

“... Really?” Mark asked, trying to keep his face from showing his deep disbelief on camera. There were a lot of people on the other side of the video call. “100 Healthy Bodys a day. That’s all you want?”

“That’s all we want,” said Sentinel Saikou Jawo of Aluatha, of Freyala.

The slightly purple man looked pretty much the same as Mark remembered, back when he first met the guy in the starter days of the Battle for Memphi, when he was trying to convince Mark to turn himself in to Aluatha. Others on the Collective call looked a bit more ragged, like the other guy Mark had met way back in Memphi, and who was actually sitting on the other side of the conference room table.

Executioner for Drakarok, Walter Volkov, former Sentinel of Okuana, was still a big man with old scars all over his face and hands, but he looked like he hadn’t slept properly in months, which was rather true. Godking Dominant had kicked out or killed every single paladin, priest, and big-time parishioner of the God of War and Murder in the days following Mark’s release of the Documentary of Endless Daihoon. Walter blamed Mark in an offhanded way for what had gone down with his entire life, but Walter knew he was effectively blaming a tiny rock for not holding back an ocean. He saw, now, the rot at the center of Okuana, and he hated every part of his former home.

Other people at the meeting included Lola, whom Mark hadn’t seen nearly enough in the last few days. Lola kept her head high and her back straight, looking at the cameras ahead, her visage poised in the square of the screen that currently belonged to her.

Mark was in a meeting with the Collective, taken at the Church of the Pantheon in Dawncoast. Mostly, it was him sitting in front of a camera, in a conference with a lot of the major players of the Pantheon in Daihoon, and of Aluatha. Some of the people in the room with him and half of the people on the screen were mostly spectators, for all people of the Collective could look in on these sorts of meetings when they wanted to look in, because that’s how the Collective operated.

High Paladin Azocar Sanchez of Hearthswell, and Sir Galen Green-shield, High Priest of Verdago, were in that later category, sitting there in that room.

Some very famous names up on that screen were the High Priestess Holy Mother Julia Garin, of Freyala. She looked regal in her gold and white dress, while her son, the superhero Justicar, Serge Garin, stood to the side in his extremely-paladin armor. The guy was big in the Hero/Villain Program and also a major player in Crystal Tower.

Mark hadn’t seen them in a year.

Another person he hadn’t seen in a while was the former consort of Drakarok himself, when the god was a mortal man named Alexander Volkov. Currently, the woman went by the name Redwolf, and she lived in a recently-rejoined part of Memphi, that used to be called Wolf Bayou, until the Gate District of Memphi had reabsorbed that whole section of land to expand the city and to make the Gate District.

Redwolf’s real designation and name was ‘High Priestess Kendrai Redwolf’. Her eponymous mask was pulled to the side, sitting on top of her pale, girlish face. She was not happy, but at least it wasn’t pointed at Mark. Mark was pretty sure that if looks could kill across the Two Worlds, then Redwolf could do it. She could already pop the brains of kaiju from kilometers away, if they had brains.

Mark was old enough to know that while most people had brains, if they used them then that would have been a deviation from the norm.

People from Okuana were watching this meeting.

Mark had mixed feelings about that. They had briefly argued about everything to do with Mark empowering Aluatha at the expense of Okuana, but Mark briefly didn't give a shit about them, and told them as much before any of that really got going.

There was one Sentinel of Okuana, Vinceni Charo, of Hearthswell, whom Mark had talked with before and whom he was starting to hate, which was still a weird feeling for him. Other people were much more familiar with that feeling.

The (Ex)Sentinel of Okuana, Navaloka Volkov, had butted heads with Vinceni before, too, and she was also glaring at Vinceni... maybe. Mark wasn't sure. There were a lot of faces up there. This was a big meeting.

Sentinel Saikou had led Aluatha's Sentinels and Paladins in their presentation of what Aluatha's Chosen wanted from Mark's Skilling efforts, but Mark was having trouble accepting their decision.

Mark said, "I can do more than 100 Healthy Bodys per day." Maybe, actually. Mark wasn't too sure about that. What he was sure about was, "I can make real powerhouses, like Shawn."

Redwolf pressed the button in front of her, along with a bunch of other people. Redwolf took priority, according to the moderator overseeing today's big discussion. Redwolf's screen was soon framed with light as she said, "Drakarok will take all the Bi-Talents you want to give us, but we're not doing Tri-Talents anymore."

Other people were furiously pressing their buttons, trying to speak.

But Mark was allowed to speak next, since he was the focus of the meeting. The button sitting in front of him lit up, letting him know he could speak if he wanted, so he tapped the buttons and his image lit up with a white frame. Mark asked, "What's wrong with Tri-Talents? I theoretically could have been paladin'd, if I didn't already have a Natural Power."

Redwolf tapped her button and responded, "It's a matter of advancement. Shawn can never be more for Drakarok than he is right now. We'd much prefer Bi-Talents that might one day ascend to full Retribution so that we can fully march on Dominant and kill every single tree with the eons of Retribution he has rightfully gathered—"

"Point of order," said the moderator, while many people from Okuana were smashing their 'I want to talk' buttons. "We're not discussing the war today."

On the other side of the table from Mark, Walter huffed, speaking under his voice, "Kaijushit."

Mark thought it was kaijushit, too. They were absolutely discussing the war, but they were doing it obliquely. Mark's button lit up again, but he let it go; his question had been answered. The gods wanted Bi-Talents so that they could support those people themselves, instead of limiting the power they could grant. It was probably the whole 'fourth talent' problem, where humans all monsterized if they got 4 Talents.

... Mark still hadn't experimented with having 4 Talents yet.

Maybe he'd do that when he went out to hunt monsters later—

Vinceni Charo, of Hearthswell, Sentinel of Okuana, lit up on the screen. It was his turn to talk, Mark supposed. A bunch of other people were visibly disgusted. Redwolf threw up her hands and walked away, but she left her screen on. She'd be back.

Vinceni tried being calm as he asked, "Will you be allowing people from Okuana to come get Skilled in the myriad ways you say you'll do?"

Mark's button lit up. Mark controlled his rage down to a simmer as he tapped the button, and said, "The Pantheon might not choose a side, and that will be good for the many people who live within the borders of both empires, but Okuana killed the Fates of Xerkona, of which I am the Inheritor for, and therefor I will not be giving Okuana, or anyone who lives within Okuana's borders, any assistance at all with Skilling. Please leave Okuana if you are able, and if you cannot leave because you serve a sacred duty, then please try to keep people safe and out of the war."

Vinceni looked distressed, but also diplomatic and thankful. When the option came for him to respond, he said, "Thank you for recognizing the sacred duty of Hearthswell, and the Pantheon."

The moderator opened the floor again.

Saikou Jawo asked, "Will you be able to provide the requested Healthy Bodys to Aluatha's Chosen?"

A hundred Healthy Bodys per day, for as long as Mark could keep going.

That is what they were asking for.

It was a big ask.

Mark had to think, so he Unioned with Alacrity and Slowness to give himself more time.

Quark was right there with him, illuminating some numbers they had already gone over during other Alacrity/Slowness moments.

100 Healthy Bodys a day.

It was a small number. Healthy Body was a 'weak' Power and kinda easy to get. But it was, in truth, a very large number for Mark and a very strong empowerment of the world.

Quark had done some calculations with Mark's time-to-harvest for the last few Healthy Body takes from the slaughterhouse. To get 100 Healthy Bodys Mark needed to kill 250-300 cattle per day. That meant that the slaughterhouse would need to increase its output by a full 50%, from 200 to 300, and, assuming Mark could pull out a Binding from a cow in a single minute, that meant 300 minutes per day of killing cows. 3 hours, at the minimum. Probably closer to 4 hours per day.

It was currently Friday, March 4th, 2050.

It had been a few days since Mark had Skilled the first round of soldiers for Walaria, and more would be coming in, soon, but Mark had been practicing pulling Healthy Bodys from cows and he had gotten pretty good at it. Not 1-minute-per-cow good. But close. He could get there eventually.

But, assuming that Mark was Skilling 100 people with Knacks, meaning 100 people who never went through Tutorial, and who were just using the Chosen System, he would be effectively 'minting' 100 'new' Paladins per day.

100 people who were already in the Chosen System, but who had been relegated to back-end work, in small hospitals and healing stations and the like. Not full paladins or priests at all.

But they would be full paladins or priests when they got a Body Power. Right now they were just Knacked.

Chosen with Knacks were a subset of the population who had only ever had a Power Level that was supported by their Chosen Power, giving them a 1 in every part of the Power Hex except Natural, which had a range of PL from 30 to 70, depending on how far they had gone with their god. With Healthy Body, Mark would be giving those people a Body at 25 and then a 15 in Arch and Shaper, and 10s in Mind and Arcane. Those people would also have a Healthy Body, which was not the best Body Power, but it was still really, really good. And you could evolve it, eventually... somewhat. Tartu had never managed to evolve his Healthy Body, but he was still trying.

Healthy Body and a Chosen Natural Power wouldn't make great Paladins...

... Though Lola was a pretty great paladin, even without a Power of her own at all.

Anyway. Such people would still be Paladins who could actually go out and fight on a frontline somewhere, with a real Power Level that would protect them from most casual harm.

That was big.

Digging more into the numbers, it got a bit more complicated.

The Two Worlds had maybe 5.3 billion people. The official count of people was off, and everyone knew it, but these were the numbers that were used in high level discussions of this type, where people were organizing systems and trying to make systemic impacts. This world war was going to have a major systemic impact on everyone, so 5.3 billion people was 'close enough' to the real number.

3.3 billion people on Earth, 2 billion on Daihoon, with the average daihoonian being vastly stronger than the average earthling. Like, Power-Level-20-on-Daihoon compared to PL-1-on-Earth kind of stronger.

That 2 billion on Daihoon was further split to 850 million in Aluatha, 1.15 Billion in Okuana, and an unknown scattering elsewhere. The average Okuanan was comparable to the average Aluathan, though Okuana had dryads and Aluatha had nothing comparable at all. Both sides had archmages, though.

Would adding 100 paladins with a simple Brawny Power be enough to make any real impact at all?

Oh yes, they would make impacts. Mark was sure of that.

But when compared to making true powerhouses that could hold back monster waves all on their own?

... Shit.

And these guys were asking for a lot of work from Mark. 4 hours a day was a lot in a warzone.

Hmm...

Back to the numbers on the wall.

Only 10% of people on Earth took the Tutorial, but 35% of people on Daihoon took the Tutorial. On Earth, those Tutorial takers end up with some kinda Brawny Power most of the time. On Daihoon, it was much more complicated than 'you get a Brawny Power'.

So there were about 1.3 billion people with Powers in the Two Worlds. A fifth, basically. But most of those people with Powers lived on Daihoon. Many people with Powers, from Earth, went to Daihoon; just look at Mark, Sally, Eliot, and Isoko. Derek too. Many such cases.

So about 1-in-4 people on Daihoon had a Power.

Chosen paladins/priests were 1 in every 100-5000 people, including people with Knacks, depending on the situation. Most paladins moved around a lot, while priests stayed where they were. Here in Dawncoast it was 1-to-100 norm-to-Chosen.

So, just looking at Dawncoast, with a population of 130,000, that meant 1,300 Chosen.

If Mark added 100 more Healthy Body paladins to the score every day, instead of just normal paladins, those guys would absolutely make differences, everywhere...

But... no.

Mark had to say 'no' to this massive request.

Mark ended his Alacrity/Slowness, pressed the talk button, and said, "I am afraid I cannot do this level of request. It's too much of an obligation."

Some faces slumped. Redwolf was back, and she sighed a little, while the guy from Okuana looked relieved.

Mark continued, "However, I would like to suggest something else. Give me 25 Chosen per day to Healthy Body, and do some recruitment for more people and let's Healthy Body those 25 entirely-new people as well, or something like that. You can figure out the exact ratio. Might only be 49 Chosen and 1 other person. Maybe you have acolytes that never quite wanted to come into the fold, or never saw much point to it? People who hang on to the sides, who don't want to truly commit? People who are nevertheless good, useful people, who don't have much in the way of Powers at all. I want those people, too, because I want to expand the full number of Chosen as well. You guys figure all of that out and I'll do 50 new Healthy Body Chosens per day, for at least the next week, up to Gate Day, at no cost." Mark finished with, "I have other obligations both with Skilling, and with other organizations that I must attend to now, so that is my final offer."

The viewers had Thoughts about that, but most of them, based on their faces, were considering how to proceed. They were not going to try and change Mark's mind.

Saikou got to speak next, and he decided to say, "The Chosen of Aluatha thank you for this generosity, and we will accept it."

Mark nodded, and then tapped the button to indicate he was leaving the conference. His image dimmed around the edges and he stood—

The image of High Priestess Holy Mother Julia Garin, of Freyala, flickered with white. She was going to talk.

Mark sat back down.

Julia Garin simply said, "Thank you, Mark."

And then her image went grey, too.

Mark nodded, and then left the conversation, many images on the screen dimming and then fading away altogether, and pretty much everyone in the room decided that was all they needed to see—

"We want real killers too, Mark," Executioner Walter said, across the table, turning off his image. The rage in his heart flexed out of his control just a little, aiming barely at Mark and then out into the rest of the world. The very air felt retributive, like prickly sandpaper. Walter rumbled, "Wait a minute, please."

Walter glanced back at the blank screen.

Azocar and Galen and Lola watched, but did not say anything.

A new call was coming through. Walter answered it, and the screen shifted around. Instead of a conference call of hundreds, it was just 3 people. Walter, the Ex-Sentinel of Okuana, Navaloka Volkov, and Redwolf took the screen. Redwolf still had her wolf mask pulled to the side of her face, over her hair.

Redwolf said, "Hello Mark. I promise this won't take long. We want Soul Kill."

Mark had a deep moment. Then he said, "If you got someone you can truly trust with that one, and if they're going after people who need it, then you can have it, alongside whatever other Talents they need."

"We want Psychokinesis, too," Redwolf responded.

Now that...

Mark had trouble agreeing to that.

Mark had gotten Psychokinesis from one of Walaria's rescues the other day, and that Power had driven that guy crazy when he wasn't shavallian'd up. Or, more accurately, it drove him and everyone around him crazy. Literally. Psychokinesis allowed one to pilot around the thoughts and feelings of those around them as though those thoughts and feelings were extensions of one's own body. Psychokinesis was inherently dangerous.

"Psychokinesis is not like other Shaper Powers. It's the ability to directly rip at the vector of the mind, turning people away or focusing them or... or at lot. But mostly it's Walaria's to hand out, too. It came from her reserve."

"If we get her to sign off on it, you'll do it?"

"... Yes," Mark said, making a tough call.

Redwolf took a deep breath, like she saw a road opening up before her. Walter relaxed a little, and Navaloka Volkov looked secure—

Mark suddenly realized something. Walter and Navaloka both used Drakarok's last name, meaning they were high in the Church of Drakarok, but Kendrai Redwolf, the High Priestess of Drakarok, did not have Volkov for a last name.

Redwolf nodded a little, and it was almost a bow. "Thank you."

Mark asked, "Is your last name really Redwolf, or is it Volkov?"

Walter and Navaloka eyed Mark just a little.

Redwolf paused, and then she laughed once. "Yeah. It's Volkov. But it's still Redwolf, too."

That felt like enough interrogation for Mark.

Mark said, "I look forward to giving Soul Kill to a person and hearing about them killing Dryads and Dominant."

"And more than a few governors who allowed this shit," said Navaloka, the former Sentinel of Okuana.

She had a serious grudge against a lot of people back in her former home.

Mark said, "Death to all monsters."

Redwolf spoke seriously as she said, "Death to all monsters."

Navaloka nodded a little.

Walter ended the call then told Mark, "Thank you."

... Mark asked, "Was the demon killing stuff ever real?"

Lola, Galen, and Azocar, once again, were bystanders.

Walter's hatred spiked, but not at Mark. "It's better for that chapter of this war to be forgotten, Mark."

Mark moved on.

He waited outside of the conference room, but he poked back into the room with his Union, at Lola.

Soon, Lola joined him, saying, "50 'new' paladins per day is a big promise."

Mark smiled softly. "I'd like to make one right now, if you want, Lola. It's just Healthy Body."

Lola shook her head. "No thank you, Mark. Not right now."

Mark steeled himself, preparing to say something he knew he couldn't take back.

Mark said, "Your inability to accept my help in this manner might be because you came back wrong from your resurrection, and so you need a Healthy Body in order to think straight. It's brain chemistry stuff, and I saw it a lot when I healed those people with harmful Powers. A lot of them saw things a lot better once they were out from under the horror of their brain chemistry."

Lola eyed Mark sternly, rhetorically asking, "And you think Freyala has left me bereft of the ability to heal myself from the common, mortal issue of bad brain chemistry?" A bit tougher, she drilled, "What

was the very first Union you learned, Mark? Good/Bad, was it? Perhaps! So how about you leave this issue alone.”

The air was cold.

Mark pulled back, giving space as he said, “I understand. Sorry, Lola.”

“You are forgiven.” Lola asked, “Where are you off to next?”

“Off to the slaughterhouse, to ask about increasing production.”

“Then I will see you on the morrow.”

The air was still cold.

“... Want to grab lunch tomorrow? Somewhere nice?”

“Yes. Call me tomorrow when you are not too busy.”

“Okay.”

Mark smiled a little.

Then he got the heck out of there.

Mark flew through the sky to the slaughterhouse, warm sun on his face and body, but he still felt something like ice knives lodged into his chest as he thought about Lola.

Reeni said, “Oh sure. We can increase production, but I heard you have Meaty, and Impregnate.”

“You want them in a bull?” Mark asked. “Addavein said you might.”

“We do! And we have just the one for it. His name is Chad, and all the ladies already love him.”

Mark soon stood beside a 3 ton bull that was one of the most calm monster bulls Mark had ever seen. He was dappled grey and black, and he wagged his tail as he sniffled at Reeni, licking her hair a little before Reeni managed to pull an apple from her pocket. Chad zeroed in on that apple, opening a mouth full of teeth and then chowing down as Reeni chuckled, patting his face.

“Calm for a monster,” Mark said, full of surprise.

“He’s a really good bull. Already has Healthy Body, too,” Reeni said, holding the side of Chad’s giant face, beside his lower fangs. Reeni did something to Chad, and Chad kinda huffed, finishing off his apple, his eyes going softer and then closing. Chad’s vector folded inward as he slept standing up. Reeni held her hand to his face, saying, “He’s ready.”

Mark proceeded.

Afterward, Mark and Reeni stood on the top of the railing, overlooking the breeding yard from inside an invisible box. Chad was waking up, but all the ladies were already sniffing around him. Soon, the bull got to doing bull stuff with the ladies. As he moved, Mark watched as he gained another ton of weight, turning truly meaty. The ladies seemed to love it, and much mooing was had. They were monster cows,

too, so they were kinda violent sometimes, but mostly the cows got pregnant and had babies within minutes, and those calves matured within hours instead of months, and then those cattle went off for processing.

Mark only watched for 20 minutes; he didn't need to see the whole process since he had already seen it once.

It was basically the same order of events as before but now Reeni had doubled her number of cow callers and catchers on the walls, inside their own invisible boxes. They were preparing to Taunt the fresh calves away from their mothers at the right time, right before they started fighting, and to put them into the growing lots with more food and get them to full size, as per normal operation.

Reeni was smiling wide the whole time they watched Chad and the ladies do their thing. She saw something amazing. Mark didn't see anything truly different besides the size of Chad.

Mark asked, "So... Is this normal? What changed?"

Reeni smiled softly, saying, "This is amazing, Mark. This is..." She cut herself off and explained, "Okay. From a basic standpoint of breeding cattle, this is fantastic. Look at him go! I need to hire even more people. We'll have 300 cattle per day for you to process, easy. Chad is passing on a lot of his Skills too. Look at those cows there, at their big bellies. That's bigger than normal. Those calves are at least Meaty and probably Healthy Body and maybe even Impregnate if they're male, or Breeder if they're female.

"He's passing on so many Skills to his children. When you cull them, take some Impregnates and keep them around. Meaty, too. Just a few! They're useful in case we ever lose Chad as stock, and they're going to be useful for other farming practices, too. Chickens and pigs. All of that.

"But more than that... This little experiment is showing that if you want to harvest Skills from some kinds of monsters, we can do that. Impregnate on a True Brawny bull and you could have all the True Brawnies you could ever want."

"... Holy fucking..." Mark's thoughts went to the war, and then to how difficult it would be to keep around True Brawny cows at all, to... to a lot. Too much to think about. Mark breathed out, "Wow."

"Wow!" Reeni agreed, giggling.

Mark came down from the momentary high, focusing on the big issue, saying, "True Brawny cows would be horrific."

"Absolutely, I agree," Reeni said, "Lots of difficult parts to figure out, from enclosures to everything else, but the possibility is there." She moved on, "Something to think about— Oh! There's the first birth."

They both stopped and watched as a normal-sized cow gave birth to a mostly-normal calf that began standing almost instantly, moving strongly, and then it suckled on the mother's udder for a minute before it bit her, and she kicked it away. The calf went to the feeders and started growing as it buried its head in the feed bucket.

"Oh wow, that's Meaty alright," Reeni said, sounding very happy, but also marginally worried. Her eyes switched between new calf and Chad, still out there and still having fun with the ladies, as she pulled out a little walkie talkie, saying, "Catch #1, ready?"

“Ready, ma’am!” said a guy who was kinda nervous.

Another, stronger voice, said, “Loading double-tranqs into the gun.”

Reeni said, “Pull him early... now.”

Mark simply watched as the calf taunters did their thing, suddenly tapping at the mind of the new calf and making it rear up. The wall at Catch #1 turned invisible, showing off the people who had taunted the cow. The calf went charging, hit the invisible-metal wall with a solid hit, got tranqed from above, and then the floor opened up and the calf went downstairs. Finally, the wall turned visible again, hiding the taunter and the tranquer.

Catch #1 yelled in the talkies, “Whooo boy! He’s a biggun! Cracked the wall!”

Another guy said, “Auto-repairs are working. Wall is sealing.”

Reeni spoke in the comms, “Everyone load up double tranqs. We proceed as normal.” She cut the comms and told Mark, “Can you be a dear and ask Eliot to come by later today? We need to reinvent a few things.”

Mark called up Eliot right then and there,

“Yo yo yo?” Eliot asked.

“Got some cattle slaughterhouse issues that need solving with some of your Manipulation.”

“Priority?”

Mark said, “In an hour.”

“I can do it in 20 minutes?”

Reeni nodded.

Mark said, “Sure! Thanks.”

Click.

Later, Mark started stripping Bindings out of cattle as Eliot refitted the breeding yard, the bulking yard, and the transport lines. Sure enough, like Reeni had predicted, Mark got a whole lot of Natural Meatys, a few Impregnates at about the same rate he got Breeders from the girls, and the rate of Healthy Body went up considerably. Instead of 1 Healthy Body every 2 cows, it was more like 4 Healthy Bodies every 5 cows.

The rate of Healthy Body massively increased when both parents had it.

That evening, the first round of paladins came through the settlement, and sure enough it was 49 Chosen and 1 guy who had been an office manager at some church somewhere for the last 18 years. Mark didn’t say anything about that. What he did say was a whole lot of ‘Okay, hurry it up, people,’ when they did a collective prayer beforehand and when too many people wanted to speak up, to ‘just say one more thing about what they were thankful for’.

Mark enjoyed their joy, but he did not have time to wait for it to finish. No one had that kinda time right now. Mark had originally planned for 'this Skilling thing' to take up 3 hours per day, maybe. Here it was a week after the Winter Ball Attack and Mark was spending 4 hours a day at the slaughterhouse, 3 hours Skilling for the Collective, Walaria wanted a whole bunch of her people Healthy Body'd since Mark was already doing all of that, and then Tulo Khava came in, asking Mark if he could add 25 people to the list, too.

"Bring 'em on!" Mark had said. "Never would have thought Healthy Body would be such a damned game changer."

And so, Mark spent three 16 hour days in a row, Skilling nothing but Healthy Body and getting almost nothing in return except a whole lot of experience.

Meetings still happened, taking up even more of his time.

Mark was going to meet with Aurora to discuss Skilling people in the settlement, but what he found in Aurora's office was Isoko standing to the side.

Aurora said, "We'll do it another day, Mark."

Isoko pulled him out the door, saying, "You're taking a break! Let's go hunting."

"Thank you thank you thank you."

"It's still work!" Isoko said, grinning. She said in English, "We're hunting witch monsters."

"... Which monsters?"

"OHHHH. Witch monsters. Well this is awesome! ... but what makes them witch monsters? Just Natural Powers?"

Mark had flown with Isoko south for about 15 minutes, to a place far beyond the normal hunting grounds of most people. About a year ago this place had been a mushroom forest, with a kaiju-sized mycelium mushroom below the surface that sprouted mushrooms everywhere above, changing the very biology of the land. There used to be a mushroom-based ecology here, with mushroom trees and mushroom bushes and mushroom grasses. And then some of the Death mana of the Ethereal Turtle had fucked up the established ecology, followed by the goblins coming in and driving the kaiju shroom deeper into the crust. Perhaps, if it was just the Death mana and the goblins, then the kaiju shroom could have recovered. But then the Archmage Twins, Lancer and Buckler, had done even more damage.

The constant, monthly Gate Days had forced the weakened shroom underground.

The mushrooms kaiju was now fully hibernating, about 500 average meters below the surface, and the surface had fully regrown, as the Wilds were wont to do. But they had grown back wrong.

“I think I know what makes them witch-monsters,” Mark said.

It seemed, according to Mark’s initial assessment based on visual clues, dreamsight, and Quark’s analysis of the lands below, that the dream was very close to the surface, here, in this space. Did all sleeping kaiju cause this kinda reaction? What about hibernating dragons? Mark would need to ask Addavein about that, because he would know.

“I don’t get it myself,” Isoko said, gesturing down below, “But it’s easy to see that this place is unnatural... or rather, full of Natural-types of monsters, each contorting the world in their own ways.”

There were mushrooms down there, but they were leftovers from the mycelium-kaiju’s offshoots; weak things, growing alongside trees and underneath greenery, instead of out in the open and dominating everything. What dominated, instead, were giant, twisting trees that had no business looking like they did. They arced across the land, forming bridges between other trees. They grew thick as houses with deep holes in the bark for monsters to nest within like burrowing maggots. A few scattered trees grew ramrod straight, white and shining and 50 meters tall, raising their pale boughs higher into the sky than all the other trees. Those white boughs and leaves formed perfect ovals of silver-greenery high above everything else. Those white trees mostly resembled the dream of the mushroom kaiju, for those tall trees scattered dust on the wind, like spores.

And then there were the monsters.

Mark was most interested in the monsters inside of the boughs of the tall, white trees. The leaf dust there was scattering weirdly, a vector present inside of those swirls, prepared to attack anything that attacked it. It wasn’t a Shaper-swirl, either; those were easy to recognize. Shaper swirls usually had vectors fully present inside whatever they were swirling. It took a skilled Shaper to only control part of whatever they were controlling. So this was not a Shaper swirl... but it could be? There was a guidance to the swirl patterns, but it was loose. Inexact. And, that swirl was present all down the entire length of the 50 meter tall tree.

The swirl pattern down the entire 50-ish meter length of the tree is what most told Mark that this was not a Shaper Power. It was a Natural Power, because it flowed near the tree, attacking anything near the tree. Small monsters usually didn’t have ranges like that, and whatever was inside those silver-green boughs, hidden from sight and Unionsense, was certainly a small monster.

A Natural Power that inherently protected a space... Mark wanted Castellan. But at that same time, Mark killed his hopes for a Castellan, but... it wasn’t Castellan, right. No way. Couldn’t be.

Down on the forest floor, in what small parts Quark and Mark could see of it, Quark painted a few dots into Mark’s vision, linking up what he saw with what he knew from the quest boards of the settlement—of Dawncoast. Mark had called it ‘the settlement’ a few times since he had decided on the name, but he would get it right eventually. Just took some time.

Anyway.

There were a bunch of interesting monsters here, and it was easy to tell where to go looking for them.

Natural monsters always did something to their environment, changing something fundamentally about how this or that worked. Most of the time those changes were only visible in secondary effects, like with

Mark and his Union of X and Y, shifting stuff out and bringing stuff back in. Hard to notice, really, unless you were in the effect. Visible effects, though, were like those dust-swirling monsters who had turned their trees tall and powerful.

Other secondary effects included a purple grove over there that was currently fighting against an orange-colored grove, the borders of the groves indistinct but there was a clear clash of orange and purple between the spaces. That was how you spotted Natural monsters duking out realities in the world, with each of them trying to impose their own way of thinking. It was very possible that the orange and purple monsters were parent and child, each having the same Power but using it differently.

Other such 'fighting areas' abounded, all throughout the former mushroom forest.

Most notably, were the spaces where the mushrooms still grew, but which looked ephemeral. That could be the result of former residents of the mushroom forest having survived the kaiju moving on, but which had yet to adjust their own Natural inclinations, which had evolved in the presence of the mushroom forest. So some mushroom-symbiosis Natural powers.

Some things had clearly evolved and adapted to their new lands, though.

There was a 'mushroom caller' kinda monster, right down below, looking like a roaming mat of mycelium. It was probably a slime-variant, and Mark recognized its hunting patterns based on the carrion around it, even before Quark populated his vision with what the scouts had marked out. Where the slime-shroom roamed, slowly, it set up shop, producing spores that smelled like carrion. Monsters would go to the shroom and try to eat it, because it looked like some dead meat, and then the slime would spray spores at the monster and weaken it enough to eat it, slowly.

Or maybe the slime would just grow the mushrooms on the monster directly; Mark didn't know.

It was a top predator of this part of the forest. Suspected Power: Shroombiosis. Mark would have thought the slime would have had a Body Power for a whole bunch of reasons, primarily because this place was full of Natural Powers and Body Powers ate those things rather easily, and this was a slime, so it could survive any counterattacks rather well (since Natural Powers rather handedly handled Body Powers, in turn), but the scans had outed the truth of the creature. It was Naturally-aligned on the Power Hex, so it was absolutely a Natural Power, according to the large-ish scanner that Isoko had brought along.

The full-spectrum, high-quality scanner that Eliot had made, and that Isoko held in her platinum hands, was two geodesic spheres each about 50 centimeters across on opposite ends of a long metal rod. It looked like a giant, disco-adorned barbell. Isoko had a visor on that let her see the readout from the scanner, while Mark had Quark to do the same.

Isoko said, "I got targets on the things in the trees and that bear up that way."

"A bear?" Mark asked, looking forward. He didn't sense what Isoko was sensing, but now that Mark was looking, Quark picked out the target underneath the trees. It was a yellow dot below a field of green, and that was it. "Ah. Out of my range."

Isoko grinned, the sky shimmering overhead with platinum flashes. "I still got something better than you!"

“Thank the gods, right?” Mark teased.

“Thank the gods!” Isoko said, smiling brightly, looking like a reflection of the world all around. She asked, “Which ones first?”

“Do we have an actual target list?”

“A small one, but there are a ton of Natural monsters here. I do have a list of the ones that are actually dangerous, though? We can go through that.”

Mark rolled his eyes at Isoko, who was handling him with soft gloves. Mark said, “Thank you very much for pulling me out of that back there, Isoko. I needed a refill and a break, and I knew I wasn’t going to get it normally. BUT! I’m pretty sure Aurora has an actual list. I was going in there to talk to her about all of that... well. Really just to start Healthy Body’ing people from Dawncoast. So give me the list!”

Isoko beamed with teasing joy, saying, “The list came from Reeni, Pearl, Amy, and Uva, by way of Aurora. They wanna make more witches for Dawncoast. A full Grand Coven.”

“... Why couldn’t they just tell me that?” Mark asked, feeling kinda hurt.

He knew he was busy, but... that was serious, right?

Isoko shrugged. “I think they just gave an update to Aurora about future plans and desires and she decided to make it happen now.”

“Oh,” Mark said, “Okay. That’s not that bad, then. Aurora is just making it happen now. Well that’s fine?”

Isoko said, “The bear over there has something like ‘Easy Life’. Jury is out on what it can do, exactly, only that it’s got something good. It’s not the biggest or strongest monster out there, but nothing seems to hurt it for too long and nothing seems to kill it at all. Food grows where it’s looking for food. That sort of thing. And then there are those birds in those white trees.” She pointed at the nearest white tree, saying, “That’s not Castellán, but damned if everyone is hoping it is.”

Mark snorted.

Isoko continued, “And shrooms are quite effective against trees, so there’s some hope that you can grab some mushroom-mancer stuff from here. Lots of shroom stuff to choose from down there.”

Mark nodded, looking around... And then he set his sight on that nearest white tree with the swirling dust around it. He looked down at the canopy, to where the dust swirled against nearby trees, turning those trees away or... something. Mark wasn’t sure. Welp! Time to find out.

“Going for the white tree first.”

“I’m on backup,” Isoko said, connecting to Mark with a Union of Good and Bad, the wind flowing for him. “Have fun!”

Mark loved his job.

Mark launched at the white tree—

The tree disappeared to his senses; sight, sound, Unionsense, everything. Mark slowed down and hovered in the middle of the cleared space where the tree had been. The Wilds down below were cleared in about a 5 meter radius from the base of the tree, and the air seemed cooler here, but if there were roots and branches anywhere near Mark, then they were too well-hidden to recognize.

A Mind effect? But Mark was PL 98 in Mind and with a Clean House ritual going on, so...

Mark asked, "Quark? Can you see it?"

"I see nothing, sir."

Mark called to Isoko on their comms, "You see it?"

With a hint of mirth in her voice, Isoko said, "Nope! Try the bear!"

"... I think she's enjoying this, Quark."

Isoko laughed a little.

Quark said, "I believe you are right, sir. And also, the bear is over there."

An arrow appeared in Mark's vision, along with a distance readout of 813 meters.

... Mark spun up his rotor and headed that way.

Much to his chagrin, the white tree reappeared once Mark got 75 meters away.

Mark kept going toward the bear.

Soon, Mark spotted the bear down below in the middle of a rather pleasant glade. The bear looked rather normal. Big, black, and with big claws. Not a monster bear at all. It was currently picking off big black berries from a large bush of them, purple juice all over its brown snout.

Now that it was inside of Mark's range, Mark saw that it was doing something funny to its surroundings, its vector everywhere, like it was standing in the middle of its own reality of how things should be.

"Holy shit," Mark said, "That's... that's not Reality Manipulation, is it?"

"The scanner says Natural," Isoko responded, hovering high overhead, barbell scanner in her platinum grip. "A reality warper might show up like that, though. No real way to tell until you hit it."

Mark descended through the trees, landing beside...

The glade was empty?

Mark looked around. There was the big black berry bush and the comfortable glade, and the remnants of berries all over the ground, but no bear.

To Mark's Unionsense, the bear was about 20 meters in that direction, past a big tree. It was right out of sight.

... Either it had moved very, very fast, or else something else had happened. Mark suspected the second possibility more than the first because the bear was not stressed at all, and was, in fact, moving rather sedately toward its next meal.

... Mark walked around the tree.

The bear was eating from a red berry bush, now, its Power thrumming into what had been a small bush and which now grew and grew and grew. The red berry bush became something to match the bear for size, with giant red berries hanging in groups of three or four among big, shiny green leaves.

... Mark walked toward the bear.

The bear, which was easily in the 6 to 7 ton range and standing at 4 meters tall at the shoulder, looked at Mark, and then it went back to eating red berries, getting red all over its snout.

Mark raised a rotor blade, preparing to secure the beast so it didn't thrash while taking its Binding, but... Something stopped him. Not physically, but emotionally.

Mark did not want to hurt this monster at all, and the monster certainly wasn't trying to hurt Mark, so... Mark didn't hurt the bear. He put his rotor back down and sent a message to Isoko, "So it's not directly affecting me, but I think it's affecting my Union or astral body, or something. There's a mental effect, for sure, because it's making me not want to fight it."

"Holy shit, you can actually interact with it?" Isoko asked, surprised. She was directly overhead, kinda far, but still within sight. "It doesn't let people get near it."

Mark regarded the bear and its vector as it chowed down on red berries. Maybe... Mark asked, "I think it knows I'm here for its Power, but it wants more in return than what I take from it? Wow, this is strong. I am feeling compelled to do exactly that?" Mark asked both Quark and Isoko, "Should I?"

"Fuck if I know. It's supposed to have 'Easy Life' and we want that for Dawncoast. We want that A LOT." Isoko added, "No one has been able to hurt it yet, though. Thought maybe you could."

Mark nodded a little as he Unioned with the world around the bear, bringing in the Good and dispelling the Bad, focusing on the berry bush. The bush suddenly lurched to life, expanding and expanding, dripping with giant red berries that filled with small, inner lights. They glowed, or maybe they just shimmered brightly in the afternoon sun. Hard to say.

The bear was unsure about this, but he ate the bigger berries anyway, chomping down on two at a time.

Mark got the distinct impression that this was not enough.

"Does it hurt people?" Mark asked.

"Yes, it does hurt people when they try to hurt it. But what are you thinking?" Isoko asked.

"We just need it in Dawncoast, and it's obviously very powerful as-is."

"It teleports around when you get close enough to it, and it's survived all the kaiju attacks in the area, so... You tell me."

“Probably not, then.” Mark regarded the bear. Mark told the bear, “If you teleport away at the fight sign of danger, then I can’t make a home for you at Dawncoast... though I kinda want to—” Mark had a thought. “Would you abandon your children at Dawncoast—”

The bear paused and glared at Mark.

“—because I can keep you and your kids safe at Dawncoast. All the berries and good stuff that a bear could ever want. Maybe a little nature reserve? But if you would abandon your kids in the case of a kaiju attack, then this isn’t going to work anyway.”

The bear turned toward Mark— and it kept turning, and turning and then it became a shadow that was not there anymore.

Its vector was now 40 meters distant, behind some trees and briers.

Mark walked toward the bear again, hopping over some logs and ducking under a branch, and though some sort of spider dropped on him from above Mark easily dispatched the spider, got the Natural Power Web Control from it, which was actually quite good when Mark thought about it for a second, and then he easily caught up to the bear. The bear huffed at Mark and then turned away, turning and turning and turning again, before it vanished.

It reappeared 30 meters away this time.

Mark walked toward the bear again, and this time a hypnotic toad appeared on a stump directly in the path, flashing colors and attacking Mark’s existence directly. The world shimmered and faded, and Mark latched right back at the toad. Soon, Mark extracted the toad’s Natural Power from it, leaving the toad alive and unable to do much but stand there on the stump, looking rather colorful.

A bird came out of nowhere (or maybe it was just a speedster bird) and grabbed the toad, eating it in one gulp. It was only when the bird had passed that Mark imagined he should have nabbed the bird, too. That thing had obviously had some speedster Power, for sure.

Oh well.

The toad had given him Beautiful Existence, Natural.

Mark caught up to the bear, and said, “Those are some neat Powers I’m taking from whatever you throw at me. What’s next?”

The bear ignored him and kept walking in the sunshine, the trees themselves seeming to bend out of the way, though they never visibly did so. The bear simply walked in a path that existed as the bear walked it, but which hadn’t existed before, but also the bear didn’t seem to be making the path itself, at all. It was weird.

It might have been Reality Manipulation, but Mark was pretty sure it wasn’t.

Isoko asked, “What’d you get?”

“The spider was an ambush Natural monster, with Web Control. It’s not a Shaper Power, so it’s broad as heck. Maybe a techie in Command would want it? The toad had Beautiful Existence and then some

speedster bird came through and ate it, once it no longer had that Power.” Mark added, “Missed the bird, but Beautiful Existence absolutely seems like a Witch Power.”

“The bird is still there, about a kilometer away on the branches of a tall tree. Its vector is kinda fucked up right now. Kinda... druggy? Hard to tell.”

“Grab that bird for me, Isoko.”

The bear suddenly turned at Mark, showing teeth, rumbling like an avalanche getting ready to tumble down a mountain directly on top of Mark.

Mark glared right back at the bear, and said, “Belay that request, Isoko.”

“... You sure? I already picked it up?”

“Heal it and set it back down somewhere, or let it fly away. Tell me when you get it done.”

Isoko said, “Sure.”

The bear looked at Mark.

Mark looked at the bear.

And then Isoko said, “That bird is super gone now. No idea where it went.”

The bear huffed and then kept walking.

Smart bear.

Mark walked with the bear, telling it, “I can give you another Power in exchange for Easy Life.”

The bear huffed.

Mark threw the gauntlet, saying, “You better give me something useful because I’m out here trying to save my entire world from an evil tree, and I will kill you to get what I want. Or, I could leave you with a different Power.”

The bear turned and growled at Mark, showing fangs, the red on its snout looking almost like blood.

Mark was done playing. He glared right back at the bear, rumbling, “Try me.”

Mark did not blink.

The bear regarded Mark, and then it found him inadequate. It simply turned translucent, then vanished, shadows flickering into the light.

“... Completely gone?” Mark asked, because he wasn’t able to sense it anywhere at all. “Isoko? The bear?”

“I’m checking!” Isoko said, vector turning a little frantic and directed. She was probably poking at her scanner barbell. Mark waited. Isoko said, “Gone! I can’t find it anywhere, and I can’t sense its distinct vector anywhere, either... Maybe it will come back?”

“Doubtful... Maybe I should have just attacked it anyway.”

Mark lifted his rotor overhead, prepared to catch Isoko's wind, but he paused. Normally, he would have just ignored what he saw, but not in this case. A small black mushroom, about a handspan across, grew where the bear had been, and it had a vector. A lot of things had vectors in the wilds, though. But this mushroom had not been there before.

And without shifting its vector at all, the mushroom kinda... turned a little, like its parent had turned when it went teleporting, and now the mushroom was a small black bear.

A cub.

It was not the same bear at all, and it didn't even look like a normal bear. It was too small. It would fit in Mark's palm if he picked it up. And then it looked at Mark with watery, small eyes, and it whined. It was the tiniest, cutest squeak. It wanted food, and a lot of it.

Mark did a union of Sustenance and Deprivation, guiding nutrition into the tiny bear and linking it with all the world outside of itself. The bear whined for a moment longer as the wilds grew strong and tall, the sunlight slowly fading as greenery came together overhead.

As the forest closed over, the light fading on the tiny bear, the bear reached full satiation. With a tiny little squeak, the tiny bear laid down on the ground, in the quiet dark, and the wilds went to sleep with it. Mark was pretty sure that absolutely nothing bad would ever happen to this bear as it slept, right there in the open, among the grasses, and wasn't that amazing.

"... I want to keep it. Reeni had it on her lists, right?"

"What?" Isoko asked, through some static in the comms. "Didn't catch that?"

Quark said, "Sir, our connection is being quieted."

That would be why Mark imagined that nothing would ever happen to the sleeping bear; the world had turned away from him. The loss of radio signals was just one such indication of that turn.

Mark was still here, though.

Mark gathered up the tiny bear along with a good meter of soil and its surroundings, wrapping the bear in a sphere of adamantium, saying, "We're taking this one home." Mark threw a rotor into the sky overhead, churning the greenery, escaping into the sky with a little bit of help from Isoko, and said, "That's enough hunting for today. Let's get this little guy back to Reeni. She'll know what to do with him."

Isoko was all, "... Okay? Sure? What happened down there?"

"No idea!"

"What about the white trees?"

"I'll come back later for a few of them. See if I can figure them out."

"... Okay! Sure." Isoko eyed the black sphere with Mark. "So a baby mushroom bear?"

"No idea!"

--

Mark stood beside Reeni in a calm grove of Dawncoast, located outside of the farms.

Mark had planted the baby bear onto the ground and then he opened up the adamantium sphere. The bear had been nestled into a bunch of overgrown grasses, but now, when the sun touched it again, it woke and whined for food. Mark fed it again, and soon the world closed over it again, the nearby trees growing overhead, shrouding the newly-10-kilo baby black bear in shadows.

It slept soundly in the grass.

Reeni was full of wonder as she said, "It's an Easy Bear at all. I had sent you out there for an Easy Bear. The Skill they have is An Easy Life. This is so much more than that. This is a Good Bear, Mark. A Good Bear and it's too young to teleport. It'll grow fast, though... Gosh. You never see much in life for a long time, and then suddenly it's everything all at the same time."

"So a Good Bear that can't teleport?" Mark asked, slightly enthusiastic. "That's good, right?"

"It's a good omen for Dawncoast, for sure. We can't keep it and we can't kill it and if you can't take out its Binding then... then we just have to live with it."

"I could take its Binding, but that seemed like a really bad idea."

Reeni was conflicted for a moment, and then she said, "I don't know what would happen if you managed that, but I do know that when someone kills or tries to contain a Good Bear they turn into a Bad Bear. That lady that came in with Misfortune Manipulation? Ha! Nothing compared to a Bad Bear."

Mark was both worried and intrigued as he asked, "So is this a good idea? This Good Bear? Or should I bring it back to the forest?"

"We'll feed it and keep it safe enough, and when it wants to move on it will. Maybe it'll come back sometimes if we keep the space good enough for it to return." Reeni looked at Mark, and said, "This is actually a really good witch familiar. If any of the current coven of Dawncoast get it I will be surprised, but I'll put a feeler out to some druids I know. Even if they can't Familiarize with it, they can still take care of it. It's good practice."

Mark grinned. "Good." He walked away, saying, "I'm heading back for some of those white tree monsters. Gonna try some Ethereal/Adamant."

Reeni nodded, waving slightly, not really saying anything. Her focus was on the tiny, sleeping, baby bear.

--

Mark hovered triumphant just outside of the canopy of a white tree.

A tiny, kinda-translucent bird squeaked furiously at him from the canopy. It had been ethereal and untouchable, but Mark had disrupted it fully. Just took a bit of slamming it with a Union of Ethereal and Adamant to knock it back into this reality.

And now Mark had a copy of the Natural Power, Ethereality.

Mark told the bird, "Yes yes, I know. You hate me. But you bastards hunt these lands and have almost killed several humans who tried hunting here, so fuck you, too. No regrets!"

Mark went and got a few more Etherealities from other birds of the same type, but he did not get all of them. The birds were kinda native to this land and flourishing, and Mark might want more Etherealities later. Who knew! It was a Natural Power, with a monster-PL of 85.

So pretty strong.

Grey Phantom of Memphi, before he had revealed himself as a Cultist of Thrashtalon, had had something like Ethereality as his main Power. Grey Phantom had needed Thrashtalon to Wild him to higher strength, though.

Mark had just needed to hunt some birds, and now he could make a bunch of people as strong, as fast, and as infiltrative as Grey Phantom.

- - - -

Mark was Skilling Chosen #39 for the day when he felt the world whine in a way that only one thing could ever cause. It was a call to war. A demand of the demons to kill, kill, kill, because the Veil had torn... And yet, it wasn't a full Kaiju Call, or a full rift. It was just a small tear, distant and quiet, rumbling like some far-away storm.

"What the fuck is that shit?!" Mark called out, instantly pulling away from #39, vector going wide and far as he tried to feel out what was happening. A bunch of people in the building had no idea what was going on, and Mark was terrifying #39 right now, so Mark told her, "Sorry, but something is coming. I need to see that right now."

"Oh my Hearthswell—" Chosen #39 was saying.

Mark was already out the doors, aiming at the balcony, ready to take to the sky as Quark flickered updates into his vision—

Mark paused.

"Oh."

"It's the Small Gate, sir," Quark was saying. "Someone is coming through from Earth, and it is a logged request which was placed about an hour ago. Semi-emergency request."

Mark calmed down, but the people he had torn past to get to the balcony, the Chosen and not, and the priests who had brought them here from the churches of Aluatha, were not calm. Mark told them all, "Sorry! Something was coming through the gate and I sensed it. Nothing to be worried about." He chuckled, on purpose, to show people nothing was wrong, and some of them nervously chuckled along with him. Mark added, "Just a bit touchy, I suppose! Sorry, sorry—"

"Sir, the people who came through the gate want to meet with you. They're from Crystal Tower. One of the people is Timeweaver."

Mark's attempt at a chuckle turned into a very serious glare at the air— He was making people nervous again. Mark masked his emotions and— Oh.

Derek came down around the corner of the staircase, saying, “They want to meet with us, Mark.”

And then the air flickered to the side, and Timeweaver stepped onto the grand central staircase of Dawncoast Skilling. He looked exactly the same as Mark remembered him from the Battle for Memphi, when he had stepped in, at the end, and suddenly shifted everything onto the right track, as though he had run the day a hundred times already and he was simply doing his end-run against the demons, and against the horrors of that apocalypse. He had foreseen the Resurrection Ghost because he had actually seen it in some future, and so he worked to make that happen by putting Glorious Man right beside Mark.

Mark wondered more than a few times if it had taken Timeweaver gathering up Glorious Man to make Mark listen, to allow the Resurrection Ghost to happen. Luckily, Mark didn’t have to actually live through all of those attempts.

Timeweaver, the Redo-Hero, was a posh Arabian man with a pinstripe dark brown and gold suit, with a dark wood cane and a bowler hat. He tipped the hat at Mark, and said, “Just a normal day, for now, so you can all calm down. We have come to talk about breaking the blockade that Dominant has put up around Sidecity; New Tokyo’s Daihoon-side city.” He added, “We also wish to discuss a return to the Hero/Villain Program for you and yours. I believe Isoko would be very happy about this. A full itinerary of talks should be in your inbox.”

Mark needed to know, “I thought Crystal Tower wanted nothing to do with us?”

Timeweaver asked, “Oh? Is being on the right side of history not good enough of a reason to turn against Dominant?”

“For you? Absolutely not.”

“Well that’s unnecessarily harsh.”

“... Maybe so, and... thanks for the help with the Battle for Memphi—”

“Your first instinct was more correct. It was harsh, but also kinda true. We have a Gate Day on the first of every month, as you know. We did not have it this month. Or rather, we did, about four times, before I decided that we couldn’t handle them coming in from their blockade and fucking us up way, way too much, so I had them call off our Gate Day.” Timeweaver shrugged. “We can talk more in a more private setting.” He glanced around at the people, asking Mark, “20 more minutes here? How much you need?”

Mark said, “I’ll be at Castle South in 30 minutes.”

“Fine by me!”

And then Timeweaver swirled and vanished.

Mark had absolutely no idea how ‘Time Manipulation’ worked, and he wasn’t even sure if Timeweaver did have an arch Power, or at least the message boards didn’t really know. That sort of stuff was hush hush and the guy always wore a bunch of obfuscation stuff. But with all the scanners in the building, and with Quark feeding him info, Mark now knew that Timeweaver was at least a Bi-Talent in Mind and Arch, and that those two Powers were at 100 and 100, while Body, Shaper, Natural, and Arcane, were at 98.

So that was fun to know.

Mark told Derek, "Let's process quickly, please."

"On it, boss!"

Mark told the people in line, the witnesses to all of this and to the gods standing at the shoulder of every one of them, "Apologies for the interruption."

One nice older man said, "No worries, son."

"Do what you have to do!" said a middle-aged mom.

Mark nodded, and soon he was standing before #39 again, saying, "Apologies for the interruption. Are you ready to proceed again?"

The woman prayed for the barest of moments, and then she looked Mark in the eyes, golden glints of Freyala deep in her soul, as she said, "We all got places to be."

Mark smiled a little, and soon #39 was out the door, Healthy Body already fixing small imperfections and helping her walk easier than she had in years. She was a doctor/priest, and with Healthy Body she would be able to heal with Union a lot better than before, simply because she wouldn't need to use so much of the Good part of the Union to heal herself.

People with Healthy Body made some of the best healers for a lot of reasons, as Mark very well knew himself.

#40 walked in the door, and Mark got to work, though he felt a presence in the sky, in the world beyond, that was not Isoko, or Lee. It was another Sky Shaper, and Mark was pretty sure he knew who it was. So he knew at least 2 of the people from Crystal Tower.

There had to be more than just 2, right?

Mark landed on the balcony of the big meeting room of Castle South.

Aurora, Yoro, Eliot, Isoko, and Addavein were there, while Derek stood in the back.

Sure enough, Wandering Sage was there, wearing flowing grey robes; her battle armor. Mark wondered why she was here. Was she here as the retired supervillain who had once tried to turn the sun off in a serialized HVP production? Or more as Isoko's Grandmother? Or as a dragon killer and one of the strongest Sky Shapers in the Two Worlds, and they were going up against hovercruisers in an Okuanan blockade?

Timeweaver sat prim and proper in his pinstripe suit in a chair to the side, playing on his phone. Why the fuck was he here, at all? Just to see if this thing went well, or not, and if it didn't, he reset time and spoke up? Probably.

The final person in the envoy from Crystal Tower told Mark more than enough, just by her very presence.

Commander Melanie Moore, age 65, superhero name Vilefire, former villain of the same name. She was blond on blond, of German and American descent, and she had been in the HVP for a very short time, decades ago. She rapidly exited that and went into the army and into command of Crystal Tower, and now she was the top fucking brass of the entire organization that protected the Two Worlds from outsized threats. She was the one who decided if Glorious Man or Timeweaver or the Reality Manipulator, Nova Nexus, went on assignment. She controlled the four teams of Crystal Tower; Adamant, Mithril, Orichal, and Iron, and all the free agents who didn't qualify for one of the Big Teams of the Tower.

And she was here!

The fuck?!

Mark breathed out, "Holy fucking shit— Uh. Hello, uh, everyone."

Missus Moore stood up, saying, "Welcome to the discussion, Mark—"

"Pleasantries another time," Timeweaver said, not even looking up from his phone. "Talk about the people we serve outside of Okuana, and be sure to remain in control of the situation. Don't let him think that you'd actually listen to me except when it matters, because he's worried about charisma-based social control, and I am at the peak of that."

Mark asked him, "Is this the second or third go you've had of that particular observation?"

"The third," Timeweaver said, barely looking up from his phone, at Mark, grinning a little.

"Thanks for clearing that up," Mark told the guy.

Timeweaver went back to flipping through his phone.

Moore frowned a little at the man, then she said to Mark, "Basic pitch: We want to break the siege of our Daihoon-side port from Okuana's people. We're offering a return to the fold for all of your HVP-enrolled people here in Dawncoast, and connected to you, Mark. This includes Addavein, provided he remains human-sized."

Isoko was thrilled and Addavein was something similar to that.

Moore continued, "Provided you assist with the breaking, Dawncoast will be eligible for membership in the mutual defense agreement of the Crystal Tower Compact."

Oh.

That was Big, and everyone knew it.

According to Aurora's vector, she wanted Mark to do this.

"We're also going to spin whatever Skilling you can do as legal, and open up our wards to be Skilled by you, if you would have them. Healthy Body is great, and we'll pay the rates your office has requested, easily. We'll also provide you with access to washouts, who don't want their Powers anymore, who will give you those powers in return for you giving them back to people in Crystal Tower. All of those specifics with Powers can be discussed later, by smaller offices, though if you run into issues I will be

able to personally guarantee that your desires are met, provided they are in-line with Crystal Tower ideals.

“As for the people we serve on Daihoon... The blockade line used to be 100 kilometers out. It is now 40 kilometers out, and Dominant has set up capture bases at D’Hawaii and all down the D’Australian island chains. He is capturing and relocating pretty much everyone who lives on Daihoon, who is from Earth, while executing every single Drakarokian he finds. The pogroms started on March 2nd, after we aborted our Gate Day at the behest of Timeweaver.

“We can save our own people but that blockade has to go, and we need help with that. Your help, specifically.”

Mark was already on board, for killing a blockade of hundreds of ships would certainly hurt Okuana in a serious way, at least culturally, and maybe even actually. But he asked, “Why me?”

Moore simply said, “We saw the aftermath of the Winter Ball Attack, due to treaty agreements between Crystal Tower and Aluatha. They sent good people to every hovercruiser they could reach, hoping to take down a single one. Each one was guarded by a dryad, so every single counter attack failed, except for yours. You were the only one able to take down one of those hovercruisers at all.”

... Oh, wow.

Did they have dryads on every single battlecruiser in the blockade—

Timeweaver stood up, adding to Moore’s words, saying, “There are dryads on every hovercruiser in the blockade. 108 of them, to be exact. The only solace is that they’re all newly made. They don’t know their full power yet. But they’re each and every one a kaiju being piloted by a human. Most of our forces are needed to protect Sidecity and New Tokyo, so we need outsiders to kill the outside threat, and Aluatha is the main entity to turn to in this conflict, and you’re you, Mark.”

Mark almost asked how bad their missed Gate Day had been, imagining that those dryads had rushed the gate when it opened, or that something else horrible had happened—

But Aurora flickered with hateful light, asking, “How does he have so many dryads? He should only have a few for every major city. 108 should be near his maximum and he cannot have left Okuana undefended.”

Timeweaver answered, “The adamantium he got from Mark and them’s exit from Endless Daihoon, and probably elven resources. The gate to the elven lands in Verdant Citadel is closed now, but it had been open for a while. He probably has ancient hoards of artifacts, too. There are many ways to explain the discrepancy, and I don’t know the full story, but I know enough to say that the major fault lies with Mark’s adamantium.”

“Fuck,” Mark muttered.

“Well that’s not fair,” Isoko said, without much heat to her words.

Aurora told Mark, “Aluatha approves of this destruction. Walaria will probably send a direct command to do this, if you choose to do this, but you don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

“I want to, and I have to,” Mark said, looking at Moore, “If only to get Crystal Tower fully on-board with Dawncoast as a true participant in the Crystal Tower Compact.” Mark asked Moore, “Does this mean that the Crystal Tower is taking an active role in the war?”

“Yes,” Moore said, though it pained her to do that. “Dominant has proven that the framers of the Humanity Accords should have disallowed dryads into the Humanity Accords. He was never going to let us do the Reset Quest at all.”

Mark was genuinely surprised. “You’re for the Reset Quest?”

“Absolutely, though it has become political suicide to say as much, and perhaps even actual suicide, if Nobody Important’s threats are to be taken seriously, which we believe they should be taken seriously. So I will never say I am for the Quest in public, but in private? Yes, Mark, absolutely.”

“Okay,” Mark said, “Then I agree to all of this. How is this going to work?”

Timeweaver told Wandering Sage, “Go ahead, Aeri.”

What?

Mark turned toward Isoko’s grandmother, as did most others.

Aeri eyed Timeweaver, muttering, “I hate when you do that, Zaid.” She told Mark, “I want Healthy Body. You’re just giving them out, right? So I want one—”

She was about to say something else.

Timeweaver said, “Tone it down now.”

Mark suddenly felt exhausted by the guy’s meddling, and he was not the only one. Mark told him, “I operated just fine helping people before you came along.”

“What he’s doing right now is just him being efficient, and not actually serious,” Aeri said, eyeing Timeweaver.

Timeweaver grinned. He coyly asked, “It’s not serious, is it?”

“No, it’s not,” Aeri said.

Mark ignored that and looked to Aeri. She was young-looking, but she still had white hair. This was because, years ago, she had captured a True Healer, someone who could grant limited immortality to another by healing the ravages of age, back when her daughter, Isoko’s mother, had super cancer. Isoko’s mom got healed, and Aeri took some true healing for herself, too. For that stunt, she was kicked out of the HVP.

Aeri Kanno was probably... Mark wanted to say 30? 25? Something like that. But not completely? Was she injured?

Mark said, “I haven’t gotten any real Brawny Powers in a while. All I have is Healthy Body because it’s so easy to get. Are you sure that is the one you want?”

“Yes,” Aeri said. “I just need to attack you, yes?”

“Go for it.”

Aeri threaded the air of the room, pulling from the vents and the hallway and the entire sky overhead, churning everything into a thread, into a needle, that carved through Mark’s shoulder, through his chest, and out the window, like a hyper-powered watercutter. Mark, of course, grabbed onto her vector with adamantine strength, and though she had a lot of practice girding her astral body, Mark was still stronger. He peeled apart her attack—

The dream took hold of reality for Mark Careed and Aeri Kanno.

Mark slipped Healthy Body into her before she even realized she was half asleep.

And then Mark allowed her to wake up, and for the dream to fade.

Aeri paused, the wind flexing out of her control. She was disoriented; knowing she had seen elsewhere, the dream, and then it was gone. She hmm’d, then said, “Still drilled into your heart.”

Mark smiled, brushing at the fabric of his working shirt, which was, of course, heavily enchanted or self-repair. Mark’s own body had flexed black at the attack, but his flesh came together, black blood flaking off into a tiny orb that Mark disappeared into a coin, while his clothes were actively repairing themselves at the same time. The window behind Mark still had a hole in it, but Eliot was fixing that.

Mark said, “I would expect nothing less from Wandering Sage.”

Isoko was appalled. “Grandma!”

Aeri huffed and stood up, and then she paused, feeling out her body, gasping a little as she breathed easier. She flexed her hand, and said, “It really was that easy for you.”

“I’ve had a LOT of practice,” Mark said, wondering if Aeri’s healing from that unknown True Healer hadn’t been as great as it could have been, if she wanted Healthy Body. But what he asked was, “Can you teach Isoko that needle-wind technique?”

“That’s one part of the many, many lessons I wish to teach her when she comes on this trip.”

Aurora said to the room, “Eliot and Sally are remaining here.” Aurora told Melanie Moore, “Mark and Isoko are enough.”

“We expected to receive Mark and Isoko, which we are thankful for,” Moore said, as she picked up a briefcase from the ground beside her, opening it. She pulled out papers, setting them onto the table in front of Aurora, saying, “Here is the Crystal Tower Compact and the agreement we wish to enact with Mark and Isoko, as soldiers of Aluatha.”

Aurora read over the papers as she told Mark and Isoko, “You two should prepare for extended combat and a trip to Crystal Tower. Expect the whole trip to be a combat. If we have to ITLKR you back here, Mark, we will. That’s part of what this agreement is for. Isoko, you will have to find a longer way back or hole up in Crystal Tower if something drastic should happen.”

Mark instantly said, “Can we induct Isoko into ITLKR, too?”

Aurora said, “No.”

... Mark got the impression there were a lot of reasons behind that simple 'no', and perhaps he would have asked for some clarification, but—

“We can do that at Crystal Tower,” Melanie Moore said. “Until Okuana decided to be how they are, we teleported people across all of the Two Worlds, all the time. We are a tier 10 city, Mister Careed. Not even Cryalis is a tier 10 city. We can do a lot.”

“Except poach my soldiers,” Aurora calmly stated, even as she picked up a pen and started signing documents.

“Of course not,” Moore said, also calmly.

“You two get going,” Aurora said, “Prepare for 7 days. If this initial disruption doesn't clear the blockade then I want you back here for Gate Day on the 20th. That's 13 days to do as much damage to the blockade as you can.”

Moore didn't like that short of a number, but it seemed like she and Aurora and probably Walaria and everyone else had already agreed to that number without Mark. Something stood out as wrong, though.

“Gate Day isn't on the 15th this month?” Mark asked.

“We're delaying it due to suspected interference and due to a great deal of rerouting from Crystal Tower's portal,” Aurora said, leaving it at that.

Mark lined up a big question, with big implications, and asked, “Is Okuana still trying to trade with Earth? Or are they still using New Tokyo's gate, and still trading with Earth themselves?”

The big question hung out there, full of implication.

Everyone in the room had already had a discussion about it, though.

Timeweaver was back on his phone.

Moore said, “New Tokyo has been a trading hub of the Two Worlds for over 70 years. Okuana and Aluatha both used us for a long time, and we tried to be fair. Our fairness fostered some of the peace that had been here since the time of the Reveal. Many people on Daihoon's side of the Two Worlds still want to use our gate, but they cannot due to the blockade. This includes people of Okuana.

“So there was a lot of inertia that had to be overcome before the threats seemed real.

“But Dominant and all official Okuana Empire shipments have been canceled. Dominant's dryads have blockaded everyone from reaching our gate, and every day their blockade tightens. Peace has broken. The inertia of 70 years of trade has come to a complete stop. And now Okuana has declared that no one will be using New Tokyo's gate at all, and that they are fully funding the Sahara Gate.”

So Moore was upset about all of this.

Mark was too.

Mark said, “Oh, good.” He asked everyone, “So that means we're breaking the Sahara Gate whenever it comes online, right?”

Moore instantly said, “Crystal Tower will not participate in that.”

Aurora, however, was full of radiant rage as she told Mark, “Of course.”

Mark said, “Isoko and I will be ready to go to Earth in 20 minutes.”

Isoko stood up and started walking with Mark to the balcony—

Timeweaver said, “Take 30, Mark.”

Mark and Isoko left the meeting, headed home, and both of them rapidly sent out messages to the people who needed those messages, including Andria, who was upset but understandable about the trip.

“I need to work out some bureaucratic bugs with Dawncoast Skilling, anyway. Don’t die! Be good, Mark.”

Mark smiled and said into the phone, “I’ll miss you too, Andria. Talk to you later.”

“Send out messages to everyone you talked to already about Skilling! The Collective, Dawncoast itself, The People. Probably talk to Walaria directly, though.”

“Will do!”

Isoko put some of her pre-recorded makeup tutorial and commercials to auto-play over the next week over her social media profiles, while Mark had Quark compose letters to all of his various Skilling obligations, from the Collective to the slaughterhouse.

And then Walaria called Mark.

“Hello, Walaria!”

“Hello, Mark. I have a list of chores for you when you go on this trip.”

“Ready.”

“Load up on Healthy Bodys before you leave and prepare to hand them out to whoever wants them at Crystal Tower. I want you to steal the Bindings of every single person on every single one of those blockade ships and hand out the lesser Bindings to whoever wants them at Crystal Tower. Make allies for Aluatha with your Skilling. Hit up the oceans south of D’Japan and grab some Ocean Shaper Bindings from some of the leviathans living down there. And finally, spend a day clearing out goblins for the People. Do not antagonize the goblins to move them, for we do not want them to ever come back to our shores, but get them separated from the People. Help the People with a few Ocean Shaper Bindings, too, but keep at least 3 for Aluatha.”

“Got it. Did you hear about the Good Bear I confronted and the cub it left me? I’m not sure how to handle the cub except for letting Reeni and the witches take care of it. It was kinda impossible for me to want to remove the Binding from the mother. It felt like bad things would happen if I even tried.”

Walaria’s voice turned a bit lighter. “A Good Bear? No. I had not heard that... Those ‘A Good Life’ Bindings are impossible for anyone to handle, and it is good you stopped when you recognized that you should stop. Bad Bears are serious misfortune magnets for the very world around them. I will be sending a few possible druids to take care of the cub. Simply being at Dawncoast will likely provide at least a month of safety for the settlement. This is good news, Mark.” She got back on topic, “We’ll be teleporting you back to Aluatha if needed, but with a Good Bear there...” She continued, “You have your requests. I

will likely send a few people to pick up some Powers from you, at Crystal Tower, after your first few days of hunting, if you manage to find what I want you to find. My current goal for your Skilling is to make use of Annihilating Light. I'll send you a list of Powers to look out for. Good luck, Mark."

"Thank you, Walaria."

Click.

And then Quark flickered a text into Mark's vision

	High Priority	Low Priority
Body	Strength or Speed modifiers x10	
Kinetic	Super Large Area, Fire, Light	Anything you can find
Mind	Battlemind, Smart, Tinkerers	
Natural	Leader, any Witch, any Prognostication, Dynamo	
Arcane	Necromancer	Fire spells
Arch	Any at all	
Note: Anything with a PL of 80 or above is useful. Anything below that you are free to distribute as you desire. Any three-pair confluences in a tri-hex pattern will automatically be useful, like the Transcendent series.		

Mark told himself, "Seems pretty straightforward, then." And then he called out to Isoko, "I'm going to hit up the slaughterhouse for as many Healthy Bodys as I can handle."

Isoko came out of her room, one bag in her hands. "I'm ready. I'll go with you."

And so they did.

After a very hectic slaughtering, with 138 Healthy Bodys in his soulhouse and Isoko standing beside him, Mark stood with Melanie Moore and Timeweaver before the Small Gate, nestled at the bottom of the big gate.

Wandering Sage, Isoko's grandmother, stood nearer to Isoko, strongly holding her hand, absolutely loving that Isoko was there with her. Aeri Kanno felt like she was rescuing Isoko from certain death, though, which meant that she was planning on keeping Isoko, if she could convince Isoko to stay.

Isoko had already told Mark that she could not be convinced to stay at Crystal Tower.

Mark wondered if he could be convinced because this was fucking Crystal Tower. With Glorious Man and New Tokyo and all of that. It was the center of superheroes on Earth, on the Two Worlds, and it was... It was everything Mark had grown up idolizing. Honestly, Crystal Tower was probably using Mark, asking him to do this, to go to war with them, but Mark wanted to kick Dominant's teeth in and this was an excellent counter attack to the Winter Ball Attack. It wasn't like they could assault Okauna's shores directly; it was too well defended. And so yeah, of course Mark said 'yes' to visit Crystal Tower, especially when it was Melanie-fucking-Moore, Vilefire, who was asking!

It was like one step away from Glorious Man asking!

And also Timeweaver was asking, and that guy had saved Mark's and everyone's life in the Battle for Memphi. Even if the guy didn't do as much as he could, letting people die in small ways... He did enough for the big things. Or at least Mark told himself that.

Aurora, Eliot, Sally, Andria, and Derek stood a bit further away, along with Addavein.

Derek was not coming with them, but that was only because he was already there.

The guys inside the Gate were going through final checks one last time, before the people in command activated the Small Gate.

Sally edged nearer to Mark, other people watching her a little, as she said, "I know it's probably wrong to say this considering the situation, but I am so fucking jealous."

A flutter of mirth passed through the group. Moore relaxed slightly, but not much.

Mark grinned. "I'll mail you a postcard."

Addavein said, "Me, too!"

Now that was surprising.

Mark looked from Moore to Addavein, asking, "I thought you were allowed to go there any time as a Hero of Humanity?"

Moore said, "Addashield was allowed, but Addavein is a dragon, and thus subject to the stricter rules of the Humanity Accords."

Addavein scoffed. "I'm playing very nice here! And it's not an act, at all! And I gave you guys all that adamantium." He told Mark, "Give them more adamantium when you get there."

Moore added, "And Addashield was stricken from the Heroes of Humanity when his true crimes came to light. It doesn't matter that his Contract was made 350 years ago and a world away under very different circumstances; it was still a Contract against children."

Addavein did not defend himself—

"30 seconds," Aurora said, right as the guys below the Small Gate were finished with their task. Aurora told them all, "Good luck with breaking the blockade. Timeweaver? You have made the right choice."

Timeweaver scoffed with surprise in his vector, not having expected Aurora to talk to him. Was this, then, a timeline he hadn't erased? It must have been, because Mark was experiencing it right now. Timeweaver told Aurora, "There are never any right choices; only the choices made."

"I strongly disagree, but you do you," Aurora said, without looking at him.

Timeweaver grinned a little, and then he told Mark, "She turns me on, too."

Mark kinda just hung his head, sighing. Sally laughed, Isoko chuckled, and Mark really, truly, tried not to sense any more vectors—

"She's a good choice, brother," Addavein said.

Aurora said, "I would smack you across the sky, Addavein, but dragons tend to take that as a challenge at least half of the time."

"Sounds about right," Addavein said.

And then the Small Gate opened with a Call to war, the Veil pinned to the sides of the 10-meter-tall doorframe, and Mark walked through, ignoring everything happening behind him, and then he was on Earth, in Memphi.

It was March and the air was cold. It felt even colder than it actually was, because the mana density in the air on Earth was nothing. Mark practically felt himself fall apart, just a little, like there was too much power inside of him to contain at all. He wasn't in any actual danger, he thought, but it took a moment, standing there on the solid concrete beyond Memphi's own Small Gate, to reorient to Earth's manasphere—

As everyone else filed onto Earth, Timeweaver stood next to Mark and pointed to the right while his vector spoke of absolute danger in ways that Mark had no trouble understanding. Mark Unioned with Adamant and Ethereal right before something cracked in the gateway to Daihoon and the Small Gate flickered and died even as Aurora had been wishing them well, one final time.

The attack happened fast.

Mark spilled out adamantium barriers into that direction like sheets of suddenly-present black void. He felt as something pinged the outermost layer, and then came the explosion. It was corruptive and shiny, like thermite that burned black on the edges. That white-centered black fire exploded all around the tarmac of the reception area.

There had been some people about 200 meters away, at the recessed control booth of Memphi's gate. They had been standing on the tarmac.

The black/white fire burned across the land, consuming Mark's outer shell of adamantium, so Mark made a whole bunch of other shells of adamantium around everyone in his group. He felt as the vectors of the people ahead of him, at the recessed zone, suddenly burned away, vanishing instantly.

Mark briefly tried running Alacrity/Slowness but he felt as the edges of his shell began to vanish under burning not-fire, so he went back to Adamant/Ethereal, asking the pertinent question, "What the fuck?"

“Zaid?” Moore asked, a flicker of bright purple viefire hovering over her shoulder, illuminating the interior of the shell.

“Major questions answered!” Timeweaver/Zaid happily explained, “This is the good outcome, I think. As best as I could do it. Mark, you’re gonna want to test the integrity of your shield a few times. When you feel it’s good, then go out there and fly Alacrity-style to the northern wall, and take a right. A voidcannon battery is out there. Capture the assassins, if you can. Dominant set them and we want to know what they know. Strip some Bindings, too. They’re good ones. If you can manage that before they suicide then this is the good timeline, so don’t make me need to humiliate you in front of Aurora again. It’s a lot worse when they target us through the gate.” Zaid told Mark, “I am very impressed by your ability to understand direction without needing words. We’re gonna have a lot of fun! The fire should be done about... now!”

It wasn’t done, but it was about 20% of what it had been.

Mark popped open the top of the shell and left a ring of adamantium 10 meters tall all around them as he zoomed into the sky, Unioning with Alacrity and Slowness. The world burned as he passed, so he slipped forward like a needle, rapidly slipping through the sky and aiming forward.

The wall was maybe 10-ish kilometers away.

He crossed the wall within moments and then he remade his eyes and body, to hover in the nude, again, high above the wilds, overlooking the green beyond the new northern wall of Memphi.

Quark was right there with him, already handshaking with Mayor Emilia Ramirez’s technological overmind that oversaw the entire city and everyone in it. Briefly, Mark saw their chat record, where the overmind had asked ‘What the fuck was that! 12 dead!’ and Quark had explained about Timeweaver, and Emilia had expressed anger at that.

And now they were working together to show Mark the target.

Mostly, it was Quark sorting through a bunch of information in speed-time, right alongside Mark. Ramirez’s overmind could do a lot, but super speed was out of her wheelhouse compared to someone with eyes and ears and speed on the scene.

Quark painted the wilds 2 kilometers below with different color blocks, narrowing down from blue to green to yellow to red, right there, deep in a thick part of the woods. The trajectory had come from that location.

Mark descended like an angry god, finding the vectors of four people, one of them almost completely dead already, and the giant ‘voidfire’ cannon already burning to a husk with its own voidfire, or whatever it was. The people wore green clothes and the voidfire cannon was like a hovercar-sized box on stilts with a long tube pointed at the Small Gate of Memphi. The weapon was layered with vegetation, except for its turret. That vegetation and the very metal of the cannon itself was already disintegrating under the fires that it had shot out.

Mark had been targeted by a void cannon by Aluatha, back when Doomo still hated Mark, or whatever the fuck he felt toward Mark. ‘Hate’ was probably too strong. Doomo had called off that attack before it had happened, and left Mark wondering what void bullets would have done to him.

So he had found out what void bullets did.

This was not void bullets.

A void bullet would have hollowed out old-Mark's head and chest and very much killed him with a good ol' double-tap. Now, a void bullet wouldn't do shit... or at least not permanently. Oh sure, Mark would lose his head and chest, but he could reconstitute from scattered adamantium spilled away from the blast.

Mark remained in a heart Union of Alacrity and Slowness, but he switched his brain to Good and Bad.

Black sparks crashed into the 4 dying soldiers of Okuana, ripping them back to life.

And then Mark ripped into their souls, dropping back to normal time as a matter of course as he used Union to rip out their Bindings. Black/white fire in the void-fire cannon suddenly spurted to life as time resumed. Those flames spread, catching on the legs of two of the assassins. They screamed.

With their Bindings secured, Mark pulled them away from the fires and healed them up enough to prevent them from dying, and then he slapped all four kinda-wounded assassins into adamantium boxes, locking them down with adamantium straps, securing them for transport.

Was that everything? Maybe. The voidfire cannon was little more than slag right now but the fires were burning out—

One of the assassins bit off his tongue, another one kinda died a little without any known cause, and the other two panicked, locked in darkness and unable to move, but more importantly unable to kill themselves. Mark healed them all, of course, and it wasn't until he was flying back to Memphi that he realized what they had done to almost kill themselves.

They were trying to break their Binding.

Mark laughed.

“Hard to break a Binding when you don't have one! ... Wait.”

Mark could prevent assassins from killing themselves.

... Huh.

Mark made himself some adamantium underwear as he flew back to the Gate District of Memphi, the turrets on the wall targeting him for a moment before standing down. The void-fire had spread rather far around the small gate. It had destroyed the primary forward gate command center and a few of the people inside, but most had evacuated deeper and some big Castellan wards had come online halfway through the attack.

Black/white fire still burned on that golden shield, but Isoko and Wandering Sage were gathering up the remnants of the destructive fire, while Melanie Moore was using whatever her purple 'Vilefire' was to consume the black/white fire and end that corruptive flame.

Timeweaver stood smiling a little, right outside of the blown-out dome Mark had left behind. He called out to Mark, “Good show! You got them all this time!”

“... I guess I did. Quark? Can you tell Ramirez that she has some assassins to interview?”

“She was waiting for that confirmation, and so I have given it to her, sir,” Quark said.

Mark opened up the adamantium coffins he had made, getting a good look at the assassins who had tried to assassinate everyone... Holy fuck. Mark made himself a chair and sat down on it.

‘The attack was worse when they hit us on the other side of the gate’ Timeweaver had said.

Ahh...

Mark breathed. And then Mark went down the list of Unions that regrew flesh and bone. The assassins came back together, physically, and Mark adjusted their restraints to let them speak, if they wanted to speak.

They just glared, or they looked away, or they closed their eyes. They controlled their vectors as best as they could—

One of them suddenly started dying again, and Mark hit him with a Union of Good/Bad.

“How the FUCK are you still killing yourself, dude!” Mark asked, not expecting an answer.

Timeweaver said, “He’s a mage and he has some mana left.”

“Ah, fuck. Duh,” Mark said, as he hit them with Entropy/Energy, and all of the assassins suddenly drained of power. The one guy who had been killing himself was now pissed off, and more than that, scared. “... What are you scared of?”

They did not answer, but now that Mark mentioned fear, all of them were deathly afraid—

Timeweaver said, “What Powers did they have? It’s good for Memphi to know so that they can interrogate them properly.”

Mark told the Redo-hero, “I am feeling unbalanced enough without you constantly suggesting the exact right course of action, though I do really appreciate everything you do.” Mark asked, “But 12 people just died, and I know you could have saved them.”

“It’s a lot harder than you think to turn a disaster into something salvageable, Mark.”

“And I fully believe and agree with that.”

Timeweaver was surprised, but he just smiled and said nothing.

Mark named the assassins according to their Bindings, “Technopath, Mind; True Aim, Natural; Erase Presence, Arcane; and the mage here was a Bi-Talent of Void Shaper and the Arcane Power Instant Hit.”

Timeweaver went, “Huh! Neat.” And then he joked, “You could make a good assassin team with those kinda Powers.”

“... Yeah.”

Moore called out, “We’re not taking the hovership we brought here. Find us a new one, Zaid.”

Zaid, Timeweaver, smiled a little as he told Mark, “No rest for the strong!”

Cop hovervans were flying in from the side, all flashing red and blue and white, as Zaid vanished from sight.

And then some heroes from Memphi descended.

Sentinel, the golden-armored tinkerer and big hero of the city, flew down with hoverslings spinning fast on his back, followed by Frozenfire, who landed and killed every single flame in the vicinity that the others hadn't killed already. Lawful Goose, the warden of the city's jail systems, came down soon after.

Sentinel asked Mark, "Can I take those guys off of your hands?"

"Sure, but that one needs shavallian— Ah," Mark paused.

Zaid reappeared, holding a vial of silver liquid in his hands. "Here we go!"

Lawful Goose patted his own pockets then exclaimed, "That's mine!"

"I am sure you have more," Zaid said.

Mark forced open the mage's mouth, force-fed him the shavallian, then he handed over all of them to Sentinel. Sentinel called down jail drones to grab the guys, lock them into traction, and secure them for flight. When they were secure, Sentinel sent them flying with Lawful Goose's transport, and with Frozenfire backup.

Sentinel remained, asking, "Can we talk about those Skills taken from the assassins?"

Mark said, "I am absolutely sure that I'm going to be handing them off to some people personally chosen by Walaria, so we can talk about them, but you can't have them."

"Understandable." Sentinel continued, "Have you talked with Archmage Blackthorn yet?"

"Nope." Mark looked up and said, "Quark. Call Blackthorn."

Sentinel nodded and departed.

Blackthorn picked up after one ring. His voice was terse. "Mark! Hello. You wanna kill all demons?"

"Not really. I got bigger issues right now."

"... I suppose you do," Blackthorn said, relaxing a little.

... On a whim, Mark said, "I got the Binding for Sex Manipulation here. You want it? Or you want to give it to someone you know?"

"Oh my fucking god yes— No! No... Fuck. No. That's too much." Blackthorn sighed, but it was a good kinda sigh. "Thank you very much, Mark. Just give it to someone, eventually, and then tell me who you gave it to. It could fix your low-libido, too, so you could even use it on yourself if you wanted, before you gave it away. Try being straight, or gay, or robosexual! Those AIs can get absolutely insane."

"... I'll tell you who I give it to eventually."

"Good man! Good luck out there."

Click.

Timeweaver said to Mark, "That went well."

"Where's our transport?" Moore said, walking their way.

Isoko and Aeri were walking together as they came this way, too.

"Right this way~" Timeweaver said, gesturing to the side, and then giving a few flourishes, adding, "Way over there. Way, way over there. Mark can do transport! I'd prefer not to be tied-down in a box though, if you could please."

Mark made some chairs and a transport for all of them before flying them to some private hoverport with some guy getting ready to go out for a hoverflight with his family on their hovership. Mark paid the hovership owner a few kilos of adamantium, which reminded Mark that he needed to help out Memphi, too.

Mark made a whole pile of adamantium, maybe 2,000 kilos, and he told the hovership owner, "Can you guard this for Memphi? Quark, signal Ramirez, please."

The hovership owner rapidly said, "Of course, Blackvein! I'm a real fan! Fuck? And this is for the city? Gods."

The wife and the adult daughter stared at the wealth, and they were all a little greedy, but whatever. They were both a little horny looking at Mark, too. Normally he didn't notice that, but he was currently mostly-nude, but he was wearing shorts!

Soon, Mark crashed out on a nice couch, having traded his adamantium shorts for some nice boating clothes that the owners had had in the closets. Isoko flew the ship. Timeweaver had fucked off somewhere, flickering away in a splash of still-unknown Power, while Moore remained. The commander of Crystal Tower was currently on her phone, tapping at buttons and looking concerned.

Mark wondered, in a way that didn't really need to be answered, if Timeweaver had tried to get someone less higher up to come talk to Aurora at Dawncoast, and if that had failed. How many times did he try before he went for Moore, herself. Did he try Glorious Man—

Wandering Sage sat down on the couch opposite of Mark, saying, "It gets easier being around Zaid the more you're around him."

Mark smiled a little. "I'm not switching alliances to Crystal Tower."

Wandering Sage hmm'd, shrugged, and said nothing else.