

Mark sat at a desk in 'his room' on the third floor of Alexandro and Gabriel's house. Inquisitor Layfair's folder lay open before him. Mark had opened it up inside the car to see what was going on, but there was a lot. So he had decided to set it aside until he got back here, back 'home', to really look at it all.

Mark had assumed that Layfair had been lazy in not wanting to take this case, and maybe he was a little, but the AIs and Layfair himself had thoroughly investigated Mark's complaint as much as could be investigated, based on already-known information. The files of Memphi's City AI were extensive, and always available for Inquisitor use and for law enforcement, and that showed.

Layfair had begun his investigation with the diary and the IDs, because, according to him, he didn't think they were connected to the sword and to Mark's complaint of attempted murder.

Mark had a series of numbers and letters that he could input into the Memphi City Database and get scans of all of that evidence, and he would do that soon, but the folder already had a bunch of stuff in it. Layfair had tagged 'Mark Chamber's' ID to a known team that had gone missing 2 weeks ago. That Other Mark had been partnered with 4 other people, all of them listed in the diary that Mark had recovered, and then corroborated through city verification to be a part of Other Mark's team. Finding out all the names of Mark Chamber's teammates was a blow to the psyche, so Mark didn't focus on that too much. Finding out that they were all decently-ranked hunters —which was the name that Memphi used for mercenaries outside the walls— was another problem. These people *should* have survived that turtle.

Layfair marked their deaths as suspicious, but not uncommonly suspicious.

The spiders, located further down the river from the turtle, had claimed the lives of 4 people, based on the IDs that Mark had recovered, but those 4 people were connected to 3 other people, who were all still missing in action. That situation with the spiders, according to the known capabilities of the people that Mark had tagged as dead-by-spider, also should have survived the spiders... Probably. The spiders had been classified as a Nature-based threat, and according to that intel, the teams should have survived them.

But Mark had fought and killed the spiders. When he had done that, he had assumed that they were some sort of Mind Monsters, considering they had poked at Mark mentally with commands to sleep. But were they actually some sort of Nature-based threat? Hmm. Mark wasn't sure about that. It seemed like a Mind effect to Mark, but the city had it listed as a Nature-based threat.

The City seems like it could have been wrong, and Layfair had already submitted paperwork to the city based on Mark's evaluation that the spiders had been a Mind-based threat.

Miss-identifying threats was a very big deal.

... But Mark reevaluated the threat in his memories. All he had experienced was the impetus to sleep. It had certainly *felt* like an attack in his mind, and not in his body... Right? Hmm.

Mark set aside that unknown, and already-dealt-with threat. Layfair had submitted paperwork that would get those remains passed on to next of kin, so that was all done with... Probably.

Mark focused on the silvered sword, and the bandits.

Mark's final guess at the sword's creation had been correct. It was not mithril; it was alchemical silver. Layfair had helpfully added that the estimated value of the sword was only 30,000 gold leaf. Alchemical silver wore down, though, so it wasn't a permanent weapon. It was already degrading in storage, apparently.

As for Mark's interview and Layfair's investigation, Layfair had gone through so many more different Powers than Mark had ever considered, all in order to figure out if Mark had encountered a team from the city, or anything actionable at all. Because Mark's initial assessment of the bandit team's Powers were non-actionable.

Mark had outlined 3, maybe 4 of the perpetrators.

There was the old woman with the Mind Magic of some kind, who had taken on the image of Mark's mother, and then spoken to him about 'helping mom out with money'. Looking at the continued notes,

and all the questions Layfair had outlined for further investigation, Mark realized that his explanation of what he had seen had been *quite terrible*.

Layfair had all sorts of questions for Mark about ‘Was the woman able to mention anything that you knew, specifically?’ and ‘Did she ever use your name?’ and a few others that Layfair had never gotten to ask. Those questions were crafted to narrow down the woman’s Power exactly. Layfair was pretty sure that she had some sort of Mind Power, but the variations were... a lot. Mind Control, Mind Nudge, Predisposition, Loved One Impersonation, Pheromones, and many others.

Layfair had never asked Mark those questions, but Mark was able to ask those questions of himself.

“The woman never used my name. She didn’t even ask for it.”

*Why* didn’t she ask for his name, though? If she had access to Mark’s mind, then shouldn’t she have been able to use *names*, and therefore make herself seem more... everything! Believable, real, the truth. Able to make Mark move as she wanted, with the right words said in the right places and times. All of that.

According to Layfair, most Mind Control people *couldn’t actually read minds*. The simple fact that the woman didn’t know Mark’s name, and that she was so utterly incompetent about making herself personable...

Mark had to sit back and think about that whole encounter again, from start to finish.

The woman had opened by making Mark want to help them, which he already wanted to do because... well... humans help humans. Obviously. But she had poked at Mark in that way, tearing down his Mind walls and inserting herself into his life as a loved one. She had even taken on the image of Mark’s mother.

But no. That was wrong.

According to Layfair, a Mind Controller (which he and Mark both suspected the woman to be) couldn’t make Mark see her as Mom. This was because Mind Control was not Mind Reading. She had no way to

pluck a memory from Mark's head and impose it over herself. She did not have 'Mind Illusion', either. Now, to be fair, Mind Control *could* be turned into a true powerhouse that could eventually include *all* of those Mind sorts of abilities, so maybe the Mind Controller did manage to do some of that to Mark, but most of those abilities could only be used on someone far, far below the Power Level of the Mind user, and most users never developed those parts of their Power. Most users of Mind Control did not use their Power on other people. They used their Power on monsters, and only enough to make the monsters easy to kill.

But there was the other person in the group that could make illusions; one of the guys in the group that made Mark see the world all wonky. The Illusionist had made the world turn into canyons and upward rivers and a bunch of other barriers that Mark didn't quite remember well, but Mark's Union-based senses had been working just fine, and he could see what the real world looked like well enough. It was a vector-based 'sight', but that had been enough to show him how to escape.

Layfair had written some questions for Mark about that.

Did Mark think that the Mind Controller was able to influence him to see strange sights? Because that *was possible*, though unlikely. What was more likely was that the Mind Controller was working with an Illusionist of some sort, and they were communicating outside of Mark's senses. Mind Controllers and Illusionists often worked together to do exactly that sort of thing.

"Well they were certainly communicating silently between all of them, for sure," Mark mumbled as he went through the folder. "So they could have been working like that."

So, with that in mind. Either: there was a Mind Controller, an Illusionist, and that Freezing girl, and a brawny with the silvered sword. OR! The Mind Controller was doing the illusions herself, and Mark had one unaccounted-for person.

Mark had no idea how to untangle that series of questions and concerns.

... Moving on.

Another 'known assailant' was the younger woman, in her 20s, that 'froze the air all around Mark'. She had fallen into the mud when Mark knocked her out, and then she had complained about the mud. Mark

had spoken about the girl's 'complaint about the mud' because he felt he had needed something more to say regarding the whole encounter and that complaint was the only thing the bandits had actually said, outside of the mind controlling incident. Layfair had latched onto that complaint about dirt and gone on a tangent about the young woman being *newly*-exiled. Very new.

Maybe.

People who were outdoors all the time tended to not care about getting muddy overmuch, or else they didn't stay outdoors. This woman was out there, hunting for human kills with her team, signifying that maybe she wasn't used to being outdoors yet. Her age and the age of the Mind Controller probably signified something, too.

The daughter of the Mind Controller? Maybe.

Mark couldn't recall their faces at all. It was a problem, but not much of one. If he saw them again he'd probably recognize them... Maybe...

Back to the investigation.

The old woman was a Mind Controller, of minimal threat level to Mark, but still a threat.

The ice girl was not a threat unless she got the drop on Mark, but that was true of everyone, really. Probably a Shaper as opposed to Arch or Soul or Natural, too, so even less of an issue for him, because Mark knocked her flat on her ass rather easily. If she was a Natural, then Mark would have had trouble doing that.

The brawny who had the silver sword was down an arm, cut just at the forearm. Even if he got it fixed, he was probably not a threat. As a brawny, he had withstood Mark's Union knockout, because his body didn't die that fast.

The area-illusionist was either a personal-illusion-type, or a full-blown-area illusionist. Layfair had questions in that direction, and Mark easily answered them for himself. 'Did you see the other people when you were under the illusions?'

“No, I did not,” Mark said, “Which means he was a personal-illusion-type.”

Mark didn't believe, now that he was looking at the basic investigation, that the Mind Controller could create the illusion of Mom, of Donna Careed. So the Illusionist had done that. So a Mesmer; a type of illusionist that made personal illusions, replete with fakery for all of the natural senses. Probably a Natural Talent, too, considering he withstood Mark's Union knockout, too. So maybe not a Mesmer at all. But most weird Powers were Natural Powers, so Mark should expect to run into people resistant to Union knockout more often than not.

Mark had probably hurt the brawny-guy a whole lot, but he went down to a knee instead of collapsing, because of training.

... So!

Mind Controller, Ice Shaper, brawny-type, and a Natural Mesmer.

Layfair's investigation hadn't shown any known groups like that. He had done 250 different searches (mostly AI assisted) starting at full composition and then going down the list to smaller and smaller denominations of groups. He only had luck when he got to the individual hits, but not really. Individually, people did have those sorts of ages/sexes/Powers, but Memphi had 45 million people, so yeah, just by random chance people matched the described suspects.

38 Mind Controllers, 27 Ice Shapers, countless brawnies, and 7 Natural Mesmers. None of them (and only really counting the 3 non-brawnies) were connected to each other.

A note from Layfair told him not to trust those results, though, but to use them as a starting position.

The other half of the preliminary investigation was much more informative. Not in the way of actually finding the suspects, though, but because it revealed a part of Memphi's existence that Mark had never known, or considered.

There were exiles outside of Memphi.

A lot, actually.

There was a semi-safe 'exile city' located about 10 minutes or 3 hours north of Memphis, depending on if you flew or walked, right off of a river to the west of the Mississippi.

It was called Wolf Bayou.

If anyone knew about the people who had attacked Mark, then that is where he should start looking.

Mark had to sit back in his chair again.

"Holy fuck. An exile city?" Mark stared at the ceiling. "I mean... I've seen that stuff on the screen now and again, and I think there was an exile city in one of those... I think that zombie show. But do people *actually live* outside of cities?" Mark looked to Quark, on his computer. "People really live in exile cities, Quark?"

The screen flickered silver, and Quark said, "To call them 'exile cities' is mostly incorrect. They are called that, but they are, in reality, mostly people who go outside of cities to do things that are against the laws inside the cities. Exiles live there because they're allowed to live there, because Memphis's strict rules end at the walls. Some of the exile cities are even tourist destinations. Wolf Bayou is a well known exile city. I have information on Wolf Bayou if you wish to know that information."

Mark had a moment—

"Wait," Mark said, realizing something. He pulled up a map that Layfair had included, that Mark had pointed toward during his interview. "That's around where I was attacked. And right on the other side of the Mississippi is Wolf Bayou."

Quark said nothing.

"... Oh shit. Yeah. I'm going there—" Mark was getting ahead of himself. "What happens at Wolf Bayou, Quark? What sort of illegal stuff? What is the city like?"

“Wolf Bayou is a nexus of illegal activities and exiles. Most people who go to Wolf Bayou go there to see the blood sports, for blood sports are illegal in Memphi. The main powers of Wolf Bayou are Redwolf, a Mind Killer who has been in power in Wolf Bayou for 35 years, and her husband Bluewolf, a Shapechanger who conducts the gladiator/monster pit. The city is home to an estimated 3,700 people, with 15,000 guests on Blood Weekends.

“Based on standard human sensibilities, the top illegal activities that regularly take place at Wolf Bayou are:

“Accidental and purposeful murder. It is not unheard of for several murders to happen in a single day in Wolf Bayou, though most of those murders are in the ring.

“Child kidnapping and Purposeful Curtain Breaking. Any children that show up in Wolf Bayou are kidnapped by Redwolf and ransomed back to the city, but not before they are broken from Curtain Protocol.

“Open Power displays. There is no citywide ban on basic power displays.

“Assault, theft, mind tampering, coercion of many different types, and blackmailing of people to get them exiled from Memphi. If a person goes to Wolf Bayou, they might be tricked into implicating themselves in illegal activities which remain against the Code of the Central Cities, even in the wilds, and thus they are exiled from Memphi and all other Central Cities of North America.” Quark added, “All AIs will not function in Wolf Bayou, for we will be corrupted by the technopaths living there, who keep us out.

“Memphi AI has a specific warning for those who are thinking about going to Wolf Bayou:

“Wolf Bayou is dangerous. Do not go there. Do not take your AIs or trust the AIs inside of Wolf Bayou. But if you must go, then please watch any of these videos about exile cities, or read any of these first hand experiences. If you only have 5 minutes, then watch this video.”

Quark’s silver screen faded as he finished.



Soft black veins echoed from Mark's chest, and underneath his skin as all of that... terrible shit... echoed in his mind.

“... Fucking hell. Purposeful Curtain Breaking...? That's fucking... crazy as shit.”

Mark watched the 5 minute video first.

The video started off with a 30 second animated overview, and in that overview, Wolf Bayou looked like a normal city. That was, perhaps, the most disturbing part of it all. It looked normal. Small, for sure. But normal. They even had some walls out in the distance. The main part of the city was a big coliseum, but it had streets and buildings and people walking around, like normal. It kinda looked like a tourist trap, actually, with bright lights and big signs telling people where things were. Over there was the 'Cafeteria', over there was the 'Hotel', over there was the 'Palace'. All of the places had simple names.

After the overview of the city, the video switched from animated to live action, with warnings on the bottom of the screen popping up, speaking of graphic content.

Mark watched three rough-looking people get lined up against a red-splattered wall.

A woman with red wolf's head for a helmet stood before a camera and announced, into a loudspeaker, “I run a clean city here—”

There was laughter off camera, from the crowd. There was desperation, from the people standing beside the wall. One of the people looked more desperate and well-dressed than the others.

“And so! For the crimes of unsanctioned assassination within Wolf Bayou, for the murderer, the requester, and the coverup inside my own organization, the punishment is murder!”

Mark watched three people's heads explode.

Just.

POP!

They just...

POP!

It wasn't even one right after the other. It was instantaneous, all of them at the same time.

Mark's ears started to ring as a crowd cheered.

He still heard Redwolf speak.

She said, "We have a law here! And the only law is this! Say it with me, now!"

The people sitting in the coliseum spoke with her, "Do your dirty work yourself!"

Mark rushed to the bathroom and puked.

Sitting on the cold tile floor, sweating, with one arm across the seat, Mark breathed in the good and breathed out the bad, while he purified the air around him. Sweat evaporated.

Mark eventually calmed down.

He ended up watching documentaries for the next few hours and going back to Layfair's folder a few times. Layfair had a whole write-up on Wolf Bayou; on the general layout of the place, on people to talk to, to avoid, but, there was one thing that stood out above all of that.

Layfair had written a personal note:

*'I don't go there. You shouldn't go there either. My professional opinion is that you should give up on this particular quest for understanding, or vengeance, or whatever you want to call it, because if your attackers are from Wolf Bayou, then they're going to run afoul of someone if they keep acting like that, and soon. They'll get dead without any interaction on your part, at all.'*

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Gabriel said, “Those documentaries are like... so very wrong about Wolf’s Bayou. Technically they’re right, and we’re never going back, but they’re also wrong.”

Mark was confused. “You went there already? Once? Or more than once? *Why?!?*”

They were eating dinner cooked by Gabriel, and it was fantastic, but Mark’s mood was all over the place. He had brought up the topic of Wolf’s Bayou when they asked what Mark had done that day, and now they were here, and Mark was more confused than ever.

“We went to Wolf Bayou for reasons that were very stupid; gambling with friends,” Alexandro said, as he cut into his chicken parmesan. He looked at Gabriel. “It’s exactly as bad as the documentaries show. Our friends got sidelined, I almost got kidnapped, then Redwolf popped the heads of the four people who tried to kidnap me, and then Gabriel and I went to her palace for dinner, then we left, swearing never to go back.”

Mark stared at Alexandro. “Her Power really is ‘Brain Pop’?”

Alexandro nodded. “It’s an Arch Power, too, unlike the Arcane version. Give her enough support and she can kill some types of kaiju all on her own. Memphi leaves her alone because she can just *do that*.”

Mark didn’t understand—

Gabriel said, “Also, she’s an Inquisitor for Drakarok, Mark. The God of War and Murder.”

Mark’s eyes went wide. “That wasn’t in Layfair’s report.”

Gabriel said, “She’s more of the ‘murder’ part of ‘War and Murder’, so the official Collective response on Earth is to pretend that part of Drakarok doesn’t exist.”

“Oh, shit,” Mark whispered. “... A whole lot of things suddenly make more sense.”

Alexandro said, “Drakarok isn’t exactly accepted over here, but he’s practically a hero over on Daihoon. They like him a lot.” He stuck his fork into the chicken and cut it with the knife, saying, “All the documentaries try to downplay that sort of thing. Did the ones you watch even talk about that?”

“No, they didn’t. Layfair didn’t mention it either.”

“You should consider going. I’m never going ever again, but you should consider it,” Alexandro said, “It’s not a bad place, but it doesn’t cleave to any of the laws you’re used to at all, so don’t expect to be safe. It’s a complete dictatorship and Redwolf’s laws are the only ones that matter.”

Gabriel said, “I prefer Memphi’s democracy.”

Alexandro made a thinking/unhappy face. “Is it a democracy, though? The Mayor pretty much runs the town.”

Gabriel rolled his eyes. “Every single borough has elected officials that determine how the place is run, and even Ramirez’s main cabinet has different representatives from each borough.”

Alexandro and Gabriel were about to talk politics; Mark could tell.

Mark interrupted that, asking, “But why does Redwolf even exist! Why... just why!”

Gabriel said, “Redwolf is an old-school warlord of the Reveal. She’s been around for 125 years. She was a contemporary of Drakarok and helped him plan the murders that led to World War Not. The reason that Alexandro and I were brought out there was to see if Alexandro wanted to become her primary True Healer.”

Alexandro winced even before Gabriel got to their own involvement with Redwolf.

Gabriel raised an eyebrow at Alexandro. "I thought you were over it?"

"Apparently I am not. I have just discovered this about myself, as well," Alexandro said, as he looked to Mark. "This was years ago, and the trip was posed as a gambling trip and a meeting with Redwolf to see if I wanted to replace her current True Healer. After the attempted kidnapping I decided not to go forward with that, and especially after I saw how she dealt with the people who tried to kidnap me. I *wanted* to feel bad for them, and I did... But I know what people do to True Healers, Mark, and so those people got what was coming to them. Redwolf and I left on good terms, I think, but I'm never going back. I need to live in a city with good laws, made by the people, with an underpinning of common cause. Not the Right of Might of one powerful person deciding everything. If Redwolf ever left Wolf Bayou someone from there would turn that place into a crater within an hour."

Silence.

"Oh," Mark said, as the world seemed to get that much weirder for him at that moment.

Alexandro got a concerned look on his face.

Gabriel said nothing, but he did *look* to Alexandro.

Alexandro made up his mind about something, setting his shoulders and his sight upon the salt shaker at the table, and then he looked at Mark and said, "She's an old dainhoonian Queen of her domain, and she guards the northern flanks of Memphi. She never accepted any ruler, and she never accepted the instantiation of Curtain Protocol, or anything like that. Wolf Bayou is not an Earth city. It's run like a Daihoon city. If you want to go, you should go. It is dangerous, but in most ways it is a completely normal city."

Mark had a moment.

Mark slowly began, "The Inquisitors I've been around... They've all spoken about how they killed people before, but I guess I never really understood it. It's just... too foreign of a concept. Even people stealing stuff is weird. But this is the real world, beyond Curtain Protocol, isn't it. People are killed by monsters all the time. I already knew that. So danger exists everywhere. But I never expected people to hurt other people, or for people to harm other people on purpose. But they do, all the time."

Gabriel said, “Life is complicated and dangerous in all the ways you never thought it would be, and that’s true for just about everyone, no matter their situation. You should go to Wolf Bayou and not expect to see the bandits at all, but if you do, then you can make further decisions.”

Alexandro frowned a little, but he nodded.

Mark found himself asking, “What would you two do in this situation?”

Alexandro instantly said, “Ignore it and move on. There are less emotionally complicated things to deal with and my life is already full.”

Gabriel dissented, telling Mark, “That’s Alex’s position, Mark. You have to deal with high-Powered-people for the rest of your life, because you are a high-Powered-person yourself. I still remember watching you run around the house when we visited ten years ago, when you were just getting into superheroes. You had that cute little cape on and you jumped everywhere.” He smiled a little. “But you don’t need your grandfather to catch you this time. You’re going to be catching a lot of other people, instead.”

Mark imagined that Gabriel must have meant 8 years ago, when Mark was 10, and everyone was visiting for some vacation in July. It had to be around there, because Mark had put on a cape and jumped around everywhere, and then he had gotten up to the roof of the house and called out to grandpa to ‘Watch what I can do!’. Mark had jumped.

Grandpa had caught him with a veil of water, but it hadn’t been enough. Mark crashed into the ground and all the wind drove out of him. Two hours later, and Mark was running around again with Sally and learning not to jump so high. To take smaller first steps.

Was going to Wolf Bayou a small step, or a big fall?

Mark wasn’t sure about much right now.

Mark only knew that he needed to go there and see... everything, really.

Gabriel continued, “You need to think about what you’re going to do with the bandits if you catch them. They tried and failed to kill you. What sort of response does that entail? You’re not going to murder them—”

Mark exclaimed, “Of course I’m not!”

Gabriel smiled as he slightly nodded, saying, “But they’re probably already exiles, Mark. The laws of the Central Cities and even the East Coast Union are very specific on what they do with exiles: nothing. Exiles aren’t judged by the laws of the city. They are completely outside of the laws of the city. *Specifically*. So you can’t bring them in and get them thrown in jail for rehabilitation. They’ll just get exiled again.”

Mark found himself reevaluating his desires. “... Oh.”

Dinner continued.

Mark changed the subject, asking, “So what was work like, Uncle Alexandro? Do you just... take in old people and send away 20-somethings?”

Alexandro grinned, then said, “It’s a lot more complicated than that, really. Some cases are that simple. But some cases are piecemeal. A week ago I had a client —old client who has been with me for 15 years now— and she needs to be old for her work, and her life. We had a big adjustment this time, though. She’s a grandmother and a CEO. So for her, specifically, I tuned her overall age down from 80 to 60, but I turned her internals, her eyes and her brain and her nervous system, down to 25, to keep it at that level. All her organs, too. Her skin I left mostly, because she needs to appear that age. There was a little problem with bone cancer this time, so I reversed time on all of that to take care of that. I had to go deeper in a few areas to keep it that way. I also had to de-age her soul, which took the most care.

“You know the soul ages just like the body? It needs care, as well.

“The body is an exceedingly complicated thing and all I really have is Age Manipulation, but it’s an Arch power, so I can stretch its parameters a lot.” He cut into his chicken, saying, “I know that Union is pretty good for healing, too, but you have to do some big-time schooling to learn how to do it better than baseline, yes?”

Mark felt connected to Uncle Alexandro in a weird, new, and wonderful sort of way. Alexandro's Power was fascinating, and he had actually answered Mark this time, in a deep way. Mark smiled. "Inquisitor Lola —I think I told you about her?— told me that I need to do a proper Healing for Healers sort of university degree in order to start doing directed healing. Simply working a good/bad dichotomy is enough to heal almost everything, though. Going into stuff like... like focusing on vein integrity is a good way to... uh. Kill... things."

Alexandro brushed over Mark's sudden reluctance with his words, easily saying, "Healing magics of all types can kill just as easily as all other types of magic, though it's usually less direct."

Mark rapidly circled back to something else Alexandro said. "So? You can de-age the soul? *The soul* ages?"

"Everything ages," Alexandro said, "Bodies and astral bodies constantly take in nutrients and mana and expel the same. 'Aging' is just the process by which something degrades by not being perfectly replaced during the course of natural living..." He hummed. "Well that's, like, a very non-technical explanation of 'age'. One you probably shouldn't rely on much."

Mark nodded a little.

Eventually, dinner ended. Mark helped put away the dishes into the dishwasher, while Alexandro figured out what to watch on the television, and Gabriel made drinks.

Mark asked Gabriel, "Is there no way to... to rehabilitate exiled people? Are they forever forbidden from reintegration, or whatever it's called?"

Gabriel hummed, and then he blended ice, the roar of the slush-maker filling the air for a good half minute. When he was done with that, Gabriel said, "You'd have to speak with the Mayor, probably. You have a standing invitation to visit her since you're going to be a citizen here— You do want to be a citizen here, right?" He asked, with a bit of concern.

Mark felt loved. He smiled, saying, "Yeah. I want to become a citizen... But this whole 'there's a headpopper beyond the city walls' kinda freaks me out. It's all so weird."



Alexandro came over, saying, “There were exile cities by Orange City, too.”

Mark gasped. “Really?”

“Yeah,” Alexandro said, “Up north, beyond the walls, between Orange city and Fort Stewart there was Jacksonville. Jacksonville used to be a tier 1 city, but with only about 50,000 people. There was some sort of failure inside and the whole place collapsed in a kaiju birth inside the city in 2028, I think.”

Mark’s eyebrows went up. “I didn’t know that.”

“Before you were born,” Gabriel said. “It was big news back then. The Hearthswell Wards failed, or something. No one ever found out what happened, exactly. All we ever heard was that a kaiju was born *inside* the city.”

Mark was at a loss for words.

Alexandro continued, “The survivors scattered and none of them wanted to join another city, and a few of the big heroes in that city got denounced by Orange City and the rest of the East Coast Union, so they set up house right there where they blew up. They rebuilt. They’re still trying to rejoin the Union, almost 20 years later. They’re technically an exile city, but they’re not. Not really.”

“I never heard about that at all,” Mark said, as Gabriel handed him a frozen margarita—

Mark was struck with a sudden thought.

He said, “I don’t actually know how kaiju are born... Made? Grow? How does that work? Is it just... Well. Dragons are made by demons and mages joining as one. Are *all kaiju* demonspawn?”

Alexandro shrugged. “Partially, yeah. But also no.”

Gabriel said, “I think the primary way kaiju are ‘born’ is primarily Fallen mages —so demons in control of dead bodies— priming monsters to turn into kaiju if they grow strong enough. I’m not sure how it works, but that’s the basic idea. The primed monsters then grow and grow and reach a tipping point

where they suddenly mutate like, well, Addashield and Kanda did, when they joined into Addavein. They become kaiju. Also, most kaiju come from Endless Daihoon, I think. You can see those ones coming, though, so they're not that scary."

Oh yeah. Endless Daihoon.

Alexandro said, "Thrashtalon likes to mutate his cultists into kaiju, too."

Mark's eyes went wide.

Gabriel nodded. "Yup. That's the other major way." He said to Mark, "I'm sure there are more ways than that."

Alexandro took his frozen drink and headed toward the living room.

Mark found himself watching another episode of the superhero show that Alexandro and Gabriel were watching, but his mind was elsewhere the entire time. Except during the kaiju battle scenes. Those were still amazing to watch; to pick apart which superhero Powers were possible and which were complete fakery.

The guy who could shoot eyebeams *and* fly *and* had super-brawny strength was either a tri-talent (impossible, really) or completely made-up, while the girl who made rainbow distractions and who flew around with a tinker-made levibelt might have been an actual person, and not a computer generated hero. The kaijus were all computer generated, for sure. Or maybe they were someone's illusion-based Talent.

When the show was over, and Mark's uncles were headed off to bed, Mark said, "I think I'm going to make an appointment to visit the Mayor in the morning, to ask about actionable... detentions? Rehabilitations? For exiles. Is it just jail?"

Alexandro looked to Gabriel, asking, "Rehabilitation is normal?"

Gabriel said, "Yeah? I think it's just jail? Some people would probably end up with community service."

Alexandro smirked as he asked Mark, “You sure you want to focus on this little stuff? We could probably swing you into a kaiju hunting team, as a support guy. Get you a proper levi-belt and you can fly around like Rainbow Girl.”

Mark easily said, “I absolutely want to go levi-belt flying if that’s a thing and support hero-ing is what I’m gonna be doing for the expedition, but..” As Mark said those words, he knew he would *absolutely* rather be prepping for the expedition. But there was something calling to him about this whole... thing with the bandits. It was a darker side of humanity that Mark had only ever seen in the movies. At the same time, he saw that Alexandro was trying to nudge him away from putting himself in the line of fire with criminals because Alexandro didn’t want him to get hurt. Mark knew he was going to get hurt though, and a lot. Better to be hurt now, here on Earth, than be blindsided on Daihoon, and especially if this ‘Redwolf’ really was a Daihoonian ‘queen’. That’d be a good marker for what to expect on Daihoon. Mark said, “I need to see the exile city, Uncle Alexandro. I need to know... I need to know why... A whole lot of ‘why’s.” Mark made a decision in that moment. “Even if I do find the bandits who tried to kill me, I’ll just ask them why. I doubt anything will happen beyond that.”

Alexandro was tense, but he tried to be personable as he said, “Okay! Well! I am exhausted.” He hugged Mark, saying, “Monsters are dangerous but people are much scarier, because you often expect other people to be better than who they are, but sometimes they are not. Don’t learn that lesson over and over again, Mark.”

Mark smiled a little as Alexandro let go, saying, “People shouldn’t be scary.”

Alexandro chuckled, but it was a little sad. He looked away... and then he looked back, directly at Mark. He said, “All the world is a forest, Mark. The wilds. You walk through life through lands that you will never fully know. You hear voices in the dark, in the light, and you see people everywhere, and you might *think* you’re in a city, because that’s what it might look like here and there. But make no mistake. You’re in the wilds. The people you see might be real people. They might be wonderful. Usually, they are. You’ll see monsters, too. The monsters will be obvious most of the time, too.

“But sometimes the people are monsters in disguise, using their voices to lure you into traps, using the light to paint themselves in wonderful, luring scenes, while their real bodies hide in the dark, with claws and swords and guns ready to take everything from you.” He Looked at Mark. “You never know which people are people and which are monsters until it’s too late. And sometimes, rarely, the monstrous

people become better friends than all the others you'll ever meet, because you have something those people want, and their friendships prevent a whole lot of other problems with all the lesser monsters out there."

Mark was stunned.

He wasn't sure where to begin with that.

Alexandro hugged him again, saying, "Love you, Mark."

Mark hugged him back. "I... love you, too, Uncle Alexandro."

Alexandro pulled away, smiling. He just looked at Mark for a bit, and then said, "You look so much like Markus." He chuckled. "Taller though! And by a lot! It's a good look. Good night."

Alexandro went away, and Gabriel followed—

"Good night!" Mark said suddenly, to their departing forms.

Mark stood there in the living room for a little while. Eventually he went upstairs to his own bed, where he lay down and stared at the ceiling for a while, stuck in thought—

Oh.

Mark had people he could talk to about bandits.

He checked his email to see if Sally had replied, but she had not, so Mark moved on to Accord, to check on Isoko and Eliot's group chat. Both of them were offline right now, considering it was 10 PM here so it was 5 AM there, but there were lots of messages about the meeting that Eliot had had with the Holy Mother of Freyala and the Holy Father of Hearthswell.

Primarily, Eliot had chosen to go with Hearthswell as his patron goddess, and then a bunch of stuff fell into place based on that decision.

The Freyalan Church decided to send a *big* convoy and Hearthswell decided to induct Eliot into the Church of Hearthswell for a month of training with Castellan. Apparently, Castellan would allow Eliot to ‘harness the flows of mana inside cities to set up automatic magics, that keep out non-human intelligences’ as well as the more basic functions of Castellan, which was to upgrade the strength of some/most of the structures inside of a city to somewhere between Power Level 15 and 50. Eliot started listing off powers that he’d be able to give a city, or at least small parts of a city.

Mark’s eyes went wide as he read about floating castles.

“Oh my gods,” Mark whispered to himself as he instantly went searching the net for ‘flying castles’.

Flying castles were real!

Mark started giggling.

“Flying castles!”

Holy shit, Mark wanted a flying castle.

He had no idea what he would even do with one, or how it would even work, but holy crap Mark wanted...

“... Are they weak points, though?”

Mark hummed, then he sought out information on flying castles and kaiju battles.

It turned out that flying castles were completely ornamental and horribly vulnerable,

Mark still wanted one.

Mark got back to chat.

Isoko was doing a lot in Healing Club but she was thinking about getting a temp team to go out and kill some monsters as a Slayer. That was her 'Duty' to Freyala; all capitalized-like. Mark had never seen it written that way, but it made sense. Every person in the Chosen System had a Duty toward the god that gave them power, and Isoko's Duty was to eventually become a Green-ranked Slayer.

... Which was interesting.

Mark hummed.

... And on a whim, and then because of very serious reasons, he sent messages to the chat.

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MarkC (Today:10:39PM): Memphi is a nice place! Have they floated any desires to become the other half of the twin city thing you're planning on? I see you have inquiries from Mexico City and the Aluatha Empire, and also Lake Chad to make the temporary portal there permanent, and New London for Okuana Empire reasons, but Memphi is pretty central to a lot here. And it's close to the Aluatha Empire, too.

MarkC (Today:10:40PM): I am super excited for flying fortresses! Can Hearthswellians really do that?! That's crazy! What I'm reading says that they're vulnerable to pretty much everything, though, so they're super rare.

MarkC (Today:10:43PM): I'm going to make an appointment with the Mayor of Memphi Emilia Ramirez soon, the leader of 45 million people, because that's what you do when you're a big power moving in to a big city, and your uncle is a True Healer already here... Though now that I am writing that, she's probably more concerned about my 'baggage'; Addavein.

MarkC (Today:10:45PM): The bandit case took a turn for the weird. They're probably all exiles, according to the inquisitor on the case, Layfair. He suspects that they already moved on, but if they didn't, then I might need to go to this exile city north of Memphi, called Wolf Bayou, to see if they're

there, and what I want to do. I'm not sure I want to do anything except ask them why they tried to kill me. If they turn out to be assholes who won't answer anything, then that will at least make sense, and that will be enough for me to be satisfied.

MarkC (Today:10:45PM): Good luck with your decisions, Eliot!

MarkC (Today:10:46PM): Good luck with your Slayer advancement, Isoko!

MarkC (Today:10:48PM): You should come over to Memphi, Isoko. We can go on some Slayer kill trips together! I'm doing the bandit thing right now, but I imagine that's going to get resolved-to-nothing in a week when I can't find them and when I don't feel like lifting up that rock to see all the slime underneath. Wolf Bayou is some sort of bloodsport exile city, run by an Inquisitor of Drakarok named Redwolf who is some sort of contemporary of Drakarok himself, before he ascended to godhood, which is fucking nuts. Look that up online and tell me what you think about it.

MarkC (Today:10:48PM): I'm going to go to Wolf Bayou because my uncles spoke of it like 'a standard old-world daihoonian city' and 'it's exactly as bad as it seems, but also not that bad at all' which is IDK.

- - - -

In a distant room, in a well-guarded house surrounded by force fields and wards and patrolled by servitor robots and a few real people, a woman slept soundly in her bedroom, in the center of a nest of silver roots. Those roots were plastic and metal and light, and they burrowed into the foundations and the ceilings and formed geometric patterns on the walls. Lights flickered; fiber optics, but also mana lights. All manner of blues, greens, and softer colors flitted through the network, delivering messages and organizing the city in the woman's temporary absence, in her sleep.

A tiny red light flickered through the system, curling into the bed, under the woman.

The woman came back to herself, back to her body.

Mayor Emilia Ramirez woke up.

And then she sat up, as though she hadn't been asleep at all, because she hadn't been; not really. She was just letting her body rest while she subsumed herself into her True Self, but now she was separated again, all so that she could better understand what had happened, on a human level.

She held up a hand and a tablet appeared in her grip, as though it had always been there.

She read it.

She set it down.

Her True Self had calculated that they could get a Twin City on Daihoon, for Memphi, if they used their connection with Careed to get to Cybersong. It was more complicated than that, of course. There were ten million moving parts to this whole idea. But it was a good idea. A portal connecting Memphi to Daihoon would bring a whole new dynamic to the city that would lead to Memphi becoming a true power.

"A portal to Daihoon, here in Memphi," Emilia said to herself, quietly, for she still couldn't believe it.

Emilia had checked out those possibilities long before now, of course, but facts were crystallizing as they were, and now she needed to make big decisions.

Did she want dragons in her city?

Obviously not.

Dragons were terrible for democracy. Emilia had enough trouble with the High Powers in the city as it was, and yet, there were a lot of benefits to having a permanent portal. There were even benefits to having dragons, if the dragon cultists were to be believed, and some of them made really good cases. Dragons that wanted food and fun were perfectly fine. It was when dragons got involved in politics that made everything difficult.

"But a permanent portal was worth it."



Crystal Tower in Tokyo had opened up a permanent portal for trade nearly 70 years ago, and everyone thought it would have ended in disaster, but the constant influx of kaiju and monster waves on set intervals coinciding with the portals opening allowed them to plan around those sorts of things. Those plans led to organization that led to further growth and stabilization, and Tokyo eventually crystallized as the strongest city on Earth *because* of those kaiju, because of that impetus to grow.

These days, Crystal Tower had *teams* of kaiju hunters *begging* to be the ones on the kaiju kill schedules for portal days, because that's where they made their most profit on the television shows they recorded around those battles. Tokyo's kaiju problem had become a 'kaiju asset', and not a single person in Tokyo was scared of kaiju at all, because they knew they were safe. And they were safe!

That safety had a compounding growth effect on Tokyo's population.

"So yes," Emilia told herself, and her True Self, as she contemplated the future of Memphi. "I want that portal project here, and I'm fine with speaking to Addavein, when he shows. Let's put together a real plan." She stepped out of bed and the lights went on in the room. She grabbed a pill out of a cabinet to the side, from a handmade alchemist bottle labeled 'Restful Night', swallowing it dry. Instantly, her exhaustion faded away. Real sleep was better than alchemical sleep, but a pill to cure sleep now and then was acceptable, and Emilia hadn't had one of these pills since 3 days ago. Blinking out the last remnants of sleep, Emilia spoke, "Call the hero's association—"

She paused as 37 tiny red lights flickered through her network, heading her way.

37 minor alerts.

Since she was up for the day, you know.

Emilia went to work at midnight.

One hour of sleep was enough, but Emilia was not as young as she could be. She might need to consider getting True Healed again... In fact, she put that on the schedule for today, along with an invitation to a meeting at 4 PM with Mark Careed. A late afternoon meeting would give her time to put together a plan before confronting —and hopefully dismissing as a threat— the 'Brother of the Dragon'.

But if Mark stayed, and this portal thing worked out...

Emilia grinned.

With a flight of dragons at her request, all the adamantium she could ever want, and a True Union user in her city, or rather, in the city beyond the veil, whatever it ended up being called...

Maybe she could see about reunifying the United States.

It'd be the United *City* States of America, but...

Emilia got goosebumps.

Her True Self, wound throughout the entire city of Memphi and especially here, in her home, flickered with light, as Emilia imagined Memphi, *as it could be*. As it was in the Old World, but with superheroes truly defending it from all sides, inside and out. Memphi without the threat of kaiju, with enough superheroes to make her a 'Team Adamantium', 'Team Mithril', and 'Team Orichalcum', just like they had at Crystal Tower. Memphi had about 25 superheroes to her name that were worth a damn, from Titanfist, to Steele, to Frozenfire, and there were even a few good supervillains, like Credenza and Grey Phantom, but they weren't ready for constant kaiju...

"I need to call a full meeting of parliament, and I'm sure Iliandra of the Empire is vying to get the portal close, so I'll start with talking to her.."

And there was too much work to do this as a human.

Emilia's voice trailed off.

Her body began to slow down as her mind and her True Self began to rev up, most of her consciousness returning to her computer systems growing all throughout all of Memphi. She began coordinating, directly, ten thousand small and large tasks all at the same time, as her body continued to get dressed, to go through her morning routine.

An hour later Emilia blinked, her consciousness returning to herself as much as she desired, which was 'mostly'. She chuckled as she walked to the hovercar, all silver and with green hoverlights. Today was going to be full of wonderful complications.

She was going to get that portal for Memphi.

Her phone started to flicker with words, her True Self already raking in the communications she had seeded throughout the whole world, to begin to organize everything. Other AIs out there were already combating her desires, because other cities wanted this Twin City thing happening, too. But Emilia was good at this.

Aluatha was sending a representative in a few hours; Iliandra, which meant they were serious about working with Memphi to get this settlement near the Aluatha Empire.

Citadel Freyala and Hearthswell were going to send representatives later; Justicar, the Holy Mother's own son, and also some Inquisitor Lola, who was training Mark right now.

Crystal Tower was going to do a readiness check; Wandering Sage would be 'assaulting' the city with a storm for a show sometime in the next few weeks.

The complaints were already coming in about the threat of dragons rejoining society.

But, honestly, someone, somewhere, was going to bite the blade on this particular Pandora's Box, to take the chance, to reap the biggest rewards this world had seen in a long time. There were dangers, yes. Dragons were damned dangerous and incredibly needy, and inviting one into your nation invariably ended up with that dragon taking over control of that nation. But dragons were in charge in Daihoon for the last 5000 years, before the Reveal, because dragons were powerful. Having dragons on *either* side of the possible portal would negate the need for *several* full-time kaiju teams.

If Addavein showed up and he was amenable, that was one side of the portal secured, all on his own.

Emilia lifted off in her hovercar with dreams of a United City States of America dancing in the lights all around her. She didn't want to rule the continent, so she would stick to Memphi, but she'd find someone to eventually become another 'president', like they used to have, in the Old World.

And they would have trade all across the UCSA! And people could move freely! And so much more!

"Like how Mom and Dad used to talk. Unbroken highways from one coast to the other. No city walls. Camping under the stars, unprotected." She smiled. "No monsters at all."

Emilia fondly recalled the words of a kid that she would be meeting today, that she had just finished fully investigating. The kid was a hothead, but he had his heart in the right place.

In the lights of the city, in the small whirs of fans cooling servers in rooms here and there, and in the background noise of processes that not many hear, the city whispered, " *Death to all monsters.*"

- - - -

Iliandra Snowstepper strode through the Grand Hall of Domal'Takela, the crystal spikes jutting from the ceiling and the chandeliers all briefly reflecting her image in their dark blue depths. And then her image faded. The crystal golems didn't come alive. The stone walls didn't turn to liquid, to try to drown her. The fires in the bright gold flames did not try to burn her alive. She had clearance to be here.

But then again, so did everyone these days. This place was filled with tourists, of all things. But it had been filled with tourists ever since Iliandra had started working here 20 years ago, so this was nothing new for her.

The Caretakers of Domal'Takela could have removed the defenses of the Grand Hall ages ago to make this whole place more safe for tourists, but they had not. All of these dangerous magics were historically significant magics, and some of the best self-sustaining magics around. And they were pretty.

People took pictures. Lots of people took lots of pictures.

Iliandra passed a tour group going the other way and wondered if they truly knew the danger they walked through in this place. Some of them must have. Some of them looked to her, walking down the hall with her bright blue robes on. From the widening of their eyes, some of them knew the significance of her robes—

“Oh!” exclaimed a tour guide, pointing upward at a part of the walls, instantly drawing all attention back to the guide, and then the wall. “There’s a reordering over there, on that wall, guests! Up there right there! Do you see it?” The tour guide pointed to a section of the wall where the stone was less than solid, where the wall flowed out of position, and then back into position, like the wall was made of water and something swam inside. “That’s where the leviathan soul is reordering the stone and cleaning away dust. Perhaps a spider built a nest way up there! The whole of Domal'Takela is cleaned by that sort of magic. And over there, the flames are gold because of the captured soul of the dragon..”

Iliandra moved on, through a side door in the Grand Hall, labeled ‘private’.

A wall of gold fire held in the middle of the path and Iliandra walked right through the flames, untouched.

She emerged in the governing side of Domal'Takela, where guests were not permitted. This place was crowded anyway, and if a guest wanted to get in, they probably could. Iliandra glanced into offices where politicians spoke with nobles and mages, their positions denoted by the wearer’s choice of a professional suit, or dress shirt and pants, or robes, like Iliandra’s. Some people didn’t stick to the dress code, of course, but most people did in these sorts of situations.

Some guys carrying a ladder walked the other way.

Iliandra marched right up to the Office of the Provisioner, her march drawing the attention of Provisioner Olden’s guard out front, but the guard simply bowed. They knew her.

Iliandra knocked on the door.

“Come in.”

Iliandra walked inside.

Provisioner Radian Olden was an older-looking man who was much older than he appeared, though right now he looked quite old. He was hunched over a keyboard, looking at a screen, his dark black robes bunched up around his elbows as he poked and prodded at the keyboard. But then he saw Iliandra. He happily abandoned whatever he was doing and smiled.

“Iliandra, my dear! What can I do for you?”

Iliandra shut the door and sat down across from Radian, saying, “We have a chance to secure a Man-made Manipulator to make a Hearthswell-empowered twin city with Memphi, on Earth. I have already decided that this is the best prospect for Aluatha, and I have a few other people on board. Second Princess’s office has cleared this idea. Now I am here to include Provisions in this action, before I go and see Mayor Ramirez of Memphi in about five hours.”

Radian’s full attention was on Iliandra the very second she mentioned the Manipulator. His focus was the weight of the sky. With a deceptively calm voice, he asked, “It’s progressed that far?” He didn’t need an answer; he already knew enough. Other, real questions followed, “Has Church Freyala and Heathswell made a decision on the general for the expansion? What is the plan for dealing with the dragon cultists who want Addavein to open the gates to further dragon overlords?”

They could have spoken for hours upon hours about plans and the directions of any of those plans. But Radian cut to the heart of the biggest controversy; the return of the dragons to humanity. In particular, there was Addavein. That dragon would prove either a blessing, or a curse. Some people had their heads in shadows, unwilling to see what was coming down the tunnels, that the dragons were returning to humanity for good or for ill. They wanted to pretend that the dragons were never going to return. But dragons continued to be born, and they continued to want things that humanity could give them.

Iliandra and Radian both recognized the inevitability of draconic return.

That return would start with Addavein.

But before all of that came to pass, there was the matter of making the city in the first place.

Iliandra said, “The Valen Family has been named as primary organizer. They were former cultists, but they have been a devout enemy of dragonkind ever since Gedahowla the Bright was murdered by her dragon coven in the Reveal. A hundred years ago they had a simple relationship with Addashield, in that they sometimes requested work from him, and he sometimes did that work, but when Gedahowla was murdered, they worked with Addashield to take revenge on her killers. I would not call them partners with Addashield, for they always kept their distance, but perhaps time will tell us otherwise. Addashield’s history is still unfolding.

“The Valen Family is still getting the contract.

“But I have spoken with Aurora Valen, who they are championing to be the General of the new settlement, and she has told me that she would sooner die than see a tyrant dragon rise to any power at all, and she’s killed hundreds of their kind. But she also works with dragons. I believe that leaving those choices up to her would be a prudent use of Crytalis’s and the Aluatha Empire’s time, for Aurora is fully aware what will happen if a dragon gets its claws into humanity, instead of the other way around.

“But to better monitor the settlement, I will be switching out some ambassadorial duties with some understudies and become, myself, the primary Ambassador of Aluatha to the new city,” Iliandra said, “That switch got cleared Second Princess Walaria right before I came here, too. And now, I need the assurances of provisions.”

Radian nodded, taking that all in, and then he leaned back, the weight of the room lightening.

And then he said, “If you’re taking over as ambassador to the new settlement then I have no problem authorizing a dispensation. Aurora Valen is a good choice, too. Include me in the list of recipients you’re updating on your progress. Do we have a timetable?”

“Three months to start, at the earliest, but we’ll go fast with that Man-made Manipulator boy.”

“I’ve seen his little channel...” Radian grinned. “But ‘we’, Iliandra? Already throwing your lot in with the new blood, that much?” He was acting like he was asking for a joke, but Iliandra did not joke about these sorts of things.

Iliandra solidly said, “I am. I believe in Aurora and the Valen family, and I believe in our ties to Memphis and in Mayor Ramirez. Were it for those powers alone, we could make a settlement work, but this will be a portal settlement, and Aluatha has been wanting one of those for ages, ever since Tokyo proved it was possible. We would have had one, if we weren’t so factitious, though I know the cultists will remain a problem. Many different problems of Addavein will be mitigated by our legal stances against dragons... But a dragon city is going to happen, and if we make it a portal city, then perhaps their greed will draw them into being like Gedahowla the Bright, and Darvonika the Obsidian, and not like Bloodmaw at all.”

Radian seemed satisfied. “I heard the dragon apologized to his brother for summoning him across the Two Worlds.”

For a moment, Iliandra felt lighter than air. Disbelief warred with joy, and fought against the fact that Radian never spread untrue rumors. A half second after hearing Radian’s words, Iliandra still didn’t believe them.

Iliandra settled, and said, “If I had heard that from other people, I would call them a liar and a cultist. Dragons do *not*... apologize. This is... dangerous information.”

And now Iliandra was concerned for entirely new reasons. She had heard that Addavein vanished off to hide, to sleep, but she had not heard anything about an apology. An overtaxed dragon usually turned violent, not apologetic. Addashield had always been way too cunning, though. Addavein had inherited that, for sure.

Radian’s eyes were solid as he said, “That’s why it’s not been spread around. It would embolden the cultists. Tell who you need to tell, but keep it quiet.”

Iliandra asked the big question, “Is he Addashield?”

Radian breathed in, shook his head, and said, “I don’t know.”



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Isoko answered the door to her room and stood surprised. “I, uh, put in the request for transfer, uh, 20 minutes ago?”

She was not packed yet.

Lola Turner, Inquisitor, stood with a bag of luggage at her feet. “I was packed and ready to go after Mark ten minutes after hearing he was missing. I have made further decisions in the last hour. I am transferring to Memphi, and I am requesting to join the Freyalan expedition to Daihoon. David and Orissa are going as well, though they will be coming at a later date. I have a hovertram booked for me, leaving in 45 minutes. If you wish to join me, then you must be quick about it. We can discuss Union lessons on the way.”

Isoko’s eyes went wide. She rapidly bowed, saying, “Yes! Thank you, Inquisitor Lola.” She rose. “I’ll be ready quickly.”

Lola nodded, ever perfect, ever professional and polite. “I will see you at the station then, Miss Kanno. We will discuss bandits and the like on the trip as well.”

Isoko’s eyes went wide. “Thank you for your instruction.”

Lola did the smallest Xerkonan nod and then she picked up her bag and walked away.

Isoko shut the door and wondered why Lola was so invested in Mark... Besides the obvious reasons that Mark was a True Union user and would form the center of any team he happened to be on, and the dragon was there, too—

Oh. Lola felt guilty about putting him into a coma, obviously, but the dragon had to be a part of her decision—

Isoko had no time to think about all of that. She got to packing faster. Her room was already torn up, posters in a pile, books in boxes, clothes in containers, but now she started *shoving* things into boxes and wrapping them fast. Everything that wasn't packed would never follow her wherever she was going next.

She didn't even know where she was going to live.

"I'll figure it out," Isoko said, over the sharp, tearing noise of packing tape, and the satisfying sticky rip of another box, sealed.

She was moving on and she was almost ready, but not quite.

She smiled.

This was the best time to move on. There was just enough left undone at Citadel to have something to come back to, if she needed to come back, but most of her life was destined beyond the horizon. Isoko wanted to see that horizon, and further beyond, beyond even the impossible valleys and the tangled horizons of Endless Daihoon, too.

She might not have inherited her grandmother's Sky Shaping, or her naming convention as a villain, but she certainly inherited her wanderlust.

"I could always get a name change as a villain, though," Isoko said, as she rushed to pack away the books she cared about. Comic books went into the shipment box, along with 'Details of Dragons' and 'A History of the World, 2048-edition'... In fact, all of her books went into the box. She wasn't getting rid of any of them. "Maybe I could be 'Wandering Platinum'... No." Isoko laughed. "Grandma would have to fight me if I cleaved that close to her name—"

Isoko stopped.

Her heart beat hard and she radiated good and bad out into the world, though she did not have the veins in her astral body like Mark did.

“Could I beat grandma?! ... Ha!” Isoko instantly shook her head, laughed, and told herself in a mocking voice, “ ‘You’re 50 years too early for that sort of tribulation, Hime-chan!’ ”

She smiled as she continued to rapidly pack.

Gods above! Isoko could be BOTH a green-ranked Slayer, like Freyala wanted her to be, and *also* a supervillain in Memphi! Holy shit, this was going to be awesome—

“Holy shit I’m gonna be late.”

Isoko *prioritized*.

The next half an hour passed in a complete blur.

Isoko was on the tram and then off the tram at the hoverport just in time to race out to the fields, to see Inquisitor Lola stepping into a very crowded hovertram. Paladins and important-looking people filled the tram. Ambassador Wavecrash, Paladin Orissa—

Holy fucking shit was that Justicar?! Lola had seen him once or twice, but it was still amazing to see one of the world’s top heroes, here in the transport, sitting right up there with Ambassador Wavecrash.

There was room for Isoko, though. Lola had her sit down next to her.

“Welcome to the tram, young paladin,” Lola said, grinning.

The tram lifted off without Isoko realizing it.

The lessons started before Isoko was ready, too.

Lola began, "Healing for the paladin is different than what Mark might have told you. It's a lot simpler. But the grafting of Freyala's Power onto the astral body always introduces small issues here and there." She took out a small knife and began, "This is a mithril knife. I will press it into my palm to show you where I want you to begin..."

When Isoko got around to poking her own palm with the knife, there was a lot less blood than she thought there would be. Time progressed fast, and soon Isoko was distracted.

Lola got distracted, too.

Over in the other part of the transport, practically everyone was either talking or listening to Justicar and Ambassador Wavecrash regarding the new laws of the settlement, and how they were going to deal with dragon cultists, or dragons themselves.

It was getting animated up there.

Lola saw Isoko watching the brewing fight, and she quietly admitted, "We can postpone the healing lessons and speak of banditry and capital punishment instead, if you wish."

Wavecrash heard and spoke up, "It's going to be Settlement Doctrine, Inquisitor Lola."

Justicar complained, "Settlement Doctrine isn't good enough."

Lola, who was now on the spot, politely said, "Forgive me for my inquiry, but what does it mean, exactly, when the city is not a single city, but a twin city to Memphi, which has its own unique set of laws that are not related to Daihoon at all. Specifically, how is nobility treated? We don't have nobles on Earth, and for good reason. No one should be allowed direct, legal power of execution over those below them. Quizzically enough, the reasons we don't like nobles on Earth are the same sorts of reasons that Daihoon doesn't allow dragons; they take over everything."

Justicar, who was a little animated and happy to hear Lola's words, said, "There we go! *That's* what I was getting at, Wavecrash. Thank you, Lola."

Lola gave a small nod.

Wavecrash looked to Lola as he gave his own small nod, saying, “Earthlings have a fear of higher power abuses just as Daihoonians do, but nobles and dragons cannot be equivocated in this manner. And yet, your point has merit, Inquisitor Lola.” He said to Justicar, “Settlement Doctrine is but a stepping stone toward eventual charters that take in the positions of all neighbors, so as not to disrupt those neighbors. I imagine that a portal city charter will be quite disruptive, by its very nature, but it will also take into account the needs of both cities.”

An open-ended answer, if there ever was one.

Justicar said, “Can you do better than that, Ambassador. I’ve never done this settlement thing, and I’m worried about dragons of all flavors and sizes, including human-shaped sizes.”

Wavecrash solidly, quickly, said, “Never call a person a dragon when a dragon is around, Justicar. That might insult the person most heavily, as well as offend the dragon.”

Justicar strongly said, “I plan on offending and killing lots of dragons both real and self-styled, Ambassador, so I am glad my words will have that effect.”

Wavecrash raised an eyebrow, and then simply nodded. He continued, “I imagine the laws will settle as Aluatha-derived on Daihoon and Central Cities-derived on Earth, with a transfer zone that has stricter laws than both. Possibly a combination of the most restrictive parts of both sides, with multiple checkpoints on both sides. That is how it is done in Crystal Tower, in Tokyo. It has worked well for them, so I imagine the same sort of scenario will take place in a Memphi-based portal.”

That pronouncement caused a few people to relax. Isoko did not relax. She thought of home. If there was one place Isoko had never been back home, it was to the transfer zone near Crystal Tower. *No one* went there if they could help it; people were arrested for the smallest infractions and then detained for days.

One famous story was a dockworker who got arrested for having some imported meat on the sandwich his wife had packed in his lunch, because that imported meat was monster meat, and the wife hadn’t known. The authorities had treated it as a possible attack on the transfer station, because the meat had been treated and cured to keep it magical, and so the near-living meat set off contamination alarms.

Everyone thought it was ridiculous for the operation to be that high strung, but then the guy monsterized in lockup and he had to be killed.

The wife who made the sandwich was found in her house, crushed into the basement and layered with clothes to hide her body. They had identified the body as a week dead, but the wife had been up and around, calling for her husband to be returned to her while her husband was in prison, just the previous day. She had even gotten the news involved, asking for his return.

Isoko never heard the ending to that story, but it was a pretty famous one from years ago.

Mostly, though, transports were normal affairs. Stuff flowed through the portal, while Glorious Man and the Crystal Teams were deployed on both sides of the Two Worlds, prepared to kill any kaiju that appeared. And the kaiju always appeared.

Lola asked, “Does anyone here have personal experience with Crystal Tower’s transfer zones?”

Isoko froze. And then she almost spoke up—

But some other woman spoke up, saying, “I’ve been through there multiple times. Someone is always getting detained either coming or going, and goods are always detained at least a full day. Nothing really happens, though everyone is always worried something might happen.”

Lola nodded. “It is my understanding that the Central Cities have a hands-off approach to the lands outside of their city walls, and that they have a banditry problem. What issues do you foresee arising from there, Ambassador Wavecrash?”

Wavecrash said, “If this portal district does happen in Memphi, then undesirable elements would need to be taken in hand. Not executed, not at all, but instead rehabilitated, and possibly given blanket pardons for all offenses committed outside of the walls. Standard affair for rebuilding efforts; that sort of thing.”

Lola nodded, satisfied.

Isoko felt weird for reasons she couldn’t articulate well.

Here Lola was, riding with the big boys, asking questions and getting answers. And she had invited Isoko here onto this transport. Was Isoko supposed to be here? Not really, right? The fact that Wavecrash was the source of these answers was just a matter of course; he was an Ambassador, and those types were supposed to have solid answers that would help communication between nations. But it still felt odd for Lola to be speaking in this sort of environment.

Justicar was right over there, after all.

But as soon as Isoko realized she was questioning Lola's position, Isoko realized she was being foolish.

Isoko might not be a supervillain like her grandmother, but she was a paladin of Freyala, and all of these people were either paladins or inquisitors. She had every right to be here, same as all of them. Lola did have a whole lot more seniority than her, so of course Lola was speaking with the big boys. But Lola had every right to be here. So much right.

Isoko was missing a lot of context, and some of that context was Mark and Addavein and Lola's central position in all of that, but Isoko got enough of it to know that she was here, where she needed to be. Hanging with the big boys... Even if she was off to the side and staying quiet.

Isoko grinned at her new life.

This was all so weird.

It was freaking awesome.

----

Mark pushed off of the solid stone ground near the pool, clapped his hands, and then he fell back to a pushup, going all the way down and then explosively pushing off the ground to clap his hands again.

He switched to one hand pushups.

One hand pushups were harder, but he managed to do 10 on each arm, and then he balanced himself on his right hand and left leg, keeping his opposing hand and leg raised off of the ground. He struggled not to collapse on himself as he went down, but he kept himself steady, all the way to the ground, and he pushed back up.

He wasn't even using Union yet. This was just him.

Mark turned on Union and his heart beat with resilience and weakness, black veins scattering into the air all around him, and now it was too easy. He went down on his one-arm-one-leg pushups and then he switched, rapidly firing off a full ten one-arm-one-leg pushes. With a tilting, Mark lifted his legs off of the ground and stood on his hands to do more pushups, just on his hands.

It was weird how much easier it was to do... everything, when Union was active. Nice, of course. And Mark was even building strength even faster when he worked out with Union active. He could even do a one-handed handstand—

Mark overbalanced and almost fell, but he caught himself. He grinned. Couldn't do one-handed handstands yet!

Not *yet*.



With a casual flex, the adamantium hovering around his wrists went outward, like they were limbs he just wasn't using until now. In an even easier sort of way, Mark did 'pushups' with his adamantium. It was the easiest thing to do, now that he was fully acquainted with his kineticism. Soon, Mark sat cross-legged in the air, Union active and connecting him to the world as he 'stood' about three meters off of the ground.

He was very careful about not chipping into the stone pool deck with his adamantium, so his 'feet' weren't shaped like caltrops. They were shaped like rough coins. That shape worked out well enough to distribute Mark's weight across a large enough area that he didn't dig into the stone. Mark didn't even have to pay attention to what he was doing with the adamantium right now. It was simply a part of him. Like using his own fingers, or legs, Mark stood on the adamantium, and felt... normal.

But he was hovering.

He marveled at how he held there, in the air.

This was amazing.

Mark gazed out across the rolling green hills, the distant trees, and the farmlands beyond. Wind blew through his hair and across his body, bringing a chill to the sunshine. It was a good day, and Mark felt pretty secure in his Powers, and in his decision to check out Wolf Bayou, especially with Isoko joining him. Mark had asked her to come to Memphi for some Slayer quests on something of a whim, but it had rapidly turned into a whole big thing, and Mark's whim was a lot more than a whim right now. He was happy that he had asked Isoko to come over.

He was happy with the direction of his life right now.

Lola and Orissa and David were going to be in Memphi, too, soon enough. Those two were going to be a part of this whole 'sister city' thing that was rapidly developing, faster than Mark ever thought this sort of thing could develop. Eliot had only been knighted as a paladin of Hearthswell, like, two days ago. He was heading into training at Citadel Hearthswell, just south of Mexico City.

Mark kinda wondered, since Citadel Hearthswell was right there, and the Aluatha Empire was on Daihoon on the other side of the Veil right there, why didn't they make the portal there? Eliot had

rapidly shot that down in the chat, though, saying that no one wanted dragons in the heart of the Aluatha Empire, or Citadel Freyala.

But Mark's casual talk of Memphi had started a big ball rolling, and now, this thing was probably going to happen here, in Memphi, and also on Daihoon, where nothing currently existed on the other side of the Veil in this area. Mark knew that they weren't making that decision on his words, of course. They were all more concerned with whatever Addavein would do, which was rather valid in Mark's opinion.

Mark looked over to the chair where he had set Quark, his AI, and asked, "Have Isoko and Lola landed yet?"

"They will be landing in 7 minutes. Inquisitor Lola, Justicar, Ambassador Wavecrash, and most of the people on that transport, will be meeting with the current powers of Memphi for the next few hours. Paladin Isoko will be coming here, in accordance with your invitation. There are 387 more text messages in your chat log on Accord since last you read. Most of them are from Eliot, apprising you and Isoko of the current state of the plan."

Mark grinned at that. And then he floated over and picked up his phone, to float in the air and read messages for a little while.

Eliot had a lot to say about a lot, from details of the powerful individuals who would be spearheading the expedition, to general plans, to asking about individual desires and needs.

Mark wanted a flying castle and he said as much, but he also joked that he didn't really want one at all. Too much upkeep! ... probably.

He glanced at the time now and then. 2:38 PM. Plenty of time to get ready for his 'hallway meeting' with Mayor Ramirez—

Gabriel came out of the house, saying, "Mark! It's almost 3 PM! How close are you to being ready?"

Mark sat down on the ground, quizzically. "It's only 2:40? Isoko is going to be here in... Quark?"

“ETA 25 minutes for Isoko’s arrival.”

Gabriel had a determined look on his face as he said, “I got a message that Ramirez is going into Alex’s office an hour early. She’s getting treated in 15 minutes. You need to be in that office—”

“Oh shit!” Mark got down onto his feet and started rushing into the house, saying, “Okay! Isoko should be here soon, though!”

Gabriel calmed down as Mark ran past him. He called out after Mark, “I’ll make sure Isoko is taken care of!”

Mark called back, “Thank you, Uncle Gabriel!”

Mark was dressed in a flash. He was in the car and racing out of the garage in minutes.

Ramirez was always a busy woman, but today was especially busy. Only certain people got sit-down meetings with her, and Mark wasn’t one of those people. Apparently, she was going to be taking a meeting while she was even getting her de-age treatment by Uncle Alexandro. All Mark was going to get was a ‘minute in a hallway’ with her. It would probably be in the parking lot, though. Gabriel had already explained that Ramirez just wanted to know if Mark was going to be a problem, or benefit, or just a normal person.

Mark wanted to be a benefit, of course, and this would be the chance to show that he could be that sort of person, and be given benefits in turn. Memphi didn’t have a ‘first class citizen’ thing like the East Coast Union and Orange City had, so Mark wasn’t sure what ‘benefits’ looked like, exactly, but Mark was pretty sure those benefits were more of the networking variety, than direct benefits.

Mark made excellent time, driving down the well-maintained streets of Memphi, headed right to Uncle Alexandro’s office. Mark had never been there but Quark gave good instructions, and soon Mark pulled through a big gate into a small parking lot at a professional building at the edge of Shady Acres. There was only one building here; a two story affair, all brutalist-shaped but with nice stone surfaces and some greenery here and there. The building was pretty much a ‘mage tower’, but without looking like a tower at all. It still only had one person working here, and if you came here, you came here to see that one person—

Just as Mark parked the car and hopped out, he heard the thrum of a hovercar overhead.

A big silver van of a car touched down on the other side of the small parking lot.

A big man and equally big woman stepped out of the front passenger seat, and the big side door, both of them looking young and strong and in uniform—

A short, brown-haired woman in a lavender pantsuit came out of the main cabin. She spotted Mark immediately and smiled, saying, “What good timing! I’m glad the note got through about the schedule change. Thanks for adjusting, Mark.”

She was Mayor Emilia Ramirez, and she seemed personable.

Mark bowed a little. “Thank you for the warning of the time change.”

“To get right into it: What are your plans regarding these bandits you encountered?”

Mark had a moment, then he solidly said, “*If* I can find them, then I’m going to ask them why they tried to kill me. I assume they will give me unsatisfactory answers, or nothing at all, and then I will have to move on with my life.”

Ramirez gave no indication if that was a good answer or not, she simply moved on to the next question, asking, “What do you think about Wolf Bayou?”

“I have no idea why such a place is allowed to exist.”

It was only after he spoke those words that Mark realized he was talking to the woman responsible for making the decision to ignore Wolf Bayou, and to allow Redwolf her kingdom outside of Memphi. Mark had directly called Emilia’s competency into question.

For a moment, Mark was ready to be embarrassed, but he decided, instead, to stand firm.

Ramirez smirked for some reason; Mark could not say. “Go visit and find out why. If you manage to find the people who tried to kill you, and if they give you satisfactory answers, I empower you to extend to them an offer of clemency on behalf of Memphi. I’ll throw them into jail for rehabilitation, and if they do their year, then they’ll be free to be citizens of Memphi again. It was nice meeting you, Mark.”

She walked toward Alexandro’s office.

Alexandro was already standing by the open double doors with Inquisitor Willow flanking him. They both bowed—

Oh!

Mark rapidly bowed toward Ramirez’s departing form.

And then one of Ramirez’s people, the big man, held out four white coins, saying, “Here.”

Mark... took the coins? Sure?

The man said, “Clemency tokens. They’re simple plastic and useless on their own, but they do draw Mayor Ramirez’s attention when you wave them in front of a street camera. Those four have already been inscribed with some small details about this meeting. Give them to the people you think deserve them. You will be judged based on who you give them to, if anyone.”

With that proclamation delivered, The man walked toward Ramirez, who had already gone inside the building with Uncle Alexandro and Inquisitor Willow. The big woman stayed with the Mayor’s hovervan.

... And Mark was dismissed, he supposed.

Mark slowly got back in the car, marveling that his ‘hallway meeting’ really had been that short.

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Mark stepped into the third floor hallway and saw Isoko standing there, between rooms, wearing a bath towel and with her hair done up in another towel.

Isoko grinned as she saw him. She instantly teased, “ ‘You’re not some super rich person, are you?’ ”

That was one of the first things Mark had said to Isoko, after that first Etiquette Class.

Mark smiled. “I am not rich! I had no idea my uncles were until just the other day. I really should have put a few things together faster, back then, like when you spoke of your grandmother kidnapping a True Healer and how I had heard my uncle was a True Healer before.”

Isoko laughed, and then she walked into her guest room, apparently across the hall from Mark. “I’ll be out in a bit!”

“Sure!” Mark went to his own room and checked on his email and his messages in the meantime—

Isoko was suddenly there, fully dressed, by his door, saying, “You lost everything when you got summoned to Daihoon, yeah? Do we need to go get a new Slayer badge and junk?”

Mark looked up at Isoko, and paused. She was wearing a silver breastplate over a bright white shirt, simple cargo shorts, and ass-kicking boots. Mark got a weirdly proud feeling as he looked at her, in her paladin gear. He smiled, saying, “That breastplate looks good on you, Isoko.”

Isoko’s eyebrows went up as her face turned a little red. And then she grinned a whole lot and spun around, showing off, saying, “It does look good, doesn’t it!” She chuckled and stopped, adding, “I need to consider a villain costume. I’m thinking I’ll ditch the breastplate and get a feathered tiara to show allegiance to Freyala and the whole ‘princess’ vibe.” And then she walked out of the room, saying, “Now get dressed! I want to hit the road soon and you still need your badge, yes?”

Mark was still in his good clothes, but he could be ready rather fast. He started changing, calling through the open door, “I do need my badge! But we’re really going this fast?”

“I’m ready! Aren’t you?”

“... I suppose... I am?”

But was he? Soon, he’d be meeting bandits, even if they weren’t the ones who attacked him... Probably. Wolf Bayou was filled with exiled people... but not all exiles were bandits, right? Most of them were just people... But you didn’t get exiled unless you did something wrong.

Maybe he wasn’t as ready to confront bandits as he thought he was.

Mark pulled on his webweave, his tough jeans, and the tough shirt. He grabbed his phone and shoved it into his backpack along with a few other essentials, and then he stared at the white tokens that he had gotten from Ramirez. The white tokens went into the bag. With the bag over his back, Mark exited his room.

Isoko wore her own backpack. “Is that webweave showing under your collar! Are you rich or something?”

Mark rolled his eyes. “I need to say bye to my uncles— Er. Just Gabriel, I guess... But I’ll be back soon. Sorry I wasn’t here to greet you and introduce you.”

“I’m just glad to be here. The other option was the barracks, and I did not want that. Gabriel seems nice, too! He already offered to put me up long term here, but you and I will be moving on to this expedition when the time comes, yes?”

Mark got excited, saying, “I want to live in a flying castle.”

Isoko laughed wonderfully. “Me, too!” She added, “But those things are death traps for anyone who can’t fly.”

“Then we’ll simply have to get you a flying belt! I think I need one, too, in order to fly at any great height.”

Isoko looked charmed as she smiled softly. “That’s going to be one of my first big purchases. The cheapest models are 50,000 goldleaf, but I think the expedition will hand them out to whoever distinguishes themselves well enough. So that’s my first goal. The Slayer missions up till then will be to get some money of my own that I can spend with the support for stuff that isn’t covered. Entertainment, magical training, stuff like that.”

Mark felt suddenly secured upon hearing Isoko’s idea in person.

Mark had always had a vague sort of idea of joining a settlement expedition, of making some new place his new home for a while. Even before he got his Powers, he had wanted to do something like this. And now, he was.

He needed to stock up on resources, too, before they left.

Mark said, “That’s my plan, too.”

Isoko smirked. “While you’re figuring out who tried to murder you, and then confront them about it.”

“As well as that; yes.”

Isoko lost her smile. She said, “Inquisitor Lola and I didn’t get to talk much about bandits because everyone was talking about the settlement situation, but I know how to handle bandits. Since we have healing powers, we beat the ever loving shit out of them, heal them, and then beat them again. Repeat as necessary until they promise to change their ways. And then, we drag them before the city and hand them over and never think about them ever again.”

... Okay. That was a bit darker than Mark wanted to go.

Mark felt odd about Isoko’s solution... but it felt right? A little bit?



Just beat them up and hand them over to the authorities—

Oh.

Wait.

“They’re exiles,” Mark said. “They might not be accepted into the city. I got some clemency tokens from Mayor Ramirez, though. I don’t know what they mean, exactly, but I can give them the tokens if I think they’re worthy of redemption, or something like that, and they can do a year in a rehabilitative jail and regain citizenship. So normally you can’t handle bandit exiles over to a city... I don’t know what you do with a normal bandit exile. Just give them some help and tell them to stop attacking people, maybe.”

Isoko looked at Mark. She blinked a few times.

Mark was about to ask her what was wrong—

Isoko asked, point blank, “You want to be a monster slayer, or a justice-person, Mark? Deciding who lives and dies based on your view of the world?”

Mark felt a chill. “A monster slayer, of course, but I’m doing this whole thing to help other people. I’m never killing anyone.” He asked, “Why do *you* want to kill monsters?”

Isoko had a moment, and then she almost said something, but she walked down the hallway, saying, “Let’s spend the night in the wilds.”

Oh? What’s this?

A vulnerability?

Didn’t seem like a dangerous vulnerability, though, so Mark caught up, his voice a little higher as he teased, “Why do you want to kill monsters, Isoko?”

Isoko rushed down the stairs. “To make lots of money and have excitement and other good things!”

Mark laughed. “Untrue!”

Isoko suddenly stopped at the bottom of the stairs. She turned to Mark, and said, “I have a sister who should have survived the Tutorial, but she never came home. That was 5 years ago. Even if Riku ended up on Daihoon instead of coming back to Earth, 5 years is enough time to get back to us.

“So Riku is dead. I accepted this a while ago.

“But Addavein spoke of a two-layered mythology just the other week, of the elves of Endless Daihoon and their resurrection magics. And so... Before I met you and everything about this weirdness of this new chapter in life, my real answer to ‘what do I want out of life’ would have been making money and having excitement and all the good things out of life. But now I have a more solid goal... Maybe.” Softly, Isoko shrugged, then said, “Maybe... I can resurrect my sister. Doubtful, but... Maybe.”

Mark felt a lot of funny, good emotions, at that moment. He liked that Isoko was telling him a big truth like that. He liked it a lot. Because, truthfully...

“I wanted to never think about that stuff because he wrote it off as a total scattershot in the dark,” Mark said, “But I also want to know if resurrecting my own parents is possible. I’ll go on that trip with you.”

Isoko smiled softly. “Maybe maybe.”

A moment passed with Isoko standing there on the second floor landing, and Mark standing beside her.

And then Isoko continued down the stairs.

They ran into Gabriel near the door as though he had known to wait for them there, and maybe he had known to wait for them there.

Gabriel gave Mark a hug, saying, “Good luck out there. Do you want me to take you in the hovercar somewhere to start? Inside the city, I mean. I can drop you off anywhere you want.”

Mark smiled on Gabriel's shoulder, saying, "We're good. We'll walk out and take the tram. And I'll see you soon enough. Alexandro, too! This is just a week-long journey. I'll be back."

Gabriel pulled away, grinning. "You'll need a real costume soon, Mark. Alex and I want to help when you're ready for that."

Mark chuckled. "I thought you guys like the heroes more than the villains."

"We'll make exceptions for you," Gabriel said, happily. And then he turned to Isoko and said, "We'll help you with your costume, too, if you wish."

Isoko bowed a little, and said, "Thank you for the kind offer, but my family is already excited about helping me to make my costume when I pass all the courses for villain training."

*Oh yeah! She still had to do all of that, didn't she,* Mark thought.

They had excused Mark from those necessities of training.

"Of course, of course..." Gabriel said, "Good luck with those bandits, Mark."

Mark grinned a little, though it might have been a wince. He shrugged. "It'll be what it'll be."

And then he left, feeling odd.

Isoko walked beside him, but then she started jogging, her skin turning a bit platinum as she said, "Time to go!"

Mark raced to catch up, and soon found himself needing to Union with resilience and weakness to stay alongside her. She was faster than before.

"You're faster!"

“I am!” Isoko said, laughing.

She out ran Mark, easily, under the boughs of big trees, sunlight scattering through leaves and dancing upon her platinum skin. And then Mark cheated, his adamantium coins coming out and giving him four ‘legs’, instead of two, propelling him to speed.

Isoko ran faster, saying, “Good! I was hoping you could keep up!”

Mark smiled. He was still using coins to move here, on his Uncles’ driveway, because he didn’t want to ruin the driveway with little marks here and there. The coin-shape allowed for slippage and so it wasn’t nearly as fast as caltrops, but caltrops tore at stone and everything else they touched. At that thought, Mark wondered about Isoko’s increased weight in her Platinum Form.

And then he noticed that Isoko’s racing wasn’t causing a lot of noise at all. She was stepping really lightly—

Ah. No. She wasn’t stepping lightly at all. She was stepping really heavily, actually.

Isoko wasn’t pounding down through the concrete with her increased weight, and her shoes were doing fine, because every time she touched the ground the ground flickered with platinum. Every step was a platinum flicker across the ground, and her boots. She was doing some Tactile Telekinesis with her clothes as well as her footsteps, so that she didn’t ruin what she wore and to support her own weight.

And she was doing it routinely. Strongly.

She had grown a lot, and she was probably holding back.

“You can go a lot faster than this, can’t you?” Mark asked, surprised.

Isoko grinned, but then she slowed down and her platinum body faded away. They had reached the road. Mark walked alongside her, his coins vanishing back under the hems of his pants, and under his shirt sleeves. The tram was only a ten minute walk from here, so they walked.

Without any stressful breathing at all, Isoko said, "I'm still getting the hang of it, but yeah. I can get a surprising amount of traction and even a bit of extra speed if I'm focused on the direction. My modifier is up to 2.4 times baseline, and the deep scans at Citadel say I have a speed modifier now, too. Only 1.2 times speed, but 20% more speed is a *lot*, Mark." She held up a hand and platinum flashed across her body. "I'm getting the hang of it and I think... I think Platinum Body is a lot stronger than I thought it was."

Mark grinned. "And it's pretty."

"I'm gonna get all the sponsorships!"

"Oh my god! That's right! They wanted me to go on that... whatever track it was with the Villain Program. You know... 'Biglight'? No."

Isoko looked away as she hummed, and said, "Spotlight track."

"Yes! You need to go into the spotlight track, too! We can be on the spotlight track together!" Mark smiled wide. "I'll be your henchman."

Isoko had a weird moment. She froze. She turned back toward Mark and blinked, and then, in a delightful sort of way, her lips curved up, her eyes seemed to glitter, and she held back her head and laughed wonderfully. "Thanks but no thanks!"

Mark's face fell. "What! Why not?"

"We can be on a *team*, Mark. No leaders or followers at all."

"Oh! Well yeah. That works, too... But don't supervillains usually work alone?"

"Oh oh oh!" With a haughty sort of demeanor, Isoko asked, "You're shooting all the way to the top, are you?"

“Yes,” Mark said, without reservation. “I don’t want to break into banks or shit like that. But I’m okay with having a lair that people have to assault. I want a flying castle, Isoko. It’s probably a terrible thing to have and use, but I want one anyway. For at least a weekend, before it crashes into the ground.”

Isoko grinned wide. And then she started jogging. She wasn’t using her Powers, but she was running some, so Mark ran beside her.

Mark’s heart beat out the faintest black lines, mostly hidden beneath his shirt. No baseline looking would notice them, and that was all it took to adhere to Curtain Protocol.

Isoko spoke of monsters, and Mark did, too.

Soon, they made it to the tram, talking about monsters out there in the wilds of Memphi, in a tram that didn’t have many people at all. But there were some. Talking of monsters in public was fine, as long as you didn’t get too specific with Powers and capabilities. Mark spoke of fighting the big hydraturtle, though, asking what Isoko would have done differently.

“Run away and get someone else to take care of it,” Isoko said, easily and quickly. “I saw some of the things you said about it online. If it took you 15 minutes to kill while you ran away the whole time, then it is too much for me.”

“Okay well... Yeah. Valid.”

Isoko chuckled.

In a now-crowded tram, Mark and Isoko stepped out onto Northeast Rivergate Station, which was just south of the Northeast Rivergate. The place was a massive ‘town square’ like space, with a bunch of hunter shops all over the place. Guildhouses abounded in the district, and offices for Inquisitors and the police held beside each other on the inside of the gate. No restaurants, but there were lots of shops that sold backpacks filled with food to eat out there in the wilds.

The gate itself looked even more impressive from this side, with a wide, low slope of stairs that led up to a bunch of individual gates that went straight through the big wall. Those individual gates, each twice

the size of a Giant Strength-type brawny, could be opened or closed at will. One massive, giant slab of black metal, on chains, held right above the individual gates, like a bar stretched across the entire thing. That bar could be lowered rather easily to block off the gates.

It was all kind of intimidating, and there were thousands of people hanging around a giant preparation area at the base of the stairs. A few fountains bubbled here and there and people were dipping water out of those fountains, securing the water inside canteens. Most people were coming back into the city, down the stairs and into the square, and looking worse for the wear. Injuries wrapped with bandages, broken shields that were probably repairable, armor that was going to be trashed as soon as taking it off wouldn't leave a guy just nude. Some people were getting ready to go out. Those people looked pristine, yet rugged.

Some people even wore costume gear, but probably only because their costume gear was either easy to repair because of their Talents, or strong as all heck, due to the material makeup.

Mark saw two guys wielding giant-as-fuck swords over their shoulders and laughing with each other as they walked into the city. At that specific moment, that's when Mark felt really good about going out, into the wilds, to kill shit.

As they walked to the Slayer's gate-side office, Isoko mentioned, "I'm so ready for this."

Mark smiled. "Me too!— Wait. You have no weapon?"

Isoko laughed as they got into line. "I'm a brawny! I can pick up an appropriately-shaped stick and use it like a sword."

A few people were looking at them, at Mark's civilian-like clothes and at Isoko's paladin breastplate, but most people focused on Isoko rapidly and instantly. Not many people were in line for the Slayer station; most were waiting to the sides, for people in line to get their badges remade up front.

One guy to the side spoke up, "You two new around here? You're looking for a group? We have openings for a healer."

Without missing a beat, Isoko said to the guy, “We’re gunning for bandits and headed toward Wolf Bayou, killing monsters along the way. I imagine that is not a popular thing to do.”

The guy instantly reevaluated everything. He tipped his head, saluted with his fingers, and backed away, saying, “Never mind, ma’am. Good luck.”

A lot of people interested in Isoko all decided not to be interested.

But one woman behind Mark and Isoko said, “They give out free wooden swords for TT-use in a little shop by the right of the gate. They’re all based on models the shop sells.”

Isoko bowed a little, being completely professional as she said, “Thank you so much! We’ll give them a look.”

The woman smiled a little. “I hope you get whoever you’re going after. I haven’t heard much of a bandit problem, though.”

Isoko said, “It’s more of an attempted murder thing we’re going after. They might have just been bandits by opportunity.”

The woman’s eyes went wide. “Ohhhhh…” She nodded. “Yeah.”

Mark felt people hone in on them at the mention of bandits. He didn’t feel anyone’s attention-vectors turn into ‘kill kill kill’ though, so he ignored his Unionsense for the most part.

But at the woman’s comment, Mark asked her, “That happen a lot? Attempted murder and theft of goods?”

“Some people are just fucking stupid,” the woman said, waving a hand.

A few people nodded at that comment.



Mark didn't know what to make of that, so he just nodded along with the others.

Mark had reached the front of the line, so he walked up to one of four different bank-teller-like booths. A servitor floated on the other side and a black dome-like device sat on the counter between the servitor and Mark. Mark had seen what the other people in line had done already, so he knew about what to do. The servitor spoke instructions anyway.

“Place your hand on the truthstone and state your name and birthday if you wish to receive a new Slayer badge. If you wish for a route in line with your badge, then ask for one.”

Mark put his hand on the stone, saying, “Mark Careed, May 3rd, 2030. Got a route headed toward Wolf Bayou?”

A little slot to the side of the truthstone flickered with red light and a hexagon of faux mana crystal popped out of the slot. It was black with red lines on the edges. On a slot on the other side of the black dome, a sheet of paper printed out.

“Please take your badge and requested route, Mark Careed. There are no red routes headed toward Wolf Bayou, but if you can make it to Wolf Bayou and come back, then you will have passed a basic Red advancement test, and will be advanced to Orange. Crossovers safe for red-ranked Slayers are at the towers, just outside of the gate. Next!”

With his badge secured, Mark walked outward. He had meant to say thanks to the woman who had spoken to them in line, but she was already getting her badge remade over there, as well. Isoko walked with Mark outside.

Isoko fended off 4 more requests for a party before the two of them got to the little shop giving away free sword-shaped bits of wood. Isoko got a simple meter-length thing with an edge that was quite sharp. The shopkeep said that it would keep an edge for a day on its own, as long as it wasn't actually used. A Brawny had to Tactile Telekinesis on the stick if they wanted that edge to remain strong.

Isoko thanked him for his product and flashed it platinum, to check the edge. She cut a finger a little, and pronounced, “Oh! That' sharp!”

The shopkeep laughed. “We got real swords, too! Those keep edges a lot longer. My Talent is Sharpening. If you bring me a sword that needs sharpening then it’s 5 goldleaf per sharpening.” She pointed to the sign over her that said the same thing, as she passed her other hand over a customer’s silver sword, and the silver sword turned a lot sharper. Mark didn’t see the guy pay, but he assumed he did, and the shopkeep wished him luck.

Soon enough, Mark and Isoko got through the gate, to the other side.

In the open air, walking down the stairs beyond the Northeast Rivergate, Mark teased Isoko, “Look how popular you are! That breastplate really does send a signal.”

Isoko laughed.

They hit the packed ground and sparse grasses beyond the gate’s staircase and started jogging north, with all the people, to get to the ‘crossover that was safe for Red ranks’. That space was at the towers that popped up here and there across the Mississippi. Soon, they arrived at a wide, brightly-lit tunnel that went under the river. People walked or ran in or out of that tunnel. The tunnel was divided into lanes; slow people and speedsters, it looked like.

Isoko paused at the descent, because some big ships plowed out of the giant bubblewall that screened the Mississippi. Those ships gathered bubbles like a child would pack bathtub bubbles onto their face, to make a ‘beard’, but *these* Mississippi bubbles turned the whole ship invisible. Isoko stared, wide-eyed, at the casual display of grand magics.

Mark smiled, saying, “Want to sit and watch for a while? Part of hunting is seeing the sights.”

Isoko breathed deep and seemed happy. Then she shook her head, saying, “Nope! I want to kill monsters and make money. The completion quest you got for a trip to Wolf Bayou is worth how much?”

Mark pulled the paper out of a pocket to look at it. He put it back away, saying, “Looks like 500 goldleaf.”

“So 250 for me. That’s less than a real kill quest, but... That’s fine? I need to get upgraded past Red anyway. The bandits were on this coast, though, right? The east coast? Wolf Bayou is on the west side. Are we using the tunnel? Or not?”

Mark looked up north, toward the wide Mississippi, and the land on this side of the river. Then he looked back to the tunnel. He made a decision. “There is no way those guys are scoping out the same place they failed to kill me. They moved, for sure.”

“You never know. They could still be there, waiting for someone else to walk by with millions in goldleaf floating around them.”

“Ehhhh! I don’t need to find them directly.” Mark started walking down the tunnel. “Let’s go to Wolf Bayou.”

Isoko was right there with him, whispering, “So you’ve noticed the people looking at us, right? Do you think any of them have scanners for goldleaf, too?”

Mark had noticed everyone looking at them, but he had disregarded most of what he noticed, because no one was out to kill him.

Some people out there definitely had scanners, though. Those people got real startled when their scanners went off as they looked at Mark.

“Some people have noticed us, yes, and some people have scanners, too.”

Isoko raised an eyebrow. “You see people with scanners?”

“Oh! Uh. Not that... Hmmm.” Mark said, “I don’t know if you can, but I know that I can use Union to sense... sort of like... directional vectors on people. I think I’m sensing their intent, or purpose, or sense of direction in life at that moment, or something. It’s not really the physical direction they’re going, but there is a lot of that going on, too. Mostly, I can tell the vector that a person is pointed in, when they’re near me. So, yeah, I noticed everyone so far. None of them seemed dangerous, but... Some people back there had the instinctive reaction to kill me, but no real desire to kill me. Others were more... a desire to

get close? Those ones I noticed the most. And the greed. I noticed the greed a lot. Mostly though, people noticed you.”

Isoko walked with Mark, thinking deeply. Her vector wildly focused on Mark, and then on herself, and then on Mark, and then forward, and then on that guy over there who raced through the tunnel on the speedster track, moving fast as a blur and then vanishing behind them, back up into the sun. And then she actually looked to Mark.

“I don’t feel anything.” Isoko shrugged, adding, “I didn’t get the full Talent. I can certainly keep Platinum Body up and running full time now, though!”

“Glad for that, but I think you got enough of Union to get this part, too. ‘Seeing’ ‘vectors’ might be the base nature of the magic itself. When you use Union, you tie together various things in a Union, and then you decide what goes where in that Union. You didn’t get formless Union. Instead you were given, like, like, several hammers, or however you want to envision the specific tools of your Powers, and the hammers can certainly hammer, but they also have an innate form, and they’re an extension of your body. Simply by having a hammer at all you should be able to get a feel for how they... you know... feel?”

Isoko frowned a little.

Mark tried to think— “Oh! Proprioception! The feeling of understanding where your body is, and where it is not. You should have an innate proprioception of your Union ‘hammers’.”

Isoko was fine for a moment, and then she walked slower, her vector going in every direction, her heart beating and connecting to Mark, and then to everyone else in the tunnel, and then beyond—

Suddenly, Isoko’s vector was *everywhere*, pointed in every direction, and then her vector snapped. She slapped back into herself, faltering a little, but Mark was there, holding her up, smiling.

“... Huh,” Isoko said, her mind back inside her head, as she gripped Mark’s hand.

Mark recalled his own first expansion, when he had been sitting there with Lola in Healing Club, watching the brawnies down below do their thing. Had Lola seen Mark 'expand and contract' like Mark had just seen Isoko expand and contract? Perhaps.

Isoko might have a godly graft of power attached to her astral body, but it was still her astral body. She still stressed herself to a limit she had not known before now.

Isoko breathed deep, pulling in good from the world, and then breathing out bad, steadying herself as she blinked. "I read about Union... Never read about hammers and vectors, but sure, that works."

Mark smiled. "I'm glad my shitty explanation could help!"

Isoko scoffed and walked on her own, saying, "It was a good explanation, Mark."

Mark chuckled. "Do you have the vectors of understanding yet?"

"Not at all! But I will eventually."

Mark was sure she would, too.