

Eliot Cybersong dashed down the narrow street, heart pumping, feet pounding, the broken streets of Abandoned Rome coming alive with mimic spiders. The small ones didn't matter at all. The larger ones, the size of dinner plates and full boulders, were major problems. Personally, Eliot was 50% sure he could make it back to the car.

But he acted 100% sure for the cameras.

“Looks like I'm in a bit of trouble, guys! Pray for me! Haha! Hashtag blessed!”

His drone silently hovered behind him, its cameras spotting every problematic spider as it came out of hiding, as they discarded camouflage in favor of aiming butts at Eliot. Eliot had started off with 10 drones and a lot of trinkets. He still had one drone and a whole spool of fishing line under his control, so he guarded his drone and whipped that fishing line out into the air to catch those webs before they reached him and could threaten his escape. The very second the webbing touched his fishing line he lost control of the line, but the spiders lost control of their web, too, so that was a fair trade. Eliot clipped off another several meters of his fishing line and kept running.

He had plenty of fishing line remaining.

But they were *hunting* him, weren't they! In the daytime! What the fuck!

They were coordinated, too.

That was the scarier part.

There had been no spiders on this path when he had come this way earlier. And then suddenly the spiders were here. Eliot had thought he could finally visit the ancestral home, but apparently he had come out too soon. This was supposed to be F-grade monster territory! Not D grade!

They shot webbing at Eliot as he ran, five of them shooting at once in a volley. He caught that volley with another length of fishing line, and taunted the spiders for the camera. A sixth spider shot webbing at his drone, but Eliot moved the drone out of the way and that webbing ball hit the ground.

Eliot burst out into the open, onto clear ground. It might have been Rome at some point in time, but the place was ruined and vegetation grew over everything. It might as well have been any ruined city on Earth.

Eliot would have to splice in some pictures of vine-covered columns in post.

His hovercar was straight ahead.

A giant spider, large as a horse, stood on top of the hovercar. It was fuzzy and the same color as the car, and some would have glanced at the hovercar and imagined it was just a very tall hovercar; such was the nature of the large mimic spider's camo. Maybe a lot of people would have noticed the discrepancy, but the street behind Eliot disgorged a whole lot of spiders, out of every building and down every wall, and most people would have just kept running.

But Eliot Cybersong was a Manipulator, and his Talent was for man made everything, and that hovercar was *of humanity* and still fully functional, no matter what spider might be laying on top of it at the moment.

With a whip of intent, Eliot connected to the car, though he almost panicked when his astral body couldn't thread between the spider's fur.

Lights blinked on inside the vehicle. The spider on the outside rumbled and moved, trying to understand what was happening. It understood enough to let loose with two giant fangs to try and pierce the metal. It could only dent the metalglass windows. It kept trying.

The car could take a lot more beating than that.

Eliot overrode the car's innate safeties all at once and rocketed it upward and then spun it fast. The spider went flying off to the right, trailing webbing to the car. Another flick of intent turned on the shields and broke the webs.

Eliot had the car meet him.

“Daring escape complete! Remember to like and subscribe! And keep watching this space for more action later!”

He escaped just fine, making sure his drone captured footage of the whole thing, and then look over to where the spider had landed, sending his drone that way—

Grey tarantula-like limbs appeared on the feed, briefly, and then came a fang, and the drone was gone. It was fine. Eliot smiled as he made sure the footage was fine and as he flew into the sky, inside the car. He also checked out the car for hidden surprises. A quick scan of the car, using the car's own systems, revealed five little mimic spiders, one of which had crawled in while Eliot broke the car's seal to get inside.

It was currently nestled under the dash and colored black like the plastics down there.

Eliot flexed the car's very existence and ripped apart the mimics, then he made sure the car was now fully Of Humanity. He set the car on auto, to Citadel Freyala, then he got one of his spare phones from a bag of them in the back seat and got to prepping his first 'adventure'.

He was not famous *yet*, but he would be.

He'd be uploading his first ever adventure to three different social media sites. He already had those accounts ready and waiting for their first video, but it took Eliot a little while to actually make the video. Do you keep this part where the spiders lured him in? Do you do it like a horror video? Horror videos were not popular, but they were good study guides, and honestly, Eliot's call to journalistic integrity demanded he include the horrible parts.

In the end, it was easy for him to splice together all of the various parts of his trip to his ancestral home. What was harder was knowing which site would actually get him a *following*, so he opted for a shotgun approach, publishing them all at the same time.

With his heart beating almost as fast as it had when he was running from spiders, Eliot pressed 'publish' three times.

"And now, we wai—"

His phone rang.

It was Mom.

"Ohhh..." Eliot said to himself as he held the phone, and watched it ring. "She's gonna be maaaaaad."

Eliot opted not to answer—

Nope!

He had to answer her.

He answered the phone, "Hel—"

"You're grounded. I don't give a damn about your ideas of being some sort of 'popular delver'. You have no team and you have no backup systems and you're not even Fully Awakened and some *smart camo spider* almost killed you!"

Eliot smiled, saying, "So you already watched my video! What parts did you like?"

The phone clicked off with a rage.

Okay. Well.

Eliot went into this knowing that this would be a problem—

The car went outside of his control and plotted a course straight for home, moving at top speed. Even the air conditioning and radio went out of his control. Eliot rolled his eyes and moved the dials to change the station, but the only thing showing up was Radio Freyala, being broadcast from home in the Citadel.

Eliot could have taken control of the car back from his mother, but in this case retreat was the wiser course of action. Eliot *did* take control of his phone back, though, so he could watch as the ticker counters on his posts started going up.

The ride home would have taken an hour.

It took 20 minutes to get the first comment.

*'LOL idiot! Going out without a team! Get spider-ate!'*

Eliot frowned.

Eliot called his mother.

She answered with a singsong voice, “Yes my lovely, wonderful child who almost died today?”

“Are you messing with my video comments?”

It was less of a question and more of a statement.

“Absolutely not! Maybe your video just takes 20 minutes to get through because it’s 20 minutes long, dear.” And then her voice turned serious again. “I’m glad that comment disappoints you, though, because that’s what they’ll say about you if you go out with that amount of recklessness ever again. Delete that video and reupload it to make yourself *not* look like an idiot, please, if that is even possible. Your first video has to be good, and that one is shit that you only spent 20 minutes editing. Spend a day on it and then try again.”

Eliot argued, “The whole *point* is to put it out there as fast as possible with minimal editing! This is real life adventuring—”

“That is a terrible word and you should void it from your lexicon.”

Eliot did not rage. That was below him, just like how rage was below mother.

“... I’m hanging up now, Mother. Love you.”

“Love you, too. See you for dinner.”

Eliot hung up.

... He left the video up. In the future, it would serve as a testament to how far he had come.

... He did need a team, though.

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Mark ended up being a loner.

He never intended this. He wanted to fix this.

Social anxiety was a *problem*, and Mark was tired of shutting down for any reason.

... Though people connecting him to his ‘brother’, which Addashield’s Dragon had named himself, seemed like a reasonable thing to get upset about.

When Mark walked around the academy of Citadel Freyala, or if he ran around the wall, people would notice him sometimes and then *actually* notice *him*, and give him a smile or a thumbs up. A few people had even tried to invite him out to a bar to buy him a beer, but when they said something about how amazing it was how much Addashield’s Dragon was doing for the world, Mark politely declined, well. Everything.

Or at least he tried to be polite.

It had been over a month since that day, since the Tutorial, since Mark found out Addashield had killed his parents at the behest of the demon Kanda. Addashield had joined Kanda, becoming a dragon at the end of Mark’s Tutorial, instead of facing his crimes.

And then Addashield’s Dragon had started killing kaiju all across Earth and gifting the world adamantium. A *lot* of it. Enough to make up for the 10,000 people ‘Addashield’s Dragon’s father’ had killed in Addashield’s near-Fall?

Enough to make up for killing Mark’s parents, too?

The world had done some basic cost-benefit analysis and decided that 10,002 dead was an acceptable loss to solve global adamantium needs for a decade, and maybe forever. Mark had done a different sort of analysis before his Tutorial, before he knew just how bad Addashield’s near-Fall had been. He had wanted to bring a Hero of Humanity back to humanity, and he sort of did, but the loss of his parents would never stop hurting.

Mark was having *distinct* trouble being called ‘The High Dragon’s Brother’, too.

He might have blown up a few different people who called him that.

And now people sort of stayed away from him, but they still gave him thumbs ups.

Some people from Nigeria had even introduced themselves and then bowed to him, telling him that they were thankful for 'his brother's' gift of an ocean wall, like the one at Orange City. That had been tough. Mark maintained as much poise as he could when those people spoke to him about that, but their words rang so hollow in Mark's ears that he really couldn't remember much of what he said to them in turn. All he really recalled was that the Nigerians smiled a little, bowed again, and walked away.

Or maybe Mark walked away.

He wasn't sure.

He couldn't even recall where, or how, that meeting had even taken place. Had it happened in an actual meeting room? Maybe it had. Maybe it had even happened in the main building of Citadel, where the leaders of all of the Freyalan Church met to discuss worldly problems in the same room.

But Mark couldn't recall any specifics about that.

And so, Mark needed to learn how to handle this problem.

Other parts of Mark's life made more sense.

Inside of his room, Mark studied a few college courses and found his eyes opened. Two courses in particular seemed the most important, for now; Understanding Curtain Protocol and Two World Geography and History. Those were the ones Mark took. Those two courses were more than enough. It was amazing what had been hidden from him, like how migration worked at the poles, through Endless Daihoon, to Daihoon or back, and just how much dragons had always been involved in Daihoon's governing structures, up until the Reveal. That last part, how dragons controlled the world of Daihoon, made it more reasonable to Mark, in a small way, why Addashield's Dragon had been 'accepted' as much as he had been.



Except, Daihoon had thrown all the tyrant dragons out with Earth's help, after the Reveal and the remaking of the System of the Veil.

Mostly, Mark discovered places he wanted to go, once he was done with his 8 months of 'are you a demon' observation, here at Citadel Freyala in France.

He wanted to visit the Settlement of Xerkona, over on Daihoon, on the 'other side' of Russia and China. Xerkona culture was everywhere on Earth, and Mark wanted to see the culture that had allowed Earth and Daihoon to work together during the Reveal, and which had also allowed Daihoon's empires to survive the monsters and the dragons for so long.

Other than that, he worked out twice a day, just because he needed to *move* in order to feel alive.

But Mark did not want to be a loner.

He did not want to have any social problems at all.

And today was August 3rd, 2048. Here at the Citadel, it was the start of a new round of Brawny Sparring 101. It was a good day to start fixing this social problem.

Maybe, if he was truly lucky, he could find a small group of people to make friends with, like he had almost had with Raoul, Jacob, and Svea, back in Non-Brawny Sparring 101. Those three had moved on with their lives, so they were gone. That was normal. Most people, fresh off Tutorial or otherwise, only stayed at Citadel Freyala for a few months, though some people stayed here for a lot longer than that.

Mark was going to make at least *one* friend today.

Or at least he would talk to new people and not zone out when talking to them.

Some other loner. Some other outsider. Someone who might stick around for a little while.

There were sure to be *some* of them in this massive crowd.

The coliseum in Citadel was the normal place for people to train in combat. Non-brawnies got the side rooms and smaller spaces. The main rooms, the massive arena floor and warehouses of space around the western side of the large coliseum, were all for the brawnies; the ‘normal’ sort of people produced by Curtain Protocol. The physically strong ones. 90% of all Tutorial takers.

Mark walked out onto the main arena floor for the first time.

The sun angled into the coliseum at a steep angle. It was early morning and small crowds of men and women were everywhere onto the sands of the arena, in groups of 3 or 5, though there were a few duos and singles. Most of them wore the white of an acolyte. Some wore basic sand-brown, like Mark. Almost everyone looked maybe 18 or 19, like Mark.

Over on the far side of the arena floor, in the western skybox, were some instructors. It was a bit far away, but Mark easily recognized Instructor Charms, sitting on the far left of a group of 5 chairs, set in a line.

Charms was a huge woman, a ‘half-giant’, though not really that at all. Mark had done some studying on various Talents, now that he was beyond Curtain Protocol, so he could tell that Charms’ Talent was probably Giant Strength. She might have a weird variant, but Giant Strength—or ‘Giant’s Strength’, as some people called it— was the Talent that most often made brawnies *big*. There were a few other half-giants in the crowd of brawnies on the arena floor; they were easily noticeable because of how much bigger they were than everyone else.

Charms looked like she was tapping away at a screen in her hands.

Other people walked around the instructor skybox, chatting with each other or poking at screens of their own.

Mark had left his phone in a small locker back in the hallway in front of the arena, and now he walked in just his clothes upon the sand. The layer of sand was thin. Most of the ground was wood, providing some safety against falls that pure concrete could not, though there was concrete beneath that wood. The wood below the sand looked like a solid piece of wood, without seams or otherwise. It might even have been grown there by a Plant Whisperer, or maybe a Tree Speaker. Maybe even someone from

Domain of Okuana. Those guys from Daihoon were the best plant mages around, and Citadel Freyala could easily afford their services, so they probably had.

Or maybe there was some home-grown Natural who made the wood under the arena floor feel so comfortably solid underfoot? Probably. Mark had practiced in a few arenas like this before, but this was definitely the nicest. The walls were maybe two meters tall, with plenty of access points from the arena floor to the stadium seating above. The seating was all strong stone, and mostly white but with grey striations. Probably marble-covered concrete. It was pretty easy for a stonekinetic or even an earthkinetic to do something like that, but the arena here had Freyalan accents on everything; Stone swords raised high, light rays, stone wings. All of that stuff.

This was a really nice arena.

A good twenty people sat in groups upon that stadium seating, near the instructor skybox, just chatting away, or working on something on a tablet. They were all healers, easily noticed because of the silver edges to their acolyte cloaks. They'd all be necessary today for basic training and the threshing of the new crowd. Injuries were the norm when it came to untested power against untested power, and this was a brawny class, so there was bound to be some accidental usage of power. Hopefully no one got killed, though that was very unlikely.

There were a lot of ways for a Union healer to minimize the injuries of others through protection-based workings. Mark hadn't gotten to do any of that with Inquisitor Lola in her lessons, yet, but—

A short man whom Mark recognized as Instructor Badger walked into the center of the instructor's booth, grabbed a tablet off of the main seat, and pressed the tablet.

A gong rang out.

Mark knew sort of what to do next, and so did a whole lot of other people. He found an empty spot and stood at attention. Everyone did the same, and quickly. Some people were already at half-attention, so all they did was stand up straighter. Not a single person was truly slow on the uptake.

Mark was almost impressed. Standing at the ready was usually a thing that sent some people stumbling, but then Mark realized that his previous interactions with people in these situations had all been before

the Tutorial, in Tutorial-prep class back when he was 15 and 16. Everyone here had gone through the Tutorial and succeeded, so they already knew about standing properly. In some ways this was graduate-level studies, but in others it was basic remedial.

Instructors either walked into view in the instructor booth, or they stood up, like Charms, in front of their chairs. Only four of them, though; the middle seat remained unoccupied in the booth. The center seat was probably reserved for Freyala, or rather for the idea of Freyala.

Mark knew the instructors, because he had researched them when he signed up for the class almost two weeks ago. All of them had real names, of course, but those were private and unavailable to the public. They used their call signs instead.

Instructor Charms was the half giant, and Mark already knew her well enough from non-brawny sparring 101. She was furthest left. Mark hadn't even realized that her name was a call sign and not her real name until he had researched that.

Instructor Badger was second left, and he had been the one to press the button. He was a short, hairy man.

Instructor Nifty was second from the far right. He looked like a normal brawny; just overall big. Pretty normal american-ish features.

Instructor Medley was furthest right. She looked like an islander, with brown skin and curly, long hair.

The healers in their silver-rimmed cloaks set down their tablets or they stopped chatting with each other, as they came to attention, too. They had their own instructor, it seemed; a woman in a full silver cloak who stood in the instructor booth, to the sides of the others, in their chairs. Mark didn't know her.

Instructor Badger spoke, his voice easily reaching the whole group of students.

“Today is the start of another Brawny Sparring 101 Club. We've got 189 of you. This is going to be a confusing 10 minutes here at the beginning, but it's pretty standard for rapid deployment orders out in

the field. If you've ever seen those then you know what's coming. The rest of you keep up as best you can.

"Up here we me, your left to your right, we have Instructor Charms, Badger —that's me—, Nifty, and Medley. We are your rulers for the next 2 hours.

"Repeat our names to me!"

Like a storm rumbling, with some people rumbling faster than others, the students called out,

"Charms! Badger! Nifty! Medley!"

And then Mark gasped, as an invisible bolt of lightning shot through the arena.

... Except that's not what happened at all. No one felt what he had felt. No one saw what he had seen.

Mark felt a thrum of power in the unity of their voices, and he knew, instinctively, that they had been gathered into a cohesive unit, in some way that was more than physical, or social. This was a Union. He looked at the unnamed healer instructor in a silver cloak, and wondered if she had brought them all together under Union.

... Probably.

Mark would have to consider that more some other time.

The lightning was gone, and all that was left was... Well there was something there. Mark couldn't see it, but he felt it, and—

Badger's voice reached them all, "I hope you know your ratings and you've been Scanned well, because this is the confusing part. *I don't care about your tier!*" He started calling out orders, "Strength modifiers over 10-times or anyone with a rank S Power! To the front! Stand here under the skybox!" He pointed near the front of the arena, right below him.

That was when Mark truly realized he might be *very* outgunned in certain areas.

Mark's Body Talent was Healthy Body. It was rank F.

People in the crowd rapidly moved, avoiding everyone on their way over. Some people were very careful about not touching anyone, which was to be expected for a times-10-rated brawny Talent. Strangely enough, one of the half-giants walked all the way to stand near the instructors, which made Mark's stomach drop a little bit more. Giant Strength was an A or B Talent, depending on the variant. Looked like some guy had gotten an S version. What was that? Like times 50?

Maybe 30 people moved to stand under the instructor's skybox.

*Holy crap!*

*That's a lot of S ranks!*

Mark wasn't the only one to be surprised. Almost everyone around him started reevaluating their position in life.

Badger called out, "Rank A! Over there!"

People moved as orders went out.

Mark rapidly got shunted *all the way back* to the entrance of the arena, back to where he had come in, to stand with 11 other rank F people. His individual grouping was the smallest there. Rank A had the bulk of the people, with maybe 50; Mark wasn't sure. Rank B had 40ish, with C, D, and E each having 20-ish people.

Badger called out, "Good! Now everyone with a speed inclination of any sort — *stay in your rank group!* — and move to your right side! Everyone else move to your left! And stay in your grouping!"

The speedsters turned out to be a minority of people, maybe 20 people total. Most of them in S, A, and B, and about evenly spaced between those ranks. A handful in C and D. There was 1 speedster in each of E and F, and both of those people looked worried about calling themselves speedsters.

Badger called out, “What I am seeing is INCORRECT! I know your Talents! They’re part of my briefings! Let’s try this AGAIN! If you have a speed rating over 1x then you are a speedster! Dexterity is the most common low level variant, and that’s *still a speedster!*”

The few wary people moved back into the main rank groupings, and a few people in the rank groupings moved over.

Mark kinda wondered at Badger’s classification, though. A speedster at *anything* over 1x? That seemed rather... wide of a field.

This proved to be a rather true thought, as the speedster camp became something like 40 people. Most of them were still in rank S, A, and B, but now ranks C, D, E, and F all gained a few more ‘speedsters’.

Badger called out, “Speedsters are expected to learn how to deliver messages and to organize troops. This is a sacred responsibility! I don’t give a FUCK if you don’t like this responsibility! You can choose how you fight when you have earned the right to call your own shots! But for now, here are your orders, speedsters! Talk to your group and organize your grouping from your left to your right based on Power Level! Not tier! The full number!”

What followed was controlled chaos.

People called out numbers. People yelled at others. Anger flowed and speedsters moved fast. Maybe too fast. Mark was pretty sure he heard someone smack into the very air itself and then bounce away. Everyone turned toward when a cloud of dust erupted into the air. Mark saw someone lay on the ground and the air around them shimmer.

Badger called out, “I said *TALK TO YOUR GROUP!* Don’t move them without their permission! Now GET UP!”

Someone had used their speed to move someone? Holy crap! That was... That was bad! Who the fuck thought that was good idea—

The chaos returned.

A short, blonde guy in F group had become the organization speedster and he pointed at Mark now.

Mark said, “Body 8!”

He was already moving next to the guys who had called out ‘Body 8!’ or other close numbers. Most people on the entire arena floor had their Body stat as somewhere between a freshly-Awoken, at 5, and those who had had a few weeks as Awakened. Almost everyone here was a brawny, so they focused on their Talent exclusively, and they were at 13-ish Body. Mark was rather low on the totem pole there, too, because he had 3 Talents to work on.

F Group finished organizing first, but only because they were the smallest at 11 people and the organization was pretty simple. They were a line of people from left to right with the people at left being the 5s and the person at the far right being an outlier at 17 Power Level. Almost tier 2.

The blonde speedster guy slotted in beside Mark, just to his right.

D group finished next. All the other groups took a while longer. Aside from the size of the groups, Mark saw a few other problems with organization. Some people were scared to get anywhere near others, probably due to their strength or speed being so high. But a higher rank Talent usually meant a person was comparatively more resilient, so an S around an S shouldn’t have been that worried about hurting each other.

Badger probably organized people like this so that they *didn't* have to tip-toe around each other. Maybe those guys were still jumpy, though, which was to be expected. A rank S brawny without any control over their power could easily break... well.

Anyone.



A rank S brawny could break just about anyone.

They'd be working on developing Tactile Telekinesis though, so that they would *not* break the world when they touched it. Many of them probably already had developed that. Pretty much any brawny from rank S to C would achieve some level of Tactile Telekinesis eventually—

Badger called out, “Not all Talents are equal, but if you have a rank S Talent, then you can usually go up against a rank S Talent. If you don't feel that you belong with the group you are in for whatever reason, like perhaps you have a Body Talent that doesn't grant you any *actual* physical power at all, then move to an appropriate group! Otherwise, stay where you are! Some Body Talents are weird, like morphers or otherwise that don't fall into the strength-versus-speed general categories. Morphers! *You do not move!* You are *fully capable* of sparring with the people at your rank!”

Huh. Mark didn't know that nuance.

Some people were really, really happy to move to a lower grouping. Some people looked distressed.

Group F gained no new people.

Badger said, “Over the next two weeks, half of you will be told to move to a side-gym, for you will be too weak to keep up with the big group. This is not shameful. It is the way of things. Focus on what you're good at; not what you *cannot do*. Not a single person in F group is going to be able to punch out anyone in S group; that's the Tyranny of Talents.

“Deal with your emotions of inadequacy on your own fucking time.

“Everyone else will either be sticking around for the next round of Brawny 101 because they still can't fight for shit, or they'll be graduating to the higher clubs, 102, 103, etcetera.

“The average stay for a newly-Awakened at Citadel is 4 to 6 months, but you graduate when you graduate, and not a moment sooner. The main criteria for you higher rank brawnies to graduate is the development of Tactile Telekinesis in some form. Other than that: Take this course as many times as you want, or need! *When* you enter the Chosen System, or if you get kicked off of the main floor, then—”

Badger gestured to the side, at the healers. “You can join the Healing Club and work on Union and develop yourselves in that way. These healers are here under the instruction of Grand Healer Badaira. These fine folks are who will be keeping many of you alive through mistakes made on the fields here.

“But this is SPARRING! *Not killing!*”

“We expect emotions to run high, for such is the nature of battle. But if you cannot control your anger to a manageable level then you’re out of the club. COFR is watching your anger issues a lot closer than we are! Expect emails about your conduct in this club later.

“Instructor Nifty over here is a speedster and he will remove you from your fights if you look out of control. He has researched your capabilities and faults, and COFR has helped him to see those of you who might become problem cases. This means those of you with too much strength and not enough Tactile Telekinesis control. If you feel yourself disengaged from a fight, do not restart the fight!

“As a reminder: This is a CLUB and not a CLASS. This is applied fighting! If you do not know how to fight, then take the CLASS!

“And that’s it for basic instruction!

“Everyone pick a partner directly next to them, and get distance from everyone else! And then square off! Fists and feet only! **No grappling!**”

“Fights begin in 30 seconds!”

Mark’s attention focused back down to himself and the people right next to him—

Blonde speedster stood in front of him, saying, “You and me.”

Mark went with it, saying, “Sure!”

They separated—

Instructor Badger called out, “**BEGIN!**”

The entire arena devolved into three kinds of fights; Fights between sort-of-equals, utter one-shots that laid people onto the ground, and people too scared to really hit each other.

Mark wasn't sure where he fit with this other F rank.

The guy came in with a right hook to Mark's midsection. Mark guided the guy's fist wide with a quick angle of his own right arm, opening up the guy's midsection for a mean kidney punch—

But the guy pulled away, suddenly wary.

Or actually, he just moved fast.

In a real fight, Mark might have grappled with the speedster, but Badger said ‘no grappling’, and for good reason. Grappling made it harder to keep both combatants safe from each other, for hands could crush and tier differences would exacerbate the issue.

Mark advanced, and through a series of exchanges that were way faster than Mark had ever experienced before, Mark ended up on the defensive, using his forearms to angle away strikes that got pulled back and aimed again. Faster and faster the guy sped up, but Mark rallied and rapidly acclimated, falling into a flow of footwork and strikes.

The other guy breathed hard, his eyes focused on where Mark would be, and not where he was. The guy was an accomplished martial artist, for sure. Maybe his Talent was ‘Martial Speed’, or something. Mark was only passable with hand-to-hand stuff. If Mark was ever caught without a weapon, then he'd be kinda fucked, but it wasn't like martial arts were useful against monsters anyway, and eventually Mark would never be without a weapon, thanks to Adamantiumkinesis.

In a real fight Mark would be using Union, too, but Mark breathed evenly, making sure *not* to use Union. This was a body-only contest.

It had been 13 days since Mark's last spar with someone, and though he had advanced from Body 5 to Body 8 through normal exercise and growth, he had mostly advanced in Union as much as he could, though he was still only at a 9 there, which was up from 5 since back then.

Adamantiumkinesis was at a 6. So up from 5! But also not really up at all. He had only been able to get to the adamantium he had 'brought with him' to Citadel twice so far, and both times were a hassle. They had stored the black powder in a place called the Vault, and Mark needed to schedule appointments to visit the lockbox that carried it. He was only allowed to spend 30 minutes in a private booth with the stuff, too.

He could just take it out of the Vault, but he also absolutely didn't want it stolen at all. He trusted the people around here not to steal it, but also he *didn't know* many people here, and most of them knew him already, so it was a liability, pure and simple, to walk around with a fortune that he couldn't even lift yet, while everyone else knew him on sight.

He had other stuff to practice on, anyway.

Mark blocked another blow from the blonde guy—

The blonde guy suddenly stumbled, breathing hard as he fell onto his ass, his eyes unfocusing.

Mark almost stumbled too as he fell out of the flow of battle. He breathed easier, using a bit of Union to clear away his own fatigue. He would have done the same for the guy on the ground, but he still didn't know how to do that, exactly... or rather, he had been told not to do that. Not yet. Mark chose to listen to Lola's command.

But Mark did extend a hand down to the guy, asking him, "You okay? You kinda crapped out there."

The guy breathed out, looking angry at himself. He took Mark's hand and got up to his feet, saying, "Thanks."

He didn't seem willing to talk about whatever had happened, so Mark didn't press. Instead, he looked out at the rest of the arena. Maybe half the people were still fighting. Others were standing around, or sitting on the ground—

“Five minutes to finish your fight!”

Mark saw at least one person get suckerpunched into a loss, because they stopped to listen to the instructor.

Mark wasn't sure how he felt about that. Who was more at fault; the person for throwing the punch, or the instructor for distracting them like that? And yet, it was the instructor's prerogative to distract. So... Yeah. Bad on those guys who suckerpunched.

... Mark was still mad at Badger for not making the bout limit clear at the beginning, though, and then interrupting the flow halfway through.

... Mark chewed on that thought for a little while.

Mark felt disillusioned with the world at only 18; he knew this, and he hated it. The people in charge were no better than anyone else. He couldn't believe that he had thought that adults knew their shit, or that they could keep his parents protected, or that Addashield wouldn't tear through those protections to get to them, or... or any of that, really. He had always imagined that adults were adults because they knew what was what, and they were able to protect those underneath them.

But, no.

The simple fact was that everyone grew older, and the world was lucky a person also grew up.

Mark could already tell he was going to have a great big *problem* with authority going forward. He had never considered himself that kind of person, and he had often looked down on others in these sort of training yards that couldn't follow orders from superiors, but Mark saw the writing on the wall.

He wasn't sure how to fix that, or how to fix his social anxiety. The social anxiety was an actual problem, though. Difficulty with authority? Well that was just seeing the world for what it was, wasn't it. High Priestess Julia Garin had even told Mark that she sent people to their deaths every day, hoping that they would survive, but knowing that if they didn't, that they had given their lives for the lives of everyone else.

All of that made Mark angry in a way he wasn't quite sure how to handle—

*Ah. Look at that.*

Mark watched as some people showed off their own anger problems.

Up ahead, in what was B group, two pairs of people had somehow gotten tangled up together and now it was a *real* fight; a total brawl. Blood flew and so did teeth. Four very angry people snarled and grappled and yelled and punched.

Mark glanced up at Instructor Nifty, still standing by his chair up there in the skybox—

And suddenly the group of four guys were separated.

Mark hadn't seen it happen at all. Nifty never moved from his spot— Or maybe he moved so fast Mark couldn't see... Yeah. That was it. And the four guys fighting were all ten meters away from each other and glaring at enemies that were no longer where they were looking. One guy finished a punch and struck only air, tumbling to the sands and then standing up fast in surprise.

So Nifty was *really* freaking fast, eh?

Mark tried to catch sight of him on the field, among the other fights—

“Time's up!” Badger called out.

Every single fight ended in that moment, though some of them definitely would have continued on for at least a few more seconds, if people were still standing where they had been standing.

*Holy crap Nifty is fast.*

Mark *maybe* saw Nifty move. Maybe. The man flickered where he stood and every single pair of people still fighting got forcibly separated, to stand meters away from each other.

Mark saw several people still laid out on the ground, but many of them were getting up already. Some of them gasped for breath and lurched to sit upright. A glance up at the healer group showed that many of them were breathing in unison. Looking at the crowds, watching for Union yet knowing he missed most of it, Mark saw the invisible wave of healing pass through the people. Faces healed. Blood vanished. Wounds closed. A broken arm reset fast, the woman it belonged to gasping as her limb flexed into position and the pain went away. Mark only noticed the truly bad cases, though. He was pretty sure—

Mark felt his breath taken from him, as his breathing lurched and bellowed briefly, and then the wave passed him by, letting him go, for he was already healed. The blonde guy's chest expanded in a deep breath and then faded away, and Mark was absolutely sure the guy didn't even notice he had breathed hard.

Did *anyone* notice they had breathed hard?

... Well yeah? Probably. Some people did, for sure. Maybe most people?

Badger called out, "And now, I reveal the full nature of Sparring Club 101! When I am done speaking, I will give actual instructions.

"Every winner from every bout will remain standing after every win! Every loser will remain seated! Every winner pairs up with a winner and every loser pairs up with a loser! You will then separate from others, and prepare to go in another minute! Every bout lasts 10 minutes or less. We get another minute for healing. And then we go again with different partners!

"S group stays on this side of the field, and F group stays over there by the entrance. The nature of this type of fighting means you will move up or down in the general area of fighting based on your performance. Let me repeat that in another way: You will *not* be fighting people in your own rank this whole time! You will be fighting people above your rank if you're good, or you'll keep moving down if

you're bad. The top few people who remain in the arena, and don't get moved to a higher room, will be exchanging blows right below this instructor's booth for the next 4 weeks.

"It is entirely possible for an S to move all the way down to F, but the reverse is not going to happen. I still encourage Fs to try and move up in a *responsible manner*. Dexterous Body will *not* overcome basic Brawn, but *you should certainly try*.

"This is the nature of Sparring Club, and this is what we do here! We will *not* be giving you private fighting lessons! We are here to prevent you from killing yourselves or others! If you want fighting lessons then you will need to attend Sparring *Class*. Not club!

"Also!

"This Body-power only time! The only exceptions are personal uses of Union, if you already qualify for that through the Chosen System. Heal yourself if you can! Save our healer squad some effort.

"NOW!

"Every winner stands! Every loser sits! Winners find each other first and make spaces for yourselves, and the losers get what is left. Spread out to the edges of the arena if you can!

"GO!"

Mark remained standing, the blonde guy sat down, and Mark spotted a guy further up, in E group.

The guy spotted him at the same time.

Mark walked his way, and the guy rapidly tried to find someone else—

Mark almost burst out laughing. The guy didn't want to fight an F ranker! How fucking weird...

Or maybe he recognized Mark as That Mark.



Okay. Whatever.

Mark turned and found someone else. He was a cocky looking guy. Mark wasn't sure the guy's rank, only that he was here with a smirk and ready to go—

Badger called out, “Losers pair up! Everyone square up!”

Mark and his new temporary friend squared up.

Five minutes later, Mark stood over a guy who had been pretty strong but his footing had gotten all screwed up and it all went downhill from there.

Mark held a hand down, saying, “I'm Mark. Nice to meet you.”

The guy sighed as he slapped away Mark's hand, saying, “And I lost to an F. Fuck me.”

So not a friend there. That was fine—

“Gods,” said the guy, as he glared up at Mark, “What is your Talent anyway? You *can't* be a fucking F.”

“Healthy Body and Union,” Mark answered, nice to know that some people still didn't recognize him...

... Wait.

He had forgotten to use Union in that fight, didn't he. Badger had said he could, though, right?

The guy looked like a weight had fallen off of him anyway. He collapsed onto his back, chuckling.

“Okay. That's not a bad loss. Nice to meet you, Mark. I'm Sammo. Just a Tough Bo—”

“Winners pair up!” Badger called, “Losers pair up!”

Mark used Union to heal himself this time, but he still lost the fight. His opponent was a girl who had to have been a D rank speedster. It was over before Mark even knew it, too. A punch to the face, chest, and then stomach, all at once, and Mark was on the ground and someone was breathing for him for a brief moment. He laid there, his lungs working under someone else's control, and then he breathed easier, and he was back to doing his own active breathing.

He couldn't keep Union going 100% of the time, but he could do it for a few hours a day, and with constant breaks.

Mark looked up at the girl who laid him out. "Hello. I'm Mark. Nice to meet you. Never fought a speedster before. It was very enlightening."

The girl looked down at him with a grin. "I'm Harriet! Nice to meet you, Mark, and you managed to get your fists up! It's more than most people."

Mark gave a strained, "Haa."

Harriet grinned. "All this ain't gonna be your full strength anyway, right? You got that black metal thing going on."

... Ah. She knew who he was.

Mark stressed himself to his limit and tried to be personable, "Still gotta give it my all, you know."

"With any luck, that dragon will turn out to be a good guy and then we can all just live happily in the cities! Course that won't be nearly as fun as exploring the world."

"... Haa, yeah," Mark said, looking down.

Okay. So. Yeah.

Mark kinda dropped the ball there, but in his defense, Harriet was hitting a weak spot.

Harriet squatted down so she could look at him directly. “I’m having a lot of trouble with it, too. Addashield killed a lot of people as he Fell, and then he never actually Fell! My brother was one of his victims. I’m still coming to terms with it, but you look like you’re screwed up about it a lot more than I am... Which is reasonable, uh, now that I’m thinking about it... Uh.”

Mark felt floaty. He kinda disassociated from the situation, saying, “I thought I was helping him so he could turn human and atone. Not for him to gain more power. But was that really my reason for doing it? Or because everyone told me I had to? I don’t know.”

Harriet got a worried look. “... Er. Sorry, dude. I didn’t mean to... I’m an oversharer... I, uh, I just meant to thank you for mitigating the dragon’s... uh. Uh... Sorry.”

Mark was back on solid ground again. He said a normal thing to say, “Addashield is gone and the dragon turned out okay. This was the good outcome.”

Harriet grinned. “Yes! That’s it! Right. Uh!” She laughed off herself, standing back up. “Yes. This was the only possible good outcome! Demons are freaking nasty! Can’t believe anyone contracts with them at all!”

Mark probably nodded and said something else.

And then Badger called out for a switch.

Mark walked away from the instructors, in the direction toward the entrance. He found another guy who had lost a match.

Mark beat the everloving shit out of the guy—

Mark stopped after maybe punching the guy too hard, because the guy collapsed backward into the sands and someone else started breathing for him. Mark almost panicked—

The guy’s lungs inflated as the healers breathed deep for him, and then he blinked and woke up and breathed on his own.

Mark instantly told him, “I’m *so* sorry for hitting you that hard.”

The guy chuckled and spoke in a thick Great Lakes accent, “Hit a fella that hard and he might think you like him!”

Mark couldn’t help but smile. “I’d go out for drinks, but not as anything more than friends.”

The guy laughed and sat up. “I’m always eager to make new friends. Cedric.”

“Mark,” Mark said. “Really sorry about pushing that hard. I was... Uh. Angry at something.”

Cedric grinned. “I’m rank C Strong Body, 11/100. How about you?”

“Ah. Rank F Healthy Body, 8/100, and Union.”

Cedric’s eyes went wide as he breathed out “Fuuuuu...” He breathed out, and then shook his head. “I mean. *Like*. You got a great set of fists on you and that Union is an endorsement from Freyala, but slap me in the face! I fell *that* far down? To **F** rank! Shiiiet. I’m so damned bad at this fist fighting. Guns and swords, my man Mark! Guns and swords! Man were meant to use our *brains* to fight not our *stubby little hands!*”

Mark smiled. “I’m partial to spears. Swords are great, too.”

“I hoped to damned we get to use some proper weapons tomorrow—”

“End round!” Badger called out. “Move along!”

Mark was already walking, saying, “Catch you around, Cedric!”

Cedric waved and nodded, and then he got up and went and found another loser.

The total arena field was maybe 200 meters in diameter, so with 189 people all fighting, there was still plenty of space. Mark had started on the eastern edge of the arena, at the F group area, while the instructors and S group were all the way to the west.

By the time Badger called out the end of the club for the day, there had been 10, 10 minute rounds.

Mark had won 6 rounds and lost 4, and ended up a lot further north than when he started, rather than simply west, which was still well into what had been the C-rank area. He was bleeding, just like almost everyone else on the field, but he was able to heal up that bleeding rather easily, and so the blood was mostly just on his clothes; same as everyone, but in a different sort of way. He was still feeling quite strong, which was not the same as everyone at all. Healthy Body mostly gave endurance and, well, a Healthy Body, which was the very basic function of most Body-based Talents, but Union gave him energy to spare.

Because of that staying power, Mark had made most of his strides westward in the second half of the club meeting, when most people were getting really tired.

Badger spoke above the crowd, “No major incidents today, which is fantastic. Aim for that every day! And now for the evaluation. Look where you are. If you started at a lower rank than where you are right now, and *especially* if you’re an endurance based fighter, then you should *consider* starting tomorrow further east. But other than that, where you ended up is where you should be. I’m gonna turn on some indicator lights and they’re going to light above a few people. If you get a light, then you come over here for a talk and get in line. Everyone can leave after I turn on the lights!”

Badger did something on a tablet and golden light danced in the air above several people, forming an indicator glow above them. A lot of people nearer to the instructors got lights on them, but there were a few lights far out in the arena, indicating people here and there.

Mark did not get a glow.

Badger said, “Good showing everyone! Dismissed!”

Mark bowed to the instructors, but only a few people did that and Mark felt kinda weird for bowing. He righted himself and walked out of the eastern entrance with all the rest of the crowd, taking his time because the crowd was thick and talkative.

On his way out of the place Mark saw people talking with other people and making friends, or looking discouraged and furious at themselves. A few people looked his way, but most did not...

There was Cedric, the rank C brawny who liked guns.

Cedric fell in step with Mark, smiling, saying, "Hey! You're just about the only F that kicked a whole lotta ass today!"

Mark scoffed, even as he grinned. "Rank isn't everything. I think I saw almost all of the morphers move pretty damned far up the ladder."

A few people around Mark and Cedric looked at them, and then they evaluated Mark. They rapidly moved on, though, because everyone was listening to everyone else. Or maybe that's not what happened at all. Mark knew he was, perhaps, hypersensitive to that sort of thing right now.

Cedric asked, "You gonna join the sparring *class*? Get more lessons?"

"Nah. I have way too much to do and not enough time to do it, so I'm just doing the brawny club because I need to for personal experience and... well. And fun. How about you?"

"I'm thinking I need some tutoring, so the class is gonna happen. I hope to Freyala I'm never without my guns, but shiiiiit that was bad news today. I didn't think I was *that* trash."

Mark grinned as he walked out into the sun, alongside Cedric. "There's so many more S ranks than I thought possible. There's freaking— over *half* of everyone there was either S or A— When you add in a bit of B, I guess. This is top Talent, isn't it? Like you'd find at Endless Academy?"

Cedric snorted. “No way. The Citadels are all about throughput; churning out as many people with Union as they can, as fast as possible. Everyone needs healers. They give us enough training to get real experience and save lives and then tell us to move the fuck on.”

“*Citadel* Freyala is still top talent.”

Cedric grinned. “I suppose that’s why *you’re* here, instead of at Endless Academy? They’d take a Tri-Talent up there in a smash, yeah?”

Ah.

He knew who Mark was, too.

Mark made a choice to be as personable as he could, saying, “I’m under demonic-influence observation, so this is where I am. It’s a pretty nice place, though.”

His voice probably came out stilted and broken.

Cedric paid it no mind, saying, “It is a nice place! I was thinking of doing Freyala Academy, but the Ecclesiastical Center in Citadel is all I really need. Four months and qualification for Chosen and I’m out on a team in Daihoon, being a healer and a gunner. Taking the actual doctor learn’n would be best, but I got a team waiting for me to get Chosen.”

“Do you have an assignment already?”

“Some provincial thing in a new settlement from the Aluathan Empire, across the Veil from Chicago. Just the normal sort of fortifying stuff, but it’ll be near home, so I love it.” Cedric broke off down a different path, and paused. “I’m this way. Nice to meet you, Mark.”

Mark said, “Nice to meet you, too.”

Cedric rapidly admitted, “I joked about getting drinks and I try to take it easy, but I’m loaded busy, too. Catch you in club, though.” He was already walking away, saying, “Or if you ever get to the gun range!”

Mark smiled. "See you around."

"We'll both be shooting little bits of metal around eventually!"

Mark chuckled to hear that, but he wasn't sure why.

Cedric was already down the way, walking.

Mark went the other direction, to Building 5, to take a shower before he went to his next destination.

... Could Cedric be a friend? Maybe.

----

Mark breathed calmly as he sat cross-legged on a meditation pillow.

Inquisitor Lola Turner sat on a pillow of her own, a few meters away.

The room was rather private and small.. It was just a normal meditation room in Healing Hall, used for the sorts of things that Mark was using it for right now. It had good ventilation. Before last week, Healing Hall had seemed like just another building to him; a place of classrooms and lecture halls and all that sort of junk. But this place had exceedingly good ventilation.

Fans on the roof, along with all of the air conditioning systems of Healing Hall, pumped and pulled air into and out of every room, cycling the air inside of every enclosed space rather quickly. This was



because Union, as most people used it, was all about breathing in the good and exhaling the bad. In this way, a person was healed.

This sort of healing produced miasma, which was sort of like pollution smoke, cow farts, and old garbage, all rolled into one particularly terrible scent.

At least Mark couldn't smell it when he was the one exhaling it... Not much, anyway.

Anyway!

Because of the way Union worked, and especially the versions that Freyala granted to her people, a priest of Freyala was always the first person healed on any battlefield. It was through this self-healing, that they then healed others. Mark had gotten pretty good at healing himself over the last 2 weeks of being here at Citadel Freyala.

But now it was time to learn the next step.

Lola breathed deeply, signaling the end of the preparatory meditation.

Mark did the same.

Between Mark and Lola, on the ground, were three potted plants that Mark did not recognize. They were the same species of plant; that was all Mark could tell. They kinda looked like sea sponges, but green. Maybe one of those aloe-vera plants that decided it would rather grow into tubes, than leaves. Or maybe a mushroom?

... Maybe they were actually mushrooms?

Nah. They were green.

Lola said, "You have advanced fast, Mark. Now that you have learned to use Union to heal yourself well, all that is left down that avenue is to expand your usage to full time, to learning to breathe positively despite surrounding miasmas, and other such impediments like being underwater, and to focus your

healing efforts on speed and safety. All Union efforts are first focused on the user, so that we would never be the first to fall in a fight. From there, we can help others.

“That is what we will be learning today.

“What we have between us, in these three pots, are air plants known as cleaners. They come from Daihoon and they flourish in lands with miasma and pollution issues. They can’t survive all that well in normal environments. This is them in their baseline state.”

Mark’s eyes went wide. He recognized them now! He had seen them in a book of geography, in that self-learning course he was taking. “They use those in areas of nuclear fallout, don’t they?”

“You’re thinking nuclear cleaner. These are not those; those are much larger. There are hundreds of varieties of cleaner plants. Mages have been breeding them for various uses for thousands of years. These ones are ‘shelter cleaner’. They’re used in bunker-type areas to keep those places free and clear of the miasma of huddled humanity, as they wait out the kaiju overhead. All cleaner plants are highly magical, and they’re remarkably easy to maintain.

“These are some clippings from Healing Hall’s garden that I have grown into full plants. You will grow them further through directed application of Union. It will be difficult. They do not breathe like you and I, but they do have a constant flow.

“Now that I have given you a goal, tell me how you plan to enact this instruction, from start to finish.”

Mark had come a long way with Union, but he wasn’t sure how to breathe with another being, yet. He couldn’t start with animals, but he could start with plants, which is what he was set to do right now.

... But *how*?

There were potentially a lot of moving parts here, or not many at all. To use Union, all Mark needed to do was ‘breathe out the bad and breathe in the good’, which, according to Freyala herself, was more like ‘partaking in the union of life, where beings exchanged what they didn’t need with what others didn’t need, and thus all life thrived better’.

Mark started spitballing, “I would need to breathe slowly, I assume, in order to match the... the very slow movement of air through the cleaners— I assume that air flows into those little holes in the bottom and then out the top?” Mark put a hand over one of the plants. “Oh. The inside is warmer than the outside, so it moves up through convection... Or something. Okay... maybe... I need to stretch my astral body over them? Still not sure how to do that at all.”

Astral bodies were the way in which a person enacted their power upon the world, and they were only about double or triple the size of the person. That was all the range a normal person ever had with their ability to influence things, but there were lots of tricks to extend range. You could increase the size of an aura at the cost of density, but that was just a theoretical possibility to Mark as of this moment. He still didn't know how to move his astral self, or even perceive his astral self, at all. He was using his Talents on instinct, without much direction.

That would need to change.

Lola nodded at Mark's answer, then she said, “In the beginning, you will likely need to touch another to bring them into your Union. This is the same for almost all Powers. Your adamantiumkinesis only works at touch range at first. General body powers, like tactile telekinesis only work at touch range. Union works over vast distances because it can be made airy rather easily. Union's *normal* nature is to be diffuse and ephemeral.

“But you will start off with touch-based communication. Try to establish a Union link with a plant now. Leave healing for a little later. Just go for a Union, for now. Figure out that part, first.”

Okay, so, Mark had jumped the gun quite a bit when it came to *using* Union on one of the cleaner plants. First he needed to actually establish a Union. Which. Fair. He had kinda glossed over that necessity.

Mark reached out and touched the plant on the left, putting two fingers onto one of the tube-like structures extending up out of the brown soil. The whole plant was about a foot tall and half of that wide, and made out of 6 differently-sized green tubes. It felt like touching a cactus; a little velvety but rather firm. It had a few succulent-like leaves poking out of the cracks between the tubes.

... Mark wasn't sure what he was doing—

There it was.

Mark had no conceptual idea of how to frame what he was feeling-sensing-*knowing*, but he felt himself link to the—

And then it was over.

Blink and you'd miss it.

Just like that, Mark *had been* linked to the plant in a Union, and then he was knocked out of the link, somehow. What had chan—

Mark realized.

At least a part of him needed to be in sync with the plant, and since the plant breathed, Mark had been briefly linked to it through his breath, but then Mark had fallen out of sync, and thus the Union was broken.

... Did that flow of air up through the plant count as exhalation?

Mark slowed his breathing, matching the slow exhale of the plant—

It was like falling into a groove.

Mark breathed out his badness, slowly—

The plant started to glow and thrive. It even grew a little, the tubes of it expanding up into the air like a pipe organ growing taller.

Mark smiled as he carefully controlled his breath, letting it out slowly and carefully. When he reached the end of his breath, he lost the groove; the cleaner plant stopped growing and the glow soon faded.

... And then, on a whim, and thinking that maybe the slow flow of air was maybe an 'inhale', too, Mark reversed his flow. He breathed in the good.

The plant started to grow and glow once again as Mark matched his breath to the flow of air coming out of the top of the plant. And then a strange thing happened. The plant started to rush ahead of Mark, and Mark almost fell out of the groove because the plant was breathing a lot faster now.

Mark reached the end of his inhale, and the plant slowly lost its glow while Mark changed directions. When he exhaled the bad again, the plant resumed glowing and growing, underneath Mark's fingertips.

Mark was linked to it, now.

He had no idea why it grew and glowed on both inhale and exhale, when they were very different actions, but he would figure that out later.

He knew if he pulled away, that he could maintain his connection, so that is the first experiment Mark did. Slowly, Mark lifted his fingers. For a moment there his connection faltered, but then Mark — somehow— reached out through his breath and reconnected to the glowing green tubes.

Mark looked to the other two plants, and wondered—

In that moment, without touching the other two, he felt himself connect to their own slow breathing—

He lost it.

Like a discordant note, the first plant stopped glowing and the small tether he had established to the other two snapped like spider silk. Mark coughed a little, but that soon passed. He was left looking at the three plants, one of which was easily 3 or 4 times the size of the other two.

For a long minute, Mark just looked at the plants, thinking.

Lola waited, and then she asked, "What do you think was the cause of the failure?"

Mark instantly said, “The first plant has a lot more air tubes so it breathes faster than the others.”

“Correct. How would you fix this issue? Speak your thoughts, please.”

Mark thought for a second, then began, “Well... I have felt you take control of my breathing many times, and maybe I could... force the first one to slow down, or speed up the other two, but... But that seems dangerous. In the future, I will have to link a whole team together and ensure that they are all healthy— Oh. Is my Healthy Body interfering in this whole thing?”

Lola said, “It is, but not to the extent you imagine, and yet also in very deep, profound sorts of ways. For now, just consider it a 5 to 15% proficiency boon. Different brawnies with different Body Talents have different numbers and influences they impart with those numbers. Continue on with your thought process. You have not confronted the main issues.”

Mark nodded a little as he looked to the plants. “I could force them to breathe differently, but that seems dangerous. I’ve seen the healers at brawny sparring link to the *entire* arena of people, and all of the people on the ground have slightly different breathing rates... but I suppose if you’re just breathing for them, then their own rates don’t matter? Is that what I need to do? Breathe *for* the plants? Only use that initial connection to force a proper breathing at the same rate?”

Lola smiled a little. She said, “You have linked to a plant, and now you need to realize that you are still linked to all the world. Once the plant is a part of your Union, when you breathe in, the plant takes from the world what it needs. When you breathe out, the plant releases the things it doesn’t need. Eventually, when you do this across enough of a system of living things, you will begin to feel your astral body like it is a limb you didn’t know you had, and you can let other people breathe at their own rates, for most things.

“That astral body is what is actually doing all the lifting in this whole endeavor; the breathing is a physical action that cements the astral action, but the astral action is the only one that actually matters. Your astral body is working in ways that are beyond your comprehension for now, but that will eventually change.

“When you understand your self, you will find that Union has a very large range, because Union is ephemeral. It is more like a whisper of wind, and not solid like a kinetic power at all, or locked to your body like a Body power.

“Eventually, you might be able to forgo using the physical action to create the astral action, but probably not. Not wholly. Instead, I recommend diversity. There are a lot of different rhythms of life you can fall into, to link yourself to others, to heal yourself and others at the same time. Before you try and forgo physical action, if you ever find yourself unable to work something fast enough, touch a new rhythm that you share with another and try to work Union through that.

“But for now, link with all three plants through your breath. *Force* the link. Breathe in the good of the world and then breathe out the bad.”

Mark looked at the plants and he breathed in, easily connecting to the larger plant, even without touching it. He felt it now, as he did that; he felt how he connected to the world, and to the plant, and to himself.

They were just there, part of a system.

It was almost like Mark had cast filaments of transference into the world itself, and those ‘spiderwebs’ had soaked into the first plant, allowing the plant to act over a much larger area than it otherwise could.

Maybe like roots, in a forest, allowing some trees to share nutrients with other trees that had less, so that invasive species couldn’t get footholds into their Union.

With that thought, adding in the smaller two plants was easy.

The smaller plants were a lot slower-breathing than the first one, but they took to the increased rate of breath easily enough. Mark was absolutely sure that the larger plant was getting more of a benefit from Mark’s ‘spider web’ of Union right now. But it was a large plant, and it had all the nutrients that the smaller plants needed, since they were all the same sort of plant.

All the plants glowed. All of them were growing.

Mark reached the end of his inhale. On the turnaround, the plants faded a bit, and then Mark began to exhale the bad.

All the plants resumed glowing and growing.

Mark smiled.

He went through a few cycles. He tried to figure out how to minimize the downtime when he reversed his breathing; to disengage the physical action from the astral body action. But he had no idea what his astral body was really doing except for 'being there and allowing transference', and that revelation didn't seem to be enough to keep it going in the downtime—

Oh.

Roots sharing nutrients. Plants with sap that moved through their bodies.

A heartbeat, pumping blood.

Mark connected to the plants with his heartbeat, and just like that, he created a Union that didn't need breath. Mark breathed in and out normally, without focusing on the good and bad, and his heart pumped blood and Union to all three plants...

Were there good and bad heartbeats?

Mark frowned a little, wondering about that. The plants continued to dimly glow and slowly grow, unconcerned with Mark's question of what he was really doing, and if heartbeats could be good, or bad —

And then his heart skipped a beat and Mark reflexively breathed in the good to steady himself. The Union broke. The world narrowed briefly, black closing in, but Mark rallied and blinked and he was fully awake once again.

Mark almost fainted.



Mark maintained.

He shuddered.

Lola waited.

Mark collected his thoughts, and then said, "So... Not sure what happened there."

"What did you try to do? Go through it step by step."

"Well..." Mark said, "I got the breathing thing right, and linked them all, but then I tried to minimize the downtime during the breath-turnaround, and I realized that plants share nutrients through roots and they have blood-like systems, and that I have an actual blood system. So I linked the beat of my Heart to their beats and... oh. My heart slowed way, way down, didn't it." Mark looked at his chest and felt his heart, and said, "It felt fine, though?"

Lola nodded. "You won't kill yourself with a normal application of this power, since Talents naturally insulate their users from the worst backlashes of their use. But you can *certainly* injure yourself. From being unable to lift adamantium, so you lay there under the astral weight of it all, to having your heart slow down so much that you pass out and your Union automatically deactivates; these are normal sorts of failures that you will experience. Other than that, I am rather proud of you, Mark, for arriving at heartbeat-linking all on your own, and to have such a good first try."

Mark felt a little brighter at that comment.

Lola continued, "Breath-linking is the first step to learning how to use Union on other people. Somewhere in there, a person usually learns how to protect as well as heal, though heal always comes first. You have skipped a step or three, and arrived at blood-linking. This is about a month earlier than I had anticipated, but everyone progresses at different rates and I can certainly adjust to your pace. You might discover other ways of linking, but for now, we should work on blood-linking and breath-linking and leave all other ideas on the table.

"These two forms of Union are more than enough to see you very far.

“A standard acolyte of Freyala gets Union of Breath for healing and protection.

“A cleric or someone who has become a solid member of the church gets Union of Breath and a little of Blood.

“A priest or paladin gains a stronger Union of Breath and Union of Blood. Sometimes they even gain the offensive versions of these magics.

“There are other, deeper and more dangerous forms of Union gifted to Inquisitors and otherwise, but I would ask you not to explore those yet, or to even really consider them. They can be dangerous, and you have not even touched upon protection magics yet. You need those protection magics because they can help insulate you from fainting like you almost did. Protection magics will likely become the way in which you must use Union for the rest of your normal life.

“As for healing magics: I asked you to forgo focusing on things other than ‘good’ and ‘bad’ to start, for you are not a doctor and you don’t need to go treading into things like how blood works, or how plants actually breathe.”

Mark felt like he had found and crossed a milestone without even realizing how far he had come. It felt great. He smiled a little, and said, “I can promise that.”

Lola nodded. “Thank you. Now, since you have advanced to this point, we should go back to breathing, and work on protection magics. This time, instead of working with the concepts of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, I want you to consider the ideas of ‘durability’ and ‘weakness’. Breathe in durability, breathe out weakness.

“I do not want you to focus on specific durability, like in the skin, or in the bones. Don’t focus on specific weaknesses, either, like expelling the weakness of your astral body, like you have learned already.

“Just use the words ‘durability’ and ‘weakness’ in your breathing efforts, and gradually expand what you consider to be durability, and what you consider to be weakness.

“I have no doubt that you will find better words later in life to provide better, more precise effects. This is *especially* true if you decide to learn the magical languages of Daihoon. But I ask you to forgo other possible words at this time. Focus on the lessons I have given you, and what you have already uncovered.” Lola took out a small knife from the interior of her robes. It was not the mithril knife, for that one had all sorts of simple adornments on it. The one she held was not a normal knife, though. It was red. “I will be cutting the plants to test your ability to protect, when you are ready.

“Intake durability, expel weakness.

“Begin.”

Mark nodded, and then he started breathing and linking the air plants into his Union.

That much was easy enough. Every inhale and exhale caused the plants to grow and glow. The green bundles of tube-like cactus spilled warmth up into the room through their central vents.

Mark breathed in ‘durability’, and felt kinda strange doing that. He wasn’t sure how to understand what he was feeling, but he knew he didn’t like it. Not really. Did he feel... stiff? Mark moved his fingers as he breathed in durability, and found that he was a little numb. So that was wrong.

The plants seemed to love this, though. They glowed brightly and parts of the plants that had been growing oddly, suddenly straightened up. Mark hadn’t even noticed the plants were growing oddly until they got better, their tubes smoothing out, the lights evening to a full-gentle brightness, like teeny-tiny LEDs illuminating under the surfaces of the tubes, and the leaves.

Mark reached the end of his inhale of durability.

He expelled weakness, which he was much more familiar with, since he had been doing that for weeks now. That was one of the first things that he had learned about Union on his own, when he considered the idea of ‘weakness in his astral body’ to be a problem. Every so often, his power would just fail, because he had reached the end of his astral body’s strength. But Mark found he could speed up the recovery time of his astral body by expelling weakness. He wasn’t quite sure what he was doing when he did that, but he thought it might be a ‘lactic acid leaving the muscles’ sort of thing, or maybe ‘muscle damage leaving’ like how he assumed healing magic worked.

Mark breathed out weakness and a thin mist of miasma flowed away on his breath—

Something very weird happened.

The miasma he exhaled usually smelled like death, and it usually got everywhere, like how the smell of burnt toast spread fast. But this time, Mark's gentle exhale of smoke threaded through the air, to vanish into the world. That miasma came back out of the air, though, like smoke guided into the intake holes at the bottom of each cleaner plant. The plants began to practically *glitter*. The lights inside of them shimmered. Mark was giving up what he didn't need to the world, and the plants were taking that out from the world and using it for their own benefit. Was there power even in weakness?

Mark supposed so.

It was magical.

Lola took her red knife and sliced into a thick leaf on the side of the middle plant. It was so quick and final that Mark would have missed it had he not been looking. It was like cutting into green-skinned gelatin. The exposed thickness of watery insides glowed like a fiber optic wire, and water dripped. The clipped-off bit of green plopped onto the dirt in the pot.

Lola said, "Keep going."

Mark breathed in durability.

The plants turned solid. Mark did too, in an uncomfortable way. He did as instructed anyway.

Lola swiped her knife through another big succulent-like knife, and the knife skidded off the leaf.

Mark's breath caught, which threw him out of Union.

Lola grinned. "Good job, Mark. Very good. I am sure you have questions, so ask them."

Mark said, “Durability feels stiff. I do not like it. The plants can’t really like it either, do they? I mean... they’re sure glowing a lot, which I think is a good thing, but they can’t like being that stiff.”

Lola smiled gently. “That is a nuance of working with plants, and one that you will figure out how to fix when you advance to working with other people, though working with other people will give you a whole different set of experiences to solve.

“I will give you another hint, though, and that is to broaden your idea of what ‘durability’ means, as I have already advised. Personally, I use two concepts the most. The first is the ‘good/bad’ dichotomy, for healing. The second is ‘durability/weakness’, for protection. My concepts of those various ideas are very large, and so I do not have the stiffness you are experiencing when I use protection for plants. Tell me: what does durability mean to you?”

Mark had never really thought about that before, but he supposed...

“Durability means resistance to damage?” Mark asked, “It feels like ‘durability’ isn’t the best word to use here, then? Would something like ‘resilience’ work better?”

Lola said, “You might find better success with that word, but the reason for the common split of good/bad for healing and durability/weakness for protection is because —unless you have a strange idea of what the word means— ‘resilience’ is about the ability to recover quickly, and that cuts into the concept of ‘good/bad’. What you need in your *protection* magics is more resistance to damage in the first place, and ‘durability’ does that quite well.”

Mark’s eyes went a little wide. “Oh!” He thought. “... Should I add the concept of ‘resilience’ to ‘good/bad’?”

“Unless you come to Freyala with a Mind Talent, a person only has so much personal capability with stretching their mind. Neither you or I have a Mind Talent. Personally, I have found it best to have three beneficial modes and a host of specific injurious modes. Of the beneficial modes: I heal, I protect, and I do both at the same time, though doing both at the same time is not nearly as powerful as doing one or the other in full. The injurious modes are something we will cover *at a later date*.” Lola looked to Mark, to see if he understood.

Mark nodded with no small amount of comprehension.

At its base, Mark understood that Union was about creating a unified system to rapidly exchange resources and otherwise with each other, and with the world, based along ephemeral ideas of intent and meaning. He also understood that he was still starting off with this stuff, and it would take a lifetime to fully understand Union.

Let's not try to work in dealing damage just yet.

Lola continued, "Now, let us return to the concepts of durability and weakness, and what they truly mean. Durability is the ability to resist damage. You should try including ideas of resisting the damages of all of the various Powers out there, based on the idea of a high Power Level in all categories, of Body, Kinetic, Mind, Natural, Arcane, and Arch."

Mark's eyes went wide again. "I saw some 'shielding stock' in a store in Central Citadel that promised to increase a person's defense against Powers to tier 2. Is that actually an application of Union?"

Lola said, "I am unsure which place you are referring to, so I can only give a guess, and say that it is possible. Highly likely, really. Power shields are one of the primary items that the Church of Freyala sells, but there are many different ways to accomplish a shield. If someone was selling them in an *open* market here then they probably have a Talent for making items, and they got Freyala's blessing. The church, however, *donates* them to acolytes and cities all the time, and *rarely* sells them on the open market." After that short explanation, Lola nodded toward the plants.

Mark got back to it.

Soon, Lola was clipping her red knife into the tubes of the plants whenever Mark inhaled, and occasionally whenever Mark exhaled. The plants might have sparkled a lot on the exhale, when smoky miasma flowed from Mark, so they obviously liked that, but Lola's knife dug into them quite handily whenever Mark was expelling weakness. It was only on the inhale, on the intake of durability, that Lola's knife skidded off of the green plants.

Eventually, Lola told Mark to try incorporating blood-Union into the mix.

Mark almost-fainted twice.

He 'fixed' that by bringing the plants up to his own speed of heartbeat.

The plants exploded.

It didn't seem like they were going to explode, but the event had started off with the plants venting sap and clear gel and seeming to bulge and twist and *then* they exploded in a gooey mess.

Mark sat there, goo on his face.

Lola sat there, goo everywhere.

And then Lola started chuckling.

Mark smiled and laughed.

It was good to laugh.

Lola grinned, and then gestured to the plants. "So do you know what you did wrong?"

He wiped the go out of his eyes, saying, "I brought them up to my level of heartbeat so that I did not faint, and they could not handle that at all."

"Correct. This can be an offensive form of Union, in this sort of situation."

Mark's eyes went wide. "Oh! Shit!"

Lola grinned. "Oh shit indeed." She said, "Your own Power will insulate you quite well from your own Power, as all Powers do, but it will not insulate others, and especially not the mindless. Mindless plants cannot fight you. An Awakened person could. A *baseline* could not. You will not encounter this specific problem when healing or protecting other *people*, unless they are very weak, so the old or infirm, but

this explosion always serves as a good lesson to people with the true Union Talent, or to people like me who have been given a large portion of Freyala's original Power." Lola gestured at the plants again. "They're still alive, but heavily wounded. Heal them to full, healer."

Mark nodded and got started, slowing down his heart through astral body control (still didn't know how he did that), to link more cleanly with the cleaner plants. The cleaner plants spurted, but Mark controlled himself more, and soon he was breathing in 'good' and breathing out 'bad'. On a whim, and because it felt right, he included the idea of 'healing the damage of suffocation' to his idea of 'good', and suddenly a small weakness of consciousness vanished from his mind, and Mark was fully awake once again. Mark had only barely recognized that he was on the way toward fainting again, and then the problem was gone. The plants grew better, Mark didn't faint even though he breathed way too slow and his heartbeat was even slower than it should be, and soon, the plants were fully healed. When the cleaners were once again 2-foot tall bundles of green-tube cacti, with a bunch of succulent leaves on the bottom and glowing internally, Mark cut off the Union.

Mark felt pretty awesome, and the plants looked... Well. They looked amazing. Mark had never been one for plants and there was still goo on his everywhere and all over the room, but this was pretty cool.

Lola looked upon Mark with a kindness. She said, "You did very well today, Mark. Exceedingly well. But this is where we should stop." She began to stand. "You can help me get the big plants back to the nursery, and I'll clean up the mess once we're out of the room."

"Thank you for the lesson."

Soon, Mark had a plant in both arms as he stood outside of the room. Lola moved the third plant out of the room for a moment, before she turned back to the space and used a cleansing breath to wipe away all the exploded plant parts from the walls, the floor, the ceiling, and the furniture. Mark almost wanted to ask her how she did that, but he'd get there eventually. Not right now, though. He had a lot of things to practice.

As Lola held one plant in her arms and Mark held two, they walked down toward the nursery, with Lola talking about the session and Mark asking questions about this and that. When they put the plants back in the nursery, Lola suggested another scan.



“Will my numbers really improve that much?”

“I suspect today will be a large jump in Power Level across the board.”

“... Oh!”

Well that was exciting.

Soon, Mark stood in the closet scanner and got a readout.

**Body, Healthy Body: 011**

**Shaper, Adamantium: 010**

**Mind: 8**

**Natural, Union: 016**

**Soul: 7**

**Arch: 6**

Mark’s eyes went wide at his readout, floating in front of him in the scanning closet. He had been at 8, 6, 2, 9, 2, 2, just earlier today. And now he was tier 1 in three different categories. Union had nearly doubled.

Mark dismissed the floating words with a wave of his hand and stepped out of the scanner room, saying, “011, 010, 8, 016, 7, 6. Tier one already? Even in the stuff I wasn’t focused on?”

Lola grinned. “Sounds correct to me. You reached for and achieved a big milestone today, Mark. Now we should talk about what comes next.”

Mark felt she had skipped past how much he had grown in a single day, but maybe not. Maybe this much was normal. Power Levels would taper off when he began to fully understand himself, and then not go much further beyond those expected ‘maximum levels’. Power Levels weren’t all that important until they vitally were, but even in combat people just used scanners to read the tier and category of monsters in order to move their teams around to survive and exterminate the enemy; they didn’t care about specific PL’s.

Mark asked, “What comes next?”

Lola said, “You’re going to be here at Citadel for a while, and you eventually desire to fight the biggest monsters in the world, so I advise you to sign up for Social Club. I believe I spoke of that a while ago, but I am bringing it up again. You cannot fight alone, and you need people who can match you for power, and so, the Social Club is where they gather, or are gathered.

“But! To begin with, we have Xerkona Etiquette, which is the Social *Class* to the club. The Class takes place in the afternoon, in the residential district of Citadel, at the Clubhouse. You must participate in the class and get a pass for the club. In the participation of those classes, you will learn how to move in the circles you want to move within; the leaders and the superheroes, where they decide which kaiju to kill, which dragons to parlay with, and what parts of the world need to be blown up that week.”

Mark felt the world crystallize.

*Ah*, he thought.

*My biggest fears and my biggest ambitions, all in one place.*

Mark asked, “Surely I don’t need to... uh... do that right now?”

Lola nodded knowingly, and then she dropped a bomb, “Usually, a tier 1 acolyte is eligible to participate in training missions. You’re still under demonic observation for the next 7 months, but you can still go on training missions. That means venturing on short trips past the wall, into the wilderness, to hunt monsters while being a part of a team and under the observation of some accompanying paladins. So join Social Club and make acquaintances with some people for the purposes of training missions, if nothing else.”

Mark’s social anxiety evaporated.

Mark easily said, “Those are very good reasons to join Social Club and the etiquette class.”

Lola slightly smiled. “I’m glad you agree. The class meets in 30 minutes at the Clubhouse in the residential district. If you run, you can make it.”

Mark blanked.

And then he started running, saying, “See you later, Lola!”

Lola gave a little bow.

----

Mark stepped off of the tram in the residential district, wondering if he was making a mistake—

Correction.

He *knew* he was making a mistake, and the only way to get better was to make mistakes.

*Time to be brave, Mark*, he told himself.

For the last 10 minutes, ever since the tram entered this part of town, Mark only saw opulence. From towering mansions four stories tall to gardens filled with roses to fountains and hovercars; the residential district of Citadel Freyala was a place of richness. Of nobility and power. But this, right here, was the heart of it all.

‘The Clubhouse’.

A parking lot with hovercars, with each space with a number on it. A wide reflection pool and a massive fountain of Freyala with wings in the middle. Tall oaks and other sorts of trees, several of which were in full bloom with bright white flowers each the size of dinner plates. Flowered vines trailed up brick buildings here and there, scenting the air with jasmine. The buildings themselves looked fancy in ways that Mark had never really known, except outside of a screen, in the movies. Everything was built large. Too large, really. Massive archways. Pillars. Wide stairways.

A few people were out and about. All of them wore fine clothes, with multiple layers of dress for the women and stuffy suits for the men. Mark only had his basic brown clothes on, for that is all he could afford. ‘Free’ was a very good price point for him.

It was 2 minutes to the start of Xerkona Etiquette Class 101.

So Mark put his hesitation aside and walked forward, trying not to run too much, toward the front entrance of the place, up a wide, courthouse-sized staircase. A man in a silver/grey suit stood beside the open archway, near a thin podium. The guy was older and stern, but he did not look angry. Mark felt the guy should have been angry at seeing some shit of a kid walking up in basic brown.

Mark approached, flinched as he felt a spike of worry in his gut, and then stood up straight. His voice did *not* break as he asked, “Hello? I am looking for Xerkona Etiquette Class 101. Could you please direct me where I need to go?”

The man gave the smallest of nods and politely said, “The day’s class is meeting in Orange Hall, Mister Careed.”

Okay. So the guy knew him. Okay.

Mark steeled himself, and asked, “Is it going to be weird to show up wearing basic brown?”

“Yes, but this is not outside of expectations for acolytes and otherwise. You will be judged for this anyway.”

Mark wanted to turn right back around... But he squared his shoulders, and said, “Thank you... sir.”

As if it wasn’t phenomenally weird that the old man knew Mark’s name already, he then said, “Good luck killing kaiju. I look forward to your rise through the ranks of society. Orange Hall is inside, to the right, and then around the way. There are signs.”

Mark felt his heart beat hard, and then he nodded and walked through the giant archway leading inside, to the Clubhouse.

A bar with crystal glasses and people in expensive clothes drinking expensive drinks. Stone floor that looked like marble. High roof that held chandeliers, filled with light and frescoes and wow were those beautiful. Big windows overlooking gardens where people took lunch in the sun. It was all so opulent.

People looked at Mark and judged his clothes. They would probably be doing that a lot—

A gold-colored metallic sign held on the side of the foyer over there, on the right side, in front of a hallway. It read ‘Orange Hall and Red Room’. Mark started walking that way—

Oh.

The Clubhouse was set up in the Power Hex. The Blue and Green wings were to the left from the entrance. Yellow was the big area beyond the glass of the foyer, maybe. Or maybe it was further beyond

that area. Maybe the eating area was in the center. Orange and Red were over here, on the right hand side.

Mark passed through a whole wing of the Clubhouse with little red sconces on the walls, and then he entered an archway that led to Orange Hall, as indicated by the color of the sconces on the walls.

There was a side room, or maybe a back grand hall. A doorway. A plaque held beside that door read Etiquette Class 101. Even from beyond the room, Mark saw people inside who were his own age. They were dressed finely.

... For a moment, Mark saw himself hesitating. He didn't have time to hesitate, but he hesitated anyway.

This was going to be difficult. He'd be meeting people who came from much larger backgrounds than him and he'd be expected to interact with them in a personable manner...

And then Mark thought of Addashield's High Dragon, and his fears fell away. He had much bigger things to fear than people his own age.

That sort of helped.

Mark went inside.

It was a banquet hall with three separate tables, each a good five meters long and set up to the left, right, and far side from the door. People were standing around, talking with each other and waiting. To the left of the room stood a man in white robes who might have been the teacher of the class, Mark wasn't sure. He was an older guy with white hair, who was currently tapping away at a tablet—

The man set the tablet down and then looked up, and spoke to everyone, "Class begins. Come to attention, please."

Some training took over.

Mark stepped to the side, getting out of the way of the door to stand halfway facing the door, and half-facing the middle of the room. He stood with squared shoulders and an even expression, with his eyes level and his feet shoulder-width apart. Some people stood like him. Others just stood where they were. Some faced the front. Most faced the instructor.

The instructor stepped to the entrance of the room, and then he walked forward one step. He looked to Mark, and asked him, “Why did you stand like that, at that weird angle?”

Grandpa had taught him this.

Mark said, “In the absence of knowing the highest power in the room, you must stand facing the door and the center of the room, if you can... Er... *Are* you the power in the room?”

Mark might have made a miscalculation somewhere; he only realized this after the fact.

The Xerkona man nodded and walked on, toward the center of the room, saying, “I am not the power in this room, but also, I am. We’ll go over that later. For now, pretend I am just another person. Therefore, standing as the young man is standing is the correct stance to take. There are variations based on multiple entrances to rooms and such, and we will encounter them in the next week. For now, everyone correct yourself.”

The people in the room moved to obey, rotating a little or not, depending on where they stood.

The professor stepped to the center of the room, turned and said, “I am Mage Wavecrash. Welcome to Xerkona Etiquette 101; the start of a new week and a new lesson plan. This Class repeats every week, in mostly the same fashion, and most of you will pass this class in a few days, or later. You do not have to come to further classes after you pass. Most of you are only here to be eligible for Social Club, which is easy enough to achieve.

“Once I sign off on you, you’re eligible to attend the club, which is usually held at a different noble’s house every weekend, on Saturday. They plan these things out long in advance. If you are eligible to attend Social Club, you can look up who is hosting that week on COFR.

“I will be teaching you all Xerkona Etiquette for mercenaries.

“I do not teach etiquette for nobility; that is a mire that is as deep as the ocean. The hope is that by the time I sign off on you for the club that you will be able to walk into any sort of proper space and act with honor, in order to receive honor in return. Exactitude is not necessary. The rules of Xerkona Etiquette are not set in stone. The only truly important thing is to always act with the highest level of personal honor that you can achieve.

“And now, you may take out your phones.”

... Er? Phones?

Mark looked around, and saw a few people who were confused and most people who simply did as told.

Mark brought out his phone, and the screen flickered COFR gold, and then morphed into words.

‘THE EMPIRE OF FOODSTUFFS!’

What followed were lessons that grandpa had taught Mark growing up, but done in a rather novel way.

Mark was ‘Mister Apple’; a persona assigned to him by the program.

It was his goal to talk to people and protect the nation from falling.

It was kind of a surreal experience that involved Mark walking around the room according to the directions on his phone and talking with people according to what his phone told him to say, though he could choose to freestyle as he desired. He did not desire to freestyle at all. He picked the prompts that sounded best.

... It was kinda fun.

A lot of fun, actually.



Mark approached a pair of people, like his phone told him, but those two people were engaged with a third person. They were in the middle of their own scripts. According to Mark's script, he had to greet them and find out their names in the process of telling them about a rumor he heard about someone named 'Mister Peach', without interrupting their conversation unduly. Mark's name for this interaction was 'Mister Apple'.

His goal here was to find out names, but his larger goal was to secure the eastern front.

Guy #1 read off of his phone to the third person, "The eastern front is starting to fall apart. We need provisions that Mister Mountain is unable to provide. My compatriot and I have heard that you are able to provide meats to our soldiers, Madame Riverlands."

Madame Riverlands, the third person, read, "The Riverlands has a great many resources available to those in need, but we cannot give away foods without gaining something in return, Mister Garden."

Guy #1 in Mark's script suddenly changed, his name filling in as Mister Garden. Mark still didn't know who the girl with Mister Garden was, though, so 'Girl #1' remained Girl #1, and Mark did not have an opening in the conversation to ask her name, or to share his own script. It was possible that she was 'Misses Garden', but that could be wildly inaccurate.

'Girl #2 glanced at Mark with wide eyes, trying not to be too circumspect in recognizing Mark as Mark. A lot of people had been doing that, actually. She said nothing. A lot of people had tried to say something to Mark about who he was, but Instructor Wavecrash told them all to stick to the script or freehand the storyline; this was not a gossip class.

Mister Garden said to Riverlands, "Should the eastern front fall, then your lands will be in danger as well."

Riverlands said to Garden, "And if we should give away our meat it will be just as bad as falling, for starvation is a danger to us all."

Mark's phone flickered, and he saw an opening. He spoke up, "Pardon me. I'm Mister Apple, and I could not help but overhear that the eastern front is having supply issues. I've heard that Mister Peach, my

cousin, is near the eastern front, and he's willing to support troops on his lands in return for protection in the Empire. He is about to be overrun but he has a whole farm in the mountains with lots of ducks."

Garden looked happy about that, while Riverlands looked worried. Riverlands flicked through her script, and then frowned as she found a message waiting for her. Garden got the same sort of message on his phone that Mark had just gotten at the same time.

**Decide the fate of this encounter on the Eastern Front amongst yourselves. What you decide here will have ramifications upon the rest of the scenario.**

Mark gained a ticker that tracked his personal objectives.

**Find out Mister Garden's name. 1/1**

**Find out Madame Riverlands' name. 1/1**

**Find out Unnamed Woman's name. 0/1**

Mark looked to Girl #1 and tried to clear away that last completion mark, by freestyling, "Pardon me, I caught their names, but not yours."

Girl #1 said something weird in that moment, simply saying, "I am no one of importance."

Okay.

Well that was not good.

Everyone else noticed that problem too, but only with Mark pointing it out had it become a problem that they were all now looking at.

Madame Riverlands attacked, "I have not caught your name either, miss."

Mister Garden said, "Pardon my companion here, she is merely shy."

Okay. Something weird was happening there, too. Mister Garden didn't name his companion?

Mark was having fun!

Madame Riverlands said, "I cannot trust someone who is fortifying the eastern front who is unwilling to unveil the name of their companion."

Mark added his voice to Madame Riverlands, saying, "I would tend to agree with Madame Riverlands on this. We are all working toward the stabilization of the eastern front, are we not?"

Girl #1 muttered, "Fuck. Okay. I've been found out." She rotated her phone to them, showing off an image of a mask coming off a person and revealing a goblin underneath. "So I'm like, some sort of impostor? I'm not sure what's happening here, exactly."

Mister Gardens sighed. Showing off his phone. There were bodies, and goblins standing over them. "My cousins died. She was holding them hostage. Maybe I should have just..." He frowned, his words unsaid.

Mark smiled, though, thumbing toward another part of the room, where another person stood, talking to other people, "I saw it over there at that other group. That guy was a goblin, too, and he got found out. I think we're uncovering all the goblins today. People are dying because we're uncovering them, but every goblin that succeeds plants destruction for the future, so we have to root out all the goblins no matter what— well... Or maybe unveil them when they can do less damage?"

Mister Gardens said, "That's what I was aiming toward, actually."

The goblin girl said, "Sorry. For what it's worth, I'm just supposed to act like a normal person, so I wasn't purposefully doing it. Is this the end of my role, though?"

Mark said, "You'll get another role after this."

Girl #1 looked at her phone again and another role was already coming on the screen.

Mark's phone flickered, too, saying that this scenario was not complete, and to finish up the plan for supplies for the eastern front with Madame Riverlands and Mister Garden—

“Oh.” Mark saw another twist to the scenario, actually. He held up his phone, showing them what it read. “I don't have a cousin named Mister Peach. That was a ruse to allow me to unite with Riverlands and figure out what was going on here.”

‘Madame Riverlands’ confided, “This is all quite heavy handed and nothing would ever work out like this in real life.”

Goblin girl nodded.

‘Mister Garden’ said, “It's a child's game of introduction; what do you expect.”

Mark chuckled. “I'm having a lot of fun. This thing is *great*.” Mark's phone flickered and new instructions came up. He glanced at them and said to the others. “It was great to meet you, Riverlands, Garden, and Goblin.”

The three others all said similar things, which was rather appropriate, but Mark could tell that at least Miss Goblin wanted to say something specific to Mark. She refrained.

Instructor Wavecrash was watching.

The various gatherings and mostly-scripted events continued for an hour, until noon, when the Clubhouse served lunch to everyone in the class. Lunch was another lesson in etiquette, but it wasn't too fancy. There were only two plates, two forks, two drinks, and a normal amount of other utensils. One of the drinks was water, the other wine.

It was really quite good food, only marred by the fact that Mark had a whole miniature lesson on his phone, sitting in front of him and telling him how to eat (slowly and with care) and what topics to discuss with other people (more Empire of Foodstuffs plots). Mark never really knew what to say or when to say it while eating, so this was pretty... well it was good food, anyway.

After lunch came another hour with the scripted game. Wavecrash walked around the room, joining conversations at his own direction in order to correct people's postures or tones or even specific words they were using outside of the scripted events.

It was basically how to stand (tall and forthright), how to act (deferential and calm), how to respect authority (which involved several people being named as 'authorities' temporarily), and how to tell authority to respect you in turn (which was a whole lot of calmness in the face of scripted anger). Mark passed with flying colors, mostly because it was stuff he already knew and all the instructions were right there on the phone. Even better than that, Mark didn't need to talk to anyone about himself, or Addashield's Dragon, or anything like that.

Oh sure, everyone noticed who Mark was; that absolutely happened. People whispered, for sure.

But when 2 pm rolled around and the class was over, Mark felt like he had truly accomplished something. It had been really fun to 'play' the scripted game.

At the end, Wavecrash brought them all to attention, and said, "The alliances forged at the party today will shore up the entire Empire of Foodstuffs. From the eastern front where the hordes are coming, to the southern lands where a dragon invades, to the house disputes in the north and center, and to the coastal lands in the west, your actions have kept the Empire together for another month. That is, of course, provided that everyone does what they said.

"Keeping one's word is, unfortunately, not something that we can train in a scripted party.

"Honor starts with words, but it lives in action, and today was all words. You all did well. I will not be vetting anyone for a club party today. Try again tomorrow. Dismissed."

Mark bowed. When he rose, he saw that he had been about the only person to bow. Almost everyone else just started walking away. The professor Wavecrash didn't seem to care, as he went back to his tablet, to tap away at it.

... Mark got to walking out of the Clubhouse, too, he supposed.

And quite fast!

Nope! Let's avoid those looks and that possible conversation! Not yet.

Why did he go fast? Why did he try to avoid friends?

He had no freaking idea why he did that.

Soon, Mark was holding onto the railing of the tram, watching the expensive side of the residential district vanish behind him as the tram went through more moderate neighborhoods.

When he got back to his room in building 5, he wanted to change out of his normal clothes, put on gym stuff, and go for a *run*. He wanted to *push* himself on the wall course that ran around all of Citadel...

But he had mostly calmed down from that intense social event, and now he wanted to be inside, doing nothing.

And he saw his Understanding Curtain Protocol books on his desk along with his History books. Studying was quiet and nice. So that's what he did for the next 8 hours, ripping through coursework and tests and reading and essay writing.

He did spend an hour before bed reading about Xerkona etiquette, though. Upon actually studying the discipline, Mark realized that something had been bothering him about that class ever since he went there. It wasn't called 'etiquette' in Xerkona culture. It was called 'Xerkona Honor'.

Mark smiled at that.

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Mark stood under another morning sun, the angle of light coming in steep across the coliseum, the air smelling like wind and sand and faintly of exertion. It was the second day of Brawny Sparring 101, and people had mostly spread out across the sands of the arena according to wherever they had landed yesterday, at the end. Mark had fought his way up from the rank F area at the entrance of the arena, in the east, to maybe 20% of the way to the west, where the S ranks fought under the view of the instructors' skybox, in the sun. Many other people took what Mark assumed was their previous position on the field, so people were pretty spread out.

They had had 189 people yesterday, if Mark recalled correctly, and he was pretty sure he had. Today seemed lesser, though. At a glance, there were maybe 150 people? Mark wasn't sure. The 20-ish healers were the same up there, on the stadium seating to the side of the instructor skybox.

Instructor Badger stood up in the skybox with his tablet. He tapped it and a gong rang out across the field. People came to attention.

Badger's voice went out across the crowd, "Welcome to Brawny Sparring 101, day 2! I want all Fs to move further back toward the entrance and all Ss to move further toward this area over here. Everyone else can stay where they think they belong! You have 30 seconds to move. These people can stay where they are." Badger pressed a button.

A golden light appeared above Mark, like a pillar of light.

He was the only F that got a pillar. There were several maybe-Ss that got pillars, though.

... Mark remained where he was, he guessed. He wasn't sure how he felt about getting singled out, but here he was, getting singled out as the only F that wasn't forced to move back to start.

It looked like 7 Fs had to move back to start, though, while some S guy, who was only about 10 meters away from Mark and rather darned far from the S-zone, had to practically run all the way across the field, back to the instructor's overlook.

Badger yelled out, “Your instructors today are Charms, Badger, Nifty, Medley! Say it with me!”

Mark felt something on the breeze; it was a gathering of Union from the healers.

The whole arena called out, “Charms! Badger! Nifty! Medley!”

The healers on the stand connected everyone in a Union for healing, and this time Mark truly felt that connection. It was like a soft billowing; an invisible cloud that was thinner than morning mist, and it rested in the wind like a filter-feeding sponge, or like one of those cleaner plants from yesterday. And then the feeling passed into the background.

Badger spoke, “If you have Union, use it to heal yourself and save our healers some effort.”

Mark was going to do a lot more than that.

He breathed in durability and breathed out weakness—

A black mist flowed away from Mark, and he was pretty sure some people nearby could smell it—

With a twisting of social anxiety at everyone near him thinking he had done something wrong, Mark somehow flicked away his miasma into the threads of Union, in his heartbeat, and tucked them away into the world. The miasma slipped away, like blood pumping into the air, to vanish elsewhere when it got too far away.

And then the miasma broke away from those threads, to fill the air again, and Mark made another terrible stink.

*Come on, Mark. How did I do it? Let's... Hmm.*

After a moment of concentration and moving his intent around, Mark did it *again* but this time with purpose, rapidly understanding what he was doing—



“Everyone pair up and square up!” Badger called out, “30 seconds to first spar!”

Three people walked toward Mark but one of them was faster than the others; a woman with black hair, an ashen sheen to her body, and a hardness in her eyes that set her apart from most other people.

“Hi,” she said, very excited.

“Hello,” Mark replied, getting there, too.

She squared up and Mark did, too. Her skin seemed to turn a little darker, a little more metallic. She wanted to fight, for real. Mark instantly loved it. He felt his heart thump hard as he clenched his fists and prepared—

He felt his heart pulse with Union, connecting him to the world without need for breathing. With every heartbeat he felt himself steady as resources got exchanged on a rhythm that was much faster than breathing. Much more solid, too. Every pump drew in good and expelled bad at the same time. Every thrum solidified his body with strength.

The woman glanced at Mark’s chest. “That’s a neat trick you got. What is it?”

Mark glanced down and saw thready veins of miasma flickering out of the left side of his chest, by his heart.

Oh?

It was Union, threading in the air on veins, taking in ‘good’ and expelling ‘bad’. A few veins held below the skin of his arms and hands, too, and those black veins also extended a bit out of his flesh. Mark grinned at that, and then the effect multiplied as Mark understood what he was doing.

Mark looked to the woman, and said, “It’s Union.”

“Looks like Poison Body.”

Mark was kinda offended and worried at the same time. Poison Body was a dangerous skill that Mark didn't know much about, except that it should not be used in a sparring match, at the very least. It was a great monster killer, though. Being accused of that sort of honorless behavior threw Mark for a loop.

His Union with the world broke.

Mark began to stay, "Of course it's not Pois—"

Badger called out, "Begin!"

Mark started on the back foot as the grey woman came for him, fists flying like pillars of steel. Mark tried to angle a punch away and go in for a kidney counter, but the woman was impossible to move and Mark almost lost the fight in that first exchange as she went in for an elbow to his chest.

Mark retreated.

The grey woman pursued, her feet crashing into the sands of the arena like metal poles, her body turning even more grey, and then silver. Ah. She had Metal Body, then. That was a rank B or C Talent; Mark wasn't sure. He was still studying that stuff in his Understanding Curtain Protocol studies. She looked pretty darned advanced with her Metal Body, though, so maybe tier 2 already? Mark wasn't sure. What was she doing in Brawny 101?

Mark learned the futility of fighting a brawny with his fists. She punched and Mark blocked with his forearms and he heard cracks in his bone. He healed those cracked bones before he could truly feel the pain. She kicked, and Mark got thrown a few meters, so Mark rolled with it, getting back up, healing himself fast. Punches sent Mark reeling. Kicks sent him flying. Mark managed to slide away but elbows and fast turnarounds sent silver-tinged fists into the parts of him that couldn't get away fast enough.

At least Mark was learning how to keep his Union going through the pain and the fight.

At 5 minutes in, the now-silver woman stopped, looking almost bored as she said, "Use it offensively on me. Union. Do it. I know you can."

Union dropped as Mark was thrown for yet another loop. He frowned, and then glared and he almost scoffed. “What the fu— No! I exploded plants the other day. What an incredibly reckless request!”

The woman had looked bored, but she developed a grin at that moment. “You won’t explode me. I promise.”

Mark scowled. “No fucking way.”

The woman laughed. “Okay fine! Then I’m gonna beat you up now. No hard feelings.”

Mark felt his anger evaporate. He grinned. “Give me what you got.”

Mark got pummeled for the next 4 minutes and then he sat down at the end of the fight, because even though he hadn’t lost, he clearly hadn’t won, either. The woman sniffed, and then nodded at him.

“Good stamina. I’m Isoko. Nice to meet you, Mark.”

“Mark,” Mark said, brushing over the fact that the woman already knew him and that she had probably planted herself next to him at the start of the arena in order to fight him. “Good fight. Nice to meet you.”

Isoko nodded and walked west to find another winner to partner with—

“Losers! Partner up!” Instructor Badger called out.

Mark got up and got to finding someone else.

Soon, he squared up with another woman.

Two fast exchanges later and Mark was standing over the woman. She had gone down like a sack of potatoes, gasping for air. And then she gasped more deeply, cleanly, and Mark heard a distinctive POP as her ribs got back into the proper configuration. Mark’s stomach dropped. The healers had connected to her and fixed her up, and Mark felt ice cold as he realized he had gone too hard.

Mark said, "I'm so sorry for punching that hard. I was... I was thinking about the other fight."

The woman shook her head, saying, "Don't worry about it. This is what it means to be a frontliner. Thanks for the lesson. If you don't mind me I'm going to collapse down here and close my eyes for a moment."

A ripple of hot shame traced up Mark's guts. He slowly nodded, and repeated, "Sorry."

Mark won all three of his next bouts, and then he came face to face with Isoko again.

The silver-woman smiled as she walked up to Mark, saying, "I lost against a morpher, or else I would have gotten closer to the S's."

Mark said, "I just fought one of those. It was freaky. Informative, though. I probably should have lost that one."

Isoko grinned. "You're gonna lose this one too unless you use those freaky black lines offensively."

As Badger called out for the losers to pair up—

Mark leveled his eyes at her. "That's just irresponsible, you know."

"Well yeah, but it helps me work on my resistances to the other Power categories, and Natural Powers are always going to be my weak point, so I need to work on them now."

"... Oh? Ah. Well..."

Mark considered the request.

Isoko raised a questioning eyebrow.

Mark said, "Still not going to do it."

Isoko squared up, saying, “Looks like I get to advance closer to the S’s, then.”

Mark squared up. “Probably!”

Ten minutes later Isoko walked west, toward the S’s, and Mark ended up on the loser’s path, toward the east.

Mark ended up walking toward the west after his next bout, and then again after that second win. It was easier to win today, and by a lot, compared to yesterday. Mark recognized that his body was just plain tougher and stronger, which he was sure had a lot to do with his wins. He was now tier 1 in Body, which meant that he was naturally more resistant to other body powers, and stronger with his own. That was definitely a reason for his ability to win this far into the rank B’s.

But his progression with blood-Union, his staying power, is really what let him go the distance. Soon enough, most people were tired from doing so many matches, especially those with the rank D, E, and F Talents, but that same truth did not hold when it came to the higher rank Talents; the B’s, A’s, and especially the S’s. The C’s were somewhere in the middle of all that, spreading around based on their own personal martial prowess.

Mark found himself completely outgunned by any brawny who had any real skill with their Power, or actual strength.

The speedsters who had any level of control over their Powers were the easiest to lose to; Mark still tried, but fighting a speedster was like trying to punch the wind.

Brawnies with 2.5x strength were pretty hard, but doable, if Mark got an opponent that didn’t know how to fight. But then Mark went against his first Giant Strength guy, and he knew he was going to lose. The guy was a giant of a man, with brown skin and a bald head. Mark had to reach up to punch him in the with what amounted to an uppercut. It felt like punching skin-covered steel, and Mark’s hand was sore afterward. The guy just stood there and took it, and then he looked down at Mark questioningly.

Mark sat down and said, “Thanks for the fight!”

The guy smiled, saying, “Sure thing. You’re Mark Careed, yeah? You got that Union going on? Can you do healing?”

Mark paused at hearing his name... and the other parts. “I’ve not been cleared for that yet. Sorry.”

“Ach, no big deal. Some speedster practically pulped my insides three fights ago and I’m still recovering. This is the first fight I won since then.” The guy winced a little and then sat down on the sands, saying, “Still smarts. I’m Escobar, from Amazonia. Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you... and yeah. I’m Mark Careed.”

“Sorry about your parents.”

Mark felt his heart beat hard and the amount of miasma flowing out of his body increased some. The flow had been almost invisible until then, but now it was back in full swing, pulsing out there in time to his heartbeat. At least it didn’t stink up the world as it flowed away, vanishing wherever these things vanished. Mark had gotten good at controlling that.

Mark breathed in the good, and said, “Thanks. It’s been pretty painful.”

Escobar nodded. “I know—”

Mark was almost furious.

“— because I lost my parents to monsters when I was 12, out on a beach trip.”

Mark lost his fury, and wondered why he had even gotten mad in the first place.

The guy continued, “I did some stupid shit and they tried to save me but they got thrashed by a flying fish that got past the guards. All I wanted was someone to say they were sorry for my loss. I blamed myself for years. And then I learned that it wasn’t my fault; we were supposed to be behind the safe lines the city had drawn, but people were just checking boxes instead of actually doing work.”

Mark frowned a little, then asked, “*Who talks about that with someone they just met?*”

Escobar grinned. “Someone who wanted to say something meaningful to a hero.”

“... Oh.”

Mark felt his eyes blur and the black veins in the air around him pulse a bit stronger. With a concerted effort, Mark breathed in the good, and threw his pain outside of himself. The miasmic veins in his skin and in the threaded into the air grew thicker for a moment. The pain retreated. Mark breathed easy.

Mark looked to Escobar. “Thanks, Escobar. I’m sorry for your loss.”

Escobar grinned softly. He nodded. “I’m sorry for yours, too.”

Eventually, Badger called for the next round.

Escobar went toward the S group side of the arena, and Mark went back toward the F group area.

Eventually, the club ended.

“And that’s it for the day’s sparring!” Badger called out, “Those with a marking on them stay in the arena! Everyone else leave! See you tomorrow.”

Arena lights illuminated the space above Mark’s head with another golden glow. He got to stay behind.

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Badger rapidly organized people according to numbers and colors illuminated in the air above everyone, with each instructor taking a color. When a person's number was up, they went forward to speak to their designated instructor.

Surprisingly, Mark did not speak to Charms, Badger, Nifty, or Medley.

Mark got a silver color and a 1; the only one of its kind on the field.

He stepped up the stairs to the side of the arena, up to where the healers had sat the whole time. The healers were gone; done with their own Healing Club for the day, but their instructor remained.

Grand Healer Badaira sat upon the arena seating, her silver cloak resting around her like a gossamer glitter. Her skin was brown and just starting to show wrinkles, but she *felt* vaguely old, though how old Mark could not say. Maybe 60s? Same age as Lola? Mark wasn't sure. Mark had thought that Lola had been in her 40s, but she was older than that by a decade, at least.

Badaira said, "Greetings, Mark Careed."

Mark bowed to her, as was appropriate. He rose, saying, "Greetings, Grand Healer Badaira."

Badaira looked at Mark's chest, where his airy veins had retreated mostly. "That is an interesting coloration and projection of Union. I would like to speak of it with you. Are you interested in joining the Healing Club?"

Mark easily said, "I am interested in Healing Club, ma'am, but I will have to decline until I'm kicked all the way out of the arena. I greatly enjoy sparring. I understand that's a 2 week time frame before the F's get kicked out?"

"Some manage to stay for a while longer beyond that, and you might be one of them. At some point, though, the effort spent in healing and protecting the F ranks will become too great to allow them to remain on the field." Grand Healer Badaira tapped the seating next to her, saying, "Please sit and speak with me of your use of Union."



Mark sat down about a meter away from her and held out an arm, turning his palm up so that he showed her the blackening of his veins, under his skin. They weren't exiting his skin right now, but the veins over his chest were still threading into the air, somewhat. He said, "They're not actually veins. They run alongside my veins, though. Is it my astral body? My mana veins?"

Badaira gently took Mark's hand, her fingers a light touch, and flipped his palm back and forth a few times, allowing her to look at what was going on there. She let go and said, "Those would be your mana veins; yes. It's a shadow system that lives in your astral body. You can let it go of Union if you wish, unless you can keep it up all the time? I imagine Inquisitor Lola is training you in that direction."

Mark let go of Union and felt more relaxed.

So the vein-like structures truly were his astral body, eh? Well that made a good amount of sense. His astral body felt a lot bigger than what it actually looked like, though. The veins near his body were tiny, but his influence felt massive, like with those threads back in the meditation room with Lola, yesterday. Were those threads like the astral control that Orissa had shown in Introduction? Where she made bubbles of light fill up the entire room? Seemed highly possible. Maybe that's exactly what it was.

Mark said, "It's kinda easy to keep it going at a low level, but it feels better to not have it 'on' full time."

"Were you putting out that much miasma on purpose?"

"... Er?" Mark looked at himself, at where the black veins no longer were. "Not really? Er... Uh. Is that... uh. Not normal?"

"It indicates that you would be a good Inquisitor, or offensive Union user. Some people veer one way or the other, and you seem set more toward the offensive nature of this particular magic. Have you tried to do that yet?"

Mark shook his head vehemently. "No. A woman on the battlefield asked me, but I refused. I blew up some plants by accident yesterday."

Badaira smiled gently. “You could probably lay down any brawny if you focused hard enough, but you won’t kill them unless you focus on specific ways to hurt them. Simply giving them all of your ‘bad’ will not kill them. Simply giving *anyone* all of your ‘bad’ won’t kill them, except in truly strange cages.”

Mark said, “I would rather not accidentally encounter any strange cases, if I could help it. I haven’t even learned how to heal anyone else yet.”

“An honorable line to draw, and a rather normal one.” Badaira asked, “Have you tried healing *anyone* else? If not, then I would like to attempt as much with you right now.”

Mark paused.

Badaira said, “You don’t have to, but you are clearly capable of it. At the very least I would ask you to be here when you are pushed out of Sparring 101. Every one of the students here at the club are fulfilling healing obligations using the normal Union granted to them by Freyala, and it helps them, yes, but such training would benefit *you* greatly.”

Mark politely said, “I appreciate the offer, and I will take you up on it, but not until I am pushed out of Sparring, as you say.”

Badaira nodded. “This is fine. Would you like to try healing someone else now? You should get the hang of it quite readily.”

Mark... made a decision. “Yes. I would appreciate your instruction on this.”

The Grand Healer took out a little silver knife from beneath her silver cloak and pressed it into her own palm. With a quick slice, blood welled up. She turned her palm sideways and let the blood drip, as she said, “I am open to you; give it a try.”

Mark wasn’t expecting this to proceed that fast, but Badaira was already wounded so Mark made a go of it—

It was the easiest thing in the world to connect to Badaira.

His heart beat in time to her own before he could even match her breath, but then he matched her breathing and Mark began to breathe in the good and expel the bad. With his heart-Union, Mark also worked along the same ideas of 'good' and 'bad', and Badaira's wound rapidly closed. In five short breaths and maybe double that many beats, her hand was healed. Not even a scar remained.

Badaira smiled. "Freyala be praised; look at that. You are going to make a fantastic healer, Mark. I'm glad to see the black veins are gone, too, when you're healing."

— Mark looked down at himself and sure enough, though Union was still active, the astral veins were gone...

And then the stress of keeping Union active triggered Mark into falling back into expelling weakness and bringing in astral body strength to keep himself active. His black veins returned a little, though they were not nearly as prominent as before.

Badaira told Mark, "It is said that when Freyala confronted the dragon Partanatrax over Moscow she became a void-dark heart, beating with the pain that the dragon had caused the world. She gave the dragon all the evil that he had ever given this world, or Daihoon, killing the dragon in one beat of her demigod heart."

Mark felt a thrum, and he wasn't sure what it was.

His heart? His skin? The world itself? Or perhaps the stone under his ass had merely moved in a small earthquake. Or, more likely, nothing had happened at all. And then he noticed his astral veins had briefly turned thick and pulsing.

"Ah," Mark said, as the pulsing slowed down, and then quieted down. Soon, the veins were back below his skin; invisible to most onlookers. "That's good to know. That Union can kill dragons."

"Not normally, but in that case? Yes." Badaira said.

Mark thought for a long moment.

Badaira brought him back to the present, “If you want to heal your sparring partners, you should do so.”

Mark was glad of the change in subject, which he supposed was why she had changed the subject.

“Should I have healed that one guy... I forget his name. The big one. You’re all watching, right?”

Badaira said, “Escobar, and you could have, though it would have been an experimental use of power and therefore it would have been wrong to do so. But Union works very well between people. The only reason some plants explode under the touch of Union is because they are truly mindless and humans are so much different than them in a lot of ways. Tomorrow, you should offer healing to your partners after your bouts, and especially if you cave in their ribs like that one poor girl.”

Mark felt a spike of shame. “Ah. Yeah. I kinda... hit her too hard.”

“That will happen less and less when the brawnies develop a higher Power Level. When you can no longer punch one, it is time to work on other methods of fighting.” Badaira said, “It was nice to meet you, Mark. I look forward to you joining Healing Club soon enough, and to seeing how you advance with True Union.”

Mark took the dismissal, standing up and bowing, canceling Union, and saying, “Thank you for the instruction, Grand Healer Badaira.”

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As Mark rode the tram to the residential district again, he felt the wind in his hair and across his body, fluttering his clothes. People spoke of this or that all around him, from grandmothers talking to grandchildren on their knees, to boyfriends whispering to girlfriends who blushed under those quiet words. The servitor standing at the wheel of the tram at the front kinda floated there, in his glass box, a facsimile of the old-timey conductors that used to drive these things. He was the same servitor that was stationed in every single tram in Citadel, which were all connected to COFR, and even Freyala, if she wished to connect to them.

Mark was kinda connected to it all right now, too, but in a small, personal sort of way. Union was active and though he wasn’t connecting to the people directly, for that would be a violation, he certainly connected to the world.

He imagined connecting to the tram itself, which then connected to the countless other trams out there, each of them rolling along on their tracks through Citadel, carrying their own passengers to other destinations. People on those trams were on their phones, which connected them to other parts of the world, and those other parts of the world had their own movements of people.

Mark wondered what other sorts of ‘dances’ of back and forth were out there that he could connect to, which he could be a part of, to experience, to flow within...

Everything was sort of a dance, wasn’t it.

Mark had imagined that word for what he was doing on a whim, but yeah. That word made a lot of sense. Mark was most familiar with the dance of battle, like he had participated in back there, in the arena. He was headed to another dance right now; the dance of politics and social interaction. But a tamer version of the real dance. A primer, really.

The real dance of politics and powers were dances that ended up with archmages ascending to true powers as High Dragons, and thousands dead in selfishness selflessness.

Mark stepped off of the tram in front of the Clubhouse, and he kinda wondered if they had actual dancing clubs here in Citadel— Or maybe a *class* would be better. Mark had never danced at all in his life, but he certainly liked the ‘dance’ of battle. Maybe he would actually like dancing, too... to like, music? Dancing to music?

Mark snorted at that thought, and he had no idea why.

And then he walked up the steps of the Clubhouse. He smiled at the old guy standing out front; he was the same guy as last time.

Mark asked, “Pardon me. Is the Etiquette Club meeting in Orange Hall again?”

“Quite right, Mister Careed.”

Mark said, “Thank you,” and then he walked inside of the Clubhouse.

Sure, he was still wearing basic browns, and people still gave him weird looks, but he didn't feel out of place this time. He made his way to Orange Hall. Soon, Mark stood to the side of the room with several other people, just minutes before class was to start. The class looked smaller today, though Mark could not be wholly sure of that, though he did notice that 'Mister Gardens' was missing from yesterday, along with a few other people whom Mark didn't rightly recall.

Instructor Wavecrash stood near the door, tapping away on his tablet, until the bell struck 11:00 and class started right on time. Not early, not late, but exactly when Xerkona Honor demanded it to start; exactly when it was slated to start.

Wavecrash walked down the center aisle of the room, saying, "Welcome to day 2 of the weekly-repeating Etiquette 101. Yesterday, I told you that I have no way to instill honor among agreements, since all we are doing here is playing honor games with a program on our phones. This is a truth, and it is also something of a lie.

"Yesterday, you all enacted the defense of the Empire of Foodstuffs. Working together, your agreements would have secured the Empire for a month. But some of the people who were here yesterday have decided not to come into class today. Two people are running late, and they will rejoin us when they can, and with appropriate penalties to their starting stations today, but 5 people are simply missing and have decided to forgo class, for whatever reason.

"And so, the agreements those people worked on yesterday have fallen through.

"Most notably, Mister Gardens, who was responsible for organizing much of the eastern front, has now left the eastern front undefended. All agreements he made fell through. Monsters got in and killed five towns. 10,000 dead. A beachhead for the goblin horde has been established in that area, and now the realm is truly in danger due to goblin infections running rampant. The goblins have even turned more of you to their sides, using crafted words and heavy threats. Those of you infected with the goblin curse will either overcome it, or fall in the worst possible ways, and it is up to everyone else to suss out those people.

"Merely giving up if you are a goblin is grounds for dismissal from the class.

“In lesser ways, the dragon to the south is seeking to become the dragon in the east, and join with the goblin horde.

“Two noble houses, one in the north and one in the west, headed by two now-missing people, have fallen to infighting and assassination from other houses, leaving many supply lines in danger of full collapse.

“This is the state of affairs now visited upon the Empire of Foodstuffs this month, on this day, and it is up to you all to solve these greater issues, and with fewer people. You may begin.”

So, like, the idea of failing alliances was nothing new to Mark. Nations fell based on unexpected voids of personnel and broken promises and lack of resources. Completely expected. But Mark did not expect to find that happening *here*, in this class that taught Xerkona culture. He was surprised. A few other people in the class were similarly surprised, but many of the people here wore unimpressed expressions. It seemed like most people expected this.

Aside from the nature of the class, which was intriguing, Mark mostly found himself... well.

Having fun, actually.

Over the course of the next 3 hours —with lunch included— Mark found himself talking of recruitment drives in imaginary lands with imaginary lords, resource management with imaginary warriors, and beseeching the imaginary king for aid in this and that scenario. The ‘king’ was played by the instructor who stood tall when he was acting and who crumpled a bit when he was back to being the instructor, in order to tell a person that they were not standing correctly, or that their choice of words was off and to ‘try it like this’ with examples given based on the situation.

It was amazing.

Mark loved it.

Of course it was all fake (and many times Mark overheard someone saying that ‘this situation wouldn’t work out like this at all!’).

But *some* people were nobodies who had never been to a high-class anything in their whole lives and who had a whole lot of issues to work through, so Mark loved it, even if most of the class was actually focused on how people interacted with each other, instead of ‘solving the problems of the Empire of Foodstuffs’.

The food was great, too.

At the end of the class, Wavecrash told everyone, “You have managed to stall the aggression of the south-now-east dragon and his army of goblins. You have eliminated the assassins hunting in the Houses of the empire. You have met the king, and each other, and the Empire of Foodstuffs will survive another month. But the empire will fall in a year. This is unsustainable. And so, each of you must find a companion to come with you to tomorrow’s class. They will join the efforts, and if nothing else then they will have a good meal. I will not be handing out invitations to this week’s Social Club today. You are dismissed.”

Some people in the class grumbled at that, but Mark and several others bowed and then left without a word, like they were supposed to.

For 30 minutes after the class, Mark thought that his new ‘homework’ was pretty reasonable.

And then he realized he would need to go out and *talk* to people and *tell* them about the class and then *get them on board with it..*

He made a decision to recruit someone at Brawny Sparring tomorrow.

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Mark cracked his fist across the jaw of a woman and the woman went down, into the sands of the arena. She did not get up, but she was still breathing so it was fine.

Mark focused inward, and on the woman, the pulse of his Union thrumming through his heartbeat, into the world, into the air, and latching on to the woman's body. A few heartbeats later his own jaw cracked as his bones suddenly set correctly, a spike of pain briefly ripping through his teeth. He spit out a tooth as he looked at the woman on the ground, on the sands of the arena. The woman breathed hard, with Mark, and then she breathed easy. Her eyes opened. She blinked a few times and Mark pulled his healing back, the veins in his skin and in the air fading inward.

The woman sat up. With her hands in the sand and a quizzical look to her face, she looked up at Mark. "I lost?"

"I rattled your brain, I think," Mark said, "You almost had me there with that knife kick."

The woman sighed. "Almost isn't good enough..." She looked at her arms and she touched her chest. "How long was I out?"

"Just 10 seconds," Mark said.

This was Mark's fourth fight of the day, and he was getting a lot better at all aspects of this Union-thing; from healing others to ensuring he was protected. This win put him on track to enter the middle-field of the arena, but he was not going to win his next fight; he could already tell. Those were B's up there, and they were hitting each other *hard*.

The woman Mark had just fought had some sort of 'knife body' going on, allowing her to cut Mark deeply with every attack, but Mark just healed the damage and blunted further damage. It was, perhaps, the only match up Mark that could hope to win against the people further up the field.

The woman said, "I'm glad I asked you to go harder, then." And then she simply sat there and closed her eyes to... well, it looked like she was meditating.

Mark turned his attentions to the other spars...

Ah.

He saw who his next opponent was going to be.

Isoko, from yesterday, was just south of him. She had already finished her bout and she was looking his way. Upon meeting the silver woman's eyes, she waved a little.

... Mark decided he was going to ask her to Etiquette Class.

Was that a good idea?

Maybe not.

Did he know anything about the woman at all?

No. But she knew about him, probably. This was true for almost everyone, though.

Was he really doing this?

Yes.

Soon, Badger called out for people to end their fights and move on to the next.

Mark walked toward Isoko and she walked his way.

Mark instantly said, "I have Etiquette Class that starts at 11 am at the Clubhouse. I need to bring someone with me today. Want to go?"

Isoko nodded, then said, "You will use offensive Union on me, and then I will do this trade."

Mark expected that, which is why he had spoken so quickly; he had needed to be the one on the attack, dictating the scenario, and then he could agree to the request he knew the woman was going to make. “Sure—” Sudden panic. “*It’s not a date!* ... just so there is no confusion.”

Isoko grinned. “There is no confusion.”

They squared up.

Mark focused his Union, black lines tracing up from his mana veins into the air, while Isoko’s perpetually-grey skin shimmered all the way to platinum silver.

Mark had experimented with what he was about to do a little bit yesterday, after talking with Lola about Badaira and her observation that Mark would be good with offensive-based Union. He had tried it with some plants after that, and he achieved a few minor effects. He certainly didn’t explode any of them, which was an improvement.

Mark’s heart beat with the world and with Isoko, latching on to her. If she noticed, then she did not *appear* to notice.

And then Instructor Badger yelled out ‘Go’ and Mark instantly breathed in Isoko’s ‘good’, taking it into himself and depriving her of it, followed by giving her all of his own ‘bad’. She breathed in Mark’s exhale, and Mark wasn’t sure she noticed she was doing that; she certainly didn’t flinch at the stench, so he had done that right.

But then Isoko stepped forward and she almost fell on her face, her body not keeping up with her desired movement. Her grin turned maniac as her eyes flashed full silver and her teeth gritted. She did not fall. She stood her ground, her skin turning radiant platinum under her basic brown clothes as she centered herself again.

And then she *stopped* breathing and Mark felt his Union break.

Darkness evaporated from Isoko’s skin like a discarded gloom. She stood up straight and said, “Good try. Need to be more subtle than that.”

Mark grinned. “I can do subtle.”

Isoko advanced, full platinum and practically glowing with power.

Mark fortified his body, his heart beating in resilience and expunging weakness into the world.

Isoko punched, and Mark batted her fist away, connecting to her heartbeat.

Mark took the good and gave Isoko the bad.

Isoko’s eyes fluttered as her head drooped and Mark tumbled her to the ground. She recovered enough in that tumble to roll out of it and stand up and away, but she did not break the Union. Mark had already broke the Union, having only used it when he needed to, and so that she couldn’t build defenses against it. She eyed Mark, wondering what he was doing. She stopped breathing for a moment, too, trying to understand what she was seeing. She walked left.

Mark walked right.

They circled.

Mark built a Union on that circling, flowing in an unseen, unfelt flow, that only Mark could sense at all. He was ready to activate it how he needed to activate it, when he needed to activate it. His heart still beat black into the air.

Mark asked, “Just wondering, but you don’t smell anything bad when I do this, do you?”

“... No. Why ask this?”

“Because it smelled like death when I didn’t know how to weave it back into the world. It’s a weakness of my own that I need to work on, to make it all more subtle—”

Mark took some of her ‘good’.

Isoko's eyes blinked too long. She almost stumbled on a small drift of sand but she recovered. She smiled, and her silver sheen got bright again as she pushed Mark out. The Union broke. She grinned daggers at him, saying, "You *are* rather subtle. I would like to try a trick of my own."

Mark saw himself walking in time with Isoko, matching her circling with his own circling. He waited to use that Union, if necessary.

"As long as it's not lethal, then go ahead."

Isoko nodded—

She came at him with a hand horizontal-flat and forward, like a knife, moving too fast to react. Her fingernails cut into Mark's hip, for he had not managed to get away from the blow fast enough. Blood spurted and Mark recovered, fending off slashing, knife-like hands. Defending with his forearms was a bad idea. Wounds opened up and blood flowed.

Mark retreated and Isoko followed, their heartbeats linked but nothing was happening to Isoko; Mark was too focused on healing his own damage and fortifying his body so that Isoko couldn't hurt him as much as she was. Taking her good wasn't effective enough right now. It barely helped. Matching her breathing was a failure. Every time he did that she broke it on purpose. It was hard to fight with matching breath in the first place, because the dance of it all was so dependent on what you were doing and aiming for at any specific moment in the combat.

But Mark matched footsteps with Isoko, and that proved to be a game changer.

She stepped forward and he stepped back, and then he stepped one way and she followed, and then he stepped forward, feinting an attack, and she backed up when she should have advanced. It was the start of a different Union; one that allowed Mark to focus on the breathing again. Isoko turned dull, her eyes unfocusing as her hands dropped to her sides.

Mark went to sit down on the ground but Isoko sat down first, collapsing out of her control. Mark broke the Union and stayed upright. Isoko did not stay upright. She came back to herself as she sat on her ass, and then she just kinda stayed there, wondering at the world.

Mark had made her sit down.

Mark said, "I don't *think* that's a win for me."

Isoko laughed. She stood back up, saying, "No. It is not." She squared up again. "This is good training for me. I usually shrug off everything. Mindbenders included."

"This isn't mindbending at all," Mark said. "It's definitely a Natural Talent; Union."

"Naturals are always the weaknesses of Brawnies. It is a weakness I must work on."

And then she shot forward, brilliant platinum and eyes full of fun.

Mark had a hard time connecting to her again, but it was not nearly as one-sided of a beat down as it had been before.

At the called-out end of the round, Mark sat down, saying, "Your win. You know where the Clubhouse is, yes? Don't be late. I'll be waiting at the tram stop by the Clubhouse at 10 minutes to 11."

Isoko grinned. "I will not be late. I have heard they have good food there."

"Some of the best! And it's free."

Isoko chuckled. "The best price!"

Isoko walked on to her next bout against some other winner.

Mark went to his spar with some other loser.

He fought a morpher this time and he got his ass absolutely handed to him. The guy fought with whips of flesh and bone and punches that became pillars of bone held together by flesh and kicks that rotated like giant bones, used as clubs. Mark tried to connect to him with Union, just to see if he could use his

actual, real power at all, and found nothing to connect to. He certainly didn't try to harm the guy, or heal him; that would have been a violation. Isoko had asked for it, but this guy had not.

Mark accepted the loss when a slice across the abdomen threatened to spill his guts out onto the floor.

It was a good fight, though.

“Good fight,” Mark said, as some teeth regrew for the third time that day and he held his stomach in. Within seconds the pain was gone and his flesh regrew into the correct format. His clothes were fucked up, though, and the pain of injury was never a nice thing to know, but it did pass fast. He muttered, “Fuck that hurts.”

The guy reassembled himself, though it took him a moment. Eventually he was a person again with bright red hair and freckles and a smile. He had a strange accent that Mark could not place. “Yes! Good fight. You are tough!”

Mark smiled. “You're tougher.” He asked, “Do you even have lungs right now?”

“I do not! All internal organs are mush! I am Ulrick! Weird Body is my Skill.”

“All your organs are mush? ... How are you alive right now?” Mark added, “I'm Mark.”

“I do not know! I just am. If I wasn't told not to do it, I would show you how I can cut myself in half and then survive and grow back to full! It is a funky Skill.” Ulrick admitted, “Separating into piles makes a mess.”

Mark was dumbfounded.

Ulrick had said ‘it leaves a mess’, like that was the only thing wrong with the Talent. It was a fucked up Talent that made him look like a monster. But he obviously wasn't a monster. Mark hoped the guy didn't get mistaken out in the wild; friendly fire could be a real problem.

Also, he was saying 'Skill' all capitalized-like, too. Mark wasn't sure which cultures did that, but maybe... Australian? Or maybe Antarctic? Somewhere down there by the Southern Pole, at the southern entrance to Endless Daihoon. That would explain the Weird Body, too. Ulrick was practically Daihoonian if he grew up down there.

Mark said, "That's an impressive... Skill? Daihoonian?"

"Yes! My parents from there... Err. It is 'Talent', not 'Skill', isn't it? I'm still learn English."

"I think everyone would understand the meaning anyway. I'm still learning Xerkonan myself."

Ulrick's face morphed into extreme joy. It was uncanny and disturbing, and then he started speaking way too fast for Mark to keep up at all. The only words Mark caught were something about dragons and killing them and how Ulrick finally recognized Mark.

Mark was glad for being unable to understand much of that, so when Ulrick finished Mark said, "I didn't understand most of that, but I think I got the gist of it. Uh... Death to all monsters."

Ulrick grinned. "Yes! Death to all monsters! It was nice to meet you, Mark! Good luck!"

Instructor Badger must have called a switch, because everyone was moving around.

Mark went further east, toward the entrance and away from the S ranks, to find another person to fight.

He lost his next fight to another Giant Strength guy, just like Escobar from yesterday.

Mark wondered at Grand Healer Badaira's words. It wouldn't be long till he just couldn't keep up with the brawnies. Heck! He couldn't keep up with most of them already. Ulrick would have wiped the floor with him in a real fight, and Isoka was almost there herself. Any of the Giant Strength guys were *way* out of Mark's ability to reach, and they'd only get further beyond him soon enough.

... Brawny wasn't his goal in life, anyway.



It was still fun to fight, though. He could keep fighting all day, and never tire of it. This was fun.

... Mark would stop when he couldn't actually advance in skill, or when the blows taken from an errant strike threatened to truly injure him. He could make it at least a week, though.

His current set of clothes was done for, though. Shredded, parts missing, blood everywhere... though not as much as usual.

Some of the blood was flaking away.

Was someone using that cleaning Union that Lola used sometimes?

Probably.

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Mark waited beside the entrance to the Clubhouse, near the tram stop. It was 10:45. Many of the people who were in Etiquette Class had already come off the tram. Mark did not expect to get to talk to them outside of the class, but now they were here.

"Greetings," said a guy who Mark knew as Mister Fields. "I don't believe we've met outside of the class's scenarios. I'm Johnathan Fellos. This is my wife."

The girl with him said, "Catherine Fellos. Nice to see you outside of class."

Mark suddenly felt incredibly inadequate, and not just because he was wearing basic browns and they were wearing good fashion. Mark had half a foot of height on both of them, too. But they were *married*? What were they? Still 18, right? Or what!

Mark flubbed his words— And then he tried to be personable, like in class. “Married already? Makes me feel rather slow on life goals. Congratulations?” He rapidly added, “I’m Mark Careed.”

Johnathan and Catherine absolutely knew who he was, but it was polite to tell them anyway. They smiled politely at that, or maybe at the remark about marriage; Mark wasn’t sure.

Johnathan said, “It’s a business venture our parents worked out long before we were born.”

Catherine asked, “Were you waiting for someone?”

“Yes! I am. The requirement to invite someone new was... Well I fulfilled it, I think. They’re not here yet, but they have several minutes left to show.”

Johnathan said, “The Empire of Foodstuffs always falls. It’s a lesson to teach those who think the world is safe.”

“... Oh,” Mark said. “I didn’t know that.” He frowned. “That makes it a whole lot less fun.”

“There are ways to win the scenario,” Johnathan said, “But it requires bargaining with the monsters and almost no one does that. It’s just abhorrent.”

Mark was scandalized. “Really?! That is terrible.”

Catherine said, “Xerkona Culture came about as a response to dragon culture and living under the constant threat of senseless death, and attempting to thrive under that sort of thing. Even today the Settlement of Xerkona is more of a diffuse nation of city states that work under the auspices of other governments on Daihoon and Earth, rather than having their own major Empire land. So it makes sense that they engage with monsters the most out of anyone. The monsters are still people, but the problem is that we’re basically food to a lot of them.”

Mark knew most of that. But you weren't supposed to *say* that. It was abhorrent to work with monsters these days, and Xerkona was working hard to make its own Empire lands, now that they kicked out all the dragons, just like Aluatha and Okuana had done.

Mark said, "I don't think I could bargain with the dragon..." He asked, "Could we kill it in the scenario?"

Johnathan smiled a little, and so did Catherine.

Catherine said, "They're calling you the *brother* of that dragon. Not to be too difficult or pointed, but perhaps you should consider learning how to do that, instead of considering how to kill an ascendant god."

Mark felt blank.

And then a rage began to—

Johnathan told his wife, "That's never a safe course of action." He told Mark, "You can kill the dragon if you get twice as many people to join the class as we started with. This is almost always an impossible task because most people who come for one day simply leave when they are told they won't get an invitation to the club without staying. The best way to get the invitation to the club is just to stick out the entire week and take the loss. Wavecrash will give out the invitations then."

Mark felt a different sort of anger come over him in the wake of Johnathan's words. Mark asked, "That's what everyone does, isn't it? Just do the basic class and then they can move on to high society?"

"Or they just crash the party," Catherine said, "Or they get an invitation from the host, whoever that might be. Do you know who it is this week?"

Mark shook his head. "I don't know how any of this works— Op! There's my invitee." Mark was polite, "It was nice to meet you both. See you in class."

The Fellos' took the request for departure easily, the two of them walking into the Clubhouse with small nods and not another word.

Isoko was wearing a nice dress as she stepped off of the tram, eyeing Mark.

Mark was, of course, wearing basic brown.

With one hand Isoko indicated all of him, saying, “What is this basic brown!”

Mark found it very easy to say, “My entire life was destroyed and this is what I have.”

Isoko came up short, her face turning a little red. “Uh... I... Uh. I apologize.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Mark grinned a little, to show her things were fine, and they kinda were. There was only so much emotional stuff one could take before new emotional stuff just slipped away. “Shall we attend to class?”

Isoko nodded. “I accept your offer.” She paused. She looked up ahead at the Fellos’ who were walking arm in arm with each other. “So who were they?”

“Catherine and Jonathon Fellos. They’re married. I just found that out right now.”

Isoko did a double take. “At 18?”

“That was my first thought, too!” Mark smiled as he started walking, saying, “But anyway! Being late is bad.”

Isoko hurried to walk with him, around the fountain and up the stairs, into the Clubhouse. Along the way Mark explained some of what the class was about—

“I’ve read about it. It sounds fun— Oh my gods look at the *paintings* on the *ceiling*!”

Mark glanced upward at some truly beautiful frescoes, or whatever they were. It was the story of Freyala’s rise from the person known as Emilia Turner into the Goddess of Healing and Protection that

she was today. It was a story of armies vanquishing monsters and light and dark banishing dragons and healing the people.

Isoko stared, having a moment.

Mark smiled, and said, "The ceiling in the next room has more."

They made it into class with a minute to spare, joining the 27 people who were already there. Only 17 of them looked like the originals from the previous two days, which was down a great deal. They had started off with something like 40 people, but then there were 35 on the second day, and now they were down to 17 plus 10 new people.

*Oh yeah, Mark thought. No way to keep the Empire of Foodstuffs alive through this.*

Wavecrash opened the class right on time, saying, "The Empire of Foodstuffs has fallen on even harder times..."

The rest of class proceeded just as Jonathan and Catherine said it would.

Mark did try to break with the scenario a few times, though, and he even got a chance to speak to 'the king' and request something that he felt was unorthodox, but which might work.

With squared shoulders and a strong, calm voice, Mark, as Mister Peach, said, "I formally request that we abandon the eastern front and the southern lands and condense the Empire onto the coast and the north."

Wavecrash, as 'the king', exclaimed, "Preposterous! Impossible! This is treason, and you are to be executed forthwith, Mister Peach. Indeed, I believe you might even be a goblin." Wavecrash tapped on his tablet, and Mark's phone flickered, saying he was dead, his little animated head rolling across the ground. Wavecrash added, "It appears he wasn't a goblin. Oh well; the realm has no room for cowards anyway."

Mark scoffed, shaking his head. "*What?*"

Wavecrash bent a little, dropping his kingly disposition, speaking as the instructor once again, “An honorable idea, Mister Careed, but you came to the king directly without a plan of action or any backing among any of the other nobles, so this is the outcome of such an action. The king needed to stamp out any ideas that would cost him power, and you stuck your head up as the tallest nail on the board, so you had to be hammered flat.

“There were ways to make this play work, but you took none of them. But, if you would have taken any of those ways, such as coordinating efforts among the others, then you would have been branded a traitor and faced a similar situation. Navigating the overthrow of a government is tricky.” Wavecrash turned to the whole room, pausing everyone’s individual conversations, saying, “We will be discussing how to properly overthrow a government over lunch, and under which scenarios it is reasonable to attempt such a thing. This is a complicated topic, so be prepared for that.” He turned to Mark, asking, “Do you have a request for your next life in the game?”

... Overthrow a government?

Uh.

Mark tried to think of an answer to the question— “Yes!” Mark said, “Cousin to the king with a line of succession to the throne that could be established upon the overthrow of the kingdom.”

Wavecrash raised an eyebrow. “An ambitious choice. Also not available. This is not a game of individual powers.” He pressed a button on his tablet. “Let’s see what randomizer gets you.”

Mark looked at his phone and his old persona of ‘Mister Peach’ —now a body on the ground— vanished under pixelation. A new person popped up; a knight of the kingdom. ‘Mister Sword’.

Wavecrash said, “You appear to have lost the burden of speaking for small orchards and gained the burden of enacting the king’s will upon the land.”

Mark wasn’t sure how he felt about that, especially when the king had just dismissed the best idea that Mark could come up with for saving the kingdom... But Mark admitted he didn’t know much about this stuff. Mark decided to see what happened.

He bowed, and said, "My king."

Wavecrash stood upright once again, and dismissed Mark, saying, "Do as I command."

A bunch of commands appeared on Mark's phone.

Mark got to it, and soon encountered an atmosphere in the room, and in his discussions, which was charged with energy. Far gone was the boredom of some of the noble kids, here just to get their invite to the party at the end of the week. They were interested in what was happening.

In overthrowing the Empire of Foodstuffs.

Mark even caught Jonathan confiding, "I was not aware that was even an option, to depose the king."

Catherine added, "And we're really going to talk about that... subject... over lunch?"

Mark hoped they did.

Soon enough, lunch rolled around, and with everyone sitting down, Wavecrash opened the discussions with, "The nature of existence is often such that drastic changes must be made to the status quo if the people and society are to survive present or future hardships. Such discussions are not undertaken lightly, and usually not at all, but they do need to happen every now and then. There are rules to follow to ensure that the discussion is a necessary one, for even in the broaching of such a subject many people have lost their heads in many different lands, in both worlds. Mister Peach was the one to lose his head today, but he would not be the first at all.

"To start, there are conditions that need to be met before such a discussion can take place in an honorable manner.

"Is the nation in danger of actual collapse, from dangers either foreign or domestic? Politics and current ideologies have no place in this discussion, and if those are what drive people to break the society currently in place, then they need to be ostracized to a varying degree.

“Are people being enslaved, and would the enslavement rate rise, or fall, under the direction of the status quo? Enslavement is not an easy thing to diagnose, despite what you may think. Is debt slavery slavery? What about wage slavery? Not all slavery is the same. Perhaps, a better way to look at ‘slavery’ is ‘Does the current status quo allow for freedom of movement and life, or is there degradation due to the status quo’ and, ‘Does the status quo demand that people become machines for those in power.’

“And finally: Could the present or upcoming problems be solved with the removal of a section of people, or would that make it worse? Make no mistake. I do *not* mean murder.

“Often, murder makes things a lot worse, which is why Xerkona Culture puts murder of other humans — for any reason at all— at the top of the Do Nots. I am not suggesting murder at all. No. What is better to work toward is censure, or ostracization in extreme cases, and never without the consent of the people.”

What followed, for the next two hours of lunch —though people only ate food for the first hour— was a complete breakdown on why, when, and how to dismantle a society that was no longer functioning, and then how to rebuild that society from the ground up.

Class actually ended up going over time by almost 3 hours, but not a single person minded, for Instructor Wavecrash was talking about a part of Xerkona Culture that they almost never talked about; the ushering of neighboring cultures to betterment through their own presence, and how to break down non-functioning cultures and then build them back up into something better. There was a reason that the Settlement of Xerkona was all about making small settlements inside every other nation out there.

They did not want to rule.

They just wanted to make sure everyone else was ruling well.

“No, this idea is wrong, Mark, ” Isoko said, on the tram ride back to the Ecclesiastical Centers. “They *do* want to rule, but from the shadows. When the mobs come they do not come for them. *That* is what the Settlement of Xerkona is all about.”

“They’re doing honor enforcement,” Mark said, “That’s not the same thing as ruling from the shadows.”



“... Oh.” Isoko looked at Mark. “No. I think you misunderstood— No wait. The proper way to say it...” She paused, and then began again, “I wasn’t making myself clear. It’s fine to rule from the shadows. I was not attacking the validity of overthrowing a bad government and installing puppets. I would rather have a Xerkonan than a dragon. A thousand times over.”

“Ah. Yeah... I guess I was misunderstanding.” Mark paused. “But the point is not to overthrow anyone at all. It’s to work with what is there, and only overthrow with the will of the people behind you, and to strive to make sure that it never gets that bad in the first place.”

Isoko grinned. “And if things get bad, then you must walk up to the king and tell him to his face that he needs to step down?”

Mark rolled his eyes. “So I did things out of order and in a way that got my character killed. How was I supposed to know I needed to get all the nobles on board with my desires, first?”

“All the other people understood that rather implicitly,” Isoko said, enjoying this. “But you just walked right up there and got your head chopped off.”

Mark laughed. “At least it was honorable!”

“Quite so!” Isoko said, “Nations walking toward honorable deaths are always good and proper.”

Mark snorted. “Bah!”

Isoko smiled. “Thanks for inviting me. That was fun. I will be going to tomorrow’s class as well.”

Mark grinned. “Good! Glad to have you— Wait. You’re not some super rich person too, are you?”

Mark was only vaguely worried about being the poorest person in that room, but it was still a worry.

“This is my only good dress, and I am quite poor compared to everyone in that room. My grandmother got it for me specifically for events like that back there. I might need to call home and get money for a

second one, though, for the Social Club. Two people complimented me on this one, but one person said it like a slap. I wasn't sure back then, but I am absolutely sure now."

Mark teased, "No one has said anything to me about my basic browns except you."

"I said I was sorry! Tell you what. You can have a punch. Tomorrow on the field, but only if you can get it yourself."

Mark laughed.

Isoko instantly said, "So *could* we organize something in the game to overthrow the king? If the AI is robust enough to handle it— What was that game, anyway? I have never heard of it before."

"I think it's actually COFR overseeing the game, with like... a backend subroutine, or something. They just call it the Empire of Foodstuffs and there might be some stuff online about it all, but I haven't looked it up. I'm pretty sure it's a Xerkona-specific game."

Isoko nodded. "I can't imagine many other nations would like people plotting to overthrow the status quo."

"That's such a small part of it! It's mostly about making sure that everyone has what they need, and then if they don't then you change things up until they do, while working under the systems that have already been established. It's a leadership-teaching game, more than anything else. The other two classes were nothing like that one."

Isoko hummed; a questioning sound. And then she said, "Do you think the game could handle a succession of people going off to another empire, to save themselves?"

"Wouldn't that get *really* messy?" Mark started with, "That's splitting the union and weakening the whole, and then there's..."

They spoke for a while on the tram, mostly just the two of them, sitting to a side. Before either of them was ready for it, they reached the Ecclesiastical Centers.

Isoko got off first, saying, “That was fun! See you tomorrow in both classes.”

Mark smiled. “See you tomorrow.”

Mark got off at his stop next.

It had been a really good day.

--

As the sun spilled across the coliseum at a wide angle, Mark landed a good punch against Isoko. He almost broke his hand against her platinum face. She smiled. And then she trounced him in all physical ways. A punch that broke his ribs. A kick that sent him flying, breaking an arm. Mark eventually sat down and accepted the loss, and Isoko nodded, saying it was a good fight.

“You’re not using your full strength anyway,” Isoko said, “You could have pushed Union harder.”

“Maybe, but I certainly didn’t want to.”

Isoko shrugged. “Training is about pushing yourself.”

“I’ll probably end up at Healing Club next week,” Mark said, looking up to the arena seating, where the healers all chatted with each other as they healed everyone in the arena. “I wonder what they talk about all the time.”

Isoko said, “I won’t know for another month. Hopefully I can qualify for acolyte by then.”

Mark’s eyebrows raised. “I never asked, but how long are you in Citadel for?”

“I got here two months ago. I didn’t make it to the end of Sparring 101 last time. Hopefully I can make it this time and then get Chosen.” Isoko looked at Mark, sitting on the ground, and said, “Maybe I can even get a noble-assignment through Social Club.”

Mark grinned at that, saying, “Good luck with that. I’ll be rooting for you.”

Isoko smiled. “Thank you.”

Mark’s trend of losing fights continued. After the first hour of club Mark was almost all the way back toward the entrance. At the end of hour 2, Mark was only a few fights from being in the total losers bracket, but he managed to stay out of that area. Some guys near the entrance just lost fight after fight, except when they were fighting others that had to stay near the entrance. Mark was rapidly becoming one of those guys.

Class ended, and Mark got a marker over his head again.

As the crowd exited, Mark went against the flow, toward the instructors.

He was first in line to talk to Instructor Charms.

The Giant Strength woman frowned at Mark, as she said, “You need to use Union offensively against every single sparring partner. You used it against Isoko Kanno but not against anyone else. It is your main Power, and users of Union are cleared to use it on these fields, and that means offensively as well, if they can. You can do that too, so do so. Dismissed.”

Mark stood up straight with surprise, and then he bowed a little, saying, “Instructor!”

He walked away, feeling kinda funny.

As he walked back to his room, under the open sky, he looked at his arm as he activated Union, his heartbeat thrumming in the clear air, cycling ‘good’ and ‘bad’ with the world. A faint darkness held below his skin, but mostly the darkness was absent. It certainly wasn’t protruding out of his skin right now.

It wasn’t until he removed his clothes to take a shower that Mark truly looked at his clothes.

“Holy crap,” Mark said, seeing the giant holes in his shirt and pants, and all the blood. “*Fuck*. I’m really getting beat up out there, aren’t I.” After a moment, he told himself, “Tomorrow is the last day of sparring. I can do offensive Union tomorrow and see if I can stay in the club at all.”

Mark took a shower then put on new clothes. It was almost time for Etiquette Class.

- - - -

Instructor Wavecrash opened the class with, “Your valiant efforts within the Empire of Foodstuffs have failed to manifest a solution to the problems in the Empire. Now, you must run to another nation, and hope you can keep your people together and also be welcomed in that other land when you get there. Today’s class is about fitting into cultures you do not know. Half of you will be guardians of those other cultures, and you will be judging whether the other half of you get in, though you have your own problems. After lunch, which will be a collection of strange foods from Daihoon and otherwise, we will switch it up, and those who were the guardians will now become the refugees.”

*Ah*, Mark thought. *So much for plans to break away from the kingdom.*

Class was still fun, but it was sad to see the Empire fall offscreen.

At the end of it, Instructor Wavecrash said, “Humanity helps humanity; that is what we do and that is how we survive the monsters. Honor is just as important than knowing everything, or having the power to enact the changes you see as necessary. Theft is one of the worst things we can do to each other. All of these statements are true, and all of them have too many meanings for any one class to impart. The only way to learn them all is to go through life and learn, and you all have learned a lot here.

“I am ending this week’s class here.

“The Empire of Foodstuffs has fallen and everyone has secured new homes, such as they were able. Class for tomorrow is canceled. I will be handing out the Social Club invitations now.”

Mark was a little surprised by that, but not really. They had gone as far as they could with the scenario. Many other people in the class seemed a little excited. Some looked happy. Some looked disappointed, like Isoko. Mark was a little disappointed, too, but it was time to move on, he guessed, and he had lots of book-work classes to work through, anyway. Understanding Curtain Protocol and Two World History were big topics.

Mark’s phone flickered with a curling graphic of a scroll unfurling.

**Mark Careed, you are cordially invited to the Cybersong Residence located at 4 Cleansed Road, in Citadel Freyala, beginning at 3 pm, Saturday August 8th, 2048. Attire is semi-casual. Basic brown or acolyte white is expected for all people currently enrolled at the Ecclesiastical Centers of Freyala.**

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On the tram ride back to the centers, Isoko said, “I was hoping for another good lunch tomorrow! It has been nice playing dress up, though.”

Mark smiled a little bit. Isoko was easy to be friends with. “Are you going to try for a team selection thing at the party? Look for other people to party with on assignment, out in the world?”

Isoko squared her shoulders. “I suppose it would be a good time, yes. Will you do the same?”

“Not for a full team; not yet. I still got 7 months remaining here in Citadel. I’ve been told I can participate in training missions, though, if I can get a team together. That’s my goal in joining the Club. I’m not really sure how it all works, though.”

“Have you signed up for the COFR training mission board yet?”

“... Er. No? There’s a board?”

Isoko shrugged. “Many ways to kill a kaiju. Usually people sign up together for those things. I went on two already. They’re rather tame.”

“What did you get to do?” Mark asked, trying not to be too excited about it.

Isoko smiled a little, then said, “The first was around Avignon Island down south from here, not too far. It used to be a major metropolitan area in the old world, but now it’s a separatist community and walled off from the surrounding ocean. They’re devout Freyalans, and so Citadel helps them with patrols on the surrounding lands. The island has a bunch of tinkers so they know what is happening all around them at all times, but they don’t have the materials to waste killing monsters, so we get patrols there to help out. They sell stuff the world over. It’s cheaper for them to hire our Citadel than protect their own lands, or something like that.

“We fought bears.

“That’s basically all we did for 3 days.

“The second time was a roam around a mountain, in the Alps. A hiking trail from the Old World that used to be really popular. We had a guide who used to be a mountain climber from the Old World, too; that was why we went out there. I got to see some nice views and kill some rock monsters. The guide was truly young and crazy, even though he had been alive for the last 100 years. He was some secret True Healer, for sure...” Isoko looked away. “Or probably not-so-secret, actually. Everyone knows who the True Healers are.”

Mark was enthralled.

He wanted *that*.

Roaming the land. Killing things that needed killing. Helping people that he’d never meet, because he had put down a monster that could have proliferated their way, but now it wouldn’t, because Mark had been there. It was a nice thought.

Mark asked, “Had you ever been outside city walls before then?”

“No. Never. It was quite terrifying the first night in those woods outside of Avignon. They have these things in the trees that try to catch you and bite your head off. But it was amazing. I cut them with my sword and then fell to pieces.” Isoko smiled— “Oh! We haven’t sparred with weapons at all, have we?”

“Nope!” Mark said, “I’m not sure why sparring isn’t with weapons yet, but I hope I get to use them next week... if I can stay in tomorrow. I was getting thrashed out there. Thinking about dropping out next week, but Charms told me today that I need to use Union offensively against everyone, instead of just against you. Seems like cheating, though.”

Isoko laughed, and it was like cute chimes, her black hair swaying in the wind. “I almost faltered so many times! That trick with matching my footwork literally tripped me up!”

Mark smiled. And then he put away his smile, saying, “I’m still not comfortable using it on people. You’re *not supposed* to use powers on other people.”

“Bah!” Isoko asked, “How else is a brawny supposed to train if not directly against their biggest threat? A Natural against a Brawny is just whoever can line up a shot first, and except for speedsters the Natural almost always wins that race, but not always—” She got a bright look in her eyes. “Have you thought about the Villain Program? You would be good at that!”

Mark blanked for a moment. Then he laughed. “No fucking way!”

“What!” Isoko looked mildly offended now. “My grandmother is a villain in Tokyo. It is a very good life, keeping the superheroes on their toes. You can’t go sending the heroes out against all the big threats, you know. They might actually get injured.”

Mark paused. “Okay. First off: *I want to hear all about that*. But also *no*. I’m... I’m going to kill kaiju someday with a team. Not beat up people for cameras.”

“Of course! But you have to start somewhere, right? And all the villains are really heroes anyway when it comes to killing kaiju; everyone puts on the white when one of those shows up.”

Mark frowned a little bit... thinking.



Isoko shrugged. “My grandmother told me that there are two kinds of heroes; those that can wield the big swords, and those that pave the way for the guys with the big swords. I know I’m going to be a normal sort of monster hunter, wielding swords twice as long as my body and using at least ten different techmaker and artificer items to supplement what I can do. Maybe I can kill some house-sized monsters, but I know my future limits. That is why I am here, to get Freyala’s blessings. So I will be hunting monsters most of my life.

“But you’re aiming to be a big man, with a big sword. I can’t do that. And if you do that, then most of your time is going to be downtime. They’re not going to want to let you risk yourself against trash.” Isoko waved a hand, adding, “And that High Dragon has killed like... all the known kaiju on Earth, hasn’t he? Our next generation of heroes are going to be *disastrously* unprepared when kaiju start showing up again if that dragon sticks around, doing what he is doing for any length of time.”

Mark hadn’t thought much about Addashield’s Dragon in the last week, and that had been really nice. But reality crashed upon him again... And this time he held. He found it easy to think, and speak, as he said, “You’re probably right.”

“Of course I’m right!” Isoko looked out. They were coming up on her stop, soon enough. She quietly said to Mark, “I don’t like telling people this, but it is only fair since I know an unfair amount about you. My grandmother is Wandering Sage. She works with... She’s a part of Crystal Tower. The Villain Program. She’s a supervillain.”

The tram slowed to a stop right alongside Mark’s heart.

Crystal Tower?

With Glorious Man and Timeweaver and the rest?

Mark knew that they had a Villain Program over there, and he even knew what those programs usually entailed, but Isoko had that direct connection to the Crystal Tower? And a supervillain? The fu—

Ah.

But of course.

There wasn't a single person here in Citadel Freyala that wasn't special in some sort of way.

Isoko looked heavily concerned as Mark thought, and as the tram slowed down for her stop. She wasn't concerned about the slow down at all, though. She was concerned about Mark.

Mark said, "Thanks for telling me... I'm not sure who Wandering Sage is, though. Can we talk about it tomorrow? I need to do... like... a lot of research into the Villain Program. We didn't have one of those in Orange City."

Isoko smiled as she stood, saying, "Yes. We can go somewhere for lunch tomorrow. It's a date!"

And then she skipped out of the tram—

"Wait! Not a date!" Mark said, getting up out of his seat. He held onto a rail, hanging half out of the tram. "Not a date!"

Isoko was already laughing as she walked away, but she twirled once and waved, and kept walking.

Mark eventually sat back down. A few people on the tram were looking at him, but mostly they purposefully ignored him. Mark's face felt red as he mumbled to himself, "Not a date."

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As the sun rose across the coliseum yet again, on the fifth day of Brawny Sparring 101, Mark took a spot on the field maybe 20 meters from the entrance. It was close to the ultimate loser's side of the field. As the rest of everyone started filtering into the arena, or as they moved further in, Mark found himself the last person in the east, at the entrance.

The ultimate loser zone had moved, thanks to people leaving.

There was literally no one further down in the rankings than him, right now.

Mark felt a chill at that realization... and then he thought about how bad he had been getting beaten up after just 4 days of normal practice, and how most people didn't have their own source of healing, and yeah, that made sense. Mark was the only crazy F rank Body to stay in the arena. Everyone else had left. Mark didn't even see that blonde speedster guy from the first day; he had been here yesterday, but he was gone now. Cedric, the gunner with the C rank Body Talent was gone, too. He just couldn't keep up because he had no capability without weapons.

Mark suspected that the instructors wouldn't let him use guns on the arena floor, anyway.

Half of the entire club was gone. And not just the F's, but a lot of the E's and D's, and even a few S's... Actually a lot of S's. Mark studied the other end of the field, near the instructor skybox, and noticed a few people simply missing. There had been a speedster with bright red hair; gone. She had been the fastest one there, Mark thought, though he never got a chance to actually talk to her or really even get near her. There had been a very dark black man who had also stood out to Mark; that guy was gone. Mark didn't even know that guy's powers because he looked like just a normal brawny, but it had been pretty much that guy and that red-head for top position on the field. They traded wins and losses back and forth most of the time—

Instructor Badger opened the club with the normal sort of gong noise, and then he said, "Welcome to day 5 of Brawny Sparring 101. Some of you might be wondering where everyone is, and the answer to that is that they're gone! Moved on. All of the F ranks except for one, all the E ranks, and all the D ranks, have moved either out of the arena and into fighting class for remedial lessons, or they have chosen simply not to come back. The S and A rank side of the field has been moved off into higher danger clubs, or given a pass to forgo further training. Some of them have gone on to the special tutor program, or had other assignments crafted for their individual needs and Powers.

“Starting next week we’ll be moving on to individual instruction and using weapons. I or one of the other instructors will also clear you for grappling, if you want to grapple and *if you are cleared for grappling*.”

“Many of you are going to fail miserably once we start using weapons, and that is fine. This is a learning club, where we learn by doing, and almost everyone that stays in this club to the end will learn how to extend their Body Powers onto their weapons, learning whatever their variation is of Tactile Telekinesis; to learn how to use their weapons as extensions of their Body instead of as the flimsy metal that they are. You’d also learn how to prevent your clothes from shredding due to errant blows, which I am sure many of you are learning to hate.”

Mark smiled at that comment. Some people chuckled.

Mark probably wouldn’t be able to fix that problem of his own because Healthy Body wasn’t much more than what it said on the tin, but maybe he could learn a *minor* version of Tactile Telekinesis. Maybe just ‘tactile telekinesis’, all lowercase-like. Just enough to keep his clothes intact.

But that was for later.

Today was a test of Union, of trying to put people onto the ground like he almost managed with Isoko. The platinum woman in question was right up ahead of Mark, in the middle of the arena, where last he left her. Maybe she’d advance forward, too, now that the top dogs were in another arena.

Badger continued, “Today is going to be just like yesterday, but next week is going to be a whole lot different. Everyone pair up!”

Mark eyed the people nearest to him, and they eyed him in turn, before two of those people rapidly decided they would rather fight each other instead of Mark. A third person simply turned around, looking embarrassed.

It took a minute, but Mark found a person.

She was a woman with Giant Strength, with big everything. She winced as she squared up against Mark, saying, “I guess it’s you and me, then.”

Mark smiled. “I’ll go easy on you.”

The woman’s attitude switched. She grinned. “Thank you kindly.”

Mark’s heart beat with darkness, black veins of ‘bad’ connecting to the ephemeral nature of the world itself, as all that was ‘good’ pulled inward.

The woman lost her grin as she focused. Her fists came up.

Mark’s fists came up in a mirror—

Distantly, Mark heard Badger give the signal to start.

The giant woman took one step forward, aiming to put Mark down before he had a chance to do anything about it. Mark connected to her, bringing her into his Union. All that was bad flowed into her, and Mark took all of her good.

The woman collapsed onto the ground with a great big thump.

Mark instantly adjusted the flow. Bad went into the world, out of both of them, and good flowed inward. A shadow left the woman’s body, evaporating into the air. She groaned on the ground, mumbling out curses of invisible trucks hitting way too hard. She sat up, and blinked. She rubbed the sand off of her face.

The woman breathed in easier and Mark helped her. She looked at him, asking, “So that’s what offensive Union can do, huh?”

“Apparently... Er. Sorry. I didn’t think it would hit you that hard. You okay?”

The woman grinned. "You tell me, mister healer."

Mark felt embarrassed. "I mean... Yeah. I'm pretty sure you're doing great now."

The woman laughed. "Holy shit that was an experience. Okay. You won. I want to try again."

"Absolutely, sure."

The woman got up, they squared up, and Mark sent her down to a knee before he backed off and healed her to full, dispersing the shadow that had accumulated on her... well, everything. She blinked out with clear eyes, and then she sat back down.

"Well okay!" said the woman, "Looks like all those warnings my dad gave me about Naturals were right. Shiiiiiet. Here I was thinking I was hot stuff."

"If it makes you feel better, I could try to punch you."

The woman laughed. She stuck out her face. "Give it your best shot."

Mark didn't break his hand, but it was a near thing. There was a definite crack.

The woman smiled. "Usually bones just break! So you fared better than most."

Mark shook out his hand, the pain already fading as he healed the damage. "I need to work on my protection magics, for sure."

"I'm Helga. Nice to meet you, Mark."

"Nice to meet you, Helga."

Mark put down person after person, each giant falling, each speedster faltering. One speedster ran at Mark to punch him, but he ended up fainting and slapping into Mark instead. Mark healed him back to

full afterward, just like all the rest, and he rapidly opened his eyes all the way, panicking as he stumbled away. The guy controlled his panic, though, and then stood tall.

“That’s your win,” the speedster said, “Though it honestly doesn’t seem fair.”

“Er... It hasn’t been fair. No. Sorry.”

Mark advanced across the field, one knock out after another. He almost met Isoko on the way toward the S rank area, but she smirked at him, and chose someone else to fight when that opportunity arose, mouthing, ‘Talk later~ Enjoy the rise to the top~’

Soon enough Mark was standing in the S rank area, right underneath the instructors, and facing off against a woman with hair made of feathers and eyes like sapphires. She frowned at him and squared up, saying, “I will not go down as easily as the others.”

She went down as easily as the others.

Mark held a hand down, saying, “I’m Mark. Nice to meet you.”

The woman sighed, and then took Mark’s hand, saying, “Leona.”

Mark met a few more S ranks after Leona, and then he met his first morpher of the day.

The guy was a person of solid stone, shaped like a human. He had no heart and no breath, and Mark wasn’t even sure he had normal eyes, but he saw just fine. Or at least it seemed like he did.

Mark said, “Uh. I’m probably gonna just take the loss if my tricks don’t work.”

The man nodded, saying, “You can have the first punch.”

At match start, Mark tried to connect to the man in any way he could... But the man just stood there, like a statue, one hand over the other over his stomach, arms loose. Legs apart. Mark’s astral heart beat

with darkness in time to his real heart, his breath billowed the same sort of shadows, and he felt no connection to the man at all...

And then Mark expanded his scope. He looked for an opening...

Hmm.

Maybe...?

Mark adopted the same stance as the man; hand over the other on the stomach, legs apart, level gaze—

Mark felt the groove connect, the world turning into a channel between him and the guy made of stone. The guy looked uncomfortable, but he didn't notice that he had started breathing, and then he faltered straight to the gro—

He jerked fully awake, dispersing the shadows around him, breaking the groove that Mark had pulled both of them into. The man smirked.

Mark smirked in turn, reconnection Union—

The man blinked and banished his smirk, breaking the nascent Union, now that he recognized it, and then he walked toward Mark—

Mark walked toward the guy and Union—

The guy jerked away, saying, "Nope!" He varied his steps and Mark lost track of him again, the Union falling apart. "You're *mirroring* me! *That's* how you're doing it, isn't it."

Mark paused. "I mean... That's like... the *start*. Yes."

The man studied Mark, and then he advanced—



The stone man leapt forward.

Mark dodged out of the way to sit on his ass as all the sand in the nearest 4 meters swept out from under his feet and the stone man punched where Mark had been standing. Maybe Mark had meant to sit on his ass? Mark decided to just go with it, saying, "Looks like your win!"

The guy nodded. "Tough lessons all around."

That was the end of Class, thankfully, or else Mark would have ended up with more tough lessons.

Badger called out to everyone, "Congrats on making it through the first week! These people need to stay for discussion." He clicked a button and lights appeared on people across the arena. Mark got a silver light with a 1 on it. "Everyone else dismissed!"

Mark bowed to the instructors and then walked over to the side, up the stairs, to the healer area.

Grand Healer Badaira stood there to the side, dismissing her own club of healers, and then she turned toward Mark. With a gentle smile, she asked, "Ready to join Healing Club on Monday?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Very good then. I'll send you an information packet on the club, and you can put together what the club entails online. Most of us are out here at the normal time as Brawny Sparring. Some of us might go to the special sparring classes, the 102's and above, but most of us are here. Show up 10 minutes before Brawny Sparring for a quick lesson, and then we'll get right into it. When you're able to hold your own with healing and protecting, then you can choose to go to the specialty classes, if you desire. And that's basically it. Glad to have you, Mark. See you Monday."

Mark bowed then he rose. "On Monday."

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Mark sat down across from Isoko at a nice restaurant in Central Citadel, saying, “So I have no money. I hope you’re paying.”

Isoko laughed. “I will pay. Don’t be too expensive of a date.”

Mark’s face was red. “Not a date.”

The waiter asked them, “Do you know what you would like to drink?”

“Lemonlime soda,” Isoko said. “I’d like to order the molcajete as well, for two, with extra tortillas.” She winked at Mark. “I’m buying, after all.”

Mark chuckled, maybe a little nervously, and told the waiter, “Lemonlime soda.”

The guy left with their order—

Isoko asked, “Did you research my grandmother?”

That was a much more comfortable topic.

“A little bit. I did. The Wandering Sage was a supervillain air kinetic from 1995 to 2035. She only retired recently— *Well*. 13 years ago. She still comes out to lay good weather down for kaiju fights, but other than that she is in seclusion? Ever since she did that kidnapping of some True Healer to get back 50 years of her life. Before that she was one of the usual villains doing their usual thing—which I still don’t rightly understand— of doing some sort of citywide readiness-test thing.”

Isoko smiled a little. “The story of the healer is a little more complicated than that, but that is the public tale. The real story is that mom got cancer and none of the healers could fix her, so grandma pulled a grandma and she jumped the line in a healer’s queue and simply kidnapped the one she needed. She let him go after she got what she needed, and she got 50 more years of life, but Crystal Tower came down hard on her. Her actions were unsanctioned and Glorious Man beat her up in a... semi-real fight, and forced her into retirement.

“Which brings me to the Villain Program.”

Mark raised an eyebrow. Sure; let’s just skip over a fight with Glorious Man. Okay.

Mark hadn’t read about that.

Isoko continued, “Normal villains do things like rob banks that are cleared to be robbed while hero teams try to stop them. It is pretty much sparring matches on real-world scales, so that teams can learn how to work together in real world scenarios. The villains participate because they’re allowed to keep what they steal out of the banks— the banks are always heavily secured in multiple ways beforehand, of course. Banks, museums, etcetera.

“Grandmother was a *supervillain*. She had a lair and heroes had to assault it and bring her to ‘justice’. Have you seen the videos? The shows still run on prime time. Even baselines can watch them.”

Mark shook his head. “No. Never saw them. I was raised... I found out I was raised in a fundamentalist Curtain Protocol land like, last month.”

Isoko’s eyebrows went up. “Oh! So you probably have a bad opinion of villains, then.”

“It’s probably a wrong opinion, yes,” Mark admitted.

Isoko laughed wonderfully. And then she said, “It’s basically just organized sparring. There are real injuries, but they try to keep that from happening. It’s mostly knives sharpening knives so that everyone is prepared for when the real monsters come out of the ocean. You can’t send your kaiju-killers out into the woods after horror stories, after all, but they still have to stay sharp. Grandma always says that

untested steel breaks all the time.” She shrugged. “And it helps to keep everyone in everyone else’s business, so that society remains intact. It is not unlike that class I joined you for.”

Mark suddenly realized something deeply true. His mouth fell open a little, then he said, “You *are* a rich person! Just like all the others in that room!”

Isoko laughed. “I am not! You take that slander back right this instant.”

“... Well...” Mark adopted some words he had used in class, saying, “We can lay the veracity of that claim to the side, but I am rather sure you *do* know how to play this social game.”

Isoko smiled. “I am very bad at all of that and wanted to stay as far away from it as possible. You’re halfway decent at it and you might actually need to learn how to be better at it, but I will not suffer that fate.”

“This is that ‘some people are kaiju killers and some are not’ thing you said yesterday,” Mark continued, “Like, yes. I see that. But it’s too simplistic, right? I’d imagine that being in a city and being a... I’m sure there’s a name for them. One of the city heroes? Being one of those makes you develop bad habits? No one is actually trying to kill each other in those programs, after all.”

“Oh yes. Bad habits all around. It’s still the best way to multiply a person’s power into being able to kill a kaiju, though. Grandmother can clear the path for Glorious Man rather easily, tossing away all of the smaller monsters and making an actual clear path for him, but Glorious Man is the one who actually swings the sword— Err. ‘Throws the punch’, I suppose.” Isoko said, “Being on a team of 4 and going into the wilderness and hunting down those house-sized threats is actually the most dangerous profession for a hero.”

“They just call them monster slayers over on Daihoon.”

Isoko got a real excited look to her as she said, “That’s what I’m going to be! You saw how resistant I was to your Union. I can do that to every effect I’ve met so far, so I’m going to be the center of a team. I’ve already decided. I’m hoping for Paladin of Freyala, and then to join the Grand Guard of Aluatha.”

“I just read about those. They’re a guild-based agency, sort of like the Slayers, but more regimented?”

Isoko raised an eyebrow. “A *Slayer*, eh? You want to join *those* people?”

The waiter arrived with the molcajete, which Mark didn’t know or even really recognize. It was a big stone mortar, maybe, sizzling hot with meats, cheeses, and what looked like thin-sliced cactus on top of it. It came with a tray filled with tortillas and a side of beans and yellow rice. It smelled spicy and quite good, actually. Mark had never seen anything like it before.

The server asked if they wanted anything else, and Isoko politely said no. Mark also said no. Isoko was already digging in as Mark put a tortilla on his plate to start.

Mark asked, “What’s wrong with the Slayers? They’re a rather mercenary outfit, yes, but they’re well respected over there... from what I’ve read, anyway. Also, is this cactus?”

“It *is* cactus! It’s one of the best parts, and I have no idea what kind of cactus it is at all.” Isoko took the big cactus leaf off of the conglomeration of melted meats and cheeses and started cutting it up, before she handed half of it over onto Mark’s plate, saying, “The Slayers are better than *adventurers* but if you want to be allowed into any organizations then you... Hmm. Actually, you could do fine anywhere you go, I think. The Slayers have organized contracts for monster kills... The Slayers are rather deeply affiliated with Xerkona. Is that why you like them?”

“I just found out they existed three weeks ago, but there was a near-friend I had who was very enthusiastic about them, and about forgoing all demands of outside authority upon her life. She ended up signing with the Slayers and going over to Daihoon two weeks ago.” Mark had a bite of the cactus. It was tough. “The cactus is tough?”

Isoko bit through the cactus with platinum teeth. She paused. She swallowed. “Is it? Maybe it is.”

Mark laughed.

Isoko said, “If you don’t mind me asking, what was your plan before... Everything?”

Mark found it easy to tell her, “Go to Daihoon with a friend and sign up for a settlement expansion expedition. Maybe see about making a life out there. I just didn’t want to be a brawny, and so I got tangled up in... a lot. Anyway! The idea was to go see the Two Worlds, kill monsters, and then maybe come home with a lot of money or maybe not. That idea changed a lot, and now I know I’m going to be the center for a team... theoretically, anyway.”

Isoko chuckled once. “Oh yes. I see why you would like the Slayers, then. They’re very worldly; respected, but with few real attachments or responsibilities.”

“That’s what I heard, too. What are you going to do with the Grand Guard of Aluatha?”

“The family has cousins in Aluatha, so I was going to go there. Be a part of that. I am not suitable for a kaiju killer program at all. Not even support. I’m planning on wilderness patrols with regiments of people and then running if we encounter anything that needs running from. I’ll probably be a healer/support, because with Platinum Body I can ensure I survive most things, so my team can survive even more.”

Mark smiled softly at that thought. “Almost everyone here is planning on being a healer of some sort. I never really planned on that, but I like that idea, too.”

Isoko arched an eyebrow as she said, “The best form of healer is one that ensures the enemies do no damage, so yes, you will be a very good ‘healer’.”

Mark felt a little embarrassed. Quietly, he admitted, “It was *too easy* to just *put people down*. It doesn't feel right. The only people that withstood it at all were those with different bodies than normal. I imagine that’s a normal problem for Freyalan healing, though.”

“That’s a well-known problem; weird body types make it harder to use. You overcame that. It’ll only get easier for you as your Power grows.”

“You’ll be able to shrug off everything, though, right?”

“That’s the hope! I’m glad Platinum Body allows me to shrug off most things. It’s scary out there. You meet one minder monster and it’s all over for most people. Fortunately those are pretty rare, and almost all of them are hive-mind monsters that prevent the rise of other minder monsters in the same area.”

Mark had taken quite a monster-prep class back when he was under Curtain Protocol, but he knew he didn’t know much when it came to the true capabilities of monsters.

Mark asked, “75% of all common monsters are just malformations of mundane creatures and plants, aren’t they?”

Isoko looked happy to begin, “First you got the enlargements. A bigger, badder creature. That’s technically a malformation, at about 35% of all monsters...”

They spoke of monsters for a good hour as they ate Mexican food. It was a good lunch. It was good company. It was almost like hanging out with Sally again, but very different.

Mark needed to give her a call, if he even could. Where was she? What was she doing?

It wasn’t till later, when Mark was in his room working on Two World History coursework, that he connected Isoko, who was Japanese, and the Mexican food at lunch to Aluatha which was on the other side of Mexico, on Daihoon. He wondered if Mexican was popular in Aluatha, because he was pretty sure that it wasn’t that popular in Japan.

... Or maybe Mexican food was popular in Japan? Crystal Tower was in Japan, after all, and that was Earth’s center for superheroing.

For a moment, Mark thought of being a ‘proper superhero’, of ‘putting down villains’ for a ‘day job’ and then killing kaiju every other month. It was an interesting idea.

Mark hated the idea of using his Power negatively on other people, though. It was all sorts of wrong.

He was glad to have ‘spared’ with some people with the offensive version of Union, though; it had been a good learning experience. Mark was pretty sure that most of the people he fought felt the same way...

So maybe there was use in the Villain Program?

... Eh!

Mark was still going to do the monster-killing and exploring-the-world thing. But backup plans were always good...

Mark flicked through his tablet, to search Memphi, where his uncle and his uncle's husband lived, and where Mark would go in 7-ish months to reconnect with family. Did they have a Villain Program? They were a tier 4 city, after all, which was a lot more than Orange City's tier 2. Mark was pretty sure they had—

“Yup,” Mark said, as he looked over a site dedicated to the ‘Villains In Memphi’, or VIM. “They do have a Villain Program.”

Mark ended up spending the rest of the night reading about the hero/villain programs all throughout the world. He had always thought of the idea of villains as completely idiotic, but, yeah, everything he read about ‘the purpose the Villain Program’, according to various sites, was either to ‘provide entertainment’ or to ‘sharpen young heroes against known threats’ or, from the more cynical sites, to ‘give humanity something to focus on besides the monsters’ or rather ‘to delude humanity into doing/thinking X or Y or Z’.

Mark didn't know what to make of those claims.

He moved on.

Wandering Sage was pretty much the same as Mark had researched last night, but it was different to look at her now, after meeting Isoko. The old woman was bombastic in her old videos of capturing heroes and ‘ransoming’ them to the city for money, but she also showed up for every kaiju battle, in the background of every wide-angle shot, there she was, clearing the sky for Glorious Man to punch off a kaiju's skull. The front-facing site for Wandering Sage, visited through Crystal Tower's page, had Wandering Sage's greatest (read: most commercially successful/popular) stories about how she threatened to freeze or heat Tokyo to unbearable temperatures unless her call-outs against various



heroes (all of them rookies) were met in battle, in places of her choosing (Also here's a link to her video page with those battles).

Crystal Tower ranked her as 'Supervillain – Retired yet working'—

Mark's breath caught as he read something he didn't expect to read.

Mistress Storm of Orange City, who Addashield had murdered in the flyby, was trained by Wandering Sage.

There was Mistress Storm's rookie video of her fight against the 'ancient crone' Wandering Sage, with her white hair flowing everywhere during the battle in the sky over Tokyo Bay. It was before Wandering Sage had kidnapped the True Healer and gotten de-aged. Wandering Sage had trained Mistress Storm.

Mark hadn't known that.

Somehow, Mark found himself watching a video of Wandering Sage giving a eulogy for Mistress Storm. Wandering Sage was dressed in mourning blacks, a veil over her young-looking face, as she spoke in front of big pictures of Mistress Storm. She spoke of her former student saving the world every other month with her husband, Red Thunder, of how they did their famous flybys, and how they would both be missed.

Wind whipped across two blanket-covered statues behind Wandering Sage.

White stone statues of Red Thunder and Mistress Storm stood revealed, under the light of day.

Wandering Sage spoke clearly and without any anger at all, as she said, "These statues will go into the Hall of Heroes, to stand with the rest of the heroes of this world who have lost their lives in the course of duty to us all. The statues were made with loving care by Glorious Man himself. Addashield's Dragon Son has donated a thousand kilos of adamantium to Crystal Tower in recompense for his father's sins against humanity, for his father's *murder* of Mistress Sto—"

She cut herself off.

She ended her speech there.

The video ended.

Mark had some emotions he didn't know what to do with, so he buried those emotions and went on to other research.

He gained some topics for tomorrow's Social Club party.

The Hero/Villain Program. Asking if the big-power/small-power split between kaiju killers and normal monster hunters was real, and to what degree. Team Building and Power balancing within a team. And finding a potential team to go on a training exercise run somewhere out in the real world—

“Oh,” Mark said, “And I need to go get my Power Level numbers checked... I'll do that tomorrow, before the Social Club...” He shuddered, shivering a little, as he thought about actually going to Social Club. Mark got out of his chair and shook himself a little. “It's just nerves. Nothing but nerves—”

He would face bigger things, in time, than a party full of nobles and otherwise.

Dragons, kaiju, and real problems.

In all likelihood, the worst thing that could come of tomorrow would be a bit of embarrassment. The best thing would be finding some people to go on a training mission with, or finding out about the world and what was happening among the upper echelons of society.

Addashield's Dragon 'Son' was still making waves out there, trying to become an accepted member of humanity.

Mark still didn't know what to make of that.

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**Body, Healthy Body: 016**

**Shaper, Adamantium: 014**

**Mind: 13**

**Natural, Union: 022**

**Soul: 13**

**Arch: 10**

Mark didn't know what to make of these vastly inflated numbers as he read the words in the air, as he stood in the little scanning closet of Healing Hall.

It was an unbelievable spread. He was tier 2 in Union, and tier 1 in everything else. That just didn't happen... But apparently it did. This is what a tri-Talent looked like, didn't it. He was lagging on his Adamantiumkinesis, but it was there, in the background.

Growing.

Mark felt it a little bit sometimes when he stressed Union, or when he felt Healthy Body activate more than usual. It was like a sideways tug, inside of his bones. Like a feather's touch of sand, rolling inside of his limbs. There was a big particle in the left side of his pelvis and in his right femur at this very moment, but 'big' was relative. Each one was more like two grains of sand that he actually recognized as *there*, as opposed to the shadow feelings he got elsewhere. Mark still couldn't actually 'grab' either of those fragments, or the shadows gathering elsewhere in his bones. They were slippery, and it wasn't like

'grabbing onto' anything, anyway. It was like trying to lift a finger that was tied down; there was only so much strength to his 'finger'.

Sometimes he felt those grains of sand in his ribs, or his spine, which Mark didn't understand at all. How could the grains move from his chest to his pelvis? The bones weren't connected at all; not directly.

Eh!

Mark was tier 2 now, which was weird.

Eh!

He waved away the scan floating in the air and stepped out into the halls of the education center of Citadel. With a tug at his basic brown clothes and a squaring of his shoulders, Mark breathed deep and made his way out of Healing Hall, passing some weekend-learners with heavy anatomy books in their arms.

... That's right. Mark needed to learn anatomy now, too. Even just the basics would improve both the speed of his healing and the depth of his ability to injure... Hmm. Maybe leave that for some other year, actually.

Soon, Mark was on the tram, and headed north. It was 2:35 PM and the Social Club was going to meet at the Cybersong Manor at 3 PM.

It was going to be a lot different from Etiquette Class.

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Mark hopped off of the tram in a very fancy neighborhood. He was the only one who got off at this stop, which did not bode well. He kinda expected to see some of his classmates on the tram, but nope! He was alone. The road was lined with massive oak trees that grew tall and shadowed the land. Wrought iron fences hinted at large gardens and grassy lawns and bigger trees. Mansions full of people lurked in those woods.

Mark started walking.

He arrived at the entrance to Cybersong Manor at 2:57; just 3 minutes prior to start.

It was a super-rich person's house, with a driveway that wound around a fountain and parking for ten hovercars and three or four stories of house, with balconies everywhere. The house was pure white stone with blue accents, and the land surrounding it was old forest chic.

There was a butler at the front. He was an older man who stood behind a small counter that was not a gatehouse, but it was in the right sort of place to act as a gatehouse.

“Good afternoon, sir. May I see your invitation, please.”

Mark took out his phone and brought up the invitation. It still shimmered like an unfurled scroll.

The butler nodded. “You're our last expected young guest today, so I can walk with you into the house.”

Mark almost panicked. “I'm right on time, though?”

“Quite right.” The butler started walking and Mark walked with him. “For most everyone, the party starts at 11 am, with lunch and food. For the new students you arrive sometime before the appointed hour. Most of your fellow classmates were on the previous tram or the one before that.” He waved a hand in the air.

The gate to the property slid shut, near silently.

Mark turned back toward the front—

And the butler began walking up the grand stairs of the house, saying, “The party takes place on the first floor. There is a pool and game rooms for your pleasure. Food is in the back, by the pool. Guests might yet arrive by air or by car.” The man entered the large open doors of the house, and Mark followed.

The foyer was grand, with a massive central staircase that curled up to the second and third floors. The floor was marble with off-white striations and the walls were white with grey accents. Color was everywhere, in paintings and carpets and in the warm light of a golden chandelier dripping from the ceiling, crystals shimmering golden hues into the entrance.

Archways to the sides and front showed the ways to rooms with people in them, gently talking to each other or even playing games on a television over there. Most everyone looked older than acolyte age; only half of the people in those rooms were acolytes, denoted by their white clothes or their basic browns. The rest wore expensive or expensive-casual clothes and one person over there was wearing a swimsuit—

Oh.

That was Wandering Sage, standing with Isoko and someone else that Mark didn't know—

The butler handed Mark a nametag; it was the last one on the nearby table. He left Mark to affix it to his own clothes, as he opened up a small fridge nearby and took out a cooled wine glass of some sort of pink wine. Mark rapidly clipped the tag to his chest and then took the offered wine glass, saying a small thank you.

The butler nodded professionally. “Be at ease, and enjoy the party. If you have any requests for people to talk to first, I can direct you this way or that.”

Mark made an easy choice, “Team building for training expeditions into... wherever they send people. I don't really care where. I want to do one of those training missions, though.”

The butler gestured toward the room with Wandering Sage and Isoko, saying, “I believe some people already have designs on forming such a group with you. Merely enter that room and they will likely come your way.”

Mark squared his shoulders, stood straight, and said, “Thank you.”

The butler did a confirmation bow and Mark sipped his wine as he walked toward whatever was going to happen next.

With an easy pace, Mark walked into the side room. At least 40 people were there. Most of them had little dishes with food. The food came from fancy trays that stood to the side. It was a bunch of things from ribs to sushi to chicken skewers with what looked like peanut sauce and desserts of all kinds. Mark was suddenly hungry, but he wanted to see Isoko first, and her grandmother, the ‘supervillain’ Wandering Sage.

They looked almost identical, except for their hair. Wandering Sage had gotten de-aged due to kidnapping that True Healer a while ago, but Wandering Sage —Aeri Kanno, age 78— had kept her white hair. Isoko had pure black hair. Mark had no idea about the woman who was with them. She wore a bright green dress, and her long, brown hair was in a braid almost down to her butt.

The three of them noticed Mark walking their way and they opened up their little group, with the woman in the green dress smiling softly and warmly the most, but the other two were similarly inviting. Mark was the tallest of them, which was still a new experience for him; he had been 5’7” but then the Color Drop treatment had bounced him all the way up to 6’3”.

Isoko interrupted whatever conversation they had been having by saying, “Hello, Mark! I was hoping I would catch you if I stood here. Mark Careed. This is my grandmother, Aeri Kanno, also known as Wandering Sage.”

Mark bowed from his chest, not his waist, and not too deeply. “Hello, Missus Kanno.”

Aeri smiled a little as she bowed just her head. “I’ve heard a lot about you, Mark. Nice to finally meet you.”

Isoko gestured to the green-dressed woman, saying, “And this is the mistress of the house, Sophia Cybersong, also known as Circuitbender.”

Mark bowed deeper than he did for Arei, getting some waist-bending in, saying, “Hello, Missus Cybersong.”

Sophia smiled a little, and did not bow at all, which was normal for the master (or mistress, in this case) of the local domain. She said, “I’ve heard about you as well. Specifically, I’ve heard that you’re looking to go on a training mission. I have a son your age who is thoroughly grounded for going off on a training mission on his own, but who needs to be out and about like all young people. Would you be interested in going out on a mission with him?”

Mark found it easy enough to say, “Yes. I’m interested in that. I need to get direct clearing from my observers to leave Citadel but they all gave me a tentative ‘yes’, as long as I can get a decent enough team—”

Mark had a *moment* as he realized he was being too trustworthy, and that he had walked in here with goals and now his goals were being filled.

Just like with Addashield.

... But this was a training mission, of some sort, whatever that might be, happening in weeks or months, and not right now. So that made this okay? Was this a genuine offer? Or some play at something? Thinking of Addashield reminded Mark that, for all his faults (and there were many!) he did have good advice about not being used by people. ‘Don’t take offers or sign papers for anything more than a week’s length of commitment after your Tutorial, though Freyala’s church was okay’, or something like that.

All of the Churches were fine, except for Thrashtalon’s, of course.

Mark wasn’t so sure about this sudden offer to go on a mission with Sophia’s son, though.

Mark blinked a few times as he came back to the moment, and then said, “Uh. Apologies.” Mark picked out something wrong with the scenario, and said, “Your son is reckless enough to go on a training mission on his own?”



Sophia smirked. “Normally it wouldn’t have been dangerous at all, but he ran afoul of some unexpected mimic spiders. He was lucky he was prepared. My son is reckless, but he’s also prepared for every eventuality, just like he was prepared for that one. His name is Eliot and his Power is Man-made Manipulation. It’s an Arch Power, so it would fit in well with your own triplicate nature.”

Ah. So this was a real offer. And a *big* one. Okay.

Arch Powers were the rarest of them all, for they were the meeting of soul and physicality upon the world; the power to manipulate broad categories of things, like ‘Reality’, ‘Time’, ‘The Veil Between Worlds’, and ‘Man-made’. Mark wasn’t sure how, exactly, ‘Man-made Manipulation’ was different from Kinetics or Natural Powers, but today was a good time to find out.

Mark bowed a little, saying, “I’d love to meet him and to learn more about Man-made Manipulation.”

So that was probably ill-said; could have been worded better, more pleasant, less stilted. But it was what it was, and it was enough.

Sophia nodded. “I’ll make sure he seeks you out sometime this afternoon. He’s shorter than you, and wiry. It was nice meeting you, Mark.” She smiled as she told Arei, “It was good to see you as well. Good luck with your league. If you need help let me know.”

Arei said, “I’ll take that offer and send you some information later, Sophia.”

Sophia departed, and then Mark was left with Wandering Sage and her granddaughter.

Arei looked up at Mark, asking, “Have you ever considered the Villain Program?”

Mark was semi-prepared for this conversation. He said, “I only realized the VP was a way to train future heroes for combat in a safe environment three days ago. Prior to that, I had always thought the whole idea itself crazy; pardon my candor. The idea of using one’s powers against another human is... Well... Abhorrent.”

Isoko got a solid look to her face, as though she could not believe Mark had just said that. She wanted to disappear, Mark was sure.

Arei's eyes widened as she grinned a little. "I haven't heard *that* one in a while. Usually people sugarcoat these condemnations."

Mark was almost about to sugarcoat his words—

"I completely agree, of course," Arei said, "That's why a proper Villain Program only accepts those with high standards of excellence. You wouldn't even need to do it as a full-time job, but rather get paid by the state to whip some little shits into shape when they start to think they're above the law, and it's not like kaiju come around regularly. The larger fact is that most of humanity isn't as good as you want it to be. Not even on Daihoon." As though she was distilling the wisdom of the ages into as small of a phrase as possible, Wandering Sage said, "Most people are good. Some are bad. Villains are needed to sharpen all of us so we're not caught unawares when the real threats loom, both without and especially within."

Mark felt as though he stood upon a crossroads.

Mark asked, "I saw your eulogy for Mistress Storm, and then at the end when you spoke of Addashield's Dragon donating a thousand kilos of adamantium to Crystal Tower as recompense for his 'father's' sins. What is going on with that whole situation?"

Wandering Sage breathed in, staring at Mark. The room felt cold. For a moment, it was just the two of them.

Wandering Sage said, "The dragon is not his father. That's what everyone tells me. And yet I cannot help but hate him anyway. I had to be convinced for three days to add that part to the speech, and I almost didn't do it in the end. But in the end I did it anyway, because only a fool antagonizes dragons and expects to avoid retaliation. Are you a fool?"

"Probably," Mark said. "Undoubtedly, really. I still can't fu— I can't believe what happened. I expected Addashield to come back to humanity and his Old Contract, or something to that effect. I thought the adults had it all figured out, and I was just doing my duty. I did not expect him to avoid everything by

dying and leaving behind himself but a little bit changed. Is the dragon actually, fully Addashield, but with a different perspective? Or is the dragon truly a different person?”

Someone else stepped into the conversation.

Serge Garin; the son of the Holy Mother, High Priestess of Freyala, Julia Garin.

Serge Garin, AKA Justicar. One of the top heroes in the entire world.

He was wearing a flower shirt and salmon-colored shorts with flipflops. Beachwear, probably for the pool outside, in the back of the mansion. His face was bearded and stern, as he said, “He’s not the same as Addashield, but he is. And he’s a dragon. His perspective on humanity is beneficial at the moment, but it will change eventually. He’s the size of a building. He’s pretending to be Addashield, but it’s impossible for him to remain as Addashield for the rest of his effectively-immortal life.”

Another person was there; Instructor Wavecrash, of the Etiquette Class.

Wavecrash said, “He’s not Addashield.”

He was wearing semi-formal clothes, and his presence temporarily grounded Mark; he was a person Mark knew and had talked to a lot over the last week.

But then Wandering Sage and Justicar bowed toward Wavecrash, and ruined Mark’s expectations of who Wavecrash was.

Wandering Sage and Justicar both softly said, “Ambassador.”

*Oh.*

*Ambassador.* To what? The Settlement of Xerkona, probably.

That was a Big Deal.

Isoko rapidly followed her grandmother and bowed, saying, “Ambassador.”

Mark found it impossible to follow in that politeness, though.

Wavecrash noticed. He said to Mark, “He’s not Addashield. Categorically, he is *not* the Archmage whom we all respected, even if our ideas of him were purposefully misled to hide his true nature. All of us have been hurt by Addashield and saved by Addashield, and so, all consideration for what Addashield has done to us must be discarded.”

Mark snapped, “So the dragon completely avoids all responsibility?!”

“Yes,” Wavecrash easily said. “Because the dragon isn’t the human or the demon. He is a new, powerful entity, and no matter our personal feelings we cannot allow them to come into conflict with humanity’s best interests.”

Mark frowned. He wanted to rage. He did not rage. “This idea that dragons aren’t their creators— It’s not just a convenient excuse that’s paraded around to avoid a fight?”

Wavecrash said, “It is many things, that is one of the truths of it all. The convenience of this truth is but one of the ways we lead ourselves toward the light to better the outcomes for all of humanity. In other, more realistic ways: Consider the nation that has been overtaken by dissidents.”

... What?

A topic change or something?

Mark was lost for a hot moment, and then he caught up to the analogy. He frowned, completing the idea that had been exposed to him in class this week. “A nation of complicated societies is overtaken by new people, by dissidents risen from that nation. They are not the previous rulers. They want life to go on more or less how it was, but with them in charge. They can only do so if everyone else recognizes them as the same nation, but changed. How do they do that? By paying off debts.

“And so, the dissidents pay the debts of the previous nation, to establish themselves as a rightful heir to the power they captured. And so, we must treat them as a maybe-ally, lest they fall back to infighting and harm everyone else in their wars.” Mark finished with, “But they’re not the same people at all.”

“Quite right,” Wavecrash said. “But there is another, simpler way for us to think, when it comes to Addashield’s Dragon. This stance is particularly poignant for you, Mark. I will lay it out for you, and for everyone else here” Wavecrash looked at Mark. “Don’t antagonize your brother while your brother is still young and deciding who he is.”

Ring.

There was a ringing in Mark’s ears.

Mark was still.

A moment passed. Maybe two.

A sting in his hand brought him back himself. He looked down at his hand, where shards of glass had cut his skin and wine stung those cuts. Black veins leaked out of his skin. He hadn’t noticed that he had broken his glass, or that all his drink was on the ground. With a quick idea of healing, Mark sealed up his wounds and then he turned off Union as much as he could.

He walked away, black veins still showing under his skin.

He did not leave the party, though. That would have been *beyond* acceptable behavior.

Or at least that’s what his training for the last week had told him.

- - - -

Mark found himself at the bar taking a shot of whiskey.

He moved on.

He walked over to the pool area where a bunch of kids were running around under the sun, screaming and playing and diving and swimming, while the adults stood around watching the kids and talking with each other. Someone was grilling burgers on a large grill that was actually a whole mini-kitchen, built into some brickwork a little bit away from the pool, on a stone circle surrounded by grass and dads all talking to each other about the right way to cook meat. They were probably talking politics, too.

Mark heard 'Addashield's Dragon' every now and then as he walked over to get another beer from the open bar by the pool. He got a big burger from some big guy who was grilling them up.

He walked... somewhere.

Isoko found Mark under a tree, looking at the gardens. "Hey there." She sat down on the ground with him. "So the Villain Program is a no-go, huh?"

Mark huffed a laugh. "This whole thing has been a rather eye-opening experience." And then Mark was simply silent, and so was Isoko. The sounds of kids splashing and yelling and playing filled the air. Someone had some music playing in the house somewhere, and song flowed out into the yard as the trees tousled in the breeze. Mark said, "Intellectually, I knew that people did dishonorable things to promote the general welfare of all of humanity, but... is it really dishonorable to *ignore* a problem that is beneficial in the short term in favor of promoting the general welfare? I don't know. All I really know is that I'm not cut out for politics and all this maneuvering." He looked at Isoko. "Unless I'm mistaken, the Villain Program is all about politics."

Isoko said, "People don't usually fight each other or monsters with any sort of brains to them. It's the same for heroes. It's not widely publicized, but the ones who actually kill dragons are those who have a lot of experience fighting people. Inquisitors, Mark. In all of Daihoon *that's* who kills dragons; the same people who kill murderers and Fallen and demon-touched. Not the people who kill kaiju; they're different spheres that overlap, but they are not the same. You want experience fighting people and killing the *true* monsters, then you become a villain and you get heroes aiming at you every week to be put down, or else you get put down yourself and you suffer, like, a week in a comfy 'jail cell' that's... Well that's a whole thing. And yeah, there are cameras and shit like that, but you get the experience to fight anyone and *everyone*."

“Grandma has killed four dragons in her lifetime.”

Mark’s heart skipped a beat at the thought of dragon killing... And then he looked at *Isoko*. “Why are *you* pushing for this?”

“Because I can’t *do shit* against the big threats in the world, Mark,” Isoko said, her voice containing depths of rage that she kept as hidden as she could. After a moment to compose herself, she continued, “That’s my burden to carry from now until forever. You will be able to do what I cannot. That split that I talked about, between kaiju-capable warriors and otherwise? You don’t know the true depths of that split because you were raised fundamentalist. You didn’t know the true nature of the world until recently, but that gap is there, and it is the *largest gap in the world*. It’s a gap that Daihoon dealt with by making Contracts with demons, to make archmages and maybe even dragons that would help humanity. They succeeded enough that they didn’t die, and that is about all that can be said about that history. The Two Worlds are doing better than that these days. A lot better. We get by with coordination and City AIs and vast resources that Daihoon never had. Our heroes can kill kaiju without demons or dragon help, if they’re suited for it, if they’re lucky, and if they have access to those vast resources...”

“But there’s another gap.

“The gap between a dragon-killer and a kaiju killer. It’s much smaller than the gap between monster killer and kaiju killer, but there’s still a gap. It’s an airy sort of gap, too, because it allows some people to cross it, like grandma, because fighting a dragon is a lot different than fighting a kaiju. It requires true talent and a lot of expertise.”

After a moment of silence, Mark looked at Isoko, and said, “You’ve been dealing with that rage for a long time, haven’t you.”

Maybe she thought she could bridge the gap to killing dragons, but from her tone, that was a special path that was forever denied to her, but people like Wandering Sage could cross it.

Isoko sighed, chuckled in a small, unknowable sort of way, and then said, “Yes. In case you couldn’t connect some dots, grandma is a Sky Shaper. Mom is a Wind Shaper and Dad is a Mist Shaper. I ended up with Platinum Body; completely unsuitable for everything that the family focuses on, and unable to

rise high. Brawny was a 4% chance on my False Tutorial. Easy enough odds to roll. I ended up losing that roll.”

Mark felt a kinship in that moment. “... I had a 96% standard brawny roll, so I had to do something drastic. I think I ended up losing that roll in a lot of ways, too.”

Isoko huffed a small laugh. “Yeah. You did. I’m gonna be a monster killer. You need to rise higher than anyone in order to survive the real world.” She eyed him. “That’s another reason for joining the Villain Program.”

“... Yeah?”

“Grandma is pretty sure that if you try to become some great hero, like you want, then your ‘brother’ is going to be pissed if you get any sort of spotlight at all. Dragons are very vain, Mark. If you turn hero and talk of killing him, or anything like that, then he’ll get mad. If you turn *villain* and talk of killing him, then he’ll either say ‘yup, that guy is a villain! Look at me! I’m a hero!’ And he’ll turn ‘hero’.”

Mark had no idea what to do with that information.

Mark said, “I have no idea what to do with that information.”

“I wouldn’t either, if I were in your shoes.”

Mark looked away.

After a moment, he said, “I don’t much like the politics of governing a world, and would like to not be a part of all of that. The truths here are all murky, at best. I much prefer the idea of killing monsters because they need killing, saving people because they need saving, and leaving all concerns for dragons calling me ‘brother’ to the side.”

After another moment, Isoko asked, “Does it bother you, for him to call you brother?”



“Yes... and no. I haven’t interacted with him at all. If he is Addashield in disguise then yes, I would be furious beyond measure. But... They had dragon rulers in Daihoon for the last 5,000 years, didn’t they? Ever since the Veil solidified in that ancient time and split our worlds firmly in two, they were walking a path of dragons as rulers, as powers. Better than demons? Who knows. I certainly don’t know anything at all. I *do* know I’m an only child who never really thought about having a brother at all... So I don’t know what to do with him as a... brother.” Mark asked, “Is your grandmother’s theory of him turning evil if I turn ‘hero’ a real concern?”

Isoko said, “Yes, to her. To others as well.”

“Then I probably need to run away and not allow myself to affect whatever he does for a long while.”

Isoko grinned. “Running away is a good sideways solution.”

Mark suddenly asked, “Why has he not chosen a name yet? I don’t get that. Of all the things I hear, I don’t understand that the most.”

Isoko shrugged. “I don’t know.” She nodded at his empty beer bottle. “Want another beer?”

Mark chuckled. “Yes! And everything else, too... and thank you. For coming out here.”

Isoko smirked, saying, “You should know that I was sent by my grandmother just as much as I came myself.”

Mark laughed. “What was the split? 60/40?”

“Oh I was 100% already headed your way, for sure. My reasonings for wanting to help you were just updated when grandma took me aside, and I think her reasonings worked better for you than my own. You’re a good person, Mark, and you have no idea how rare that is.”

Mark stood up, saying, “Bah! People are basically good!”

Isoko stood up, too. “When they’re not tested they can *afford* to be good, they are good. That’s *not* the same thing as actually being good.”

“... Maybe, yeah. But how often does *that* happen? Not often, I bet.”

Isoko snorted a laugh, just once. “You and I have led very different lives.”

“Everyone does, right?” Mark walked back to the party with Isoko, asking, “So what were your reasonings for coming over here?”

“I like you and think you’re cute and I want to fuck around with you, but I’m pretty sure you’re not interested.”

Mark felt his face heat up. “Err... Yeah. Not interested. Sorry.”

“Boys, then?”

“Not that either. No one, actually. At all.”

“Oh! ... Well. That’s cool. So sushi? I want some of that and I think they just set out a new spread.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever had *good* sushi! I would like to try it, though.”

Isoko smiled. “So you’ve had bad sushi?”

“Mom and Dad and I would go out...” Pause. He continued, “—to this place in Orange City sometimes because Dad loved it, but I tried every kind of sushi they had and I never saw the appeal. I hope that high-class sushi can change my mind.”

It hurt to talk about them, but it also felt good to talk about them.

Mark felt a lot of ways about thought, turning it this way and that way in his mind as Isoko took up the conversation, talking about how to properly prepare sushi and what fish is best and all of the various arts of sushi that Mark had never known before. When they got to the sushi table, Isoko showed Mark how to eat it properly and then again how to eat it to make it taste good (which were two different things, somehow).

Mark decided sushi was *okay*.

“I suppose it’s not for everyone,” Isoko said.

Mark laughed. “Have you had those burgers off of the grill? That guy is a great cook.”

“Not yet! I do want one, though...”

- - - -

Eliot looked down from the balcony at the pool area. Mark was down there with that Kanno girl and with a few other acolytes from the week’s Class, all talking about the resolution to that week’s Empire of Foodstuffs. One of Mark’s minders started walking up from the sides; the Paladin Orissa, if Eliot remembered correctly, and he was pretty sure he did. A quick check on his phone told him that yeah, he did have that right.

Orissa met with Mark and Mark looked embarrassed for a moment —probably about breaking that glass and spilling wine; everyone would be talking about that for years— but Orissa waved him off, probably telling him not to worry about it.

One of the acolytes moved in to talk about something unrelated, and then that person's partner moved the conversation around to training missions, and 'Oh! You're up for a training mission too, huh, Mark? Fancy that!'

Gods above, that guy was in the eye of a storm of popularity and intrigue.

Eliot was pretty sure the guy either fully recognized that fact, and he maintained his core beliefs —the Villains hadn't persuaded him, after all— or he was oblivious.

But he clearly wasn't oblivious.

Cousin Tomou nudged his shoulder with his own, saying, "He's not *that* unstable."

Eliot scoffed. "I'm not worried about that."

"You should be. *I'm* worried about that," Tomou said. "My father and uncle tried to talk to him about our new ocean wall but he exploded at both of them and then rapidly apologized and then he started *crying*."

Tomou was Nigerian, and Addashield'd Dragon had put down an ocean wall across their bay last month, finally securing the pass between Asaba and Onitsha. That entire inland-sea behind that new wall was now truly usable territory, as long as they kept it clear of monsters, which they certainly could, now that new monsters weren't crawling inside all the time. If Mistress Storm and Red Thunder were still alive, then they would have had no problem clearing that entire place. It would have taken them several days, but that was fine. Without those two, it was going to take a year or five to clear that ocean.

Even still, Nigeria was set on a path to becoming one of the largest powers in Africa because of that ocean wall, though it was already pretty much there. The wall just secured their base of power.

Cybersong's Nigerian cousins were going to get very politically powerful. More than they already were, anyway. Tomou wasn't handling it very well, in Eliot's opinion.

Eliot said, "Of *course* he exploded at you. You guys tried to get him to talk about *maintenance plans*. Holy shit, Tomou. Just talk to the dragon himself."

Tomou strongly said, “We’re *not* talking to the dragon himself. That would be a violation of the Humanity Accords.”

“Like all the rest of humanity isn’t violating those accords daily, and even more so now...” Eliot’s voice trailed away as he looked down at Mark, and at all the people circling him who were clearly waiting for a proper moment to talk. He wasn’t worried about most of those people. One shark made him very worried. A woman in pastel pinks and a sequined hat. “Oh gods. Crystal Tower’s Villain Program failed their bid, so now the Hero Program is trying? I thought the general consensus was that that was a bad idea.”

The woman in pink was Ivona Gusca, also known as Mind Dancer; the Recruitment Coordinator for Crystal Tower.

Tomou said, “Ivona is probably going to try and direct him to the Villain Program, too. They can’t have Mark’s opinions about the dragon shouted out of a hero’s mouth.”

Eliot had too many sudden thoughts about all of that, so his mouth moved faster than his brain.

He exclaimed, “It’s *crazy* to care about what that dragon wants! We should drive him off like we did all the rest. *Tell me* I’m not insane, Tomou.”

Tomou said, “You’re insane.”

“I said to tell me the *opposite* of that.”

“Addashield’s dragon is a *High* Dragon. Not just a smart kaiju, but a *person-like* kaiju. The High Dragons ruled all of Daihoon for 5,000 years, and some of them were even benevolent.”

Eliot felt some kinda hypocrisy in the air. He eyed his cousin. “So explain again why your people won’t talk to him, if he’s so benevolent?”

Tomou scoffed. “We won’t violate the Humanity Accords, but at the same time we know what is what.”

Eliot found himself suddenly not caring about that dragon anymore. “Ugh, gods. I don’t want to talk about this shit anymore.”

“Fine, fine! So when are you going down there to make a plan with him for a training mission? Your mother bid heavily to make this week her week. Don’t throw it away.”

“When did you turn into such a politician, Tomou.”

“When a High Dragon changed the fortunes of our city overnight and both father and mother slapped some sense into me.”

Eliot rolled his eyes and said nothing. Instead, he put hands to the railing and looked down. Mark was talking with Ivona now, and it seemed to be going... about as well as could be expected. Eliot stressed some sensors in order to listen in.

Mark didn’t want to be a part of any Hero or Villain Program. He wanted to do real work in the real world; not do jumped up propaganda and placation shows for the populace. Of course he was nicer about it than that, but Eliot could read between the lines. Everyone could.

Eliot backed away from the railing and snatched up his glass of wine again, saying, “I kinda like how he wants to go out into the wilderness and just kill shit. It’s plain honorable... But fucking hell, Tomou, I’m a Man-made Manipulator. I don’t want to whittle spears out of trees, or get trapped weeks from civilization.”

“You’re getting way ahead of yourselves. It’s just a training exercise. What could go wrong?”

“Ah. So now you’re cursing me. I see how it is.”

Tomou laughed. “I can do just fine away from civilization for a month. What’s *your* fucking problem?”

Eliot frowned at him. “You told me you *hated* your expedition to the Richat Structure.”

Tomou smirked. “Nothing quite like holing up in a cave in the ground that you excavated yourself while the monsters prowl overhead. Makes you appreciate civilization more. It might be the same for Mark.” He shrugged. “Worst case scenario you get a massive first video with millions of views. Maybe two or three videos.”

Eliot rolled his eyes. “Yeah yeah yeah. I already thought about that...” His voice trailed off as he looked downstairs again. Looked like Mark was moving on to somewhere else. Back to the food? Oh yeah. Back to the food. Eliot breathed deep, and then he said, “Okay! Time to do this.” Eliot downed the rest of his wine glass and picked up his phone. “COFR. Can I actually get a training mission with Mark Careed in a timely manner, or is he still under watch?”

The phone flickered gold. Citadel of Freyala Resources said, “Training missions for Mark Careed are subject to approval. You have already been approved.”

Eliot breathed out softly—

Tomou looked affronted. “You mean you didn’t already know?”

Eliot laughed. “Come on now, cousin Tomou! Contrary to perception, I do a lot of pre-planning and quintuple-checking.” Eliot started walking inside but he turned back briefly, saying, “I was unapproved as of an hour ago, and I bet you’d still be unapproved if you bothered to check.”

Tomou straightened up and then he fell in line with Eliot, walking with him. With a quick whisper he asked his phone, “Can I get a training mission with Mark Careed?”

“Training missions for Mark Careed are subject to approval. You are not approved.”

“Well okay then.” Tomou put his phone back into his pocket, saying, “Good luck on your bardic career, Eliot The world will be watching.”

Eliot grinned wider. “Gods I hope so.”

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As Mark walked over to the dessert table, Isoko was there with him. Mark was glad she was nearby, though it was probably a ploy from her grandmother. They really seemed to want him in the Villain Program. Mark had needed to fend off some pink woman —Mark already forgot her name— who was all about the Hero Program and how rich it could make him and how much fame he could get, but Mark wasn't interested in money at all and fame... Mark was pretty sure he had enough of fame already. He'd already be rich as a monster hunter, too, and...

“Oh,” Mark said, as he bit into chocolate-covered ice cream bites.

Isoko had her own bites, and her eyebrows went up, too. “These are so good! What are these?”

Mark asked her, “The Hero Program wanted me to *not* like them, didn't they?”

Isoko laughed once; a single surprised burst. And then she looked at Mark, pretending offense. “Nooo! Are you saying the Hero Program isn't filled with absolute heroes? Noooooo!”

“Okay okay. Thank you very much. You can tone it down.” Mark looked around some as he stepped away from the dessert table, asking, “So who shows up next— Ah.”

Mark spotted the next person before they arrived.

He was a shortish guy, wiry and thin. Or maybe Mark's estimation of people was still off because he was taller now; he was still trying to get used to that change in perspective. The guy was brown-haired and skinned, and he had a weird hue to his eyes. Maybe brown, but maybe amber?



The guy came right up to Mark, saying, "I'm up next. Eliot Cybersong. You want to go kill monsters on a training mission?"

Mark's eyes went wide. And then he smiled. He had checked on the possibility that he could go on a training mission sometime soon-ish, about an hour ago, when he had spotted Orissa at the party. He said, "Yes. I want to do a training mission. Do you know where? When?"

"COFR assigns them as they become available. So far it's just you and me—"

Isoko said, "I'll go with you."

Mark had just about to suggest that very thing. He nodded. "And Isoko."

"Good!" Eliot said, "Then we'd just need a Mind or Arcane, but maybe not. I'm an Arch, but I can do pretty much everything a techmind can do, just without the actual mind-tech interface. Technology is good like that."

Mark eagerly asked, "What is a Man-made Manipulator, anyway?"

Eliot paused, not ready for Mark's enthusiasm or else reevaluating something; Mark did not know. And then Eliot said, "Do you know what a Manipulator is? The category at all?"

"So I read up on that stuff, yes, but the idea still doesn't make sense to me. A Natural works along personal understandings of the world and a kinetic works on their specific physical thing. How is an Arch-type Manipulator any different than a Natural?"

"Well..." Eliot paused, then began, "A lot of people would tell you that each Kinetic, Natural, and Arch are pretty much the same, and that's kinda true, but not really true at all. The difference has to do with the nature of magic itself. You know how all spell casting is based on imposed rules on the world? And how a mage taps into those rules to cast magics? Those rules are imposed by demons and the Stone God and Risen AI Malaqua, though Malaqua is a recent addition to those old rules. The basic magics were already in place for a very long time, due to the demons."

“Malaqua solidified understandings in a large way, parceling out stuff into the Body, Kinetic, Mind, Natural, Arcane, and Arch directions, and thus he repaired the Veil and separated the Two Worlds once again, yadda yadda, history schmistory.

“A Natural uses their own understanding of a weird thing in order to work in weird ways, which is a bending between mind and soul. A witch sprinkling herbs together in a stew and calling it a healing potion works because they say it works, because they believe it works. Naturals have a large range because they’re all rather airy.

“A Kinetic takes their own understanding of a specific, tangible thing, and then uses it as a physical extension of their astral body.

“An Arch takes the demonic-soul-impositions on the world and manipulates them and all their attendant physicality and otherwise, with their astral body. Arch powers don’t obey personal understandings at all, but I can stretch those imposed understandings a bit with some physical action. And that’s probably the easiest way to explain the whole thing.”

Mark smiled a little. “Ah. That makes a lot more sense, then. Thank you.”

“Anyway!” Eliot added, “As for myself: I like people and being around people, and I hope to be quite famous someday, and if I have to trudge through a whole lot of monster guts to get there then I will. How about you?”

Mark thought that all rather direct, and perhaps a bit too direct, but people were watching so it was best to be clear about these sorts of things, he supposed. Mark said, “I want to be ready when needed and in the meantime I will act to save as much humanity as I can.”

Eliot tried not to stare, as he asked, “How do you feel about being famous? On camera for the world? ‘Cause I have drones and I scout with them and I also splice videos about all of that together afterward.”

Mark paused. “... Like the Hero or Villain Program?”

“More like a standard bard from Daihoon, actually.”

“Oh!”

‘Bard’ was a very different thing entirely. Mark had almost no experience with any of that, but he knew, vaguely, that bards were historical record keepers and storytellers, more than they were people looking for popularity and money. More ‘adventurers’ but without the bad connotation of that word; they fit in every type of group in order to bring that group’s story out into the rest of the world.

Mark said, “Neat! Do you have a channel already?”

Eliot grinned. “I do, actually.” He took out his phone and tapped away at it. “I think my mother informed you that I was grounded because of a little thing with spiders... and... There!” He turned the phone around and handed it over. “As you can see, I was never in danger at all.”

Mark looked at the video for a moment, watching as Eliot sliced through some spiders with fishing line, or something, as a graphic overlaid the video explaining his Power and what it could and could not do. Mark raised eyebrows at that. He looked for the guy’s channel name and views, and found them as ‘VeryHuman’ and 20,000 views. He handed the phone back, saying, “I’ll have to watch the whole thing sometime later. Do you have much experience moving between groups of people on Daihoon yet?”

“I got out of Curtain Protocol just months ago so I’m still making real connections, but they’re getting made. My main idea is to sign up with the Slayers, with COFR directing me toward problem areas and stuff like that.”

Mark grinned a little. “I’ve heard a lot about the Slayers. They’re rather un beholden to any great power but still respected, unlike adventurers.”

“It’s pretty much exactly what I want, so unless I get a whole lot of better offers then I’m probably going that way,” Eliot said, glancing around.

Mark chuckled at that. Eliot probably *would* get better offers after this. Maybe someone would try to do an end run on Mark through Eliot, which would be interesting—

Eliot asked Isoko, “How about you, Isoko? What are your great plans?”

Isoko shrugged, and said, “I’m going into the Grand Guard. I’ve got family in Crytalis, and the plan is to do patrols and maybe meet a nice guy. The opportunities for advancement practically anywhere in Daihoon are fantastic.”

Mark smiled at that, jumping in, saying, “Why is Daihoon doing it so much better than Earth on that front, do you think? Because that’s what I’ve heard, too. Anyone can just go out and clear land and secure a city and it all just sort of works out.”

A pause.

Eliot wasn’t sure how to answer that question, or where to go with it.

Isoko shrugged. “There’s not a single part of Earth that isn’t spoken for, that some individual culture is not trying to reclaim from the monsters. But Endless Daihoon is only 500,000,000 humans in three major Empires and only two of those Empires are fully independent while the third is just happy to play nice with everyone. And it’s *Endless* Daihoon.”

Eliot said to Isoko, “Yeah, that’s most of it. But the larger part is that they’ve been fighting wars with the monsters for 5,000 years, so they know what to do. People on Earth still make mistakes and die to monsters, so they made the whole hero/villain stay-in-the-cities thing and we kinda stabilized around that. We’ve got giant cities, though, so there’s a lot valid with that strategy.”

Isoko said to Eliot, “We could clear Earth of monster if we wanted, but we don’t because the people who can *take* the land and *secure* it are stepping on the toes of older generations who still hold onto those old borders because they want to, even if they can’t defend them at all.”

Mark nodded a little.

Eliot said, “Aside from the fact that those old borders still exist because it was the one ‘best’ way to prevent World War 4, by making no one able to challenge borders at all, the monsters attack all the time and constantly come through everywhere, so I do *not* agree that we could clear Earth of monsters if we wanted. They just pop up sometimes. That’s why we have border walls and City AIs that constantly check everything. The powerful people need to stay where they are to keep the land we have secured. If everyone scattered to the winds we’d have 25% of the population of Earth just die because they can’t

defend themselves properly, and the return of monarchies and shit like that, like they have over on Daihoon.”

Okay. Those were valid points, too.

Isoko said, “We could *absolutely* glass parts of the planet and turn it into plains, ensuring that nothing grows but prairie grasses. Slimes would pop up, sure, but it’s better than other options.”

Mark was surprised at that suggestion. “Really? And just kill all of the life out there in the woods and elsewhere?”

Eliot said, “It’s all full of monsters anyway, but yeah; that’s an extreme solution. Very Okuanan.”

Isoko said, “The Dominion of Okuana has some good points about killing everything and then reseeded biodiversity to inhibit monster growth.”

Mark asked, “Can you really do that? That ‘inhibit monster growth’, I mean.”

“Oh sure,” Isoko said, “The Church of Hearthswell does that all the time. Though that’s more ‘inhibiting spawning’ than ‘growth’.”

“Okuana does enchanted trees in forests. Hearthswell puts enchantments on city walls,” Eliot said. “That secures cities pretty well from tiny Veil breaks. Without those we’d just die.”

Mark nodded. “With her Castellan, right? To organize the land in certain directions.”

Isoko said, “That’s the one.”

And then, somehow, Eliot and Isoko got into a conversation about the various pros and cons of using nuclear armaments across the entire planet and then coming back in with proper cleansing magics, and Mark managed to know something about that. Cleaner plants! Those tube-like air-sucker plants that cleaned up the air, and which Mark had used in his studies with Lola once, had special breeds that

cleaned up nuclear fallout. The nursery at the Healing House even had some. They were big, neon-orange things, and they glowed brightly in the presence of nuclear radiation.

“They’re pretty small things in the nursery, though. Lola said that they have to be cared for a lot when there isn’t an active nuclear site they have to be used on.”

The three of them had moved to a lawn to the side, to sit in the sun and talk.

Eliot said to Isoko, “Even if there was a truly good systemic solution to clearing Earth of monsters, bombing Earth is not a good idea.”

Isoko was just having fun with it now as she teased the guy, “Everyone should just evacuate to Daihoon for a year or five and then nuclear bomb the entire Earth and then come back later when it’s clear. We can do the same thing to a good portion of Daihoon; just have all the daihoonians come over to Earth for 5 years.”

Mark rolled his eyes.

Eliot laughed. “That’s a great idea! You should save it in your pocket for when you’re making a supervillain speech.”

“Grandma already used that one 30 years ago,” Isoko said, grinning.

“What was the outcome?” Mark asked, fully invested.

Eliot laughed. “It’s safe to say that it did not happen!”

Mark briefly felt embarrassed—

Isoko told him, “It was this whole storyline cooked up by the Hero/Villain Program, one of the Big Storylines, if you know what those are—”

“I do not,” Mark said.

Isoko said, “A supervillain threatens to blow up the sun, and it’s like a multi-stage story that happens over a whole season, with hero candidates coming in and fighting and failing, usually. The story can change depending on who wins in certain areas and stuff like that, and at the end of the 9-month season the hero candidates either win or lose.”

“... Wait.” Mark asked, “How does a supervillain ‘win’? Is that even possible?”

Isoko laughed. “Grandma would say it *isn’t* possible, because they just bring out Glorious Man to clean up the plot if it ever gets that bad.”

Eliot smirked. “How *would* a supervillain blow up the sun in one season and then have the world still exist in the next season?”

Mark got the sudden impression that Eliot and Isoko were referencing something specific. He had watched the movies like everyone else, but he didn’t know what they were talking about.

Isoko rolled her eyes. “Grandma really wanted to win that one. She got close! They were in talks about it a lot, about how they’d do it. It would have been a lot of special effects and people playing parts like they’re real. Like that Empire of Foodstuffs game, but less AI constrained.”

“That’s neat,” Mark said, feeling oddly comfortable with that idea.

“Yup,” Isoko said, “A lot less stressful than hunting monsters for real.”

Eliot smiled as he said, “If you’re stressing out on a monster hunt then you’re doing it wrong.”

“What!” Mark said, suddenly uncomfortable. “You *cannot* mean that.”

Isoko lost some of her composure, too. “I heard you were reckless, but tell me you’re not *that* relaxed out on the field, Eliot.”

Eliot scoffed. “I’m gonna show you a good trick that I bet neither of you know about.” He pulled out his phone, and then he sort of pulled off a part of the phone, like he pulled off a bit of flickering putty. “My Talent is Man-made Manipulation, yeah?” He pulled the putty into a thin pair of glasses that he buffed up larger. He handed it over to Mark, and then he made another one for Isoko. “Here you go. Neither of you will be able to break them without directly trying to break them, so please don’t try. They’re not *that* strong... Well? Put ‘em on!”

Mark looked at the glasses for a moment... And then he put them on.

And suddenly, he saw differently. Numbers appeared when he looked at Isoko, and then back at Eliot. Scanner numbers. Eliot was at tier 3 Arch, and tier 1 everything else. Isoko was at tier 2 Body, and, oh, tier 2 everything else, too? Huh. Platinum Body must be doing that for her—

“Field Scan for non-human signatures,” Eliot said.

And the view changed. Almost all numbers vanished, leaving behind just... nothing, really.

Mark looked around.

Isoko looked around.

Mark asked, “So that’s very impressive, but there’s nothing showing up right now?”

Isoko said, “I don’t see anything either.”

“And that’s a *good* thing,” Eliot said, “People scan.”

The readout changed completely, and now Mark saw faint outlines around every person around him, as well as a little arrows at the side of his view. As he turned, those arrows resolved into people, and as he turned more, those outlines became arrows again, indicating nearby people just out of sight.

“Oh shit,” Mark said, “This is amazing.”



Isoko breathed deep, and said, “*This* is why the Cybersongs are a noble house of Freyala. I had heard that you could do something like this, but not... this.” She looked all around. “This is... a lot.”

Mark asked Isoko, “Platinum Body gives you resistances in every single category?”

Isoko laughed. “Yes. I thought I told you this?”

“I didn’t realize that it meant your Body tier was your tier in *everything*.” Mark looked at his own hands, and saw his outline. He was tier 2 Natural and tier 1 everything else. “Can you scan actual Power Level?”

Eliot said, “Not yet. Working on that. It’s a lot more invasive to do that and it’s usually not necessary, anyway.” He snapped his fingers and the glasses flowed off of Mark’s and Isoko’s faces, back to his phone, to rejoin what was there and fill out what had been lost. “And so! You can see why I said that stressing out on a monster hunt is doing it wrong. If you’re not out in the field with a proper scout, then you’re just gonna die.” He looked to Mark. “Union can do some of this, but not nearly as well as I can. I know Paladins get that application of Union. Not sure what actual-Union can do.”

“I have a private tutor, Inquisitor Lola. Lola is great. I’ll probably learn how to scan for nearby people soon enough. I’m moving over to Healing Club on Monday, too, so they might talk about it there.”

“You’re dropping out of Sparring Club?” Isoko asked. “Right before we get to start using weapons?”

“I’m getting torn apart out there, and I don’t think using weapons will matter.”

“Brawnies are fucking crazy, so I don’t blame you,” Eliot said, grinning.

Isoko scoffed. “We’re only that crazy when we have dedicated healers.”

Mark grinned.

The conversation meandered, and it was nice.

Eventually, Mark exchanged information with Eliot and also with Isoko, since the three of them were going on a training mission together. Mark wasn't sure exactly when that had been decided, but it was happening. The party lasted for several more hours, with Mark splitting up from Isoko and Eliot at Eliot's suggestion, because a lot of people still wanted to talk to him.

- - - -

Eliot stood in a side room, away from the party. His mother, Sophia, also known as Circuitbender, stood with him. There was a small circular table separating them from the other people in the room, and no windows. The door was shut and sound was blocked.

Isoko and Wandering Sage stood on the other side of the table.

Circuitbender opened up with, "I put forth an agreement of non-interference. We will not interfere with your plans for Mark, and you will not interfere with ours."

Wandering Sage said, "I agree to this agreement in the largest of senses, but the minutiae will prove this agreement as untenable. Instead, I put forth that we adopt a position of allies with each other, with the goal of propping Mark up as far as he can go, alongside Citadel Freyala."

Circuitbender eyed Wandering Sage. "My end goal is to have him as an Inquisitor of Freyala. What is your goal?"

"Supervillain. I want him to be allowed to politically challenge his 'brother' within the realm of fiction, and one day be able to kill dragons with ease."

Circuitbender did not scoff, but Eliot could tell she wanted to. Probably just to make a point, though. Everyone going into this meeting here already knew what the other party wanted, though Eliot was a bit worried about that 'kill dragons with ease' part. Isoko looked a little worried, too.

One did not simply start out a career planning on becoming a dragon hunter...

But, Eliot supposed, maybe some people did.

Mark certainly qualified.

Assisting someone in making dragons was just as bad as dealing with demons, and every single report that COFR had been able to create, and which Eliot had been able to sneak a glance at, painted Mark as an unwitting accomplice to that great evil. So he was cleared of wrongdoing, which was good.

And Addashield's Dragon was rather cooperative. He was clearly on his way to becoming a nation unto himself, just like Addashield had been.

Eliot had only ever seen the archmage at one of grandmother's parties, maybe twice, and it chilled him to know that a Hero of Humanity had been secretly making hidden dragons and killing his apprentices for over 300 years. Gods above, this was the biggest political thing to happen on Earth since Glorious Man came of age and started actively hunting kaiju every other weekend, when he was still 20.

Would Mark do that, too?

It was possible, though he'd have to be a lot smarter about it than Glorious Man's 'Big Punch!' attacks, and especially with that airy-black-vein thing he had going on. Honestly, 'supervillain' would look good on him.

Eliot was unsure that Freyala wanted anything to do with that, though.

Circuitbender said, "I haven't spoken to anyone about your plot to turn Mark villain, but I will speak on it now, here in private. Guiding Mark to become a villain is dangerous, even for you. Mark's outbursts are getting less extreme. With time, he might even leave all of that behind. It would be wiser not to antagonize that particular dragon, at this particular time, for to try and politically maneuver a dragon in *any way* is to simply infuriate them."

Wandering Sage simply, deeply, said, "Your plan for Inquisitor coincides nicely with my plan to make him a villain, and the simple fact is that no one *makes* anyone at our power level do anything. Mark will be at this level soon enough; within 5 years. The dragon is already there. Do you think we don't have plans to kill Glorious Man if he were to ever get mind-controlled by a bad actor? Do you think we don't have plans for all the great powers of the world, if they turn actually evil, or if they go outside of the allowed evils of the Villain Program? Of course we have plans. Plans within plans, all based on the

natures of people, as they are. All I am asking of you is to leave the door open for Mark to become a villain, and if he walks through it, then he walks through it, and we will gain another plan against the dragon. Or at least a distraction.” Wandering Sage said, “It is quite possible that naming Mark as his brother is just one such distraction, and he plans on murdering Mark the very second he steps out of Freyala’s oversight.”

Eliot felt his heart pulse hard, sweat gathering under his arms. Because, yeah, he had considered that possibility, too. He wondered if Mark had considered that possibility, in his plan to go on training missions outside of the city. Eliot looked to Isoko.

Isoko had no such startled reaction. She already knew about that possibility. She was ready for it.

Eliot didn’t understand that; how could anyone their age be ready to face a dragon?

Wandering Sage said, “Isoko will join Mark for a training mission or two, but beyond that she will split off and go on her own. I hope that you will make your Eliot do the same.”

Circuitbender stood tall. “I haven’t discussed that with him yet, but your words are taken under advisement.” And then Circuitbender vanished; the tilt of Mom’s hips, her shoulders, and the countenance of her face. All of it was the same. All of it changed. Sophia Cybersong said, “Thanks for coming to the party, Arei.”

Wandering Sage —for she was never ‘off’— was a bit more pleasant than a moment ago, as she said, “It’s been a good party. You really outdid yourself this time.”

Sophia went to the door and opened it, saying, “You should come around more often; this is a pretty normal party for the Cybersong house.”

Wandering Sage said something about how life was at Crystal Tower this time of year, and how Glorious Man’s last party had been rather amazing. Both of them seemed to be saying perfectly normal things, but you could cut the anger in the air with a knife.

The two plotters went out of the room, leaving Eliot and Isoko alone.

Eliot asked, "Mark is probably going to stay on Daihoon once he gets there, yeah?"

Isoko said, "I certainly am, so maybe he and I will stick around together for a little while.

Eliot grinned. "Don't like this particular arena?"

"Not when I'm effectively an F rank."

Eliot lost his grin. He nodded. The Tyranny of Talents was ever a dividing line upon the Two Worlds that only demons, gods, and fools could ever cross. Everyone else just landed where they landed.

Eliot said, "I could see Mark as a villain."

Isoko scoffed. "I can see it, too!" She dropped her voice, " 'Why are you hitting me! I'm a human, just like you!'"

Eliot waved her off. "That's a normal problem for a fundie. He'll get over it, and once he does he just needs a writer. All good villains have good writers."

Isoko raised an eyebrow and *looked* at Eliot. "You have dreams of fame, don't you."

"The *biggest* dreams."

Isoko frowned a little. "Don't use him like that. He doesn't deserve that."

Eliot said, "And you're not trying to do the same thing?"

"Nope, because I know we'll never be in the same bracket. If I stick around him I'll be the one used, which is fine, but I'm not sure I want to be that close to the dragon."

Eliot frowned a little. He just nodded.

- - - -

In the middle of Rome, beside a house that used to be whole and was now rubble, the rubble shifted. One rock fell inward, revealing a depression that was invisible until then. Another stone collapsed down, into a hole in the rubble, followed rapidly by a third. A cavity opened. The air inside the hole is black, but also filled with rainbows, like gossamer veils breaking, separating, exposing a cave beyond.

A goblin on the other side screamed as it ran away from a monster, directly through the cave, into the open air.

Ten sharp talons, like ripping anger, clawed at the opening in the Veil between worlds, but the gossamer thread was already sealing. Talons scrambled to hold open the hole in the world. Roars of frustration echoed out from between the talons; a roar of pain, anguish, and frustration. The big monster pulled back, but not fast enough. The break in reality sealed shut, once again.

Meters of white talons rest upon the ground, severed from their owner. Not much blood.

The goblin is sitting, dumbfounded. He saw *that* just happen, and he has no idea what to make of it all. The setting sun anoints the sky and the land all around. The broken claws lay here and there.

Disbelief rocked him. The goblin looked at its hands, and then at the open sky, crisscrossed with tiny white lines.

The goblin shouted for joy. It was a whooping sound. A war sound. A call to eat and be merry.

Above the goblin, a bit of an overhanging wall shifted in the late light of the day. Eight legs stretched, eight eyes looked down at the prey below. The mimic spider rapidly judged the green, moving flesh, to be a good size target, so it dropped from the overhang and landed directly on—

The goblin snatched the spider out of the air and then ripped into it, plucking off the fangs and eating it face first. He burped halfway through the meal. His wounds sealed up, like they were never there in the first place, and the goblin tossed the half-eaten corpse to the side.

The corpse bubbled with transformation, and soon, a broken fetus of a goblin crawled out of the flesh.

The big goblin stared down at the broken, useless thing, and then he stomped on it

He needs to find bigger fleshbags to transform into brothers; not baby spider fleshbags. Though they are quite tasty. With uncanny knowing, the goblin looked around at squiggles on the sides of buildings. He doesn't know what he is seeing right away, but he knew language when he saw it. He'd learn, eventually.

At least he was in human territory. That much was easily visible, and human territory was either quick-death, or an overwhelming victory.

With imprecision, the goblin said, "Aye ami don Earth how. Haye thepeak anguisht don Earth."

'Anguisht'? No. They call the language something else here.

The goblin was close, though.

He would find out what the words said from his brothers as soon as he could make some from some smart prey. There was bound to be good prey around here, somewhere, and humans always made the smartest goblin-fodder. Maybe some goblin could be born that was worth a damn—

Another spider dropped on him.

Another small meal, eaten and gone.

And then the spiders started to coordinate.

This was a much easier problem than the big talon monster. The goblin started chomping on spiders, rolling out of the way of cast webbing, and then he chowed on more spiders. Just one bite. Not too deep. Just enough to matter.

Within minutes the weakest of the spiders are dead. Bodies bloat and then pop, and a brother rolled out into the world. They're a bit fuzzy and they have large eyes, but they can scout and hide well.

Can't speak worth a damn either, but that's fine.

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The sky was dark and filled with clouds, while the red lights of hovercars patrolled out beyond the walls of Citadel.

Mark walked along the running road near the wall, just to get away from it all, to walk in the dark and clear his head. The air was cool and Summer was nearing an end, so it was going to get colder. Florida never got snow, but they'd get snow here at Citadel. Mark wanted to see snow.

He wasn't sure if he wanted to participate in any more situations like he had back there at the party.



The party had been decent... ish. Really good, all things considered. He accomplished his goal of meeting high society, but breaking that wine glass had been a... a bad moment.

... Anyway! Mark had definitely not eaten that well in a long time, and he had even made a new maybe-friend. Eliot seemed like a great guy. Great scout, for sure. It was nice to see Isoko in a new environment, too. Isoko was probably someone to keep in touch with.

... Mark needed to call Sally again.

Was she near a phone right now?

... Mark ignored that tangent and focused on the party.

There seemed to be at least 3 major factions trying to get Mark to go their way.

The first faction were the Cybersongs. They wanted Mark to be a paladin of Freyala. This was a complicated thing, because Mark had been 100% sure, before tonight, that Freyala wanted Mark to just move on into the world, and look back on his time here at Citadel fondly, and maybe as a fall-back option. Not the main option.

The second, weirdest faction, was the Villain Program of Crystal Tower. A freaking *supervillain* was trying to recruit Mark, for gods' sakes. Wandering Sage seemed like a decent person, outside of her over-the-top villain persona she played on the screen. She raised good points. You don't risk your world-saving heroes on fighting real battles all the time; every battle carried risk, and any one could die to any number of weird monster magics, at any time. And at the same time, heroes still needed villains in order to *know how to fight* when it came time to fight, and villains needed to be honorable but willing to play the heel. The whole movie-and-television-show-business aspect of it all was just the vehicle to keep the participants battle ready.

And Wandering Sage wanted to kill Addashield's Dragon.

The third faction was Mark and his Parents.

Mark didn't want to live his life in revenge against a monster that was cooperating with the world, and especially if the whole world wanted to keep the monster around. Mark had other plans, and none of them involved being consumed by a dead-end revenge.

Walking in the dark, thinking about everything, Mark let his mind wander for a while.

And then he took out his phone and called up Sally. She was probably on Daihoon right now, so if this call connected it was going to be a miracle. Mark would just leave her a voicemail—

“Mark!” Sally blurted out, “Oh my gods are you okay?! I was worried sick!” People were talking in the background. Sally yelled at them, “Oh fuck off! I'm talking here!” She said, “Hold on, Mark. I need to get somewhere— Hmm— Mark? You there?!”

Sally was somewhere quieter now.

And Mark had stopped in his tracks. His voice cracked, “Y— yeah. Hey, Sally.”

Sally's voice cracked. “Y— You okay, Mark?”

“No, not really, but I will be.”

Sally sniffled. Then she strongly said, “Good.” And then she said, “I heard you got fucking *tall*, dude!”

Mark chuckled once. “Six foot three inches.”

“Holy fuck! You might actually come up to my chin.”

Mark scoffed— He paused. “... Wait. To your chin?”

Sally chuckled and said, “Sooooo... there's this Brawny power called Giant's Streeength—”

“Holy fuck! Congrats! I’ve sparred with them and I can’t even punch them anymore, and I’m tier 1 Body already. Giant’s Strength is one of the really, really good ones! Did you get the Rank B or A version?”

Proudly, Sally declared, “I am a rank A Giant’s Strength! Times 12-point-4! It might even go up higher someday!”

Mark felt a profound sense of joy. He smiled, and he softly said, “That’s really, really good, Sally. Congrats.”

“Fuck yeah it... is...” She went quiet. And then she said, “I don’t know how to say this right. I’m just gonna say it. I’m sorry about your parents and I hope you’re not thinking of revenge, or getting anywhere near that dragon. I lost you once and I don’t want to lose you again. You need to come out here to Daihoon and forget all of that shit back home.”

Mark felt his heart ache, black veins pulsing out from his astral body into the night, almost invisible. He said, “I think that’s what I’m going to do, but I’ve gotten some supervillains asking me to be a villain for Crystal Tower, and I have to at least consider it.”

Sally was quiet, but Mark might have heard a scoff; he wasn’t sure. And then Sally asked, “You’re not *seriously* going to be a cartoon villain, are you? Get endorsement deals from soft drink companies? Get beat up on the weekends?”

Mark laughed. “Apparently it’s this whole system...”

Mark ended up talking to Sally for a good hour about everything and anything.

Somehow they ended up on monsters, and how Sally was regularly fighting them now.

“The worst shits are the goblins,” Sandy said. “Almost all monsters are just mindless horrors, but goblins are smart and the older ones can talk, but literally all they want to do is infect everyone with their corruptive goblin magic and turn them into more goblins. *At first*, they made me doubt the human/monster divide because they can talk and reason, but they used those words and reason to try and kill you, to get around you to kill the people you’re protecting.” Sally exclaimed, “This one time it

was a talker —that’s what we call them when they’re like that— and he was talking about trade routes and staying in goblin territory and we were pretending to be interested, to listen, but our scout was watching 4 goblins walk through the underbrush to try and surround us. They tried to spring trap but they got sprung instead. It was easier to let them come to us to die instead of chasing them down.”

Mark said, “That sounds like the stories I read about them. I encountered a baby goblin at the end of his time in the Tutorial. It had a mace and it talked at me. Addashield was there, though, and he said how it was just trying to confuse me with not-words, and that confusion worked for half a minute as it slowly walked toward me. But I saw it was coming in for a kill and killed it back,” Mark said, “Addashield said something about mountain goblin folk, or something like that. Not sure. Only that I would kill a lot of them during my life.”

“He was probably talking about the Endless Mountains. You know Daihoon is kinda like a candy-wrapped Earth, yeah? And the candy wrapper goes off the north and south poles?”

“Yeah. I learned that, like, weeks ago, or something.”

“Mm-hmm! The mountains and valleys form in the candy-wrapper part at the poles. They’re full of impossible heights and depths. Full of monsters, too. You can follow the rivers up the valleys, though, and you either pop out on Earth, if you know the way, or you walk up into *Endless Daihoon!* All up in the motherfucking *magnetosphere*, Mark. There are so many mysteries about Endless Daihoon. People think that Heaven is located somewhere up there, and also the Elves and other fantasy races that might actually be not-monsters. You could theoretically walk to the moon if you wanted, but ain’t no one does that... Some dragons have, though.”

They were on to the dragon now, eh?

Mark said, “I’m hearing, over here, that a lot of people don’t hate the idea of Addashield’s Dragon. They like him. They want him as a new god. I hear there’s a history of that in Daihoon?”

Sally sounded like she might be shaking her head. “If any of the big settlements spots a dragon that dragon is getting shot out of the sky. But there’s an *undercurrent*, you know. Ancient history. Ancient magics. Ancient dragons who are still known ‘allies of humanity’, as ridiculous as that sounds. I don’t

know what to make of it at all, either, but it's definitely a thing that is happening... And he's calling you 'his brother'."

Mark breathed. "Yeah. I have tried not to think about that too much."

"... Anyway! Yeah. There's a history of dragons being in charge over here, and a lot of people want them back in charge. It's a whole *thing*."

Mark scowled at the night, at that thought.

He stopped in his tracks.

... He kept walking. "They really do, huh?"

"History is more complicated than how we were taught in school, under the Curtain."

Mark heard the distant rage in Sally's voice when she said 'Curtain'. It mirrored Mark's own feelings. He said, "When I found out we were raised fundamentalist— Well. Short story: I'm taking an 'Understanding Curtain Protocol' class here at Citadel Freyala, and— Oh." Mark looked at his phone. "We've been talking for two hours. Want me to talk about what I heard in class, or later?"

Sally sighed a little, and it might have been a yawn. "I do, Mark, but... I'm mostly over my own rage, and I lucked out with this version of Brawny. It's hard to be mad when you won the Talent lottery."

Mark grinned. "Have you learned tactile telekinesis yet?"

Sally chuckled. "I'm working on it! This is actually really good practice to hold my phone and not have it break, even when I'm kinda... really tired."

Mark smiled softly. "I miss you, Sally. I'll see you later— Or you could come here! But then you'd get involved in politics, I think. I'm here for another 6-ish months; I don't know. 7? I talked to people about it today and schedules are all sorts of malleable."

Sally yawned on the other end of the phone, then she said, “I have duties to Drakarok and I don’t want to go back to Earth for a while. The family all relocated to Memphi, though. I think a lot of people did. So I might see you *there*, if you go there, but I hope to see you *here*, Mark, on Daihoon. We could really use a big-time healer.” She sighed dramatically, then added, “And your *other Talents too*, I *guess*.”

Mark chuckled.

Sally easily said, “I love you, Mark. Don’t die on me.”

Mark felt his heart beat hard. “I... I love you too, Sally. Don’t die on m—”

Sally’s voice turned high pitched, “As a friend! As a friend! I like girls and you don’t like anyone! I’m too tired! Good night!”

She hung up.

Mark smiled brightly.

He was going to hold that over her head for the rest of her life.

... But in a loving sort of way.

Obviously.

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Sunday was lazy, and Mark needed that.

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Monday morning.

Mark was dressed for the arena, but he did not go into the arena with all the other brawnies. He went through a side entrance, to a different sort of room that was mostly a way station that led directly out onto the stands.

To the Healing Club.

Most of the people for Healing Club were already out there on the stands, but Grand Healer Badaira and Inquisitor Lola were in the hallway, talking, when Mark turned the corner.

Both of the women glanced at Mark, and then they recognized him.

Badaira grinned as she said, "Welcome, Mark."

Mark bowed to Badaira. He rose, and said, "Glad to be here." He looked to Lola, adding, "I'm glad you could come."

Mark had sent off an email to Lola yesterday asking about the lessons for the week, and Healing Club, and how all of that would work out. Lola had replied that she might just come today, though it was not a sure thing, and that they could have a lesson during the club.

It seemed Lola was able to come today.

Lola smiled beatifically... Which she really only did when she was angry at someone.

... She wasn't angry at Mark, was she?

Lola said, "Barring a few individual lessons during today, we can likely transfer the bulk of your learning to Healing Club. There's nothing quite like pure practice, and Healing Club can do most of that." She lightly turned toward Badaira, adding, "I was speaking with Grand Healer Badaira about plans. I believe that you might only be staying here for a week, to work on vast workings and throughput, and then you should move on to the higher sparring clubs as soon as possible."

Badaira did a tiny little bow, with just her head. “Staying here and forgoing the higher sparring clubs might help you develop a vast appreciation for Union, for its main power is not in helping small groups, but in *leading armies*.”

Both of the women had put certain spins on their words, but only Badaira did it directly. Lola was more circumspect.

Mark got the impression that maybe the women didn’t like each other, or maybe they were rivals.

Lola said, “In all likelihood you will be able to do both, but you are advancing fast, and I don’t want you to pick up too many habits from normal Union users.”

Badaira resigned her arguments to a regal sort of silence.

The two healers were *definitely* having a fight, and they were being exceedingly polite about it.

The fight was about Mark, wasn’t it.

Mark said, “I am highly interested in smaller scale combats between unique forces, if that helps. But is...” Mark was about to ask if ‘coordinating an army’ was truly that difficult, and then he realized the depth of where that question led him. Of course coordinating an army was difficult. Mark didn’t even want to think about that, though. “Er... I’m not sure I want to... coordinate armies?”

Badaira latched on to that, asking, “Not even armies of supporters in order to fight a kaiju with your own power? Or focusing the power of a city onto an individual, either for good or for bad?”

“Oh,” Mark said.

An army could be ‘everyone who lives in a city that is under attack’, couldn’t it.

Badaira had spoken of Freyala’s rise to power, back when the goddess was known as Emily Turner, of using Union to focus the evils that the dragon Partanatrax had caused back onto that dragon. Emily Turner had become a void-dark heart, killing the dragon in one beat of her Power.



Mark thought for a moment, about many different things, and concluded, “I was approved for a training mission in two weeks. I should get some small-scale training before then.”

Lola just nodded, so small it might not have even happened.

Badaira bowed to Lola, and then moved on, up the stairs leading to the stadium seating.

Mark remained with Lola for a moment, asking her, “Did something happen?”

Lola said, “Nothing in particular. Badaira and I used to be companions. She went into healing, becoming a Grand Healer. I went into the Paladins, and then I became an Inquisitor. We fundamentally disagree on the best ways to use Union, but if you want to learn how to heal an entire city, then Badaira is the one you should listen to.”

Mark’s eyebrows went up. “She can do that?”

“You can too, using the same tricks that she does, that we all do. Even the lowest Union healer could do it, too, but linking a city is a fundamentally dangerous act, and the only way any politician or leader would allow such a coordination is if they cannot stop you, because you are stronger than them, or if it actually needs done, and they agree to assist.” Lola looked at Mark. “You will be of the first category, of powers impossible to stop if you want to do something, so it is important to align yourself with proper organizations, Mark. Do the Slayer thing for a few years in the beginning, but take the Villain Program job later. It will *vastly* boost your credibility.”

Mark felt a weight. “Really? The Villain thing? You approve?”

“Inquisitors are murderers, Mark. There is no way around that. We hunt and kill the demon-possessed, the Fallen and the would-Fall. Villains and Inquisitors align a lot nicer in goals than either Wandering Sage or Cybersong wish to admit, but which Freyala easily sees,” Lola said, “We would welcome you as an Inquisitor, by the way, but not for years.”

Mark had an emotional reaction to the idea of killing, and so he made an emotional decision, “I don’t think I can do that. Become an Inquisitor. Kill people.”

As though Mark had just commented on the weather, Lola continued, “And that’s fine. It’s a terrible, horrible thing to kill people. I hope you never have to do it. But you should still eventually learn how. If you should end up on Daihoon, you might be called to do exactly that.”

Mark’s thoughts went blank.

He came back to himself. “What?”

“Inquisitors are mostly active on Daihoon, just so you know.” Lola discarded the heavy topic like she was throwing a weight overboard. She seemed lighter, as she said, “But we can leave all of that for other days. For now, let us heal and directly protect people.”

“... Yes, please.”

Lola led the way into the arena, right past a well-stocked vending-machine area. Mark only really noticed the vending machine area because it had a sign up that read, ‘Free for Healing Club Members! Honor System!’. Mark kinda wondered what that was about, but then Lola went up some wide stairs, into the arena, and Mark followed.

The sun slanted into the arena, but the healer area was in the shade and it would continue to be in the shade for the whole day. People were already sitting around, chatting. The brawnies were coming onto the field down below, walking in the sun. Some of them were shielding their eyes, briefly, as they looked around.

Lola sat down in the front-middle of the pack and patted the seat beside her.

Mark took a seat.

Badaira was chatting with some other students, but she looked up when Mark sat down. She checked her watch, then told everyone sitting down, “5 minutes to start. Begin breathing exercises now.” And then Badaira began to breathe deeply, like she was showing the club how.

Everyone sat up straight, while some stood, and then they began breathing deeply—

Mark felt a snap of Union in the air, like a weight upon the world that tried to draw him in and make him a part of it—

Lola told Mark, “You can let it happen.”

Mark started breathing in Union with everyone else.

Lola was doing it, too, but she was also talking, “You and I will be talking to each other throughout the whole club, as this is sort of a private lesson, but not quite. Ask questions when you can —learning how to talk while breathing Union is an important lesson, too— and let’s try not to interrupt everyone else’s Union work too much.”

Mark nodded.

“The club always starts this way to establish a baseline. You’ve felt the gathering of Union when Badger calls you all to order, right? The gathering we’re working on right now is meant to ping off of that call, to connect the gathering Union here to the Union they wish to establish on the arena floor.

“That is how you start the big workings.

“You start with the personal power, build momentum, and then latch on to a big signal, like Badger’s gong, that goes out to a set of people, or that the people establish themselves. If the Union gathering here cannot grab onto the gathering down there well enough, then Badaira signals Badger and Badger might make everyone on the field call out some specific names, or whatnot, to establish the ‘groove’, as some have called it.”

*Ah, Mark thought. Like at the start, when Badger had us repeat the names of the instructors.*

Mark asked, “With fewer people—” His breathing Union broke instantly. “Is there— Mmm.” He couldn’t get the Union back together while he spoke, so he tried to be quick about his question. “With fewer people is there less need for that unified dance in the larger population?”

Lola waited on Mark, and then she answered, “Correct. Looks like there might only be 70 people down there today, and there’s 23 up here. That’s a good ratio, actually. 1 Union to 3 other people means that we will have no trouble going off of the Badger’s gong. There will be no need for a unified dance...” Lola grinned. She asked, “Are you signed up for any dance classes yet?”

Lola seemed to find it delightful that Mark had called Union a dance in his email, and also just now.

“Not yet, but I looked at them,” Mark said. “I’ve noticed the flow of battle is easy enough to get into, and from there it kinda just... flowed. You know? A step here, a circling there. It’s all enough to grab onto someone with Union.”

Lola smiled a little. “ ‘Grab onto’ is a bit of a loaded language, and shows that you are more suited to offensive capability with this magic, but we knew that already. Usually people say ‘join with’. To say ‘grab onto’ implies an offensive act, so don’t use that phrase around people who don’t know you.”

Mark glanced at the other people in club, some of them looking at Mark weirdly. They rapidly looked away. Mark felt a flush of red on his face. “Er... Did not know that.”

“And that is why I am here teaching,” Lola said, “Anyway. For you, you can use anything that another person or life form shares in common with you. That is the true basis of Union, as Freyala envisioned and used the Talent. To form a Union is to consecrate a common ground and build something upon that space.”

Mark nodded. He knew that, but not in those specific words. It was a bit enlightening to hear it like that, though. It was sort of like someone explaining to you a concept that you knew, but which you just didn’t have the words for. Mark breathed deep, in contemplation, and with everyone else breathing deep, too.

He grinned.

Lola said, “Now here is where we add some new thoughts to your repertoire. You have the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ duality, along with ‘durability’ and ‘weakness’. Personally, I place this addition into the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ part of the scenario, but you might want to do differently.

“Tell me: Have you ever wondered why you never took water breaks or bathroom breaks out there on the arena floor?”

Mark blinked.

It was like someone telling you that the oven had been on for an entire week, but nothing burned down, so, in the end, was any damage actually done?

Yes. There was damage.

Mark’s psyche rebelled.

“What! No way. I would have... noticed...” Mark quietly said, “*I never noticed.*”

Some other healers chuckled.

Badaira hushed them, and then made a big show of breathing more—

Mark suddenly said, “I don’t have to go to the bathroom anymore?!”

Everyone else was professional enough not to laugh. Lola professionally chuckled.

Mark had another thought. “Oh gods. I could make an enemy piss themselves.”

The Union broke as a lot of people laughed.

Badaira even grinned and then she rallied people to rejoin, and she might have even used that laughter as a joining mechanism; Mark wasn’t sure. He was still wondering if he could make someone piss themselves. It boggled!

Lola smiled, barely able to contain her mirth, but she adopted a strong countenance and with a deeply serious, sarcastic tone, she said, “This is a dark power you tamper with, Mark Careed.” She lightly added, “Also, it’s not nearly as effective of a weapon as you might suspect.”

Mark almost laughed at that one—

And then Lola added, “You can evaporate the water in someone’s body, though. That is a much better way to use this power.”

Seriousness returned to the conversation.

Mark said, “No thank you.”

Lola nodded. “Even so, it is good to bring up these subjects, because the maintenance of a crew is important. The words we use to sustain and maintain a crew while on missions are ‘sustenance/starvation’, and ‘purity/impurity’. These two uses of Union have deep nuances and side effects. Most of the time, you can just get away with using the good/bad dichotomy, but sometimes you need to do more, and this is how you do that.

“ ‘Sustenance’ and ‘starvation’ can take from an environment and blight the land, or take from an enemy and weaken them deeply. It can also take from yourself, and give to others. These are all rather slow-acting things, though. If *you* —personally you— eat well and drink water, then you can provide sustenance to a group such as all of the people down there on the arena without blighting the land. That is why the Healing Club has that snack bar downstairs. We’re all literally eating and drinking for all the other people down there.

“In a forest, you can just take from the land around you just fine; there’s lots of life there, and the blight you put out in the world is easily healed if you stretch it out thin enough. There’s no forest in this stone garden, though, so we have to use the snack bar downstairs.

“Against an enemy, in a protracted combat, you being well fed and them running on fumes is a good way to improve your chances of winning, but it won’t save your life or damn the enemy in a single 10 minute exchange. Now *several* 10-minute exchanges? A day of fighting? *Then* that is when this aspect of

Union will show its power. That is how you keep an army fed and watered even in the worst parts of Daihoon or Earth.

“This is why Freyalan acolytes and otherwise are the ones that go out with teams to heal and fight outside of cities, while Hearthswell stays inside the cities, by the way. We are good at roaming battles. Hearthswell is much, much better at other aspects of healing and battlement fortifications.”

Mark nodded.

Lola continued, “ ‘Purity’ makes your body without waste and clean. It is what I use to clean up my outfits, and otherwise. The environment absolutely loves ‘impurity’, too. All sorts of messes. Messes are lovely for a forest, and easily go into all parts of a forest, or any natural system with life in it, really. You only need to run purity/impurity every so often, though; not a full time thing at all. It’s good for cleaning up toxins and otherwise, and if you want, you can even use it to draw out metals from the ground, or from other places.”

Oh! *That* was how Lola had made Mark breathe out the adamantium from his bones!

Lola was aware that Mark being able to grow adamantium was a secret, though, so she added, “Once your adamantiumkinesis gets to a level where you can detect the stuff in the ground, then you’ll be able to easily find more, and grow your stocks, and you can even use Union to draw it out.

“In all of those cases, you feel the pulse of Union in the give and take; you can’t just give, you can’t just take, you *have* to do both. Otherwise the Union becomes unbalanced and you risk saturating your astral body, blocking you from doing more Union work. Wherever you give and take changes the world as you desire.”

Mark nodded; that particular lesson was a repeated one, but repetition was the mother of learning.

Lola looked to Mark. “We’ll just be breathing right now. Leave your blood-Union to another day. I imagine Grand Healer Badaira will direct us in specific ways, though. It is almost time.”

Mark looked over to Badaira and she was still breathing deeply, but she glanced his way.

Badaira nodded, and then said to the group, “Hands up if you ended Friday on healing.”

Hands went up, but not all.

Badaira pointed out people, saying, “Jessie, Tommy, Laura, Adrienne, Wilbur, Floyd, Nathan. You all stay healing. Everyone else switched to protection. All people who were on protection at the end of Friday switched to healing. Mark, you’re on protection. I’ll switch some people around as necessary later. Now we wait for the gong, and then we *connect*.”

Nods all around.

By Mark’s rough estimate the number of people on healing or protection were roughly the same. Maybe more people were healing than protecting, but that was fine, right?

Lola asked Mark, “What do you consider when you think of ‘durability’?”

Mark rapidly rattled off, “Toughness of body that is more than skin deep.” His breathing Union broke, but he kept talking, “An inability to be damaged. A resilience that is bending instead of breaking.”

“Do you consider the damage from the sun, or the damage from the clothes you wear, like a shoe that doesn’t fit right? How about the glare of a bright light? Can you stare into the sun while you are protecting yourself?”

“... I had not considered that.” Mark breathed deep ‘durability’ and the light of the sun was still there, but now it was easier to handle. The light wasn’t any dimmer at all, though— A different problem suddenly occurred. “Wait. If we’re all breathing in durability and exhaling weakness, then the entire group of people out there will only be getting protection during half of the breathing; the intake?”

Lola smiled softly. “Once the battle starts we’ll all start staggering our breaths, because a staggering is just a different type of Union; a Union that is spread out.”

Mark’s mind felt expanded yet again. “... *You can do that?*”



“In a group, yes. Individually? No. It is one of the great benefits to having multiple Union users in the same group together, and one of the main differences between individual and group use.” Lola put her finger to her mouth in a quiet gesture—

A gong rang out across the field. Mark hadn't even seen Badger get to his spot in front of the instructor booth, but there he was.

Every single person on the field, and in the sands, jerked to attention.

That's what really did it. That *jerk*.

Mark felt the Union of their group reach for the people down on the field, and connect. Mark breathed in durability, and expelled weakness, twisting the miasma coming out of his mouth into the air, like sewing into an invisible quilt. The miasma vanished into elsewhere.

Badaira brought the group to further attention, saying, “I will begin the staggering, linking to you and moving you through the motions.”

And that is exactly what she did.

It was weird.

Badaira sort of... extended the groove in the world? Or something like that? She breathed a little out of sync with the group and people began falling into those new grooves one at a time, and then, within a minute, the entire group was staggered.

It was like a single harmony of voices becoming a song instead; a chord progression. Or some other word that Mark didn't know. He wasn't too much into music. He just felt the change in the air as unifications became something more... woven. Less singular.

One person passed off a magic to another, which passed off the magic to the next person, which came back to the first person, and now the entire group was breathing in 'good' and exhaling 'bad' at the same time that they were inhaling 'durability' and exhaling 'weakness'.

... It was almost like what Mark did when he was using blood and breath Union at the same time. They were not in sync with each other, for how could heartbeats and breaths ever be unified except... through the medium of the body. Huh.

... Huh.

Everyone here seemed to know how to thread their miasma into the astral, too; nothing stunk like death. That was nice—

Oh.

They all knew how to breathe out the ‘weakness’ of a stressed astral body, too, didn’t they? They could keep going forever, too, if they wanted, and as Mark breathed out weakness, he did his part to make sure even the healers, who were not focused on keeping their astral body together, were able to maintain just fine.

Mark smiled at that.

He had thought he was being smart with that ‘discovery’ of his, but everyone had already figured out what he had thought was neat and cool and not-done-yet. Welp! That’s what the club here was for; for teaching.

And Mark was learning.

Lola smiled. “Very good, Mark. Now all you have to do is keep that up for 2 hours.”

Mark said, “I can do—”

He fell out of the Union.

He focused, and got back into the Union, his breath matching the rhythm of the group that was stretched thin across the entire arena floor. All of the other healers were already talking amongst

themselves, though Mark only now realized that they were talking only on their exhales... Or something. He looked at the others, trying to understand what he was seeing.

Lola said, "It takes some doing to get the hang of talking and breathing at the same time, but there is a trick. The trick is to view it all as communication, as a Union created through words, which are actions upon the world that link us all together, just as the people on the field are linked together through actions which are still just physical in nature. It's all a Union."

... Huh.

Mark felt himself connect to Lola, to the air, to the world and to each other healer in the club who overheard him, as he said, "It's like breathing but different."

He was able to keep his Union going, even though he spoke.

Lola said, "Here's a big secret to Union, Mark. You are the locus of a creation of your own making. Just by existing at all, you are a part of the world, and the world is a part of you." She smiled a little. "As soon as you understand that, having Union active at all points in time will be as easy as breathing."

In that moment, Mark felt *connected*.

His heart beat in rhythm to everyone else there on that bench, and also to everyone else down on the field. They didn't beat at the same time, and some, like that Ulrich guy with Weird Body, didn't beat at all. But they were there. They were participating in the creation of a fighting force, to drive back the monsters and to save the world, each in small, individual ways, that would become large ways when taken in aggregate.

It was magical.

Mark blinked, and he saw threads.

Threads connected everyone to the world, to each other. As the S rank speedsters pummeled their opponents from ten directions almost all at once, their hearts beating fast, the S rank brutes held their

own, those small punches doing nothing, their hearts beating slow and steady. They were not connected in heartbeats, but they were connected in the spar. They were connected in the ultimate, nebulous goal, of helping each other, and also the world.

The instructors helped, too. Speedster Instructor Nifty separated some people who got too heated before they actually injured each other. Charms evaluated from her tablet and from her own breath, for she was in a Union right now, too, and so were Badger and Medley, who all had Freyala-gifted Union as well.

And the healers healed, and protected. Instructor Badaira was a dancer of intent across the web, shoring up thin spots in the group, her breath like a wind of creation and stabilization in those areas.

Mark saw light in the corners of his eyes.

Threads of light came from him, from his astral body, from the black veins that pulsed under and out of his skin. It was weird to see those threads in the air, in his skin. How far was he stretched right now?

Were all those threads in the air, him?

... Not exactly; but also not 'no'.

Mark saw it now. Those threads *were* him, but they were not the whole story. He was just one threading. One bit of light in the air that wasn't light at all. It was his astral body, stretched thin. The healers on the benches were other colors among the world, but Mark couldn't see them that well.

He felt them.

Astral bodies touching astral bodies.

Mark felt the world.

The underlying *strength* of it all.

He was a thread, and the world was an ocean of threads, crisscrossing and weaving, knotting and tangling, breaking and coming together, splitting and joining and—

Darkness closed in from the edges of the world, and Mark's heart thumped hard, weak—

Mark pulled back, gasping, throwing himself out of the Union, leaning back and sweating hard. Sweat poured off of him as he struggled to understand where he was and what he was doing. His eyes worked. His heart and lungs worked. But he felt too connected. Where was he? Was he on the bench? Was he on the sands? Was he standing or laying dow—

Something *crinkled*.

Mark snapped back to himself like rubber bands breaking.

And then there he was again, in his body, fully. He breathed. He was sitting down but he threatened to fall over, so Lola's hand was on his back, holding him upright. She was staring into his eyes. She was saying something.

Mark blinked a few times, and then Lola started to make sense again.

Lola's worried face faded. She spoke softly, "There you are, Mark. You had a little trip, but you're back."

Mark looked around and saw people staring at him, but also Badaira snapping her fingers at the others and redirecting them back to the Union. He couldn't actually see the Union, though; whatever vision he had encountered was over. But he knew that the Union was still there, in the air. The world was still threaded all throughout.

Mark looked back to Lola. "What was that?"

"A revelation of the world."

Mark breathed in, then out, and said, "Okay."

Lola grinned. “In a smaller, just-as-true way, you stretched your astral body further than you should have, focusing on connections that I cannot perceive, but which I have been enlightened to by Freyala Herself. I still have lessons for you that are *not* whatever you just did, but what you just did will get easier with time, and with astral body strength. If you do that without supervision you’ll probably faint, though, so try to take it easier with that.”

Mark took that in, and said, “Okay!”

Lola chuckled. With an easy countenance, she said, “Get back to it, Mark. You’re on protection detail.”

Mark focused on Union again and he started breathing with purpose, falling into sync among the broken-with-purpose rhythm of the group.

And then he just experienced it all for a while.

Some of the healers spoke with each other. Some watched the fights. Some were studiously focused on their connections to the people on the field. Some tapped away at their tablets, reading or playing games. Not a single one of them, and probably not Mark either, could weave the tapestry that held together everyone on the arena floor and on the stands. But they could all contribute a little part.

Mark’s part was breathing in durability and breathing out weakness, and focusing on the group. To an outside observer, it might appear that he was doing nothing at all.

But really, he was his own center of a vast, connected network that brought people together and made them whole and strong.

Eventually, Mark managed to fully understand how to speak while running Union. It was a tricky thing, but he figured it out. It was sort of like, when throwing a punch, you could just throw the punch, or you could put your whole body into it, and then you still delivered a lot of punching power even if your fist wasn’t the strongest. Mark focused on his Union, on durability and weakness, and managed to say, “It really is like just becoming a beating heart that enables exchanges between a vast area.”

He 'overshot the punch' through pure Union power, and thus, when he destabilized his own 'punch', his 'punch' was still solid enough to work... well enough.

Lola corrected, "You are the center of a web of exchanges *that you desire*."

Mark corrected himself, "Exchanges I desire, yes."

Lola said, "I've always imagined it as helping hands reaching out to each other, through the wind. Some have imagined it as roots in a system. I think you spoke about that once."

"I did. I learned about that from one of my elementary teachers. It always seemed neat that plants help each other with nutrients sometimes."

"That ideology ties in well to blood Union..."

Lola spoke of nuances of Union and Mark focused his Union this way and that, at her instruction, for the next hour. Most of those nuances were repeated lessons. Protection was a pretty easy type of magic to focus on. Making sure people didn't take damage was pretty simple, though Lola had a lot of case types with regard to protection that Mark hadn't thought about before.

"The damage of the sun was just one source you didn't consider, but there are others. Fire is a usual thing to protect against, and instead of considering a specific protection against that, you must instead expand your definition of durability, like you did with the damage of the sun. What does fire do? It changes the energy state of a system in a way that damages a system. So if you make 'durability' include the idea that the system cannot be changed in energetic ways against your will, then you will have guarded from fire, and also cold and also electricity. Similarly, you can exhale weakness, and consider that being vulnerable to energy-changing powers as a weakness that must be purged.

"That's just being defensive with it, though.

"You'll be able to be offensive with it, and give weaknesses to energy state changes to an enemy. This goes alongside the ideas of buffing and debuffing the 6 categories of Body, Kinetic, etcetera, and weakening an enemy in those sorts of ways..."

Mark adjusted his thinking a few different times.

A problem arose.

Mark said, "I don't think I can hold all of those specific ideas of what 'durability' and 'weakness' means all at the same time. How do I fix that? With time and practice?"

"Time and practice will help, but truthfully this is an impossible fix on your own. You need to have some Mind enhancing magics cast upon you by a Minder, and then you can do everything at the same time. For most of your career, you will need to prioritize and change up how you work your protections..."

Eventually, Grand Healer Badaira switched the entire chorus of healers over to from healing to protection, or from protection to healing.

Mark switched from protection to healing detail.

Lola spoke of healing, "In with the good, out with the bad; this is truly the best way to heal the body. This is because, for the most part, the body knows how to heal itself. In the few cases where you encounter cancer, or malignant issues of other kinds, you can work in purity ideology. Perhaps you might even work in some sustenance/deprivation to help provide nutrients to the body, as well.

"But you, *specifically you*, with your Healthy Body, and all bawnies like you, will find basic healing methodology exceedingly useful. This is because your Body Talent is specifically useful toward making you healthy, and you can share that healthiness with other people, even if their own bodies aren't able to support them, as-is, for genetic or whatever reasons.

"The only reason you should ever go beyond good/bad methodology is after medical school, where you can learn more direct ways to heal the body. That's 4 years of schooling at the least, or more likely 8."

Mark grinned. "Not doing medical school." He asked, "But surely there are ways to heal the body better than just good or bad. Are there no specific ideas?"



Lola shook her head. “Don’t go too far down that path, Mark. Once you are stronger, you *will* kill people if you push that methodology far at all. Instead, what is better and what people usually do, is that you might find that your basic healing is overkill. You might consider the ideas of half-healing/half-protection, in the dichotomy of ‘resilience’ and ‘weakness’, as we spoke about earlier, because with that sort of ideology, you can start to include ideas from protection, like buffing/debuffing the 6 categories..”

Lola spoke of previous lessons, tying many different threads together into half-and-half healing/protection.

Mark tried to ignore that part about how ‘he *would* kill people if he tried specific healings’.

That was a weapon he hoped to never need to wield.

----

The dragon spread his building-sized wings wide into the clouds as he flew. The sun soaked into the silver scales of his long body and mist cooled him down. He waved his tail through the air, flicking at cloudbanks, the wind flowing over him like an ocean. At the speeds he flew, the air pressure almost felt like water. He shook his neck, stretching out, sending a ripple down his body as he beat his wings and ascended higher in the clouds. Spikes of adamantium rippled down his spine in the wind, ripping at clouds, gonging as they struck each other

It was a nice sound.

It was the sound of *power*. Of wealth.

Sloane Addashield had never had this much adamantium before.

He still didn’t, not really.

... It was weird being a dragon.

Sloane had always heard it was a loss of self. A destruction of the individual. And it was. The Addashield of today was not the Addashield of last year. But Sloane had often considered the day he would have to abandon his humanity and accept dragonhood, and what it might mean for him. He never considered it in the open, of course. Becoming a dragon was a far-off possibility that he never let Kanda know about at all, and that he hoped he never had to use, because it was a death, of a sort.

Kanda was gone, though. Truly gone. But some of her mannerisms were still here. The call to be praised remained, and that was fine. The dragon was a lot more vain than Addashield used to be. Addashield liked nice things, yes, but he would have been aghast at carrying around a *world's* worth of adamantium on his back. It was like wearing a target on one's back, and also showing off too much, and it was so dangerous, but also, it was all under the dragon's control, and more adamantium grew all the time.

Addashield would have been giddy with joy...

And the dragon was too. Hmm.

The dragon was not his father, and yet, he had an entire lifetime of his father's memories.

But the desires were all different... sort of.

That's what truly let the dragon know that he was not Addashield.

Yes, the dragon wanted to help humanity, just like Addashield. But Addashield became a Hero of Humanity because he could, and out of a horrific sense of guilt, *and* a true desire to help humanity.

The dragon had no guilt, but he did have that true desire. What, after all, was there to be guilty of? A few thousands dead, but the world saved for a generation? Maybe a lot more than that? That was an acceptable loss that any rightly-minded person would have accepted in a heartbeat.

... Addashield would have considered the past in exactly that way, too, though.

So was he Addashield, or not?

Looking back on 'his father's' life, the dragon thought the man flawed, but decent. A good man. A Hero of Humanity. That's what the dragon wanted to be, too. Addashield had burned all his connections to both worlds, though. This was both a blessing, and a curse. If there had been someone still alive, like Yunthal Brightwind, then the dragon would have gone to that person, in particular, and tried to establish himself through them. Would 'dad' have liked that?

No. That was dad's life.

... Or was the dragon his own dad?

The dragon wasn't sure.

The dragon sighed as he flew, thinking about how to connect to the world.

Daihoon was right out. That was dad's world.

Earth was a better option. There was that Hero/Villain Program thing. The dragon could be a good hero through there...

Honestly, the biggest indicator that the dragon was a new person was his outlook on life. He wasn't concerned about politics, or kaiju, or even other dragons. He just wanted to have an easy life, and he wanted a real connection to humanity. The easy life was practically guaranteed, because he was a High Dragon, and he had enough adamantium to shred absolutely anything.

The connection to humanity was harder to source.

That was probably why he had spoken of that guy, Mark, to reporters, and claimed him as a brother. It humanized the dragon, even though he remained firmly a building-sized dragon. The dragon hadn't even intended that while claiming Mark as a brother, though... But Addashield had.

Seemed like the dragon still had Addashield's instincts to talk obliquely to reporters, and to accomplish many things at the same time.

But the dragon just wanted a family to connect him to the world, right?

And yet, he knew he was not going to get that from Mark. The guy probably hated him, and he had every right to hate the dragon.

Honestly, the dragon was kinda *furious* at Kanda for making Addashield kill Mark's parents. Mark ended up a tri-Talent, with the *full Union Talent*, and also Adamantiumkinesis. Healthy Body wasn't anything too special to note, but it existed, and therefore Mark was a tri-Talent, and there were synergies everywhere with that Power. Mark was going to go far and probably live for a while.

Therefore, Mark was a good person to know. To be connected to.

... Eh!

That was enough thought spent on a guy who ultimately was beneath the dragon's concern.

If Mark rose high enough to be of note, then maybe they'd speak again some day.

... Maybe Mark would even try to kill him. That'd be cute. Ultimately impossible, though. The dragon would need to instruct Mark how to fight better, if that should happen. That's what big brothers were for, after all.

... Huh.

The dragon grinned.

Maybe it *was* useful to think of 'that other person who was born at the same time as him, from the same parents/situation'. They had a word for that sort of thing, over on Daihoon; Talzarki. The rough translation to English was 'Happenstance Sibling'. 'Battle brothers' or 'war companions' didn't quite hit the same idea. A talzarki was more like a person who survived the same kaiju attack which leveled a city, and then they met each other and built and survived and thrived in their new, destroyed world. Sloane Addashield had been talzarki with Yunthal Brightwind. Addashield had a real family, of course, but that was 300 years ago and Addashield kinda just stopped caring about his technical-offspring when

some disasters killed everyone from the main line. Brightwind was the only one who went on to make a *true* family, that he overlooked for hundreds of years and with great care. Addashield had always been closer to Brightwind's family than he was to his own great, great, great...

... Huh.

Now there was a thought.

Maybe *the dragon* couldn't make a human family, but *Mark* could.

The dragon could be a great uncle! A family protector!

And that would show humans that he could be trusted, because of course he could be trusted.

And if people didn't want to accept him into a city somewhere, then he could make his own city. Dragons always did that back on Daihoon, before Earth came into the picture and threw the dragons off. Addashield was a big part of that overthrowing, but even he had 'allies' among the dragons. People still needed grand protections from the bigger threats out there, and there was always a bigger threat out there, and the dragons only demanded farm loads of fresh food and tribute and stuff like that. Or at least the decent ones did. The political dragons were the actually dangerous ones, and it was only ever good to have a few of those around...

The dragon was a political dragon, wasn't he?

The dragon grinned.

Maybe his future people could farm cows and *he could bring rain!* And they could build their little houses and maybe a castle or two for the dragon and he could make rivers and— And so much! Oh! This was a fun idea—

*Oh. There's a kaiju down there.*

It was a mutated crab-type and it was chasing a boat-like thing. If the crab-part wasn't enough of a reason to kill it—for those tasted amazing—the dragon could also get some credit for saving the humans!

Win/win.

The dragon dropped out of the sky like a divine hammer, crashing into the kaiju in the ocean, crunching it with ten thousand tons of adamantium spikes, mincing it to make sure it was dead. With his spikes lodged in the beast, the dragon hovered above the beast, observing its corpse. It was going to be delicious, for sure. The whole encounter took less than 30 seconds and the beast tried to fight back with high-pressure water jets, shot out of barnacle beasts that grew on the kaiju. It was a pretty standard big-kaiju/small-supporter monster configuration, and all pieces of that ecosystem were now very dead.

The dragon cast a gaze at the people the kaiju was chasing.

It was a transit hover-type vessel that was smoking a bit, so they probably had needed to land due to emergencies, or whatever. Maybe a long range water bolt from the now-dead kaiju barnacles had gotten it? Yes. That was it. It looked like something had clipped the front end.

They were screaming even more now that the dragon was here, hovering with wings spread wide, letting them gaze upon his magnificence. Why were they screaming so much?

The dragon huffed and told them, “What! I killed the monster! You're safe now, except I think your ship is still sinking. Want a ride somewhere close?”

The screaming stopped. They whispered about ‘That's Addashield's Dragon!’ and ‘Oh FUCK!’.

The dragon tried not to smirk—

Someone stepped out and said, “Go away, dragon! We don't want you here!”

The dragon scoffed.

The people with that rude person rapidly beat that person and then apologized to the dragon, but the dragon just huffed.

“Most dragons would kill you for that. I should know; I killed enough of those bastards over the centuries...” Or Sloane had? Hmm. “Or maybe dad did. Whatever! I can take you somewhere. I think I passed Argentina back there.”

“We thank you for your kindness and could not think to trespass upon the rescue you have already given us. In an hour, we’ll be back up and flying!”

“Nonsense! I’ll take you to Argentina.”

The dragon would hear no more objections. With a bit of an adamantium shell, he grabbed the ship and protected the people from the strong wind as he flew them back to Argentina. He found a city easily enough, the city wall rising on the horizon...

And there were explosions?

Oh! It seemed the city was experiencing a monster wave! Looked like malformations; dog-type. Maybe more like a giant tiger-type, actually. Either way, the turrets on the walls were mowing down the monsters and some heroes on the wall were doing their best.

They’d win the fight; the dragon easily saw that.

But the dragon wanted to help.

Turning his spikes into a blender of metal, into a minor hurricane of death, the dragon wiped out hundreds of tiger-things within minutes. It was *so easy* as a dragon to cover tens of kilometers with adamantium death, and then sweep a hundred kilometer-wide wave into broken, dead mush. When that was over the dragon set down his cargo of a rescued vessel just a kilometer outside of the city, pulling his adamantium shell away and putting it back on his back, in the shape of spikes.

Everyone was completely unharmed, but now the wall turrets were shooting him, which kinda stung. That was why he had set the cargo so far away; so they wouldn't be caught in the friendly fire.

The dragon shielded himself with adamantium as he approached the city again. He raised his voice, "I found some people in the water, running from a kaiju! I set them down over there! Good luck to you all."

He flew away, away from the shooting turrets, back to the crab kaiju.

Crab kaiju was absolutely delicious.

After the meal, the dragon found some more problems to solve.

Problems were just so much easier to fix when you were a dragon.

Addashield should have become a dragon a century ago, but then, of course, Kanda would have fucked it up if he had ever made actual plans in that direction...

Hmm.

The dragon was still unsure if he was Addashield, or not.

The dragon, unnamed as of yet, wondered if it was time to pick a new name and move on, or pick 'Addashield' and go back as much as he could.

... Sons often took their father's names, right?

Hmm.

Brightwind's demon, which had been sister to Addashield's demon Kanda, was named Adank.

'Mark' became Karm?



... No, it would be Kram?

The dragon chortled.

No.

He was not a 'Kram', thank you very much.

-----

Mark sneezed.

“... Huh.” Lola raised an eyebrow at Mark, then she asked, “Was that a normal sneeze, or a miasma sneeze?”

“... A normal sneeze? I don't smell any miasma?”

It was the end of the first week of Healing Club. Mark's training mission was *next week*, though he had hung out with Eliot and Isoko twice again. He had decided to spend next week up here on the stands of the arena, and not move on to the smaller, more intense brawny sparring courses, because stressing Union in these wide scale applications was doing wonders for his astral body growth.

He had checked out his gains in the scanner just this morning.

**Body, Healthy Body: 020**

**Shaper, Adamantium: 019**

**Mind: 16**

**Natural, Union: 029**

**Soul: 18**

**Arch: 13**

Almost tier 3 in Union! And he had reached tier 2 in Healthy Body.

Healthy Body was supposed to cap out at 25, but Lola already thought that Mark would go higher than that, but she couldn't tell him how high.

Lola looked at him. "It's weird for you to sneeze. Usually that's the sign of an attack, or a miasma problem. Keep that in mind."

Mark wasn't sure how to take that information, because he certainly didn't feel attacked— "Wait. That means you haven't sneezed in... in a long time?"

"Correct. I have not. Not unless I was being attacked."

"... Huh."

"Just keep it in mind." Lola moved on, saying, "Anyway. Repetition of lessons is always useful. Now is a good time to go back to those cleaning magics, to make yourself pure, so that you aren't affected by atmospheric or environmental attacks. Mind you, you still will be affected by those, for an area effect attack is always going to be dangerous to you due to the ephemeral nature of Union, but there are ways to make it easier to function in such areas..."

Mark listened. He adjusted his breathing and heartbeat accordingly.

He learned.