

Mark's mind wandered while he raced down the riverbank, flying on four 'feet' made of adamantium caltrops. Black veins beat from his astral body, filling the air, drifting into the weave of the world and drawing resilience from the surroundings, while giving weakness in turn. He ate up the miles and he gripped a man's silver sword in his hand.

He wasn't sure what he was doing with the sword, but he was holding onto it.

Ten miles away from that encounter, Mark raced across an innocuous-looking bit of sandy riverside and the land tried to snap shut on top of him, with fangs and whipping tendrils and an opening maw right underneath Mark's feet. He reacted before he realized he was in danger, leaping up, the fangs of the monster snapping shut beneath his legs.

Sudden rage came upon Mark, like the burning of a house.

Mark brutalized that monster, using his new silver sword and his scalpel of adamantium to rip it to shreds, right there on the shore of the Ohio River.

When he was done, when he was breathing hard after the killing, Mark recognized the appearance of the trap, and the monster. It was a frog-type, or maybe more crocodile-shape that had opened its maw a full 180 degrees and then it had buried itself in the grassy mud, waiting for something to fly into its mouth. It wasn't even aware it had attacked Mark before it had attacked him, and thus Union didn't warn him at all. The alligator-thing had activated on a trigger reflex, like a fly trap... or like an alligator. It was an automatic devour-reflex.

Now that Mark was aware of the monster, and he wasn't lost in his own world, he saw more open-maws waiting here and there on the banks of the river, in the sandy, muddy spots. Mark was more careful as he flew now, because these 'hidden' monsters were kinda everywhere. His thinking didn't go as deep as it had been going, before the trap. He was more present.

Mark killed a few more trap monsters before they had time to react to him, each of them 'waking up' with a snap of their jaws, even if Mark wasn't in the area of attack, even if he killed them from the side.

They were *remarkably* easy to kill from the outside, but tougher on the inside. Specialized ambushers? Yeah.

... And there were a lot of them. Very easy to see, too... Hmm.

Mark stopped killing them. They were probably a monster that Memphi would want to keep around, just to make it easier to control all the other randomness that came with unknown monsters. Trap monsters that were easy to see for humans might be remarkably hard for other monsters to see.

Mark flew on.

Maybe 15 miles from the encounter with the people who had tried to murder and rob him, Mark found a quiet spot, free of monsters, and he sat down and had a moment.

The sword was a good sword; plain, but very well made. It was a meter-long thing with a solid crossbar and a solid handle. The whole thing was one whole piece of metal, without any adornment or anything fancy at all. It was a working tool.

It might have even been mithril.

Mithril was PL 65, which was weaker than adamantium by a ‘considerable’ amount, while adamantium was PL 79. The sword just be a silvered sword, too, made with alchemical silver, which was something like PL 50. Different alchemies made different qualities of silvered swords.

Those people had probably stolen this sword from someone they killed.

Mark made an easy decision. He was going to tell the authorities and leave it in their hands. Probably give them the sword, too. It had to be someone’s family heirloom, or something like that—

“Oh shit. I cut off that guy’s sword arm.”

... He didn’t know how he felt about that.

Mark watched the river flow for a little while. It was a big, wide, and brown-blue stretch of water, filled with life, while the lands around Mark were filled with different sorts of life. There were monsters all around Mark, visible due to the strength of their vectors pointed this way and that in the world all around him, but none of them were pointed in his direction, so he was safe-ish. There were ambush predators that reacted without thinking, though. Mark had forgotten about that part of his Tutorial training.

Dealing with people who wanted to harm him had never been part of his Tutorial training.

Mark breathed in the good and breathed out the bad, and soon he felt less disturbed. He got back up on his caltrop 'feet' and kept going.

15 minutes of hard-flying later, and Mark wondered if he had missed the Mississippi River.

It was fine, though. The Ohio River and the Mississippi Rivers flowed together. He'd find Memphi soon enough—

There was a big tower on the horizon. It looked like a tree stump from this distance, but that was just to disguise it. Mark could tell it was a guard tower of Memphi, because they had spotted him. Their vectors pointed his way. They didn't feel murderous at all. They just felt present. Waiting. It was so much different from the monsters, and from the people back there. It was a breath of fresh air.

Mark felt buoyed as he rushed forward.

Soon, he breached some sort of unseen perimeter and the guards in the tower watched him *intently*. Their base really did look like a massive tree stump, but done in grey concrete and the size of a 10 story building. The top even had craggy 'broken wood' edges that hid people looking out at Mark, while the bottom had 'tangled roots' that 'hid' some doors. For 50 meters around the tower, the land was plain grass; a killing field.

Mark got to the edge of the killing field and shouted, "Hello! I need some help!"

He waited.

One of the roots opened up at the bottom of the tower and a man stood there, wearing webweave armor and plates on top of that armor. He had a black and yellow armband with an 'M' on the center. Mark almost freaked out, but he knew, rationally, that the armbands were just normal tools of identification for Memphi, or something. Mark might have seen some of them in the debris he cleaned out of the backpacks of the dead, but he couldn't recall that right now—

The man shouted back, "We don't talk to people here unless they have an emergency! Go to the city if you have a problem."

Mark wasn't sure where to begin, exactly.

He managed to organize a hierarchy of needs well enough, based upon what these people needed to know, and he said, "Some people tried to kill me up the river, about 15 miles, or something. I can describe them." He held up the sword. "One of them stabbed me with this, and I took the guy's arm for it. There was an older woman Mind Controller and a younger woman Ice Weaver, or something like that. I don't know, exactly. The other two might have just been brawnies, or maybe just Knacks— Ah! One of them was a Mass Illusionist, for sure. Both the brawny and the Illusionist were men, maybe 25 or 30-ish."

The people in the guardhouse, which Mark estimated to be 17 people, all rapidly got on high alert. There was no outward signal that they went on high alert, but Mark could tell from the weaving of vectors that there were 17 people in there, and over half of them pointed his way. After a moment, with one of the vectors inside wildly pointing in other directions —maybe giving orders?— most of the people in the tower started pointing in other directions, looking around the tower for the other threats... Hmm.

Did they think Mark was tricking them, or something?

Mark almost wanted to be mad about that. Why the fuck would a human try to trick another human in the wilds! But then he realized, again, what had been done to him. He was fucking furious, about so many things right now. His anger wasn't going away.

The guard standing by the opening of the tower glared at Mark, and then elsewhere, scanning the land. He turned back toward Mark. "You fought them off yourself?"

That was too much.

Mark spat, “YES I *fucking* fought them off myself! THE FUCK—” Mark took a breath. “... Sorry. I’ve never experienced that before. It was... not easy. I can heal myself, so...” Mark held up the sword with just a few fingers, letting it dangle in his grip; he did not hold it like a weapon at all, in order to look like less of a threat, which was crazy. Why would a human be a threat to another human! How funny! Mark chuckled. “They stabbed this into me! Almost got my heart... They might have gotten my heart, actually.” Mark felt cold. “Never thought... Humans would hurt other humans, you know?”

The guard regarded Mark, right alongside a bunch of people inside the tower.

The guard listened to something; he probably had an earpiece—

“We’re not handling that. Go to the city. It’s 10 miles down the river. Take you about 20 minutes at your rate of movement. We’ll have an Inquisitor meet you at the Eastnorth River Gate. Do you have a name? ID?” Without missing a moment, the guard added, “Don’t come closer. I don’t need to see the ID.”

Mark blinked, assessing if he really looked that dangerous or not...

Mark answered, “Mark Careed. Just registered as a Villain for the Hero/Villain Program. And a Slayer. So I have credentials.”

The guard relaxed a little. “A villain, huh? You certainly got the look. What the fuck are you doing out here, wearing booty shorts and a backpack— Eh! I don’t need to know. My boss is telling me to move you along; that we won’t deal with *whatever* this is. Thanks for the warnings. We’ve taken note of your complaint and descriptions of the people you claimed attacked you.”

Mark felt a little better, but at the words ‘you claimed attacked you’, he bristled again. He crushed that anger down, and said, “Then I’ll go to the city. Thanks! Just stay on this side of the river?”

“Correct!”

The guard waved Mark off, and then went back inside the roots of the guard tower.

Mark flew on, skirting the tower's kill zone area.

The people in the tower were a little more active after Mark appeared, but they didn't do anything for or against him. Even their various vectors were calming down, which was nice to see.

And an Inquisitor would meet Mark at the gate.

He felt better already.

Memphi was one of the largest cities in the world at 45-ish million people, located across a 1000-ish square miles, or something like that. Mark had looked up a lot about the city after talking with Uncle Alexandro and making 'plans' to eventually move here. They were rather nebulous plans, and they were going to change, but it was fine to be here right *now*? This was good?

Sure.

Memphi was a citystate in parts, mostly the East and Western parts, with Eastern Memphi being the much larger half. The Mississippi River carved a mile-wide shipping lane through the center of the territory of Memphi. That river was one of the most heavily guarded rivers in the world, because it went right through the city, and it connected Chicago with the Gulf of Mexico, and a bunch of other cities out there. They used that river for shipping, fishing, and the water needs of 45 million people.

The river here didn't have a solid metal wall made of cylinders, like the bay of Orange City, but it did have some sort of bubble-wall that rose on both the intake and exit of the city. It was something that they had purchased from the Aluatha Empire and which needed constant upkeep, but that river was the

lifeblood of the city, so they made it work. That bubble wall was pretty amazing to see in person, along with the more normal walls of the city.

Mark slowed his flight when he was a mile away from the city, to stare.

Memphi's walls rose on the horizon like a solid cliff face. The Mississippi River had a similar 'cliff face' to it, but that cliff face was made of white water; bubbles. Stone towers stood like big tree trunks here and there in the waters of the Mississippi. Mark couldn't tell a lot of what he was seeing, but he knew city defenses when he saw them. It was all so massive—

Mark spotted something that made him reevaluate his entire trip here.

A shipping-container ship pushed out of the bubble wall, like a child gathering bubbles in a bathtub. The ship, covered in bubbles, moved near the pillars in the water, dwarfing those pillars, still floating on bubbles, and then the ship vanished from sight, the bubbles turning translucent along with the ship.

And the ship floated northward, and pretty fast.

Mark watched the surface of the river ripple in the invisible ship's passage, and that was it.

Invisible ships! How many had Mark missed? A lot, probably. Maybe some of the attention-vectors on the river that had pinged his way had been people on ships, looking at him. Not everything out there had wanted to kill him, after all.

Mark moved closer to the city wall and soon he was walking among other people. All of them were in groups. Mark was the only one solo. He stood out quite a bit because of that... Probably. But he was also 'flying', which always garnered attention. Not many people could naturally fly.

Mark stopped flying and soon started walking, but people were still eyeing him. Soon enough, though, the people were more focused on their own patrols, or whatnot. Mark wasn't sure. They kept to their business, and Mark kept to his own business.

Mark came across a big sign posted right in the middle of a bunch of different dirt paths that led into the wilds. The sign was maybe 500 meters from what had to be the 'Eastnorth River Gate'.

Chief among the big sign area were a bunch of little signs, pointing down various roads leading away from this place. Those smaller signs had numbers to them. They were paths for patrols, obviously.

Then came the warnings and the kill advisories. A blanket warning was issued against getting near the river, as the river was highly dangerous and unpredictable. 'Only approved teams should attempt getting close to the river'.

Which was strange... But yeah. The river was dangerous. But it was also a good path to take! If you could take it.

A few other signs spoke of monsters that 'did not count for monster kills' because Memphi wanted them around. Those various desired-monsters were the alligator trappers on the river that Mark had encountered. Other such monsters were some sort of cat-type monster that was a collection of bright glowing worms that hung out in trees and were very visible, and which ate whatever attacked them but otherwise did nothing, and a dog-type monster that crapped out 'delicious smelling' slimes, that were actually incredibly toxic. The dog-type monster hunted everything else eating whatever died after it ate its crap. The dog-type monster was a hiding-type scavenger, too; you usually didn't see them and they didn't bother you unless you were paralyzed and almost dead.

A few different monsters were to be killed on sight, or reported. Hookmouth Bunnies were to be exterminated in sight. Any flying monsters were to be killed or reported ASAP, depending on personal ability.

Mark read it all and didn't absorb much of it, but it was still amazing to be out here and looking at everything like a real hero, able to *exist* out here in the wilds, and not straight-up die like any baseline would. Even brawnies couldn't come out here without other powers backing them up, or if they had a good Tactile Telekinesis. Mark had pulled back his caltrops and his black veins somewhat, and he was walking on his actual feet again, but he could deploy his Powers at a moment's notice. He was mostly safe out here, and that wasn't even mentioning his innate Power Level against pretty much everything; he could withstand mental monsters, pretty easily.

And that felt pretty awesome.

Some teams eyed Mark as he walked solo, but they mostly ignored him, now that he was this close to the city and not flying. All of them were talking about routes and distances to cover for the day and patrol arrangements, and all of them had black and yellow armbands on; they were busy.

The gate loomed ahead.

The gate to the city started off as a large staircase, a hundred meters wide and that much tall. The stairs were big, and meant to be fought on, if needed. The entrance looked kind of like a lava flow, seeing as it was so wide and so shallow of an incline.

Mark walked up the stairs, to where 6 different doors, each 10 meters wide and tall, stood proud. Only 2 of the 6 doors were open, and those two doors were heavily guarded. People were stationed on the wall, at turrets up above, and at guard stations by the two open doors. They had some big guns. The guards by the doors checked IDs and asked questions of people coming back into the city, which seemed to be most people. It was maybe 3 hours to sunset, so it made sense that most people were going into the city, but this was a good time for the night guard to get a move on, so people were still leaving, out into the wilds. They'd spend the night out there, too. Probably several nights.

Mark looked around for someone wearing the silver armor of an Inquisitor, or maybe white robes, but he saw no one. Maybe only Freyalan Inquisitors dressed that way? The guards here all wore black with yellow accents, with steel breastplates with an embossed 'M' on the front.

Mark got in line.

He was the least dressed person in line, which was pretty weird and uncomfortable, but it was what it was, and Mark's Union sense was telling him weird things about what people were feeling as they looked at him, but he ignored those senses. Some people were distinctly worried about him, but no one wanted to kill him.

A few people went from barely looking at Mark, to being suddenly *very* interested in him, but they refrained from acting on that interest. They had recognized him... maybe. Two of those people took out their phones after looking at him. Mark tried not to think about that too much.

The line went fast.

Mark looked into the open gateway, down a long, stone tunnel, where people walked inward and no one walked outward. This was the entrance; the other gate was the exit. Some guards told people to walk further away from others. A sign to the side told everyone there that they had to walk into the city with at least 4 meters between them and the next person.

It probably helped to keep out invisible monsters? Mark didn't know. Maybe they had scanners in the walls? They probably did.

Soon, Mark was at the front of the line, facing a guard who sat behind thick glass, with a computer screen in front of him. There was no slit in the glass to speak through, but the guy had heard all the teams in front of Mark just fine.

Mark opened his mouth—

“Unknown man from the woods,” said the guard taking names, in a not-interested sort of voice. “The City AI tagged you.” The guy gestured to the side, to the other closed doors to the city. “Stand to the side please. Over there. A man in black and yellow will be with you shortly.”

Mark nodded and stepped to the side, saying, “Thank you.”

Mark didn't have to wait long.

Soon, a hovercar appeared above the wall. It was an expensive-looking model, all solid white and sleek. It descended, past turrets and down the cliffside that was the wall, to land near the closed doors, only 30 meters away from Mark. The crowds watched as the doors to the hovercar opened and a pair of people stepped out.

Oh my gods. Uncle Alexandro.

Relief flooded Mark like a warm summer day, as Uncle Alexandro, Dad's brother, rushed out of the car, stopped suddenly, his eyes going wide as he looked at Mark, and then, with tears in his eyes, ran up to

Mark to grab him in a hug. Mark hugged his uncle and he was crying, too. Alexandro looked almost exactly like Dad. Same height, which was shorter than Mark now, same kinda face. Darker hair and a meaner sort of build, because he was healer who had to actually use his body to get around, and not a kinetic—

There were so many things to talk about, and Mark didn't even know where to begin.

But Mark managed to say, "Hey, Uncle."

Alexandro held him tighter and then he let him go and stepped back, tears in his eyes as he said, "Hey, Mark." He chuckled. He smiled. He shook Mark's shoulders, then let go, saying, "You got fucking BIG! We need to get you a shirt, though."

Mark felt all sorts of good as he chuckled, too. "I thought I would have been colder, but It's not been that bad—" Mark stopped suddenly. Mark turned a bit professional as he said, "A lot has happened." He looked past Alexandro, to the paladin standing behind him.

The paladin was a woman, tall and lithe, with a silver breastplate and chainmail over robes. Her outfit seemed like it was more for looks than for function. Now that Mark was looking, Alexandro seemed to be wearing similarly professional, really nice clothes, though he wasn't wearing a breastplate or anything like that; just a nice shirt, slacks, and a jacket.

Alexandro turned a bit professional, too. He wiped at his face as he sniffled and gestured to the woman, who stepped beside him. He said, "Mark Careed, my nephew, this is Inquisitor Willow Turner, my new bodyguard from the Collective."

Mark stood up straighter. "Oh! Hello!" Mark held out a hand. "I heard Uncle switched bodyguards, or something?"

Willow shook Mark's hand, smiling a little. "A pleasure to meet you, and yes, your uncle did switch his guardians on the List. I'm still adjusting, but I look forward to this posting." She let go. "I heard that you ran into some trouble getting here, and so I'm your initial contact for whatever happened. I'd like to hear the whole story, please, but not here. We can get in the car and go back."

Alexandro was a little mad for Mark as he asked Mark, “Did some people really try to *kill* you? That’s what the AI told Willow.”

Mark had a lot of questions, like why was Uncle even here right now, and if Willow was allowed to take testimony or was that a conflict of interest... There was a lot. But Mark just said, “It’s been a rough... 6 hours? I’m not sure. Addavein summoned me and then I was supposed to— I’ll tell the story in the car.”

There were a lot of people out here, and Mark’s Union sense was telling him that they were all looking his way, a lot.

Willow had been about to interrupt, but then she just smiled gently, and did a little bow. Alexandro had something of a similar reaction, but he smiled a lot wider.

Alexandro grabbed Mark in another hug, and Mark hugged him back, and soon they were walking to the car.

It was a nice car, and soon the car lifted off, straight upward, Mark’s Union sense twinging on absolutely everyone within sight. Some people were anxious. Some were curious. Some were jealous. There were other emotions in there that Mark could probably suss out if he wanted to, but he did not want to sense those emotions at all. None of them were ‘kill kill kill’, so Mark safely discarded them.

Alexandro was full of love, and Willow was full of worry, and that was enough to know.

Seated in a nice, plush seat, Mark asked the first question, “You both look like you came from someplace expensive— And holy shit! You’re a *True Healer*, Uncle Alexandro! Why the heck are you 44 if you can de-age people?!”

Alexandro chuckled, and then he laughed. “We see each other for the first time in years, and *that’s* the first question you ask?”

“It’s a decent question!”

“What’s wrong with being 40-ish! People respect you at this age.”

Willow accelerated the car into the sky and they crested the wall of Memphi, all 250 meters of it, and suddenly Mark saw the metropolis that was home to 45 million people.

Memphi was a *major* city. Tier 4! Orange City was only tier 2. Those extra two tiers really showed, in the skyscrapers and raised trams and hovercar traffic everywhere. Green fields stretched in the distance, and smaller cities were out there, among the green hills and across from the wide, wide Mississippi River.

Mark stared. It was all so much.

“There’s a lot to see out there, Mark.” There was hope in Alexandro’s voice. “If you want to stay. If you want to move here, permanently.”

Mark easily, happily, said, “I want to move here eventually, yeah. I don’t think I can go back to Orange City.”

Alexandro looked relieved. He grinned. He asked, “But?”

“But I need to go back to Daihoon. I was going to do an expedition there, and... There’s a lot to talk about.” Mark looked at Willow, and asked, “*Can* I tell you about the people who tried to kill me? Or is that a conflict of interests?”

“Though the actions of the humans are a concern, it is a lesser concern to the movements of Addavein, and that is where I would like to start.” Willow said, adding, “This is being recorded by the Memphi City AI, for corroboration with COFR, just so you know.”

Alexandro said, “Wait wait! Here.” He opened up the back seat of the car and took out an extra shirt. And then he looked at Mark, and he paused. “This is not going to fit you. Uh.” He went back into the back seat and grabbed a blanket. “Here you go.”

Mark smiled as he wrapped the blanket around himself. “Thanks. I... uh... I ran into monsters and their prey and I salvaged clothes from dead people. The meeting with Addavein was kinda—” They both looked at him with worried expressions. Mark rapidly added, “I cleaned the clothes!”

Alexandro blinked. And then he strongly said, “That’s *not* what I was worried about, Mark. I’m worried *about you*. And if you’re *okay*.” He turned to Willow and said, “We can hold off on the interview for now.”

“No no no. Let’s do this,” Mark said, as he held the blanket around him. “I’ve done fast interrogations before. This is fine. And yes, Addavein is a worldwide concern.”

Alexandro was *concerned*. He said nothing.

Willow waited.

And Mark began, “At something like noon, on Worldly Road, in Citadel Freyala, in France, I signed up for the Slayers, first, and then for the Villain role in the Hero/Villain Program. Somehow Addavein caught wind of the villain-thing not 5 minutes after I left the Crystal Tower building. So there I was, on Worldly Road, and I got a call from a restricted number...”

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“I’m concerned, Gabriel,” Alexandro said, “That kid has been through a lot, and I have no idea how to help him, or even if I *should*.”

Alexandro was a True Healer, and one of the best. His Power was literally Age Manipulation, which put him right up there with the Biomorphers and even the few truly powerful Bio Manipulators that worked at Crystal Tower itself, making sure the big heroes survived everything that the world threw at them,

and they also did cosmetic work to make the heroes truly beautiful for the cameras. Alexandro's niche was more for making old people young again.

Even if he didn't have the full suite of moral dilemmas that the better True Healers had, his power had still affected his entire life in deep ways that he could only ever come to terms with.

Who to heal? Who to let die?

Every healing took 20 minutes of concentration. Based on the pure needs of the job, of which Alexandro was only shouldering a small fraction, he could still run himself ragged with 24-hour work days and *never* run out of work. So long ago, he had hardened his heart, for his own sanity. He had Gabriel, which made him laugh and feel loved, and he had a life outside of work, and he worked for 8 hours a day, 5 days a week, and that was enough.

Mark had no idea what Alexandro's actual job or life was like until today. Until Curtain Protocol came down. Until after Markus and Donna had been murdered by a Falling archmage.

Alexandro had seen his fair share of terrible stories due to work, but this past year, it felt like all the bad stories were striking home.

It had been a lot.

And now Mark was in one of the guest rooms of the estate, and the shower had been running for about an hour now. He was still alive, according to Gabriel. He was just... sitting in the shower.

He was in pain, and Alexandro could not help him more than he was already planning to help.

Alexandro didn't blame Mark for crashing so hard, or even for sitting in the shower for an hour. When Alexandro had gotten the news of Addashield striking that hidden bunker with Markus and Donna... Alexandro had been an absolute wreck for a month. He was still a wreck! He had always imagined that he would have forever with his brother, and his brother's wife.

It still pissed Alexandro off all these years later that Dad had never taken advantage of his offer to heal him...

Shit.

Alexandro hadn't thought about Dad in a long time. He was still holding on to that anger, wasn't he. He was never going to get over that. Shit.

Alexandro sat at the kitchen bar, drinking one of Gabriel's mojito's, as Gabriel made dinner in the kitchen. Alexandro finished off the mojito and the sparkling mint flavor tasted fantastic. It was a good distraction.

Gabriel flipped a chicken breast on the grill, as he said, "I could do a real reading on him, but I can already tell you that he needs rest. Direction. Time to heal." Gabriel pointed at him with the spatula. "Like you."

Alexandro frowned...

And then he sighed, and said, "We lied to him about so much, Gabriel. His parents made the decision to raise him as a Curtain Protocol fundamentalist, which was... what it was. Shit. I'm still mad about that, too. Shit, Gabriel!" And then Alexandro gestured at the house, saying, "Mark thought we lived in that little cottage we bought to use specifically for his visits! Sussed that out real fucking fast once he saw this grandeur. I think that hurt him, too."

The cottage that Alexandro and Gabriel had pretended to live in for the family visits was just a guest house on the property. That place was a 1 story, 4 room house, which was currently empty. It was a nice enough house, and it had served well to keep Mark unaware of the nature of 'What Uncle Alexandro did for a living', and what a True Healer actually was. It always seemed like Too Much of a lie to do that, but Curtain Protocol had a bunch of protocols, and hiding money that was gained from Power usage was one of those protocols.

This house, the real house, was a black, white, and marble edifice to strength, and Alexandro absolutely loved his real house. Three stories tall, set on 15 acres, this house had guards on the property and a great big pool out back and huge entertaining areas. This was a house that Alexandro and Gabriel would

never grow old in, because when the two of them started hitting 50, then Alexandro would take them back to their 30s. Maybe 35; they hadn't made that decision yet. They hadn't really talked about that decision in years, either.

... Should Alexandro bring up that conversation again?

Shit.

There was another spike of worry—

And then there was *yet another* spike of worry. Alexandro was rich as fuck. Mark had grown up poor as shit, because Markus and Donna wanted him to know the value of money, and Curtain Protocol. Alexandro had written off his inheritance from Dad when Dad died, even though Markus and Donna had wanted him to take his split of the fish tank profits, and they wanted to pay him off for his share of the house. But Alexandro had told them 'Absolutely not! I'm rich. Take the property as your own'. It was one of the ways in which Alexandro could support Mark without really supporting him.

Alexandro had bought Mark a few expensive items over the years, too. Like his phones and computers, but he had bought them through Markus and Donna... Which was another 'lie' that they had told his nephew. Alexandro was pretty sure Mark knew about that lie, so it wasn't one he needed to really address.

Gabriel shrugged. "Kids know that parents lie to them. And if he did not know, then he is now aware. This is a lesson every kid learns growing up under Curtain Protocol... and in most other sorts of lives, too." Gabriel shrugged. He put burger buns on the grill, saying, "I think Mark is a lot stronger than you are giving him credit for, Alex. He has to be, and so he is. Don't baby him. Respect him."

Alexandro rolled his eyes. "So we'll ignore that he's been in the shower for an hour?"

Gabriel nodded. "Exactly. He's decompressing. Let him. And when he's ready to have these conversations, we can have these conversations." And then he Looked at Alexandro, adding, "You've done nothing wrong, Alex."

“I’ve done everything wrong.”

Gabriel hummed, and then he took Alexandro’s empty drink, dumped the muddled mint and the ice into the sink grinder, and started making a new mojito. “Have you, really?”

Alexandro sighed. “... No.”

Gabriel grinned, and he looked so beautiful when he grinned like that. “Good! I Knew you were gonna be okay.”

Alexandro grinned in return. ‘I Knew you were gonna be okay’ was pretty much Gabriel’s catchphrase.

Gabriel didn’t have a Power, but he did have a Knowing about the people around him, and Alexandro was around Gabriel almost all the time. Gabriel would have been a great therapist if he had any desire at all to go to school and get the actual accreditation. Alexandro had done that for his Doctorate in Healing Magics, to get better with his own Power, but Gabriel never wanted to go into professional learning. He liked being a bartender, and a cook.

Alexandro said, “Shoulda been a therapist, Gabe.”

Gabriel smiled brightly, wonderfully. “I like my hours as a househusband, bartender, and cook, thank you very much.”

Alexandro laughed. He smiled a bit. Gabriel joked; he was also a big time accountant. He loved numbers, which was pretty odd, since he had a Knowing for People. Alexandro always thought his choice of profession was kind of odd, but it was what it was, and Gabriel was happy.

Gabriel changed the subject, asking, “So what’s the plan if Addavein shows up here?”

All the wind dropped out of Alexandro’s sails.

It was such a big question. Neither of them had truly understood the severity of that question, because how could you deal with something like a ‘new world order’ possibly starting, and attaching itself to your family as a ‘nephew’?

Alexandro said, “All I know is that Addavein is not welcome here.”

“In line with normal operating procedure, then,” Gabriel said, as he handed Alexandro his next mojito. And then he asked, “What about Mark moving in with us? That *had been* the plan.”

Alexandro had a lot of mixed feelings about that topic. Before today, before hearing about Addavein summoning Mark, Alexandro wanted Mark to live here. They had a room all ready to go for him on the third floor, facing the south, the city. It was a nice room. Practically an apartment unto itself.

But now...

They had enough security concerns *without* housing Mark—

Alexandro felt terrible even as he had that thought. Was he really not willing to house Mark in his own home?

Short answer: He wanted Mark here.

But the longer answer... Alexandro was already his own personal security concern. Over the course of his life, there had been no fewer than 28 attempts to kidnap him, and every single day at the office some client always brought up how they wanted to have this person or that person to get a treatment, too. Alexandro’s client base was full, though, and he always wondered when his next denial-of-healing would result in another attempt on his life, or a kidnapping.

So Alexandro *wanted* Mark to be here, but...

Hmm.

They could put him up in that guesthouse that Mark had visited, that he had thought was Alexandro and Gabriel's house? That place was pretty nice, and Mark was... probably used to that place, more than this big house.

Alexandro also had some properties in the center of Memphis, near downtown, that he gifted to guests for a month or two when they visited. Those places were bachelor pads, which would be great for someone Mark's age.

But Mark wanted a team to explore the world with, and that necessitated a bigger house.

... No.

All of that was terrible.

Alexandro backed away from that train of thought.

Alexandro said, "We're offering him the room here. I want him here. It'll be a security concern, I'm sure, but I want him here."

Gabriel grinned. "Good. Me, too." And then Gabriel teased, "So look at you, pulling the big strings with the city to go out and meet him at the gate! You thinking about not being a hermit anymore?"

"Oh gods no," Alexandro said, laughing. "That was all Willow. The call came in and she was right on it. She's trying to make good impressions, and she is wildly succeeding. And I think she's just plain more active than Carlotta ever was."

When Alexandro switched from Hearthswell oversight to Freyala oversight, for The True Healer List, there was a change of guard. Inquisitor Carlotta Sanchez of Hearthswell had been with Alexandro for 23 years, but she had been itching to see her grandkids grow up for a while and she simply wasn't equipped for the vast increase in Alexandro's kidnapping risk, now that Mark was talking to dragons.

Carlotta took the retirement she had been thinking about for years now, got de-aged from 60 to 24, and Willow entered the house as Alexandro's primary guardian.

Gabriel put cheese onto the chicken breasts and let it melt, saying, "I heard from Carlotta this morning. Did I tell you?" Alexandro shook his head and Gabriel continued, "She's doing great. The grandkids are in middle school now, and..."

Gabriel spoke, and Alexandro loved to hear him speak.

Mark would probably be out of the shower in a short while, Alexandro thought. Gabriel was making dinner for the three of them, and he usually timed these things perfectly, as long as the people he was cooking for were anywhere nearby. Gabriel was good about Knowing what people were up to, and what they needed.

Mark had sat under the barely-warm shower for a while. The tile was cool, the water was simply pleasant, and Mark had too many thoughts in his head. He shaped his adamantium into fish and swam them through the water droplets, and this time he could actually make the fish flex like they were swimming. His overall shaping was still crude, but he didn't need to use his fingers to make the adamantium into fish-shapes. He was learning; progressing.

"Not perfection, just progress," Mark whispered to himself.

Physical therapy seemed like a lifetime ago, but it had only been... a few months?

With casual flexes, Mark turned fish into caltrops. He tried to spin one caltrop really, really fast, and he managed to spin it faster than he had when he was in the woods, testing out his Shaping. But his speed was still 'tied' to his 'astral body muscles'.

Mark would need to break himself of that... that whole thing, really. Maybe now he could, now that he was secure in a city again, and he wasn't in danger of meeting someone in the wilds that *wanted to kill him*.

Mark could honestly say that with this whole Addashield business, and then with Addavein, and now with this murder attempt, that his opinion of humanity was at an all-time low.

But he was glad that Uncle Alexandro had met him at the gate. Mark was really happy to see him, and Gabriel, too...

But holy shit, this was not how he had expected Uncle Alexandro's house to be. Mark looked around at the primary bathroom yet again, at the big glass shower enclosure, at the massive tub sitting over there, with windows overlooking the pool outside, at the marble... *everything*. They were rich as fuck.

This was yet another mind fuck.

Mark got up off of the shower floor, did a final wash with warm water, and then—

He smelled food. Good food.

Uncle Gabriel was cooking again, then? Whatever it was, it smelled fantastic. Mark finished off his shower and dried off as he looked at himself in the big mirror in the bathroom. Firstly, the mirror itself was very large, and expensive looking. Maybe not actually-expensive, but it was certainly expensive in terms of real estate. The mirror was floor to ceiling and 3 meters wide.

"Rich," Mark whispered to himself.

Anyway! Mark's skin was a bit lighter, which was kinda weird. Shouldn't he have tanned, being out in the sun all day long? But he supposed a high Body would negate the need for the body to tan, and also he 'healed' himself all the time, so... is that how it worked? Mark didn't actually know. Seemed plausible. His eyes were more silver and black, too, which was... something. Silver irises, shot through with black, with deep black pupils.

Mark ignored his reflection.

He grabbed a criminally soft white bathrobe off of a hanger and tried it on. It fit well. He wasn't going to wear it, though. Alexandro had given Mark some extra clothes that would probably fit him. Just some board shorts and a large tee shirt, and yeah, those fit well. It was nice to be able to wear something other than basic browns.

Mark looked at himself in the mirror, wearing real clothes again...

He wiped away a tear, breathed deep, and left the bathroom.

Dinner was delicious, and also a confusing mess of stories and plans and a bunch of other things tossed around and talked about, and Mark wasn't sure what was happening at the end of it all, but he did know one thing. Maybe two things. Gabriel could cook really well, and Mark had said as much, but also...

"I'm *going* back to Citadel, Uncle," Mark said, with a clean plate sitting in front of him. "And then it's on to a settlement expedition on Daihoon."

And Mark didn't want to live in this too-fancy house, anyway. He had told them that once, but he didn't want to harp on it.

Alexandro nodded, saying, "Okay okay. A young man has to go out and make his mark on the world. I get it. And you don't want to live here with your boring uncles anyway. So how about the cottage?"

Mark laughed. "The one you guys pretended to live in?"

"That's the one!" Alexandro said, shamelessly and with a bit of a grin.

Mark was about to turn them down—

But Gabriel said, "We're signing *something* over to you, because we need you to know that you will always have a home here. *You are wanted*. Even if you go back out into the world, you have a place to

come back to. Always. We'll have the housekeepers keep it up for you and pay the land taxes and all of that junk, but it'll be yours, Mark."

Mark felt tight in the chest. Happy, in a nice sort of way.

Alexandro added, "Or there's the room upstairs!"

Mark chuckled. In a small way, he said, "I'm going on that expedition, but... I do want to have a home here... if you'll... have me..." Mark was about to say something about the danger of Addashield, but he choked up. He wanted to be here, with family, for at least a little while.

Alexandro grinned wide. And then he got up from his chair and grabbed Mark into a hug, saying, "We love you, Mark."

Mark sobbed a little, and then Uncle Gabriel was there, too, hugging him, also saying nice words, and Mark almost felt home again. He started sobbing and then Alexandro started crying, and someone said something about how Markus and Donna would be happy Mark was here, and the night kinda went on from there.

Mark found out that Uncle Gabriel was a very good bartender, and that Gabriel and Alexander were pretty much hermits, but they wanted to show Memphi off to Mark, if he wanted. And yeah, Mark did want to see the city. This weekend, though. Alexandro still had work; so much work. Gabriel had work, too.

As they sat around a table on the deck, drinking drinks, Mark said, "So tomorrow I have on my own... I want to know what is happening with that almost-murder in the wilds. How can I keep tabs on that?"

Gabriel said, "Inquisitor Willow will know more in the morning, I am sure. She's only been in the house for about 40 days, but she's on the ball about everything. If not her then some of the others."

Mark suddenly remembered a lot of little things. From a woman named Carlotta that used to live with his uncles, who had to have been their previous Inquisitor bodyguard, to how they had switched over to

Freyala on the List. Mark's eyes went wide. "Oh my gods! You're on The List, Uncle Alexandro!" He instantly said, "You've probably seen some crazy personal-attack shit, too, haven't you?"

Alexandro happily said, "I'm up to around 28 kidnapping attempts, which is why I'm a bit of a hermit. Maybe 32, if you count credible incidents that went nowhere, when the kidnapers decided not to kidnap."

Mark felt unmoored. He had not expected... that. Mark whispered, "Why would people do that...?"

Alexandro had a fast answer, "Because sometimes people get desperate, and a lot of the most desperate people in the world are those who are running out of resources, be those resources money, time, or anything else, really. I see people who run out of everything, all the time, Mark. My Power is Age Manipulation."

Mark's eyes went wide. And then he frowned. "I have this Union sense that lets me know what people are pointed toward sometimes, when I focus. Those people who tried to kill me were *greedy*. That's it. Not needy. Not desperate. I'm still figuring out this sense, but I'm pretty sure those guys were just greedy..." Mark had a few more complicated emotions. "Is it greedy to want more time alive? Oh, shit. I never thought about that."

And he hadn't. New thoughts all around.

Alexandro grinned a little bit; strained.

Gabriel said, "Those people you met could have been Thrashtalon cultists. Could be demon contractors. Those are outsized possibilities, though. I'd think they would just have been greedy. Most people are. Greed is a rather normal thing for most people to feel, and those scanners for wealth usually have upper bounds. Those people probably saw their scanners peak and then snap and break, and that would mean literal millions of goldleaf. Of course they tried something. Murder, though? That's too much. Fuck those people and I hope they die to monsters."

Mark was conflicted in a way he never knew he could be conflicted.

And so, he just started laughing.

Alexandro chuckled.

Gabriel grinned.

Mark laughed even as he exclaimed, “Oh my gods Uncle Gabriel! *You can't say that!*”

Alexandro guffawed.

Gabriel chuckled, saying, “You’re gonna have to learn how to say crazy shit, too, Mark, what with being a Villain and all.”

“I’m going to be such a terrible villain,” Mark suddenly admitted.

Alexandro laughed largely, saying, “I can imagine it now! Mark on Weekly Showdown, talking about how people shouldn’t hurt other people, so ‘could you kindly all step aside while I rob this bank, please?’!”

Mark scoffed. “Villains are all hypocrites and robbing a bank is at least two layers of hypocritical...ness? Hypocriticalness, sure.”

Gabriel grinned as he tilted his glass in his hand, the ice tinkling. “As a villain, your words are only good for distracting the enemy. Think of it like that, and less like you’re trying to make sense.”

“That’s how you do it,” Alexandro said, agreeing.

“Oh gods, that’s terrible!” Mark said— And then he gasped. “You two watch the supervillain shows, don’t you!”

“Of course we do!” Alexandro said. “I have to have something to talk with the clients about.”

Gabriel rolled his eyes. “Your uncle plays it off, but he’s a total nerd. Want to see the nerd cave? We have action figures!”

Mark laughed.

He ended up seeing the nerd cave and getting a tour of the whole house.

It was nice.

Eventually, Mark went to bed in a bed that was meant to be his, if he wanted it. And he did.

It was a great end to a stressful day.

- - - -

Mark woke to sunlight spilling across the room, beyond the foot of his bed.

He stretched, his adamantium drops rolling through the air, and he breathed deep. In with the good, out with the bad. Black miasma flowed from his mouth, threading into the world, and Mark woke up all the way.

He sat at his bed for a while, categorizing what he needed to do for the day.

Citadel Freyala had been alerted to Mark’s return yesterday, thanks to Inquisitor Willow and the City AI of Memphi, which was really the Mayor of Memphi. Mark had heard something about that earlier, but he had forgotten, so he needed to check up on that. He needed to book passage back to Citadel Freyala,

eventually, because the expedition to Daihoon was probably going to leave from there... But probably not for a while? Mark wasn't sure. He needed to make calls.

Which meant he needed a new phone.

Which was priority number one. New phone. New gear. See if his personal AI Quark survived, or not. They usually did, right? Quark wasn't a real, living AI. He was an offshoot of COFR, so he probably got backed up, along with all of the videos that Mom and Dad had left him, and the family movies. The letters were back in his room at Citadel, which was... probably fine? Yeah, probably.

So a phone.

And then Mark wanted to make calls, and check on whatever was going on with the killers out north of Memphi. They probably wouldn't let him know about the investigation... or at least cops didn't let you know about ongoing investigations. Did Inquisitors let you know?

... Were the Inquisitors even on this case? Seemed like the local cops should be on the case.

Mark didn't know.

Killers were big deals. Humanity didn't harm humanity; not directly like that. It was anathema to the continued existence of humanity to do shit like that. It was humans against monsters, and things had been steadily improving for both Earth and Daihoon for decades since the Reveal, since that mana apocalypse, but it was still humans against monsters.

Back in the Reveal, the sea level had risen 23 meters, kaiju turned out to be real, and monsters and magic fucked everything up. And then there was World War 3 and *then* World War Not, which was only averted from a full scale horror show by one man who murdered 4 world leaders and over 250 staff, or something like that. That man, General Alexander Volkov, then went on to become the God of War and Murder, Drakarok.

... Whom Sally was acolyte'd to.

Mark needed to call Sally again. Would she still want to party with him, now that he was officially the ‘brother’ of Addashield? Mark needed to call Eliot and Isoko, too, or maybe they had tried to call him? Either way, Mark needed to check.

Anyway.

Humanity survived because humanity helped humanity.

That was why Basic Income existed, and why a person, any person at all, could live and function in this world, even if they did nothing at all. Of course, that put a person in basic browns and in basic housing, and sure, people stole from each other, and small crimes happened all the time. But murder? Murder for profit?

Mark still boggled at that.

... Mark got up and told himself, “Phones, then check on the investigation, and then all the rest.”

After taking a brief morning shower and then purifying himself so he didn’t have to use the bathroom — Mark didn’t think he would ever get tired of not having to use the bathroom— Mark put on clothes that fit him well, which Uncle Alexandro had gotten in a drone airdrop last night. The fabrics were soft, nice, and clean, and they weren’t basic brown.

Mark loved it.

Mark walked downstairs, and then downstairs again to the first floor, because this was a three story (and a basement!) house. Gabriel was working on a computer at the kitchen table, near giant windows that oversaw a pool area and the forested land beyond. Mark was pretty sure there were farms out there beyond the property line. He remembered Shady Acres being a farming community, and this was still Shady Acres.

Gabriel saw Mark put aside some papers, saying, “Hey, kiddo! Alex went to work already, but he’ll take a half day off when you want to go into the city. You want breakfast? There’s frozen breads in the freezer, or I can make you an omelet. Or you can cook for yourself.”

Mark smiled and asked, “Do you got cereal?”

When Mark was a kid, he had marveled at how the only cereals that Alexandro and Gabriel had in the house were a bunch of sugar-blasted fruity things, which Mom had decried as ‘terrible for your health!’ but Mark had loved those weird, fruity flavors. It had been more than one small fight when Mark had snuck those cereal boxes back home, to Orange City.

Gabriel chuckled, probably thinking the same thing. “We do. That cupboard right— Yup, you got it.”

Mark looked at ten clear plastic containers of different colorful cereals. He picked the one that had bright red and white stuff inside and poured himself a bowl, as he asked, “I do want to see what Uncle Alexandro’s work is like, now that I can actually go there, but... There’s a lot I need to do. You guys offered to help last night?”

“Absolutely! What do you want? I assume electronics.”

Mark smiled. “Yes. Thank you. I need a phone again. Those things break way too often.”

“This is a tier 4 city. Phones are part of Basic Income. So that doesn’t actually cost you anything, if you want to become a citizen.”

Mark breathed in deep. Ah. This conversation, then. Mark poured milk into the cereal, thinking, as he walked over and sat down across from Gabriel. There was a lot of room for Mark, even with Gabriel taking up a desk’s worth of space... And then Mark looked at the table again, while he was sitting at it.

“This is the breakfast table, right?”

Gabriel laughed. “Yeah. Don’t mind me. Eat!”

Mark felt a little embarrassed, for this was Gabriel's house, but he banished that emotion and seriously asked, "Do you two actually want me here? No sugar coating it, please."

Gabriel turned serious. He said, "It'll be difficult, Mark. You're high profile, and there's a certain amount of inherent danger in your very presence in this city, in our lives. But not much more. And maybe even less danger, if you get down to it. Inquisitor Willow has already asked if you're staying, because she wants you here, too, because having someone of your power in Memphi, in our lives, makes both me and Alexandro safer. We're just two guys, you know? Baseline-normal people. But Alexandro has Age Manipulation, and that makes him an *easy* target.

"So, in all honesty, best case scenario —and the most likely— is that you're here, all *supervillain*-strength, and that dragon is in our lives a little, but life continues on more or less as it always has. We expect some sort of crossfire and shit to happen, but we already have a lot of protection on top of you, so don't think that you actually need to protect us.

"But having you here is a good deterrent.

"And you're going to be a hero anyway, even if they do label you as a villain. We like heroes. Your uncle and I are both total nerds, so maybe we'll get to rub elbows with people we watch on the television without them hitting us up for age treatments. They will hit you up for that all the time, though. Be aware that that will happen if you live here.

"The worst case scenario is something that the entire world will have to contend with, and not something anyone is eager to have happen at all. So they'll make concessions to the dragon, and... And it's a whole big thing. We're fine with that risk, Mark.

"So to put it shortly, we want you here, Mark." Gabriel added, "And if you want to be here, you should talk to a whole bunch of people who are in charge, because that's the level that everyone expects you to act on, eventually. There's Emilia Ramirez, the Mayor of Memphi. To simplify her, she's a Technopath, with the City AI as her larger self. She'll want a face to face meeting with you soon, if you choose to do anything other than visit. Then there's Kraigen Steele, the leader of the Hero's Association..." Gabriel paused.

Mark had been nodding, thankful that Gabriel was giving it to him straight, as he ate his cereal. Gabriel always had a more level head on his shoulders than Alexandro, so Mark was glad that he was able to speak with him alone. All of those concerns were real concerns, too. When Gabriel mentioned Mark being a hero, even with the 'villain' tag, Mark felt happy.

He was great with meeting some high-powered people, and the red and white cereal was pretty great. Better than Mark remembered, but completely unsuitable for a breakfast food... probably. Or maybe that was just Mom talking.

But then Gabriel looked at Mark, studied him for a moment, and continued, "And Archmage Blackthorn, of course."

Mark blanked. His spoon dropped into his bowl.

A moment passed.

Gabriel studied Mark.

Mark made a decision. "I can... I can..." He made a more solid decision, saying, "Sure! I can meet... Uh. Blackthorn— I have to?"

"You would need to meet him, yes. Eventually. Blackthorn is part of the defense of the city, and you want to be that sort of person, so you will eventually run in the same sort of circles. I've met him before. He's an okay guy. His demon demands he has lots of sex and lots of drugs, which is what Blackthorn wanted, and got, so he's a pretty chill guy most of the time. I checked with Inquisitor Willow this morning about him, and she told me that Blackthorn's oversight told her that Blackthorn is perfectly in line with his Contract, and is in no danger of Falling at all. He has over 25 years of Contract fulfillment banked, so he'd need to go cold sober for a quarter century in order to be at risk of Falling. And that's not going to happen."

"... Okay!" Mark said, and he wasn't sure why he had said it so enthusiastically. "That's! That's a *thing*!"

“You still want to go to Daihoon though, yes? And you’re not actually qualified to stand on those stages yet, so those meetings don’t have to happen for years.” With a strong look to him, Gabriel continued, “But they would have to happen, eventually.”

Mark steeled himself, because yeah. He wanted this. He wanted this responsibility, this capability, and so, he would walk this path. He said, “I get it. Eventually. For now, a phone would be nice, and then an update on the thing with the killers outside the city.”

Gabriel grinned just a little. “Sure.” And then he gestured toward the archway to the main living room. “I took the liberty of ordering you a bunch of electronics this morning. You got a phone, a laptop, and some other junk in there to set up. There’s also a standard-sized webweave underarmor in there. It might not fit, so you should try it on. Alexandro is looking forward to helping you come up with an actual costume on top of the webweave eventually, and so am I. And for now~” Gabriel spoke to the air, “Bert. Please categorize Mark as a guest user.”

Mark’s eyes went wide—

The lights brightened a little bit, and a House AI spoke up with a pleasant, male voice, “Yes, Gabriel.” The AI, Bert, added, “As a guest, I should inform you, Mark, that Citadel of Freyala Resources has contacted me about your Personal AI, Quark. Quark is waiting for you to open up a new phone and to join with that phone, along with all of your personal data.”

Mark smiled, “Thank you, Bert!”

Gabriel said, “He’s not a living AI.” He asked, “I didn’t know you had a Personal AI?”

“For all of an hour, and then Addavein moved around in the air above me and everything kinda broke and went flying. Landing in the river truly broke the personal AI, though.”

“Ah, yeah. You said that yesterday— Well I’m glad you have one! That nixes one of the suggestions I was going to make tomorrow.” Gabriel added, “Well finish your breakfast and go open your presents!”

Mark chuckled, saying, “Like Christmas again!”

Gabriel got a nice, small smile. “Yup~”

... Which made Mark wonder why his uncles were never allowed to truly visit, or help the family out when Mark got coma’d, but then he remembered Curtain Protocol, and how Mom and Dad had probably had a long argument about accepting help, or maybe his uncles had withheld help, because they knew Mark would start to wonder where the rich stuff was coming from and then break Curtain Protocol, or something... But there *was* all that help, actually, during Mark’s coma. The nurse, the machines. Some of it was basic care, but *truly* basic care would have had Mark in a hospital, and not at home, right?

Mark said, “I just now realized that you guys have been helping me financially my whole life. I know that you guys slipped me new phones every year, but... Thank you.”

Gabriel smiled a little, then said, “The finances of the family between your uncle and your father, and a little bit your mother, is a very complicated topic. You’re old enough to know all of it, if you want. I can only give you a small breakdown, though. Do you want to know some of it?”

“I do.” Mark sat back down. “Not everything, obviously, but... some of it.”

Gabriel said, “Your grandfather didn’t want to take Alexandro’s Age Regression at all, ever, and then he passed, and everything kinda solidified along those lines, with Markus and Donna being strongly independent, and them wanting to raise you that way, too. Alexandro and I were hoping that maybe when you were in your 30s that we could eventually convince Markus and Donna to de-age with me and Alexandro. Maybe move out here, too. Donna was close to accepting, but... But fishing was something Markus truly loved. He was never going to give that up.” Gabriel added, “But we helped when we could, anyway. We were actually looking into buying some fishing tanks here in Memphi and luring Markus that way. Never panned out. We did manage to help pay for a lot of things back in Orange City, though. The last thing we did was help get you that in-home coma care. Otherwise you would have been in a hospital. It was a fight to get them to accept that money, but it was a fight we actually won for once. I had no idea that Color Drop treatments existed, though. We looked into those costs later, and we simply got told we couldn’t afford it.”

Mark felt tears threaten again.

He got up and hugged Uncle Gabriel, saying, “Thank you.”

Gabriel hugged him back, holding him tight, saying, “You’re welcome, Mark.” He patted Mark on the back, saying, “Now go try out your webweave! It’s Power Level 10. Cheap stuff but a good starter set to wear under your real clothes.” He added, “And eventually a costume!”

Mark chuckled and pulled back to see a few tears on Gabriel’s face. Mark wiped away his own tears and nodded.

And then he went to the living room.

A big white box waited for him on the couch.

Mark ripped it open and unearthed a brand new phone and a laptop, both sleek silver and glass, but made of tier 0 materials. They wouldn’t survive much real battle, but they would survive most normal wear and tear for a good while. Mark plugged them in and soon he got to personalizing them with some help from the House AI, Bert. Within minutes, both machines flickered gold with a distant COFR connection, and then silver, as Quark rematerialized on his personal devices.

Mark smiled at his phone. “Welcome back, Quark. Sorry for getting you killed.”

“COFR has my base programming and I am not a living being, so I cannot be killed.” Quark added, “You have high-priority messages waiting for you from Inquisitor Lola Turner and Inquisitor David Turner, along with normal-priority messages from Eliot Cybersong and Isoko Kanno. I will play the priority messages now.”

“I—” Lola’s voice cracked, and then she easily said, “I have heard you were kidnapped and then sent back to Earth, and then *set upon by bandits*, of all the Freyala-damned things. I am glad you are okay. We will resume lessons when you return to Citadel. I will begin to instruct you in the ways in which it is lawful and wise to kill people for their transgressions against humanity, or when to haul them in for judgment by a city. It is a bit early for those particular lessons, but you need to know them, since, with your adamantium Shaping, you will be able to haul people around goodly distances just fine. I look forward to your return.”

Mark was wide-eyed at that dangerous message, but he felt the love therein, and he was grateful for Lola. Lola was a good person but she surely had some rough edges.

David's message played next.

"I will leave discussion of Addavein to other parties," David said, "But as for the bandits you encountered, I believe Lola has some lessons planned for you. Those lessons might be too early, but they're crucial to learn. Personally, I let all criminality go, except for the criminality that you experienced. I would have brought those people into Memphi or to the nearest guard tower to request a pickup. That's me as an Inquisitor, though; I have that executive power. Perhaps you need to get involved with the cops at Memphi, though; I do not know how they split power over there.

"If the bandits were of Thrashtalon, or demon-touched and outside of parameters, then that's a strict execution; no court necessary.

"That's probably difficult to hear, but you need to hear it. I've heard that there's an Inquisitor Layfair on that case against the bandits. I don't know him, but if you want to pursue that case and see what goes on there, then look him up at Collective Temple there in Memphi. Other than that, I think that settlement expedition you were going for might be a few months before it starts. You have lots of time to get back here, so take some time with your family. I'll see you later, Mark. I'm glad you're okay."

... Mark had a moment.

Most of that message was nice, but...

"Those guidelines for *execution* make sense... but fucking hell."

Mark clicked through the phone to get to the other messages.

Eliot had written a very long text message that started on part 1 and went all the way to part 36.

Mark set that aside for a moment and clicked on Isoko's text.

'Congrats on becoming a villain! A 'battle' with your 'hero' 'brother' is a great first foray into the realm of villainy, or at least that's what grandma tells me. News of that is all over the world right now. Glad you're okay. COFR has a chat server for people in groups, so come join Eliot and I. Eliot is freaking out

about a lot, because now people are telling him that Addavein is going to be harrying him and me and everyone near you for the rest of your life. I'm fine with this, by the way. I'm gonna be a villain, too, so we can be villains together! Join the chat server!

A chat server?

Mark almost clicked the link, but that would involve a lot of talking and Mark had other things to do right now. He almost circled back to Eliot's message... But again, same problem.

He went through his new clothes.

Ten minutes later and Mark was wearing skin-tight black webweave that made him blush as he looked in the mirror. But, he supposed, it was 'underwear', so this was fine. Mark took it back off and then he put on some other normal clothes. Blue jeans and a t-shirt looked good on him, and he was happy to wear them.

"Am I really going to be wearing that webweave? In public?" Mark mumbled to himself as he put his clothes away in his room on the third floor. "No, right? I mean..." Mark breathed out as he realized something. He grinned. "Costumes go over the webweave! Right."

Crisis averted!

Mark plopped down on his bed and started reading Eliot's 36-part text, instantly thinking that he probably composed it with Man-made Manipulation, and that there wasn't anything here besides worries. Mark was proven wrong after the first few sentences.

'Glad you're back and you survived your brother. Knew you could do it!

'I want you as a Heavy in my team going forward. That means superhero-level power, Mark. Such a request comes with various offers, powers, and responsibilities. As such, I want you to know the current, brief rundown of all of the current offers on the table, and I want your help making decisions.

‘To start with, there’s the idea of setting up near one of the poles, so that we can constantly have trade with Earth. Trade is a big deal, and is a primary motivating factor on where to start a settlement and new major city.

‘We could also do a partnership with a current city on Earth, and become their Twin City on Daihoon, opening up a semi-permanent portal between our two worlds, allowing trade to flow this way and that. A lot of cities are asking for this, but not many of them are able to fulfill the HEAVY REQUIREMENTS for a permanent portal setup. Only two places have permanent portals on Earth; Crystal Tower, and a completely undefended portal that they just let blow up all the time in the Sahara. Permanent portals attract kaiju, after all.

‘So to have a permanent portal city, we need:

‘Archmage(s), at least 5 full kaiju-level teams on BOTH SIDES of the rift, a full assortment of support staff, numbering in the thousands, for just the kaiju teams alone. And then we need 10,000 people for various city functions, like food and such. Semi-permanent portals are only open once every week, or so, and everyone is on high alert every time, because if a kaiju doesn’t come running, then every monster within a hundred miles will, and...’

Mark read for a while, his mind swirling with ideas.

Eliot was enamored with the idea of making a semi-permanent portal between Daihoon and Earth inside of a city, and Mark thought it was a pretty neat idea, too.

Mark read it all a few times, and then he clicked the link in Isoko’s message—

A whole new app opened up, called ‘Accord’.

Right away there was a warning about Curtain Protocol, and that this was Open Social Media.

‘Accord is not responsible for people developing any mana inclinations at all...’ and yadda yadda, click this click that, yes yes, agree agree...

Mark took a few minutes to fill stuff out, and then he eventually figured out that he needed to click Isoko's link again, and that's what allowed him to join COFR's chat server, or more specifically, Isoko and Eliot's private chat group, which was the only private group open to him. There were, according to the number on the screen, 18,207 private chat groups. Mark could only see one of them. The public chat groups were... not something Mark was interested in, at all. But he might look at them eventually. He saw chat groups for general partnering for training missions, new user introductions, general chat, movies, books, a whole bunch of stuff, really. Mark ignored all of that.

Inside the private group chat there were lots of messages from Isoko and Eliot, but Mark wasn't going to read them, yet. There were over 600 messages! He did check the earliest message, though, and it was dated yesterday.

Mark smiled at that. The group had only been open for a day. Maybe Mark would read the other ones, eventually.

He felt included, even if he hadn't been able to be there in the beginning.

Mark started typing.

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VeryHuman (Today:8:28AM): Is that Mark typing?

VeryHuman (Today:8:28AM): I think it is!

VeryHuman (Today:8:28AM): Come on, type faster!

MarkC (Today:8:28AM): They're pushing you to make a permanent twin city, eh, Eliot?

VeryHuman (Today:8:29AM): MARK!

VeryHuman (Today:8:29AM): You're okay! Yes! And I want to! Did you read the other chats?

HimePink (Today:8:29AM): You went with 'MarkC' for a handle, huh?

VeryHuman (Today:8:30AM): Did you read the other chats! No wait, of course you didn't, there's too much. LISTEN UP! They're throwing me into an interview with Freyalan Holy Mother Julia Garin and Hearthswell Holy Father Rafael Pardo in 2 hours. I NEED TO KNOW IF YOU'RE IN MY CITY, MARK. We are fine with dealing with Addavein! But this question needs to be answered now, and for at least the next 5 years.

VeryHuman (Today:8:30AM): I'm vaguely sorry about the pressure, but not really. I'm under a lot of pressure, too. Share in the pressure with me, Mark.

VeryHuman (Today:8:30AM): Isoko already agreed to be a solid YES, and I need the same from you.

HimePink (Today:8:32AM): He's so wound up. The majority of all of this shit isn't even going to be us. It's going to be, like, 10 different noble houses. We're soldiers and pieces to be moved on a board.

MarkC (Today:8:37AM): I am pretty sure I am a 'yes', but I need to ask questions. What is the nature of my role in this upcoming expedition? Or, more importantly, when is this going to happen? How long before it happens?

VeryHuman (Today:8:38AM): You'll be in the group of monster killers, working under some person who works under the general for the settlement expedition. So three layers from the top. This is one layer above most nobles in the expedition. It goes General → Seconds in Command → Forces of the Seconds (We are here) → Civilian Leaders → Civilians. You're in third place, along with me and Isoko and most violent people. You, specifically, would be responsible for big monster kills, and you'll probably be working under some kaiju-killing-type people, who are the Seconds in Command. You'll be support for those bigger people; not actually tasked with killing kaiju yourself, but you'll be expected to get experience in that direction.

VeryHuman (Today:8:38AM): What else do you need to know? I don't know specific names yet. I think the Valen Family, which is a big noble family with interests all across Daihoon, is going to be heavily involved in this settlement, but we're not sure yet.

VeryHuman (Today:8:39AM): This is going to happen in 2 months from now. That seems to be the timetable for organization. Could be shorter. Could be longer.

MarkC (Today:8:45AM): I'm giving you my official 'Yes'. I'll be in Memphi for a little while, and then be back in Citadel soonish, or something. Please keep me apprised of big events.

VeryHuman (Today:8:45AM): YES!!! WOOOOOO!!!

VeryHuman (Today:8:45AM): awesome! Yes! I'll keep you apprised!

HimePink (Today:8:46AM): Glad to have you, Mark! Now what's this I hear about bandits?

VeryHuman (Today:8:46AM): Bandits?! The fuck?! You got robbed?

MarkC (Today:8:47AM): It was a thing. So you heard Addavein summoned me, yeah?

VeryHuman (Today:8:47AM): How did that happen, tho? Like. Physically, magically, how? Can you prevent it from happening again?

HimePink (Today:8:48AM): I don't think he can, Mark?

HimePink (Today:8:48AM): Like, prevent it

HimePink (Today:8:48AM): I mean

MarkC (Today:8:52AM) I have no idea about any of that. You've heard more than me?

VeryHuman (Today:8:53AM): Isoko heard more than me. All I heard was rumors.

HimePink (Today:8:55AM): I heard from Grandmother and Crystal Tower that you dedicated yourself to him as his brother, which has caused a metaphysical tether which allows certain magics to function, and summoning and banishing are some of the magics he can do to you now. I think you have to sever that

tie to break that connection, but don't quote me on that. It's all rumors, and tied behind magical learning, of which I have no connections toward. I don't know anything about magic. Grandma says your eyes and hair color are heavy indicators that you're tied to him, and he's tied to you.

HimePink (Today:8:55AM): Tell us what happened!

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Mark lay back on his bed, staring at the ceiling, thinking.

He decided to ignore 'summoning magic' for now. He'd ask around about that later. Chances were that Inquisitor Willow or someone wanted to talk to him about that very thing. Lola and David wanted to talk, too, and that topic would probably come up as well.

But for now, Mark grounded himself, chatting with Isoko and Eliot about his own unexpected trip to Daihoon...

Er.

Mostly grounded himself.

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VeryHuman (Today:9:37AM): I still can't believe some people would be stupid enough to attack you. There you are, floating nude on black metal, scanners going wild with 'MONEY MONEY MONEY!', black veins echoing out of your body and air, and you casually dropping that you have a True Healer for an uncle —I'm letting you know now that my family is going to try and hit you up for access— and they *still* tried to attack you. It is INSANE that they went for it.

MarkC (Today:9:38AM): I had on shorts and a backpack! I wasn't nude!

VeryHuman (Today:9:38AM): Sure. Let's focus on that part.

VeryHuman (Today:9:38AM): But seriously, though. I'm telling people you were nude. It's a better story that way.

VeryHuman (Today:9:38AM): (I will not tell people this particular lie)

HimePink (Today:9:39AM): Not that insane. They already attacked him. They had no idea how Mark would have reacted outside of Mind Control. So they went for it. People sometimes come out of Mind Control all sorts of fucked up. Union helped to keep Mark on an even level, though.

HimePink (Today:9:40AM): Type with your damned hands, Eliot. I can't keep up with your text speed.

VeryHuman (Today:9:40AM): I am typing with my hands. ;)

MarkC (Today:9:41AM): I don't believe that for a damned second.

HimePink (Today:9:42AM): Anyway. Fuck those fuckers. Limb restoration is cheap magics for a tier 4 city. They probably have dedicated healers for that sort of stuff.

MarkC (Today:9:44AM): Is it cheap? Limb restoration was hard in Orange City. One of my Dad's employees was put up on a wait list until we got upgraded to First Citizens and could get him into a limb restorer, or whatever it was. I never found out fully.

HimePink (Today:9:45AM): Tokyo is a Tier 10 city and they can deal with pretty much any medical thing, except for True Healer magics. Those people are always in demand. Tier 4 should be able to deal with limb restoration, and easily. IIRC, Orange City is Tier 2, right? So they probably do have a hard time getting healers for the more difficult magics.

HimePink (Today:9:45AM): Gods. Is Orange City really that bad off? Only tier 2? Whatever the case, Memphi is probably looking at all the known healers for limb restoration, but honestly people lose limbs all the time, so don't expect that to pan out.

VeryHuman (Today:9:46AM): I just looked up Mind Control issues and Isoko is right. Those people probably did go all-in on the attack, and then doubled and tripled down even when they realized they should have backed off.

MarkC (Today:9:47AM): Well that's fucking disappointing. How the fuck did they ever get to that point! I still don't get it. Of all the things I don't get about all this shit, that's the most 'I don't get it' part.

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Mark continued to talk to Eliot and Isoko for a while, and it was good. This was nice. This was great, actually. Eventually Eliot had to go into his meeting, though, so he dropped off, and Isoko said she needed to get back to Healing training, and if she could ask Mark questions about Union some time. Mark happily agreed.

When Isoko dropped out of active, Mark smiled a bit, laying there on his bed.

He had real, new friends.

He called up Sally, but she didn't answer.

Mark ended up writing her an email on his new laptop about what he was going to do with his life, and if she was interested in being there with him, making a new settlement, wherever that might be, and whatever form that might take. It was an open-ended letter, because the question was open-ended. And then he sent it.

Mark went back downstairs to find Uncle Gabriel on a video conference call, so Mark backed away and —

“Oh, hold on,” Gabriel said, as he pressed a button on his laptop. “Yeah, Mark?”

“Love the new stuff! Thank you so much.” Mark got right into it, saying, “I want to talk to someone about the bandit stuff that happened to me. *I need to know...*” Mark wasn't even sure he felt so strongly

about needing to know, or what he needed to know, exactly, but he did. At the same time, he doubted he would find any sort of satisfactory answer. “I need to know *why*.”

Gabriel took a moment, then he said, “Okay.” And then he grabbed a slip of paper at his side and held it out. “Here. Some phone numbers of who to call.”

He had already expected that question and concern— Oh wait!

He had a Knack for Knowing People, or whatever it was.

Mark paused, smiled, and then he took the list. A quick glance showed him names like Mayor Emilia Ramirez, whom Mark knew he needed to speak with anyway, eventually, and Inquisitor Layfair, whom David had messaged him about as being ‘on the case’ with the ‘bandits’. There was a number for Inquisitor Willow, too, who was closer to Mark just by virtue of being Alexandro’s assigned Inquisitor, so Mark decided to go that direction, first. Gabriel had listed her personal number, and also the number of her ‘office’ here, which was kinda weird to think about.

Willow and her husband lived on the property, along with a pair of other people that Mark had heard about last night, but not met at all. They all lived on the other side of the house, actually. They were probably gone for the day, but if Mark called that ‘office’ number he’d probably get one of the paladins...

Over in that direction, actually. Maybe a hundred meters away, or less.

Mark said, “Thanks, Uncle Gabriel.”

Gabriel grinned. “Just call me Gabriel. And you’re very welcome. We’re glad to have you here, Mark.”

Mark felt warm again. “Glad to be here for at least... a month? Eliot is doing a lot right now. The expedition isn’t taking off for a while.”

Gabriel lit up. He got up and hugged Mark, saying, “Good! I love it! Alex is going to be thrilled, too!”

Mark hugged Gabriel back, and felt even better. “Thank you.”

Gabriel hugged him tight for a moment, then pulled away, saying, “I think Wendy is in the house today, over there. I gotta get back to work.”

Mark said, “Right! Uh— Thanks again.”

Mark skedaddled and Gabriel got right back to his conference call, apologizing for the interruption. That was all Mark heard before he was already up and away.

... He walked over to the *other side of the house*.

It was a surreal experience.

There was a door and Mark knocked on the door.

Mark heard some woman’s voice saying something, and then the House AI, Bert, chimed, and said something in turn. Two moments later the door opened.

A woman stood there, a little shorter than Mark. She wore a tank top and booty shorts, and she had wavy, brown hair, and a book in her hand. She was barefoot.

She easily said, “Hey, Mark. Nice to meet you. I’m Wendy.” Wendy held out her empty hand.

Mark reflexively shook Wendy’s hand, saying, “Nice to meet you, too.” He let go.

It was weird to see her in her underwear, right?

“What’s up?” Wendy asked.

“I want to know about the investigation with the... ‘bandits’, I guess? Are you, uh, a person to talk to about that?”

“Not at all, but Willow told me to help you out if you should ask. You need to go to the Collective Temple in Memphi. They’d probably want you to file a personal complaint or offload the case to the local police, since there’s not much actionable to your case. Bert can upload the directions to your phone. I am a hermit and a Hearthswelling and today is my day off, so I’m staying here. If you want an escort into the city some other day, I can accommodate that need *some other day*.”

“Oh! Okay. Uh. Thank you.”

“Do you have a hover license?”

“Not at all. I have a regular car license.”

“Head on down to the garage in the basement and take any plain-looking car. Bert can help sort that out.”

Mark paused. “Are there trams in Memphi?”

“Yeah. You could take the car to the tram, or you could walk down there. It’s a 20 minute walk. The car is faster in every possible way, otherwise you’re gonna be an hour and a half getting to Collective Temple. The car will take you 30 minutes.”

Mark kinda wanted to walk and take the tram. But... “Can I metal walk? Or are Power displays forbidden here?”

“... They let you shapewalk around Citadel?”

“Er... No?” Mark didn’t want to get into how he had only started ‘shapewalking’, like, yesterday. “Shapewalking is fun and I wanted to know if I could still do that around here...” Mark felt the need to get out of this conversation. “Just... Never mind.”

Wendy said, “No big Power displays anywhere inside city walls. Shapewalking is among those prohibited. Go take a car! It’ll be faster. Nice meeting you.”

She shut the door.

Mark stood there for a moment...

And then he got going. Briefly he looked in on Gabriel but he was still in his conference call, so Mark went downstairs to the garage and was kinda stunned with the options.

There were spaces for three hovercars, but only two were in the garage, while there were four regular cars sitting on the other side of the place. Mark picked out the cheapest looking ground vehicle and, thanks to Bert, he found the keys locked in a box to the side. Bert opened the box for him, and then Mark got into a car.

It was a plain four-seater, but it was *nice*. Powder blue, same sort of interior, white accents. It was comfortable.

As he sat down in the driver's seat he put his phone in a slot on the dash. Quark lit up and prepared to give directions, but Mark wondered about the old truck, in Orange City. That got him wondering about the boat, then about Trace and Devon and their families. He thought about the rugby team, about Adam, Voshon, Cody.

He had left behind so many people.

Mark imagined that he had seen many of those people for the last time, and he had never realized, at the time, that it was the last time he would ever see those people. People simply went away... or maybe Mark went away. Nothing was the same. Everything was always changing.

And here he was, sitting in a really nice, plain sort of car, that was one of *several* owned by his Uncle. This was a part of his family that Mark just... Never knew.

It all felt so strange.

Mark pressed the button to turn on the car, and then the garage door opened, leading out to a long driveway between large trees. Mark drove down the long driveway, to a gate that opened automatically, and onto the main street of Shady Acres, with Quark giving directions on his phone.

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“I don’t understand,” Mark said, in a rather harsh way. He was stressed as fuck right now and he let some of that anger show. “You’re really telling me that there’s nothing to be done. That those killers are going to get away with it.”

Taking the car had proven to be a good choice, because the trip was nice and Mark didn’t have to be around anyone else, which he realized he wanted, and was glad for, about halfway through the drive. Being on a tram is not a place he wanted to be right now. Especially if people recognized him.

And now he was here, at Collective Temple, which was a giant cathedral with its own hoverport and offices for every single denomination of paladin, priest, or other sort of person in the Chosen System, which was a lot of people. Every god was here, except for Thrashtalon, of course. And every person here was dressed nicely. It was kinda wonderful to walk through the main hall and look up at all the sculptures of the New Pantheon, and down at the people in the halls, wearing the silver breastplates common to paladins, or the other people, who wore more normal clothes. Chainmail seemed to be a popular choice, for some reason. Mark had seen Willow wearing chainmail, too.

Mark had gone to the front desk, sitting under a radiance of multicolored glass windows, and then made his way through some bureaucracy to meet the agent working his case. Inquisitor Layfield was a 30-something native of Memphi who sat at a desk in a big office of desks. Layfair seemed permanently exhausted.

Mark had started off polite and strong, reiterating the sequence of events, the possible Powers that he saw on display, but now he was here, facing Layfair with an exhaustion all his own.

Layfair said, “Look, Careed. The incident was outside of the city, and we have no records of that sort of team composition, so that check failed to turn up anything, and so, at this point, we’re 99% sure the people who tried to rob you are exiles. You survived. They probably won’t. A lot of exiles don’t make it past 3 years.”

“What the— So what if they’re exiles! They’re obviously survivors! They survive by *killing people!*” Mark said, trying not to raise his voice. He failed. “I turned over that silver sword! It had to be expensive! Surely it had a paper trail! Surely the AIs you have here are better... better than *this!*”

Other people looked their way.

Some people tried *not* to look their way.

Layfair had started off polite, too, but now he solidly said, “I solve violent assault *inside* the city, between hunters, when demons are involved or when Thrashtalon is involved. Not open-ended monster hunter drama outside of the city, unless demons or cultists are directly implicated, and that’s not the case here. What you have given me is an impossible task. A strictly no-go situation for me, and even for the cops here in Memphi, and I’ll tell you why:

“The people you described could be from anywhere in the world, and they are likely already gone.

“Even their armbands could have been fake. The City AI turned up no one with those sorts of Powers you mentioned, in the age groups you mentioned, in the same sort of configuration you mentioned. Individually, those people exist, but not together. I expanded the search to include pairs of people. Still nothing.

“Now the AIs don’t tell us everything. All it takes is an investigator meeting *one* accomplished technopath in their career to make them discard almost all AI information as fake. Besides that, no one wants to live in a complete surveillance state, so AIs aren’t allowed to distribute what they see to third parties. And different AIs can determine things in different ways, especially when Powers get involved.

“Murders are flagged hard, but for everything else below a murder... There are reasons that Inquisitors exist. We solve violent crimes between the hunting community, and especially murder, which does happen a lot, but when it happens *outside* of the city, between people *we don't know* and *can't piece together*, we don't do shit.

“Those people have already moved on. They shot their shot, and they failed. They're going to move on. That's how exiles function.”

Mark was flabbergasted.

He had handed over the backpack full of collected remains and badges to Willow yesterday, and she handed it off... to these people, right? And the sword?

Mark asked, “You got the sword, right? That's an expensive sword. It can't be tracked? What about the pile of IDs and the diary I recovered from the dead? I know the IDs aren't connected to the sword at all, and the sword came from the maybe-brawny... bandit...” Weird word, there. Mark didn't like it. “But they happened in the same area... kinda.”

Layfair frowned. “The items we received from Inquisitor Willow are in Evidence for a few more days, and then they'll be turned over to Memphi Hunter Remains, for distribution to family and next-of-kins.”

... Layfair wasn't telling Mark something. Something big—

Oh.

He wanted Mark gone.

Out of his hair, out of his problems.

There had to be a reason he was being so dismissive, right?

Maybe he was just busy.

Mark found himself asking, "What other cases are you working on?"

Layfair frowned, and then he said, "Serial rapist, kill-stealer issues that ballooned into a murder four nights ago, and there's the Headtaker case. That's a serial killer that is active every few months, taking someone's head and then dropping the body at Southgate. I don't expect to get anywhere with Headtaker, but it's my turn to fail to solve the body drop this month. I'm closing in on the rapist, for sure. I got 2 interviews today, and I expect to get what I need to get from one of the women. The kill-stealer-to-murderer is going to be an active hunt, as soon as we can clear the suspect for a Memphi-approved take down, or the guy turns himself in, which could happen. He'll face jail if he accepts a takedown, or maybe he'll take an exile offer. Hard to know."

That was a bunch of information that Mark did not need to know, exactly, but Mark had asked, and Layfair had delivered. Mark was overwhelmed. Logically, he knew that people did bad things to other people all the time. Assaults, murder... the other bad things. Mark didn't understand it at all, but he *knew* that people did bad things to other people. Layfair was on triage, or something like that. In a monster war, warriors who were too far gone, or only facing scratches, got ignored, while people who could be helped and who needed help got help.

Mark said, "Those seem like bigger cases than mine."

"They are," Layfair said, solidly. "We aren't even the cops for Memphi, kid. I just got handed your case because of who you are. Maybe *you* should take this case down to the local level, because *I* certainly can't downgrade this case to the cops. Freyala knows I tried! But my boss's bosses want you taken care of at the highest level, so here you are, being an obstruction to casework that is *actually important*."

Oh.

It was like that, huh?

Layfair continued, "I got handed this case yesterday evening, did all the preliminary work, and now I'm giving you my professional opinion that this is a dead-end of a case. Let it go."

Mark had an angry think.

Inquisitors were not cops. They were high-powered individuals that were responsible for big events. They mostly dealt with Thrashtalon and demonic influences and high-powered killers. The local cops would have been the ones to figure out an attempted murder. The city of Memphi was the one with the jail, where people could be held and rehabilitated.

Inquisitors just killed people.

Mark made a swift decision, based on too many weird things that he had yet to piece together in his mind, and in his life.

All the world wanted him to be a villain, eh? Maybe it was time to start acting like one. Bombastic. Primarily, he imagined what Gaston Lussier, Shadowlock, would do, aside from laugh maniacally. The laughing came after the big speech, though, *after* winning. That's how villains normally operated, right? To start with, though, the villains always made promises.

In a discarded sort of way, Mark realized his sense of propriety had been shattered by Addashield, and Addavein especially.

“Okay!” Mark said, a bit too loudly, as he *looked* at Layfair.

Layfair got *concerned*. And then Mark stood up. He squared his shoulders and Layfair got even more worried.

Mark projected his voice to the entire room, “There is *absolutely no way* that a *functioning city* would ever ignore *potential serial murderers* outside their doors! You are obviously overworked, and you need help! What do I need to do to haul these people in myself!?”

Layfair looked more embarrassed than Mark had ever seen a man be embarrassed.

Good!

Mark was fucking mortified, too!

Layfair quietly hissed, "Sit down, kid."

Mark asked, "Why should I, if you're not pursuing this case? If you're handing it off to the local cops! I should go to them! Furthermore, I demand all of the evidence that I have turned over to you, so that I can better follow it all myself!"

A few people were watching.

Most were ignoring Mark and Layfair.

Layfair stood up, declaring, "Vigilantism was always an option for you, *Brother of the Dragon*, Blackvein, but I needed you to tell me that you were pulling a vigilante before I could clear you for it. All high Powered people in good standing with Memphi can do the same when it comes to matters *outside the walls*."

"... Oh!"

A few people chuckled somewhere.

Mark sat down. "So where were we?"

Layfair grabbed a folder out of his desk and slapped it in front of Mark as he sat back down, too. "I said to myself, when I got this job and I saw that it wasn't an easy solve, I said, 'Layfair, you unlucky bastard,' and then I made up this little plan of attack for you to take, use, and then go see how futile it is to capture killers in the wilds, and hopefully not get killed yourself." He pushed the folder toward Mark. "That's yours. The majority of Inquisitor-selects die in their first year on the job, and that's *years* after getting their Powers at least partially mastered. You, a similarly-disastrously-unlucky-bastard, are being fast-tracked by the powers-that-be."

Mark took the folder. It weighed almost nothing.

... The folder rapidly felt a lot heavier, emotionally.

“... Alright,” Mark said to himself, holding the folder.

Layfair said, “Come back in a week if you get nowhere. In that amount of time, I *might* have solved one case myself. This shit takes a lot of time, so don’t go thinking you’ll solve anything fast. And you’re not getting the evidence back at all. You have pictures, and a code to the scanner database, with all the evidence scanned for you to look at at your leisure. Figure it out. Goodbye!”

Well okay then!

Mark *could* have walked out of there embarrassed.

Instead, he held his head high, shoulders straight, and strode out of there without another word to Layfair. He walked out of Collective Temple with his task set before him, and a set of new, old realizations on his mind.

Heroes were needed in order to make the world a good place.

And Mark was developing a problem with authority.