I reached out and curled my armoured fingers through a pervasive, invisible… *thing* that underpinned reality. Whatever it was, it had no desire to make any sense whatsoever. Instead, I got a rapidfire series of impressions as my own mind tried to impose some sort of order on it. It was like… like strumming a thousand dried ligaments, or a tangled mass of steel cable… or the bright, silken hair of a smiling— Oh, wow. That was— with my fingers gently combing through…

My heart skipped a beat, and I blinked. Dang, Itias, get your shit together, man. Like, I know Spiritborn magic is unpredictable, but why am I seeing stuff like *that?* I'd never been even a little bit intimate with anyone before, not in the way that the last impression showed me.

Phew, okay. Shoving the distracting mental images into a box, I concentrated on what I needed to do. Rotate my wrist like *so*. Something in my left gauntlet whirred, then clicked, sounding like an old analog clock. First step, complete. Second step… curl my pinky and ring finger, and then *grip*. The gauntlet made a low *kachunk* sound, and before I could second guess myself, I pulled downward, *violently.*

My stomach dropped, and my body flew like a ragdoll up into the sky.

"O-oh, oh! Fuck!" I squealed, whipping my right hand out desperately. It caught on nothing, on thin air, and I wrenched at that invisible force again. My trajectory changed, and suddenly I wasn't approaching the apex of a deadly parabolic arc, I was zipping horizontally through the air like a lobbed tear-gas grenade.

Unbidden, a whoop of exhilaration escaped my smiling, chapped lips. I was flying! Okay, maybe it was more like perpetually postponed falling, but that's kinda what flying *was*, right?

Um, crap, my body kept twisting in midair — I wasn't going to be able to pull on the air right. Flexing my left hand, I gently strummed the ligaments of the world, and my spin slowed. As soon as I felt a little more control, I began to twist and pull my body through the air, and it was actually *working.*

I let out another amazed, giddy laugh as the wind whistled through my hair. My hood had almost instantly flipped back, and now it and the rest of my cape was catching the wind like a ripped parachute. But like… it was helping to keep me facing forward too, so that was cool!

As I flew, I felt my internal flow of mana beginning to dwindle, and I knew I would need to keep a close eye on it. It would take me *weeks* to regenerate the magic that I'd already used up. Unless I could go hang out in one of the APA enclaves, where there was still a functioning leyline. No hope of that, though. The APA had made sure they were the only ones who could access those priceless wells of power.

Still, a sort of malicious smile pulled at my cheeks as I thought about how I could create my own magic. That was basically what Spiritborn *did*. It was why they'd hunted us. The mages were naturally talented at manipulating magic, but they couldn't create it themselves. That's why a mage would work to gather and store magical energy into their focus. It was like a little battery for them. Spiritborn had the opposite problem. We could create magical energy within ourselves, but controlling it was hard. A Spiritborn would never be able to do anything more complex than blasting fire out of their hands or using the wind to speed their movements.

Unless they had something to help them control the chaos. Something like a pair of gauntlets that, with careful operation of intricate mechanical components and a firm mental intent, could reshape a Spiritborn's magic into complex patterns.

Well, that's what my book had taught me, at least. My granddad had never taught me anything, and mum didn't know shit, other than enough of our

history to keep me and her safe from the hunters. Who knew if the book was actually like, a reliable source.

Still, with the book's help, I'd been playing around in secret, learning how to use the gauntlets to shape magic into intent and complexity. So far, I'd figured out a few 'spells' but my oddball flight ability wasn't actually a spell. I had no idea how it worked, other than that I was basically going halfway through the steps of casting a spell, and then suddenly I could yoink myself through the air.

Unfortunately, the air wasn't exactly happy to have a teenaged cannonball flying through it. Cold wind knifed straight through my clothing with every pull on the weave. The nights got cold *mighty* quick up here in the north.

It was getting unbearable. My eyes were watering with it, lips cracking, and any exposed skin was beginning to go numb. At least I was near the protest now, I could distantly hear the commotion over the rush of the wind.

The buildings were getting tall as I closed in, four and five stories now. In the middle distance, the monolithic skyscrapers of the city center were illuminated against the distant, rolling hills of Maine. Thankfully my destination wasn't among those monsters, I was definitely not confident enough in my abilities to navigate that jungle.

I was confident enough to drop down into the middle of the protestors, changing my velocity at the last second with a tug upwards. The lurching stop had my stomach turning, but I wasn't a chunky red stain on the pavement, so I wasn't going to complain.

The park I landed in was large, a massive grass expanse lined with tall poplar trees, but a playground off in one of the corners was the only other feature of note. Well, except for the thousand or so protestors who had been penned into the place, but they weren't normally there.

The atmosphere among the trapped people was like lightning, all bottled up by fear and anger in equal measure. Sporadic chanting would pick up when someone with enough charisma got it going, only for it to fizzle again as people grew tired. It was clear that nobody wanted to be here anymore.

There were signs of recent violent clashes around — open spaces where medics were keeping everyone back from someone in need of their expertise, while spent gas canisters lay in the grass.

The funny thing was that I wasn't completely out of place, given what I was wearing. Everyone was covered up, with medical masks and warm clothing. What I didn't have was a protest sign, although many, *many* people in the crowd had turned them into makeshift shields. Oh, and the bike helmets, there were a lot of those.

As I'd flitted in from above, I saw more cops coming in from the south, having parked their vehicles out in front of the courthouse. To the north stood their unofficial counterparts, several ragtag groups of right wing counter-protestors who were alarmingly well armed. Everyone knew the cops and the military cosplayers were in bed together, probably even talking over the phone. Didn't seem like anyone in power gave a shit though.

If any of the three groups here were going to start shit, it would be the military wannabes, so now that I was on the ground, I began to push my way through the crowd in their direction.

With the way everyone was packed in, I had a tough time finding my way. The gauntlets might give me magic, but I was still a small, scrawny little dude — a sentient pinball trying to get from one side of the park to the other.

Wincing as a stray elbow caught me under the ribs, I stumbled into someone else who was actually my size. “Sorry!” I blurted breathlessly, cringing again as I felt one of my gauntlets crush against them.

“It’s okay,” a familiar voice gasped, causing me to spin in alarm. It was Eva!

Eva was a short girl, only slightly taller than my five feet four inches. Her hair was golden-blonde, styled into a bob that was always unruly at the best of times. Two blue hairclips kept it out of her face, although a strand had escaped containment and was tickling her nose.

She was really cute too, in a messy sort of way — never really giving a shit about her looks or presentation, aside from, I think, plucking her eyebrows. Her reasoning was that if you did the bare minimum to conform to society’s beauty standards, people wouldn't expect more from you.

“You can’t help it if the fash has us boxed in,” she said, taking hold of my shoulders to steady us both. It was about then that she noticed my getup, eyebrows rising as she took it all in. “Damn, speaking of cosplay…”

“A-ah… yeah,” I said, squeaking out a nervous laugh, wondering what the hell to do now. She hadn’t recognised me yet, and it would probably be a good idea if it stayed that way.

Hesitating for a moment, she peered at me closely, asking, “Are you here with friends? I got separated from mine, and… well, I’m pretty sketched out.”

I shook my head, trying to figure out how I could speak without giving the game away. Wait… with my androgynous looks… if I changed how I spoke a little, made it more feminine, she might mistake me for a girl. That would make it *way* harder for her to connect the dots later down the line. It couldn't be *that* hard to change my speech patterns, right?

“I’m here on my own,” I told her, my voice coming out far more timidly than I’d intended.

She gave me another surprised look, head tilting slightly to the side in a familiar gesture I recognised as her *extra* thinky expression. “Well, then now we’re here with each other. My name is Eva,” she grinned, wiggling so she could get her hand free and offer it to me for a shake.

I tried to take it, only to realise my gauntlet wouldn’t let me shake her hand or anything. “Oh, uh… I’m… um… Lette.”

Oh god. Had I really just taken a chunk out of the word gauntlet and used that? I was so lame.

“Cute name,” she said, her eyes crinkling with a friendly smile.

“Oh… thank you,” I said, returning her masked smile with one of my own. Cute! She thought my name was cute! She had no idea how happy she’d just made me. The rush that was coursing through my veins right then… I couldn’t *help* but beam at her. Which… like, *why* did it make me happy? Wow, I was so weird.

Her next move surprised me more than anything else that had happened tonight. She winked at me, her voice taking on a sly tone as she said, “Can’t see much under the mask either… but I bet you have a cute smile too.”

It took me a full five seconds of staring at her before I fully processed what had just happened. As far as I knew, she was straight… so why was she flirting with me? Not just flirting either, she had *game*. Unless my disguise wasn’t as good as I’d thought, and she was messing with me? No, she was probably just joking around. She was a bit of a *handful* like that.

Scrambling for a reply, I blurted, “I'm… um… a girl?”

God. The way I said that, and the way I felt as I claimed something that I didn't deserve — I cringed and tried to shrink in on myself.

“I know,” Eva said, toning down her mischievous expression. “Sorry if I made you uncomfortable…”

I shook my head quickly. “No, no… it's fine… I mean — I just wanted to make sure you knew, you know?”

“Oh!” Her energy came *right* back. “Oh…”

I couldn't see her eyes too well with the chaotic lighting that was filtering through the crowd, but… I was getting one hell of a vibe from her.

This was… not actually okay. I shouldn't be deceiving her like this. I was being real cringe. Was this why she'd never said much about boys? Was she a lesbian? She'd have told me if she was, right? Was I not… did I do something to make her think I wasn't an ally? Oh no…

My spiral of self-doubt was abruptly interrupted when a fresh commotion broke out at the nearby line between the protestors and the militia. What the hell was I doing? I needed to *be* there, to step in if things turned sour. It’s why I was here after all — to protect Eva.

We weren’t far from the line between where the protestors and counter-protestors had formed, so I abandoned Eva with an apologetic look and began shoving my way through the crowd.

When we got there, it was pretty easy to figure out the problem. Some gun-nut guy with a ragged beard, combat vest, and assault rifle was waving his gun around and yelling at the protestors, while a large black woman was matching him. Despite his gun, the woman wasn’t taking any of his shit, fearless in the face of his diatribe.

I thought she'd fold when he shoved her, face red with anger, but she stumbled only one step back before stepping right back into his face. Her fist came in, quick and wild, a right hook that slammed straight into the side of his jaw. He went down like a sack of bricks, tumbling uselessly to the ground in a heap.

Several protestors moved forward, some trying to hold her back from kicking the man, while others went to try and restrain the man and take his gun away. An older black dude got his hands on it, and made to eject the magazine and chambered round.

As that bullet pinged out and into his hand, I caught something in my peripheral vision — the suggestion of a movement, nothing more, but I reacted anyway.

With a flick of my left hand, I pulled myself through the air and into position, while my right hand cycled, rotated, and contorted into the correct position for one of the few spells I knew.

Several sharp cracks filled the night, silence descending in their wake. Some dickhead had just unloaded half a magazine at the poor guy behind me. Screams rose up over the general din of the crowd as people who couldn't see what had just happened panicked. Everyone around us though, they stood frozen, staring…

Staring at a series of bullets that hung in midair, sheathed in the faint purple energy of my stasis field. Each bullet glowed white hot — all of their deadly kinetic energy had been converted to heat.

Exhaust mana rose as dancing tendrils of purple smoke, threatening to destabilise the spell and send a sharp whip of mental feedback towards me. Passing the maintenance of the stasis field to my left hand, I shifted my stance and twisted my large right gauntlet until it was down at my hip. The

movement, and a rolling beckoning motion from my fingers, channeled the exhaust into my right gauntlet.

When it was safely contained inside my gauntlet, I flexed and twisted my forearm. It made a series of guttural mechanical sounds, followed by a sharp hissing as the bigger gauntlet began recycling what it could, and venting the rest. To the naked eye, the metal plates all rippled and shifted and my arm was briefly wreathed in a darkly glowing purple smoke.

“Shoot again, and I send these bullets back where they came from,” I called, feeling an eerie calm settle over my mind. I was confident, and I was in control. I wasn’t Itias, the awkward little boy who should be growing up, but wasn’t. I was Lette. I had just stopped a bunch of bullets in mid-fucking-air. All I had to do was keep hold of this crisis-calm… because if I didn't…