

The path through the wilds to Wolf Bayou was a theoretically straightforward path.

Mark expected complications to arise in the form of monsters. Of bats that shot lasers, or rabbits that unfurled into gaping maws of teeth and stomach acid. That would all still happen, for sure, but the first complications came in the form of other people. Honestly, Mark should have expected that most of all.

Mark and Isoko jogged through the linking tunnel that ran below the Mississippi river, connecting the eastern shore to the western shore outside of the walls of Memphi. The tunnel was kinda crowded at this hour. A lot of people were going home, and the night guard was moving out. Getting through the tunnel itself was a straightforward affair, but foot traffic slowed down and Mark heard people yelling up ahead, but then traffic resumed.

Mark never found out what the problem was up ahead.

The tunnel itself was rather unremarkable. It looked like someone had simply used some stoneshaping Powers to drill a hole through the ground and then reinforce it here and there, while some other people had installed some glowing rocks in the sides of the tunnels, and the ceiling. Maybe the same person, actually. Probably part of a team of rock shapers. Cities had a lot of those on call, all the time.

People saw Mark and Isoko, and some of them had scanners that went wild on Mark, and some people looked at him funny, their eyes going wide in recognition, or some other emotion that was too obtuse to properly understand at a glance. Most people looked at Isoko, though, with her silver breastplate that was clearly Freyalan in design, and they wanted her as a healer on their team.

Isoko got propositioned for a teammate slot twice in the trip underneath the Mississippi River. She said 'no', both times, though some people did ask for some healing and they got that healing. Just some cuts and bruises; nothing special.

The two of them made it out the other side of the tunnel soon enough, into the open air on the western bank of the Mississippi. That's when they encountered their first real snag on the 'easy trip through the wilds'. The setup over here was pretty much the same as the setup on the other side, with a big gate with multiple smaller gates in the wall, and a well-beaten series of footpath roads that led out into the wilds to the north. Mark barely got to look around before there was an 'emergency'.

Some guys were running down those footpaths, toward the city. One woman with a group of 5, 2 women 3 men, spotted Mark and Isoko, or rather, they spotted Isoko's breastplate.

"There's a healer! Holy shit— Can you cleanse infections?" The woman got right into it, coming over, saying, "We've got an infection we're controlling. We need it purged." She gestured to a man behind her with his hand wrapped around his stomach. He was clutching severed leather armor. The woman said, "It's some sort of egg-thing. Plant-based, we think. Can you do it?"

Based on their vector states, Mark believed them. The guy with the infection had some sort of weirdness to his own vector states, and not just in his belly, like a bunch of worms pointed in other directions, but also in his left arm, under his bracers. Another woman in the group had something weird going on with her own vector states on the back of her right leg. It was like each person was a single vector, mostly pulling toward Isoko and a little bit to Mark, wondering who he was to have a healer with him, and then they dismissed Mark, but their smaller, foreign vectors were all over the place, and mainly focused on the person they were attached to and trying to quietly eat.

It was not a pleasant set of experiences to feel. Mark bet it felt worse for the afflicted, for sure.

Isoko quickly said, "I'm not that qualified. He is."

Mark was on it.

He connected himself and Isoko to the entire group of five people and experienced multiple things in that moment. Connecting to Isoko was different this time. It was a lot nicer, actually. Before, when Mark had gone onto his training mission with Isoko and Eliot, connecting to them had been like connecting to any normal person. But now, with Isoko being a part of the Chosen System, with a Union of her own, connecting to her was like connecting to the people in Healing Club. Instead of reaching out and touching Isoko, he reached out and grabbed hands with her.

Isoko jolted a little. She had felt that, too.

She reached back to Mark, and 'held his hand' as well. She had some experience with what Mark had just done, then? That was good.

Mark focused on healing the party. His heart beat hard, black veins flickering into the air all around him, pulling in resilience and purging weakness. He breathed in purity and breathed out impurity, and soon, the team was both worried, looking at Mark and wondering what he was doing, while soon feeling good. Their shoulders relaxed. Their muscles untensed. All of them had small health issues right now, probably due to spending all their healing items and single-use magics on healing the infected, but Mark was better than a single-use item. He healed them all, fast enough.

“Oh wow,” said the guy holding his stomach. He chuckled a bit as he breathed out, “That’s so much better. Thank you.”

The extra vectors inside of the team, and inside their clothes, vanished quickly, but not because of Mark. Mark’s purity/impurity purge only got rid of the putrescence or necrosis that the worms were doing, he was sure. The worms themselves were still there, unable to be cleansed away that quickly. They were living things, after all, and Mark was not going to be purging away living things unless he was sure he was killing what needed to be killed.

And yet, the worms started dying anyway, or maybe purity/impurity made them weaker enough for the infected guy’s body to kill them? Maybe the guy had taken some antiparasitic meds, and those were finally working?

Mark wasn’t sure about anything that was happening right now, but he knew that if he continued on this slow healing path, that they’d all be fine soon enough.

But to try and diagnose what he was seeing, Mark asked the guy, “You a brawny? You’re clearing up faster than I expected.”

Brawnies healed really easily, as soon as they got any healing at all. Even basic parasites were no match for them. Maybe that’s what was happening. The guy looked pretty normal, with light armor, a sword at his right hip and a gun in a holster on his left hip.

The guy said, “Basic Brawn, yes sir. Fuck, that feels *so* much better.”

Mark smiled a little, glad he had been right. He said, “Glad I could help. You have something under your bracer there, too, but it’s weakening. You still need to take that off and clean it up.”

The man got a concerned look to him, and then he pulled off his bracer. Some worms and eggs fell out and the guy freaked out a little. The other people in their group almost said something to him—

But Mark looked to the other woman in the group, saying, “You have something stuck to the back of your leg— No. Other one. Yup. Right there.”

The woman pulled off her outer leather armor instantly, cursing as she revealed a gathering of worms and eggs in a big cut in her armor. “Fuck! When did those— Oh fuck.” She showed her backside to one of her partners, scraping away the worms and eggs even as she, asked, “Did they get through the webweave?”

The first woman poked at the back of the other woman’s legs, saying, “No...? No. Doesn’t look like any cuts in the weave.”

The other woman chuckled. “Oh thank the gods.”

A different guy on their team smiled as he said, “With as much as we paid for this shit it should be good against worm burrowing.”

The team began to talk among themselves about their encounter with some ‘worm pigs’ which were, as far as Mark could tell, feral pigs that were infested with some symbiotic worms. As the dead and dying worms inside of the first guy flaked away into impurity, cast off into the air, into the world, they scraped off and stomped on the living ones, and then those ones vanished into the miasma as well. Soon the team was fully clean.

“Thank you so much, again!” said the guy who had had the worms in his guts. “I didn’t think they had gored me that deep, but I guess they had. The skin just fucking healed over it too fast... Oh! Why aren’t you wearing a breastplate, too? You’re a healer too, right? You two need a team?”

The woman who had spoken first, spoke again, smiling wide. “We have 5, but we could do 7!”

“No thank you,” Isoko said, “We’re out here on a mission to hunt bandits, who might have simply been opportunistic almost-killers.” As the team of 5 all jolted at that, Isoko continued, “Do you know of an

older woman Mind Controller, a younger woman Ice Shaper, and a pair of 28-ish year old men who might be a Mesmer and a Brawny?”

The five people kinda all had a moment.

The newly-uninfected man frowned a little, saying, “I don’t know anyone like that. Sorry. Thanks for the healing, though.”

The others had similar small words of non-knowing.

Mark smiled professionally, saying, “Thanks anyway. Good luck hunting.”

The team of five got going, but at a much slower speed now that they were done with their emergency.

Mark and Isoko attempted to walk north.

They got stopped by another team that needed healing almost right away.

Mark and Isoko ended up stopping several more times, either individuals or teams experiencing emergencies in the shape of this, that, or another thing. All of them had been racing toward Memphi to get healing at some station just beyond the big gate, but when they saw Isoko out there, they asked her first. Mark and Isoko dealt with broken bones. One guy had a medical patch on his stomach that held his guts inside, but Mark and Isoko healed that problem perfectly. One person was just the upper half of a body, strapped into a backpack, carried by another. That half-body dude was already healing, but really damned slowly, so it wasn’t an emergency to get him back to Memphi too fast.

As Isoko healed the half-there guy, Mark stood with the partner who had been carrying him. Mark looked down as a spine regrew in a sploosh of blood and viscera, followed by slowly spooling guts. A liver came next and the guy’s arm regrew.

As the guy’s first finger came into being he scratched his forehead and nose and then his stomach and chest, moaning in comfort as more and more fingers joined the scratching. He gurgled out words that Mark eventually recognized as, “Fucking hell, the itching is the worst part.”

Mark stared at the whole event happening on the ground, and he never stopped staring. It was so fucking morbid, but the guy wasn't in any real pain... Maybe?

Mark asked, "You're not in pain?"

The guy laughed, his insides flexing on the bare ground as he gurgled, "Ain't no way! I'm on them good pain meds! Pain meds are cheap as fuck!"

The guy's partner scoffed. "This bastard is just a fucking regenerator so he—" The guy spoke loudly down at his friend, "*—He thinks that means he can get up close and personal with the big ones.*"

The guy waved a regrowing hand, dismissive— He gasped as his insides passed a pain threshold, or something, and he grinned, his voice turning more normal and understandable as he said, "Ohhh! That's so much better. Thank you, ma'am."

Isoko was focused on healing, but she managed to nod a little.

The guy's partner scoffed again. "I'd say he deserves the pain, but I always carry around an extra pain inhibitor for occasions like this, and he saved my life today, so I can't really fault him... Much." He looked to Isoko, saying, "Thank you for healing the idiot. Mom hates it when he gets hurt like this."

Isoko nodded again, still focused on her breath and her heartbeat to heal the guy. She was doing this one all her own because she wanted to stretch herself, but Mark felt like he should step in to help soon.

"Brothers, then?" Mark asked, watching as the guy's pelvis started to regrow, as his skin started to stretch down onto that regrowing pelvis.

"We are!" said the regenerator— The guy stared at his brother. "Don't tell mom."

"I wasn't about to!"

The guys talked amongst themselves.

To the side, Mark asked Isoko, “You doing good?”

Isoko nodded, tersely, as she managed to say, “I’m good.”

Mark saw her struggling, but healing this guy here was just about throughput, and not about doing anything special at all.

Soon enough the guy was able to put on pants, so he did, and Isoko looked to Mark with a small need in her visage.

Mark stepped in, helping Isoko finish off the healing, and Isoko breathed easier.

With freshly regrown feet sticking out of basic brown pants, the guy stood up under his own power, and soon he was walking by himself, with his older brother at his side, softly yelling at him. The guy thanked Isoko again, and the brother did, too. Soon, Mark and Isoko waved goodbye and headed north, to the intersection of a dozen different roads.

Was there going to be another delay?

Maybe, maybe not.

A great big sign awaited them in the center of the dirt roads that led off into the wilds. The roads were labeled from Route NW-1 to NW-12, with Route NW-1 labeled twice, since it was the return route for many of the others, with the return route between NW-9 and NW-10. Mark had seen a similar setup on the other side of the Mississippi, at the Northeastern Rivergate.

All of these routes were just the starter routes to a hundred smaller trails all throughout the wilds, all across the entire northwestern quadrant of the lands outside of Memphi. The roads had lengths between 50 miles, and 250 miles, with those 250-mile-routes seeming to be the most prevalent of the routes. They crisscrossed and meandered out there. Most of the trails between the roads were unmarked and warned to be full of monsters. Among the warning signs was a sign that requested people make new trails if they could, for the wilds would grow to 100 meter tall trees and truly dangerous lands if Memphi let them get that bad.

'Burn the forest if you can! You probably can't.'

Mark said, "So I think we start—"

Mark felt a flash of someone's vector slam into Isoko, who was standing beside him.

"Hi. Sorry. Are you a healer, ma'am?" said some guy, walking this way, currently bleeding from a bunch of bandages wrapped around his legs and side. His team stood behind him. Two guys were holding a stretcher with a woman laid out on that stretcher. "Sorry to impose. We have some wounded, and we know we could go to the healing center beyond the wall, but—"

Isoko looked kinda worn out and anxious even as the guy was talking.

Mark cut off the guy's request, saying, "I got it." He pulsed with healing, black veins extending into the air. The veins didn't extend all the way to the group of wounded, but his astral body did. In a few heartbeats the people holding up the stretcher, and the woman on the stretcher, were all looking better.

The man who had spoken first smiled a little. "Thank you so much!"

Mark conversationally asked, "What'd you run into out there?"

The first man grinned, saying, "Cat-types. They literally just appeared out of fucking nowhere. Probably a Veil-slip. Damned unlucky of us. That was 70 miles ago, and the injuries weren't so bad, but they took out our scouter. Broke the damned thing, even though it was made out of tier 3 materials. I think the alchemical silver batch went bad—"

"It was a fucking tier 5 cat, Gerald!" The woman on the stretcher was sitting up now. "The silver batch was perfectly fine..." She sighed out, breathing deep and feeling better, as she said, "And they were sparkle seekers. Of course they went after the shiny silver scouter." She grunted in slight pain as she started standing up.

Gerald, the first guy, rolled his eyes and dropped the topic.

Soon, those guys walked on.

Isoko and Mark were left staring down several roads.

Route NW-11 was the road they wanted; the one directly to the left of 12.

Route NW-12 went northward alongside the Mississippi, at about 200 meters west of the river, before the road curved off to the west at around 50 miles down the way. Route NW-12 was a mirror to Route NE-1, on the other side of the Mississippi. When Mark was coming back to civilization, if he would have jaunted about 200 meters to the east, he might have seen and walked back home on Route NE-1, instead of what he had done, which was following the river and hitting all of those monsters on the coast.

They wanted Route NW-11 because that's what their route calculator had said... Hmm.

Mark looked past the sign, to the land... It was like a parade ground. Everything was trampled to sand and dirt, with small bits of grass here and there. This close to the gate, there were no clear roads to take.

But there were signs on poles indicating routes.

Isoko looked at a pole down the way that read Route NW-11, saying, "That's the one, right?"

"Yup!" Mark said, as he started walking that way. Isoko walked with him, and Mark said, "So I didn't expect to be asked to heal out here, but I guess you did. I completely forgot that breastplate'd healers were basically advertising that they were healers."

Isoko smiled a little, looking away before she turned back, saying, "It was nice to heal people. Nicer than I thought it would be, actually."

Mark grinned. "It was, wasn't it!"

Isoko said, "I need to practice more because that took a lot out of me, but..." Her voice trailed off as she looked northward.

People were coming into Memphi, carrying loot in bags on their backs, with blood and viscera on their clothes and smiles on their faces. The sky was gold and the road ahead was mostly dirt and green. Night was a few hours away, but Isoko and Mark could make it all the way to Wolf Bayou by tonight if they wanted to make it; if they ran. Both of them were fine with camping out in the wilds, though, and both of them were looking forward to doing just that. Unless they were harried by monsters, then they had plans to carve out some place for themselves and rest when it got too dark.

But tonight was supposed to be a good night to be in the wilds! Lots of moonlight.

The clouds were a bit thick overhead, though. Maybe they'd clear away?

Most people coming out of the wilds were coming down Route NW-1 and NW-12. They were done with their week in the woods, or their few days, or however long they had been out there. It was easy to see the relief on a lot of the faces of the people, as they looked up past the tree line to see the wall of Memphi looming above the greenery.

Isoko had a grip on the handle of her wooden sword, smiling as she said, "I'm finally out in the wilds, like a real hunter. A real ryoshi. I'm so fucking excited, Mark!" She said to Mark, "You need a breastplate, though, because I'm not healing every single case that comes our way."

Mark grinned. "No way to grow stronger if you don't do the work."

"Ha ha," Isoko sarcastically said, then she said— She paused. She went, "Oh."

"... What?"

"I, uh, just realized—" Isoko ordered her thoughts, then kept walking. "Okay. So. I was told that *under the Chosen System*, and as long as I'm presenting like a healer, which means the breastplate, that I need to heal anyone who comes to me with obvious problems, as long as other duties are not more pressing. Technically, we're on a mission and there's a healer station just beyond the gate back there, so none of those people actually needed my help. But I was told that I needed to heal people if they came to me like that, and I'm glad to do it, and that I should expect requests like that all the time, as long as I'm wearing the breastplate.

“However.

“*You* are not in the Chosen System, so... I think they should have paid you or... something. You’re a private healer. Not a paladin who has accepted the capabilities *and* the duties to heal others.”

Mark went, “Oh.” And then he waved a hand, saying, “I’m not accepting money for healing people, but... Do you want more of my help to fulfill your own duties?”

Isoko thought for a second, then said, “Some would be good, I think. The throughput on that regenerator case was a *problem*. How did you do it so easily? Was it just a matter of knowing the right way to hit the problem, or... or what did you do back there?”

Mark said, “He was a regenerator, which is something I didn’t really know existed, so his biggest issue was a throughput problem, as you identified. To solve that you had his astral body that was supporting his regeneration, which needed to be supported, which is what I did with a Union of Blood for resilience/weakness, to make his astral body stronger—”

“Yes. Did that,” Isoko said, nodding.

“—But he probably has some sort of nutritional needs, as well. So while I did a resilience/weakness Union of Blood, I also did a sustenance/deprivation Union of Breath, and that made the whole thing a lot smoother.”

Isoko had a dawning expression of ‘duh’ on her face, as she said, “Ahhh, fuck. I should have— I wasn’t doing the sustenance thing at all.”

“You didn’t get much time at Healer Club, right?”

“A few days is all. All of the lessons are online, but actual experience is missing. I don’t have Union of Life, either, but you didn’t use that one?”

“I did; just a flash for purity/impurity in order to clean him up.”

“Have you ever tried purity/impurity against a monster? Designating them as completely impure?”

Mark paused, not sure how to tackle this issue, directly. “I did, just a bit, but I also don’t want to purposefully use purity/impurity to kill things. I used to clean up the worm mess, mainly, and allow the body to attack the worms directly.

“I have an idea of what purity/impurity means and I want to focus on that meaning instead of ruining the meaning by designating certain living things as impure.

“My mother... Mom had a cleansing magic that she gained from a year in arcanaeum. I’m not sure how Union purity/impurity works, exactly, but I think it works along the same lines, and Mom ended up with some odd sideways-magics when she worked her cleansing. I used to think that moths had gotten into all of my clothes when I was younger, but nope! It was Mom, accidentally cleansing holes into my clothes because she pushed too deep with the magic... Or something. I wanted to ask her about what her specific issues were, but I never got the chance.

“I have talked to Lola about this very same issue, though, and she has said that purposefully staying away from living things as a purity/impurity target is a good limit to that magic.”

Isoko said, “... Huh. That’s probably a good lesson, yeah.”

Mark smiled a little. “Yeah.”

Isoko asked, “So do you really want to spend the night in the wilds? Or are we running?”

They were maybe a half a kilometer from the gate. The other roads had peeled off left and right, while up ahead were signs designating this dirt path as Route NW-11, and with a list of mile/kilometer markers indicating distances to other roads and paths. They wanted to get off of this road about 100 miles north of Memphi...

Mark paused at the final signs before the parade grounds turned into roads leading into the wilds.

The one for Route NW-12 had a small sign underneath it that read 'Wolf Bayou and assorted Exile Settlements'.

... Shit. Were they on the wrong road? Were the directions Mark had picked up wrong?

Isoko noticed the sign, too.

"Why do we want to take Route NW-11?" Mark asked.

Isoko hummed.

Mark pulled out his phone and Quark flickered silver on the screen, as Mark asked, "How do you get to Wolf Bayou from here?"

Quark spoke in a plain male voice, "The road to Wolf Bayou does not exist, but most people headed out of Northwest Rivergate would take Route NW-12 up to mile marker 90 and then cut off north into the wilds. Then you walk another 17 miles before you reach Wolf Bayou, which is rather visible in the dark and in the daytime. Wolf Bayou often clears a road between NW-12 and itself, and there is a big tower in the woods at that location, indicating the turn off."

Isoko turned right.

Mark quietly thanked Quark and put the phone back into his backpack as he followed Isoko, toward NW-12 instead of NW-11.

Soon, they passed under the first trees of the route—

A vector appeared directly above Isoko and a slime dropped directly onto Isoko's head, but she turned full platinum and she ripped the offensive thing off of her head.

Mark paused.

Isoko said, “So I guess that’s on me. They say not to walk under trees without looking up, but I did it anyway.”

Some guys walking nearby chuckled.

One of them called out, “You can be a part of our team! We’ll protect you from the slimes!”

Isoko smiled and said, “No thanks!”

Isoko was doing a purity/impurity on herself, but Mark flashed a Union of Brain, instantly evaporating the problem, making sure her backpack didn’t degrade. Isoko paused. “Ah. Thanks.”

“I didn’t see them either.”

“Not even with your vector sense?” Isoko said, as she swiped her wooden sword —which flashed platinum— through another drop slime that had been almost-invisibly clinging to the underside of a low branch. The slime splattered as she struck its semi-solid core, killing it. “I can’t get any sense of vectors yet, but I can tell *something* is there.”

“Ambush monsters,” Mark said, and then when that wasn’t enough for Isoko to understand, he said, “They’re not directed attacks. They’re attacks that are triggered by proximity.” Mark grabbed a big, fallen stick with some adamantium and then floated it forward, smacking trees in their path. Slimes just started dropping, and when they hit nothing, they crawled back over to the trees and climbed them again. They were slow about it, but they were there. “See?”

“Ahhh! So I don’t feel bad about not sensing them yet.”

Mark and Isoko walked alone along the dirt and sand road, under the bright blue sky.

They saw people far ahead of them, and also far behind, but mostly they were alone. Just them, and about five meters worth of space from the forest on both sides of the path.

They healed a few people, running fast toward Memphi, but mostly they walked forward, making decent-ish time.

There weren't many monsters, but then there was a surprise. An alligator appeared out of the right-side forest, growling and rumbling as it charged some guys who were walking south, and who were too close to the forest for comfort.

It attacked, rushing forward, jaws wide open and held sideways, like a clapping trap that would have swallowed a man whole. The men it targeted were prepared, though.

The first guy reacted fast enough. He took out a small handle-thing from his belt and swung it at the alligator like he was striking with an invisible sword. The alligator faltered in its charge, turning sleepy, and from a dark green color to something lighter, almost greyish. It splayed out on the ground and the invisible-sword guy jumped over the crashing body. The alligator landed at the feet of the other guy, who bunched his fists and started wailing on the alligator, punching through its skull and killing it fast enough.

Mark and Isoko watched for a moment as the brawny punched the gator to death. Soon the guy stood up from the dead monster, lined up his foot, and kicked the thing. The gator went flying into the woods. Trees broke as the almost-ton monster crashed into the greenery, sending sharp cracks into the air, both from the breaking body and from the breaking branches.

The brawny and the invis-sword guy walked on. They nodded to Mark and Isoko as they passed, and Mark and Isoko nodded back.

That had been exciting!

When they were far enough away from the pair of guys, Isoko quietly exclaimed out of the side of her mouth, "Oh my gods what do you think the invisible sword was? It had to be a tech weapon, right?"

"It was shiny, so maybe. Could have been an artifact, too. It didn't really put the monster to sleep, but it drained it of... of whatever. Vitality? Same sort of effect?" Mark glanced backward. The two guys were just walking along, talking about this or that. Punchy-guy was clearly a brawny, based on the punching, but the invisible sword guy was... unknown. He had on the same sorts of clothes as the other guy, but he

did have a few shiny baubles on his body here and there; his sword holster, and sword, his shoulder pads which were kinda dark silver, and his boots which were some sort of shimmery purple, or something. Mark faced forward, saying, "Tinkerer, maybe. Has on a bunch of small things that look incongruent."

Isoko faced forward, too, adding, "Magic Tinker. Maybe even a mage. That's a good combo for a 2 person team; one mage with a bunch of tricks and one brawny to beat the shit out of a downed monster."

"That's a good point about the duo... What do you think people are thinking about us?"

Isoko burst out laughing. This route didn't have many people on it, so there was no one to look their way; not right now, anyway. Isoko said, "We're just a poor little healer and her big brawny guardian, out for a stroll." She looked up at Mark. "A Poison Body Brawny, too. Very deadly."

Isoko had called out Mark's skill as Poison Body the first time they had met in the sparring arena, which had been offensive since no normal person would use such a deadly Talent in a friendly match. Mark had reacted with offense back then.

This time, Mark scoffed. "I am very deadly, thank you for noticing."

Isoko laughed and then started jogging.

Mark kept up until Isoko started barreling down the road, going faster than he could keep up, so Mark started cheating with his adamantium caltrops, flying alongside her, smiling a little.

Without missing a beat, Isoko said, "If you don't keep running and working out your real body, you're in for a terrible old age!"

Mark laughed and started running with his actual feet... Mostly. "I'm not going to waste away! I've been working out without using my powers just as much as I had before!" And he had Healthy Body, but he didn't comment on that.

Isoko smiled. She ran faster.

Mark kept up, but he had to 'cheat' more and more as Isoko really hit her stride.

The ground flickered platinum with every step under Isoko's boots, her skin a mirror finish, reflecting all the gold of the sky and the green and brown of the forest all around. Mark saw himself in the side of her grinning cheek, though it was more of a funhouse-mirror sort of sight than any real reflection.

She was having fun.

Mark was having a blast.

Not five miles from the city, when the road began to turn to little more than a grassy path in the wilds and Mark and Isoko had left other people behind, an alligator jumped out of the woods, all hissing and roaring, to ambush Mark. Isoko flashed platinum, rapidly angling away from the beast, while Mark reacted with a scalpel of adamantium, drawing the black weapon across the monster's neck. It was like sticking a sharp finger into particularly dense gelatin. The alligator died as Mark separated its head from its body, its roar of the hunt turning into a whimper of death. Mark used his other bits of adamantium to grab onto the monster and fully arrest its charge, and then he ripped the head off of the monster.

Blood pooled out of the severed stump.

The head tried to snap together in Mark's adamantine grip, but it failed to do more than injure itself further in its death bites.

"Holy shit," Isoko said, as she held her sword toward the ground, to the side. Then she put her sword away. "You killed that thing fast."

"I killed a few of them before when I was running to Memphi after getting summoned. Those ones buried themselves in the dirt of the riverbank, though, and acted like ambushers." Mark lined up his boot at the side of the body, to punt the monster into the woods like he had seen the other guy do... But the body was at least 2 meters long, with another 2 meters of thick tail, and Mark wasn't sure if he had enough strength to kick the thing. "I guess they're more active when they're not actively waiting for prey to fall into their mouths?"

Mark stared at the body, trying to decide if he wanted to break his foot trying to kick it into the woods, or not.

He tried to kick the monster into the woods.

It did not work. It was like kicking a pile of very heavy trash; the trash didn't move at all. Good news: he did not break his foot!

Isoko chuckled. "Let me try."

Mark backed up. "Go for it."

Isoko kicked and the alligator's body flopped half over before coming right back down. Isoko paused. And then Isoko tried again. She tried a few times, but the beast must have weighed at least 750 kilos. It was as big as a cow, after all.

"... Well shit," Isoko eventually said, stopping. "That other guy must have been a really fucking strong brawny."

Mark grabbed the monster with some wraps of adamantium and cut into it a bit, before he spread his adamantium out some more to give a better surface area connection. He strained, but not overmuch, as he stabilized himself with other spikes of adamantium in the ground. With an astral strain, Mark heaved the body into the woods.

The gator slapped against a tree and tumbled right back down, almost back onto the road.

Mark nudged it into the woods some, saying, "I'll let you get the next one."

Isoko chuckled, and then she looked at the sky. Night was maybe an hour away. "So we run until we feel like stopping? Maybe a few hours?"

"Sure. And then we can set up and sleep for a few hours. I'll watch over you, and you watch over me. Maybe around midnight?"

Isoko grinned. "Sounds like a plan."

They ran.

The number of people on the road was not much. That number rapidly decreased as Mark and Isoko ate up the kilometers, traveling down the gently-winding, grassy road. Most people on the road had already headed off into the woods to kill monsters, or they were a lot faster and further than Mark and Isoko. Or at least that's what Mark thought was happening.

Monster attacks on the road increased with the decrease in people. Mostly, they were unremarkable attacks, and Mark and Isoko simply killed the things and moved on. Rabbits turned to meat blenders and got blendered themselves. Snails shot bolts of fire and got stabbed for their attempted attack. Easy stuff.

Some incidents required thought, though.

Cat-like things jumped out of trees to sail their way with claws outstretched, ready to grab, back legs ready to rend. They were shaped more like frogs than cats, with slick skin and no fur at all, but they were cat-types since the *main* threat was lurking in the trees, ready to pounce. Isoko drew her sword through the frog that attacked her, splitting it into half and stepping through the gore to kill the one crawling up from the grasses. Mark killed another two that tried to get him, drawing his adamantium blade through their forms, punching through skulls and bursting brains before he grabbed bones with his adamantium and tossed the frogs away. A few flicks of adamantium tossed the rest of the bodies into the woods...

And Mark heard growling and crunching on the bodies, as uncertain vectors aimed his way.

Mark had heard those crunches before, but not nearly this close. Something was in the woods.

Mark did not advance, and the crunching continued.

Isoko grabbed the slimy skin of her own assailants, wrapping platinum fingers around limbs, before she sent the bodies into the woods, directly at the sounds of crunching in the dark. Something roared with complaint, and then it went back to eating.

Isoko asked, “We killing whatever that is?”

Mark said, “It’s not hostile... It’s probably a scavenger monster. Scavengers are plentiful around hunter trails, aren’t they? I read something about that.”

“I read the same thing, but... they have a tendency to turn dependent and hungry for people eventually.” Isoko looked at Mark. “Which is why I think we should kill it.”

Mark hummed, and then he stepped into the woods—

Instantly, the crunching stopped. The unseen monster went completely silent as it vanished from all of Mark’s senses. Perhaps it didn’t actually go silent at all, since its vector was gone. Perhaps it blinked away?

Mark stopped. He stepped back out of the woods.

Isoko asked, “... It’s gone?”

“Feels like it.”

“Will we see it again, you think?”

“I have no idea.”

The sky was deep purple with the oncoming night. Fireflies danced in the air, like gentle yellow, white, and dimly blue glows. Monsters prowled in the dark, eating each other, procreating, and sometimes slipping through the Veil, coming through from Earth to Daihoon and rippling the foundation of reality in their passing. The air smelled of blood and forest.

Perhaps, if Mark had no ability to scout monsters at all, and if he was unfamiliar with these wilds, then he might have been scared. But he could see well enough in the dark, for the clouds were rather thin overhead, and he could Union-sense just fine. There were things out there, looking for easy meals. But they weren’t looking at Mark or Isoko with hunger.

Mark turned to Isoko. “Can you see enough? I think the clouds are getting thicker.”

Isoko grinned. “It’s not that dark.”

“Okay,” Isoko said, as they walked through the dark woods. “It’s really fucking dark now.”

Mark laughed, his voice echoing in the chittering, buzzing night—

And then some vector from the side, small and terribly hungry, slipped through the trees and aimed right at Mark. It was the size of a baseball and Mark could only react, putting his adamantium into the way of the whatever-it-was. The thing crashed into Mark’s blades, squeaked, and blood or something like it splattered on Mark’s face.

Mark slashed down at the thing, sending it to the ground, making sure to grab and kill every part of it. It crunched under Mark’s black metal, like... like an exoskeleton, maybe?

“What the fuck was that?” Isoko asked.

“I think it’s a bug,” Mark said, poking at the thing with his adamantium, feeling it in the dark. “Yeah. That’s a bug. A smaller version of the one that tried to take your ten minutes ago, I think.” Mark flicked the monster into the woods, sending it deep into the shrubbery. It landed somewhere out of sight, which was not very far. “I can’t see shit.”

Something began lightly crunching on the bug’s body.

Mark and Isoko both said, “It’s back.”

“Yup,” Mark said, as Isoko went, “Oh yeah.”

Mark could barely see Isoko. The sky was black, the moon barely visible behind some deep clouds. Memphi was far to the south; far enough that the ambient glows were nearly gone. There was absolutely nothing out here. Not a damned thing.

Except for the monsters.

Isoko said, “So I *vastly* underestimated the number of monsters out in the wilds, and now we have head-charging bugs. Let’s stop?”

Mark agreed, and yet, there were a whole bunch of different ways to stop for the night.

Mark said, “I kinda want to go until we see other people and then hang out with some strangers out here, rather than us two alone in the woods together. I feel like any plan we make should go in that sort of direction.”

“We could build a fire and camp out right here? Get some people coming to our ‘tent?’” Isoko added, “*If* that’s how this works.”

Mark said, “I’ve read a bunch of different ways. We’re in a known clearance territory, so if we build a defended fire then we should attract anyone out there in the woods, but even us talking like this probably has a few people out there with long range senses feeling us out, checking to see if we’re monsters. Now if we were in an actual *exploration* zone, then we’d never go out in the woods like this; we’d have a full team and we would have stopped for the night about an hour ago. But we’re *here*, where it’s safe enough to just... build a fire and watch people show up. *Or*, we can go until we see other people around fires.”

Silence.

... Except for all the bugs chirping, the birds making noise, and the monsters in the woods making weirder noises here and there, in the distance.

“We’re still on the main road?” Isoko shuffled around a little. “Right?”

“I could take out the GPS and check?”

“Nope! Let’s just start a fire and see what happens.” Isoko walked over to the woods, to the side of the path. Deadfall crushed under her feet as she sliced her sword through some undergrowth. “Here’s good, yeah?”

Mark began clearing the woods with Isoko, blades flying through young trees, as he said, “Seems good to me. You want to start the fire, or do you want me?”

“I would actually like some proper light sooner, rather than later, so can you do it?”

“Absolutely!” Mark felt around for a big enough tree—

Something tried to attack him, aiming at him with a desire to ‘KILL KILL!’, hissing loudly, fangs snapping in the dark. Mark slapped it aside and then tore it apart, whatever it was. He tossed it into the woods and went right back to chopping a tree into pieces. Soon, he drilled his metal into a long bit of wood and then spun it fast, twisting the metal as he turned the inside of the trunk to wood pulp. It was a wet tree, but with enough heat anything could burn. The tree trunk, all meter-long of it, simply took some extra time to get flames roaring out of holes Mark had drilled inside.

Soon, light returned in flickers and glows, and Isoko’s skin reflected it like a mirror. She was shivering a little in the dark, but she calmed when the light came back.

“I’ll drive some spikes into the ground to use as a backing,” Isoko said, “If you can carve them into shape for me?”

“Sure thing.

Soon, the two of them were sitting on a big log that Mark had carved out of a tree, a fire glowing in front of them, tree branches, like spikes, driven into the ground behind them by a good 4 meters. The short wall of tree spikes was just so that they could have a kinda-wall in one direction. It was a pretty decent campground, made all the more presentable by Mark shaving down shrubbery and trees and piling all of it into a pile, into a bonfire.

The bonfire soon roared into the night sky. It was smokey and hot, and Mark luxuriated in the warmth of it all while he purified the smoke from reaching him. Isoko did, too, her entire body still fully platinum, her heart beating with resilience and weakness, just like Mark's. Isoko's face relaxed, but her Power did not.

By the time they had gotten to that point with the fire, Mark had killed four beasts, two of them wolf-types, and the other two cat-types that had tried to pounce down from the trees. Isoko had killed ten, eagerly flashing her temporarily-platinum wooden sword through various monstrous bodies. They had kicked those bodies into the deep darkness far away from the fire, and though the monster out there had vanished a few times, it had come back a few more times.

Bones crunched in the black of deep night, the monster unwilling to allow itself to be seen—

Suddenly, the crunching stopped.

“It stopped again,” Isosko said, as she looked around. She frowned. “I don't sense any monsters yet... Not at all, actually. I thought I got the last ones... Mmm.”

Mark was already Unionsensing whatever was out there and he got three impressions of vectors pointed at the fire, and then off to the side, to Mark and Isoko. Something was watching them from the dark, making decisions. They had been walking this way for a minute, according to what Mark had been seeing out there, but a lot of things were circling the camp right now.

Isoko had asked Mark not to point them out until they became a problem; she wanted to test herself, as well.

But these three were a problem... maybe.

Mark said, “I think these ones are people.”

The three vectors were coming from the south, from Memphi's direction, and they were now fully focused on Mark, as he named them as much as he could.

Mark asked Isoko, "Can you tell where they are?"

Isoko shook her head. She stood up, though, and called out, "Hello, to the hunters! Come share the fire, if you wish!"

Some unknown woman's voice called out from the *north*, though she was at the *south*, "You two are barely 25 miles from the city and you're stopping for the night?"

Isoko paused. She glanced northward, looked confused, but decided to speak toward the north anyway, saying, "It's a lot darker out here than we thought! I expected moonlight; not endless cloud cover."

Isoko was looking north, but the vector of her attention was focused south, east, and west; every direction that wasn't north.

Some male voice from the south called out, "What's a fucking *healer* doing out here with just one guy? Are you two fucking idiots, or something?"

"Maybe it's a lover's outing," said another woman's voice, at the south, as she stepped into the light, smiling. She was mousy, wearing all-black maybe-leather armor, her helmet in her hands. "Hi there! I'm Sherry, and it's a really dark night. We got stopped from going further, too." She hooked her helmet to her belt and she pulled around her backpack, saying, "I got hotdogs to grill on sticks if you want some!"

Another woman, taller and darker and in similarly black gear as Sherry, stepped out of the dark, beside a man who could have passed as a brother for either woman.

Isoko said, "I'm Isoko, a Paladin of Freyala, so there's no need to break into your food rations if you don't want to. We've got sustenance going. Mark over here is doing the bulk of that, if you want to partake."

Mark smiled as he stood up. "You guys hungry?"

The guy was frowning as he took off his helmet, saying, "You two have some sort of fucking deathwish or some shit? Being out here with a major fire?" He thumbed at himself. "Jed. Brawny. Hitter."

The taller woman hooked her helmet to her belt as she said, "Cindy. Air Shaper. Scout."

Mark wasn't quite familiar with those methods of identifying oneself, so he played along as best as he could, saying, "Mark. Metalshaper and Union. Scout and hitter."

Isoko said, "Isoko. Brawny hitter and Union."

Sherry happily put away her hot dogs, smiling as she said, "And I'm Sherry! Drainer; versatile hitter. And we would gladly take you up on your offers of sustenance."

Her smile did not reach her eyes; she was still wary.

Mark connected the three of them to the world, breathing in sustenance and deprivation as he hit them with a braindance of purity/impurity to clean them of whatever they might have going on, and then he began beating in time to their hearts a dance of resilience and weakness. He turned off the Union of Brain and watched as the three new people each jolted a little, probably feeling comfortable, as he offered, "Want me to carve you up some stools to sit on? Isoko is providing clarity of thought so the body doesn't really need to sleep."

Sherry relaxed, her smile turning genuine as she happily said, "Well aren't you just some nice people! It's so nice to meet nice people. I will happily take a stool. Thank you so much!"

Mark smiled a little as he carved a tree into makeshift stools. He cut off branches and canopy and threw those pieces into the fire, sending up a fountain of sparks into the air and blossoming heat into the night. It felt good. And then Mark got carving onto the trunk. Rapidly, Mark ended up with a few 2-foot long sections. He took each section, which was about a foot wide, and carved the bottoms so they had three prongs, so it sat level wherever it got placed, and then he leveled the top, turning them into somewhat-comfortable seats.

All of that took less than five minutes.

The team of three watched the whole time.

Mark sat the new seats about four meters away from Mark and Isoko's own bench seating—

Sherry asked, "Are you two looking for a team? Because we're headed north and then west, aiming at a 250 mile trip. We do one round trip a month. A week in the woods nets us each 1,200 goldleaf a piece! We could hit up big targets with you two on our side, though, and go after a 2.5k goal every month. Easy money~"

"Thank you, but no thank you," Isoko said, "We're here to pursue some bandits who might have just been some opportunistic thieves. We're headed up to Wolf Bayou for the investigation."

Sherry, Jed, and Cindy, got a concerned look to them—

Sherry recovered fastest, smiling wide and sitting down on one of the stools, saying, "Well that's a plum shame, but good luck on your own hunt. I ain't never heard of bandits around here, but I have heard of a lot of desperate exiled folks."

Jed grumbled, "There were bandits a few years ago. I heard the city watch drove them all away." He took a seat, frowning at Mark and Isoko. "You two are taking a lot of risks. You two actually Inquisitors?"

Isoko said, "They want Mark to be one of those, but I'm not headed in that direction."

Sherry, Jed, and Cindy all focused on Mark.

Mark grinned a little. "Not an Inquisitor yet... It still freaks me out that people would hurt other people. I don't want anything to do with any of that."

"And that's a good thing!" Sherry said, smiling. It looked like a real smile this time, too. "Are you two really not interested in a teamup?"

"No thank you," Isoko said.

"No thanks," Mark said.

Sherry nodded. “I had to ask again. So! That’s enough questions for me. From the looks of things, you two are completely new around here, aren’t you? But you have no fear of the dark, which means you’re strong, and with a goal like hunting opportunistic killers, then I’d certainly believe that. Me and my sister and brother have been around this place a long time. This is year 11 we’ve been doing this. So how can *we* help *you* do what you need to do around here?”

Mark felt at ease.

Isoko probably felt the same way, for a tension in her shoulders vanished, and her vector calmed down.

Mark said, “I’d love to know what you three know about Wolf Bayou. I heard it’s a fucked up place, with the leader being some sort of Daihoonian Queen? A contemporary of the God of War and Murder, Drakarok, when he was still just a guy?” Mark saw Jed roll his eyes some, while Cindy relaxed on to her chair and Sherry looked like she was waiting for a moment to speak. Mark would have said more, but there was a new problem. Mark added, “Just one second, though. There’s— That. Yes. You see it. I got frontal attack.”

Eyes glowed in the woods to the side, small and vibrant yellow, belonging to a good four wolves that were prowling in the dark, circling the fire, aiming for the humans by the fire.

Mark hopped through the air, directly at the problem, traversing 10 meters of distance in a single second. Two wolves went directly for him, maws open all across their bodies, eyes glowing all down their backs. Malformations; not exactly ‘wolves’. The other two malformation wolves circled to the side, going after Isoko. Mark killed his two enemies and Isoko killed a third, while Sherry turned the fourth into a husk of dried skin and bone. Soon enough, Jed tossed the dried malformation into the fire where it caught flame instantly and burned, while Mark flicked the other three bodies into the dark woods. Cindy enveloped the fire in wind, keeping the smoke away from them as they all sat back down.

Sherry began, “So that’s some impressive metalwork.”

“Thank you,” Mark said. “Where was I— Oh yeah. Wolf Bayou. What’s it li—”

Something started crunching on the dead malformations in the dark.

The three guests looked at the dark. They didn't seem too nervous, but they were cautious.

Mark looked at the dark, too.

Isoko said, "We have no idea what sort of monster is making that noise in the dark. We went after it a few times, but it goes away when we get close."

Mark had been about to say something along those lines. Isoko had gotten there first, so Mark asked, "What is it? Do you know?"

The three guests seemed to relax a little as Isoko spoke, and Mark asked his question.

"I'm pretty sure I know what it is," Sherry said, as she glanced to Cindy. Cindy nodded. Sherry said to Mark and Isoko, "It's a dark eater. They do exactly what that thing is doing; eating in the dark. The people who have seen one say that they look like snails with the shell, but it's more like a tentacle beast that has a shell, and the shell is some sort of 'invisible dark'. That's what the mages I've met tell me about them. If you can capture one then they sell for a lot of money, but you need special Talents to do that. They're not harmless at all. They will eat you if you present as a target, but as long as you're not already dead, then you're not a target."

Mark asked, "So we don't need to worry about them?"

"Usually not, but I wouldn't get comfortable," Sherry said.

"It's fucking unnerving," Jed said, "I hate the fucking things."

Sherry cheerfully said, "They follow people and eat the corpses they leave behind. You don't see much of them beyond the rivers and other bodies of water because they're aquatic things most of the time. They're really quite harmless as far as monsters go."

Isoko asked, "What kind of monsters around here are the dangerous ones?"

Sherry smiled brightly, illuminated by the equally bright fire, as she began, “We’ve been at this for 11 years, as I said, and in that time we’ve seen some really nasty ones. Why this one time when we were up around Walnut Ridge— Oh! That’s an old settlement that still has some trade every now and then, directly northwest of Memphi at about 40 miles away from the Northwest Rivergate, down Route NW-4. Anyway. At Walnut Ridge they were having this *burrower* problem..”

Mark and Isoko listened to stories about monster hunts for a few hours, and it was wonderful. Sherry was nice to listen to, and soon the other two, Cindy and Jed, opened up about their own experiences hunting. The three of them were siblings that had been hunting together for the last 11 years, with Sherry as the oldest and Jed as the youngest, and all of them around 30 now.

All the while, other people came out from the dark to share in the light, and Mark and Isoko spread the healing and sustenance around. Soon, they had 12 people in that clearing in the woods, and Mark found the whole experience wonderful.

Eventually, though, the sky cleared, clouds moving on, and the moon came out, bathing the world in silver and just a little bit of gold from all those cracks in the lunar surface. Mark and Isoko decided to move on with their trips, and that started the breakup of the camp. They were all just waiting out the clouds, anyway.

Cindy killed the bonfire with a twist of air, ripping the firelight from the gathering and allowing the moon to shine like it should have been shining.

Mark watched as Isoko watched Cindy wield the wind to crush the flames into embers. Isoko was clearly feeling some kinda way at that moment, but it wasn’t Mark’s business to intrude on that. But he did lean in to her and whisper, “Want me to hold up a log for you to sit on and we can metalshape-fly down the path for a few dozen miles?”

“Yes,” Isoko said, without reservation.

Mark grinned at that.

Soon, Mark said goodbye to his new acquaintances as he held Isoko up on a log, with two ends of the log wrapped in thin bands of black metal. It was a rather secure seating.

And then Mark raced down the path, under the moonlight, Isoko glittering platinum as she floated beside him, smiling wide, luxuriating in the feeling of 'flight'.

The monsters didn't attack much when the moon was out and the prey was chugging along at 35 miles per hour, which was really nice.

Mark made great time and Isoko seemed to love 'flying'.

But the joy ride had to end eventually. Something big jumped out of the woods. It was the size of a van, and Mark sent Isoko up into the air as Mark backed away, drawing the monster's attention. Mark had meant to throw Isoko *clear* of the monster, but Isoko came down right on *top* of it, her sword flashing platinum as she drove it into the head of the big monster. Mark ended up standing back, supporting her with Union, as Isoko carved a monstrous boar asunder. She held onto thick fur with platinum hands on as the monster bucked and kicked and tried to gore her with its tusks.

Mark focused his Union fully on durability, making sure Isoko could tank the monster's attacks just fine, and Isoko probably did the same, considering how the tusks of the boar skidded off of her, sparking in the night. The boar didn't get many chances to hurt her, though.

Isoko rapidly made quick work of the monster.

Stab! Stab! Stab! Into the head and out the eye.

The monster squealed and roared and crashed into a few trees, and it even blinked in and out of existence a few times, reappearing full body-lengths away from where it had originally been. It was a blinking boar.

But Isoko held on, even as the monster moved around wildly, and she kept stabbing.

Mark was pretty sure he heard Isoko roaring right back at the beast.

Soon, the boar fell over, its dark body covered in a dark slick, moonlight shining overhead as Isoko stood triumphant over its severed head. She was covered in a dark slick herself, but that blood flaked away, and soon she was just standing, platinum in the moonlight, grinning.

Triumphant.

Isoko happily said, "I'll run now, but thanks for the lift, Mark."

Mark winced. "Sorry. I meant to throw you *clear* of the monster. Not... on to the monster."

"Oh! I, uh, I aimed at it. I thought you meant to do that?"

Mark paused. "... You can aim when you're thrown?"

"Well no. But I can certainly twist some and aim. And I think the boar wanted me to fall on top of it. It tried to gore me! Did you see that?"

"I did see that! I'm glad it worked out, too."

Isoko chuckled.

She started running.

Mark kept up.

The morning dawned and wildlife died to Mark and Isoko's weapons.

Mark and Isoko met people who wanted them to join them, but when Mark or Isoko spoke of their goals the people rapidly turned around, or they excused themselves, or they found some reason not to be involved. Mark did not blame them, but it was kinda funny.

They killed monsters, talking strategy the whole morning, dissecting what some flying frogs had going on with them, or why there were flying fish hanging out in the woods around a few different red-leaved trees. They killed some big black bears with a bunch of black bumps on them. Those black bumps burst whenever they were bludgeoned, and healed the bears whenever they got covered in their own fluids, which was quite weird. But deep enough cuts carved them up well enough, and soon they had carved the carved into bits and dispersed the remains into purity/impurity, killing them for good.

“Have you tried making, like, lines of adamantium?” Isoko asked, as they strolled northward, waiting for the next attack. “Eliot says that monowire is illegal in all known citystates, but you using monowire yourself has to be a good thing, yeah? Or is that too fine of a structure? Will you lose control of the wire like you would a needle?”

Mark said, “... I don't know. Let's find out.”

Mark took some adamantium and stretched it into a long line, about a hair's thickness— The line split and turned into a bunch of tiny dots of adamantium, like water turning spherical in a zero-g environment. With some direction, Mark put the dots back into a solid line of adamantium, and then he made it thinner. He focused, keeping it thin, but the lines felt... unstable.

Mark floated the lines in front of him, saying, “It feels like holding onto a piece of cotton cand— Oh, yup. There. See that?” Mark had applied the barest bit more strength to the line, to hold it more secure, and it had flexed into droplets. “I held it too hard and it split.”

Isoko looked at the drops. “Can't you hold two ends of a line, like a garrote, and leave the center unheld and super thin? Adamantium is usually used as tiny lines of the stuff, welded to the edge of a blade, anyway.”

Mark tried that, but... “No. I don't have the center line of adamantium under my direct control. I feel like I'm going to lose it. I don't like that feeling at all.”

“Ahhh... Yeah. Expensive shit!”

“Just a little bit!” Mark said, as he transformed the adamantium into blades again. “Two 4-inch scalpels is about as thin and small as I want to make it, but this much is more than enough.”

Isoko smirked. “It’s not the size of the blade, it’s how you use it.”

“Right! And it helps that I have two of them. That does more than enough... Why are you laughing? ... And you’re laughing more? — OHHH... it’s a sex thing, yes. Okay.”

Isoko howled with laughter.

Mark rolled his eyes.

They killed more monsters as they walked Route NW-12 toward Wolf Bayou.

By noon later, they hadn’t crossed much actual distance, but holy heck had they done some cleanup.

The monsters seemed to be running for them, like no one had cleared this part of the woods in years, or something. It was starting to get crazy.

Mark tossed a monster body into the woods as he eyed the other monsters running down the road at them. Looked like a pack of boars, each the size of a small car. He asked Isoko, “You feeling good, right?”

“I am feeling *fantastic!*” Isoko said, her skin practically a mirror in platinum. She caught Mark looking so she did a pose, or something, tossing her palms up as she brought her arms in, smiling as she framed her face, saying, “How do I look?”

Mark laughed. “What is with that pose?!”

Isoko scoffed. “It’s a perfectly normal pose for the cameras! ... It’s probably more Kpop than Jpop, though. I’m not sure if I want to be an idol... But platinum princesses should be idols, right?”

“Have no idea what any of that means.”

Isoko laughed— She stopped laughing as she looked ahead. “Looks like we got more monsters to serve up.”

The boars were not there anymore.

A school of flying fish was darting through the woods. Were they coming this way? Mark wasn't sure. They danced in the half-light of the woods, like glinting silver dinner plates that flashed and flickered, little red glows on their fins and eyes almost looking like neon lights. And then they went dark. Non-visible, but not invisible.

Their vectors still pointed right at Isoko and Mark; they were hungry.

Isoko had seen them before Mark, but Mark was the first to know that they were headed their way. Before Isoko could ask about them vanishing from sight—

Mark said, "They're headed this way, straight on. They're just not visible from the front— Not much, anyway. 10 meters—" The school of fish split up, heading in multiple directions, floating on the air and each other— No. Not the air. They weren't air fish, they were *lightfish*. They were lightkinetics, Mark was sure. "Light kinetics! Lightfish! They're circling."

The fish circled, briefly appearing here and there in the light. Mark saw red fangs between flashes of silver flank, and that was all he saw. He easily sensed them, though.

Isoko's eyes darted left and right, tracking what she could track.

Mark steadied himself, saying, "I kinda miss fighting with a spear, but I really like fighting with my 'claws'."

Isoko readied her wooden-yet-platinum sword, holding it close to her face, ready to slash at whatever came for her most 'vulnerable' parts. With a casual tone, she said, "It's so freaking weird how you can feel through your adamantium. Grandma says she can feel through the entire sky on some days."

Mark scoffed. "The entire sky! How big is your grandmother's astral body? Or is it just diffuse?"

Isoko stepped to the left, avoiding the snapping jaws of a flying fish as she almost-casually cleaved through the flank of the thing. The fish went down and the entire school attacked.

Mark and Isoko were sashimi chefs for a little while, though he was sure that they'd be fired if they were preparing real fish for dinner.

Soon, they had destroyed most of the school of flying fish. The remainder scattered before they were turned into meat.

Toward the end of the fight, as they were fleeing, Mark took extra care to grab and carve up one particularly nice-looking fat fish, as he also started preparing a fire to the side.

Isoko smiled at his preparation, asking, "Wow you must be hungry!"

"It's *lightfish*, Isoko!"

"I mean, well... Yeah. But is it safe to eat?"

"Oh yeah," Mark happily said, as he opened up the fish and found deep pink flesh. "Oh my gods, look at that flesh. That's perfect. Wow. It's practically glowing, too... Er. Dammit."

The pink flesh glowed, which was fine, but the white spaces between the muscles and inside the striations of the muscles were already wiggling. Which was bad. Fish flesh should not wiggle.

Mark just about cursed.

Isoko looked at the fish and winced. "Bad luck."

White worms wiggled everywhere inside the fish's flesh. The worms even glowed, just like the flesh, and now that the fish was dying and flesh started to lose its pink illumination, the white worms stood out even more. The entire thing was absolutely infested with parasites.

Infested!

Mark hatefully tossed the fish into the woods and chopped up his attempt to start a fire.

“FUCK YOU fucking lightfish! Full of fucking parasites,” Mark said, as they walked on, leaving the carnage behind. “That looked like a tuna variant, too!”

“It really did,” Isoko said, agreeing.

“I bet it would have been delicious.”

“Absolutely, yes. One of those fish, uninfected, probably would have fetched, like... 500 goldleaf apiece? I’m not sure.”

Mark had a moment. “500? Really? That much? The going rate for good flying fish back home was only 50. Mom and Dad would have had a private feast on a fish like that if they ever caught one, but you couldn’t sell them without a license so we never tried catching any.”

“50 has to be the wholesaler’s cost, right? Or maybe Orange City was less expensive?”

“Tokyo does a lot of fish too, I thought?”

“Oh sure. The Japanese nations are all about fish. But we’ve also got 250 million people to feed, so the cheap stuff is cheap, but the expensive stuff gets really fuckin’ high.”

“Ahhhh... yeah. I can see that.” Mark thought for a second about where their conversation had been before the fish, and then he asked, “So is your grandmother’s astral body really damned huge, or something?”

“Diffuse. Grandma *usually* can’t feel through the sky. She has to concentrate to feel things. You just naturally feel through your adamantium though, right? Is it because it’s dense?”

“Oh. Huh. Well that’s neat. And yeah; I think so?”

“What’s it feel like? To feel through the adamantium?”

As they walked Mark poked at a rock with his metal, trying to understand how he felt that rock, and then he touched his fingers to each other, gauging the difference. ‘Finger to finger’ didn’t feel like a correct analogy, so he touched an elbow, and that didn’t feel quite right either. But then he touched the inside of his wrist, and decided, “It feels like using the insides of my wrists to touch stuff.”

“... Huh.”

The afternoon rolled around.

Sometime around 2 PM, maybe 90 miles north of Memphis and 30 miles away from Wolf Bayou, or something like that. Mark and Isoko found themselves fighting in rhythm. She rushed forward, blocking monsters to attack her, carving through claws and faces, and Mark secured her physicality while he swiped at the monsters who tried to flank them, cutting off heads and severing limbs. It was a dance, and more dance partners showed up with every passing mile, the forest absolutely teeming with raging, gnawing, swallowing, venomous, leaping, clawing monsters.

They danced for half an hour, and the monsters never stopped coming.

It was exhilarating.

And the monsters kept coming.

Mark tossed bodies to the side as Isoko kept killing.

They breathed in sync with each other, and with the world.

And they sped up.

Mark wasn’t sure how it happened, or when it had started, but he had entered a flow, and Isoko was right there with him. The monsters did not stop coming. They only got denser. Mark and Isoko practically ran down Route NW-12 toward Wolf Bayou, and the monsters ran right at them, toward their deaths. The beasts roared and charged and they ignored each other as Isoko carved limb from limb and Mark killed with just as much precision.

This dance was not just them and the monsters.

They were dancing with the world, drawing in monsters and somehow avoiding all the people around them—

... Where were all the other people?

That thought is what threw Mark out of the flow. The flow faltered. Mark kept killing, but now he wondered where the people were. Had they seen anyone for the last hour? The last two hours? How long had they been killing an endless flow of monsters?

Was Mark the one driving people away with Union? Gently guiding them to get gone, and for all the monsters to come their way? Or was there someone out there directing the fight, sending monsters at them?

Mark was about to say something—

Isoko spoke first, carving through a wolf-like monster and stepping into the path of some wolf-shaped malformation, saying, “Is this a damned monster wave?!”

The monster she was about to kill juke'd to the left and Isoko missed her chance to kill it with one easy stroke, so Mark killed it for her, slipping his scalpel through its neck, dropping it to the ground; dying but not dead. Isoko's words took a moment to register, but then they registered, and holy fuck.

“I think we *are* in a monster wave, holy shit?” Mark said— “Oh fuck.”

There, in the distance, to the north, what Mark had assumed was a cloud was not a cloud at all. It was a fucking dust storm, low and rumbling. A monster stampede.

Fuck.

This was a monster wave.

Mark called out, “Quark! Can you hear me? Volume max! Is this a monster wave?!”

Isoko had killed two more wolves by the time Mark had asked that question to his AI, and now she killed some bat-like things that swooped at her.

But in the darkness of the forest, beyond the path, two more wolves simply ran past them.

Mark hadn’t noticed all the monsters running to the sides, avoiding Mark and Isoko, until that moment.

Mark stretched his Unionsense as wide as he could, pulling his adamantium inward to get the range in his Union that he had been missing. As he fended off a pair of giant rats, killing one and injuring the other, he felt a flow to the world that he hadn’t noticed here, in his and Isoko’s private battle with whatever came their way.

The forest was alive with vectors, like a river, and most of them were headed south. They were avoiding Mark and Isoko.

Quark still hadn’t answered.

Mark rapidly pulled Quark out of his bag to try and figure out what was happening—

The phone was dead, which should have been impossible, but maybe they had been hit by some sort of electrical attack earlier. Those flying eels, earlier? Any number of the hundreds of monsters they had killed might have fucked them up in ways they hadn’t even noticed. Mark shoved Quark back into the bag and told Isoko, “Hold on! I’m breaking the wave!”

Isoko backed up to Mark, standing behind him, guarding him with everything she had, fending off three rats—

Mark focused on a Union of Vein Decay, on the dance of electricity between himself and Isoko the world, and in the brains of every single monster rushing their way. Black veins shot out from him, stabbing into the hearts and brains of every living thing directly in his line of sight, instantly killing hundreds of enemies.

The stronger ones survived.

Most collapsed anyway; even the strong ones.

The stronger ones that collapsed got run over by the ones behind them that were too strong to be dropped by the 'simple' destruction of their veins. In the dark forests to the sides, monsters still ran on, untouched.

Mark could have struck deeply into the monster wave. He could have extended his black veins into the world outside of his sight, to strike at every living thing for a half a kilometer. But this was an active hunting zone, and he might hit a person. He wasn't about to accidentally kill someone. The only monsters that died were the ones that Mark saw, directly.

The monsters kept coming. Mark killed more and more, and they began to pile up.

The monsters began to ignore Mark and Isoko, the strong ones racing by, leaping around the thing in the middle of the path with all the black veins. The monsters' vectors even told Mark that he wasn't in any danger from them; they were just running.

The monsters were crazed.

Those that Mark killed piled up into a crashing mountain in front of Mark and Isoko. A hundred meters of bodies, piled into the path. Blood and roars filled the air. It was an apocalyptic sound. It was a horror of a situation. Mark almost wanted to run, too. Isoko's vector was going wild with worry. She wanted to run away from the north as well.

Isoko cried out, loud enough for Mark to hear over the roar, "We need to ru—"

A silence flattened the world. All sound evaporated.

And then something roared in the distance.

Something shook the entire world.

Sound returned all at once as the stampede turned completely frenzied.

Isoko calmly spoke, her voice cutting through everything, “There is a kaiju coming, Mark. Plans are forming to take care of it, but you must escape notice, for now. The pile of bodies is a big notice. The kaiju will want to eat it. Can you purify it away? I will help.”

Mark looked at Isoko and her eyes were glowing gold.

Freyala was here.

Mark flickered purity into the world, and Isoko was right there, hand to Mark’s shoulder, helping him. Black lightning shattered the highway full of dead monsters and some of the living ones, too.

“Very good,” Isoko said, smiling. And then the gold faded. Isoko blinked. She chuckled. “That’s a fucking rush. Okay. Uh. I think we need to move north as fast as possible. That’s the last impression I got.”

So maybe Freyala had been here more than just a little bit.

“North? *Into* the attack?”

“Yes,” Isoko said, very firmly.

“Well okay then!”

Mark understood *enough*.

He pulled his Union back, since most of the monsters were dead and all the rest were screaming in fear as they bulldozed through the forests to the sides. Mark spotted and grabbed a big hunk of wood, from some freshly-broken tree, grabbing it with bands of black metal and then securing it in the air beside Isoko—

Isoko wrapped herself around the tree, grabbing hold as she pointed to the north. “We have to meet up with someone! We’ll know who we’re meeting fast enough! 15 miles! Avoid everything! Go go go!”

Mark was already flying forward, racing into the stampede, avoiding the monsters by simply flying over almost all of them.

Slimes, wolves, glowing cats, cow-sized land octopuses, frogs, and low-flying monsters of all kinds from birds to big bugs, all flowed south.

Mark carried himself and Isoko north, into the dusty air—

Isoko pulsed, her heartbeat clearing the air of impurity. It was just a few meters around them, but Mark could see a lot better than he could before. It was more than enough to see what needed to be seen, because Unionsense told Mark what he needed to know, allowing him time to dodge incoming monsters in the dust long before he saw them.

Shapes loomed in the dust storm of the stampede, massive and crawling, smashing and crashing. Elephant-sized monsters that would not move unless they were moved in turn; Mark went around. Tall monsters, like massive spiders with legs that kept them up and away from the problems of the world below; Mark went under them. Shimmery things that were indistinct colors in the dust—

A school of monster fish flew into the bubble of clarity surrounding Mark and Isoko, slipping around them, vanishing back into the dust cloud. Some of the monster fish almost wanted to take bites out of Mark and Isoko, but then the whole school went on, and the almost-biters went with it.

Mark raced forward, unsure what he was aiming for—

Seemingly all at once, the sky cleared.

For miles in every direction, Mark saw the barren Earth and monsters, crazed and running away—

The kaiju.

It was a cloud, but not. It was a mountain, and not at all.

It was not there, and then it was there, its vector appearing out of nowhere.

The kaiju was the only thing that mattered at all. How had it gotten here so fast? Why hadn't Mark seen it before? All the monsters had been running away from it, and Mark had thought them running scared, from a kaiju, yes. But now they were truly running, freaking out. All the vectors of all the monsters all around were pointed in every direction. The monster wave had turned crazed, because it had not been a monster wave at all.

Mark had read about kaiju being born, spontaneously.

That's what had just happened, for sure.

Because the kaiju had *not* been there, it had *not* been a weight upon the world, but now...

All Mark could see, all he could think about, could feel at all, was the pull of the kaiju in the air.

Mark could only see parts of it at any one time, for if he looked at the left wing then he could not see the tip of the right wing. It was, predominantly, a bird. It was white and soft yellow, and at sunset it would have vanished, but it was 4 in the afternoon, the sky was blue, and the bird was as wide as the sky.

Eyes opened up alongside every frontal edge of its ten different wings. Its center mass was a collection of glowing spikes that trailed light from every tip, shredding the sky like prisms shredded lights into rainbows. The shredded sky worked differently from a normal sky. Rain, snow, winds, even flickers of night; all the variations of the sky appeared around the white, many-winged bird, in the prisms created by its central crystal spikes.

The kaiju sang.

The song undulated upon the world, echoing in and out like a soft refrain, a warble, and a lone violin note held way past its expiration date. It chilled. Snow fell across the land to the left of Mark and Isoko,

like icicle needles. A few icicles pierced a few different large rats, killing them, freezing their bodies and turning them to snow that fell to the ground and layered. Some monsters escaped. Most did not—

“Use me as a shield, Mark. Right fucking now.”

Mark was appalled, and because of that he hesitated.

The snow storm drifted their way. Mark was still running forward, but now he drifted right—

Isoko leapt off of her log and landed on Mark, covering his head, holding on to him, saying, “Run faster! We have to get up there and support them!”

Support who?

Oh wait.

Them.

There was a settlement sitting in the way of the kaiju, and Mark had not seen it because it had been so small, so distant. But snow spikes landed on the city and some sort of city shield flashed in response, lighting up that small, small part of the world.

Snow spikes struck Isoko, on Mark’s back, like hammers coming down on an anvil, each one sounding out hard and heavy. One of them struck Mark’s arm and scraped across his skin, down his bicep, drawing blood. His arm chilled, ice filling his veins, but Mark purged that infection with a bit of purity and impurity. It worked well.

Isoko said, “We’re good. We can survive the small stuff. We need to support Redwolf up there. We’ll see her. You’ll have to do most of the work. Priests are already up there, trying to support her, but the thing thing— Ugh!” Isoko winced, her head jerking to the side. Mark felt ice roll down his face. “I’m fine. Just a hit. Not a puncture. The cold can’t reach me.”

Mark was already running as fast as he could but he had no idea what he was running toward, except for the idea that he was running toward the Head Popper Queen of Wolf Bayou, in order to support her to pop the kaiju's head, or something like that.

Mark complained over the roar of the kaiju song, "But it doesn't even have a head! Can Redwolf actually do anything?!"

The kaiju was, like, 6 spikes of crystal, all laid against each other, like 6 ocean liners all bundled together, with countless mountain-sized feathered wings extending out from those crystals. Eyes opened everywhere.

It felt foolish to run toward the settlement up ahead, to run to Wolf Bayou, directly under the beast's leading crystals—

Another vector flickered active to the left.

Mark only noticed that vector because it was pointed right at Mark and Isoko, and when the vector noticed them, it became the thickest vector in the immediate area. Whoever it was was focusing on Mark with almost all of their being.

It was a woman with a red wolf half-mask sitting on top of her head. Her pale, girlish face showed below the mask. She had on a death metal band shirt and black jeans, and she floated on top of a slick silver platform with a half-moon handlebar sticking up in front, her hands gripped on the handlebars.

Redwolf.

A man with a black wolf half-mask and wearing dark armor stood on the ground next to her platform, holding onto the platform, floating in a gloom that was only around him and the base of Redwolf's platform. The man was wreathed in shadow, and so was everywhere he touched.

Redwolf commanded Mark and Isoko, "Stop where you are and Union link with me and with Blackmask. We're moving into position and killing the kaiju. Further instructions to follow."

Mark was hesitant because he knew of Redwolf, but he also knew that she could kill kaiju, so she probably wanted to kill the kaiju, and Mark had to help her do that. So he stopped flying forward and linked with her and with the guy holding her platform, his heart beating with resilience and weakness—

The world flickered with shadow—

Mark was suddenly underneath the kaiju, looking up at the front edge of the beast, while he floated a meter off of a stone square in some sort of town. He pulled his adamantium inward. Isoko held on to his back, but she let go and fell to the ground. They were surrounded by people, all of them prepped for something. They were in Wolf Bayou, for sure, in the middle of an anti-kaiju squad.

Redwolf, and a whole lot of casters, or priests, or whatever. Paladins with breastplates, priests with robes and chainmail, and civilians, some in armor, some in clothes. All of them stood around the square, all of them stood at the ready, though all of them were scared. Some of the priests were focused on the walls of the city; they had to be Hearthswellians. Some of the paladins were focused on everyone else, the feeling of their astral bodies oh so familiar; Freyalans, for sure. Mark couldn't place the other people who belonged to the various gods of the pantheon, but he recognized them as clergy—

The kaiju overhead sang a song of vibrating ice and rain. The intangible magical roof of the city sparkled and cracked as ten-meter-long spears of ice crashed down from on high. The city shields held.

The Hearthswellian priests faltered.

Mark instantly got to supporting them, connecting to everyone that he could reach, vibrating with his own brain, blood, and breath, a dance of resilience and weakness. Power flooded through Mark, into the world, into the population of Wolf Bayou. He wasn't sure how far he had reached, and he didn't care who he reached so he reached everyone he could.

The effect was immediate.

It was like he had set off a bomb of shared power.

Everyone straightened up.

Redwolf giggled, chuckled, and then she roared with laughter. She called out, “That’s the *fucking* GOOD STUFF!” She roared at the monster overhead, “**FUCK YOU, KAIJU!**”

Mark felt, saw, and witnessed, in every way he could, something strange.

Redwolf’s existence flickered red, like an inward pulse; a drop of water landing on a multidimensional surface but in reverse. Mark heard something distant. He saw one of the inner ice spires that made up the center of the winged, spear-like, eye-covered kaiju, simply *break* in the middle.

A shockwave passed out, taking multiple seconds to reach Wolf Bayou. The shockwave reached the city, popping the bubble overhead, completely exposing them to the kaiju—

The world filled with a song of ice and rain and deadly night—

The Hearthswellian priests began to chant in another language and the bubble began to reform, slowly, like crawling light reaffirming itself over the tiny city far beyond the walls of Memphi—

The kaiju’s song turned muted, once again—

“Kid,” Redwolf said to Mark, suddenly there, floating beside him on her silver platform. “Focus. Keep doing what you’re doing, but more. That thing has 5 brains left. I need to pop 5 more brains up there. Focus on me. Give me everything you can. Right now.”

Mark set down onto the ground, sitting down, pulling his adamantium in all the way to rest against his skin. And then he flowed Union outward. Mark became one with the world, with the city of Wolf Bayou. It was not a large place. Maybe a few miles across. Mark managed to cover at least half of it. He touched the vectors of everyone present, gathering their hopes for life, their hate against the kaiju, bringing them together in a Union.

To unite them against the force in the sky.

To unite them under Redwolf.

He even brought the kaiju into its own destruction.

Mark had connected to a kaiju before, to Addavein. It was easy to connect to a kaiju, really.

Their physical bodies were way too distant to connect to at all. Multiple miles away. Ten or twenty, or however far away they were. This crystal-spike eye-wing kaiju was no different in that regard. It was high in that sky, for sure.

But its astral body was everywhere, like a suppressing, fearful *power*, driven into the land, into the hearts of everyone, everywhere.

Mark connected to that beast, too, and it didn't even notice Mark's touch.

It was like tapping into another world of power, there for the taking. An endless font of everything that Mark could ever need to make it kill itself. Mark gave that strength to Redwolf.

"There we go," whispered Redwolf, her astral body seeming to turn visible, red, in the air around her. She spoke, and her voice sounded in Mark's mind just as much as in his ears, "That's even better than before." She asked, "You canceled the fear effect?"

Mark couldn't speak right now, but Redwolf understood what she needed to understand. Mark wanted to nod.

He was absolutely sure that many other people in the square nodded instead.

All of the people in the square were focused on Redwolf, on supporting her in some way, and Mark was no different right now. Black veins extended out to everyone within the square, but mostly toward Redwolf.

Redwolf breathed strongly, and then she looked upward. She winced. "This is gonna fucking suck, I can already tell."

Like five ripples in the world, Redwolf became the epicenter for five separate inward splashes of red light.

Far, far overhead, the kaiju became the actual center of Redwolf's detonations.

The five remaining crystal spires that made up the bodies of the kaiju all cracked in half.

The thing died. The song ended. Just like that. Five bombs for five heads; set off and sending shockwaves across the world. The thing died instantly and Mark lost most of the Union he had been tapping into for power.

The world relaxed.

But now, the monster was falling to Earth.

Mark felt kinda floaty.

Redwolf started shouting orders and people started to fulfill them. She yelled about how it wasn't coming down on them, and that they were fine. Mark wanted to believe her, but that thing was too big, and—

Light bloomed in the sky; a thousand explosions, a thousand crashes and a thousand more ripping tears on the very fabric of reality itself. It was enough to nudge the kaiju's falling body backward, back north, toward open land.

Redwolf held her head, blood flowing from her nose as she roared into a tech-thing on her floating platform, "Brace for impact! Kaiju fall! Kaiju fall!"

It was a quake, a dust storm, and a hurricane, one right after the other. The wards over the city broke twice, but they came back online each time. Mark was there, just off center of it all, feeling out the city and holding the people together as best he could, everything focused on resilience and weakness, but it was a lot harder to do without the countersink of the kaiju itself.

Somehow, minutes passed in raging sound and falling stone, and Mark lay on the ground, staring into the dusty sky. He wasn't sure how he ended up on the ground, but here he was, on the ground. Was it over? It was over, right?

Mark gradually pulled his power back, turning off his Union of Brain first, and then pulling back his Union of Blood—

“Keep it going, please,” Redwolf said.

She was sitting on the ground next to Mark.

Mark was not sure how that had happened.

Redwolf said, “I'm gonna have a headache for a full day without some more healing. Is that the best healing you can do?”

Mark switched to ‘good’ and ‘bad’, instead of the half-and-half protection/healing that was his resilience/weakness blend.

Redwolf frowned a little. “What's that?”

Mark said, “That's good/bad. The other one was resilience/weakness.”

Redwolf closed her eyes, and then she winced. “I think I liked the other one better. Go back— Yeeeahhh. That's it. Fuck. You really are a True Union kid, aren't you.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

Redwolf nodded. “Just... just keep doing that for a while. Reach whoever you can. I'm sure practically everyone in the city under 20 Body is seriously injured, and that's 50% of the people here.” She looked up at some guy in a white mask, saying, “How is it looking?”

Whitemask said, “80% structural damage. Buildings holding due to wards. Few building falls that we’re working on clearing now. 3 deaths, 540 injured. Estimated time to repair to full is one week. Basic functions will be back in four hours. Shorter if Mister Careed keeps up his Union centering.”

Mark kept up his ‘union centering’, as Whitemask called it.

“Fuck,” Redwolf said, “... Could have been a lot worse.”

Whitemask bowed and stepped away.

While they had spoken, Mark had extended his range and yeah, he felt injured vectors, denoted by their focus on themselves and their pain, turn softer, turn outward. Mark’s own healing was helping to organize all the other Freyalan healers out there, like a server coming online in a grouping of individual computers, or however Eliot had explained it that one time on the chat boards.

Looking around himself, Mark saw that he was was in some sort of central square of Wolf Bayou. Probably *the* Central Square; Mark recognized it by the fountain over there and by the videos he had already seen on the place.

Redwolf was talking softly to a few different people, organizing whatever was happening out there from right where she sat, next to Mark. Isoko stood to the side, a few steps away, focused on breathing and her heartbeat.

Redwolf eventually finished with initial talks with her people and she just sat there, relaxing in the sun, though Mark could tell she was in pain, her vector pointed inward just as much as it was pointed outward, at all the people in the square and at whoever she talked to. She looked focused on herself right now, but she was still the queen of her community. She was worried about everyone else around her.

She didn’t seem like such a big time killer of Drakarok in that moment.

Eventually, the litany of people bringing concerns to Redwolf tapered off.

Mark spoke up, “So, uh, hello, ma’am, uh, Redwolf.”

Redwolf paused, and then she started laughing— she winced and held her head. “Let’s not talk for about an hour.” She sighed. “That fucking *hurt*. Six damned brains! All the size of a manor.”

Mark’s idea of ‘Daihoonian Queens’ probably needed an update.

And then Redwolf took off her red wolf half-mask and Looked at Mark with serious, bright red eyes. Those were not colors you’d find on a human from Earth, at all. Her eyes were brightest red, and they practically *burned*. “We’re gonna talk later about your interactions with Addavein and everything else, but not right now. You understand?”

That sounded more like a ‘queen’ to Mark.

Mark said to her, “Sure.”

Oh.

That was not deferential enough, was it.

Redwolf relaxed anyway. She nodded, and then she pulled her mask completely over her head and laid down on the ground. She mumbled, “Fucking headaches.” She spoke a bit louder, “What’s your favorite food, Mark? We’ll get it made.”

Mark had no trouble saying, “Really good tuna. Blackened steaks.”

Redwolf angled up her mask to look at him. She smirked. “Good choice.” She put her mask back down. “We’ll have a good party tonight. Do you want someone to escort you around town while you’re here?”

“... Uh.” Mark decided to just get on with his main reason for coming here. “I’m looking for four people that tried to murder me and steal from me. It was an ambush on the road and I escaped. I want to find them and ask them why, and then offer them some tokens of clemency from Memphi if they want that. I’m starting to think they were just blinded by greed and not actually bandits.”

Redwolf frowned a little as she lay there. “You think they’re here?”

“I fully expect to never see them again and to need to put that attempted murder behind me.”

Redwolf nodded a little. “There’s a lot of shit you have to let slide as a True Power, Mark, otherwise you’ll drive yourself crazy. Attempted murder is not one of the things you should ever let slide, because if they attempted to murder you, then they would certainly murder others.” She spoke up, “Greenwolf! Where are— Ah. There you are. Help Mark find the people who tried to murder him. He doesn’t want to kill them right away. Clemency from Memphi and whatnot.”

A man in a green wolf mask appeared from the light as though summoned, but Mark had watched the light peel away from him. Mark had already noticed him as a vector in the air, but a lot was happening right now, so he hadn’t thought much of it, not until the guy was suddenly visible.

Mark noticed other invisible people in the area, now that he was truly looking.

And now that he was looking, he also watched as the black veins in the air around him were bent toward the invisible people, as he noticed them. They noticed him noticing them. Mark wasn’t sure how he felt about suddenly realizing that his veins pointed toward people he was noticing, and how he presented to the world. Seemed like a tell, like he was exposing himself somehow.

Mark would work on that tell later.

Greenwolf bowed, saying, “On it, ma’am.” Greenwolf turned to Mark. “I will take your statement now, if it pleases you, Blackvein.”

Mark had a moment of surreality, and then he began, “One of them was—” He paused, and then he opened up his backpack, grabbing for Quark on his dead phone, saying, “I have all of it here, but I think Quark got zapped by some electricity monster when we were out there. Maybe if I can get it running I can give you the current investigation... Hmm.” Lights blinked on and silver light appeared, briefly. And then the phone died again. “... Ah. Never mind about that, then.” He looked up at Greenwolf and began, “It was four of them. An older woman Mind Controller, maybe around 50-ish...”

Redwolf lifted her mask when Mark mentioned ‘Mind Controller’ and then she took off her mask and frowned when Mark spoke of a possible Mesmer. She said nothing, though, and Mark continued to beat

black veins into the air, healing and supporting all of his fellow Union-users all around as they healed others in turn, as Mark talked of his run-in with some opportunistic killers.

Greenwolf asked clarifying questions about powers seen and words spoken. Talking to him felt like talking to Layfair or Willow, or to any of the other investigators that Mark had spoken with ever since he came out of Tutorial and ended up at Citadel Freyala. Isoko stood to the side, not doing much; just watching. Mark eventually finished.

Greenwolf said, "I will seek you out later, Mister Careed." He bowed, and then vanished from sight.

Mark kinda wondered what was going to happen next, since a bunch of stuff seemed to be happening a lot faster than Mark could think—

Redwolf said, "The people you speak of don't ring any alarms, but if they're here or if they passed through, then Greenwolf will know of them." She sat up and then stood up, asking, "You want to take part in the kaiju cleanup? You'd be one of the centerpieces in the cleaning; 10,000 goldleaf for the job at that role, like industry standard."

Mark stood up. He found himself about a foot taller than Redwolf. It felt like the world was coming at him fast, and he was barely keeping up. So he bought himself time, saying, "I need to know what that sort of job looks like, and why you're offering... or asking?"

Or telling.

Mark knew, in the back of his mind, that the kaiju needed to be erased from existence as fast as possible, but his mind was a bit frazzled right now. Why was Redwolf talking to *him* like this?

Redwolf looked at Mark for a moment. She hummed. "This would be your first kaiju kill, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am. It's getting easier, but the normal amount of kaiju a person encounters in their lifetime is between 0 and 1, and I've had at least 4 or 5 right now, right up in my face. I think it's going to be a lot more, though, and..." Mark's heart was steady. He looked at Redwolf. "And I'm ready for it."

Or at least he was getting there.

Redwolf grinned. She started walking down a road, saying, “With me, please.”

Mark walked with her, and Isoko walked silently behind a few steps. Mark glanced back to Isoko, to gauge her mental state, and she shook her head a little and simply walked in stride. A man in a purple wolf mask stepped to Isoko’s side and spoke quietly to her—

“It’s never easy to face a kaiju,” Redwolf said, drawing Mark’s attention back to her.

They were walking down a wide street, paved with stones and with stone buildings to the side. It was a nice street, but there was battle damage from the kaiju fall. Mark was pretty sure he heard in the far distance, to the north, a gradual rumble, like the body was settling, or something. He for sure heard stones falling here and there in the city—

Something wooden snapped to the left, instantly drawing Mark’s attention.

Someone cried in pain to the right, and that drew Mark’s attention, more. He focused his Union healing in that direction, toward the person in pain, to some inwardly-pointing vector and the four vectors surrounding that vector, trying to help that downed vector. They were all people, of course, but four half-walls separated themselves from Mark so he couldn’t tell who they were, or what they were doing. The walls didn’t matter for Union, though.

As Mark healed that downed person, their vector gradually pointed back outward, relief flooding their body. Mark had no idea how he had helped them, but he had.

Redwolf continued, “And this kaiju was worse than most. We almost all died today, Mark. That kaiju should not have been there.”

Mark’s blood ran cold. “... Okay?”

“I’m sure you noticed the monster wave; you were in the thick of it. It was a rather spontaneous wave, too. That’s not too strange. The land here is incredibly rich, so spontaneous waves happen sometimes

because there aren't enough hunters killing enough monsters. But then the kaiju appeared. That particular beast was a creature of ice and sky, and having a sky-based kaiju is always a terrible thing, because yes, they can appear just like *that*." Redwolf said, "But I can kill kaiju rather easily, just by myself. That one should *not* have been a problem, but it had 6 brains. So, it was a problem. Thankfully, some helpful Freyalan priests knew you were in the area, so I went and picked you up and you were solid enough to do what needed to be done. Freyala is good like that; connecting people in their moments of need.

"And then the whole battle went down without a major problem.

"It should still have never have happened like that. Spontaneous kaiju births are always *worrying*."

Mark went, "... Okay?"

He wasn't sure what Redwolf was getting at, but it made him uncomfortable in some unknowable kind of way, like he was in deep waters and sharks were circling, or something like that.

Redwolf seemed to watch Mark from behind her mask. And then she grinned, and said, "The world is dangerous. Don't be surprised if some other bandits come after you for your adamantium, or your life. If you let the next batch live, you should extract their reasons for attacking you and be content with whatever they tell you.

"But anyway. About the kaiju cleanup.

"I'll put up the all-call request in a few hours. I'm imagining paying for 10 centerpieces, of which I assume you'll be one of them, and then 1,500 sidepieces, each of which will get 150 goldleaf to help clean up, as long as they can actually clean up well. My own men will be going in to extract whatever goods we can extract out of the big thing before all of that. Everyone in the city at the time of the kaiju kill will get a fraction of the sales of those goods, which is also industry standard.

"That whole body has to be gone by 48 hours, or else we'll end up with a bunch of B and A rank monsters after they eat the feast of meat out there. Maybe even a few S's if we let the poison pot stew for too long. I don't need to tell you how dangerous a high speedster rabbit is; you probably killed a bunch of the normal little flesh monsters out in the wilds to get here."

They had arrived at a big thoroughfare. To the north was a coliseum; the centerpiece of Wolf Bayou, where they held all the blood sports. To the south was Wolf Palace, which looked like a castle. A nice castle, all white stone but with differently-colored roofs here and there, from red to green to purple and all the colors of the rainbow and more besides. But it was still just a castle.

There was an open gate leading to the castle, and Redwolf stepped to the middle of the gate. She turned and said to Mark, “Do you want to stay in the castle? Or do you want to find lodging in the Grand Hotel?”

“Ah...” Mark looked back toward Isoko.

Isoko was deferential, but her vector was pointed *away* from the palace.

Mark told Redwolf, “Hotel. Thank you.”

“Of course. Set it up for them, Purplewolf,” Redwolf said, to the guy standing next to Isoko. And then Redwolf told Mark, “It was wonderful to meet you. I need to sleep for several hours. See you tonight for the party. I am usually of the night guard, so don’t expect much official to happen during the daylight hours.”

And then she turned and walked toward her palace.

Mark said, “Nice to meet you, too!”

Redwolf waved behind her without looking.

The gates closed, and Mark found himself talking to Purplewolf and Isoko about accommodations.

Mark lay on a bed in a team suite, at the top of the Grand Hotel, on the fifth floor. There was a crack in the white marble wall, but as Mark lay there watching the wall, he sensed a vector in the wall, crawling in the crack. The wall began to seal, to heal. It was fucking weird, but also really, really neat. And now

that Mark had a moment to himself—even with Isoko laying on her own bed over there—he sensed a bunch of different vectors crawling through the wires and the walls and the floor and ceiling. Something was repairing the entire city in one slow swoop. Probably the Hearthswellian paladins and priests—

“So!” Isoko said, laying on her bed.

Mark said, “So that happened.”

“Yup.”

Mark asked, “That’s what Freyala guided you to, right?”

“I had no idea what was going to happen, Mark, only that we were needed up ahead. I thought we were going to need to fight through a bunch more monsters, or something. Not... Not get picked up by Redwolf and her teleporter... Blackwolf, I assume, based on the mask.”

Mark nodded. “She called him that; yeah. Her teleporter.”

“The colored masks makes remembering names convenient, at least,” Isoko said. “But they do the same thing with some hero teams out there. You know the Color Rangers aren’t actually the same Rangers as they used to be, yeah?”

Mark chuckled. “The Color Rangers? I never watched that one, but I heard about it.”

“What! Never?” Isoko laughed. “It’s like the most popular kids show of our generation!”

“More like the most popular kids show of our parents’ generation.”

“Ehhh!” Isoko asked, “Have you studied the powers in the area? The names of the heroes we’re going to be working with? Is Redwolf actually one of those heroes, or is she... is she something else, I guess?”

Mark paused, and then he began, “My uncles talked a little bit about the heroes of Memphi. There’s, uh... Titanfist, that’s a big one— Oh! Kraigen Steele. He’s the leader of Memphi’s hero’s association. He uses his normal name for all of that. We talked a bit about who actually comes out and kills all the kaiju all the time, and they said some guy named Frozenfire and some supervillain named Credenza does most of that work, most of the time. And also Blackthorn, the local archmage.”

Isoko said, “I don’t know any of those guys— No wait... I might have heard of Credenza before. I think she’s a support hero? Luck-based. Doesn’t so anything herself, but she does fuck up an entire battlefield all on her own.”

Mark nodded. “That’s what I heard, yeah. Frozenfire is a through-put kinda hero, with the Talent of Temperature Manipulation. He makes ice to make propelling fire and stuff like that, or something. I think he has a few different sidekicks to help litter the land with fire or ice, depending on what’s needed...” Mark sat up and looked over to the big screen on the wall, and at the keyboard sitting below the screen. “I bet we can look them up on the internet.”

Isoko said, “I’m ready for a break.” She got up and started tapping away at the keyboard, lighting up the screen. A loading symbol prominently appeared in the middle of the screen, along with a message at the bottom. ‘Technical Difficulties – No Internet Connection’. Isoko tsk’d. “That’s about to be expected after a kaiju attack. I’m surprised that Wolf Bayou is this advanced, anyway. They have to be supported by Memphi, don’t they?”

“I’m getting that impression, yeah. Like. It’s an exile city, but not really...” Mark lay back on his bed, saying, “I’m still supporting people anyway. I’m going to close my eyes for a minute.”

Isoko said, “Let me help.” She went back to her bed and set the keyboard on the nightstand between them as she lay down, too. Her heart beat with good and bad, and Mark connected back to her instinctively. She breathed in, and then out, asking, “So... uh. How do I help? I can’t actually target anyone without seeing them yet, or having line of sight.”

“You’re doing a lot already, just by being open. All I’m doing right now is functioning as a server in a computer system, or however Eliot explained it that one time. I’m helping all of the other Union users out there connect to each other, extending our range all across the city, and enmeshing our Power with the weave of the world.”

Mark could feel maybe the nearest 200 meters in every direction, the vectors of everyone and every living thing, all jumbled up and hurting, but mostly healed already. But beyond that he felt the other nodes of the Union network out there, like expansions to his own network. If every person out there was an invisible pull on the blanket that was reality, the other Union users were other blankets, other people that could feel the world like Mark... or something like that. They were all 'stitching their blankets' into one 'unified quilt'.

It was neat!

Mark said, "It's like Healer Club. If you have questions, ask, but I'm still figuring this out myself."

"I spent a few days in Healer Club, but not many. I haven't even gotten to really learning how to connect to a group on my own and I'm still learning how to speak while keeping Breath active."

Mark smiled as he lay there, eyes closed, saying, "To keep Breath active while in a Union, you gotta pull back harder before a punch, like when you know the punch isn't going to be good enough so you wind up more. That's how I figure it. Breathe deeper inward, and then punch harder outward."

Isoko hummed, then she breathed in deep and said, "Is this working? No. That's not working." A breath. More words, "How about now... Maybe this is working. La la la la la." Inhale. "La la la la... Ah, I think... Is that working. It is working. I feel Like I'm missing something. I'm not matching breath with you at all."

"Unions don't have to be in perfect sync to be a Union; they can be staggered."

"Logically, I understand that, *but...*"

They spoke for a while about Union work.

It was a nice cooldown from the day's action.

Holy shit, they had really been there for a kaiju birth, hadn't they. And they had helped to kill the beast!
Holy fuck that had been cool.

Mark smiled a little.