next to their grandpa. Dream remembered mocking Drista for her poor drawing skills; he also remembered the whack upside the head with a fishing rod that he got as punishment. Grandpa cherished the photo, hanging it right below his prized weapon.

Dream approached the wall. His fingers glided over the metal fishing rod built strong enough to hold a grown man. He stared at his sister’s drawing, at the hero she envisioned him to become. What would she say now? Would she still look up to her big brother, even if he’s not the hero she thought he was? He missed her more than anything; the idea of disappointing her ripped him up from the inside.

The smiling face stared back. It gave no answers.

But, perhaps, it did give solutions.

Dream needed a hero costume, one that would disguise his identity. And, well, he was the worst at design. He may not be the hero Drista envisioned, but he could at least look the part.

“What do you mean, you’re not going to make it to the Hero Championship? You said you’d be there to cheer me on with George, remember?”

“I know, Sapnap, but work just called and they really need me to come in. I’m sorry. You know I want to be there.”

“You can’t tell them no?”

“I don’t think so. It sounded like an emergency.”

Sapnap groaned. “I’m about to enter my biggest competition since the Hero Trial, and you aren’t going to be there. Again. *That’s* an emergency.”

Dream winced. He knew Sapnap wasn’t going to take the news well, especially since Dream waited until the morning of to cancel on him. It didn’t help that he was lying about work. Guilt ate away at his stomach, but he swallowed it down.

“You know I want to be there for you, Sapnap. More than anything else. And I’ll be cheering for you from afar, just like I did during the Hero Trial. Alright?”

His best friend sighed. “...fine. But call George if you get out early. Maybe you’ll be able to make it in time to see me destroy Technoblade in the final.”

Dream rolled his eyes. “Yeah, sure thing, Sappy. Now go kick ass.” Dream hung up and put the phone in his pocket and muttered, “I’ll see you there soon.”

The arena stood in the distance. Dream approached in a bright lime green hoodie, the hood pulled up to cover his hair. His face was covered by a white mask that he got from a Halloween store. It was shaped to look like a human face with a wide, closed-mouth smile. The mask was a...work in progress. He wasn’t crafty, and when he first tried to make one using clay, he couldn’t see enough.

Did he look a little like Michael Myers? ...yes. But was his identity hidden? Yes, and that’s what really mattered.

Strapped to his back was his grandfather’s fishing rod. Not only was it to honor him, but also because Dream desperately needed some kind of a weapon. If his grandfather could fight villains with this and an unenhanced Gift, then so could Dream.

Hopefully.

He walked to the back entrance of the arena with the confidence that he knew where he was going. He didn’t. But he quizzed Sapnap for some information about how the tournament worked for heroes, and he learned that heroes had to officially sign up for the tournament day of. The sign-up was allegedly located somewhere around here. If he could just figure out where...

“Hey, sir? Sir!”

Dream froze. His instinct was to outrun whoever was after him, but that would probably just look more suspicious. He glanced back, and saw an official-looking person with a nametag approaching.

Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit...

“You’re looking for the tournament sign-in, right?” the worker said. Dream nodded, jaw clenched and not saying a word. “It’s down that hallway. A lot of people are missing it. I knew we needed better signs.”

“Uh, yeah. I mean, thank you,” Dream winced, quickly breezing past the employee. That was close. Too close. And he was just getting started. Finding the booth was the easy part. Actually getting signed up for the tournament was the *real* trick.

He approached the sign-in table with that false confidence. It helped that there was a permanent smile on his face. The employee at the desk stared at him, clearly uncomfortable. She kept

glancing between him and a clipboard.

“Hi there.” He winked, but then realized (like an idiot) that she couldn’t see it. “I’m here to register for the tournament. This is where we do that, right?”

The women gave him a one-over. “You’re...a hero?”

Danger. Danger.

“Well, that’s a bit insulting,” he said, not giving away his panic. The employee’s eyes widened.

“I didn’t- I’m sorry, that was incredibly rude of me. I was just surprised. I don’t recognize someone who looks like you from any of the agencies. Your uniform is very...unique.”

“Thanks. My sister designed it. I’m real proud of her. And yeah, no sweat. I wouldn’t expect you to recognize me since I’m not an official hero yet. My agency thought it would be cool if I made my debut during the tournament. It’s a bit unorthodox, but hey, anything to stand out, right?”

“Mhm...who is your agency, did you say?” The woman picked up her clipboard.

Dream was prepared for this question. “It’s Prime Hero Agency — the really big one that covers a ton of districts. You know how it is with those big agencies. They get too many heroes signed on, and then they have no idea what to do with them. Scheduling debuts is a bitch, I hear, especially since it’s dependent on villain attacks. Villains don’t work a 9-to-5, you know? You can’t, like, plan on them to be attacking, much less that it will be a big attack with a lot of media attention for a good debut. My agency says that’s why I’m lucky to debut at the tournament.”

The woman was clearly tuning him out. She scribbled on her paperwork. “What’s your hero name?”

It was embarrassing — just how much this question threw Dream off. It was even more embarrassing when he realized he didn’t *think* of one.

It’s just that...Dream was always going to be his hero name. It was given to him by his grandfather and mother for a purpose. To inspire others to dream big and accomplish great things and become a hero too. He’s never entertained the idea of a different hero name. ‘Nightmare’ was as close as he got, but he couldn’t use that. He had nothing, and now the woman was staring at him because he was taking *way* too long on the question, and she was definitely suspicious of him now. He was screwed. He was so, so, *so* screwed. His cover was blown, his chance at being a vigilante ruined. Hell, he might even get arrested for this. He didn’t want to deal with that.

“Sir? Your hero name?”

Dream jolted. “U-Uh, sorry, it’s just- right, well, you see. It’s a bit of a long story. It was going to be Dream, but uh.” *Backtrack, backtrack, make up an excuse now.* “It, um. It was taken! Right, we just learned it was taken by a previous hero. Really, really old hero, not active any longer, but still an old hero. It’s not good for branding, repeating used, old stuff. So I can’t use it because Dream was taken but now I’m just kind of stuck without it. I’m not the most creative-”

The woman raised her hand, cutting him off. “I don’t have time for this. Do you have a hero name or not?”

“Uh...”

“Dreamwastaken it is, then.”

“What?” Dream wheezed. “Dreamwas- what kind of hero name is that?”

“One you came up with. Unless you have a better idea, I really do not care.”

“Uh...what about like...” He couldn’t use anything ‘Dream’ related because Sapnap and George would figure it out immediately. His eyes flickered to the advertisement for the new local aquarium behind the worker’s head. The giant manatee imprinted on his panicking mind. “... Manat...ree...d?”

He cringed and mentally smacked his face while the woman blinked. “...Manatreed? That’s what we’re going with?” Dream nodded miserably. “Alright, moving on. I need to register your weapon.”

She passed him a paper that listed the five weapon types — sword, axe, trident, crystal, and bow — and spaces to detail the enchantments made on the weapon. Dream sheepishly pulled the fishing rod off his back and held it out. Any professional politeness left on the employee’s face disappeared.

“It’s a new prototype?”

The worker huffed, clearly over it. Dream took a cautious step back. “Do you have your agency license on you, Mr. Manatreed? Or do you have some long-winded explanation for that too?”

Finally, a question he was prepared for.

He passed over the small card with ease. The woman looked over it in detail, ran it through the scanner, and then passed it back. She looked flustered that there weren’t any issues this time.

“Thanks,” Dream said, taking the license back. Sweat dripped down his back. He *may* have stolen the license from another Airnic Sapnap worked with, Karl Jacobs. Normally, Dream felt bad for stealing, but Karl already stole his place as Sapnap’s Airnic teammate, so... let’s just say, Dream felt he was justified. The license wouldn’t be fully processed until after the tournament, meaning no one would realize it was stolen until Dream was long gone.

“Well, then, Manatreed, fill out the weapon registration the best you can and I will get you added into the tournament roster. You are position 48. Here is your number to stick to your uniform, along with a list of the tournament rules and a schedule. Once you finish signing, you can make your way over there. We have accommodations for competing heroes, along with small warm-up areas and a viewing room. We ask that you be mindful of the schedule and time yourself accordingly. If you are longer than five minutes late to check-in for your match, you will be disqualified. As I’m sure you’re aware, the tournament grand prize is an Enchanted Netherite Axe, and the second and third place winnings are listed below. Do you have any other questions?” Dream shook his head and handed the papers back. “Good. Also, sign this.”

She passed him one last form. It looked like a legal document. “Uh...what is it?”

“It’s just you saying that you or no one else on behalf of you will sue if you suffer minor or serious bodily injury and or death.”

Dream almost dropped the pen. “Does that happen a lot?”

“Well, no deaths, *yet*, but this is Technoblade’s favorite tournament. He’s the Blood God for a reason.”

“Right.” Dream signed the paper and asked if there was anything else he needed to do. There

wasn't, so he made his way to the competitors' quarters. The accommodations sounded amazing, but Dream couldn't risk interacting with the other heroes in case his cover got blown. What would he even do if Sapnap came up and tried to talk to him? He'd be screwed.

So, Dream hid in a bathroom stall.

"It's better than the closet," Dream mumbled to himself. At least the bathroom had toilet lids. It made it a bit more comfortable.

There was a quiet knock on the stall door. "Sir? Is everything alright in there?"

Shit. The bathroom attendant. Because the Hero Championship was so fancy, they had attendants in the bathrooms. At least the bathroom smelled nice, but it was kind of ruining Dream's plan to avoid suspicion.

"All good in here!" he answered, peaking the stall door open. "Just got those competition jitters, you know. Really twists my stomach up. I'll be fine..." He glanced at the attendant's name tag. "Beckerson. Don't worry about it."

Beckerson nodded and offered to knock again when it was time for the hero entrance lineup. Good man. But until then, Dream needed to finalize a plan. Beckerson brought him the official tournament bracket. Dream found his horrible name in the bottom right corner. He was going up against someone with an equally horrific name — ConnorEatsPants. Dream had a lot of questions about that one.

He scanned the rest of the bracket. To his relief, Sapnap was in the left pool, meaning they wouldn't meet unless they both made it to the final. And that would *never* happen. Not that he didn't support and root for Sapnap 100%, but Technoblade was in the left pool; Dream was just being realistic. This also meant that the bracket was set up perfectly. Dream wouldn't have to go against the top hero until the very end. That didn't mean Dream's pool was easy, no — to make the finals, he would likely go up against Philza or Quig in the semis. Plus HannahxxRose was the bracket spot right below Dream, and they'll probably go against each other in the second round. This tournament was stacked.

"Wish me luck, Beckerson," Dream said, exiting the stall. The tiny butler-looking man waved.

"Uh, good luck..."

The heroes were lined up in a tunnel that led to the arena floor. There were 68 competitors in total — an increase from the usual 40 or so. It was hard not to fanboy when the greatest heroes in the district, and possibly the world walked by. Of course he was going to gawk! His mask hid it all anyway.

"Whoa! Nice, uh. Nice mask?" the hero next to him said, discomfort written all over their face. Dream recognized them as the Naturnic crystal user, Snifferish. "I don't think I recognize you. Manatreed, right? Are you a new rookie?"

Dream didn't say anything. He wasn't being rude. He just couldn't risk talking around these heroes. His voice was too unique, and he knew too many people in the tournament — Sapnap, Puffy, Bad, Skeppy, Quackity, plus multiple other heroes he talked with at the hero bar. Silence was his safest option.

"Uh...I'm Snifferish. What's your Gift?" No answer. "Is that a fishing pole? Do you have any other weapons?" Dream paused, but then shook his head. Snifferish smiled.

“Oh, that’s cool.” Snifferish rocked back and forth on their heels. “...so...is the no-talking thing part of the...aesthetic?”

Dream stared. Snifferish’s smile morphed into a grimace. They nodded firmly and looked away.

The hero lineup went smoothly beyond that. They entered the stadium in a line, their names being announced on a loudspeaker. When they got to Dream, the announcer hesitated.

“Making their official hero debut at the tournament, we have Manatee!” Dream cringed. There was a long pause. “My apologies, ladies and gentlemen. That’s Mana *treed* .”

When he rushed to the bathroom after it ended (Beckerson giving him a long, concerned look), he pulled out his phone to watch the live stream. He wanted to know if anyone was getting suspicious about his false hero identity.

“Since the tournament is his hero debut, we don’t have a lot on the creepy smiley masked hero in lime green,” said the popular hero news commentator, Hasanabi. “According to the Hero Championship website, Manatreed is an Airnic with an Enchanted... I’m sorry, am I reading that right? Does that say *fishing rod*? I thought I saw him with one during the opening ceremony, and I was like- huh, that’s a weird aesthetic choice for his costume. You’re telling me he fights with that thing? *How?*”

Hasanabi scoffed. “It’s a smart debut tactic though. I’ve never been more excited to watch a rookie match before. Manatreed will be taking on ConnorEatsPants, who’s been in the field for a couple of years now. He’s an Electronic sword user, best known for his ability to use his lightning to increase his speed, and his Sonic the Hedgehog-inspired costume. It will be interesting to see how these two match up.”

So he was fast. Dream was fast too — he’d probably be even faster if he had an Enchanted weapon. ConnorEatsPants would likely outmatch him in speed, which threw off Dream’s strategy a bit.

“Sir? Your match is starting soon,” Beckerson said, knocking politely.

Dream took a deep breath. He could do this. He had the wit, the skills, and the determination. Forget Technoblade, forget any big-name hero. This tournament was his to win.

ConnorEatsPants stood on the opposite side of the ring, holding his Enchanted iron sword a bit awkwardly. He kept glancing between Dream’s fishing rod and his mask. Connor’s feet shuffled, scuffing his shoes against the floor. Dream tracked every movement.

The goal of the match was simple. Either knock your opponent out or knock them out of bounds. Lethal force was banned and would get you disqualified, but it could still happen. And injury?

It was practically guaranteed.

The official raised the flag. The two opponents prepped. The flag fell, and the match began.

Connor acted first, his sword crackling with electricity. He zipped across the battlefield so quickly it looked like he was teleporting. He zigzagged around like a ping pong, going a short distance, stopping, and zipping off again until he was right in front of Dream. All of this happened in less than five seconds. Dream ducked in a backbend, and he could feel the crackling electricity pass over him as the sword narrowly missed him. Dream focused a burst of air in his feet and used it to jump back and put some distance between them.

It didn't last for long. Seconds later, Connor was right on top of him again, swinging his sharp blade. If Dream were any slower, he would have been hit right now. His air-enhanced speed barely kept him alive. He was a trapped mouse reduced to dodging. There was no time or opportunity to make an attack.

It was infuriating.

Connor got a little too close, nicking Dream's arm with the tip of his sword. Dream growled and channeled a massive burst of energy into a wind burst, knocking him and Connor in opposite directions. While the Airnic landed gracefully on his feet, Connor hit the ground with a *thud*. It gave Dream the break he needed to formulate a plan.

Connor was *way* faster than Dream. There was no way Dream could land a hit on Connor whenever the other attacked — it took everything in him to dodge. If he let Connor get close, Dream was done for. He needed to attack when Connor was far away, but that wasn't any easier when he was ping-ponging around everywhere.

Wait. That was it!

Connor could only run short distances. It's why he kept running and pausing. He was vulnerable during the split-second between his sprints. That would explain why he ran in a zigzag — it made it hard for his opponent to predict where to attack.

The Electronic hero recovered and charged again. Dream flicked his fishing rod, cracking it like a whip. Despite his mask, his sharp eyes tracked Connor's sprints. *Left, right, left, left, straight, right-*

Dream flicked his rod far right, the line whipping out extra with a boost the wind. It sailed right at Connor — and then barely missed him as the hero reared back last second.

So close.

Connor stared with wide eyes. He knew Dream figured him out. He knew he was in trouble. Dream could sense his fear, feel the change in atmosphere. It was electrifying. It was addicting. Dream's smile matched his mask.

Connor charged again. Dream flicked out his rod. He guessed wrong, flicking it left when Connor went right, but Dream didn't falter. He kept the line going with a boost of air, flying it 360 degrees and wrapping it around his opponent. The hook attached to the uniform, and with all of his strength, Dream *pulled*.

Normally, you'd never be able to fling a grown human around with a fishing rod. But Dream wasn't *normal*. He could wield a Gift as well as some could with an Enchanted weapon. Summoning a massive wind current, Dream lifted and rocketed Connor all the way across the arena and into the stands.

The crowd roared. The announcer confirmed what no one could believe:

Manatreed, a no-name debuting rookie, won the match.

His next match was against the Naturnic trident hero, HannahxxRose. She was famous for multiple clutches during villain base camp raids, where she managed to break through intense defenses and take out the villain at the last minute.

That was all to say, she was a tough opponent.

Rose and thorn-covered vines covered the field, creating a dangerous maze. The thorns were coated in a painful neurotoxin — Dream learned that the hard way. His ankle ached with numbness. And to make things worse, the maze was thickening, trapping Dream inside with nowhere to go. Thankfully, the vines didn't grow quickly, but it felt more and more claustrophobic by the second. The more he backed up, the closer he got to the boundary. But, if he stayed put, he'd be swallowed up by toxic rose bushes.

Dream glanced at the arena ceiling. He was at the edge of the boundary. He couldn't go forward. But maybe he could go up.

Tapping into his well-practiced parkour, Dream jumped at the nearest branch. The thorn went right through his shoe, and intense pain flared in his foot, but he ignored it. He used the branch like a spring and, with both hands clinging onto the handle for dear life, he flicked his fishing line at the ceiling. With a boost of wind, it sailed hundreds of feet to reach the ceiling and wrap around the pipes. Dream cinched the line so it wouldn't get any longer and swung across the roses of death like Tarzan.

It wasn't perfect. He got clipped by the taller vines on his thigh and stomach. But what really mattered was that he barreled toward a stunned and defenseless Hannah and kicked her square in the chest. She hit the ground hard, and, with a well-aimed punch, she was out cold. Pain from the toxins overtook Dream's body, and he collapsed right next to her.

“Unbelievable! The underdog debuting hero, Manatreed, wins again!”

Dream limped off the field. He could barely walk, and a worker had to support him before he collapsed. Thankfully, they had treatment on hand for the neurotoxins, but it took time to settle in. He stumbled out of the infirmary and into the bathroom like a walking corpse, nearly giving Beckerson a heart attack.

“I'll be in my room,” Dream mumbled, stumbling over to his stall and pulling up Hasanabi's stream.

“So we're in the final sixteen of the tournament. While many heroes, like Technoblade, Philza, and Quig are performing as expected, there's been quite a few upsets. The most notable are with the two most recently debuted heroes. Sapnap, a rookie Pyro sword user, completely destroyed HBomb this last round. Look at how he explodes his way through HBomb's shield. A really impressive display by Sapnap. This, paired with his equally good debut, shows that Sapnap has what it takes to make it big in heroics. We'll be seeing his name a lot more in the future.

“Now, let's move on to the second major upset of the tournament. Manatreed, who is making his debut at the tournament instead of a villain fight, has also advanced to the final sixteen after a near loss to HannahxxRose. There's a lot of attention on this rookie — not only is he doing so well, but his fighting style is something I've never seen before. Most people harness their Gift through their Enchanted weapon in a very specific way, but Manatreed has shown an incredibly diverse skill set. He's used his fishing rod weapon offensively and as support. Watch him swing through the air. You can see the wind pushing him across the field, helping him glide. He's yet to attack directly with his Airnic powers yet, though. It'll be interesting to see if he's capable of doing that.”

Dream wasn't sure he could. So he decided to test it out in his next match. Against Punz.

Yes, he knew this was a stupid idea.

Punz was a newer hero, but he was already top-ranked. The Hydronic sword user climbed the ranks frighteningly fast. His attacks were legendary, and his defense equally so.

In other words, Dream was going to die.

“You got this. You’re not gonna die. You...” There was a buzzing in his pocket. With dread, he pulled out his phone. “...are getting a call from George. Oh, I’m fucking dead.”

He cleared his throat before he answered. “Hello?”

“Hi, Dream,” George said, sounding overly pleasant. Dream could hear the murmur of a crowd in the background. “What are you doing right now?”

“Uh...” Dream’s mind scrambled to catch up, but it felt like the gears were stuck. “I’m coding this new mod for some gaming website. You know, the normal, boring shit. Why, what’s up? Is Sappnap okay?”

“Oh, he’s great. Better than great, actually. You’d know that already if you were here, though.”

Dream winced. “I know, but my boss just sounded so desperate and-”

“Yeah, funny thing about that. I texted your boss. He gave me his number after you were stubborn and refused to give him an emergency contact.” Dream’s blood went cold. “And you want to know what he said? I think you know this answer.”

A bowling ball of guilt slammed into Dream’s chest. “George, I- I don’t-”

“Just tell me the truth, Dream.”

The truth? That Dream ditched supporting his best friend so he could illegally sneak into a hero-only competition? How could Dream say that out loud? George must know already — why else would he be calling? He wanted Dream to confess, but Dream *couldn’t*.

“George...it isn’t what it-”

“If it really hurt that much to watch, you should have just said something.”

“-looks like — wait, what?”

Dream almost fell over, he was so anxious and confused. He opted for sitting on the toilet seat instead.

George sighed. “I *know* this has been hard for you, Dream. You’re trying not to let it show, but it’s still obvious to me. Seeing me and Sap become heroes... It was your dream first, Dream. It was always supposed to be with you, and now it isn’t and it hurts me and Sappnap so much, but I know it’s hurt you more. We thought it might help, sneaking you into all the inclusive hero scenes. We thought it would fill a bit of that void, but...but if it’s hurting you to see all of this, you should have said something. You know we’d understand.”

Dream was reeling, but not because of what George was saying — though it was all true — but because of what George *wasn’t* saying. The accusations he wasn’t making. He thought...they thought Dream was skipping because it hurt seeing Sappnap compete in the Hero Tournament when he couldn’t? Oh, the fucking irony of it all. Dream almost started laughing, but he knew that would blow his cover. If George was going to feed him the lie, Dream was going to take it and *sprint*.

“I...I know, George. You’re right, it hasn’t...it hasn’t been easy, and I feel like shit for it. I’m so happy for you and Sappap and I want to support you guys. But, I don’t know. Today just felt like... a lot.”

It was the truth. It was hiding a huge lie, but it was how he felt.

“I’m so sorry, Dream. I should’ve known. I’m sorry we put you in that position.” George sounded so pained, so genuine. It made Dream feel like the biggest dickwad ever.

“No, no, George, I’m the one who should be sorry. I should be there to support Sap — I mean, he’s made it to the final sixteen! That’s insane! I just wish I could get out of my stupid head and focus on that.”

“I know, Dream. And I’ll tell Sappap you’re rooting for him. You’re a good friend, so stop beating yourself up over it.”

Dream smiled bitterly as he said goodbye. *Oh, Georgie, if only you knew how wrong you were.*

As predicted, Punz beat the shit out of Dream.

The Hydronic hero was ruthless and so, so powerful. Not only did he have his Enchanted sword, but he used it to harness his Gift so he could create a bow and arrows out of water, essentially giving him two weapons. Punz had the potential to go far, maybe even go all the way in this tournament.

Too bad Dream needed to win.

There was a huge slash down his right arm, and another one slashed across his back, almost turning his hoodie into a crop top. The blood loss was intense, and Dream’s fishing pole was doing little to help him against Punz’s attacks. Dream couldn’t get close and attack with his Gift because of Punz’s sword, but he couldn’t keep his distance and attack with his fishing rod because of the hydro bow.

Another arrow shot by, slicing Dream’s shoulder. He hissed and rolled further away. *Fucking hell. I can’t go down like this. I can’t.*

His flaw was his lack of Airnic strength compared to those with Enchanted weapons. He can’t create a second weapon out of elemental power like Punz. The best he’s done was against Illumina, where he stole the air magic Illumina created and used it against him. He took the enemy’s sharper blade and made it a double-edged sword. But that won’t work this time. Punz was a Hydronic — Dream couldn’t steal from his powers.

Well. *Unless...*

Dream focused all of his energy into creating a wind tunnel arched around his body. When Punz fired another water arrow, Dream maneuvered it so the arrow traveled through one side of the tunnel, around his body, and careened right back at Punz. The hero was so shocked, so unprepared for the attack that the arrow smacked him right in the chest. It knocked him on his back, and Dream wasted no time. He flung out his fishing pole and wrapped his line around Punz’s arm. The hero tried to stop it, tried to dig his sword into the stone, but it was too late. Dream flicked him and sent him skidding across the arena floor and into the wall.

Punz lost the match. The crowd lost their minds. And Dream?

“That’s a...That’s a lot of blood...”

Dream lost consciousness.

He woke up in an infirmary bed. Bandages covered his body, and he ached, but not nearly as much as it should. The beating he took should’ve left him bedridden for days. Yet here he was, sitting up with ease.

“Ah, please, take it easy. People tend to get nauseous after I heal them; I don’t want you passing out.”

A woman with bubblegum pink hair hovered over Dream, gently pushing him back in the bed. She wore a pale blue hero suit with a white coat that looked like a doctor’s coat, except it had snowflake detailing. Her bangs were held back by a cat-eared headband, and there was an Enchanted crystal tied to a long chain around her neck.

“I’m Nihachu, a healer and hero. I’m going to give you a quick checkup so I can clear you for your next match, okay?”

Dream nodded. Nihachu placed a palm on his chest. A feeling like being dunked in ice water from the inside rushed over him and left Dream stiff in the bed. When Nihachu withdrew her hand, the icy feeling disappeared along with any leftover achiness.

“Sorry. I know it can be a little uncomfortable. How do you feel now?” Dream nodded again and gave a thumbs up. He really did feel great. A tingling lingered over his now healed wounds; familiar but frustratingly unidentifiable. It felt nice, soothing, but it bugged him because *where did he know that feeling from?*

Nihachu smiled and scribbled on her tablet. “Good. I’m going to go let the officials know you are cleared for your next match. It will be in less than twenty minutes, so you can just rest here until then.”

Dream decided to take her up on that offer; the bed was a lot comfier than the bathroom floor. He pulled out his phone and earbuds to catch up on Hasanabi’s coverage again.

“So it’s official, Manatreed has been cleared for competition after getting severely injured in his fight against Punz. He is now the only rookie left in the competition after Sapnap’s elimination against Vikkstar. This means, in the final eight, we have Manatreed, Quig, Philza, Sylvee, CaptainPuffy, PeteZahHutt, ItsFundy, and our reigning champion, Technoblade. Manatreed and ItsFundy will compete first to claim a spot in the semi-final. I’m pretty excited for this matchup. ItsFundy is another Hydronic — a Hydronic axe user, to be exact — and we learned from last round that Manatreed is very capable of using his Airnic Gift offensively. However, as we all know, ItsFundy relies more on physical attacks than elemental. I cannot wait to see how these two will adapt to each other’s styles.”

“Physical?” Dream muttered to himself. “Finally, something I can work with.”

And he did. To everyone’s shock, it was probably his best performance yet, despite his opponent being so experienced. Right from the start, Fundy lunged at Dream, spinning around with his powerful axe like a tornado. He left no openings for a close physical attack, but Dream created his own mini tornado around Fundy’s feet to throw him off balance. Fundy teetered, and Dream swiftly kicked his opponent in the chest.

Fundy stumbled and fell on his back, and Dream pounced. He grabbed the Hydronic's arms and pinned them to the ground while securing his legs by straddling them down. Fundy peered up at him through his ginger hair, eyes wide. Dream tied his fishing line around Fundy's wrists and yanked him out of bounds with his fishing rod. All the while, Fundy lied there, stunned silent. It was over so quickly, no one knew how to react.

Except Dream, of course.

He pumped his fists in victory, relieved he was uninjured finally, but then he realized that might look like poor sportsmanship. He didn't want negative coverage right now (there would be plenty of that when they realized he wasn't a real hero), so he went over to Fundy. He helped his opponent free his hands and got him to his feet. The whole time, the hero stared with those wide eyes.

Shit, did Dream give him a concussion? He was trying to avoid hitting Fundy's head. Dream pantomimed tapping his own head and then giving a thumbs up and thumbs down. The Hydronic blinked like an owl.

"Huh...my head...oh! No, my head, it's fine. No, I, uh- sorry. I got a little distracted. You're really, uh...really...cool. You impressed me a lot," Fundy flushed. He fiddled with the fox ears that were a part of his costume. "I did not expect it at all."

Now Dream felt bad for beating him so quickly. Fundy was such a sweet guy. He nodded and patted the man on the shoulder. He walked off the field, but Fundy chased after him.

"Wait!"

Dream tensed, reaching for his fishing pole. Maybe Fundy was actually pissed he lost and didn't want an audience? Fundy still had the much stronger weapon.

"Sorry, but I was wondering. Do you, uh... Do you want to go do something later? With me? They are playing *Treasure Planet* in the theaters."

...wait a minute.

Of all the things Dream expected of this tournament, getting asked on a date was *not* one of them. He purposely avoided other competitors. No one knew what he looked like, and his mask looked like it belonged to a psychopathic murderer. He wouldn't even talk to them! Why would anyone ask *him* on a date?

"You don't have to answer now! I guess this is very sudden, and you have a tournament to focus on, but...it would be fun, I think," Fundy said, wincing, and now Dream felt bad. Fundy was *so* nice. How can you say no to someone so nice?

It was sad. Dream could kick his ass in the tournament, but his heart couldn't handle rejecting the Hydronic hero. He settled for an ambiguous tilt of his head and a shrug. A 'maybe' was better than a 'no.' Fundy lit up like the sun and grinned.

"Okay, okay. I'll ask you later then, yeah? Good luck in the tournament! I hope you win."

Fundy bounced away like a kid on Christmas, leaving Dream to stare at the wall in shame.

It was the semi-final, and Dream was about to get his ass *rocked*.

Philza Minecraft. A legend among the hero community. An Airnic sword user capable of harnessing his Gift for healing while also being a terrifying offensive force. But what really made people scared was his ability to fly with his Gift. He created these hyper-realistic bird wings for his hero costume and harnessed the wind so he could fly with them. He did it so fluidly, you'd think he was born with wings. The wings combined with his battlefield prowess got him nicknamed the Angel of Death.

And Manatreed was his next victim.

“You're making him sound like a serial killer,” Sapnap snorted. Dream was in the bathroom and on call with his best friends before his next match. “I actually talked to Philza a little bit in between matches. He gave me really good advice. He and Technoblade are close, which means he probably knows a lot of Technoblade's strategies. I think Philza could win this thing.”

“He's still going to kick that Manatreed dude's ass though,” Dream said, trying not to sound mopey.

“Oh, yeah, totally.”

“And we'll have front row seats,” said George.

“Also a fact. I hope there's not too much blood because that's just nasty,” Sapnap added helpfully.

Dream sank lower on the floor. It was a strange conversation — talking about yourself with your best friends without your best friends knowing they're talking about you.

“I bet Dream hopes there's lots of blood,” George said, making the Airnic jolt.

“What? Why?”

“Because you would totally kick his ass. Everyone's freaking out about the way he fights, how he uses his Airnic powers — it's not even that impressive compared to you,” the Hydronic explained. Dream scrambled for a way to respond to the overwhelming irony of *that*.

“Oh. I guess. I'm not so sure, he's pretty good at fighting. I mean I can *kinda* see how our fighting styles are similar but...I don't know. Maybe it's just an Airnic thing?” There was a thin fucking line, and Dream was doing flips on it.

“Eh, maybe. Karl for sure doesn't fight in practice the same way you would,” Sapnap muttered. Dream bit his tongue to contain his bitterness.

“Ooh, I know, I know...” George's voice slowed for dramatic effect. Dream rolled his eyes while a fondness curled in his chest. “What if...and I know this is gonna be hard to believe...Dream *is* Manatreed in disguise.”

A nauseating rush ran down his skin. His heart, his brain, his lungs, everything just *stopped*.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck-

“BAHAHAHAHAHAHA!” Sapnap cackled, smacking something aggressively — probably his thigh. “George, what the *fuck*?”

“What? I mean, have you ever seen them in the same room together?”

George's voice was *dripping* in sarcasm. It sounded like that when he made the declaration too; he

was joking the whole time. Dream should've been able to tell, but the fear and adrenaline took control of *everything*. He was normally a 'fight' person — as seen with the reaction that got him into this whole fucking mess in the first place — but in that moment, he never wanted to run away and disappear off the face of the planet more.

“Yeah...haha George, very funny...” he said because it would be weird not to respond. His head, however, still felt like it was drifting far away from this conversation. Was it really that easy to piece everything together? That easy to figure him out? What would happen if he got caught as a fake hero — would George and Sappnap sell him out to their agencies? It would put them in favor of the agencies, reporting someone impersonating a hero. In the hero world, everyone knows you do *anything* to get ahead. “Guys, stop. I'm *not* Manatreed.”

“Look, I cracked it, I cracked it,” George giggled, oblivious of the spiraling mess in Dream's mind. “Manatreed is just an anagram for Dream Ante.”

Sappnap scoffed. “Pffft, what? What does that even mean, you idiot?”

“It means...uh...he's the *antithesis* of Dream. They gotta duke it out or something to establish who the true Dream is.”

“Ha, good luck with that. You know, I actually wanted to confront him earlier; just like, ask him where he learned to fight and shit. But I swear, you cannot find this dude *anywhere* in the competitors' areas. He just like, fucking vanishes after each match.”

Dream was *very* grateful for his bathroom hiding strategy.

With a shaky hand, Dream took off his mask so he could rub his palm down his face. His chest hurt with how hard his heart was *still* pounding. “Well, I guess we'll never know then. Not that it like, *matters* or anything — it's not like I can ever compete against him in hero tournaments.”

He could *hear* George's scowl. “Dream-”

“Hey, I've got to get back to work, alright? Just wanted Pandas to know I'm fucking proud of him and I wish I was there to see it.”

“I wish you were here too, Dream,” Sappnap said. “Party at the bar later tonight?”

“Probably.” Dream hung up and took a deep breath. So his friends were hoping his secret identity loses. No big deal. He walked outside the bathroom and looked at Beckerson gravely.

“If I die out there...thank you for being a great bathroom attendant.”

And, leaving a bewildered Beckerson behind, Dream headed to his doom.

“You ready for this, mate?” Philza asked as they met on the field. His green striped hat covered his eyes a bit, adding an air of mystery. Dream nodded firmly. “Well then. Let's get on with it, yeah?”

With a gust of wind, Philza took to the sky. Dream stood there, mesmerized by the beautiful wings. They looked so realistic, the way they flapped and tucked in when Philza divebombed-

Wait.

The impact smacked Dream right in the chest and sent *him* flying . He was headed straight out of

bounds, but he flicked out his fishing pole last minute. It snagged onto a nearby light pole and he locked the line. The whiplash tugged on his arm, and he hit the ground hard, but he was still in bounds. It was close — *way* too close — but he was okay.

“Nice reflexes, kid. Not many people can take a hit like that,” Philza said, striking down again with his sword. Dream tried to dodge, but it sliced across his chest. The wound was shallow but hurt like a bitch. He staggered back, feeling like a helpless idiot. Next to Philza, he looked like a joke. He had no idea why he thought he could win.

He tried to hook Philza, but the man batted the fishing line away with his wing. He tried swiping his opponent’s feet out from under him, and Philza just *flew away*. Dream wasn’t fast enough to escape Philza once he took to the air. The man pummeled him with attack after attack — punches, kicks, slashes — and it took everything out of Dream to block them and not get one-shotted out the arena again.

After going back and forth for a few minutes, it seemed Philza got bored with playing around. He grabbed onto the end of Dream’s fishing pole, and with terrifying strength, ripped it out of his hands. Then the hero took Dream’s last hope of winning and threw it out of bounds.

So this was it. Dream was weaponless. Next to someone like Philza, he was powerless too. No prodigious ability with his Gift was going to save him now.

This was where the underdog fell.

Phil landed about twenty feet away from Dream and pointed his sword. Powerful wind currents swirled around the Enchanted blade, pulling Dream in closer and closer. He tried digging his heels into the ground, but it barely did anything. He slipped and skidded closer and closer towards his opponent — towards the swirling element he knew so well. If Dream never attacked Illumina like an idiot, he would have an Enchanted weapon too. He would be able to fight back, maybe even win-

Wait . *His fight against Illumina!* In a strange way, it looked so much like this one. His opponent powering up their weapon with his element. *His element*. Air was *his* to control, no matter who was conjuring it.

He reached out his hand and tried to grab control of the wind Philza was harnessing. The hero's will was strong, and it was difficult to get any wind to break away from the funnel. Dream gritted his teeth and grasped for anything, *everything* he could. Then, with the air he now controlled, he twisted it around Philza’s funnel in the opposite direction. The opposing forces unraveled each other, breaking the current that was pulling Dream in. Now steady on his feet, Dream used that wind to launch him off the ground and into Philza’s chest. They rolled, and Dream kicked the hero’s sword far away from them.

Now they were even.

“How did you do that?” Philza gasped. “Your weapon-”

Dream cut him off with a kick to the abdomen. He loomed over the downed hero, feeling unbelievably powerful.

“Don’t ask questions,” he warned. It was breaking his code of silence, but he wanted to make his message clear. Philza’s eyes bulged wide, but before he could say anything else, Dream knocked him out with a kick to the head.

Growing up, Dream was always told that he dreamed too big.

It was mostly in a joking manner. A way to poke fun at the nickname he was so fond of. His aspirations were never-ending, and he was proud of that. His parents were too. It's why they encouraged him to go by Dream instead of Clay. They wanted to see him go far too.

And while he loved them for this, as an adult, he's developed a terrible sense of *when to finally stop*. No one told him, 'idiot, your dreams are so far from reality they're in another fucking dimension,' as a child, and now he's severely stunted in terms of self-control. A normal person would know that trying to become a vigilante was bad. They would know trying to steal a rare Enchanted weapon was idiotic. They would know his plan to win was insane. They would know not to mess with the hero leading the manhunt for your accidental villain persona.

Oh, and they would know not to fight *Technoblade* with a fishing rod.

Everyone online was laughing about it. 'RIP ROOKIE' and '#Manadead' trended on multiple social media platforms. Even people who rooted for him earlier joked about his inevitable doom. No one actually thought the underdog would get this far. And, because they had normal brains, they based their ultimate predictions back in reality.

Dream couldn't do that. Dream was too determined to do that. He got this far. He's defeated so many amazing heroes already. What's one more to add to the list, right?

Right?

He sat in the bathroom stall, trying to mentally prepare himself. Beckerson, the good man, handed him a cold towel and an energy drink that he grabbed from the competitors' lounge. Dream focused on the music blasting in his ears as he mentally prepared himself for this fight. It wasn't an ideal setting; Technoblade was probably practicing in the warm-up gyms or treating himself before his pre-match rituals. But this was Dream's situation, and he was going to make it work.

He ran through strategies in his head. Like Punz, Techno used a crossbow for distance and a sword for close combat. The difference was that Techno owned two Enchanted weapons, instead of making one out of his element like Punz. No one knew why Techno had two — when asked about it, Techno would just laugh and ignore the reporter.

Switching between the two weapons was an effortless skill for Techno. He never slipped up, never faltered. Every attack was calculated, every move was analyzed. His Blood God title was hard-earned. There were no weaknesses to be found after weeks of Google searching. Not even Reddit had answers.

"Do you have any advice?" Dream asked Beckerson.

The attendant shrugged. "Dying sounds painful?"

Dream sighed. "Noted."

Maybe he should reconsider stealing the axe again.

Walking into the arena, Dream could feel the electric change in the crowd's energy. Their hype fueled his own, spiking his heart rate and making his brain buzz. The podiums were already put up on the far end of the field, and the prized axe was put on display. It was absolutely gorgeous. The Netherite glistened under all of the lights, and Dream's fingers itched to touch it.

The crowd got louder. From the opposite arena entrance, Technoblade made his slow, kingly entrance. His hero costume was an iconic combination of details — a jeweled crown graced long, braided pink hair, the pig-face mask, the regal red cloak. He held his sword in one hand, and his crossbow in the other. It looked like he was ready to solo an army.

And here Dream was, a fishing pole strapped to his back and fingers clutching his sleeves in a desperate attempt to hide how badly his hands were shaking.

Pathetic.

They met in the middle. Dream was tall, but Techno was a giant. He was beefed too. He made it look like Dream had never *heard* of the gym. They shook hands, and it felt like Techno radiated coldness. At the referee's call, they readied their weapons. A circle of frigid iciness surrounded Techno instantly, and Dream gulped. The stadium went silent — whether it was the crowd quieting down or his ears going numb to sound, Dream didn't know. All his focus went into surviving and winning this fight.

The referee blew the whistle, and the battle commenced.

Techno struck first. Dream knew he would. He was an aggressive opponent like that. Dream didn't have a weapon that would be good to parry such a large sword, so he was limited to dodging. He slid to the side and dropped low, hoping to kick Techno's feet out from under him. It didn't work. The pig-masked hero flipped back, clipping Dream's shoulder with his foot and knocking him off balance.

Dream stumbled and tried to plant his feet, when a giant spike of ice appeared over his head. He yelped and the wind shoved him back on instinct before the ice spike could impale him to the ground.

"Holy shit," Dream squeaked. He flicked his fishing pole at the ceiling and swung himself *far* away from Techno.

The Cryonic hero sighed. "Really?" He raised his crossbow, and it glowed white as it powered up. Dream steadied himself like he did against Punz. The arrow shot right at him, and Dream tried to redirect it at Technoblade, but it was so... *heavy*. It was nothing like Punz's water arrow. It took all his concentration just to smack the arrow off its course. It skimmed across his mask, scraping it, and embedded into the arena wall.

Before Dream could recover, another arrow came soaring. He threw out his arms and shoved the air to bat it away. Another arrow, and another, and another kept flying. Dream threw his whole body and power into dodging. It was exhausting and humiliating. Techno was barely trying, and Dream was fighting for his life.

"C'mon, at least *try*. The viewers are going to get bored," Technoblade said.

Dream sputtered, diving to avoid an ice explosion. The viewers? The *viewers*? They're mid-battle and Techno was concerned about the *viewers*?

Dream flicked out his fishing pole while Techno shot another arrow. The fishing line flew over and wrapped around Techno's wrist, but he couldn't block the arrow in time. It hit his shoulder and he cried out, almost dropping his weapon.

Technoblade scowled at the fishing line pulling on his arm. He put his sword on his belt to free up his other hand, and while Dream recovered from the arrow, he tugged on the line to pull Dream

towards him. The Airnic yelled and stumbled, crashing on the ground not far from Techno, the fishing pole still in his hands. Technoblade grinned and pulled out his sword again, sending another wave of ice right at his opponent. It hit Dream hard and froze his left foot to the ground. Sharp, intense pain sparked the nerves in his foot before they fell numb to the sheer cold.

Dream panted. He could barely even look at Technoblade, he was in *so* much pain.

“Can’t run now,” Techno mocked and swung his sword. Dream freed Techno’s other arm so he could block the blade. Metal clashed with crystal as the sharp diamond edge dug into the pole just above the handle. Dream pushed back with all his strength, ignoring the flaring pain in his shoulder. He’s parried like this with practice swords against Sappnap. Trying this move with a metal rod against a diamond sword was stupidly hysterical, but it was the only thing keeping him from being sliced in half.

Techno took a step forward, putting pressure on Dream, who couldn’t adjust his stance. He stared into Techno’s eyes through the pig mask and saw it — the glowing bloodlust spoken of by traumatized villains in prison. A man turned into a beast turned into a god.

Dream blinked, and suddenly, the arena was gone. The crowd’s noise silenced into crackling fire, the smell of blood and sweat turned into smoke and burning flesh. His weapon disappeared, and suddenly, *he was a defenseless kid pinned to a burning wall by a faceless monster.*

“You still fight even though there’s nothing left to fight for,” the monster of his memories said. “You were too slow to save them, too weak to stop me. You’re nothing but a waste — a waste of a Gift, a waste of a chance you didn’t deserve.”

The monster’s hand closed around Dream’s throat and squeezed. He gagged and kicked and cried. The monster laughed, and the faceless expression bore a smile of shark teeth.

“You are nothing, and I’m a god. There’s no stopping the will of a god.”

A throbbing pain in his shoulder freed him of the memory. The arena returned, and Technoblade was in front of him instead of the monster. His sword dug into the shoulder he just shot with an arrow. Dream’s hand shook as he desperately pushed back, but it wasn’t doing anything. He wasn’t strong enough, he wasn’t good enough, he couldn’t win, *he couldn’t save them, he couldn’t breathe-*

A spark ignited in his chest. It was just like that horrible memory. The memory bled into reality again, and he felt the sensation he hasn’t felt since that horrible day. Beating energy pounded inside him, wanting to come out, to be freed. He *needed* to let it out.

So, following the memory, he closed his eyes and released everything with a breath.

A powerful slash of air cut through the arena, knocking the audience back in their seats and sending Technoblade sprawling. The ice containing Dream’s foot shattered, and the fishing pole was ripped right out of his hand. It clattered on the ground, and seconds later, Technoblade’s sword and crossbow did the same.

The spark...was not just from his memory.

Technoblade sat up, the crazed bloodlust burning brighter than ever. He smiled, but it didn’t look like the faceless monster.

“Finally. Someone worth fighting.”

That snapped Dream completely back to reality. Their duel. It wasn't over yet.

Techno's weapons were thrown to opposite sides of the arena. The hero went for his crossbow first since it was closer. Dream glanced at the sword and got his craziest idea yet. While the Cryonic hero picked up the crossbow, Dream dove and snatched up the diamond sword.

The blade hummed under his hand, and coursing energy ran up his fingertips to his heart. It felt similar to that unexplained spark, but also completely different. This was what it felt like to wield an Enchanted weapon. The rush of power; the ease of calling on his Gift, like an ever-flowing bridge of energy. It was a feeling he *dreamed* of. Sapnap and George's descriptions were a pale comparison to reality.

Technoblade froze, and his head tossed back as he cackled. "Oh, the viewers must love this!"

He was right. The crowd screamed obnoxiously loud. And their cheers only got louder as Technoblade strolled over to Dream's grandfather's fishing pole.

"And now I'll make it even better," the Cryonic hero said. He picked up the fishing pole and flicked it dramatically. Dream gulped, but not because he was scared of Technoblade.

Techno's smile faltered. He squinted at the metal rod. "That's weird-"

A huge wind tunnel crashed into the center of the field. The crowd roared, thinking the battle was simply continuing. Except...

Dream never moved. He did not create that wind tunnel.

The dust cleared, and three new people stood on the field. Dream immediately noticed the wings on the person in the middle. It was Philza Minecraft. But he just beat Philza? Why was he interrupting the match?

"Yo, Phil, what is this?" Techno said, raising his crossbow cautiously.

"Stand down, Technoblade," Philza said, holding up his hand. "We're taking this guy into custody."

Dream's heart stopped beating.

Techno balked. "What? Why?"

Philza didn't answer, his sharp eyes locked on Dream. Dream struggled to breathe as panic set in. He took a step back. It was the wrong move.

"Don't even try it, Manatreed," said a curly-haired hero. He wore a heavy brown trench coat and held a flaming crystal. "Lower the weapon and surrender yourself peacefully, or we *will* use force."

"Anyone want to explain *what the hell* is happening?" Techno snapped, growing more and more tense. The third hero, Smajor, summoned his Hydronic-powered crystal.

"We have reason to believe there is a connection between Manatreed and the villain who attacked Illumina."

Oh. Oh no, no, no, no, he was *so screwed*. This wasn't supposed to happen, they weren't supposed to find out so soon-

Techno looked down at the fishing pole again. “You mean...”

Philza nodded. “He is Nightmare.”

Chapter End Notes

Attentive: First off- THANK YOU???? Over 2k hits and 300 kudos on the first chapter?? Ah, I can't wait to share the rest of this story with yall!

Yomi: No one is ready for it

Wips: Yomi and I have brought chaos to this story as beta readers. You're welcome, everyone

Attentive: Also! I posted a cute little promo tweet. It's supposed to be like a cringy clickbait news article, but I posted a subtle clue that foreshadows the greater story as a whole. Check it out on my [Twitter](#) and see if you can figure it out! Just saying, my betas couldn't :)

Wips: Atte I'm blind and dyslexic

Attentive: ...

Yomi: ...

Dream Hates Children

Chapter Notes

This chapter was brought to you early by Quackity's Merch. I said if Mexico won the free shipping, I would update. I have a million finals to worry about, but I am not a liar, so here is the update.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

In hindsight, his grand escape from the Hero Championship arena wasn't his greatest moment.

“So- riddle me this, guys. I'm still reeling from what just happened, I think I literally pooped my pants back there. So we all know Nightmare, right? The big, bad, scary villain that took down Illumina *without* a weapon and then just *vanished*? It turns out, that the newbie hero we've all been rooting for in the tournament — Manatreed? Yeah, he's fucking *Nightmare*. He posed as a goddamn hero and snuck into the tournament just to *destroy* everyone with a fishing pole. A completely normal fishing pole.”

He lost his grandfather's fishing pole in his scramble to get away. That's probably what hurt the most. That weapon was his grandfather's pride and joy, the remains of his legacy, and Dream lost it due to his carelessness. He had the opportunity to get it back, but he chose to go for the more selfish (villainous, one might say) option instead.

“So not only is he kicking ass and harnessing his Airnic Gift better than anyone despite not having an Enchanted weapon, but the dude stole Technoblade's Enchanted sword during the match. Like, seconds before Philza Minecraft and the other heroes showed up to arrest him. You can see where this is going, right?”

He didn't really *mean* to attack anybody. He just panicked when Philza approached him, and the sword was in his hand, so he reacted on instinct and, well... Enchanted weapons make all attacks more powerful. He slashed at the air, and the air slashed the heroes, knocking them to the other side of the arena. Dream almost shit himself, he was so freaked out by his own power.

“My dude *leveled* everyone. Literally, people in the stands got knocked out of their seats and shit. Smashed a huge hole in the ceiling too, which is going to be a pain in the ass to fix. But that's not even the worst part.”

The ceiling was an accident, but it was also his salvation. An escape, if he could just get up there. And with an Enchanted weapon, he was confident he could.

But he didn't want to steal Technoblade's sword. He had too much respect for the Cryonic hero to do that.

“Watch this clip guys. We've got some of the best heroes knocked on their asses over here, and Nightmare with an Enchanted sword and an easy escape over there. All he has to do is summon an air current and float out of here before Philza gets up. But no. He runs over to the display cases, smashes the glass open with a mini-tornado, and steals the grand prize, a Netherite axe.”

He wanted that axe. The only reason he snuck into the tournament, the reason he risked his safety,

was to get that axe. He didn't come this far to leave without it.

“Yeah. Clearly, we're all *fucked* now. There was no stopping this guy after that. He flew out of there so fast — yes, *flew*, even without wing assists. Watch, he just jumped on the Enchanted axe and somehow kept it against his feet while using it to fly away like a magic carpet. Not even Philza stood a chance at catching up to him. But hey, at least he returned Technoblade's sword. That was... Oddly kind of him, I guess. Better than him seriously injuring Techno to the point of retirement.”

Dream turned off Hasanabi's stream and threw his phone to the other side of his bed. He buried his face in his pillows. The urge to scream was strong, but his apartment had thin walls, and he really didn't want Mrs. Macey sticking her nose into his business at a time like this. Not when he had a stolen Netherite axe in his closet.

Oh, Prime, he stole the axe. There was no coming back from this. He was going to be branded as a villain forever. He couldn't use the axe without everyone knowing it was him. Becoming a vigilante was no longer an option.

“I. Am. An. Idiot.” He slammed his head into the bed repeatedly.

“Alright, what'd you do this time?”

Dream jolted up. Sapnap stood at the door, eyebrows raised with a blank look on his face.

“Sapnap! Wha- What are you... Why... Huh?”

His best friend scoffed. “I'm checking in on you, obviously. The tournament finished. Well, sort of. Have you seen the news?” Dream paused and then nodded. “Yeah. What a fucking shitshow. I can't believe that dick was Nightmare. And now that he has the Netherite axe...”

“Yeah, it's... Pretty fucked up.” Dream shuffled so he was sitting criss-cross with his back up against the bedpost. Sapnap immediately claimed the open space, sprawling out with his head resting on Dream's knee. “You did well though. No, I mean — you were fucking *amazing* out there. I was screaming my head off at work, I'm surprised I didn't lose my voice. Or my job.”

Sapnap snorted. “Thanks. Yeah, it... Went better than I expected, that's for sure. My agency is stoked, so that's good. Maybe I'll be the breadwinner of the group soon.” Dream rolled his eyes. Even if Sapnap started making more money, he'd probably still expect Dream to pay for everything. Which he should, considering Dream will fight anyone who tries to pay for him. “But it's just, I don't know. I want to be happy and celebrate but I just feel this... Like this fucking weight right here-” He pounded a fist into his chest. “And I'm so *fucking* angry, I...”

Heat started resonating off Sapnap's skin, and it wouldn't be long until something started smoking. Dream nudged Sapnap's shoulder, and his best friend's body trembled with a deep inhale. Sapnap closed his eyes, and with each breath, the unnatural heat seeped away.

“Everyone's losing their shit. The shit Nightmare can do with his Gift — he's like you-” Dream froze. “-but so much *worse*. His power is insane, and he uses it to scare and hurt people. It pisses me off because I *know* you'd be better than him if you were a hero. People wouldn't be so scared if one of the good guys could do what he can do.”

Dream gazed at the cuts and bruises on his knuckles, a heavy lump in his throat. What do you say to that? The guilt was already eating away at his conscience.

“So... What were you moping about earlier?”

Dream flinched and looked away from his beaten fingers. "...What?"

"The little fit you were throwing when I walked in. Something about being an idiot? Did you finally accept your title as the biggest dumbass on the team?"

Honestly, yes, Dream thought, but he would never give Sapnap the satisfaction. "Yeah, right. I *know* I lose brain cells whenever I'm with you and George."

"Sure thing, Mr. High School Dropout."

"Online school is not dropping out. Smart people know that."

"Say that to my grades."

"Suck my dick, schoolboy."

"Bet." Sapnap reached up, a shit-eating grin on his face. Dream rolled his eyes and smacked his best friend's hand away. Sapnap broke out into giggles, burying his face into the bed. Dream contemplated kicking him to the floor.

"Okay, but seriously. Is everything okay?" Sapnap asked once he calmed down again. Dream sighed and tried to think of a lie.

"Yeah, it's just... My coworkers found out about the time I ate cat shit as a kid."

Sapnap choked on his spit.

They plastered his face everywhere. Of course, it wasn't actually his face, thankfully. But that eerie smiley mask followed him at every corner, on every channel, on every website. Lime green and smiley faces haunted him. His sister's costume design turned into an omen for every civilian and hero.

It was a manhunt for his head. If Dream was smart, he would retire the uniform and weapon and live the rest of his life as a normal IT dude with hero friends.

"I got you, bud! Don't panic!"

Dream didn't pride himself on being smart.

Most would say he was out of options. That his reputation was beyond saving. Dream didn't disagree, per say (the number of wanted posters and hate on social media was convincing), but he was also stubborn as hell. If he spent all of his time as Nightmare doing good, then eventually it'll outweigh the bad. Right?

There was a cat desperately hanging onto a light pole. It wasn't as classic as a cat in the tree, but it was a lot more desperate. A huge crowd gathered at the bottom, all bracing to catch the kitty if it fell. A couple of people even got a blanket and had it spread out like a catch net. The cat flailed and cried, trying desperately to hold onto the pole. Dream's adrenaline spiked hearing the distressed cat. He didn't care that everyone was scared of Nightmare; he was saving that kitty.

He jumped over the crowd and floated up, wrapping his hands around the cat's torso. It yelped, but he tucked it safely into his chest and levitated slowly back down to the ground. He kicked off his axe, flipping it to his hand while his shoes connected with the concrete. It was a beautiful black

kitten, and it curled up in his arms like it belonged there. Dream's heart twisted as he looked into the yellow eyes. Patches wouldn't mind a sibling, right?

"Hey! Nightmare stole the little boy's cat!"

Huh?

Dream turned and saw the large crowd staring at him with fear and trepidation. An older woman hugged an inconsolable five-year-old boy. The cries only made the crowd angrier. All they needed was pitchforks and torches, and they would look like a medieval mob hunting a witch.

"What?! Wait- no, I was just-" Dream took an uneasy step back. Okay, so maybe he *thought* about stealing the cat. That doesn't mean he was going to! "You have it all wrong, I was just trying to help-"

A loud *boom* cut him off, and an electric figure came running down the street. Their trident was aimed right at him. The demon-like hero costume was unmistakable, but Badboyhalo looked nothing like the soft, exhausted bartender Dream knew. The fury on his face was one only seen on the faces of the most *vicious* of pet lovers.

He looked so mad, maybe he'll actually say a swear. No villain's ever done it before, but hey, no villain was as bad as Nightmare, apparently.

"Shit! Here's your cat!" He clutched the handle of his axe and floated the kitten over to the little boy, who finally stopped crying as it landed in his hands. "You're welcome!"

He fled the scene before Badboyhalo could reach him. When he got to his family's safehouse, his cat-saving acts were all over the news.

Nightmare Steals Child's Cat, Stopped By Pro-Hero Badboyhalo

Nightmare Throws Cat at Child (Real, Not Clickbait!)

Dream sighed. This was going to be a *long* rebranding.

He tries to go for something more harmless next. Something that definitely can't be seen as villainous. While secretly patrolling a busy street, a kid accidentally let go of their balloon. The child cried out as the balloon rose higher and higher, and that's when Dream jumped into action. He flew up and grabbed the balloon, but apparently jumped a little too close to a window cleaner on a high-rise platform. Dream watched, horrified, as the window cleaner screamed and stumbled back off the platform. Their harness caught them, thankfully, but now they were partially dangling four stories in the air.

"Shit! My bad!" Dream directed himself onto the platform. "I got you, don't worry-"

"Don't touch me!" the window cleaner screamed, falling further off the platform so they were completely dangling now.

Dream sighed. "I'm just trying to he-"

"Nightmare!"

Punz stood on a nearby roof, a water arrow arched and loaded. He looked as pissed as Badboyhalo

had, but he wasn't above cussing.

"*Dammit*. I'm sorry!" Dream called on a surge of wind, pulling the window cleaner back onto the platform without physically touching them. Once he was sure the civilian was safe, he scaled to the roof and ran for his life. Punz made chase, but the Hydronic hero was no match for a parkour expert Airnic. He did get a good hit in with his hydro arrows, though. Dream sat in his apartment bathroom, blood all over the floor and Patches hovering on the counter. While bandaging himself up, he risked a look at social media.

Notorious Villain Nightmare Knocks Window Cleaner Off Platform, Evades Hydronic Hero Punz

Nightmare Wreaks Havoc Downtown, Steals a Child's Balloon. Does Nightmare Hate Children?

Dream glared at the stupid balloon resting against the ceiling. He fled with it by accident; he didn't even realize it was in his hand until he got home. And now he was a child bully. Did no one even care that he saved the window cleaner too? At this point, he could donate thousands of dollars to good charities, and there would probably be some article like 'Nightmare Crushed a Leaf While Leaving Charity Foundation'. It was *infuriating*.

Sure, he wasn't perfect. Sure, he *did* fuck up with the window cleaner, or accidentally stealing the balloon, or assuming saving a cat would be perceived as innocent when it's *him* doing it — a villain, a bad guy. But he was *trying*. He was trying so hard. Couldn't...couldn't anyone see that?

The cycle was never-ending. Stopped a car thief — caused a massive pile-up catching the perp. Tried to help an old lady cross the road — gave her a heart attack when she saw him (she survived though!). Saved a high school kid from getting bullied — got accused of trying to bomb the campus (he didn't even have bombs???). Exposed a drug truck — got framed for owning the drug truck. Seriously! He's never even *touched* drugs before! Now everyone thinks he runs a cartel.

He was cursed. There was no other explanation.

Maybe this was his punishment for surviving. That monster didn't ruin his life enough murdering his family right in front of him. Now he had to ruin any chance of happiness in Dream's future. Fucking bastard.

Dream was just about to give up when it finally happened. The perfect opportunity to redeem his name.

He was with George when the call came in. That's how he even knew about it. Three sidekicks got targeted by a criminal underground ring and were separated from the other heroes. It was all hands on deck to save them before the villains could hurt them. George leaped up from the couch they were lying on and threw on his hero costume.

"I swear, if it's Nightmare behind this- I heard he targets kids," his best friend grumbled. Dream sighed and held up the big white goggles George was looking for.

Once George was gone, Dream rushed to grab his own costume and weapon. He didn't have much time. With almost every hero being called, not only did he have to beat everyone to save the sidekicks first, but he had to escape quick enough before the entire hero society attacked him at once. Dream was good, especially with his new axe, but he wasn't *that* good.

As he approached the warehouse the villain's trapped the sidekicks in, Dream noted his surroundings. There was a large crowd of heroes, police, and news reporters gathered out front, meaning this was likely a standoff in a hostage situation. Barging in meant putting the sidekicks at risk. Fortunately, Dream was a master at stealth, but he knew a lot of Pro-Heroes were as well. He wasn't going to be alone in that warehouse.

He snuck in through the vents; he was just skinny enough to snake his way through them. Peeking through the ceiling, he could see the criminal goons roaming the halls. All of them wore either ram horns or crazy purple makeup, which meant this was the work of Jschlatt and Minx — two infamous villains in Hypixel. They were among an elite group that controlled the criminal underground. Stopping these elites was the last mission his parents ever took on.

And while Jschlatt and Minx weren't the monster in his nightmares, this just got a lot more *personal*.

He kept crawling, following the guards until they led him to a large open room in the warehouse. Below him, he could see two of the sidekicks chained to a concrete column. The one with half-black-half-white hair was bleeding from his head and appeared unconscious. The other was the opposite, shouting obscenities even Dream wouldn't say.

"Schlatt you fucking pussy, you cocksucking motherfucker bastard, you priss bitch fucker—" the blonde boy fumed and fumed. A long-haired woman in an elegant outfit stepped into his vision, walking over to the sidekicks.

"Fuck, your language is worse than mine," she commented with a thick accent that could only belong to one person: Minx.

"Get your ugly bitchass face out of here—"

"Shut him up already, would ya? I'm trying to have a heart-to-heart conversation here," another voice said. Though Dream couldn't see him, he knew it was Jschlatt.

"You get away from my best friend, you deadbeat freak!"

"Minx!"

"I got it, I got it! Calm your tits, Schlatt." Minx sighed and rolled her eyes. "Sorry about this, kid. I wouldn't have to do this if you stopped burning through the gags."

"You've got some real fucking nerve apologizing—" Before the loud sidekick couldn't finish, Minx nudged him with her toe. There was a distinct *snap* of electricity, and the blonde boy passed out next to his duochrome companion.

"Oh, thank Hypixel. He's a funny kid, I'll give him that, but I could not fucking *focus*," Schlatt groaned. Someone whimpered, like forcibly muffled cries. "He's fine, Tubbo. That wasn't even enough to leave a mark."

The whimpers got even louder, sounding more like screams. Dream still couldn't see them, so he tried to map out the scene using his other senses. The third sidekick, Tubbo, must be on the far right of the room with Jschlatt. They removed him from the other sidekicks, who were being guarded by Minx, so that they could have a 'heart-to-heart'.

Suddenly, this felt *way* too familiar for Dream. It wasn't the same as what that *monster* did, but Dream's brain kept going back to that night. He knew how it felt, being pulled away from the people you love, watching them get hurt by a villain you're powerless to stop. Seeing them lie

there, unmoving and helpless while you *struggle and scream, please stop it, why are you doing this, leave them alone, hurt me instead, kill me-*

“Ok, seriously? Tubbo, come on. I just want to talk. That's *all* I've wanted to do, but you never listened to me. No, instead you *ran away* five years ago like it changed who you were. I gave you everything I could, Tubbo. Don't forget that. You can't run away from that.”

Dream's adrenaline spiked, and he pulled out his axe, ready to dig it into Schlatt's neck. It was clear the villain's only target was Tubbo, which put the other two sidekicks at risk of becoming collateral like Dream's family. Dream wasn't going to let that happen.

“Listen, Tubbo. I know we had our misunderstandings. I wasn't as present in your life as I should've been, but that wasn't my fault. I wanted to, but your bitch mother always shut me out, pretending she was the better parent. Don't forget, she's the one that 'accidentally' left you on the side of the road in a box when you were a toddler, not me. I was the one that went after you, saved you.”

The muffled cries increased. Dream crawled until he was looking through the vent over Jschlatt and the sidekick. He saw Tubbo tied up to a chair, tears streaming down his face as he struggled against the bonds. Schlatt towered over him like an ant beneath his hovering shoe, just threatening to crush him.

“Who gave you your first computer, huh, Tubbo? And who replaced it again and *again* after your experiments failed? Who actually gave a damn when you got your Gift? You were twelve and everyone said it would never happen, that you were too old, but *I* never gave up on you. And how did you repay me? Fucking running away and becoming a sidekick to these fucking bastards?”

Dream used his axe to pry the vent hatch open. He moved the metal opening out of the way and lowered himself down feet first. He was two, maybe three stories off the ground, but it wasn't that bad of a drop. Not for Dream, at least. He let go of the vent and floated down swiftly and silently, not making a sound when his feet touched the ground.

“So what do you have to say for yourself, Tubbo?” He crouched down, forcing the teen to look into his eyes. “What excuse do you have for betraying me, betraying your *family* like this?”

“He can't say anything if you got him gagged like that, idiot,” Dream said, announcing his presence. The villains jerked, Minx using her stolen crystal to send a wave of lightning at his head. Dream blocked it with ease.

“Well, well, if it isn't Nightmare. I'll admit, I... Wasn't expecting this.” Schlatt let go of Tubbo's face and approached Dream, pulling out his own Enchanted axe. “So to what do I owe the honor? You're not one to show your...face very often, and everyone knows you're *impossible* to contact.”

“Oh yeah?” Dream leaned back casually, though his senses remained on high alert. The duo-chrome hair sidekick was stirring, but no one else seemed to notice. “And who is trying to contact me?”

Schlatt cackled. “Please. Do you seriously- you don't make a splash into villainy like you did and *not* attract the attention of the big fish. Who isn't trying to get their hands on you is the better question. Ninja, the Pauls, xQc, Trainwrecks, Aqualadora-” The ram-horned villain chuckled. It was bone-chilling. “Hell, I wouldn't be surprised if XD made a reappearance after all these years.”

It was like a Cryonic froze him to his heart. That name. He said that bastard's *name*. Without meaning to, a swirling breeze started flowing through the room. It rustled against his hood, made

the villains glance around uneasily.

“That’s nice,” he said. “Unfortunately, I’m not here to talk to anyone. I’m here for them-” he gestured to the sidekicks, “-so you can either give them up or I’ll take them by force. Your choice.”

Minx and Jschlatt gaped, exchanging obviously stunned glances. Tubbo screamed through his gag again. The duo-chrome sidekick’s head jolted up, forcing himself awake.

“What?” Minx squawked.

Dream couldn’t let his bravado drop, no matter how badly he was blushing under the mask. “You heard me.”

He flicked his axe, sending wind blades at Tubbo’s chair, cutting it up to pieces. Tubbo crashed to the ground, and suddenly Dream was right there, picking him up and tucking him under his arm. He sent a wall of air into Minx, and she flew back, giving him easy access to the other two sidekicks. The duo-chrome sidekick was abhorrently tall, which, combined with his squirming, did not make picking him up any easier. He settled with tossing the giant sidekick over his shoulder and carrying the last, still unconscious, teen under his other arm. They were *so heavy*. The only reason he hadn’t collapsed was because his Gift helped carry the weight.

“You fucking madman,” Schlatt wheezed, drawing his gold glowing axe. “So it’s true, huh? You target kids?”

“No, Schlatt. It’s the opposite. You’re the deadbeat who kidnaps his own child.”

Jschlatt bristled and flung a barrage of jagged stones at Dream with a swing of his axe. The Airnic leapt away from it and landed next to the villain. He couldn’t move his arms, could barely hold his own axe, but he had his feet. He kicked Schlatt in the chest, pushing with all his strength and his Gift. The villain landed flat on his ass, and Dream made a break for it with the sidekicks in tow.

He stopped running once he was outside and confident they were safe from any interference, villain or hero. He dropped the sidekicks to the ground. The two conscious teens instantly scooted protectively over the unconscious one. Their eyes burned with a fight despite having no weapons or any real way to move. Dream raised his axe, and that fight turned into terror.

He started with cutting off Tubbo’s gag. The boy spat, trying to get that cotton taste out of his mouth. He eyed Dream with narrowed eyes.

“Why are you doing this?” he asked. “What do you want?”

Dream cut Tubbo’s feet bonds next. “To get you out of there. It’s easier for me than the heroes. I don’t have to play by the rules.”

The sidekicks still looked skeptical. When Dream finally freed Tubbo’s hands, the boy jumped away and quickly started trying to free his friends himself, putting himself between them and Dream. The masked not-villain watched Tubbo struggle with the tight knots. It was amusing, but Dream understood. He would do the same if it was George and Sapnap.

Dream flipped his axe so the handle was facing Tubbo. The sidekick looked at him like he was mad — which, admittedly, maybe Dream was. He literally stole this axe, bled for it, and here he was, casually handing it over to a hero sidekick. Only a fucking idiot would do that.

“Go ahead. It’ll make things easier.”

Tubbo took the axe, shooting Dream a few more wary looks, before cutting his friends free. The duo-chrome teen rubbed his wrists and sent a pointed look between the weapon and Dream. Tubbo sighed and stared down at the axe.

“He was lying, you know,” Tubbo said, and Dream blinked. “He only cared about me getting my Gift because he wanted to use me. The only reason he didn’t give up on me about developing a Gift was because he refused to have a Giftless son. He’s a bastard and that’s why I ran away.”

“Uh... Kid? You don’t have to explain yourself. I know Jschlatt’s a dick.” He didn’t sign up to get this kid’s sad story. He was on a tight schedule. It wouldn’t be long until the heroes caught up.

“If you’re not working with him or any other villain, then why are you doing this?” Tubbo pressed, his grip on the axe tightening. The duo-chrome teen put a hand on his shoulder, but Tubbo shook it off. “Not now, Ranboo.”

The teen, Ranboo, huffed, looking more and more anxious. Tubbo stared Dream down, as if he was trying to intimidate the not-villain. A literal child with big brown eyes and fluffy brown hair. Trying to intimidate him.

“Look, I know you won’t believe me, but I really don’t have any sketchy motives here. I’m not doing this for money, I’m not trying to kidnap you, and despite what literally fucking *everyone* is saying, I don’t hate children-”

“Were not fucking children...” a voice mumbled, barely coherent. The foul-mouthed sidekick was awake. He stirred, clinging to the others to sit up. Dream used the distraction to steal his axe back, making Tubbo yelp, “Hey!”

“Seriously, I heard that some sidekicks were in danger, and I wanted to help. End of story and goodbye.”

“We- We’re heroes! Big heroes! Not *sidekicks!*” the blond boy shouted. That was a straight lie. A sidekick was anyone who passed the hero exam before they were 18. The exam was open to people as young as fifteen, but they were still minors. They weren’t getting assigned big-boy hero work just yet. “Wait a minute. Was that fucking *Nightmare-*”

Dream flew away, feeling better about himself than he has in months. He felt like he finally did something right — something good. He felt like he was actually a hero.

“When the first responding heroes first arrived at the scene, they saw the villains responsible injured and the sidekicks nowhere to be found. The villain behind the kidnapping, Jschlatt, told the heroes that Nightmare attacked them and took the sidekicks. Fortunately, upon scoping the area, the sidekicks were found outside of the facility with only minor injuries. We have pro-hero Wilbur Soot here to tell us more.”

“Yes, thank you. As you said, the sidekicks have been found and are safe. Any injuries sustained seem to have come from rope bindings used by Jschlatt and Minx. According to the sidekicks, they were not harmed by Nightmare. Nightmare fled the scene before the heroes could pursue him, but right now we believe he wanted to claim responsibility due to the high profile status of this kidnapping.”

“Nightmare you fucking bastard!” A blonde-haired boy in a red and white hero suit shoved his way

on camera, trying to steal the microphone from Wilbur Soot. “Trying to get clout for kidnapping me! You didn’t do shit! You little piece of-”

“Down, child,” Wilbur said, pushing the young sidekick away. “Sorry about Tommy. He’s a little excited about being on TV. As I was saying...”

And there it went. Dream’s last real chance at being seen as a hero. His (objectively flawless and badass) rescue of the sidekicks was brushed off as him trying to take credit for the kidnappings.

He couldn’t win.

The city was quiet tonight.

He sat on the edge of a tall building, overlooking all of Hypixel. For once, there weren’t any sirens or explosions or cries for help. Not that Dream would do anything if there was. He came out here, clad in lime green and the smiley mask, with the intention to patrol, but he quickly gave up. There wasn’t any point. No matter how many people he helped, how many heroic deeds he did, people would only ever see him as a disgusting villain. He was *tired*. So, so tired.

“Well, this looks like a very compromising position,” a voice said, so deep it reverberated. Dream flinched, not expecting to get snuck up on by a man with the voice of the devil. He lost his balance, and his hands flailed out before he fell off the edge of the building.

“HOLY SHIT!” a female voice shouted while a higher-pitched male voice wheezed, “Oh Jesus!” Footsteps thundered forward and Dream watched, floating midair with his axe under his feet like a skateboard, as three heads popped over the edge.

“Oh thank fuck,” the alarmingly deep-voiced man said. He wore a grotesque black rabbit mask that covered half his face. It looked straight out of a horror film. Dream was a little jealous of the quality. “Toast would fucking castrate me if I got him killed.”

“I knew we should have had Sykkuno talk first. His voice could never scare anyone,” the woman with brown to blonde ombre hair and a red business suit said.

“Um...” The last man with fluffy dark brown hair frowned. “It’s probably not a good idea to sneak up on *anyone* sitting on the edge of a building.”

“Who the hell are you and what the fuck do you want?” Dream didn’t have time to deal with this. After everything that has gone wrong, the last thing he needed was to get pestered by these... people (he couldn’t tell if they were heroes or villains, and frankly, he didn’t give a shit.)

“Right, right, sorry.” The woman winced. “I’m Valkyrae, nice to meet you Mr. Nightmare. The guy who scared you is Corpse Husband, and this is Sykkuno.” The two men waved, and Dream awkwardly waved back because he felt obligated to. “On behalf of our organization, we’d like to talk about... A little business deal, I guess you can say.”

The wind pushed Dream up so he hovered right by the ledge, but he didn’t step on it yet. The three strangers scooted back, and he stared them down from his towering position.

“And who’s your organization?”

“We’re called the Comfy Cartel.” Sykkuno held up a business card. “The best vigilantes in all of Hypixel.”

Dream took the business card, though he didn't need it. Sykkuno wasn't lying. Comfy Cartel was the best-known vigilante group in Hypixel, possibly the whole world. At this point, the police and heroes didn't even bother to stop them. Besides their tendency to shoot to kill and then ask questions, the Comfy Cartel mostly operated on the side of the law. In many cases, they were helpful because they could get their hands dirty in ways heroes could not.

Dream stepped onto the ledge. "What do you want with me?"

Valkyrae grinned. "We've been watching you, Nightmare. And we noticed something... Odd."

"Oh?"

"You're a terrible villain," Corpse Husband deadpanned.

"Wha- *What?*"

Valkyrae facepalmed. "*Corpse.*"

"What? It's true. We all agreed."

Sykkuno sighed. "He means that you seem to be trying really hard to do good things for a villain."

Dream stilled, and his axe shifted as his grip went lax. "... You noticed?"

He hadn't meant to say anything. It was barely a whisper, but that only let them know how shocked he was. He didn't know them; he didn't know if they were friends or foes. Letting his emotions show like that was stupid. But still... They *noticed*.

The trio snickered. Valkyrae leaned on Corpse's shoulder. "Oh, yeah, we noticed, buddy. It's hard not to for anyone who *actually* pays attention. I mean, what villain goes out of their way to stop bullies? Or rescue a kid's balloon? Seriously! Is the media blind?"

"But to be honest, it's fucking weird — why are you doing all of this?" Corpse said, his one visible eye glowing red.

Dream sighed and sat on the edge again, this time facing the vigilantes instead of the city. While he still didn't know if he could trust them... These were the first people to ever try to hear him out. Everyone else either wanted to capture, kill, or use him. This was a chance he probably won't get again.

"I think you know why," he admitted, looking down at his axe. "Like you said, the media is blind and I... I'm an idiot."

He was an idiot for getting involved the day of the Hero Trial. He was an idiot for thinking stealing the axe was a good idea. He was an idiot for thinking he could get the public to change their opinion. The list went on.

"Well... That's good enough for me?" Sykkuno said. The other two nodded, and Dream perked up.

"Huh?"

"You see, Nightmare, you're in a unique position here. Despite your failed heroic efforts, you're pretty much the most feared villain right now. And that's exactly what we need," Valkyrae said while Corpse pulled out a file.

"We've been using our infiltrations to track the chatter in the underground villain sphere. Pretty

much everyone has their eye on you and wants to work with you. Our boss thinks you could get farther and faster up the villain chain than anyone. And, you're probably the only person strong enough to take them out."

Dream took the files, skimming through them. It was detailed profiles on every major villain in Hypixel. "Is that so?"

Sykkuno's leg bounced. "Well, I mean, it already kind of worked with Jschlatt. He won't stay down for long knowing him; he's got a knack for getting out of jail. But with your power and reputation, we're not even kidding. We think you could dismantle the villain elites from the inside."

And that was the whole point, wasn't it? When it got down to the roots, taking down the elites was his parent's last mission. It's what they died doing, and it's the legacy Dream promised to carry on. The legacy was why he refused to accept that he couldn't be a hero. It's why he's kept fighting. At the end of the day, this was all for them.

Dream pulled out the last file in the folder. There was no photo, for no one besides Dream has seen him and lived. But the name on the file sat in bold red.

XD. The worst of them all.

The folder closed with a snap, and he stared the trio down. "I'm listening."

Chapter End Notes

Attentive: When I said there will be a shit-ton of cameos, I was not kidding. I will turn anyone into a Genshin-BNHA mashup character.

Yomi: Amazing, Atte. We love to see it.

Attentive: Thank you. Btw, check out this [awesome fanart of Dream at the Hero Tournament](#), it's amazing! Also, Wips made a [promo newspaper front page](#) for this fic and it's SO COOL! Go check it out! There's another clue in it too :D

Wips: I installed a very untrustworthy pdf reader to do it. Will my data get collected by some sketchy company? Maybe. Do I care? Not at all.

Yomi: We are a dedicated team and fear nothing.

Dream Goes to the Underworld

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

For better or for worse, Dream agreed to work with the Comfy Cartel. They brought up a good point. There was no better person to play double agent and take the villain underground rings down from the inside. It would also (hopefully) take him out of the spotlight while allowing him to do good.

While the cartel will provide him information and support, he was mostly acting alone. Getting close to the villains, setting them up to get arrested, that was all on him. They did, however, offer him resources that they believed would get him further in his infiltration.

Cue Emma Langevin.

The referral came from Corpse, actually. Dream commented on how he thought Corpse's mask was badass, and the vigilante immediately called up his tech guru. From what he overheard on the phone, Emma was *very* excited to be commissioned by *the* Nightmare. That was the first red flag.

The second was the dodgy hole in the wall dive bar she used as a base of operations. The business was shut down years ago, but the bar was fully stocked. Instead of patrons filling the space it was...who knows what, really. Mannequins with half-finished costumes, an old Samsung fridge stripped for parts, a tiny robot creature that threw a fit anytime Dream looked at it, and damaged weapons, Enchanted and regular, scattered literally everywhere.

He walked cautiously, scared to touch anything — there was *definitely* something toxic or explosive, or both, lying around. He reached out to a nearby mannequin to steady himself, and the whole thing wobbled and nearly toppled. He scrambled to catch it before it could domino into the mannequin next to it, cursing under his breath.

And then he met the third red flag.

“Sure, walk right in, would ya,” a sarcastic, harshly accented voice called out. A woman with split-dyed blonde and brown hair walked in from another room. Her face twisted after giving him a once-over, and Dream has never felt so exposed. “God, that mask is a fucking jump scare. Has anyone ever told you that?”

“It's, uh, kinda why I'm here. You're Emma?” he said, scratching the back of his head and then holding out his hand to greet her. He fumbled when a heavy weight was placed on it instead, almost dropping the gaudy lime green box. He balked, wondering where the hell the box came from considering Emma was still fifteen feet away.

“And you're Nightmare. That's Spirit. Now we're all acquainted,” said Emma, strolling into the room and taking a seat on a wobbly barstool next to Dream.

“Who's...” Dream trailed off. A weird, horse-looking robot that barely came to his knee started chewing on his shoelace. He saw it walking in, but with the exposed wires on its forehead and weird claw limbs sticking out its back, he assumed it was a broken piece of junk. “Oh. Okay then.”

Emma snorted. “Ha. Even Spirit hates your horrible shoes. That says a lot, man.”

Dream scowled and shoved the stupid robot away with his toe. “What'd you say about my shoes?”

“They’re terrible. Embarrassing, really. I’m surprised there’s not an article on them already.”

“I didn’t come here to get insulted.” Dream didn’t mean to, but he felt his emotions rise, and his element responded. The air stirred, rustling Emma’s well-kept hair. They brushed their bangs straight again and raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah. I know. You’re here because your current mask looks like a bad Halloween costume, and I was gracious enough to make you, a known *villain*, a new one. In fact, I spent a week straight making the most badass mask in the *entire fucking world* just for you.” She crossed her arms and stared. Her face never expressed any anger, but the gleam in their eyes sent a shiver down Dream’s back. He shrunk back and winced.

“Right. Sorry. Thanks.” He squeezed the box to physically relieve some of the twisting knots in his stomach. “Should I...open it?”

“No, that’s all you get. A box. Yes, open it!” She scoffed, chuckling a little. “Prime, what’s with you masked men? Don’t tell me. Are you a Leo too?”

“Wha- yes? I guess? What does this have to do with anything?”

“Because you’re a dramatic bitch.”

Dream gaped. “I don’t even- you know what? Nevermind. I’m just-” He shook his head and opened the box. A blank smiling face stared back.

This mask was a smooth circle, white with a shiny gleam. A simple black smiley face contrasted the white material, looking like it was hand-drawn in ink. It looked eerily similar to the picture Drista drew, and his hands shook as he brushed against it. It felt sturdy, almost glass-like, but it was shockingly lightweight when he lifted it. The thick black leather straps looked a lot more secure than the cheap velcro on his current mask. It was absolutely perfect — except for one thing.

“I...I love it,” he said, cradling it. “But, uh. How am I supposed to see?”

Emma laughed. “Yeah, don’t worry. Try it on and you’ll see.” She bounced eagerly on her toes. Dream stared at her, not moving. If this was some ploy to see his face, it wasn’t working.

The tech engineer’s eyes widened. “Shit. Right. I’ll, uh...here.” She grabbed a nearby tarp and unceremoniously plopped it on Dream’s head. “There you go! I promise, all I can see are your ugly ass shoes now.”

“They’re not *that* bad...” Dream muttered as he pulled off his old mask. They were comfortable and practicable. Sure, he’s owned this pair of gym shoes for a...few years, but they were still holding up! He hasn’t even needed to glue the soles back on yet.

He secured the new mask to his face. He liked the comfortable support it provided to the back of his head, and it somehow stayed up without completely smashing his nose. When he pulled the tarp off, he expected it to remain pitch black. But color and light flooded his vision, and he blinked repeatedly to make sure he wasn’t hallucinating because...he could see *everything*. It wasn’t even an exaggeration. Though the image was crunched and distorted, when he looked in his peripherals, he could see everything behind him. He held out his arm behind his back and checked both peripherals — sure enough, it was a complete 360° view.

“Pretty awesome, huh?” Emma smirked, crossing their arms. Dream could only nod. “There are four cameras across the axes that show everything in real-time. Plus the screen is powered by an AI that tracks your eye movement and focus. Try squinting at something for like, three seconds.”

Dream did so, squinting at Emma's face, and suddenly a giant pair of nostrils filled his vision. His jaw dropped.

So. Fucking. Cool.

"Nice nose hairs," he giggled like a teenage boy. Emma rolled their eyes.

"Alright, cut it out, you manchild. I wanna show you the best part. Here, look."

She rummaged through their purse and pulled out a small makeup mirror. She held it up to Dream, but all he saw was a white mask with a black smiley face.

"Okay, now smile. A big smile too, not some pursed lips smirk," Emma said, and Dream hesitantly listened. Seconds after moving his face...the smiley moved too. Not much — the smile remained the same. But the two eye dots arched up, mimicking an overly happy emoji. Dream jolted back, and the smile returned to normal.

"Wait...how does it..." Dream grabbed the mirror and scowled at it. The smiley moved dramatically; narrowed eyes, downturn scowl. He stopped glaring but kept frowning, and now the mask looked sad.

Emma cackled. "Isn't it awesome? It's kind of cute, but also, if I was fighting you? Damn, that's fucking scary to see. It only mimics strong facial expressions, so unless you walk around perpetually angry or something, it'll mostly be the default smiley."

Dream stared in the mirror, studying the mask closely using the zoom feature. It was scary how clear his vision was. It really brought a whole new meaning to 'caught in 4k.'

"It's incredible," he breathed, finally passing back the mirror. Emma beamed. "Seriously, I've never seen tech this good, this has gotta be worth..." His mouth went dry at the thought. Life insurance and inheritance left him set for life, but this might throw a wrench in that. "Fuck. Do you take monthly payments?"

"Oh, dear." Emma failed to cover up her laughter, hiding her mouth behind her hand. "Look, buddy, you don't gotta make yourself sound so pitiful. I wasn't even planning on asking for payment that way. That is, if you take my offer."

Normally, this would be great news. But the coy look in Emma's eyes combined with her critical remarks earlier and, well. Maybe falling into massive debt wasn't such a bad choice.

"...what is it?"

"This is a terrible idea."

"I don't know what you're talking about. This is the best damn idea I've ever had."

"I'm not putting that on. You cannot make me fucking touch that thing. It's not happening."

"Okay. Give me the mask."

Dream froze, forcing his face into a dramatic glare so Emma would know just how serious he was being. He had a netherite axe and they were 5'2. He could punt them. He *will* punt them.

"You got about three seconds before I commit Leo on Leo crime."

“What does that even-” Something grabbed his ear, and suddenly, his world toppled and flipped and he landed *hard* on his back. “-mean?”

He wheezed and coughed, curling on his side to regain his breath. A pile of fabric landed on his head.

“Put it on, Nightmare. It’s part of the contract.”

“I didn’t sign any fucking contract,” he grumbled, sitting up and glaring at the clothes now in his lap. His enhanced vision let him see Emma prepping to smack the back of his head, and he flinched. His arms covered above his head, partially surrendering and partially protecting it from getting backhanded. “Okay, okay! Alright. Do you have a bathroom at least? Because a tarp isn’t going to cut it for...this.”

Emma smirked triumphantly and jutted her thumb to a side door. Dream stalked over and locked the door behind him. To his disappointment, there were no windows, and the vent was *tiny*. There was no escape. He glared at the partially constructed robot discarded in the urinal, pretending it was Emma’s stupid face. He said a silent prayer that his family would forgive him for this dishonor.

And then he started stripping.

“Fucking stupid- what’s the point of shit like this? All this extra skin, like — what good does it do? You can’t take a hit, you can’t fight full-out, you get a weird-ass tan line... Am I putting this on backward? Wait, are these buttons supposed to connect down- oh my fucking Prime. I’m quitting, I can’t, I can’t, I can’t.”

He struggled with the weird straps and buttons and...openings, finally finishing the endeavor by lacing up the combat boots. Those, the leather thigh strap for his axe, and the metal-plated leather gloves were the only acceptable parts of the costume. Well, and maybe the pants. He liked the pants — black, baggy, athletic material with lots of pockets and pouches. They were thick but flexible, with extra padding around his knees which was good for parkour. The only problem was how low on the hips they sat. It was clearly an intentional design because the crotch area would not let him pull them up any higher. Combined with the leotard, it made for maximum hip exposure.

That’s right. A fucking leotard.

A black, sleeveless turtleneck leotard and a lime green hoodie cropped so short it sat above his pecks. Any sort of practicality the pants provided was eliminated with something as exposing and uncomfortable as this. At least the hoodie had elbow pads. It was...something, he supposed.

Fuck it. It’s been five minutes, and the wedgy was already one with his asshole.

He waddled back to Emma, the leotard rubbing in all the wrong places. The tech guru’s face lit up like a Christmas tree, wolf-whistling as she looked him up and down with greedy eyes. Dream’s cheeks *burned* behind the mask, making it feel warm and stuffy.

“Oh, fuck yes! Prime, I’m a fucking genius!” Emma kissed her finger and pointed up at the sky. Dream crossed his hands to make an X.

“No, fuck no. I can’t wear this! I- I can barely fucking walk!”

“You look so hot though. That old hoodie — damn, it did your body dirty. Am I drooling? I think I’m drooling.”

Dream glared. “I look like a wannabe stripper.”

Emma tsked their teeth. “Nightmare, Nightmare, you’re missing the big picture. Any villains see you like this, and they’ll be bending like a straw to get *near* you.”

Dream frowned, not convinced. He knew the power of pretty privilege, being George’s best friend at all. But he also knew that it didn’t apply to someone like him. He crossed his arms self-consciously, and Emma’s face softened. She put a hand on his shoulder.

“Here, think of it like this. Your power and reputation will get you in the door, right? But sex- sex gets you in the bedroom.”

Dream physically jerked away and gagged. Yeah, that was a *revolting* idea. Emma rolled her eyes.

“You don’t have to take it so literally, drama queen. I mean it metaphorically. It’ll get you access to their darkest secrets, their deepest desires, their most lustful fantasies. People get stupid when they get horny. I can speak with authority on that as an asexual. You look like this, and you can get them to do *absolutely anything*. Besides, people always forgive a hot villain.”

He wanted to say no. His ego and his wedgy were *begging* him to say no. But that annoyingly logical part of his brain knew Emma was right — that this was his best chance at taking the villains down, at taking *XD* down...

But also — *really?* Dressed like this? He’d get justice for his family, but at what cost?

Emma cleared their throat, glancing up awkwardly. “While you think on that, uh... Is now a good time to mention that I *maybe* programmed the mask so it won’t work unless the leotard is nearby?” Dream glared so harshly he knew the mask mimicked it. “I’m sorry! It’s an insurance tactic! Someone might try to steal the mask to make copies, but it won’t work unless they like, strip you naked or something.”

Dream facepalmed and accepted his doom.

When the time arose for his first infiltration, the Comfy Cartel assigned him an agent to be his main contact and information dealer. He didn’t understand what their exact role was, but he assumed it was some field agent to be his backup and make sure he didn’t betray the cartel. They didn’t tell him who, but he guessed Valkyrae. He’s already met her and she knows he’s not really a villain.

“You’re Nightmare, right? It’s so nice to meet you!”

He did not expect an adorable bundle of joy with a cat ears headband and the sweetest smile in the world.

“I’m TinaKitten, by the way! But most people just call me Tina.” She smiled and waved, her hands barely visible behind her giant pink knit sweater. “Hey, I like the new outfit! You look so good! Did Emma make it? That mask is so good, it’s gotta be her.”

Dream blushed and rubbed his neck. “Uh, yeah, thanks...it’s nice to meet you too, Tina.”

She beamed, bright teeth and crinkled eyes, and it stabbed rays of sunshine into Dream’s heart. He had an overwhelming urge to pinch her cheeks.

“Are you ready for your mission? Keemstar, wow. That’s no easy target. But I believe in you!”

“Yeah, hopefully, it works and I don’t, like, get arrested too or something,” he said, eyeing Tina. She was tiny and didn’t look like a fighter. Obviously, looks could be deceiving, but... “So...are you my handler or something?”

Tina shrugged and motioned for him to follow her. “I guess so? That’s one way to describe it. I like to think of myself as your eyes and ears from afar, you know? We’ll get you an earpiece so we can stay in contact, and I’ll help you out with coordinating police traps for the villain. I’ll also try to keep the heroes off your back, so I hope you don’t get arrested too!”

Dream snorted. “Thanks, I’m glad you got my back.”

“Really? Aw, thank you!”

Tina skipped ahead and held open a door for him. Inside, she passed him a tiny earpiece and some field gear to stuff his pockets and belts (smoke bombs, flash bombs, tear gas bombs, a tiny gas mask, a first aid kit, a stun gun, zip-tie cuffs, paint bombs). They went over Keemstar’s file and their infiltration and set-up plans. Keemstar’s brand was all about getting attention and clout from other big-name villains, which made him the perfect first target. There was no one more talked about, no one more infamous right now than Nightmare. A cartel sleeper agent passed on the word that Nightmare wanted to work with Keemstar, and the villain took the bait immediately.

Honestly, sometimes it was too easy.

“Okay, Nightmare, here we go. Our agent just confirmed Keemstar is waiting for you at the meeting place,” Tina said on the comms. Dream took a deep breath and brushed his fingers against his axe just to feel that thrum of power.

“Approaching alleyway now,” he muttered back and made his descent from the rooftop. He spotted Keemstar standing behind two beefy bodyguards and dropped down in front of them. The guards tensed at his arrival, but they completely froze up when they really *looked* at Dream.

Keemstar, who was focused on his phone, took his time looking up. “Well, you’re punctual, at le-” A sharp, moist inhale was followed by an aggressive hacking cough. Dream wrinkled his nose and willed the flush away from his burning neck. “What the- What the actual fuck? Did you...Did he always look like that? Tell me I’m not going crazy.”

The bodyguards shook their heads while Dream crossed his arms. He decided to pop his hip to the side for good measure and felt equally powerful and disgusted watching the men track the movement.

“Got a few upgrades. Is that *really* going to be an issue?”

“No, no, of course not. I’m all for it. Now, let’s take that little drive, shall we?” Keemstar tapped his phone, and a sleek black car with tinted windows pulled up on the street. As per their agreement, the car would drive them to Keemstar’s base of operations. Unbeknownst to Keemstar, Tina was tracking his location and would give it to the police the moment they arrived at the base.

The driver got out and opened the back door for them. Keemstar gestured with a forced smile. “After you.”

Yeah, no way Dream was stupid enough to risk that. “No, it’s alright. I don’t want to take your seat or anything.”

Keemstar shrugged and slid in. Dream followed after him, and then the bodyguards, one in the back with them and one in the front. Inside, he realized the back windows weren't just tinted, but covered by black screens. There was a divider between them and the driver's seat as well, so he couldn't see anything outside. The back of the car was custom designed so that the two rows faced each other. Keemstar sat with his back to the driver, so Dream took the seat across from him.

“Sorry about all of this. It's just standard procedure, I'm sure you understand.”

Dream nodded, and the villain grinned. Keemstar reached into a built-in cooler in the console and pulled out two bottles of beer. He held one out, but Dream shook his head.

“Really? You sure?” Keemstar shrugged and passed it over to his bodyguard instead, popping the lid with a keychain. “Don't think I've ever met a villain who turned down a drink. It's pretty customary for us at the top.”

“Is that why so many of you are alcoholics?” Dream couldn't help himself. The shock on Keemstar's face was too good.

“You're a blunt one, huh?”

“I'm just being honest. You don't get this-” he brushed the netherite axe, “-by accepting drinks on the job.”

“A prude, too.” Keemstar took a huge sip just to be spiteful. Dream smirked behind his mask. The target willingly consuming something that inhibited his cognitive functions? They couldn't make this any easier.

“You're right, though. Your resume is fucking stacked, and you've only been at it for what? Four, five months? Every hero ever is gunning for your throat, yet no one, not even *Technoblade*, could beat you. The media can't keep your name out of their mouths — I swear, everywhere I go it's ‘Nightmare this’ and ‘Nightmare that.’ ‘Nightmare beats every hero ever in a fight.’ ‘Nightmare shits in child's ice cream.’” Keemstar snorted. “I'm impressed, really. I keep telling everybody, getting press like that? It's what really matters in this gig. It's how you become a big threat like you and me. People don't fear us for what we've done, not really. They fear us because the heroes, and the journalists, and the social media warriors *tell* them that what we've done is bad; that we're dangerous and need to be stopped. *That's* how you become a villain with power to his name.”

“Oh, I get it. So *that's* why you always ride the coattails of other villains?”

Keemstar chuckled and took another swig of his beer. He waved his finger at Dream, but the smirk on his face held a playful lit. “My, my, nothing gets past you, huh? I mean it when I say I think you're going places. When I heard you wanted to work with *me*, out of every villain who's surely worshiping the ground you walk on, I was fucking ecstatic. There's no better way to retire than after working with the craziest bastard Hypixel has ever seen.”

Dream's face blanked, and while his mask hid that, Keemstar surely noticed his shock with the way his body jolted. “Retire?”

“Yeah. I haven't announced it formally, since I was waiting until after our little gig hits the news. I just figured it was time. Being a villain just isn't the same anymore, you know? The good old days there were all the villain gangs; creating huge organizations of damn impressive villains teamed together. We even had civilians supporting us who just wanted to see us take heroes down. But now it's all about the elites, all about being the top dog of the underground rings of underlings, all while hiding in the shadows. It's...boring. So, I thought I'd make my exit in style and go live an

easy, comfy life.”

“Right.”

There was a bitter taste in his mouth. Skewing Dream’s plans seemed to be all his life did. First the attack on his family, then the Hero Trial fiasco, then the Hero Championship fiasco, followed by his failed heroics and now *this* — his first mission to take down the underground villain top dogs, and his target is *retiring*? Is it morally wrong to take down a retiring villain? You put them in jail so they can’t break the law anymore, but that doesn’t matter if they’re going to live away from society in a cottage in the woods. Or does it? Dream was *so* confused.

“Don’t worry about it, Nightmare,” Tina spoke up as if she read his mind. “He’s still got to pay for all the terrible things he’s done in the past, so our mission is still a go!”

Dream closed his eyes and sighed quietly. Right. He’s got this. No reason to change his plans. The elites needed to pay for all the harm they did; that’s what his parents wanted, so that’s what Dream needed to do.

“Yeah, thirteen years. It’s been a long run. I’m gonna miss it — though I doubt most people will miss me. The joys of being a villain, am I right?” Keemstar smirked, finishing off the bottle. “Honestly, it’s been a long time coming. Things went to shit like, what? Six years ago?”

Dream’s eyes snapped open. Goosebumps covered his skin, and it felt like his senses turned to hyper mode. His heart rate spiked uncomfortably, pounding out of his chest like a sledgehammer against a metal door. “Six? What...What happened six years ago?”

It had to be a coincidence, right?

“Eh, nothing really *happened*. That’s just when XD started making a name for himself; he’s the one that really fucked up the system, starting the underground rings and all. And now the bastard isn’t even around anymore.”

It *wasn’t*. And now Dream was pissed.

Oh yeah. He’ll totally ruin this man’s retirement, and he’ll do it dancing and laughing.

When they called it the underground rings, Dream didn’t expect them to be so...literal.

Based on the noise, they were driving through the party district. He could hear the loud, laughing crowds and resounding base from afar. It surprised him; he expected a villain’s base of operation to be somewhere isolated, away from the public eye. They began to drive down a long, spiral decline, and it sounded like they were driving through a club instead of just past them. The noise was so loud, and it only got louder instead of fading and morphing. By the time the car stopped, the noise was all-encompassing.

Dread filled his stomach.

The driver opened the door, and the cheering noise only got more intense. Blinding stage lights kept him from seeing where the noise came from.

“Go on, Nightmare! They’re all waiting for you!”

He stepped out, wincing as his eyes adjusted. High concrete walls, hundreds of feet tall, surrounded

them, a spiral bridging on the walls for cars to drive up and down. Bright, flashing lights made everything a swirling rainbow of colors. The noise, the lights, knowing he was so far underground...it was so overwhelming, he had to take a deep breath to calm himself. On the ground, a loud crowd of cheering people surrounded the circular stage they were parked on. There had to be at least 500 people here. How were the police supposed to arrest 500 people? Keemstar could easily escape with a crowd like this.

“Tina...” he mumbled.

“Working on it. We got the location pinpointed, but try to isolate him above ground. That’s our best bet,” she assured him.

Keemstar came up behind him, clapping and smiling as he gestured at Dream. He waved pleasantly at the crowd like some kind of politician.

“Are...Are these all the villains working in the ring?” Dream asked breathlessly.

“Hmm? Oh, nah. A lot of them are prospective recruits or side pieces. I think last we calculated we only had, what? 200 villains registered with my ring? Maybe 150? Who knows; they’re all the same level of untalented wannabes. If they’re not Giftless, they might as well be.”

“Then why keep them around? What’s the point?”

“Exactly why I’m retiring! Villain gangs, they were smaller, had more talent. You had to earn your place. But they got hard to sustain, I guess, with the agencies getting more and more controlling of Enchanted weapon production. It’s a rarity someone outside the elites has one, and nowadays, you can’t find a Gifted person worth a dime if they don’t got one boosting their power. Well, except for you, I guess.” Keemstar smirked. “These fools? They’re only good for making the heroes feel like they make a difference — a giant mob that keeps replenishing.”

Sick. Dream felt viscerally ill. Sweaty palms, twisting stomach, spinning vision, pounding headache, racing heartbeat. *Are they not humans?* He wanted to scream. *How can you act like they have no value?*

“Is this it? You present me to your followers like a show pony?” he said instead. Keemstar chuckled and clasped a hand on Dream’s shoulder. He suppressed his knee-jerk desire to shove it off.

“Oh, no, this is just how you keep them loyal. Get them excited to watch from a distance things they’ll never get to do. You see, I caught wind of an Enchanted weapon being transported across Hypixel tonight. I figured you’d like a job like this — it’s practically your brand.”

“Nightmare,” Tina cut in. “We’re coordinating with the police right now. They’ve organized a squad to bust the underground ring, but we’ll have some heroes stay back to catch Keemstar. I’m scanning for news on Enchanted weapons transports so we’ll know where you’re headed. Lead him there and the heroes will be ready to take him down.”

Dream smiled, wide and forced. Keemstar’s eyes widened watching the mask’s expression change.

“You got it, boss.”

The bodyguards tried to follow them back in the car. But that simply wouldn’t do. Dream had a very specific plan in mind.

“Are they really necessary?” he said. “No offense. I just wonder if they’ll...get in the way. My power is not known for holding back.”

One bodyguard eyed Dream’s axe uneasily. Keemstar’s lips twitched down.

“Well...”

“C’mon, Keem, this job is nothing. Screw procedure, screw safety measures. Just loosen up; it’s your last run as a villain, remember?”

Keemstar eyed his men, face pinched, before he shrugged. “I take back the rude comment. Keep watch on the club, boys. We’ll be back in an hour.”

Dream smirked and turned to the driver. “Can I have those?” He flicked his wrist, floating the keys over to him. The driver jumped back, looking faint. “Thanks.”

He got into the driver’s seat. It was a *nice* sports car, a stick steer model with way too much horsepower for someone as little impulse control as Dream. He hummed a senseless song as he started the engine, thriving off the powerful thrum he felt through the steering wheel. Keemstar got in the passenger seat, eyeing Dream as he put on his seatbelt. His discomfort only made Dream more determined.

He threw the car in reverse and spun it fast, throwing Keemstar in his seat. The car got dangerously close to the stage edge, and Dream cackled.

“Shit!” Keemstar gripped the door like a lifeline.

He jerked the stick and pressed the gas, going so fast the wheels spun at first. The car skidded side-to-side before it regained traction and bolted up the winding driveway. The crowd cheered like the mentally messed up weirdos they were, excited by the reckless behavior.

“Woo, let’s GO!” Dream laughed like this was the funniest thing in the world. Which it was, to him.

“Airnics. You’re all speed junkies, I swear.”

“That was brilliant, Nightmare!” Tina cheered in his ear. “Okay, so when you get back above ground, there will be a road adjacent. Turn right and go down it until you hit a dead end. The heroes will be sent there. At my current estimates, you’ll only have about ten seconds to escape before they get there. Which I know doesn’t *sound* like a lot of time...”

“It’ll be fine,” Dream mumbled, accelerating the car for good measure. He’s dealt with worse.

“It better be,” snapped Keemstar. Dream rolled his eyes.

“Okay, okay, that’s what I thought. And hey, you be safe, okay?” Tina said, and...that shouldn’t hurt as much as it did. He shouldn’t feel like his heart was twisting, the heavy bubble of guilt building in his chest. Maybe it was that longing for what he lost acting up — his desire to work on a team with people who cared about him, taking down villains and watching each other’s backs.

Or maybe he just felt bad about the horrific thing he was about to do.

Dream slowed down as they approached the exit. Keemstar pressed a button, and the thick metal doors slid black.

“Alright, my intel tells me that the truck is headed east — dude, *east!* I said east! East is straight, not right!”

Dream shrugged. “How am I supposed to know that? I couldn’t see shit getting here; I have no idea where we even are, much less east and west.”

“Then you should’ve asked. Are you *stupid?* Whatever. With your driving, we’ll still be able to catch up with it — assuming you don’t fuck it up again. Just turn around at this light.”

As they approached the light, Dream sped up even more so that they were pushing 100mph. Thankfully, there weren’t many cars on the road, and the others wisely got out of his lane when they saw him coming. They blew through the light, and Keemstar sputtered and cursed.

“Are you fucking kidding me? What are you doing? Are you dumb in the head or just that incompetent?”

Dream squeezed the steering wheel, the leather of the wheel squeaking against his leather gloves. His mask’s vision gave him a perfect view of Keemstar’s face. Furrowed brows slowly loosened as his eyes widened and darted, checking his phone and the man driving him. His hand drifted to the trident strapped to his back, but Dream used the wind to knock the man’s hand away. The Airnic made a show of not touching his axe as he kept Keemstar’s arm pinned.

“Nightmare...what the *fuck* is this?”

“You know, Keem. You mentioned someone earlier. Someone I’ve been hunting for a *very* long time.”

“What are you getting at?”

“Nightmare?” Tina said.

Tina. Prime. Mom and Dad. Please forgive me.

Dream subtly pulled out the earpiece and turned it off. “XD. What do you know about him?”

Keemstar’s jaw dropped, lost in silent disbelief for a brief moment before he threw his head back and cackled. “You — all of this — Prime, what could you *possibly* want to do with that fucker?”

Flashes of memories (“*Dream, baby, don’t look. Don’t look.*” *But he couldn’t. He couldn’t look away, even as the flames began to rise-*) and Dream clenched his teeth to force them away. The speedometer rose to 120mph.

“Okay, okay, *shit!* Slow down! You’re going to get us killed like this!” Keemstar tried to squirm, so Dream increased the air pressure holding him down. The man gasped and whined.

“Answer the question.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say! I barely knew the man! He came out of nowhere acting like he was king because he fucked up some agencies and heroes — FUCK!” The car jerked to the side, slamming Keemstar’s head into the side window. Dream gave no reaction. “Damn it, Nightmare, I’m *trying*, okay? I just know he’s the reason the villain system changed, he’s crazy fucking powerful, and no one’s seen him for four years. Even when he was around, the bastard was a fucking cryptid. He refused to work with me or anyone else, real lone wolf type shit. I only even *saw* him once for like half a second and- oh. *Oh.*”

“What?” Dream snapped. They were approaching the dead-end fast and he hasn’t learned anything new. He *needed* to learn something new; he’s been losing his goddamn mind over it for *so long*.

“Nothing, nothing. It just all makes sense now.”

The building cutting them off was in view. People on the sidewalk scattered to the side.

“Spit it out, Keemstar.”

“Well, it’s just...”

He could see the reflection of their headlights in the building windows, the wall getting closer and closer and closer.

“You look a lot like him.”

He slammed his foot on the brake so hard, pain shot up to his knee. He gritted his teeth as the car skidded and jerked, the stench of burnt rubber everywhere. He tried to hold the steering steady, but the wheels jerked and they spun right. Everything jerked forward, followed by momentary weightlessness as the car caught air and flipped.

There was no time to grab his axe. It was strapped to his thigh, and his hands were embedded into the steering wheel, and the roof of the car was fast approaching the concrete. He closed his eyes and tensed every muscle and twisted his gut and stopped breathing altogether. He imagined the power he felt when he held an Enchanted weapon; the power he felt facing Techno, facing XD-

A massive wind picked up the car and flipped it back to its wheels. It scraped and skidded against the concrete, lurching hard, before it came to a harsh stop *right* in front of the building. The force made it tilt on its right wheels again, and Dream used his powers to slam it right back on the ground.

Heavy breaths and gasps filled the silence between the two villains. Keemstar ran his hands against his chest and face, like he couldn’t believe he was alive and unharmed.

“What...do you mean?”

Keemstar’s headshot over to him, a wild look in his eyes. “You...You never touched your weapon-”

Dream tightened the air around the villain, making his gag for oxygen for a second and then releasing it.

“*Explain what you fucking mean, Keemstar.*”

“You...the wind...I noticed your power was weirdly similar to *his*, but that...” Keemstar shook his head. Dream glared so he knew how short his patience was. “It’s not identical. Like I said, I barely got a glimpse at him...but the green clothes, the white mask...even your hair color looks identical. I’m not lying, my memory is the best there is, I swear...”

Dream scoffed. He lifted his hands off the steering wheel only to find them trembling. He clenched them and shoved them against his side. It felt like he was being suffocated by another Airnic, the pressure in his chest becoming unbearable and *so painful*.

“Well, then remember *this*. You’re a sick, evil bastard, and I’m going to tear down everything XD built.” He grabbed his axe and slammed it against the glass. Even though it was bulletproof, it shattered with ease. “Enjoy prison, Keemstar.”

He flew out of the car window and hovered high in the sky, watching the heroes descend on the scene. While four of the heroes secured the scene and subdued Keemstar, who surrendered like a coward with his arms raised high, one never moved, their eyes trained on the sky. Karl Jacobs stared right at Dream, and Dream stared back. He should've flown away already, he knew that, but his mind was stuck in that car, on what Keemstar said.

Stuck on a stick finger picture drawn by his baby sister *years* ago.

Karl raised a hand to his ear, and Dream flew away.

Or, at least, he tried to.

He was making his way back to the Comfy Cartel base, alternating between flying and parkour because he was so mentally exhausted, he couldn't focus long enough on either.

He...may have lost control a little back there. Or a lot. Prime, he probably looked like a fucking suicidal psychopath. How many people's lives did he put in danger, driving like that? He almost crashed, almost smashed into the building — how many innocent people would have gotten hurt if he did? If he wasn't strong enough to stop the car?

Some fucking wannabe hero he was. What's the point in fighting the villain allegations when he did *stupid, impulsive, bullheaded* shit like this all the damn time? He just makes the media's job so fucking easy.

Prime, he wanted to kick himself. Or a wall. Kick *something*.

He landed on a rooftop and kicked at the concrete for good measure. It didn't quite have the same effect as kicking himself in the ass would, but a sharp pain stabbed his big toe, making the nerves ache. It was nice, being able to feel something other than panic during his existential crisis.

Except now his right foot really fucking hurt. He kicked at the building again with his left one just to even it out. But it wasn't a hard enough kick, so he did it again, but now his left foot hurt more so he kicked again with his right foot and-

“Well. This is the weirdest fucking shit I've seen in a while.”

Dream's eyes snapped open. The mask let him see who was behind him without turning around, but even then, he recognized that voice. The mocking monotone was unmistakable.

“Techno,” he greeted, forcing his voice to be steady. “I was wondering if you'd ever catch up to me.”

“What are you wearing?”

Goddamnit.

With a groan, Dream spun around and slashed his axe at the hero, sending dull blades of wind at Techno to knock him back. The Cryonic countered them with shields of ice, each one shattering and reforming with each hit. The wide grin on Techno's face was *terrifying*.

“Finally, a rematch.”

“What? No. No, no, no, no, no.” Dream did *not* have the time or energy for this. He barely

survived his last duel against Techno. He spun his axe, bracing his knees to take to the sky and get the fuck out of here. He made it about thirty feet in the air when something wrapped around his ankle and *yanked* him back to the ground.

“Oh, I *like* this thing.” Techno tugged on the fishing pole — *his* fishing pole, the one that belonged to his grandpa, the one he lost escaping the tournament. Dream felt something stir in his chest; a burning desire to punch Techno’s mask off and use the fishing pole to dangle him off the side of the building. “I see why you used it. I still can’t believe it’s not Enchanted.”

Dream slammed his axe down on the wire, but it didn’t break. Damn it. His grandfather made his fishing pole *too* good. Oh, the irony if this led to his arrest.

“Working with Keemstar. I didn’t think you’d stoop so low so quickly.”

Dream scoffed. “I’d hardly consider *that* as working with him.”

“You’re right. You seem like a really shitty partner in crime, leaving him like that right in the exact area we got an anonymous tip.” Techno reeled in the fishing line, dragging Dream across the concrete. It scraped his stupid exposed hips, and he winced. “What are you up to, Nightmare?”

Dream slammed his axe into the ground to fight being dragged any further. “Who says I’m up to something? Hundreds of people saw us at Keemstar’s little underground club. I’m sure any one of them could’ve called the cops.”

“You’re not a good liar.”

“You don’t know shit. I’m a great liar.” A blade landed at his throat, and Dream reconsidered his life choices. “Alright, alright, don’t act like it’s *that* weird. I’m just...getting rid of the competition.”

“...and you consider *Keemstar* your competition.”

Techno’s voice was dripping with disbelief. And yes, the idea did sound outrageous. But Dream didn’t need people pointing it out.

“Any elite with an underground ring is. I mean, did you think Jschlatt and Minx’s arrest was a coincidence?”

Techno narrowed his eyes, a glowing red hue to them. But he didn’t attack, didn’t press forward with the sword at Dream’s throat, didn’t draw the crossbow off his back or threaten to shoot.

“I still don’t believe you. But I’ll let Philza deal with it back at the agency. He’s always been better at interrogation.”

“Actually, I’ll pass.” Dream finished untangling the fishing line from the ankle he tucked under his thigh. He kicked the freed leg out as he flipped back to his feet, clipping Techno’s chin with his heel. “Interrogation is against my boundaries. Also, do you think I could have that back?”

He pointed at the fishing pole. Techno’s jaw clenched and he swung his sword, sending a flurry of ice spikes at Dream. He quickly kicked out his axe and took to the air, zooming out of the fishing pole’s reach.

“Alright. Next time then.” Truthfully, Dream didn’t want there to be a ‘next time,’ but he also wanted his grandfather’s fishing rod back goddamn it. The mission was to fight villains and avoid heroes, but he might have to make an exception here.

Oh *shit*. The mission.

The earpiece suddenly felt like a brick in his pocket. Realistically, he could just fly home and wait to deal with it in the morning. Or he could not deal with it at all, stop associating with the Comfy Cartel entirely, and just take out the villain underground rings all on his own. It shouldn't be that hard to do anyway, right?

"...screw it." He pulled out the earpiece and turned it on, shoving it in his ear. Someone was talking, but not to him.

"-fucking piece of shit. This absolute priss bitch, thinking this is acceptable? In any context? Is self-preservation or, I don't know, *common sense* not something that-"

"If, uh. If you're talking about me, I'm...I'm sorry," Dream cut in. The comms went silent; all he could hear was the wind and his pounding pulse.

"I- did he just — NIGHTMARE! YOU BITCH!"

Something...didn't sound right. "Uh. Tina?"

"DO I SOUND LIKE-"

"Nightmare!" A much softer, non-murderous voice cut in. "There you are! We were so worried about you. An informant called and said you nearly crashed? What happened, did the comms cut out or something?"

"Please, Tina, we all know he didn't 'cut out.'" Now in context, Dream realized the other person was Emma. "He- no, *you*. You turned off your comm! Do you realize what a dick move that was? Tina was terrified something happened to you! She called me because she wanted me to try hacking your comm to at least get your location so we could make sure you weren't *dead*."

Dream cringed. "I'm sorry. You- you're right, that was *really* shitty of me, I wasn't thinking..." He shook his head. He *still* couldn't think properly right now, his thoughts becoming an unintelligible buzz. "It got out of hand, but we got it done. The heroes arrested Keemstar, the police should be taking down the ring right now. I'd still call this mission a success, right?"

"That's true-"

"Nope. Nuh-uh. Don't validate this dumbass."

"I hate you," Dream deadpanned.

"Ha! Not as much as I hate myself!"

Tina sighed. "We'll go over improvements before the next mission. All that matters is that you got out safe."

Dream thought about the blade that had been pressed to his throat not long before. The cold diamond, chilled even further by Cryonic power, must've had a lasting effect because he shivered just thinking about it. There were a lot of villains who fell to that sword before; how long until Dream joined them? With Techno's obsession with finishing their match, like they were...what? Rivals?

No. Rivals were equals. Techno was his enemy. And he would stop at nothing until Dream was cut down.

He can't slip up anymore. They couldn't just improve the next mission; they had to be *flawless*. Nothing, not even fucking XD himself could distract him. If he was going to take down the underground villain rings, the screw-ups ended tonight.

“Nightmare! No! Don't-”

“What? I thought you said to-”

“Noooo! I said *don't* go down that street-”

“Oh. Shit.”

“Nightmare!”

“I got it, I got it, they didn't even see me.”

“...Philza Minecraft is tailing you right now.”

“*What?* You- You're joking, right? Tina?”

In his defense, for his second villain takedown, they completed the *mission* without any screw-ups. All he had to do was show up in the middle of Kaceytron's new robbery, and let his clout and notoriety do the work for him. Kaceytron was too surprised and focused on his unexpected appearance to realize what it *meant* until the cops had the building surrounded. How did the cops get there so quickly, you might ask? Did Tina call them?

No. Dream spray-painted ‘PISS BABY’ on the police station doors and flew away, leading them right to the robbery.

It was flawless. Absolutely perfect. A masterful execution.

Until Dream tried to run away, only to fly down the street where Philza, Techno, and Wilbur — aka the hero alliance known as SBI (what it stood for, no one knew) — were having a press conference. The exact street Tina *apparently* warned him to avoid at all costs.

Fucking brilliant. His best work yet, really.

He felt a ripple in the air and dived just before Philza's attack could hit him. Shit. This was the issue with his flying hack — while he didn't need advanced technological wings like Philza, he couldn't fight back when his weapon was being used like a flying skateboard. All he could do was dodge and swerve and pray to Prime he got out of this mess again.

“I got him, Phil!” a loud voice carried, catching Dream's attention despite the distance. He squinted down and the mask zoomed in on that dirty-mouthed sidekick, Tommy, standing in the road. A flaming sword pointed up at Dream, glowing brighter and brighter as it charged up with Pyronic power. But that's not what made Dream worried.

He was focused on the massive bus barreling at the sidekick, trying to stop but the brakes not slowing it fast enough. Tommy's back was turned, so he had no idea he was about to get flatted like gum under a shoe.

“Tommy!” Philza shouted, but he was too far away to do anything — to warn the sidekick, to grab him.

Dream dived without another thought.

“C’mon...c’mon...” he muttered, putting all of his energy into rocketing his body through the air. It felt like he was falling but even faster, everything in his peripherals a blur, all of his senses honed in on the sidekick. His mask let him watch the emotions play out on Tommy’s face in detail. First triumph, thinking he was going to get a hit on the notorious Airnic. Then confusion, apprehension with the fast approach of his enemy. The bus slammed on its horn, the honk a deafening alarm that felt like an all-encompassing white noise in Dream’s mind. Tommy’s face twisted, eyes wide, mouth agape, his head turning over his shoulder, catching a glimpse of the bus just within reach-

Dream slammed into the Pyronic, an explosion of flame and wind and screams. Heat and fire, *it burns, it burns, it burns.* “*Let them go! Stop it!*” He squeezed his arms tight, locking them so he couldn’t let go, no matter how much *everything hurt, stung so bad everywhere, he couldn’t pinpoint where the injury was.* “*It doesn’t make any sense now. And it’s not my job to explain it to you. But it will. Trust me, just wait. It will.*” The pain made his vision blur in and out, and he was flying blind, but he *let his powers guide him. Through the smoke and the burning stench and blinding flame, he followed the air, followed the source outside that fed the fire inside.* “*Get me out. I...I gotta get...gotta get out...*”

The axe clipped a building and they went flying, crashing, and rolling against the concrete. Dream groaned and winced, coming to a skidding stop on his back. He smelt like smoke and burnt laundry and his lungs stuttered and heaved for air, though he didn’t think it was because of crash landing or the fire. Trembling arms reached back, forcing himself to sit up. Bright, holographic dots blocked his vision, so he blinked until they went away. Tommy laid in a curled heap next to him, cursing and squirming. He looked a little bruised and singed, but that seemed to be the worst of it. A lot better off than he would’ve been against that bus.

“Fuck,” Dream wheezed, crawling over to his axe.

“Nightmare?” Tina gasped. “Oh my- Nightmare? Are you okay? Are you hurt? Do I need to send backup? Oh, I’m calling Toast-”

“I’m fine. Don’t...don’t worry...”

“Why the fuck would I be worried about *you?*” Tommy grumbled, his speech a little slurred. He sat up forcibly, his eyes rolling and droopy. Well. Maybe add concussion to the sidekick’s list of injuries. Still not bad for a save like that. “You- You need to get away from my and...my and me friends, yeah. Fucking pussy.”

Dream rolled his eyes and used his axe as a crutch as he stood up. “Whatever. You’re welcome, I guess. Again.”

“No! No, don’t say that, I’m not thankful, I don’t *owe* you shit. You can’t manipulate me like that, nope. I was gonna kick your ass, if that stupid bus didn’t get in the way.”

“Nightmare, Philza is close, you need to get out of there,” said Tina. Dream eyed his axe. He didn’t think his shaky knees could handle standing on it right now. Maybe getting that backup wasn’t such a bad idea.

“NIGHTMARE!”

Oh, not *again*.

“Leave me alone, Techno!” Dream shouted back at the royal-looking hero sprinting down the

street at him. Right. No time for backup. He'll just have to improvise.

He threw his leg over the axe handle, the sharp blade behind him, and clutched onto the front with both hands. With a small hop, he kicked off the ground and flew away like a witch on a broomstick.

“Yo, Dream, did you hear?” Sappnap asked. The shit-eating grin on his best friend's face already put Dream's guard up. “People think Nightmare participates in witchcraft now. That's why he targets kids, it's part of a ritual-”

“You've *got* to be fucking with me right now.”

“I'm not! I swear, I'm not. George, show him.”

George held up his phone, displaying the article headline. “Rumor in the hero world is that he's using witchcraft to enhance his powers and take out his villain competition.”

Dream was filled with the ever-manly urge to *slam his head through a fucking wall*.

“...you know, when I heard people say that Nightmare looked, like, fucking hot now, I didn't think they'd be *right*-”

“SAPNAP!”

“What? It's true!”

“Vouch,” George muttered, zooming in closer on the article's photo. Dream sat there, utterly speechless as he was stuck in a weird limbo of flattered and utterly repulsed.

“Aww, Dream, don't be so jealous. I'm sure Gogy still loves you more,” Sappnap cooed, throwing an arm around Dream's shoulder and poking his cheeks. Dream pretended to bite at the finger.

“Hmm, I don't know,” George drawled. “Maybe this will be the start of my villain arc-” Dream slapped a pillow in George's face before he could finish that. Sappnap cackled.

“Nah, I think this is the start of Dream's villain arc-”

Dream hit Sappnap with a pillow too, but only so he couldn't see Dream's face twisting in involuntary pain instead of smiling. Because, if they saw, his friends would *know*, and they could *never* know.

So it's too bad the pillow he hit George with had fallen to the floor.

Chapter End Notes

Attentive: This chapter was brought to you by [TheGeekGurl](#) who took one of my random shitpost challenges on Twitter and wrote a [fun little story!](#) It was supposed to come out for Christmas but I definitely over committed myself when I made that bet.

Wips: As per usual.

Attentive: Listen...

Wips: I already sold my soul last chapter scrambling to get to it together in time for your sudden deadline. I have no more souls to sell Atte. Amiright, Yomi? ...Yomi?

Yomi: *cowering in the corner*

Attentive: uhh...

Yomi: I...I have so much fear...

Wips: Oookay...

Yomi: I'm just thinking about the fanart...I already survived whore week...I can't do it again...I can't...

Attentive: BTW, huge thank you to Wips and Yomi who worked on the [promotional clue](#) for this chapter; they made some villain files for villains like Jsclatt and Minx and they look SO COOL. Also, if yall want, maybe we'll make more villain and hero files and release them on Twitter... let me know if that's something you'd be interested in :D

End Notes

Huge shoutout and thank you to yomiyomi and Wips for beta reading and giving the best advice!

Works inspired by this [one](#) [When all else fails, Be a villain](#) by [1butteredcroissant](#)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!