

The sun sank below the western horizon, beyond the mountains and beyond the western coast of New Tokyo, casting Maeganuki Ranch into cool shadows. The young cows mooed, sounding happy, oblivious to the butchery of the older cows earlier in the day. It had been a good day. Mark stood on an overlook above the ranch, where workers from New Tokyo had carved into the mountain, leaving a cliff overlooking all the new construction.

There was a lot of construction to look at; pastures, big walls that turned those pastures into something like wide wells, towers overlooking it all, security measures everywhere, and many buildings for processing and breeding.

Not to begrudge Renni at the cattle farm back at Dawncoast, but New Tokyo had been more than prepared to fulfill all the Dynamo, Healthy Body, Telekinesis, and True Brawny needs that Mark could ever imagine. And they had done it fast, too. They didn't have anyone with Man-made Manipulation, like Eliot, but they did have Builders and Stone Shapers and even one Terrakinetic who had carved out the mountain, turning it into more land for Maeganuki Ranch's expansion.

The Ranch itself had originally been a collection of 4 buildings, each of them already a rival for what Renni had at Dawncoast. The ranch also had Tamers and the more nuanced Rancher and a whole bunch of strong hands of their own to wrangle the cattle as much as they needed wrangling, though they were used to normal monster cows. And then Mark had come along, heralded by Melanie Moore and members of New Tokyo's parliament and others.

The cows Mark had needed were exponentially more dangerous than the ones the ranch, or anyone else in the current world, had ever dealt with before.

Some superheroes had gotten involved.

Captain Titan of Justicar's Team Mithril had been truly helpful. Mark had barely spoken to the guy during the blockade, or afterward, and then he had shown up, requested by Justicar, and gone to work. Captain Titan had only possessed Sally and Titanfist's (of Memphi) Power of Titan's Strength, but after a bit of cattle wrangling and subsequent Skilling, he also had Telekinesis, ripped from the very same cows that he had been wrangling for New Tokyo's Telekinetic needs.

Team Mithril now had the superhero Tempest with Arch Weather Manipulation, Sky Shaper, and Accelerator Body, Specter with Natural Ethereality, Strong Body, and Battlemind, Captain Titan with

Titan's Strength and Telekinesis, which was all he wanted, and then there was Serge Garin, AKA Justicar.

Mark had offered new Powers to Serge, but Serge had declined.

"I have Union and Pinnacle Existence," Serge had said.

Mark had been floored. "That sounds impressive?" And then Mark had rapidly added, "But you have True Brawny on Crystal Tower's public stat sheet? *What* is Pinnacle Existence?"

Serge had said, "It's like True Brawny but healthier; The version of Immortal Body without actual immortality and instead more strength."

Mark had filed that information away, marveling at all the new Powers out there that he had never heard of before, and offered, "Want some sort of Mind Power?"

Serge had smiled and politely declined. "I got Specter on the team for that."

So Mark had moved on; he had had lots of people who wanted stuff.

And now he was here, overlooking a ranch that was fully updated, and with a bunch of new staff all with the Natural Power Tamer because Mark had taken Tamer from one of them and put it into a bull, and then that bull sired a whole new generation of Tamer cattle. And thus, a whole lot of secondary staff had gotten upgraded to full workers.

The family that owned the ranch had been overjoyed because now that Okuana was at war with New Tokyo, New Tokyo had needed to fulfill its meat needs in other ways, and Maeganuki Ranch was happy to provide, as long as they had staff capable of that providing. Tofu and fish was not quite enough for a population of 530 million people, and just 5 Tamers and 4 Ranchers on staff was not enough for all the new needs of Maeganuki Ranch.

But with 34 Tamers/Healthy-Body, and 27 Ranchers/Healthy-Body, Maeganuki Ranch was overstuffed, so most of them were going to move on to other ranches across New Tokyo's lands. Tomorrow, about 200 more would-be Tamers/Healthy-Body were going to come in and Mark would Skill them, too.

The True Brawny cows and the Telekinesis cows had been truly dangerous, though, and 2 people had died, but Jessie came by and resurrected those people. They ended that program a bit early, to revisit it on another day, but now there were 45 more Kaiju Killers on New Tokyo's payroll. All of those people had been in the army, which had gotten brutally murdered at Chiba when the blockade started pouring into that place. Jessie had brought them back, though, and then Mark empowered them.

Such an incursion would likely never happen again.

Somewhere in all of that Aleph Two had visited and talked some numbers with Mark.

True Brawny occurred pretty often. Telekinesis was a 'normal' enough Power, too. But together? Not often at all! According to him, Telekinesis/True-Brawny was estimated to occur naturally 1 time in every 200 million people. That was a broad 'estimate', with a lot of caveats, because the only known user of both Powers was Kandon Valen, Aurora's Brother, and the few people that Mark Skilled with those powers a week ago. The AIs guessed that there were others out there, but those other people had chosen to remain hidden, or whatever.

And now there were 50 *more* Telekinesis/True-Brawny guys out there, and New Tokyo had 45 of them in their army... Or however many there were. Mark just did the work. Other people recorded numbers. Quark recorded everything that Mark needed to know, though, if Mark needed that information in the future.

New Tokyo had gotten pretty much all of Mark's Shapers and Speedsters and a bunch of Powers that Mark simply could not put into cows to reproduce those Powers.

The army guys from Aluatha had gained a lot, too, but comparatively less, for sure. Walaria had only listed 32 people to gain what Mark had to give, but 230 people had come on the trip, and so, thanks to New Tokyo's efforts, Mark had ended up giving all 230 of those people a second or third Power. Most of the people guarding Jessie already had one Power or another, so Mark had mostly ended up giving out a lot of Healthy Bodys.

And then there were the Smart cows, the Battlemind cows, and the Tactician cows. Those cows had been truly dangerous to handle, with almost all of them almost escaping before Mark could put them down, but New Tokyo had handled it. Mark felt a bit bad about killing those cows. They were very much smart enough to be people... but Mark couldn't allow himself to think about that too much. There was work to do and billions of lives at stake.

The Dynamo cows were pretty much just cows; they couldn't do anything with all the mana they made, so they were simple as heck to care for.

Mark had Dynamo'd and Healthy Body'd 220 people for New Tokyo. That combo was particularly great, because the high PL of Natural Dynamo was directly opposite of the 25 PL of Healthy Body, leaving all of that Arcane and Mind area completely open, but highly supported by those two Powers. Those mages were going to be truly special.

The 'war' with Dominant was going to be a stomping at this rate.

And now Mark's list of Powers was filled out in fun and exciting new ways, and the cows were subdued and mooing gently in their green, green yards down there, munching on morning-dew-covered grasses, tails swishing. Farmers of Verdago oversaw everything alongside the Ranchers and the Tamers, while governors and councilors were over in one of those buildings far over there, talking about getting more people in line for Mark to Skill tomorrow.

Mark had promised them the next 3 afternoons, but the morning were for him. Mark had plans. He was gonna take some Dynamos in his soulhouse and turn them into something for Addavein or Rekaro or, mainly, Tartu, to see if he could make 'Swords of Empire' that were really 'Staffs of Empire', that would allow for Dynamo artifacts. Of course, the danger with making those is that they could get stolen and used against Aluatha and Mark's people, but that was a risk Mark was willing to take, because if Mark made the empires of the Two Worlds strong enough, then Dominant would think twice about making any more moves.

There was no *need* to go to war with Dominant right now.

Billions of lives were at stake in a Worlds' War, and nobody wanted that.

Mark honestly hoped that New Tokyo's diplomatic efforts on that front found fruit. No one *wanted* a war right now, except for maybe Dominant, because right now Dominant was, well, dominant. No one had dragons, no one had dryads except for the Godking, and Dominant had a bunch of hidden powers. Mark hadn't watched much of the news, but he had seen a little, and a whole bunch of professors and soldiers and talking heads for Aluatha and New Tokyo and otherwise were saying the same thing: Dominant attacked now because to wait was to lose.

If he had managed to kill Aluatha at the Winter Ball Attack, and if he had managed to pull the heart out of New Tokyo, then he would have swept up the remainder without much trouble.

But Mark was here.

Mark usually turned off the screens when they started to talk about him, though.

Hopefully the heat of this upcoming war died down now that Mark had made a good 500 new Big Powers in the world, because if Dominant was just some asshole on the edge of humanity, relegated to obscurity through the advancement of everyone else in the world? That was fine by Mark.

If Dominant kept up this war, then it was going to go terribly for him, for sure... hopefully.

And if he waited?

In 20 years from now, humanity would have thousands of new cities all across the Two Worlds, Empires risen from the ashes of history, and powerhouses like Nobody Important and the Demon Kings like Planty and hell, even Thrashtalon... Well, probably not him. And not the goblins, either. But all the rest of humanity would set upon Okuana and oust that tree forever.

... But if Okuana tried shit? Like really, truly went for war...

Then... Then Mark would figure out something with Jessie and probably make some deals with Thrashtalon to get the demons fully against Okuana... maybe. Would Mark give up the Reset Quest to get the demons all on his side?

... If he could get all the demons to agree to 'soft reset' the System?

... Was that even a thing?

Mark sat down on a boulder, thoughts heavy.

*Could* he make deals to make the demons less demony? To codify a new system for Power distribution? To get rid of the monsters and to propel humanity into a future, like the one they used to have before magic came along and tore down all the civilizations of Earth, robbing humanity of the stars?

... Well... Humanity couldn't go past the gravity well of Earth anyway because there were giant monsters out there...

Mark furrowed his brow, thinking way too heavy of thoughts. For the first time since he started campaigning for the Reset Quest, Mark was thinking about everything necessary to really get there. Lola had one spoken of pushing a button to kill half the world and Reset everything to a paradise, then and there, and Mark had said 'no fucking way', and yet...

The path forward was going to be—

“What ya thinking about?” Isoko said, landing softly beside him.

Mark glanced up at Isoko, and he knew she had been having deep thoughts all day long, too, so maybe... Mark said, “I was thinking about everything happening right now, and I kinda feel like I was in a dark room, and all I had in front of me was the Reset Quest lighting the way. But then Nobody Important knocked me off of that path, and here in the dark I found... a lot. Figured out how to fill out my soulhouse, how to Skill people, how to string my body along a wire and not die to void bombs, and now I'm here, in New Tokyo, and it occurs to me that this has been really awesome.”

Isoko grinned, asking, “Stopping to smell the roses is nice sometimes, huh?”

Mark wasn't going there, exactly, but... “Yeah; that, too. But... If Doomo and New Tokyo's people can get Dominant to pull back everything he's doing —not even sure what the diplomats are even asking for, actually— then we don't have to go to war with him, and that would pull a whole lot of worries out of the world right now. We could grow as a people; as a civilization. We could get beyond the monsters and the horrors just through pure advancement of powers and tech. What if every city on Earth was a tier 10 city, like New Tokyo, and they could blast the lands outside of the walls and kill absolutely everything? Would the demons stop trying to take down the city walls? How awesome would that be! But no. We're headed toward a war. And I think that even if we advance enough then Dominant is going to try shit, anyway... And I think you're worried about some of that anyway, right? About war.

“I don't want a war.”

Isoko's eyebrows went up, and then she softened, smiling slightly, truly, as she said, “I don't want war at all, and I'm glad you don't either. But what about when Dominant opens up that Sahara Gate, full time?”

Mark cringed. “I *want* to knock it down at least once, but I know I shouldn’t because that would strain relations...”

A thought occurred.

If Mark went and knocked down the Sahara Gate, that action would likely kill people.

Mary Getty, that Mind Control woman who Contracted with Leash to turn demonic, had been Mark’s first human kill.

Mark had killed hundreds just the other day, in the blockade.

“Oh fuck,” Mark said, elbows on his knees, hands to his face, staring down at the ground. His face felt hot, his chest felt cold, his life felt too short. He whispered, cursed, “I killed so many people.”

Isoko sat with him.

She said nothing.

It was more than enough.

Mark breathed out Bad for a while, and Isoko helped him breathe in the Good.

When the sun had set, the stars came out, and the lights of New Tokyo glittered everywhere as far as Mark could see, Mark got up. Too much sadness had a way of burning itself out sometimes, and Mark had hurried that along with a Union of Good and Bad, and Isoko had helped.

Isoko suggested, “Feeling hungry? I hear they have steak on the menu down the road.”

“Yeah. Sounds good.”

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Mark floated easily on the wind over the skies of New Tokyo, belly full, buoyed by Isoko’s Shaping and by her presence. He smiled a little as he said, “That was good food.”

“I’m glad I suggested it, too,” Isoko easily replied.

Mark snorted.

The two of them were flying, in a roundabout sort of way, toward Wandering Castle, somewhere over there in the distance. Neither of them were going fast. Neither of them wanted to go fast. Isoko floated next to Mark in the dark sky with one leg extended and the other pulled back, arms to her sides and gently pressing down, like she was swimming in clear waters. She kinda was. It was an easy sort of look, to go along with the easy look in her eyes. It clashed with her actual thoughts, though, hidden from most of the world, but not from Mark.

Mark hadn’t really noticed it until now. He had been busy. And then he had crashed after realizing that he had killed a lot of people and Isoko had rescued him from worry by filling his belly with good food. With a bit of distance from his own issues, Mark saw Isoko’s problems clearer.

Mark said, “I’m sorry for not noticing your own pain.”

Isoko barked a laugh. And then she smiled, saying, “Thanks, but I’m doing... I don’t want to lie, but I don’t want to acknowledge any of it, either.” She lost her smile and shook her head. “It’s gonna be a war.” And then, as if preparing to rip off a bandage, Isoko said, “I don’t want a war, Mark.”

“I don’t want a war, either.”

Isoko tried not to be too serious as she seriously asked, “I know you said that earlier, but... I know you, Mark.”

“I mean... I did. Yes, I did. Dominant deserves to die and I want to kill him, and that means a war, and yet...” Mark organized some of his thoughts and explained, “War is going to be horrible. Worse than what we all just went through. I don’t want to kill people like that ever again, though I am absolutely sure that I will have to do exactly that, over and over and over again, maybe for the rest of my life—”

“It won’t be like that?” Isoko interrupted, *needing* to stop Mark from going in that direction because she did *not* want to follow. “You’re just going to be an Inheritor. It doesn’t mean... That.”

There was a lot to talk about, from the Reset Quest, to the war, to Dominant, to everything that was needed to survive any and all of that. It was all too much. Too large to think or do anything about here

and now in this cold Earth sky. But they could talk about it. They could try to organize *some* of their feelings.

Mark decided to say, “This whole Skilling thing I’m doing has so many different outcomes to it, and we haven’t seen any of them at all. I’ve Skilled like 65-ish people total with some combination of True Brawny, Telekinesis, and something else. They just need some healers, some support, and some wildcards, and each and *every single one of those guys and girls* will be kaiju killers. The healers are being handled by the Church of Freyala, I’m sure, though we haven’t directly talked about that, but people are already lining up to get with those true powerhouses. I saw some of it when I was Skilling people. Most of it will happen way, way out there, far beyond any of my sight or control.

“I’ve made something like 200 true powerhouses, in total. Most of them today. Some of them in the last week.

“It takes 7 true powerhouses to garrison a normal settlement or a small city. We have something like 10,000 in the world right now, but I just increased that number by a full 2% Isoko. I’m pulling numbers out of my ass right now, but they’re close enough.

“Maybe if I make enough people capable of holding their own against Okuana, then maybe we can blockade them back, or something... I’m not a tactics guy.” Mark added, “All I know is that if we have enough people capable of ripping apart ships and intercepting missiles and stuff, then there *won’t be a war* with Okuana anymore, because they won’t try shit.

“And sure there will be assassinations, but eventually even the assassinations will stop, because we’re going to out-civilization them.”

Isoko nodded a little, thoughts a million miles away, vector and shoulders relaxing.

Mark continued, “So I think the best thing I can do for the world is to make powerhouses and... and as much as it pains me not to help out the little guys because *I* was a little guy, I think I need to not do any of that anymore, unless I get like... a real solid case. Someone, well... like me. Which is weird to say.” Mark didn’t understand why he felt uncomfortable talking about Skilling people like himself, so he moved on, adding, “But the point is that I don’t think there will be a war; not at the rate I’m going with this Skilling.”

Isoko asked, “Do you *want* to be a tactics guy?”

“... What?”

“We’re stuck in these contracts with Aluatha for a few more years, but... like, your apprenticeship to Walaria will be life-long. Okuana will never stop gunning for you. People next to you will get hurt, a lot. So... You said you weren’t a tactics guy, but you’re talking about moving in circles that determine how the world works, so you *need* to be a tactics guy. It’s use or be used, Mark.”

“Okay, so... what do you suggest?”

Isoko said, “Let’s go find that guy, Devo Stone, from Aluatha. He’s Visionary, Battle Manipulation, and Strategist, right? He’ll know what Okuana is up to, and he might even have a good idea of what kind of stuff the world needs right now. I would suggest, as a matter of course, that you do as he asks but only as you want, and you make sure he knows that’s how it goes.”

It was good advice, but... Mark had felt that Devo was rather easy to get along with when he Skilled the dude. He wasn’t... whatever Isoko was getting at.

Mark said, “I think Devo is the kind of guy I can trust to be a soldier, looking out for other soldiers, and not whatever kind of politics thing you think he’s into.”

Isoko stressed, “I’m not talking about politicians, Mark. Politicians have to work to get elected by the people who vote for them. General Devo Stone, of the nation of Rocktower inside of Aluatha, is a *noble*.”

“Okay. Yeah. I get it... You wanna do that with me? Go talk to Devo? Not...” Mark angled his gaze toward the northwest, where Wandering Castle was probably one of those pinpricks of light on a distant mountain’s slope. “Go home for the night?”

“I talked to Grandma on the phone when you were Skilling. We can go home tomorrow morning. Let’s go find that General.”

“Quark?” Mark asked.

Quark spoke up, “General Devo Stone is currently located at the Imperial Hotel, south of the Imperial Palace, at the hotel bar. He is at a get-together of minor political importance, and he is receiving guests. The event is invitation only and formal dress, and the entire district is having a party on the streets in

celebration of the blockade breaking and of the resurrection of Yokosuka's people. Shall I request an invitation?"

Mark had a sudden instinctual desire to be *anywhere but there*, which was weird as fuck because Mark had been through a big battle and he had done the Winter Ball a few weeks ago, and so he belonged anywhere he wanted to belong. But if he went to the Imperial Hotel bar wearing his current superhero costume, then they would probably accept him as he was, but he would also get swamped.

And this was a party on Earth.

This was New Tokyo; the land of superheroes and big world events that Mark had always looked up to as a bastion of the best of humanity. Mark might be brushing elbows with Glorious Man in a social setting, and that would be weird as fuck. He'd also be seeing some politicians who propped up all the superheroes; people who were truly good... or at least as good as could get. Aluatha, by comparison, had tried to fuck Mark over more than once. Aluatha's animosity was a lot easier to think about and work around than being around actual good superheroes, who were *nobles*.

... Mark looked to Isoko.

Isoko seemed to be having much the same reaction as him.

Mark asked, "It's silly for us to be scared of going there, right?"

"I don't have anything to wear to a party like that, Mark."

It was not a joke. Isoko was dead fucking serious.

"We can find clothes," Mark countered.

"It's the Imperial Hotel! The entire Imperial Quarter is formal on formal. Grandma warned me never to go there without 3 days of prep unless I wanted to make a fool of myself..." Isoko took a breath, squared her shoulders, and said, "We're going. Let's go. I need the best damn dress money can buy."

Mark told Quark, "Request an invite, Quark, and where can we buy some formal attire?"

Quark beep-booped, and then said, “Devo Stone’s secretary is penciling us in for 45 minutes from now, if that’s acceptable. Otherwise we can go right now. And certain people are exempt from formal dress requirements. You are on that list. Your costume is acceptable.”

Isoko instantly told Mark, “*We’re going in formal clothes.*”

Mark said, “We’re going in formal clothes.”

Quark said, “Here is a list of places that sell high-class fashion to *right-now* clients..”

Mark and Isoko got going, back the way they came.

They passed by Crystal Tower again, to the north of the Imperial District, and it was kinda still amazing to Mark, in all the ways that places can be amazing. The spire of white/blue crystal reached into the sky and sparkled with an inner light that wasn’t visible in the day, but which, at night, was visible like the color of pre-dawn light. The rest of the place down below and ahead was all manner of towers and golden lights and red hovercar bumper lights flowing in traffic on the streets and in the low skies.

The Imperial Palace was a monument to a different age, all large and low and mostly filled with open space. The roofs had those angles and tiles that you only ever saw in Japan, set within green gardens and open paths. The whole thing was a relic, nestled into an otherwise massive, major city.

Mark and Isoko kept out of traffic, guided by Quark, to land on one of several landing zones for flying heroes.

It was currently March 15th, 2050, Tuesday, and the moon was half-illuminated in the bright, clear sky, while the city rose all around like an ancient stone forest of business and politics. It had all been built with an eye to the past, with angled roofs with tiles, and with bright, solid lights. No neon. Nothing that modern, at least not on the surface. The *bones* were modern as heck; Mark was absolutely sure that there was even an underground kinda city down there, both because he had seen the movies about that place, and he felt people down there, tens of meters below the surface. Down there it was surely crowded, but up here the streets were open, evacuation signs illuminated here and there, but not flashing at all. If Mark wanted to visit Under Tokyo, he could take one of those evacuation routes down there, deep into the concrete jungle and fake sunlights. But up here, it was all open.

The city had left room for nature in this open space. Big trees grew here and there, twisting in the light, illuminated from below with spotlights, all gnarled and pretty, but contained to spaces beyond the foot traffic, and there was a lot of foot traffic.

Hundreds of people were out on the streets, many of them in suits or pantsuits, men and women, most of them a little drunk or a little high, if they were so inclined. It was a subdued, professional kind of party, most of the happenings happening beyond sight, in the buildings all around and in the happy voices laughing and talking as people moved from party to party. Karaoke was big in some parts, and some guys were singing in the streets, having come from one of those interior parties.

People instantly spotted Mark and Isoko, firstly because Mark was so damned tall, and then came recognition a moment later. Mark expected to get mobbed, and he kinda was, but this was a professional place and so they only got mobbed a little bit. Mark didn't speak Japanese, but now was a great time to try and Understand it all, so he got to doing that as he walked down to the Imperial Hotel, with Isoko at his side. He signed four autographs, which was rather minimal, but he did have three people cry on him and then kowtow, which was also completely out of place, but which Mark had seen in the movies so it wasn't too surprising.

It was surprising that it was happening to him, though.

Sure, Mark was already famous, but this... this felt different, somehow. This was New Tokyo; that was the difference.

People got out their phones and made little posts on various media and Mark smiled and shook hands, and it felt nice. He had saved the city, they said, and Mark eventually understood that in Japanese and started speaking to them back in broken Japanese, saying he was glad to be here, which most people were extremely joyful to hear him speak their language. And then some important-seeming woman with a pair of bodyguards started sobbing tears of joy, talking about how she had lost her brother to 'Green Death Ecology in Okuana 20 years ago' and she hated them ever since. But now all the world was seeing those people for who they really were, and she was so happy that Mark was here, telling the truth of it all.

Quark marked that woman as Yuma Otsu, a member of the House of Representatives. She was currently serving her 17th year, having been reelected for a 4th time just recently. She was a known very-vocal supporter of the Hero/Villain Program.

Mark bowed to Representative Yuma and said in perfect Japanese, “I look forward to working with New Tokyo to herald the end of the Tyrant Godking.”

Yuma bowed furiously and when she came back up it was with tears in her eyes. “Thank you for everything, Mark Careed, Blackvein.”

It took Mark and Isoko 30 minutes to walk 1 kilometer, to the back of the Imperial Hotel, to some clothing store that specialized in getting people ready for big meetings, fast. Mark paid the people 33,500 goldleaf for outfits for both him and Isoko, and mostly for Isoko. Soon he was in a black suit with a tie, while Isoko wore a slinky, sparkly silver dress. Mark had no idea why it was so expensive, but it looked good and she was happy with it, and that’s what mattered.

While the two sellers were bowing in the background, Mark looked at himself and Isoko in the mirror and thought this was good enough.

“Ready?” Mark asked in Japanese.

Isoko had gotten more and more professional as they walked here, as they got ready. She stood, back straight, eyes forward, vector focused, as she spoke in Japanese, “Ready.”

An AI-guarded door stood between the clothier’s business and the Imperial Hotel. The clothiers vaguely, demurely, warned Mark and Isoko that the guard might take a minute to review their information, but that they absolutely would *not* be turned away due to lack of formal dress.

The door opened before Mark fully stood before the door.

Mark thanked the clothiers and then walked through into the Imperial Hotel with Isoko on his arm. The streets outside were crowded, the businesses out there having a big night, and it was no different here at the Imperial Hotel, but the clientele here were of a very specific variety.

There was a secondary guard, right beyond the door.

Mark recognized this guard as the same guy who was guarding Jessie Stills’ platform at the Virgin Social at the Winter Ball, because of course it was. Surrounded by softly-gold alabaster walls and thick square pillars, under soft lights and near wooden surfaces and tables and chairs, the elite of New Tokyo

and Jessie Stills' entourage of 250-ish people mingled and drank. Aluatha had bought out the entire *very large* hotel. The Imperial Hotel took up practically an entire city block.

And then Mark recognized Cade Waterson.

Cade bowed a little, recognition passing through him as he actually saw Mark, in person, and so he said, "If we knew you wanted to come to this, we would have personally invited you."

"I didn't even know I wanted to be here until an hour ago," Mark said, as the door shut behind them and the two clothiers had a little screeching-in-joy moment once they were out of sight. Mark barely heard that joy over the soft instrumentals flowing through the air of the Imperial Hotel. "Seems like a happening place."

"Didn't know Aluatha bought out the place until 30 minutes ago, either," Isoko commented, eyes on a swivel. "Is Jessie safe?"

"Quite so, Miss Kanno," Cade said. "He completed the resurrections 10 hours ago, and he just woke back up from a nap. The final count for revived persons is at 65,316. So only several thousand are missing."

Mark and Isoko spotted Jessie at almost the same time.

Jessie was way over there, past several large pillars and beside his father, Hank, both of them dressed in suits and ties. Jessie was talking with some girl, and from his vector it was not a sexual thing, but an... intrigue about mysteries? Mark wasn't sure about that, but it seemed good.

"About the same percentage of resurrection failures as in Memphi, yes?" Isoko asked.

"About the same."

Mark asked, "How is Jessie doing, exactly? He seems to be getting along with his situation better?"

Cade bowed a little, again, and then he walked into the party, into the wide open spaces between the tables and the various gatherings. Mark and Isoko walked with him, and Mark spotted a whole lot of the people he had Skilled today, and most of them rapidly spotted him, in turn.

Cade said, “Jessie is doing as well as can be managed. He has a standing request for a Dynamo. Can I request you complete that request tonight?”

“Oh yeah!” Mark said, “He did want that... yes. I have 30 of them right now.” Quark spotted Devo Stone before Mark did, marking the General in Mark’s eyesight to the far left, past a few different pillars. He wasn’t visible right now but when Mark took a few more steps he spotted the guy. The General was surrounded by people. Mark told Cade, “Let’s do Dynamo for Jessie first, then I have an appointment with Devo Stone.”

Cade nodded professionally, leading the way back toward Jessie.

It was a bit of a walk, though, so Mark asked, “How are *you* feeling these days, Cade?”

“Very well, sir.”

That wasn’t the whole story, but it was the socially acceptable one.

Mark nodded a little.

And then Jessie spotted them and his eyes went wide and he sighed and relaxed, and spoke in Japanese to the woman he was talking to, “Apologies, but I have to take this appointment.”

The woman and the two guys she was with all bowed a little and stepped away.

Mark said, “Hey, Jessie. I heard you finished the resurrections.”

“And I hear you got to be a giant fuck-off dragon,” Jessie said, frowning a little, sounding way too jealous.

Mark couldn’t help himself as he blurted out, “It’s *sooo* fucking weird to talk to you sometimes. Why does it matter that I was a dragon for a bit— and I *wasn’t*, by the way. I just manhandled a self-created kaiju and then steered it around. Totally different.”

“Well it *looked* like you were a dragon. And yeah, I’m jealous! I got Cade over here ready to wipe my ass if I needed it because I can’t even defend myself from a *basic* goblin. Not even talking about Goblinhome goblins. So you got that Dynamo I want?”

“Why the talk of goblins aga— You know what? I don’t need to know. Hold on—” Mark was ready to get on with it... but then he grinned. “Go ahead and punch me.”

“Fuck no I ain’t breaking my goddamned hand on your stupid fucking chiseled jaw. Why the hell is your face so damned pretty, anyway? You make yourself look like that?”

What was happening right now?

Mark countered, “You want a True Brawny? Maybe you’d get a better face with one of those slotted, too, but then you’d never be able to cast spells, so Dynamo would be a waste.”

Cade reluctantly, but strongly, said, “We cannot risk the mutation of his Resurrection into something else, sir.”

Jessie flipped Cade off, only talking to Mark, saying, “Yeah yeah, fuck you both for different reasons. Rub it in my face why don’t you. Come on. Give me Dynamo already. I know that noble family of whoever-the-fucks gave it to you to give to *400 people before you gave it to me*, so stop holding out.”

... Mark did not need this animosity in his life right now.

Mark poked Jessie’s chest, falling into dream—

Mark paused as he saw Jessie unfurled in the air above the black grasses of his soulhouse.

He had never been inside of Jessie until now, and honestly, he was kinda expecting to find a trap. Jessie’s whole ‘Resurrection Ghost’ story was a lie told by the governments of the Central Cities and then spread out to the rest of the Two Worlds in order to lay the reasoning for the Ghost at the hands of ‘some unknown person’, instead of where the honor really lay, which was at the feet of the Cult of Thrashtalon. No one wanted Thrashtalon to have a win, though, and so, *somehow*, Jessie Stills existed.

Jessie seemed like a real person on the outside, and also on the inside, as Mark pulled him apart a little on the black grasses of his soulhouse.

“... A real fucking Power, huh,” Mark muttered to himself.

He was surprised.

It was real.

Resurrection was real.

Resurrection was a funny thing to look at from inside. From the outside it was all fractal and white, but from the inside it was like standing at soft shores at a riverside beach where the waters came inward, inward, always inward. The headwaters lay deep in a fractal infinity, in the dream, but the exit was here, at Jessie, and yeah, that made a whole lot of sense.

Jessie pretty much pulled souls together from way, way out there, bringing them back to life, to a body, here, at these gentle shores. The shores also had some capability to turn matter into living flesh, too, which was a part of the complications of the whole idea of Resurrection. Honestly, there were a lot of complications here, and Mark only understood the surface of Resurrection.

... Mark glanced at Jessie's core Binding memory, expecting to see something fake, or something dangerous. Maybe even something goblin-related. Jessie did mention goblins twice around Mark, after all. And yeah. There was a goblin there, of sorts.

Jessie was 13 years old and writing a story about a superhero who had died, bitten by a goblin, and who came back to life as the goblin.

... Mark didn't look further into that, at all, leaving it exactly as he found it as he gathered up Dynamo, preparing it for slotting into Jessie's current Arcane Power of Resurrection.

Dynamo was Natural, and kinda reminded Mark of his own 'water wheel' invention he had taken out of Union and replicated all across his soul, back when he was under attack from Wongod, like 10 months ago. Mark's bastardization of his own Union had been sort of like the Dynamo he saw right now, but Dynamo was more fluid. More... infinite, Mark would say, especially as he gazed upon Jessie's weird Resurrection-from-infinity-thing he had going on here.

Instead of a waterwheel, though, Dynamo was a shifting of power, like a mirror-prism capable of tuning any light it needed to tune. Why did Mark call Dynamo a prism? Well it was kinda reflection-y, he supposed, but it was also a filter and a tuner, all at the same time.

Natural Powers were weird as fuck. A lot of them had parts that were analogous to the Sigildry that Mark had learned almost a year ago, but a lot of them simply would not survive in the real world because they were literal dreams, and not anything similar to ‘shapes you could make with your hands’.

Arcane Powers, however, were all specific spells, solidified strongly enough that they were always usable as long as the user had mana left to use those Powers.

Even Resurrection’s weirdness with the infinite river flowing inward from all the dream was like a ritual enacted upon Jessie’s body. Much like Necromancer, it had hookups for a whole bunch of stuff, from mana filters to make bodies, to stuff that reflected the interior of a target’s soul and brought that stuff to the outside... maybe. It was *dense*. Mark couldn’t understand it all that well, but he saw parts of it he recognized from other stuff he had studied... and he probably shouldn’t linger in here too long, actually.

Whatever was going on with the various jumbled magical languages inside Jessie’s soul (some of which were clearly unknown to Mark) Mark felt that Dynamo would go very well together with Resurrection. Dynamo would go well with any Arcane Power, actually.

So Mark planted the prism of Dynamo on the beach that was Jessie’s Resurrection.

Mark had no control over whatever memory appeared at the center of the Powers he put into people, but he was still able to look at them before he exited them, if he wanted. This time, he lingered and he looked.

The memory that appeared at the center of Dynamo was a memory of Jessie waking up, fully rested, sun barely above the horizon out beyond his window, and knowing, *absolutely*, that he was ready for everything and anything the day could throw at him.

Mark pulled out.

He had been under for less than a minute.

Jessie blinked, waking up strongly from his half-nap.

Cade and Isoko and a few other people stood to the side, watching.

Mark asked Jessie, “Feeling good?”

Jessie breathed deep and his vector filled out, like he was brimming with energy, eyes widening, and then relaxing. With surprise in his voice, Jessie said, “Yeah I feel... really good?”

Everyone nearby was watching. Some people from far away were watching, too, stepping up onto the sides of chairs to see over the gathered crowd. Cade and Isoko and a few glaring soldiers kept everyone from approaching too much.

Mark gave a rundown of Dynamo like he did for everyone who got the Power today, saying, “Dynamo is a Natural Power. It can do a lot more than give you nearly infinite mana. A word of warning: Not needing to sleep is common for Dynamos and others, but be aware that sleeping is necessary to remain sane, for all peoples. Even Dynamos can experience Dragon-Wake-like symptoms if they never sleep.”

“Cade warned me about Dragon Wake,” Jessie said, kinda flippantly, looking at his hands. Flickers of glowing white energy passed down his hands for a moment, then he stopped. “Aluatha is taking good care of its Resurrection-Bot.”

... Mark could have walked away after that, but instead he frowned a little, and said, “If you want a rescue from this life then tell me now. If you want to give up your Power to someone else, I can do that, too. But you saved 65,000 lives today, Jessie. That’s amazing. You should be proud.”

Cade was carefully still.

Hank, however, smiled and stepped forward, saying, “He should be proud! He did a great thing!”

Jessie frowned and glared at Mark, a real hate bubbling inside of his heart. “I didn’t get to be a giant fuck off dragon. All I am is some stupid long-armed white ghost.”

Mark was thrown for yet another loop. “Resurrection is fucking amazing...” He admitted, again, “It’s so fucking weird to talk to you.”

Cade remained carefully still. Eyes forward. Vector on a swivel.

Isoko asked Jessie, “You wanna give up your Power? Get a different set?”

But Jessie scoffed at both Mark and Isoko. “Those fuckers won’t allow it. They’re too scared it’s going to mutate in the hands of another.”

Mark admitted, "I bet I get a call from Walaria later asking me if I can safely remove it."

Real fear struck Jessie to his core.

Hank sighed.

... Mark *almost* continued, almost saying something like 'I can probably remove it and then put it into a cow' along with something about how the ranch was doing a really good job of figuring out how to pass on Powers through breeding. Maybe they could get Resurrection in 10 different people. Resurrection was a funky spell, with parts that drifted off into the dream, but it was pretty much just the Arcane Power Necromancer but with a whole lot of fine-tuning and a whole lot of stuff that Mark had never seen before.

But Jessie was actually, truly scared.

So Mark said, "I'll have to tell her that I can't. It's too specialized."

Jessie kinda shuddered and chuckled, and then his worry broke into a triumph. His voice still cracked, though, as he said, "You can't get rid of me that easily!"

Mark said, "Glad to have you with us, Jessie."

And then Mark turned and walked away before Jessie said anything else weird.

The guards closed ranks on Jessie.

Isoko easily wrapped her arm around Mark's, leaning in and pretending everything was fine, as she asked, "You figure out how Resurrection works?"

Mark was acutely aware of many different facts. Primarily, he was standing in a room full of soldiers for Aluatha, and they all had loyalties generally like Mark's, but there were many people in the room that were not from Aluatha at all. It was pretty easy to spot those outsiders: they were mostly Japanese, and thus shorter than everyone from Aluatha. So secondarily, Mark was in a room with a bunch of people of truly unknown loyalties, some of which were probably demonic. Archmages existed, after all, and though Mark didn't know any of the potential archmages here, he was sure there were some.

So the demons were listening, and the demons had already yelled at Mark about not wanting Resurrection Magic off the reservation. Archmage Blackthorn's demon, Planty, had said as much, and very strongly.

Mark decided to tell Isoko, "I have no idea how Resurrection works."

Isoko played it off, shrugging. "For the best." Inwardly, she knew Mark was lying completely, and she even flinched her arm, tensing against Mark as she caught his lie, but on the outside, and in her face, she moved on, saying, "Now where is that General..."

And because the General was currently the guy in command of this whole situation here, and thus nominally the strongest man in the room or at least the one expected to be on-call for the big events, and Mark and Isoko wanted to talk big events with him and they were the strongest people actually in the room (with only a 98% certainty), General Devo Stone stood about 25 meters away, talking to people about very important things, but also ready to drop them at a moment's notice. That moment happened now.

General Devo Stone nodded a little toward an elderly Japanese man, all white haired and slightly hunched and with his hand on a cane, saying, "Excuse me, Councilor Umeda. That appointment I told you about is here now."

"I'd like to be a part of this coming discussion, if it's alright with Aluatha."

Stone nodded just a little, and then followed that look toward Mark, allowing Mark the opportunity to answer the question. Mark did not know the Councilor Umeda Unkei, but Quark gave a rapid rundown, as much as he could. Mark almost balked when he saw that the guy had been in office since 1960, Pre-Reveal, and though he had retired once in the 2010s, he had come back to fill someone else's shoes for the last 20-odd years. The guy was a Big Name, with his hands in every part of New Tokyo, and though Isoko didn't notice him right away she noticed him now. She rapidly let go of Mark's arm to look more professional, her vector flexing to worry and triumph.

The guy was something like 125 years old.

He didn't look a day over 100.

Mark stopped a few meters away from the pairing, saying, “Evening, General. Councilor. I’d like to discuss the nature of the war, and how far we’re going with it. I don’t expect it to be a long discussion, or in detail at all. I’m fine with New Tokyo knowing the answers to my questions.” He nodded a little toward Umeda.

The elderly Councilor nodded back, saying, “New Tokyo owes you a debt beyond debts, Inheritor Careed, but I would impose upon you again to let us sit down for this discussion. It’s about 3 days past my bed time, though, so I don’t expect I can manage for too long of a night.”

Mark grinned a little, saying, “Absolutely, sir.”

“Glad to have you with us tonight, Councilor Umeda,” Isoko said, being very polite.

General Devo Stone gestured to the side, to a glass door room beyond some soldiers, saying, “The rooms over here have some nice webweave couches...”

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“How are the new Powers working out, General?” Mark asked, once they were situated and sitting in the side room, and the pleasantries were over.

The couches were nice.

Councilor Umeda sighed as he eventually sat down on the third couch in the room, beside Mark and Devo Stone. His body might betray him, but his mind was sharper than most minds Mark had known, his vector like an ice pick, his thoughts swirling behind that ice pick like a command center’s susurrus of activity during a kaiju attack. The guy hadn’t felt like that outside of the room, but now he was focused, knowing the real talk was happening right now.

Isoko stood behind and to the side of Mark.

A few other people, like the General's secretary and a pair of soldiers, and the Councilor's bodyguards, stood on the edges of the room. One of the Councilor's men offered tea, but the Councilor shook his head just a little, and the guy backed off demurely.

General Devo Stone sat down with a greater ease, opposite of Mark, his mind like a thousand different ice picks, all ready to go, and all the world was ice. His countenance and ease of voice was more like an uncle's, though, as he grinned a little, saying, "I'm sure you can feel most of it already, yes? Battle Manipulation and Visionary go together like the ocean and the sun, while Strategist allows me to recognize all the islands of danger and the lurking leviathans in this upcoming war, allowing me to angle our course as needed. But that's a bunch of upper-level speak that I'll tell the papers. You want something solid, yes? What are you looking for, though? What do you want to happen in this war?"

"I don't believe that the people of Okuana are our enemies at all, and I don't want to fight soldiers." Mark added, "But I'll respond through ITLKR to any dryad threats. I didn't exactly promise Walaria that yet, but I'm promising it to you, and to New Tokyo, right now."

Councilor Umeda bowed just a little, his vector flexing, relaxing. He was still an ice pick, focused on everything happening in this room, but his voice was easier as he said, "Thank you, Mister Careed. Crystal Tower, New Tokyo, and Aluatha have mutual defense protocols, most heavily visible through the ITLKR systems, but we have those treaties with Okuana as well, and this current chapter of history has broken a great deal of that International good will. New Tokyo is glad to see young, strong hands reaffirming our mutual treaties and desires."

General Devo Stone had a small moment of a thousand ice-pick vectors all shifting, as Councilor Umeda spoke. Some of the General's animosity and worry pulled away from New Tokyo, as Councilor Umeda made his reaffirming speech.

It was kinda nice seeing how serious these two were.

Mark, of course, couldn't read minds, but he practically could. This was a tense conversation due to the violence inherent in these sorts of discussions, and due to the violence of the past week, but right now it was just surface tension... and maybe some old tensions, too. New Tokyo was a 'rival power' of Aluatha in certain ways. They both had gates between the Two Worlds, of course, and New Tokyo did not like it when Aluatha got their gate.

... Mark belatedly recalled how New Tokyo had been the ones to deny help for the Battle for Memphi, even though Crystal Tower had wanted to help. That proved a prudent call, when the Battle for Memphi caused kaiju and Cultist attacks to trigger all across the world. So Mark understood that, in retrospect...

Superheroes being held back by politicians felt bad, though, even now.

But Timeweaver had been in Memphi when he needed to be in Memphi, 'making' it happen like it happened...

Mark decided he didn't really need to think too deeply about any of that stuff anymore. It was in the past. It did color Mark's perception of this event happening right here, but that was all.

General Stone had taken 10 seconds to think. He was still thinking as he told Mark, "This war is more than Dominant's doing. The Godking is merely the head of an empire, filling that empire with propaganda against the rest of the world. There will be no avoiding front lines and battles with people."

Mark responded, "I understand that, but I'm not killing people unless they're archmages or kaiju-level— And, yeah, I will go against archmages. Should have said that earlier. Count me in for that."

Stone's vectors flexed, his gaze focused but easing up, as he said, "Amberstone managed to seal you for a moment. Are you capable of preventing that sort of action when it invariably happens again?"

"That's what I have a team for." Mark added, "But, just so you know, I *did* kill him before he could do anything. Yes. He got his attack off, but I killed him, and then I also put his demon back, and his demon revived him. I didn't want to have him turning into a necrodragon at that moment, and the demon didn't want that either. In retrospect, perhaps I should have triggered the necrodragon then and there, but I made the decision I made. Amberstone got away. I'm sure I'll see him again. I'm sure, if I need help, then you'll teleport someone with ITLKR to help me, too."

Councilor Umeda focused here and elsewhere, thinking deeply again and coming to a conclusion about something. He looked to the General.

A lot of hidden thoughts coalesced for General Stone, the cacophony of his vector finding purchase and then hitting the world of his mind, forging a path forward. It was kinda weird to Unionsense, and Mark was sure he was barely scratching the surface of what the General was thinking and doing with his Powers, but he understood the big parts.

Devo Stone asked Mark a big question, “Can Aluatha count on you to produce more True Powers for the war effort?”

“Yes, of course.” Mark added to the Councilor, “That goes for Crystal Tower and New Tokyo, as well. I reaffirm my decision to Skill a lot of people over the next few days. My hope in doing this is so that more and more of the world is strong enough to fully resist Dominant’s tyranny. We don’t have dragons, or archmages, but we do have superheroes, and I will help with that as much as I can.”

Councilor Umeda nodded.

General Stone easily said, “Then I see this war going in this way: Blockades everywhere, denial of resources, fallback tactics, and specific ingress into Okuana’s territory to deny them strategic locations and resources. We have all the Two Worlds ready to unite against Godking Dominant, and I plan to use that coalition to great effect. I see us winning this war. Of that there is no doubt. But, before we win, I see the war going one of two ways:

“Either we win in under a year and behead Dominant,

“Or the war goes slow and steady and dangerously, and then we win anyway.

“It all depends on Dominant’s response.

“What we’re most looking to prevent is Doomsday Scenarios, where Dominant sets off ten thousand nukes all across the Two Worlds, burning out the world while he rests underground, ready to take back what’s left. That’s what most of our prognosticators are focused on. Other than that, the war will be a steady noose, tightening and tightening.”

Isoko shuddered. A few people had similar reactions.

Mark nodded a little—

“*Would* he truly do that?” Councilor Umeda asked, though he already knew the answer.

“He would,” Mark said. “He’s a tree. People only exist to provide him with mana and underlings.”

General Devo Stone nodded solemnly to Mark and then to the Councilor, saying, “Mister Careed has the right of it, but nukes everywhere would not be that disastrous of an event. Make no mistake. A billion would die. But humanity would survive and then there would be nothing preventing us from an all-out attack against Dominant.”

Mark nodded a little, expecting all of that—

“All the world went against him in the past and he won,” Isoko said, speaking up and surprising most everyone. Isoko stepped forward, to stand beside Mark and let loose with something that she had been brewing for a day, saying, “After the Dragon King died and never-died, Dominant turned elves into goblins and all the world fell to him. Maybe it was a free-for-all and Dominant was a cockroach who survived. Maybe Xerkona had some Fates back then, too, and those Fates foresaw everything that Dominant needed to do to win and he was not a cockroach, but a truly accomplished assassin or general. I don’t know how it happened. All I know is that Dominant is *not* stupid, but he still attacked Aluatha, uniting the entire empire once again against him, and then he attacked New Tokyo and Crystal Tower, uniting a great deal of Earth against him. If he does something else to the other nations of Earth, making all of them hate him too, then that would be a third point in a pattern of attacking and only making the Two Worlds more angry at him.

“So I’m worried he’s going to pull another goblins-type event; he’ll make something that targets all of Okuana’s enemies. He might even have access to the elven lands again, and elves. And historically, the goblins were worse in that ancient history they are these days. That’s what all the history books *and* the goblins say. Dominant won, and thus he turned the goblins weaker, into what they are today.”

Isoko hadn’t really asked anything. She finished, standing there, waiting for a comment.

Councilor Umeda regarded Isoko’s worries with seriousness, and then he looked to the General.

General Stone seriously said, “I believe Mark is scheduled to assist with the People down south, on Daihoon, against the goblin threat on D’Australia.” Stone looked to Mark, asking, “Do you still have plans to do that?”

The anti-meme, eldritch watchdog of the People, loomed on the edges of the room like an ethereal flow of tendrils and eyes.

Mark was the only one who saw it, though as his vector did indicate something was with them in the room and so the Councilor and Isoko all wondered what he was looking at. Two of the bodyguards and the soldiers saw Mark looking to the side, too. None of them saw what he saw. All of them wondering what he was looking at was enough to get the antimeme to flow into them.

Surprisingly, the General was the only one who wasn't touched. Everyone else ignored the plight of the People. General Stone still wanted an answer... which was surprising. The antimeme touched him but couldn't hold onto him. He didn't seem to notice the tendrils flowing into his head and chest, though.

... Wait.

Had the General activated the antimeme to disrupt the discussion happening? To *not* answer Isoko's concerns? ... Maybe?

Mark decided to say, "I hope to bring some Powers to the People, to help them with self-sufficiency. I will not, however, attack the goblins. We don't want them coming back to the Greendearth mountains."

The eldritch thing flicked inside of Isoko's vector and she shuddered, saying, "I need to stay here with the family, Mark. I won't go there."

Mark had some Thoughts about that, primarily about the necessity of getting Isoko a True Spellbreaker again. She had left her Spellbreaker back home at Dawncoast, for sure, otherwise she wouldn't have said that; she would have jumped at the chance to *not* talk with her family right now.

The General made the antimeme worse as he asked Mark, "Can you actually go there and do that? Most people can't even make plans to visit the People."

The antimeme touched the General again, but it couldn't affect him.

Councilor Umeda groaned a little in soft pains, and then he stretched and cracked his back, saying, "I believe it is truly late, and I must be heading off."

"Water People, Vaka, Picory," General Stone said, gauging Mark's reaction.

Mark remained sitting there, chilled to his soul, because Councilor Umeda strained to stand up and Isoko rapidly moved to help him stand. Everyone else in the room started moving toward the exit, even while he was still sitting there. They made some small talk as they went.

Umeda held onto Isoko's offered arm, asking, "Have you visited the Imperial Palace in any of your time here?"

Isoko easily flowed into her role as a mover and shaker, saying, "Only the public parts, but I would love to be able to visit the actual interiors alongside Mark, I am sure."

Mark reached out to take Isoko's hand, to prevent her from walking away—

"They'll be fine, Mark," Devo Stone said, still sitting.

"I know they will be, but I still don't appreciate you pulling that shit on them," Mark said, frowning. He wasn't truly angry, though. This place was safe, and Isoko was surrounded by soldiers and she had some deep respect for Umeda, so she was happy to talk with him. Mark watched her go, saying, "I suppose you needed to clear the room? You didn't want to discuss Isoko's valid concerns of Okuanan superweapons?"

"Of course Okuana has superweapons, and of course I am not talking about them in front of compromised actors. This is a hotel room, Mark. The AIs are watching, even if they can't hear about the People, though I bet Aleph One and Aleph Two will flag the videos in this room later and then see what we speak about. The Blessing of the Picory will give them some problems, but they'll overcome it, I am sure."

Mark frowned a little. "Is the Godking going to make another 'goblins'?"

"We're not sure he *needs* to. The goblins still exist, after all."

"... Oh."

"I do need to know if you're actually going to Vaka, Mark."

Mark watched the guards shut the door, and then it was just Mark and Devo in the same room, sitting on couches across from each other. Mark turned to the man, saying, "I will. I'm going to grab the

soulhouse book and try to give it to Eliot. I'm not sure how I'm going to manage it, but I'll make it happen."

Devo nodded a little, saying, "Aluatha hasn't managed to secure it, and it's been held in treasure by the Picory since the time of the Dragon King, so if anyone can secure it it's probably you."

The antimeme flowed around them heavily, sinking tendrils into both of them—

"You can actually see it, can't you," Devo said, already knowing the answer.

"Yeah. I can. You're a part of Aluatha's Containment, aren't you?"

"Ever since I was a child. Born into it. My defenses are still spellworks, though, and they *can* break, and I feel them weakening already, so I will have to leave more discussion of the Picory to another day. Is there any chance Aluatha can get you to give that housebook to someone else, besides Eliot?"

Mark almost scoffed and spat, 'no way', but he gave the question actual thought.

Devo Stone was going to be a failure point for the war, but he was already deep in Containment, whoever those guys were, and he was a True Power now, thanks to Mark. Mark had only heard about Containment from Walaria, once, and it had been about the Picory antimeme, and how they fought against stuff like that all the time, but they fought the eldritch all the time... Hmm. Mark was feeling more and more confident that Devo was the right General to elevate to true power, but he didn't like how the guy had just used the antimeme against Isoko and even New Tokyo.

Maybe Containment needed an unkillable soulhouse'd person?

But... No.

"No," Mark said, "Because I'm going to give Eliot the book and also one of my own books of life. I'll do the same for him. We both have Necromancer now, so if anyone can do it we can do it, so if either of us die we'll revive with the other one."

Devo nodded solemnly, saying, "That's a fine plan. Moving on: How do you feel about me feeding you dryad targets and then you going *into* Okuana, on your own, possibly shifting shape with that Adamantine Immortal body of yours, and then becoming an assassin? Not just dryads, either.

Archmages would be good targets, too. If you would wish to deal with the fallout of the demonization of those killed archmages, then you could deal with that fallout. Or, you could let the demonized archmages run amok in Okuana's backlines."

"... I see and understand the strategic use of *making Magefalls happen* in enemy backyards, but no fucking way, sir, and don't ask me to do any of that shit, ever."

"The other option I gave you was to kill the demonized archmages."

A hurtful anger rose in Mark's chest, like fire burning cold. He said, "I don't *want* to be an assassin, unless you can figure out how I could assassinate Dominant."

Devo dropped a bomb, saying, "You have to kill all the dryads in Okuana to kill Dominant. He's reborn from the nearest one, any time his main body is destroyed."

"Fucking WHAT?!"

Devo continued, "We *didn't* know how he survived all of our burnings in the past —because Aluatha did use to have dragons— but thanks to your trip to Endless Daihoon and all the information of your soulhouse you have shared with Walaria, we're sure of a few different things.

"One, is that Dominant either doesn't have a soulhouse, or that he doesn't need orichalcum to grow his house, or it's reached a size cap, because the international flow of orichalcum *out* of Okuana is a well-documented thing that does happen. So if he doesn't need orichalcum, then he probably doesn't have a soulhouse. So he's not being reborn from a soulhouse.

"Two, is that Dominant knows extensively about Resurrection magic, and books of life, and that he has *probably* stuck books of life inside of every single dryad he makes. They're probably 'libraries of life', considering Dominant's history and powers, but they're still what we would call books of life.

"And three: We're about 99% sure that this war is going to be Dominant apocalypse-ing the world many times over. He won't take down the System itself, but he will kill everyone on the Two Worlds, if he can. That billion-death estimate I gave earlier? It's probably a good estimate. And when that happens, Dominant will be reborn from the ashes.

“So while Isoko is expecting something magical, perhaps something to upend the entire world on its end, we know and are preparing for the 99%-event; a slog of a war, liberating city after city, and eventually cornering Dominant and then him pulling some dangerous shit. It might be 8 years before we get there.

“For the soldiers, there will be a lot of waiting around. I have several thousand men out there right now, on the eastern edge of Okuana, doing exactly that.

“For you, it will be months between engagements.”

Mark had a moment of despair.

Mark said, “Gods that sounds fucking...” He sighed, and decided to look on the bright side, saying, “Sounds better to have an apocalypse later than right now?”

“Quite so.”

... Mark had another moment. A better one. He decided, “I think you should make this war go as slow and as steady as possible, that way we can make our civilization strong enough to survive anything he can throw at us.”

General Devo Stone blanked, and then he said, “Huh.”

“... What?”

“I expected you to want to go faster. All the royals want shock and awe.”

“I want to out-civilization Dominant. I want to make everything so good out here that he’s *nothing*.”

Devo thought a little bit, even as he said, “That’s one way to go about it.”

“What do you need from me to make the war happen safely? Minimal casualties on both sides.”

Devo said, “I’ll send you an email with details, but mostly Aluatha needs you on the backlines and ready to respond at a moment’s notice because I can make this happen a lot easier if I had an invincible adamantine dragon at my disposal. So what I *need* is for you to get that house book to Eliot, and for our backlines to be secure.” He added, “But that’s for whenever you can get it down. For now, there are a lot

of soldiers out there who are truly thankful for what you have done for them, and all of New Tokyo is right outside, and they're also thrilled. It's a work party, but it's still a party. Can I introduce you to some of the people here?"

Mark hmm'd and kinda nodded, but then he said, "Normally I'd take that offer, but I have my own work to be doing." He stood. "Do you want some of those True Spellbreakers for Containment?"

Devo Stone stood, saying, "No no no... thanks, but no. They interfere with our own magics."

"It's a design flaw I'm working on."

There was more small talk, but Mark soon left the room alongside the General.

Devo went off with some guys from New Tokyo and Mark walked off with Isoko, headed toward the exit...

Mark paused, and looked toward Jessie.

The 'Resurrection Ghost' was nursing a fruity drink, sitting on a round couch in a corner, in a cordoned section of the main foyer of the Imperial Hotel—

"What ya thinkin' bout?" Isoko asked, quietly.

Mark was reluctant in a lot of ways, for this was a public place and he could not show weakness around troops. Blackvein needed to be unassailable. Spies were everywhere, after all. But Mark didn't want to be that kind of person. Everything was too serious. Isoko was scared. The war was going to take forever, or not nearly long enough. Dominant might pull a win out of his ass in a way no one expected or could even prepare for. A billion people would die.

Jessie could be the solution against that bad ending.

But that was a lot of responsibility to put onto a guy's shoulder.

Too much.

Mark said, "I need to talk to Jessie again, but... Hmm."

Isoko put her arm around Mark's and then tugged him along for all of one step, toward Jessie, before Mark fell in line beside her. Isoko grinned, saying nothing. And then Cade was there again, giving way to Mark. Isoko stayed outside of the cordoned space.

Jessie looked up at Mark, his pink frozen drink dripping condensation down his hand, onto his black pants. His voice was kinda ragged as he muttered, "What do you want?"

Mark sat down on the round couch, saying, "I'm going to do some more Skilling here in New Tokyo for a few days, and then I'm off to solve some other problems. Once I'm done with that other task, I'll probably be relegated to the back lines except in an emergency, which is what happened here with the blockage. So if you're ever around Dawncoast, come on by. I'll introduce you to Eliot. I'm going to try and get him a soulhouse. Maybe you can be in his cohort, so that you can go out and do stuff instead of being so chaperoned all the time."

Because if Jessie was in Eliot's cohort, that was just as good as Eliot having Resurrection himself, and Eliot wanted Resurrection. Mark had no idea how Eliot and Jessie would get along, but maybe... maybe it would be okay?

Jessie furrowed his brow, and then he asked, "What's a Cohort? Like... a team?"

"Oh, shi— Ah. Sorry. There's some background information— So, you know I have a soulhouse, right?"

"Uh... I'm not sure about anything right now. I've..." Jessie frowned at the floor, and then he looked to Mark, asking, "*What do you want?*"

Mark would let other people explain cohorts and soulhouses to Jessie. Mark said, "When the world goes to shit, when Dominant pulls his worldwide nuke plan, or whatever it is, I want to be able to count on you to revive everyone."

Jessie paled, and then he puked to the side, emotions overwhelming him. Snot and tears came out and the guy blubbered incomprehensible words. The guards nearby turned and worried a bit, but Mark was there with some Purity/Impurity, cleaning up the mess, and the guards formed a blockade between Jessie, Mark, and the rest of the party.

"It's too much, too much," Jessie blubbered, wiping his face with the back of his hands, guards blocking sightlines. Cade put up a little silencing spell and the noise of the party vanished. Mark was pretty sure

Jessie didn't notice that at all as Jessie curled into himself, saying, "Worldwide nukes?! Is that really what's going to happen? Oh my gods, oh my gods."

He was freaking out, and badly.

"Breathe with me, Jessie. In and out," Mark said, breathing in a Union of Good and Bad.

Jessie shuddered a breath. It was difficult for him, but he uncurled a bit, and Mark gently took his hands and set him up right, but Jessie's lungs refused to fill. He was all out of breath, tears flowing freely.

Mark had a moment of reflection, sitting beside Jessie, who was also a young man, just a year younger than Mark, who had also been thrust into too much power, too young. For Mark, it was being a Tri-Talent. For Jessie, it was being the Resurrection Ghost. Aluatha had targeted both of them. Aluatha had failed to grab Mark. Aluatha had successfully grabbed Jessie, taking him into custody. Mark got to live in the real world for a bit, meeting people, meeting Freyala, meeting Isoko and Eliot and then getting with Sally again, and then there was all the rest. The Hero/Villain Program, learning to forgive Addavein, learning to fight and make his own mark on the world. Jessie only had his father, who was somewhere else right now, and Cade, who was his oversight, assigned to him by the people who had captured him.

They weren't allowing Jessie to gain any real power, except the power they allowed him to have.

As Jessie's emotions tensed his body, making him unable to breathe, to cry, to do anything but sit in his own horror, Mark recalled a moment of his own hopelessness, back in Citadel Freyala, when meeting Holy Mother Julie Garin, and what she had told him back then.

"A wise woman once helped me. Now, I help you," Mark said, breathing in Union, letting his power falter at Jessie's frozen astral body, at his tensed lungs. Mark did not force his way in. He just applied gentle pressure, saying, "Breathe with me, Jessie."

Jessie cracked a little, pain flowing in dark miasma away from his body for just a moment, and then he tensed again. He couldn't breathe at all.

Mark breathed deeply, saying, "We face so much sorrow in our lives. Accepting it and moving on is the only way to get through this or any other day. Breathe in! Breathe out!"

Jessie shuddered, cracking once again, tears flowing strongly. And then his emotions cracked and the Bad trickled out in thick almost-paste, flowing away like disintegrating snot. His lungs un-froze.

“Breathe in! Breathe out!”

Jessie breathed strongly, a horror of darkness flowing from him, out into the world, and Mark threaded that horror into the world, dissipating it back into the dream.

“In! Out! In with the Good, out with the Bad. There is nothing wrong with feeling overwhelmed. Everyone is overwhelmed now and again. But we keep at it. We keep living. We have to, both for ourselves, and for the people who love us, and who we love in turn. Keep breathing now. In and out. Good in, Bad out.”

“I couldn’t save all of them,” Jessie cried, a dam breaking in his mind, gushing darkness flowing away. “*I can’t save all of them.* You can’t ask me to... to revive the world.”

“It’s a miracle you can save *any at all*. You don’t have to be great. You just have to try.”

Jessie quietly said, “I wanted to be a Tamer but they wouldn’t let me ask you for that. They didn’t want me to possibly mind fuck the people I revived— but I would never do that! I wanted... I wanted monster friends. But all the monsters are monsters, aren’t they, and the ones that talk are even worse.”

“They tend to be... But...” This was probably a bad idea, but Mark said, “I could see about getting Goofy Goblin in touch with you?”

Jessie’s eyes lit up... and then he shook his head. He was quiet for a moment, and then he asked, “Do you know where he is?”

“Nope.”

Jessie cracked a smile and then he laughed just once.

It would have been a better moment if it was a private moment, but the guards made it as private as they could.

Mark asked, “So what are you doing sitting by yourself over here?”

“Ah, fuck...” Jessie breathed out, shrugging. “I... I needed to be alone. Some guy... I don’t even blame him for what he said but...” Jessie quietly said, “I couldn’t revive the guy’s brother, and the guy is some high-up dude who... he said he understood, and he talked about his brother being a devout Verdago guy, so he was probably ‘farming rice in heaven’ but... Fuck, man. It just got to me.”

“Life is tough. Bringing people back to life has to be a whole new level of toughness.”

Jessie snorted, laughing once.

Mark smiled a little. “Don’t be a stranger, Jessie. Come on by Dawncoast anytime you want. Eliot will grill you about Resurrection, though.”

Jessie snorted, softly saying, “Yeah, I know... He...” Whatever he was going to say, he decided not to say it. Instead, he said, “Maybe they’ll let me come by! Who knows!”

Mark stood saying, “If you want me to break you out of here, keep in mind that I’ll only be breaking you out to take you to Dawncoast. I’m still a part of Aluatha for the next few years, and especially for the rest of the war.”

Jessie stood saying, “Ha! Yeah...”

Maybe he wanted to say something else, but he decided not to.

Mark left it at that.

Soon Mark was flying through the sky with Isoko, back to Wandering Castle.

Isoko asked, “So Jessie as a backup world revival, huh?”

“It’s the longest shot,” Mark said, putting a lot of meaning into that small phrase.

Isoko just nodded a little, her mind flowing away, toward her home, still about 20 kilometers away.

Mark changed the subject, asking, “Are you ready to go back to the compound?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be!”

Mark and Isoko both knew she was lying, but... it was what it was. Mark asked, "So you, uh, want to stay home when I go to the People maybe... two days from now? Not sure."

The eldritch antimeme of the Picory people made Isoko say, "You shouldn't go down there, either. The goblins might come back to the Greendearth mountains and no one wants that."

... Mark moved on, trying to be cheerful, saying, "So about that old guy! Did you know him?"

Isoko was already excited before Mark even finished the question/comment, saying, "Oh my Freyala, Mark! You should know *Councilor Umeda Unkei!* The guy practically invented the concept of modern day superheroes— Okay. Not 'invented', but he absolutely mainstreamed them here in New Tokyo. He's the reason Crystal Tower exists at all! He's like, the biggest supporter of superheroes in the entire Two Worlds!"

Mark suddenly stopped in the air, feeling like the world had fallen out from underneath him.

He gasped, "Oh my gods."

"Yes!" Isoko said, laughing now, as she circled in front of him. With a wide smile she said, "And I got to talk in front of him! I could barely hold it together! You felt their vectors, right? I felt like I was going to crack and start confessing how I stole a soda when I was 10 and beat up a girl on the playground every other day for a month back in grade school."

Mark had a surreal moment, saying, "I thought they felt like ice picks, ready to break open everyone around them." Mark shuddered. "And before that Stone felt like an uncle, or something almost warm."

Isoko giggled. "I got to talk a bit with Umeda after we left early. He's going to un-blacklist us from the HVP."

"You did? Awesome!" Mark said, being enthusiastic for Isoko.

"He wants us to do a bunch of promos for a bunch of stuff." Isoko waved a hand, brushing away the conversation, saying, "It's a whole *big thing* and I'm *so glad* we came here, Mark."

Mark easily agreed to that, saying, "Me, too." He started flying again— "Councilor Umeda is something like 140 years old!"

“Yup!” Isoko readily guessed Mark’s question, almost teasing him as she asked, “You’re wondering why he’s still old, right? A guy that powerful has to know people, yeah?”

“Well yeah! That’s exactly it.”

Isoko grinned. “He did get younger in the 2000s, but they called him back to the Diet and he didn’t want to go, but he went anyway! They keep telling him to take the True Healer offering, but he knows that if he does he’ll truly never be able to leave office. He famously complained that the only way New Tokyo would allow him to leave the Upper House was in a casket.” She added, “He’s still as sharp as an adamantite blade, too, so I feel good voting for him again.”

“I guess so... So what did you think of Stone?”

Isoko glided alongside Mark, saying, “He was focused on that room with us because Umeda and you were both there, but his Powers— He’s a seer now, first of all. He was inside every soldier in that room, all of them connected by a subtle thread even more diffuse than my Sky Shaper. Sort of like how you described the Witches’ Welcome to us.”

Mark hmm’d, thinking back to the talk. And then he shrugged. “All I felt was a library of ten thousand minds inside of his own, each of them as sharp as Umeda. Makes me a lot more confident about the war.”

“Oh for sure! Absolutely,” Isoko said, softly smiling beside Mark.

And then Wandering Castle loomed on the horizon, just ahead, and Isoko tensed. Mark reached out and took her hand. Isoko smiled brightly and squeezed his hand. She looked confident on the outside, but inside she was scared.

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At 2 AM Mark landed with Isoko in the center courtyard of the massive compound that was Wandering Castle.

The place was different from before, emotionally.

It was late, for one, so the whole place was on night crew, which meant only a few people were awake. It was also a few days after breaking the blockade, after the fighting. More importantly, Mark had Skilled Chimiko, Isoko's Mother, with Healthy Body a few days ago. That seemed to make a world of difference in everything that happened from that moment forward.

Mark was present for the series of events that happened after they landed, but he was not the focus, which was a little strange for him but also a welcome reprieve.

Aeri Kanno woke with a start when Isoko touched down, Wandering Sage's vector flickering through the sky and sending a tiny breeze through the main courtyard. A pair of guys responded to that flicker, coming out of a side building, both of them known to Isoko, but they weren't fully Japanese. They had sand-brown hair and one was a bit older than the other. Mark imagined they were partially Daihoonian.

Isoko introduced them, saying, "Mark, this is Naozane and Nicholas."

"Howdy, Mark! You can call me Nick," Nick said.

Naozane said to Mark, "A pleasure to meet you, and to know that our cousin is safe with you."

"Not too safe!" Isoko said, grinning a little— Her face fell. "Oh. Mom's up, too, huh?"

Nick excitedly said, "Aunt Chimiko is different, Isoko."

Isoko put on a pleasant face. "I am glad to be home, for as much as time would allow."

"Oh please," Nick said, almost scoffing. "She got back into sushi and she's been prepping for you to come back home for days now."

"What?" Isoko asked, more surprised than actually asking a question. "She's making sushi again?"

Naozane said, "She has prime cuts on storage, waiting for you to— Ah. Here's grandmother."

Aeri Kanno settled down from the sky, onto the stone of the courtyard, smiling brightly, white hair in a quick bun. Bits of white hair stuck out of her bun while her nightgown flowed around her like ethereal mist as she rushed Isoko and took her into her arms, speaking soft joys in quiet ways.

Isoko responded similarly quietly, first with disbelief, and then with questions that were answered with similar disbelief, but in positive ways.

And then Isoko's mother appeared beyond a large, open doorway, wearing an apron over her outfit, her vector as warm as the sun as she said, "If you two are not hungry right now, I can save it for later, but I dearly wish to make you a nice meal."

Isoko briefly looked to Mark—

"I can eat," Mark said.

With happy confusion, Isoko told her mother, "We would be delighted, Mother."

Aeri Kanno rapidly told the cousins Nick and Naozane, "Help Mark get some clothes. Show him around, and to the baths. Just a clean up." She told Mark, "The meal will be ready in an hour."

Mark decided to go along with it.

Soon Mark had taken a neat shower and then he relaxed into a nice spring, hot water flowing into shallow pools, shooting the shit with Naozane and Nick, who were 25 and 28, and brothers. Small fountains bubbled heated water down rocky surfaces. The air was steamy, and the sky overhead was open to the brilliant night. The two sand-hair cousins spoke of how they were from Rocktower, with the other half of the family that ended up on Daihoon, as descended from Aeri's father, Nori Kanno, and how they were technically low nobility.

"Oraka is our family name," Nick said, lounging in the hot baths near Mark.

"Rather distant from the Rocktowers and the Stoners, but the Stoners are our neighbors down the road," Naozane said, and then he corrected himself, "*Were* our neighbors. Father likely still rolls in those circles, but we haven't been on Daihoon in years."

“We were discharged from the army due to injury. Had to come to New Tokyo to get a proper healer, and we stayed.”

Naozane showed off his left leg, and there was a scar like a spread of long-healed cuts down his entire left side. “It was a monster called a glasser, an obsidian variety. We lost four guys to the crystallization.”

“That’s a serious injury if they didn’t have healers capable of removing the issue,” Mark said. “Mind if I try healing it?”

Naozane suddenly sat back down in the waters, saying, “No no. Thank you, but no.”

“You can try healing mine!” Nick said, smirking at his brother.

Naozane quietly snipped at Nick, “Don’t be a bother.”

“It’s no bother at all,” Mark said, Unioning with Good and Bad, to start, black veins pumping into the air around him, and into the water. He threaded it all into Elsewhere, thought, like normal, so the water remained clean. “We’ll start with this.”

The brothers relaxed a little, feeling Mark doing something.

Mark continued to heal them as he made small talk, asking, “Do you guys know Devo Stone? Or is that a different family?”

“We heard about him...” Nick paused a little, relaxing a bit more, and then he grinned a bit. He was feeling better. “That feels better than the bath.”

“Thank you, Mark,” Naozane said, glaring at Nick very slightly as though in warning, and then he answered, “We heard about General Stone. Newly promoted. The Stoners are not the Stones, though. The Stones *were* a nuanced family of Strategists; which was the backbone of their noble obligation. So they’ve been leaders in wartime for 200 years. Devout Imperialists, too.”

“They’re not *that* Imperialist,” Nick countered.

“They’re Imperialist now,” Naozane said.

Mark smiled a little bit, saying, “They’re with Walaria, for sure, so they’re probably as Imperialist as they get.”

Nick laughed. “It’s so cool that you’re so famous! Pedro said you were a cool guy, and you are!”

Naozane added, “Have you been to Rocktower yet? I know Pedro and Joey invited you there, but they would smack me if I didn’t reiterate the invitation.”

“I almost saw them at the Winter Ball, but then stuff happened. I think Isoko and the others got to visit them when they were there.”

Nick and Naozane were a little serious at the mention of the Winter Ball.

Naozane asked, “It was bad?”

Mark said, “Jessie was there able to Resurrect people, so it wasn’t that bad. But yes, it was bad.”

“The elders always spoke of how Okuana was before the Reveal,” Naozane said, “They spoke of treacherous evils, and how all of his people were Mind Controlled into subservience. How true is the Mind Control?”

“Vaguely true, as far as I’ve seen,” Mark said, switching through his Unions of full healing as he spoke. He had already gone from Cardio Health and Decay to Bone Integrity and Decay, for Decay was a rather great secondary option for general unwelcome bad health, and now he was all the way up to the musculoskeletal systems, starting with Marrow Health and Decay, heading into Bone Integrity and Decay. As he did that, Mark said, “Mind Control doesn’t last forever, though, but what does last forever is upbringing, and so Dominant employs Mind Control strategically in his troops, making sure the whole organization moves in proper ways, while using propaganda broadcasts and reports to control most of the normal populace in his cities. I actually pulled out a Mind Control from someone in the blockade, along with a bunch of other heavily restricted Powers, so the blockade was absolutely being goaded into doing what they did. They still did it, though.”

Nick and Naozane both paled a little.

Nick changed the subject, asking, “Do you go to tournaments? Neither Naozane or I are in the army anymore, but we still sign up for the tournaments in our weight classes.”

“They have Brawny Battle Tuesdays at Dawncoast,” Mark said, smiling. “Those are always fun. I used to go to them and get knocked out at the beginning, back before I evolved my Healthy Body. What weight class were you guys in?”

Nick got all enthusiastic about the tournaments around here and they talked for a good half hour about the ‘low tier battles’ because they were ‘always so much more interesting than the high tier battles’.

“I like the mid tiers the best,” Mark said, “That way you get to see people do stuff instead of just watching two guys pummel each other.”

“But the pummeling is all technique and learning! It’s not just one guy getting in a lucky punch in a good way.”

“That always happens, though. At the mid tier they can take a few good punches.”

They would have gotten into it deeper but Isoko’s father, Hokichi, stepped out onto the deck beside the hot springs, saying, “Dinner is about ready. I have gathered clothes for you, since I believe my nephews forgot.”

“Oh shit,” Naozane said, standing up, flushed with embarrassment. “We lost track of...” He paused and looked at his left side, which was completely healed. “Oh. It doesn’t catch anymore.”

“Look at how white you are!” Nick said, laughing.

“You’re white, too,” Naozane said, looking down at Nick.

Nick paused, and then he stood up, looked down at himself, and laughed. “Now I know why you’re also so white, Mark, even though you’re fighting nude out there all the time!”

Mark smiled a little, standing up as he said, “Sometimes I miss my tan.”

And then they rinsed off, the cousins marveling at their healed bodies, talking about how it should have taken a soulhealer to fix them, but Mark had healed them anyway. Mark put on a nice robe, saying how with enough nuanced healing, most bodies healed just fine. The soul would catch up later, and it probably already had.

Dinner was more like a very early breakfast, taken at 4 AM and in a cozy room with a long table and pillows on the floor, beside the table. Everyone who could be awake was awake, meaning about 15 people.

Isoko was at the middle of the table, happily sitting next to her mother before the meal got served, and telling Mark to sit next to her.

Chimiko's pleasant face was like a balm on Isoko's heart, and especially when she got up and started placing plates of sushi on the table and telling everyone not to be so formal about it. It was a large family gathering of 15 people, and she said she was still rusty at all of this. But from what Mark was looking at, from all the little bits of fresh, red fish, and white rice, and green seaweed, all cut and arranged in neat little rows, Mark would have said that they had ordered catering. But no; this was a home made meal.

"I hope my meager skills are adequate to the moment," Chimiko said, as she sat down across from Mark and Isoko.

Her husband, Hokichi, sat next to her and softly replied, "I know they are."

There was a real love there.

Isoko reached over and grabbed Mark's hand, holding him tight for just a moment.

Mark got to sit near the middle of the long table with Isoko, with everyone talking about a whole lot of stuff, all around them. Nick spoke of a tournament happening in a week. Isoko's aunt Ome spoke of a new Hero/Villian Program venture with Isoko and the Wandering Clan, now that she wasn't blacklisted from the HVP, and then Aeri announced that they were thinking of unbanning her, too.

"For true, Mother?" Chimiko said.

Ome asked, "They're really going to allow it?"

Aeri smiled a little, looking at Isoko, saying, "Apparently, our little Isoko here got to talk with Councilor Umeda directly today, so it might be happening. The *whole Clan* including our Daihoon cousins might get a show soon." With the attitude of a diva, showing Mark where Isoko got it from, Aeri added, "But I will have it center around me, of course."

Gasps and exclamations of surprise and congratulations echoed in the dining room.

And then Aeri told them all, “Ach! Enough about this old woman. Let’s talk about Isoko’s look right after the blockade. Tit cups and a strapless thong is quite provocative, young lady.”

Isoko’s face turned a little red, but she rapidly decided, “It was a good look!”

Hokichi did not approve, saying, “It was too much, Isoko.”

Isoko tossed her hair and exaggeratedly said, “I’ve already got a figurine deal lined up. I bet they’re going to sell out within a day.”

Chimiko laughed, and everyone was surprised at that, at the true joy in her mirth.

Hokichi said, “We’re *not* putting *that one* in the display room.”

This only caused Chimiko to laugh more.

It was a fantastic meal, and even better company. Sake was the drink of choice, and it got passed around a lot, while the whole family ate through all of the sushi. Chimiko readily spoke of having more she could make, so she made some more to order, asking first what Mark liked.

Mark said, “I liked the spicy tuna.”

“Always a good choice! That’s one of the most popular ones overseas, but not so much here.”

Nick teased, “At least you didn’t say ‘*California* roll’.”

Chimiko happily countered, “I can make those, too!”

It was a really good meal.

It was a good night.

With the sun having risen on the eastern horizon and all the world bright with a new day, Mark lay down with Isoko in her bed, but not too close. Just beside her. Birds tweeted outside, and her cats mosed

on in to lay between them. Mark and Isoko faced each other, at first, with Isoko smiling a lot, and Mark also feeling something like true joy. The cats started purring as they curled up with Isoko. She petted one of them; Mark didn't recall the name.

Isoko said, "Healthy Body worked for Mom. It might work for Lola, too."

Mark felt tears in his eyes that Isoko was thinking about him, even though he was thinking about her. Mark softly said, "I didn't think it would but... I'm glad it did."

"She actively didn't accept it though, right?"

"I think the trauma was too close but... That's the best time to heal it. I'm not sure why she didn't want me to help her... I don't know— Oh. Uh. Can you tell your cousins that I'll Skill them if they want it? I think they were either afraid to ask or they were forbidden from asking. We didn't talk about Powers at all, but we got close... What are their Powers?"

Isoko smirked. "Grandma told them not to ask you for Powers but I'm surprised they actually followed that ruling. Nick especially. But I'll tell them."

"Okay, good," Mark said.

Isoko grinned a little, happy. Something weighed on her mind; probably a hundred different things. Mostly, though, she was happy.

... But something weighed on Mark's mind, and so he had to ask, "Do you think it's the right decision to try to go slow with the war?"

"... Oh, uh..." Isoko blanked, and then she decided to say, "I don't know. The General and others would know better, and it's going to be an evolving situation, right? All I know is that I don't want to be in a war like that ever again... But I think I will be, and so I have to be ready for it."

She had expected a different topic. Mark had no idea what that other topic was, but...

Mark said, "Same."

Silence.

Staring.

And then Isoko said, "I love you, Mark. Good night!" And then she rapidly turned away and pretended to sleep, disturbing the cats just a little. They mewed. Isoko added, "Now knock us out! I need my beauty sleep for the camera."

Mark felt all sorts of amazing. He softly replied, "I love you too, Isoko."

And then he Unioned with Sleepiness and Wakefulness, and both of them drifted off to slumber.