

Isoko drifted in a dream of light and color and wind. She flowed on storms. She dove into tidal clouds. She lifted her arms and the world twisted into a hurricane, and then she rode that hurricane like it was a surfboard blender set upon the land, turning mountains to debris and oceans to droplets.

Lightning crackled, and Isoko rode the lightning.

Isoko cackled, like Grandma, and the world cracked at her laughter, detonating into fire and driving rain that Isoko ran across, escaping destruction and bringing destruction with her. And finally, Isoko formed a wrap of wind and lightning, creating a shield that she rode back into the endless storm, to shatter that storm in a great detonation of air and shock. And then the ride was done.

Isoko stood upon silver winds under a clear blue heaven of her own making, suspended in a great canyon of fluffy white clouds.

Everything was beautiful.

Nothing was wrong.

Tears of joy streamed down Isoko's platinum face and the world rained tears of joy with her, onto her Full Platinum body, onto her reflection of the sky.

A golden glow intruded.

The storm had not changed nor would it change, according to Eliot's various machines, of which Quark was using to forecast the weather. Mark could tell the stormy sky would never change, even without mechanical verification.

The sky roiled with wind and very little rain. Clouds buffeted Mark, and Mark held on to the deck with easy caltrops. Most others would be scattered to the wind right now, and Eliot had needed to move the Dreadnought so that it pointed *into* the storm, allowing the ship to take a better angle into the wind. But Mark was fine. The world touched him, and he broke the world if it needed breaking.

None of the storm even thought about touching Isoko.

She remained anchored in the air, more Full Platinum than the 'glowing prismatic' thing she had been doing, after exposure to Sleipnir's prismatic mana heart. Isoko's vector was still pointed inward, so Mark didn't know what was happening with her exactly, but the effects of her second Awakening were already changing how her Powers presented.

Looking at her kinda reminded Mark of an egg without a shell. Or maybe like a jellyfish.

Her central body was firm, and she clearly had a Sky-Shaper-like thing going on because there were little silver sparkles in the air, reaching out into the storm and trailing into the breeze. That was not normal. Mark knew what Sky Shaper's looked like, and Isoko's control over her surroundings was not like any Sky Shaper control Mark had ever seen before.

Lee, the Sky Shaper back at the settlement, had a softness about him. You couldn't tell where his control over the sky began or ended, unless he was actively using his power, and even then his Sky Shaper control was more like directional vectors he put into large sections of the air than any real control. Nothing precise.

That was a known issue with Sky Shapers and other big powers, like Land Shaper and Sea Shaper.

Macro control; that's what it was called. Great for big fights. Bad for small fights.

Platinum Body and Union were precise Powers.

So Isoko was undergoing a big change, and she would likely have issues going forward.

Mark could see that change happening right now, in real time.

Isoko was gaining a sort of 'largeness'. She was like drops of food coloring diffusing into a whole lot of water, but it wasn't fully diffusing. Weird glittery strands scattered in the air... but not really like strands, actually. More like troughs or crests in the ocean. Isoko herself was nestled into a silvery, glowing air, like a woman resting atop the crest of a wave.

That cresting wave prevented all outside actions from really moving her, which made Mark wonder about asphyxiation from lack of moving air. Isoko had almost injured herself in that way, before, that first time she tried Altering for Wind Shaper under Elaria Valen's tutelage. But, no. Isoko was breathing just fine, and in fact, every breath she took seemed to expand the silver-cresting glitter of her jellyfish-like astral body further into the sky beyond.

Her Power had been concentrated, and now it was diffusing.

It was kinda relaxing to watch her breathe.

Mark kept his eyes on the world, too, of course, keeping watch for kaiju and other monsters. But the only things to fly by in the last hour were some manta rays, each the size of a house. They had flowed on the storm, like they were flying through the ocean. It had been a little magical, honestly. Mark wished Isoko could have seen it, but they had taken pictures. Eliot was documenting everything.

Isoko remained asleep.

Mark wondered what the others were thinking about Isoko.

Mark said to Quark, and to everyone else on the comms, "So I've seen a *lot* of Powers, and looking at Isoko's soft silver waves in the world... I'm not sure what that is. Could it be her Platinum Body's Tactile Telekinesis and Sky Shaper at the same time? There's some Union in there, too, but it's so subtle I can barely feel it. She doesn't seem to be waking up as fast as expected, though... How long is this supposed to take?"

Lola said, "I'll come up and look. One minute."

Tartu was down in the bowels of the ship, working on something with Andria. He spoke up, "Based on reliable histories of the *Tutorial*, most people take between 10 to 30 minutes from finishing the Tutorial to coming back to Earth or Daihoon. Larger Skills take more. I have no idea what 'bathing in kaiju prismatic mana' does to a person besides what Walaria told us would happen; power ups for everyone involved."

"I think I took an hour in the Tutorial," Mark said, "But that was because Malaqua *specifically* held me back to talk to me, and to delay putting me out right next to Addavein. It's already been two hours for Isoko."

"... Well maybe Freyala is talking to her?" Tartu asked, his vector suddenly focused on the conversation.

David and Lola got real interested, too.

Mark looked at Isoko as best he could, to see if there were any gold glows in her vector. "... I don't see any gold glows. It's all silver."

David suddenly stood beside Mark in the driving rain, getting soaked right alongside him, saying, "I don't see any touch of Freyala."

Mark put out a black umbrella to shield David from the rain and wind as he said, "It looks like it's settling down, right?"

Lola was currently racing up the stairs of the forecastle. She burst out of the doors and walked over, composing herself as much as she could after running as fast as she could. Mark shielded her from the rain, too, and she curtsied at him, briefly, as she stepped to Mark's other side, to regard Isoko.

Lola watched for a while before she said, "The prismatic glow is lessening. How much less, Quark?"

Quark said, "20% of the original radiance."

“Ah! Quite a bit less than I imagined.” Lola watched— Her eyebrow went up, and then she stepped closer — she stopped herself. “Curious.”

“What?” Mark asked.

“I’m usually rather good at discerning Powers,” Lola said, “But the exact nature of this assortment of Powers eludes me... It could simply be a tug-of-war between Platinum Body and whatever level of Wind Shaper she has now acquired... What’s the timetable on the scanner, Mister Cybersong?”

Eliot spoke up, “It’s ready. Tartu has to activate it, though.”

Something about that sounded odd to Mark.

Mark asked, “Why does he have to activate it?”

Tartu answered, “It’s more of a System call than a proper scanner so I have to put up some domains to heighten the depth of the scan.”

“... You can do a System call?” Mark asked, “With *the System*?”

“Sure,” Tartu said.

“Really?”

“It’s not usually done, but... yes? What’s the problem?”

Mark asked, “Can we actually *interact* with the System outside of the Tutorial?”

Tartu scoffed. “We’ve been interacting with the System on Daihoon for thousands of years, Mark, back when all we knew was the Thresher. The tech from Earth just makes it a whole lot easier.”

“Well I never knew that— No wait... Sacrificing goats and entrails reading. Someone said that... I think.” Mark asked, “Is that all a scanner is?”

“... Kinda?” Tartu said, “Those metal contraptions we call scanners are ‘sacrificing goats and entrails reading’ but without the sacrifice and goat shit, and some are a whole lot better than others. Eliot and I made one of the upper-middle ones, and I *can* scan Isoko right now. We can scan anything within my range and within range of the ship, actually. But I’m not chancing getting near her and the scanner won’t work correctly until she’s closer to fully Awakening. So we wait.”

Mark nodded a little, accepting that answer. He glanced backward at Derek, coming up to stand in the forecastle, far behind everyone else. Mark wondered if he wanted to stand with the three of them, and so he angled his head and gestured for him to get up there.

Derek shook his head.

Mark bobbed in the air and then turned back to face Isoko. He asked Lola, “Should I try Unioning with Isoko?”

Lola shook her head. “No no. We can stand here, waiting. I don’t think she’ll be cooking for much longer —”

A golden glow entered the world.

Lola suddenly gasped.

Freyala stepped down onto the deck of the ship, a golden light upon the world. She stood like a golden light at the edge of Isoko’s silver waves, regarding the young woman.

David and Lola suddenly stood much, much prouder. Derek gasped in shock back by the forecastle.

... Mark put up a wind and rain shield at Freyala’s back, too.

Freyala gave a little nod toward Mark, and then she went back to looking at Isoko—

“She’ll be dangerous,” Freyala said, without looking at anyone. “But I think she’s proven herself and we need all the help we can get. If nothing else, several good backups are necessary.”

David and Lola tensed.

Mark barely heard it as Derek whispered/shuddered a quiet ‘holy fuck’.

They dared not speak.

Mark dared.

Mark asked, “What do you mean? Backups?”

Freyala said, “Gods can die; as they have in the past, as they will in the future. If you’re aiming big then there will be collateral damage, and no one knows how deep or far that damage will go.” She turned and looked at Mark. “But sometimes some damages must be done. Good luck.”

And then Freyala vanished into the silver waves in the air, like a sand castle vanishing under water.

Gold shimmered and trailed away.

Mark, Lola, David, and Derek back there, all kinda just watched—

The air tensed.

Isoko’s silver waves crashed against the world as she stirred, shockwaves cracking the wood underneath her floating body. Mark barely registered the danger, but Lola suddenly panicked. Mark flickered adamantium into the path of the shockwave, encapsulating himself, David, and Lola. Derek was too far back to be hit easily. The shockwave passed around the party.

Mark pulled the adamantium barrier away and Isoko stumbled out of the air, a platinum foot touching down on the deck of the Dreadnought and platinuming the nearest 50 meters of ship with her touch.

Shockwaves in the air rippled through the deck, the wood crackled, and Isoko suddenly stopped, eyes widening at the ground, realizing what she was doing. The entire deck was corroded with splinters.

Isoko instantly pulled her foot back into the air and the platinum waves returned to the air, making her look once again like some sort of wave machine in a swimming pool, and also kinda like a jellyfish.

Derek was slightly injured.

Lola was bleeding from the face, ears, and body, but Mark was already healing her strongly. She was fine, and she cleansed herself to remove the blood.

Derek had popped back there, but he was fine further down in the ship.

Lola smiled and wiped away tears of happiness, lost to the rain, saying, "Congratulations, young lady."

David said, "Congrats, Isoko."

Mark smiled wide and teased, "Why ya always gotta be nude, Isoko!"

Isoko scoffed. "Fuck you too, buddy!"

Mark laughed.

Isoko radiated pure happiness, and also platinum shockwaves—

"Take it away from the ship, Isoko!" Eliot said, "You're breaking my deck!"

Isoko laughed even happier and then she took off, into the sky, propelled on glittering platinum air, right up into the storm—

And then Isoko truly opened up, her platinum waves dispersing like smoke in a hurricane, touching the sky for the nearest several kilometers, breaking the storm.

Clouds tumbled rain and turned to mist and wind.

Lightning stilled.

The sun shone.

And Isoko floated, arms spread wide, legs together, embracing the world and creating a wide, blue heaven of her own making.

Mark zipped up there, rotor spinning hard as Eliot repaired the ship and everyone back there started talking about Freyala's latest appearance. Isoko noticed Mark through a unionsense, long before he reached her, and she tensed the air around him with a barely-there platinum glow that soon faded. But the effects remained.

Mark barely had to lift himself up because the wind was working with him, and soon he floated beside Isoko, smiling, saying, "Congrats!"

Isoko crashed into him, full platinum and weighing about 1,500 kilos herself, but still a lot less than him. She hugged him tightly, saying, "Thank you."

Mark easily held on to Isoko, saying, "You're welcome."

Isoko breathed against his chest for a moment, the wind holding them up just like his rotor. There was no storm right here. Just them and a gentle breeze from below.

Isoko confessed, "Freyala talked to me."

"She appeared to all of us before you woke."

Isoko nodded against Mark's chest. She didn't say anything else.

Mark continued, "She said stuff about how gods can die, and collateral damage, and how sometimes damage must be done anyway."

"... Yeah. She said some of that..."

Mark could tell that Freyala had told Isoko more than the rest of them, and Isoko knew that Mark knew that, too, but she didn't say anything else and Mark did not press her.

Mark hugged her. "Wanna get scanned? Eliot and Tartu have it ready."

"I can already tell what most of it is," Isoko said, letting go. She floated away and held the sky at bay, saying, "It's macro-sized Power, across the board. I think I have the full Union, too, but it's not how it was. It's... kinda spread out."

Mark hummed, then said, "So first off: Amazing. Thought some of that might happen, especially with Freyala appearing. But also: Everyone is shit with Union to start with, so you need to practice more. I bet Lola can give you all sorts of tips, and there have to be some Sky Shaper-level Union users out there. You can talk to them. And if you can't *ever* do fine control, then I'll give you a big 'ol adamantium blade to use while you zip across the sky, cutting through kaiju, and that should help you get good points across." Mark smiled, adding, "I did promise you a Wind Sword of Empire, after all."

Isoko teared up and started crying. Happy, sad, worried, exhausted, thrilled. So many emotions, all at once, from a thousand directions in her life, crashed into Isoko and left her a crying mess. Mark kept hugging her, and she hugged him for a long while, too.

Eventually Mark set her down on a bed of adamantium, and she kinda just collapsed with a soul-deep exhaustion that was deeper than she thought possible. Her Power collapsed inward when she finally nodded off, for real, and then she began to radiate silver waves again, in time with her breathing. The storm returned but Isoko remained a calm spot in the rain, clouds, and wind.

Eliot made a little room for her on the deck, at the front of the ship, and Mark set her in that bed. Or at least he tried. Isoko floated above the bed, above the solid ground of the deck, and so Mark just put her in the room, and that was good enough... maybe.

It turned out that putting her into a contained room was exactly good enough, because as soon as Isoko wasn't exposed to the sky, she started to calm. Her Full Platinum faded, and she gently lowered into her bed, grabbing at her pillow sleepily and then pulling on her covers, tighter. She slept, and the storm outside of her hut on the deck returned, raging against the hull of the ship. It was not quiet.

Isoko was comforted by that noise.

Tartu stood about 20 meters away, with Mark, holding on to rain jacket and trying to talk over the wind, "We should scan her now!"

"We can't do that!" Mark said, almost scoffing. "We can't take that moment away from her!"

Tartu countered, "I'm not sticking around while she's awake and active! I wouldn't stick around *you* during a decouple ritual, either! It's basic safety!"

"... Okay fine... I guess? Ugh... I don't..." Mark frowned, exaggerated, and said, "Okay!"

Tartu whipped out a bubble of a Domain around Isoko, inside of her wooden cabin, and then he retreated fast, racing down an anti-wind Domain that barely functioned in the storm, saying, "Eliot's got the rest!"

Soon, the scan came through Quark.

Mark waited until Lola, David, and Derek were back to read it, though.

They all read it together.

Body, Platinum Body: 092

Shaper, Sky: 092

Mind: 92

Natural, Union: 092

Soul: 92

Arch: 92

Estimated astral body strength: 92%

The little 0s in front of Body, Shaper, and Natural, meant that those were Isoko's Powers, and not grafted on. She was a full and complete Tri-Talent, now.

Lola gasped, putting a hand over her mouth, joy overflowing. "Oh, *Isoko*."

David chuckled and then laughed. He disappeared into the ship for a bit and then came right back out, carrying some small glass bottles with clear liquid that he handed out, saying, "I knew I needed to save some of that alcohol from that monkey brew layer!"

Derek stood in the back, but David had him come forward, too, saying he was a paladin of Freyala as well. Soon, David slapped a bottle of alcohol into Derek's hand, too.

They all raised a small bottle, and said, "Cheers!"

They took swigs, and David downed it like a man. Derek shuddered and laughed. Lola was apparently made of sterner stuff than just about anyone, because she drank it like it was water. Mark laughed at that, even as he sipped his drink, tasting it but not really feeling it.

Mark smiled, saying, “Awesome.”

Repairs took a little while. During that time, everyone had small discussions on whether to move or not, since Isoko was still asleep. Soon, everyone who could put their mana into the Storm Prism to see if any targets were nearby, while Quark, David, Derek, and anyone who wanted to, tried figuring out the map to Kabberjaw that Elkatracks had left them.

“Because we’re going to Kabberjaw next, right?” Eliot asked.

“Yes,” Mark said. “Isoko will be awake and capable of doing something at the scale of dragons, if not directly being able to kill one, so I think we can handle Kabberjaw now.”

Tartu said, “There will be a fight when we get there. Maybe not an actual fight, but at least a political one, about poaching.”

“Yeah, and I’ll tell them to suck it,” Mark simply said.

“As long as you can back it up with power, then that might be for the best, considering your first threat was a never-ending blood feud if they should touch us,” Tartu said, “Which I am thankful for, by the way. Don’t think I said that yet.”

Eliot instantly teased, “He could have gone further”

Sally said, “If dragons kill me then I want a pile of dragon skulls for a gravestone, Mark.”

Mark grinned. “Duly noted.”

Conversations moved on to prismatic mana targets.

Eliot and Sally were still working on mana manifestation, so they got nothing.

Tartu’s target was 32,000 kilometers away, which surprised everyone.

“Why so far?” Mark asked.

“Endless Daihoon is all the way to the moon and forms Daihoon’s ‘magnetosphere’, which is not a magnetosphere at all but it is analogous to Earth’s magnetosphere, and that’s fucking *huge*, Mark,” Tartu said.

“... Well yeah. I guess— Second question! Why were all of our targets only 10,000 kilometers away— Wait.” Mark winced. “I know the answer already. It’s because those were just the *closest ones*.”

“Correct,” Tartu said. “You all probably have more targets further out.”

Eliot asked, “Could we adjust the Storm Prism to locate *all* of the targets and then I can do some maths to rank them by power to see which ones are best?”

“... I mean...” Tartu hummed, then said, “Theoretically... Andria?”

“I have no idea,” Andria said.

Tartu hummed, and then said, “Probably gonna run into the points-at-the-moon problem, but want to try it anyway?”

“Yes,” Eliot said.

They got to working on that, eating up another hour.

It turned out to be a much, much harder problem than either Tartu or Eliot or Andria expected it to be, because the ‘points at the moon’ problem was indeed the problem.

Andria’s target was 10,500 kilometers away.

Mark’s target was 8,700 kilometers in the very other direction.

Kabberjaw, meanwhile, was only 2,500 kilometers ‘that way’, toward Daihoon, and maybe, like... ‘east-ish’? Mark was pretty sure Endless Daihoon didn’t have a real ‘north’ or ‘south’ so he wasn’t sure how to describe any particular direction to anyone. But they had a map and they knew how to navigate the dreamlands at least a little, and so after a small discussion about ‘do we want to piss off the dragons more, or not’, and deciding that ‘not’ was the best answer, they got flying in ‘that direction’, toward Kabberjaw.

Mark soon got into a deep, philosophical discussion with Tartu about the nature of ‘north’ and ‘south’ and Endless Daihoon, as Mark prowled the edges of the ship, looking into the storm for threats.

“How can you even say that the Northern Crossing is ‘north’, though?” Mark asked. “There’s no magnetic force about it.”

“What would *you* call it then, *Tyrant King*?”

“I’d say it’s more ‘West’, but only when facing certain directions. East could be the Southern Crossing. North is obviously the moon, and south is the planet.”

Tartu scoffed. And then he smarmily said, “Point out the moon or the land in the sky, please.”

Mark, undaunted, said, “I can’t see magnetic north or south, either, but you’re the ones who are making the compasses, not me!”

Tartu ripped into Mark, saying, “You have no idea what you’re talking about—”

The world stilled and the storm shivered as Isoko woke up in her little house, which promptly exploded with a burst of silver power.

“Isoko’s awake again,” Mark said.

Isoko, hovering above the deck and Full Platinum again, stared at the destruction she had wrought against the Dreadnought... And then she looked over to Mark, a few hundred meters away, and called out, “You left me alone on the deck!? And naked?!”

With a grin in his voice, Mark called back, “You did that yourself! And after Eliot made a nice little hut for you, too!”

“... Oh shit.” Isoko floated upward and looked out. “Ahh... that debris floating away would be... a hut? Yes. I see it now.”

Mark smiled brightly as he moved toward her, asking, “Wanna see your scanner readout?”

“What?!” Isoko detonated the world again with another shockwave, calling out, “You scanned me while I was asleep?! I didn’t get to see first!”

Mark really, really wanted to throw Tartu under the bus, because Isoko was actually, really upset, so Mark said, “Can you control yourself right now to not lash out? Because Tartu ain’t getting near you while you’re awake. No one is. And Tartu needs to be near you to let the scanner work.”

“... errr.”

“*Can* you turn off Full Platinum right now?”

Isoko paused. And then she pulled back, saying, “One... Second... uhhh.” Isoko dimmed a bit, trying to turn off her Full Platinum, her skin barely turning normal, appearing briefly like tan underneath a thin mirror-like film. But then she lost focus and her body turned Full Platinum again. Wind shocked away from her in spinning, twisting eddies as she looked at her hands, saying, “I can figure it out eventually— Show me my readout!”

Mark gladly showed her.

Isoko gasped and held her chest, the sky clearing completely for kilometers around, everything turning soft and breezy. Eliot was already fixing up the Dreadnought, splinters getting smoothed into the deck.

Isoko teared up again, saying, “Sky Shaper, Full Union, *and* Platinum Body. A Tri-Talent. Holy fucking shit.”

Mark teased, “Almost as good as mine!”

Isoko laughed, and it was a shockwave of platinum pushing against Mark and then cracking the sky with minor lightning. Isoko paused a little, then looked out at lightning dancing through the sky on silver waves. “... So I think I need to learn control.”

“Yes. Lots and lots of control exercises,” Lola said, speaking up on a speaker Eliot had installed near Isoko. “First off, I believe Tartu and the team have a gift of illusionary clothes contained in an adamantium buckle and mithril belt.”

“Oh yeah!” Mark said, watching the ground open up and a little box pop out of a tube in the ground. “I did give over some more adamantium for that.”

Isoko grinned and reached down for the belt—

And it was like a sandblaster reaching down onto wood. The wood disintegrated and the belt went flying.

Isoko desperately scrambled for the belt, but she ended up flying in the other direction, tumbling a few times before she could right herself.

Mark snatched the belt out of the air with a quick bit of adamantium, while Isoko was thoroughly embarrassed. Soon, Mark put the belt on her, too, fighting against her the whole time, until the belt touched her skin. In that moment of contact the belt turned platinum with Isoko’s Tactile Telekinesis and the magical item settled onto her body—

Illusionary clothes popped up onto her body, like a white sun dress with a tan sash, and Isoko chuckled as she swished a hand through the illusionary fabrics.

“Thank you so much, guys!” Isoko said, wholeheartedly.

Eliot had rebuilt the speaker and the floor, so Tartu said, “It’s not your style, I know, but we’re going for a theme here with the team.”

Eliot said, “Sally is also gonna need some illusionary clothes, for sure. Maybe I won’t, though! Hope not. We’re still working on comms, too, but now that we see that the belt works, I’m sure we can make some comms easily enough.”

Mark said, “Maybe everyone needs an AI Familiar, too?”

Isoko said, “I am absolutely NOT ready to have a kid; no offense, Quark.”

“None taken, miss!” Quark responded.

“Moving right along...” Mark said, “Now that Isoko is awake, are we going to Kabberjaw? It’s on a water layer, right?”

Eliot said, “I want to swing by Purple Palace, too. The other one is out of the way now, but Purple Palace is between here and Kabberjaw.”

Isoko asked, “Can we stay in this layer for a while? I want to, uh, be able to walk around and figure out what the fuck I’m doing here.”

“Sure!”

Eliot said, “We got a ways to travel in this layer, anyway.”

And so Mark took his position back on the forecastle of the Dreadnought, and Isoko flew to the front of the ship. She got as far away from everyone else as she could, while remaining on the ship. It was a good nod toward safety, but Isoko was not safe at all right now, and she knew it.

She was quite pretty, though, as she played in the clouds and the storms, brushing them forward or backward, stilling them, churning them into lightning and tornadoes, and also Unioning with the world, bringing in the Good and expelling the Bad. Lola spoke to her from a comm device up there, and eventually that comm device became a hologram floating in the air beside her, and Eliot delivered a little adamantium ear clip that would serve well as actual comms.

After a brief mistake of blowing the bit of adamantium off into the sky, and Mark retrieving it and helping Isoko, put it onto her ear, Isoko had her comms back.

“Eyyyyyy! Welcome back!” Sally said, on Channel 4.

“Missed you, Isoko!” Eliot said.

Derek, Andria, David, and Tartu all gave small welcome-backs.

Mark leaned back on the stone of the forecastle, and teased, “Now you better hurry up and learn everything there is about your new Powers, because I want to go inside and watch a movie!”

Isoko instantly said, “Well go inside then! I got this *handled*.”

Mark scoffed.

Isoko huffed right back at him. “Go!”

“Nahhh.”

Isoko rolled her eyes and then took off flying, higher and higher into the sky, and Mark followed, a lot slower. Just enough to feel her joy, for real, through Union. He kinda really loved her emotions right

now. It made him feel better about everything, too. Soon, Isoko came back, announcing that the sky was clear for kilometers around.

And then, Isoko's lessons shifted to plant growth and whole sections of the Dreadnought suddenly burst into moss and tiny cleaner plants. Some of the stained, prepared wood of the ship even started growing again, branching out into new leaves and new roots. Eliot frantically called for Isoko to stop that right now as he began repairing everything.

"So apparently we need an anti-plant growth shield," Eliot said. "That's my mistake. There are plant kaiju out there and they would have done the same thing."

Sally said, "And we need a kaiju-carry option!"

"Right right. Sleipner won't be the only kaiju to almost fall out of bounds and take Mark and whoever with it," Eliot said.

"When we get the grav crystal at Kabberjaw we can make a hover platform," Tartu said.

"Coming around to the idea of working with dragons?" Isoko asked, teasing.

"I like the idea of dragons-from-Contracts," Sally said, "Can we talk about that again?"

Tartu sighed and said, "Okay, so—"

"Isoko," Lola said, stepping briefly into Channel 4.

"Sorry ma'am!" Isoko said, and then her light went off on Channel 4.

Lola's light went off, too.

Isoko went back to playing with the sky and with Union, in a very macro-sense.

Mark watched all of that as he listened to Tartu and Sally talk of dragons and demon Contracts and why ‘It would never work out!’. Tartu had a lot of the same reasonings against dragons-as-Contracts that he had against dragons themselves, from the facts that dragons simply could not operate at the level of people and thus would always be outside of any well-functioning society, but to hear Sally and Tartu talk about the subject reminded Mark about a lot of things. They were going after that size alteration Power, Titan’s Strength, for Sally, after all.

In a lull in the conversation, Mark asked, “Are there ways to shrink dragons down to people-sized?” He added, “I’m pretty sure that Addavein is looking for such a way right now, just so we’re all clear about that. But I haven’t asked anyone else about that sort of thing yet.”

“Is he, really?” Tartu asked, suddenly deeply interested, and also pissed off.

“Why so pissed off?” Mark asked.

“Because... Ugh. I don’t know anymore. I suppose...” Tartu collected his thoughts, and then said something deeply personal. “If I were like you, and I might be after a prismatic mana power up... *Would* I care about the plights of the little person? Of normal society? Like, I’m not saying you don’t care—”

“Okay good, because I was about to get mad,” Mark said, flippant.

“Anyway,” Tartu said, “If *I* got a major powerup that allowed me to determine *how the world worked...* would I still care as much about lesser people, or would I see them as people to be humored and placated and controlled? Because that’s what rulers do, you know. They give people candy to placate them—I don’t mean actual candy. Earth has a good saying about this. ‘Bread and Circuses’. It’s basically the whole Hero/Villain Program. We give programs to distract from the pain of it all, and if you’re really big in the HVP, then you’re one of the gladiators in the circus, keeping the crowd looking into the theater instead of looking out there at the horrors of the world.

“Which is good, in a lot of senses.

“No one needs to look at horrors all the damned time.

“HVP is hope. HVP is power applied properly. And I really like that. It’s how I can make a difference. I can tell stories that help people live their lives and ignore the fact that they can’t do anything about anything, just like me, because I can’t do anything about either.

“But if I had the power of a *real* superhero... If I had the power to *decide* how the world worked...

“Well. Then it would be *wrong* of me not to use that power on as large of a scale as I could. And once you get to that size... When do you stop seeing people as people?

“And now you’re talking of dragons being human-sized, and trying to relate to humans.

“Is Addavein becoming small like an emperor stepping down from his throne to slum it with the plebs? Because that’s what it seems like to me. All of us on this boat are kinda like plebs rising up and becoming emperors, and... if we’re emperors, then is it even right for us to do HVP anymore? Or should we all be doing... a whole lot more.” Tartu said, “Anyway... Addavein trying to become small kinda ticks me off. Like... Like a demon trying to infiltrate the world. A bunch of power, pretending at being a person, and that’s my ramble for now.”

Mark found himself agreeing with a lot of Tartu’s words, but also... not. And yet, they still resonated. Mark said, “I really do like hanging out with you, Tartu. I never really thought about it that way.”

Tartu felt delighted at that, in a weird sort of way.

And then Mark hit ‘em with the, “But you’re wrong, and emperors should be allowed to do whatever they want as long as they make sure that the coliseum is defended and functioning well.”

“But see! That *is* the goal of the emperor. But if they’re playing among the lessers then they aren’t doing a good job, so there’s a balance—”

“Ugh! ‘Lessers’,” Sally countered, unable to hold back anymore.

And thus began a big political discussion.

Mark mostly waited through the discussion, not really caring to interact with demons-from-Contracts for now, until he found the appropriate place to throw the conversation into another direction. Soon, he found a spot.

“So Doomo tried to assassinate me several times and I wanna know what I should do about that—”

A bunch of things happened kinda all at once.

“Ah, here we go,” Sally said, settling in for A Talk.

Isoko stopped concentrating on the sky and the wind resumed. Mark caught words from Lola’s projection near her, saying that now was a good time for other things, anyway.

David said, “I’m putting the ship in park.”

Tartu took a deep breath, muttering, “*Oh gods—* Okay!” Tartu oriented, stopping whatever he was doing downstairs, and said, “Okay. Yes. Let’s talk about this.”

Eliot, Derek, and Andria all sort of stopped what they were doing. Derek not so much; he could do thousands of things at once.

Mark began again, “Okay, so... Doomo tried to kill me, along with the goblins —which is just what they do so I don’t care about the goblins right now— and some third force, possibly Xerkonan, with the corruption ooze, also tried to kill me. I don’t want to talk about the ooze-incident unless anyone has any new info that might have come out when I was fighting goblins?”

“Nothing that I have heard,” Lola said, “And I have tried to hear a lot.”

That seemed to be the consensus of everyone else.

Tartu brought the conversation back on track, “The only real issue is Doomo’s attempted assassinations.”

“Right, yes,” Mark said, “So I already tried extending a peace offering by saying that Doomo was the one that warned us all about the bad goblin shit coming—which was a lie, but it was one designed as an offering of peace after the first attempted assassination— and then I went and killed goblins, and came back, and *then*—” Mark took a breath. “*Then*, he sent the archmage twins after me again and that white webweave woman with the illusions and shit. They were trying to capture me while simultaneously pretending that they were saving me from a sudden summoning from Addavein, who was already on Daihoon, so he could not possibly summon me, since you have to be on another world to do that.” Mark finished with, “So that last attempt might have just been a concentrated lie, or an opportunity attack of some sort. Was it an assassination? Probably, in the end. But at first it didn’t even look like one, and I am not going to treat it like anything other than what it could have been, which was yet another assassination attempt.”

Like he was waiting for a moment to speak, Tartu instantly said, “By all rights you should leave the Empire behind. Individual actors have been good to you, like Aurora and Walaria, but can you trust Doomo? Of whom Walaria is useless against, and Aurora is going to fall in line with, if the issue were pressed?”

“Waiting for the ‘but’ here,” Mark muttered.

“But!” Tartu said, “You could cool the waters by responding with even more lies about how good Doomo has been. Perhaps you could lie that he sent you a gift basket of flowers as a peace offering. *A basket of rain lilies.*”

He said that last part like Mark should know what it meant, and while David and Derek suddenly understood something, no one else did.

“That sound so fucking stupid, Tartu,” Sally said, like she was talking to a child.

Undaunted and ready for someone to say that, Tartu eagerly countered, “There’s precedent! And I know you don’t get it, but it’s a rather famous story about unity in Empire. Something like 500 years ago, before Aluatha was really Aluatha, before the Imperial Family and Gedahowla the Bright and her Grand Draconic Coven, one of the Islander Kings of what would become the Barrier Islands of Aluatha tried to assassinate one of Grand Mages of Sototh, which would eventually become South Aluatha. In that time,

the islands were always fighting the lands of Sototh, but Aluatha came in and applied pressure and they got the Grand Mage to simply lie about receiving a peace offering from the Islander King.

“A gift of rain lilies.

“It was a complete fabrication.

“It cooled the rhetoric a lot, though, and it brought the people together at the table,” Tartu said, “And you can do the same.”

Sally instantly countered, “Nice story, but there’s so much propaganda there that I don’t even know where to start, but even if it was a 5% true story, then it would only work if all sides were actually willing to discuss things; if both sides were equal. Mark is a big deal but he’s not the Empire, and so Doomo obviously doesn’t give a shit about Mark’s wants. *The Empire* has demonstrated this much time and time again.”

Tartu said, “Yup.”

“... That’s it?” Sally asked. “That’s your rebuttal to my rebuttal.”

“You’re rather correct, Sally,” Tartu said. “It only works with both sides wanting the same thing, and when both sides are rather equal, and Mark is not the equal of the Empire at all... But you can still *try* the peaceful option. And if that doesn’t work then you can bring a lawsuit against Doomo and see how far it gets. Even bringing a lawsuit at all means that you’re willing to work within the system instead of killing people. Even if you don’t do the rail lily option, I think a lawsuit is a fair step up from whatever this talk could have been.

“I do not want to talk about actual treason and murdering the First Prince, but we’re all aware that’s the other option here. So let’s just get it out there. So you kill him. Then what?”

“Then you have the entire Empire aiming at you.

“That’s a non-starter.”

Sally said, "Well... Yeah."

"Well I don't *want* to kill him," Mark said, because it was the right thing to say, even if pretty much everyone there realized it was at least half of a lie. Mark hummed, laying back to stare at the sky, saying, "Yeah... Lilies first, then a lawsuit in a month if he doesn't play nice? Sounds decently peaceful."

Pleasant silence.

The conversation in Channel 4 moved on.

Derek asked about Kabberjaw, and Eliot, Tartu, and Andria started working on a better layer scanner. They were already working on a few different things, though, from some way to hold dead kaiju up, to prevent them from falling through the layer when Mark killed them, to better speed for the ship... and the list went on.

Isoko spoke up, "Soon as I figure this out, I should be able to solidify the air in a big way. I think I got half of it. Watch!"

She lifted her hand to the right side of the ship, toward some clouds streaming by, and detonated a silver sheen out there like a shockwave passing along a plane perpendicular to the ship. Was that the goal? Mark wasn't sure. Isoko was suddenly unsure, too, as she grabbed the wind and stabilized it in a small area—

Isoko promptly tore herself into the deck of the ship, breaking wood and almost breaking herself.

"Ouch," Isoko softly said, her voice barely heard under a thundercrash of breaking wood.

Mark was there with a quick Union of Good/Bad, but Isoko had retreated to Full Platinum the very second she realized she was driving herself into the deck of the ship. She was hurt. Bleeding. But okay. Mark reached down with a handle of adamantium and Isoko gripped it and Mark pulled her out, free of the ship. The very second she was free of touching the ship, the air grabbed her and threw her upward into sky but she held onto Mark's handle and Mark held on to the ship.

Isoko gripped that handle strongly, her TT warring with Mark's control, barely edging into his kinesis. She was panicking a bit, getting torn into the sky, so Mark shifted the metal and grabbed her back, holding her wrist with a shaped hand, and Isoko relaxed.

She still flailed about on the edge of Mark's grip like a fish on a line, though.

Mark held on, joking, "Looks like I got a weighty one on the line tonight!"

"Oh shut up!" Isoko called out, "This is very difficult!"

Mark grinned. "Looks that way, yeah! Want me to let you go, to fly around in the sky?"

"NO!"

Mark tried not to smile. Sure, Isoko was panicking, but she was fine.

"Just! Just... Hold on."

Mark held on.

Isoko slowly, surely, calmed down, her vector of panic quieting, replacing with certainty. When that happened she slipped back down onto the ship... Mostly. A thin platinum air separated her from the deck of the ship. Right now her Powers were kinda like a collection of magnets, Mark thought. Isoko was trying to force similar poles together, and that took a lot of force. But then, when she finally overcame that force, practically kicking at the ground, she slammed to the ship's surface. The nearest several meters of deck turned platinum. When she connected and her control was inside the ground, instead of in the sky, just as it had happened with her illusionary clothes belt, Isoko walked around freely.

Mark asked, "Did your grandma have this problem?"

“Maybe. I’m not sure. We weren’t under Curtain Protocol like you, or at least not as deeply... but I kinda stopped asking Grandma about all of this stuff when I didn’t get any Wind Powers at all. I never saw Lee have any issues like this.”

“The problem has to be a combo of TT and Sky Shaper, yeah?”

“I think it’s more of a problem of macro-level control and the habit I got into of *always* running Union,” said Isoko, walking around on the deck. “When I run Union now, I go Full Platinum. I can’t really... separate the actions anymore.”

“Ohhh... So turn it all off?”

Isoko leveled a glare at Mark. “While I’m out in the middle of Endless Daihoon, yeah sure.”

Mark rolled his eyes. “I can protect you, so just do it, and then try to work things individually, from the ground up.”

“Bah! Fine.” Isoko took a breath and then calmed. Slowly, every part of her disconnected from the world. She closed her eyes and her Full Platinum slowly faded, her uncovered skin turning pale again, her black hair turning black, and her Union disintegrating. She softly told herself, “Calm, calm, calm.”

Over many minutes, Isoko’s Full Platinum faded.

The sky stormed again and mist flowed in and brushed against Mark and Isoko, and still, Isoko calmed.

Mark put a wind block in front of her so she wasn’t blown off of the deck.

Eventually, she stood completely herself, platinum faded, the deck no longer sparkling, her vector firmly in her own body, once again. Isoko’s vector had softly filled much of the world, like a tint to the background, but now she wasn’t out there at all.

Isoko opened her eyes and looked at Mark and grinned, saying, “So that wor—”

Full Platinum came back and Isoko went flying, tumbling into the stormy sky and the storm burst away into a clear blue heaven. She stabilized fast, way up there.

Quietly, so quietly, Mark heard Isoko curse, her words whipping away in the wind.

Mark looked up at her and said to himself, "She'll get it eventually." And then Mark said into Channel 4, "How about we get a micro-rift open to Earth or Daihoon and get some internet and connections up in here to help Isoko? Maybe her grandmother will know tricks."

Isoko spoke through her comms, "Please!"

"Sure," Tartu said. "It's close to dinner time anyway, yeah?"

"Are we only doing 1 meal a day?" Andria asked, and then added, "Because I can do that; I don't feel hungry. But... I like food."

Andria was holding back; she was not hungry at all, but she desperately wanted normalcy. Any kind of normalcy would do.

"Mark is doing Unions of Sustenance and Deprivation with the plants every now and then, and I will be teaching Isoko the same," Lola said, "But we can do more meals..."

A day passed rather easily.

Mark watched as Isoko gained control in large ways, first being able to walk around on deck while in Full Platinum, and then to turn off Full Platinum and keep it off. Her Unionsense went away when she turned it off, though, which Mark could barely imagine doing, which helped him understand his own powers in a few different ways.

“Of course I realize it *now*, looking back on it,” Mark said, sitting in the air next to Isoko, at the prow of the ship. “Like when I was fighting Kardi and the cultists at Memphi with that Wand of Destruction. That disjunction turned off my Unionsense, too. So, like, duh. Unionsense is a part of Union. Not just a new sense added on to the other parts. I’ve been using Union, actively, the whole time. I just didn’t think about it like that.”

Isoko chuckled a little, her Full Platinum coming back, making the world wave silver at her mirth. She collected herself rapidly and then went back down to baseline, then she controlled herself, and said, “Try turning it all off right now.”

“Out here?” Mark said, shaking his head, “No way.”

Isoko suddenly shocked to Full Platinum, the deck of the ship splintering and breaking into the sky, whipping away on a gentle breeze that joined the storm. “... I guess we are in Endless Daihoon, yeah.”

“Yeah.”

Isoko looked at her skin, and said, “You know... I am really happy, but I would have liked to skip the ‘learning’ section of this whole *thing*.”

Mark grinned. “You ever seen that show with whats-his-face... the Australian guy and the Brazilian girl and the bank robbing?”

“ ‘To Bank a Heist’?” Isoko asked.

“Yeah! That’s it. It’s all about figuring out the main characters’ Powers. Deep past Curtain Protocol; pretty much completely open, actually.”

“Ah, nah. Never saw that one. Lola knows a bunch about Powers and Union and she’s been—”

“Attention!” Eliot announced, “We’re 2 minutes from opening the micro rift! Deploying dimensional anchors, now.”

The ship was going slow, but then the whole thing started to ‘friction’ with the storm. The golden Castellan bubble appeared, flickering around the ship, and then becoming a solid geodesic sphere around the Dreadnought. Soon, the ship was a rock in a storm, and the storm was moving around the bubble.

Eliot continued, “The mini-rift will be open for 30 minutes. If the ship has to move, then the rift will break. If something goes wrong, then the rift-gate is on a dolly and I’ll move it to break the rift. It only works when we’re completely stable! So put in your requests for stuff to search in now, or, more realistically, over the last 20 hours since that’s when the list went up for internet searches. Everyone prepare your phone calls if you got ‘em.”

Isoko’s composure fell away and the world turned silver in that falling. She was fine. The air turned clearer and the sky flexed in other directions. Mark still wasn’t sure how she was doing that without actually trying, and more to the point, how she was doing it without sending herself careening off into other directions. Mark had to use caltrops. Isoko needed ‘caltrops’, too; she had thrown herself into the ship when she tried to make a wind wall. But apparently she could... naturally grip the sky and use it as its own ‘caltrops’? Obviously it was more complicated than that. She’d figure it out, but if she wanted to talk to him about Shaping then he was all ears. So far she hadn’t asked about Shaping at all, and she probably wouldn’t. She wanted to figure it out herself.

But now she wanted to call her family.

Isoko tapped away at her earpiece and Mark left her to that.

Mark asked Quark, “The messages ready to go?”

“Yes sir. Messages for General Aurora, Uncles Alexandro and Gabriel, and Lawyer Goro Teshima ready to go.”

Mark had composed a few rather normal messages for everyone. Recordings would be informing Aurora that everything was on track, and that Isoko had gained well, and that Mark needed to know about dragon society here on Endless Daihoon. Aurora, being the world's best dragonslayer, probably had experiences with Elkatracks and Quatrok and Odanci, too, and so Mark wanted to know about those guys, specifically.

For his uncles, Mark was just checking in, telling him he loved them, and that he hoped they were doing well.

Mark's lawyer was going to get a half-hour breakdown of surface-level incidents that Mark had seen or knew about regarding Doomo's treatment of him, as well as instructions that Mark would like to proceed with a lawsuit for whatever Goro thought necessary or applicable. On what grounds would Mark sue? He had no idea.

Mark was positive a lawsuit wasn't going to work at all, but he was sure that he wanted to bring a lawsuit anyway just because it would be a *legal* fight, instead of a disastrous fight. Goro had once spoken with Mark about Aluatha Empire going after him under false pretenses, to lock him up into that adamantium farm, and how he could probably file something, if Mark wanted, but ultimately Mark had decided against that. Now, though, Mark wanted to reopen *all* of that history.

Mark was going to call one person, though.

Walaria.

From down in the belly of the ship, far out of sight and behind a few different shields that would limit everything out here from affecting the rift in there, Eliot said, "Rift opening in 3, 2, 1... Open! ... Okay! Looks like we connected to *Earth*, and we appear to be about 4,200 kilometers above the Pacific, north of Hawaii. That's exosphere, and orbit. There will be a lag to Daihoon, but it'll work. There is a hard vacuum out there, but clear sight lines... connection working... handshaking— There we go! Connected! Firewalls up and— whoa, okay! Uh. Lots of sudden traffic. People were watching for us. Send your messages, people! Aluatha is already sending a question to us. Mark. Call Walaria."

... Mark nodded a little as he waited for the shoe to drop. Walaria was already primed to call him, and also kaiju might be coming.

But...

The sky was clear.

No kaiju.

“... Well okay then.” Mark rapidly moved from one side of the ship to the other, and he didn’t see any issues. “Anything on scanners out there, Quark?”

“Nothing, sir.”

“Send the messages and then call Walaria.”

Quark beep-booped and then said, “Calling Walaria— Ah. Intercepted. Uh... Addavein is on the line.”

“Mark!” Addavein said. “How goes Endless Daihoon? Did you get your prismatic mana yet?”

“Uh. It’s okay.” Mark reoriented fast, deciding to try his words on Addavein, first. Mark said, “So I killed a Sleipnir for Isoko, and no one is quite sure what to say about that, but Isoko is fine and she’s working on mastering her new Sky Shaper powers... and her Full Union, and, uh... I think the gods are using us as backups for problems coming down the pipeline, and I met some dragons, Quatrok, Elkatracks, and Odanci, and we’re going to one of their human exile cities to do some shit and get stuff in return, mostly being able to hunt in their lands... Got any thoughts about that— Oh! And Big Silver paid us a personal visit when I used the machine to search for my prismatic mana target. Gravity went wonky—” Mark looked up at the sky, expecting Big Silver to show up in that exact moment. Didn’t happen; thank the gods. “And there were like, a thousand moon-sized eyes in the sky, all looking down at us, and then he went away. Maybe less than a thousand moon-sized eyes, actually, but still it felt like a lot. Got any thoughts about that?”

“... I have *so many thoughts*. One minute. Princess Walaria is trying to reach you right now, and I guess I’ll let her through. Call you back!”

Click.

And then:

“Was that Addavein before me?”

Mark decided to say, “Yes, ma’am. Also...”

Mark gave her practically the same rundown he gave Addavein because it would be interesting to see *if* they had different reactions, and *how* different their reactions were. Walaria’s initial reaction was the same as Addavein’s, though.

“... One... moment...”

Mark waited.

“The gods are using you as backups?” Walaria asked, almost in disbelief. In even more disbelief, she asked, “What did she say, exactly?”

“Freyala said that...” Mark paused. Freyala had spoken about Mark’s actions having big waves, and thus they needed backups for the inevitable collateral damage, because even gods could die. Gods had in the past. So instead of saying that, and knowing that Walaria would probably be getting footage of the whole event from someone anyway, and probably Mark himself, Mark decided to say, “I want to trust you with this, but holy fuck, Walaria, does your family have a horrific track record with me and mine.”

Walaria’s voice was solid as she said, “On my honor as Princess of Aluatha, I promise you again what I have already promised you in Agreement, as much as can be promised by mortal hands; you have your autonomy, and I will protect that to the best of my ability. You do not understand the depth of the Agreement that we undertook, but I hope you do, one day, for I will always honor the spirit as well as the letter of the Agreement, for as long as we both shall live, and further beyond.” Walaria continued, “With that said, and more meant, I apologize for my failure to enforce my side of the Agreement, to keep you out of attempts to control you... but I am your master in Mage Society, so when I ask important questions like ‘the gods are making backups?’, do *not* stiff me on an answer, Mark. Do *not* do this, above all else, do *not* make me think a Magefall might be happening.”

“... Yeah... well... Point. Send her the recording of the event.” Quark beeped in the background as Mark said, “Basically: Freyala spoke about how Isoko was going to be dangerous, but ‘we need all the help we can get’. And ‘if nothing else, several good backups are necessary. Then she went on to mention how gods can die, as they have in the past, and how they will in the future. Since I’m aiming big, there will be collateral damage, and no one knows how deep or far that damage will go.” Mark finished with Freyala’s own words, “But sometimes some damages must be done.”

A moment passed.

Walaria spoke strongly, “I have seen the video, and I thank you for that. I will have to think on that. Shifting priorities: Sleipnir, the 8 legged sky horse?”

“Yes. Lola knew that name, too... Was... Was that a problem?”

“Any monster that is known before you encounter them is a problem, especially any monster from a godly myth. It’s a complicated subject and Tartu would be able to tell you about it. If he hasn’t then it’s not a large issue. Still, finding a known kaiju is a large oddity. Ask the Solari boy about it.” Walaria asked, “Do you have any questions for me?”

“Quatrok, Elkatracks, and Odanci. Odanci had a ward, named Nalamenca, that attacked us. I attacked her back and let her go for... some reason. And then they all came out in force for a big talk. Long story short, they threatened, I threatened back and a whole lot better, I think, and then Odanci told Nalamenca to apologize. Nalamenca did not apologize, and in fact antagonized more, and so Odanci killed Nalamenca and ate her prismatic mana core, or something. And then Elkatracks and Quatrok spoke of needing appliances, so we’re headed to a place to drop off some appliances and get some supplies, so we can hunt in their land. Thoughts?”

“... You know you just admitted to dealing with dragons to *me*, right, Mark?”

“*What of it?*” Mark simply stated.

There was a bite to his words.

Mark wanted to apologize, to be polite, but... no.

“Do what you must and hide all evidence.”

“A heads up: I’m also bringing a lawsuit against the Empire for the multiple assassinations recently, as well as all that shit that happened back in Memphi. As a preemptive strike: Do you want to work out ignoring our trades with dragons right now, and I can drop the charges I’m bringing against Aluatha for the previous dragon trading charges?” Mark added, “But the lawsuits against the assassination attempts *are happening*. I did, however, grow some rain lilies downstairs and take a photo op with them, and make a small message to post to the HVP message boards, thanking Doomo for the flowers. So there you go.” Mark asked, “Did I post that yet, Quark?”

“You did not post that yet, sir.”

“Should I post that propaganda?” Mark asked Walaria.

“... Post the message. We’ll talk more later. Good luck. And Mark? This is too heavy handed, by far.”

“Not as heavy as void bullets to the brain.”

“... Good journeys.”

Click.

“Oh oh oh!” Addavein said, “That was some spicy talk!”

Mark groaned. “How much were you listening?”

“All of it! I like the touch with the rain lilies, but I KNOW you didn’t come up with that. Who did?”

“Ah... Tartu. Speaking of him: I think he’s going to try to pray to Verdago, to get the real Farmer Talent... This shit with the gods... How serious is this?”

Addavein hummed, then said, “It’s serious, but it’s not *that* serious. What is concerning is that you have 4 of the 6 acknowledged Pantheonic powers on board, and that Tartu is looking at being #5, but the full godly Powers are already out there, in full, in several people.

“You already know of the Full Union users. One of them is High Priestess Holy Mother Julia Garin, and the other one is her son, Serge Garin, also known as Justicar. They pretend at being ‘mere Chosen’, but they’re more than that, by far. And now there’s you and also Isoko,” Addavein said, “Not too sure about Pluta’s backups, or Verdago’s for that matter, but I know they have them. Pluta’s is probably in New Washington. Verdago’s might be there, too.

“Hearthswell has a Castellán backup in New Tokyo. She’s a Bi-Talent with Shapeshifter body, and there is no way she’s dead, even though no one has directly seen her in a long time. She appears when there is need, but other than that she’s been keeping New Tokyo upright for 60 years. Her name *used* to be Lacy. Who knows who she is anymore.

“Drakarok has a Retribution backup in South America named Sarge. Might even be his former second-in-command. There’s also Redwolf, and you met her in Wolf Bayou north of Memphi. She’s not a Full Retribution, but she could be with a trip to Endless Daihoon. The Head Popper could take out a kaiju all by herself, too.

“Malaqua has actual copies of himself with his Power scattered around Earth. He raised them himself, so that the System could never be corrupted as bad as it was, ever again.

“So this thing with Freyala appearing and talking about the issue is concerning, but not *that* concerning.” Addavein added, “What’s more concerning is Quatrok and Odanci trying to goad you into thinking they’re anything less than tyrants themselves. Quatrok is an enemy of mine. He still wants me to rule the worlds, though, but who wants to do that? Certainly not me! Do *you* want to actually do that?”

“Not particularly,” Mark said, thinking about multiple godly backups scattered across the globes, “But I would appreciate fewer assassinations in my life.”

Addavein chuckled, and it was the rumble of a volcano and an avalanche. “I just survived another one of those, too! A small one; more like a pot shot, so not really like an assassination attempt at all. Can’t

really blame the guy who tried, though; he was terrified of me passing overhead to kill a kaiju he was aiming at. Ha!”

Mark smirked as he looked out at Endless Daihoon.

All of this was so fantastical.

It was more than he had ever dreamed of when he was watching Glorious Man fight kaiju on the Saturday shows, when he was 8 years old and he barely understood what he was seeing. All he could tell was that Glorious Man was strong, and that he needed to be strong if he wanted to be out there, too, helping people and saving the world.

Life was more complicated than ‘be strong’, but it was a good base with which to handle all the rest.

“I gotta ask... How was *your* trip through here?” Mark asked. “The big one, to Arakino to repair the System?”

Addavein hummed, weighing things, no doubt. And then he said, “Big Silver buzzed us, too. He does that to all the truly strong people. But we didn’t go in there with an army. We just went in with the few of us. If you go into Endless Daihoon with an army then the armies are never seen, ever again. Anything more than 20 superheroes is deadly for all involved. The actual number is likely a lot higher than that, but ‘20’ is a good number.” Addavein added, “But other than those initial thoughts toward the excursion... We went as deep as possible, toward Arakino, and we eventually got there. It was terrible at the end, but the worst part was the middle part. Everyone below archmage or superhero died in the middle part, and we barely made it through the last part. Reeni had to stay back past a certain point.

“The kaiju close to Earth and Daihoon are the normal ones. The Cat 7s and the Cat 8s... The only way to escape a Cat 8 is to be lucky AND crash into dreams and keep going, skirting the very edge of death and life and watching in horror as the Cat 8 swims by... hopefully swims by. They stay inside the layers as much as they can because Cat 8s are basically the cleaners of the layers.

“They fill up the entire layer, Mark, and it’s a 10 hour trip between layers when you’re in the center of Endless Daihoon... Though you’ve seen Endless Daihoon by now. What could you even call a ‘center of Endless Daihoon’? It’s all subjective, and the only real way to know where you are going is to either

head away from the Two Worlds, or toward them.” Addavein asked, “You’re not going further than 10,000 kilometers out, are you?”

Mark answered, “Tartu’s target was at 32,000 kilometers. He was the furthest away.”

“... That will be dangerous, but possibly doable. You’ll have to get good at skirting the dreamlands.” Addavein added, “And if Tartu goes for Farmer, then you might find a much better target closer by.”

Mark took that under advisement, but he also frowned as he realized something. “Elkatracks implied that we’d start seeing Cat 7s at 5,000 kilometers in, and maybe even a few Cat 8s. Was that implication a lie? Was she trying to scare us into taking a dragon escort?”

Addavein scoffed. “Elkatracks is the most cautious, trustworthy dragon I know, so it was not a lie, exactly. Most of the dangerous kaiju do not get that close at all because the layers are thicker and more real way out there, so they stay out there. That’s where the prey is, after all. Past 5,000 kilometers the cat 1 kaiju are so numerous and the dreamlands so stable that you slip in and out of layers and dreamlands quite easily, and you’ll see kaiju like you’d see monsters when stepping outside of any settlement.”

“Ah...” Mark imagined what they would need to get past a horde of cat 1 kaijus and he felt that maybe... maybe they would have enough? “Isoko on Sky control would take care of a lot of cat 1s. Sally with a big sword would do the rest. Eliot making a base would be good enough. And Andria... To be honest, I’m not sure what Prosperity does. Is it a Luck thing?”

Addavein said, “Prosperity is technically the weakest of the Pantheon’s powers because it works best in low-stress environments, but it’s the most-used Power in any governmental position. I imagine that Andria couldn’t do much with either the real Prosperity or the Chosen System version of Prosperity, except realizing before everyone else certain small things. Like maybe you should take a different layer toward or away from your destinations. Small things like that. It’s not Luck. It is more... holistic, than Luck. Bad environments make Prosperity users very uncomfortable, so they tend to get out of those as soon as possible.”

Mark suddenly realized something.

Mark recalled seeing Andria on the floor, almost catatonic with worry when Big Silver showed. It had hit her even worse than it had hit Eliot. Maybe she wasn't just unnaturally scared of kaiju; it wouldn't be the first time Mark had ever seen someone go catatonic around a kaiju. But...

Was Prosperity fucking her up?

More than most?

Ahh...

She was probably having a *really* hard time, especially with Mark actively choosing to not listen to her... But then again how could he? Gods. Kardi had fucked him up a lot.

"I should talk to her about that. Thanks, Addavein."

"No problem... So how did your meeting with the dragons go? Did Quatrok say anything about past dealings with me?"

"He said something like, 'If you, or your brother, seek to create the world I want, then I will help'... or something close to that."

"Hmm... Well good luck. Later, Brother."

"Later, Brother," Mark said, feeling really weird about calling Addavein that word, but he did it anyway.

Click.

Mark took a moment.

And then Mark asked, "When are we shutting the rift?"

"2 minutes, though everyone is already done with their calls."

“Oh... Yeah.” Mark said, “I’m done. Close it.”

“Preparing to close the rift!” Eliot said. “1 minute warning.”

Mark looked over to Isoko, sitting serenely on the prow of the Dreadnought, her vector calm and pleasant. David and Lola were in the secondary steering room, at the top of the castle, and talking about very serious things that only they were privy to. Mark was pretty sure that Derek had tried to actively Clone himself through the micro-rift, and he had either succeeded or failed, but either way Tartu was yelling at him, or at least talking at him sternly. Eliot and Sally were near that, but not really interacting with that event. Eliot was doing something with the ship again, while Sally seemed to be doing something with the ship, too.

Andria was sitting by herself just inside the castle, down and to the right in the Hub.

Accessible.

Waiting.

Hmm... Now, if Mark was a paranoid man, and he was, he would assume that Andria was waiting *for him*... And he might as well go fulfill that prophecy.

Mark did a once-around the Dreadnought, looking for kaiju, but none were out there at all. Soon, Eliot was announcing that he was closing the rift, and Tartu was announcing that people should not try to play with the rift, no matter if it did look like a particularly interesting keyhole, Derek. Derek countered Tartu’s suggestion of what to do with his life with ‘If I’m not getting prismatic powerups then I should at least be allowed to try fitting through pin-hole rifts in space! Never know when it might come in handy.’ to which Mark replied that Derek had a point.

And then Mark visited Andria, just inside the Hub, saying, “Hello.”

Andria startled, and said, “Ah... Hello. Uh? Need... uh, something?”

She was nervous. Scared. Frozen in fear a bit, but still moving around. Working. Normal, *for her*, as far as Mark knew.

“I have been made aware that you might be particularly susceptible to the negative effects of simply existing inside Endless Daihoon, and I am sorry for not noticing. If there is anything I can do to make this trip easier for you, please let me know.” Mark finished with, “I wasn’t *trying* to be mean to you, but Kardi... She fucked me up a lot. I’m sorry that I let her influence how I have interacted with you.”

Andria’s eyebrows went up, and then her face scrunched and all of her vectors suddenly flexed to complete and total emotional breakdown. She maintained, though. Even with voice breaking and tears flowing freely, she managed to say, “I’m sorry I came on too strong! I just wanted to help! You can do so much and now you’re doing all of that and I’m just glad to be here, even if it is the most terrifying thing I have ever done in my whole life and I am so worried about dying and... and of course we’re all worried about dying! You were assassinated and— attempted assassination! And then you got demons all over you and I’m... Thank you... for telling me that.”

Mark... nodded a little, and said, “If you need anything, then say so, okay?”

“That anti-Fear is good, please!” Andria sobbed, happily.

Mark grinned a little as he Unioned with Glory and Fear, wiping away all fear from Andria’s vector.

Andria suddenly relaxed, and the tears flowed softly. “Thank you. Can you... keep it up until I go to sleep? I need to sleep.”

“Sure. Sleep well.”

“Thank you.”

Mark went back up top and Andria went to her room to collapse completely into her bed. Soon she was sleeping and Mark was standing at the forecastle, looking out at everything.

Isoko floated toward him, not platinum at all, saying, “So that was cute.” She spun in the air and then landed on the forecastle next to Mark, and she didn’t break anything at all. She also wasn’t Platinum, though, and that was a bit concerning. “Glad you worked it out with her.”

“Andria seems alright... kinda shameful I didn’t notice her particular difficulty, though.”

“I think she’ll be fine.”

“I hope so. You seem alright, too! Grandma helped? But the non-Platinum is concerning.”

Isoko grinned for a moment, then said, “Grandma helped a lot. Proper Sky Shaper is more about letting go, than about directed control, so that’s why I’m not Full Platinum right now.”

“Ahhh... directly counter to Platinum Body *and* Union.”

“Sort of. Sky Shaper and Platinum Body feel like they’re at opposite ends of a spectrum right now; I can use them together, but not as well as I want to be able to use them together. Union is a cool middle ground. I can Unionsense the entire sky, but only when purposes rise above a certain level of purpose; sort of how I can sense breezes everywhere but only if they’re strong. Like, I can tell your vector, because you’re close and strong, but Derek is kind of a wash of purposes, sleeping Andria is too quiet to feel at all, and the others are like soft impressions, barely felt.”

Mark nodded. “It was a good stop, then.”

“A very good stop.”

“So what is your range?”

“About 3 kilometers. 4.5 if I really relax and don’t do anything at all. 1.3 if I have Full Platinum active.”

“Ahhh... Sky Shaper and Platinum Body are vastly different densities of astral body.”

“Yup! I’m getting the hang of it, though!”

Mark grinned. “I know you will— Oh my gods. Do Glory/Fear!”

Isoko desperately wanted to, but she held herself back, saying, “Lola told me to try normal Unions first before I get into stuff like that because it’s up to me to find out whatever my ‘best’ Union is.” She added, “I can already tell you my best Unions *ain’t* gonna be Glory and Fear.”

Mark thought for a moment, then said, “Well you’re prismatic, so... Prismatic/Weakness? Figure out something better for ‘weakness’ later when you figure out something that makes sense?”

Isoko’s eyes glittered and her vector lit up. “Ohhhhh.” And then she smiled and gave Mark a playful backhanded slap against the arm, saying, “*This* is what I was missing when you were doing all your weird Unions and talking with Lola, and I was over here trying to make sense of ‘Good/Bad’ in different ways!”

Mark smiled. “Welcome to the big leagues, Isoko.”

Isoko’s eyes glittered, and then she sniffled, and said, “Gla— glad to be here.”

“I think I see it!” Mark said, into the comms, flying in front of the ship Quark suddenly enhanced Mark’s vision, and yup. There it was. Mark said, “We’re here!”

Isoko floated beside him, Full Platinum, asking, “Where?”

Mark pointed into the distance. “See that purple dot?”

“Not really,” Isoko said, humming.

“Confirmed,” Eliot said, through the comms. “Purple buildings floating in the sky, with golden trim. Looks like Purple Palace to me.”

They had flown for 3 days toward Daihoon to get here. It had been an easy flight, crossing through air layers and water layers, but this was only halfway to the destination of Kabberjaw. They still had a few more air layers to go, past this one, and then it was a big step into Kabberjaw’s water layer.

Isoko hadn’t been able to hold onto the air around the ship when they went into the drink, but that was an unreasonable ask at Isoko’s skill level. Didn’t stop her from trying. That whole event seemed to have been particularly annoying for Isoko, because she had lost all control over everything around her when the only thing around her was water, but that was normal for Shapers when they were divorced from their element.

But she could walk into the ship now, without hurting herself or anyone else.

That was a vast improvement.

She had even toppled an inquisitive butterfly kaiju out of the sky, away from the ship, when it tried getting too close. It was a simple cat 1, but it was still a kilometer wide. Isoko had been thrilled about that, and so had everyone else.

Mark got to take a ‘break’, watching some shows with the team inside the actual lounge, while Isoko was on watch. It had been a nice break. Mark still didn’t sleep, though.

And now they were here, near dragon lands. Just for a flyby, to check out one of the listed sites on Elkatracks’ map, to see if these dragon-led lands were the real deal, or if Kabberjaw was some sort of trap.

The Dreadnought flowed forward and soon they were close enough to Purple Palace to actually see it, in person. Quark identified possible issues everywhere, from the turrets on towers, to the big purple dragon roosting on top of the 'palace' and looking their way, to the aircraft taking off from the sides of the place, aiming at them.

Mark kinda just stared at the palace itself, and marveled.

It was several tens of hunks of amethyst, the whole place measuring about 47 kilometers across, all mashed together into a floating beauty of architecture, nature, and power. The main column of the place ended in a big open area for the dragon at the top, who was purple-scaled, just like the Palace, while the Palace itself was a bunch of apartment buildings and spires and catwalks and deep waters. In fact, now that Mark was looking at all of it, he saw that gravity must have been weird around the place, because the center of the amethyst crystal was a sphere of water, and the crystals jutted up from that, while greenery spilled off of a thousand waterfalls at the top of every jumbled spire and flowed with the water, down to the center of the place.

Mark said, "Holy shit that place is cool."

Isoko asked on the comms, "Could we go inside?"

"Probably not," Eliot said. "Mark? Wanna handle these hails? Here:"

A male voice crackled through the comms, "—peat, state your intentions, unidentified vessel!"

"Hello," Mark said, "This is Mark Careed and Friends, and the vessel Dreadnought. We are passing by on a task toward Kabberjaw and wanting to see what dragon culture is capable of, instead of all the propaganda we were always hearing about back on Earth and Daihoon. Purple Palace was on the way, and I gotta say, I am really glad we stopped by. That place is one of the coolest places I have ever seen."

Silence.

Mark floated in front of the Dreadnought, alongside Isoko, waiting. Mark looked to Isoko. Isoko shrugged. Mark waited.

There were 4 ships sailing toward them, taking up positions in front of Purple Palace. Floating geodes of purple crystal took shape behind those fighter ships, floating into place beside the Palace, the turrets warming up... Hmm.

And the dragon was looking at them, head raised, body still laying down.

The Dreadnought was currently 84 kilometers away from the Purple Palace, and David had slowed the ship to a halt. Comms could reach this far, easily, but not much else besides that. Mark doubted those weapons had enough of a punch to cross the distance.

A female voice came over the line, "You are allowed to fly by, but not to stop. Our weapons are tracking you. Do not dally."

Mark asked, "You guys need help with stuff? We're on our way to give appliances to Kabberjaw. Engines and stuff. We don't have the materials to make the engines, so if you have materials then we can make stuff, but we don't have anything extra right now."

Eliot spoke up, "I'd need metals. I can supply plastics myself. But metals are not possible to make out of thickened air."

Isoko nodded eagerly. She wanted to see the inside of that place, too.

"... Your eagerness to help is noted, but we will not be partaking of anything at this point in time—"

"We need water purifiers!" said a man's voice. "Can you make water purifi—"

"Pay no attention to that. Thank you for stopping by. Do not stop by."

Eliot said, "I can make the stuff in under 5 minutes if you have materials. No charge. I'm just looking to help! I'll make them super simple, too, so you can check for any possible bugs or whatever."

The dragon huffed on top of the central spire, and then put his head back down, though his eyes remained open. Mark wasn't sure how he knew that it was the dragon speaking in the comms, but that's

what he figured happened when a strong, masculine voice echoed in the airwaves, “Kabberjaw’s prices are too much and I doubt we will get a better deal than materials-cost, so let them make us things and then go on. No names. No intel. No meeting in person. Engineer, pass on the schematics you need. Figure it out.”

The female voice begrudgingly said, “Yes, sir.”

The ‘Engineer’ said, “Eliot Cybersong! I’ll have your materials delivered to the white side of the Palace, on a cargo ship to meet you out there!”

“Sure, Engineer,” Eliot said. “We’ll park the Dreadnought over there— You do mean the parts where the crystal is mostly white, right?”

“Correct! There’s the white side and— Ah. That’s intel. I’ll have to stop there, but... Don’t get inside of the purple line. It’s rocks floating in the air; can’t miss ‘em. That’s when gravity starts to pull toward the Palace— I’ll have to stop there, ‘Commander’ is... Well anyway! We absolutely need water pumps! ... and say, do you think you could do some solar cells, too, and maybe...”

The list of requests went on, and Eliot agreed to them, soon listing off what he needed to make those things, that Purple Palace needed to provide.

David began to move the ship, angling over toward the white side, while Eliot and the Engineer spoke.

Mark and Isoko mostly put themselves between the Dreadnought and Purple Palace, watching the place as the ship took them around. The Palace was so cool. It was all tall buildings and low waters and a certain elegance that invited mystery. People were everywhere. This place was alive and healthy-looking, for sure. Mark wanted to go in there, to walk on the weird, curving domes that were kinda like courtyards, and to see what lay below the waters. There was stuff down there, for sure, because the waters of the Palace were glowing slightly, with a blue radiance. Quark marked it off as possible Chernkov radiation, but there was no way to really tell without getting closer, since wards could cause a whole bunch of things to look like things they were not.

“The scanners of the ship picked up that glow easily enough, sir, and making the waters look like nuclear wastes might cause people to pause.” Quark said, “So it could be a warning light, or not.”

Mark asked, "Could there actually be a giant nuclear generator under there?"

Quark had no answer.

"Eliot?"

Eliot spoke up, "The stuff they want me to make is to clean up radioactive waste, but maybe not? I'll know more based on whatever materials they send up."

Far down below, a ship was getting loaded up with crap. Broken screens, ruined rebar, bent iron I-beams from skyscrapers. Some metalshaper down there was ripping apart most of the stuff in a frantic dash to get the job done fast, turning the metal into ingots, while others were casting spells on the metal to do... something.

"Ideas on those spells they're casting on the metal? Lola? Tartu?"

Lola spoke up, "Anti-radiation spells."

"That's correct," Tartu said, "But those spells date back to the Reveal. There are better spells these days, which means these people are far out of touch with normal reality."

"Old televisions and metals, too," Eliot said.

"Isolationists, for whatever reason," Lola said, "They are probably all family, or at least split up into a few families. Can we get a population analysis from someone? Quark? Eliot's machines?"

Mark nodded, for Quark's benefit.

Quark spoke up, "I estimate no more than 50 people, because most of those people down there appear to be illusions. That courtyard over there and the courtyard we saw on the way into the place both had the same woman walking with the same child across the courtyard, carrying a bushel of apples."

That caused everyone to pause.

Lola said, "One family? Maybe 3, just to keep the interbreeding to a minimum? Perhaps they accept new people every once in a while."

Isoko said, "I changed my mind. I don't need to go down there."

That seemed to be a normal sentiment among the crew.

Soon, the envoy ship lifted off of the Purple Palace's flight deck and angled up to the Dreadnought, carrying with it a few tons of raw, mostly ingot-shaped metals, and assorted bits and bobs. The tiny envoy ship was completely remote controlled, according to Isoko, long before it got into Mark's range.

Mark said, "Prepare for a possible bomb, just in case."

There was no bomb.

The ship, which was all of 10 meters long, dumped off metals onto the deck of the Dreadnought.

Eliot couldn't Manipulate the metal at all. It had too much radiation in it. So Tartu came up to the deck and did some Domains that cleared the metal completely. Soon, Eliot was sending down load after load of product after product, the envoy ship rapidly moving goods back to the people down below. Eliot almost offered them more stuff, because this was obviously a humanitarian trip, and that's what everyone was soon saying on the comms, privately, but Lola had some good advice.

Lola said, "These people seem to be doing the best they can, as do most exiles. Do not denigrate that hardship. Do not offer them 'stuff you think they need'. Ask them if that is the full list of needs, and do not push to give more when they tell you 'no more'."

Isoko asked, "But what if they're all like... slaves or whatever?"

"Then we help them improve their lives and leave them be, or, we become crusaders," Lola said.

Sally said, "I certainly don't get any 'slavery' vibes from them."

So Eliot finished off the list of goods, taking about 30 minutes to do it, and then he asked, "We'll never be back this way. If there is anything else you need, ask for it, and we might be able to provide it."

The Commander's voice came over the air, strong and serious, "Thank you for your help. We have everything we need. Please be off."

The Engineer had a strangled sort of voice as he said, "Buughhhh..." And then he spoke coherently, graciously, saying, "Thank you for your help."

David put the Dreadnought in drive, and slowly, gradually, they left the Purple Palace behind.

The floating turrets and the squadron of fighters never stopped eyeing them, but that was fine, because Isoko and Mark kept themselves between the Dreadnought and the Purple Palace the whole way. That much was just basic politeness... sort of. Mark and Isoko were soon hanging out above the back of the ship, above the big stone plate that served as the final shield of the rest of the ship, just watching the fighter jets.

Soon, they were out of sight of Purple Palace, and headed towards their appointed crossroads of Endless Daihoon.

Derek was at the controls right now and he was also navigating, so he spoke in the comms, "Crossing in about 20 minutes."

"Mark to the forecastle," Mark told himself, and everyone else listening.

Isoko flowed in the sky alongside him, smirking, asking, "What's the next layer?"

"Looks like another air layer," Derek said, "But if Mark can ego us far enough we can skip a few layers. Might end up right inside Kabberjaw's water layer."

Isoko focused hard, saying, "I'm gonna keep the air bubble this time! I swear it."

Eliot spoke out, “It’s okay if you can’t, Isoko, and I would prefer you not even try. That much water crashing down on us is not as easy to withstand as slipping into the water and leaving the air behind.”

“... Then I can at least let the air go slowly?” Isoko tried.

“... Sure sure,” Eliot said.

Soon, David was back at the wheel, Derek was fully Unioned with himself and the entire length and area of the ship, and Mark focused on a Union of Purpose; to get to Kabberjaw.

The dreamlands beyond the edge of the sky were a roil of earth and water and wind, and surprisingly, a bit of fire and stone.

Eliot said, “I think Kabberjaw is water and land, so Purpose us plunging into the *surface* of an ocean, and *not* coming up from the bottom of the ocean. The second version would really... hurt. We’ll survive it but we’re not gonna be happy, okay?”

“Heard and understood!” Mark called out. “Proceed!”

“Here we go,” David said, and the Dreadnought flew forward, into an edge of reality and then beyond.

Mountains exploded to the side, all volcanic and full of rage.

Rivers became oceans on the other side.

Air held around the Dreadnought, and Mark held onto that reality with solid, adamantine Purpose. Isoko tried to hold on with Purpose, too, but the more she tried the more her Purpose flinched at Mark’s own control. She wasn’t about to overpower him, though. PL92 slapping at PL 98 was still a tough battle of wits, but the ship was not in any danger.

Next time Mark was gonna have to ask Isoko to simply not—

Something clicked for Isoko.

And suddenly the air held around the ship and Isoko Unioned *with* Mark instead of against him, their Purposes fully aligned.

Isoko stared, experiencing the moment. Her Full Platinum and the wind in the sphere around the Dreadnought tore at the Dreamlands, breaking them completely as the ship sailed on—

And then Isoko lost it, fading, faltering. The dreamlands encroached again, but barely. Mark's Purpose was smaller than Isoko's Purpose, but it was a lot stronger. A lot of air fluttered away from the ship, inundating the dreamlands and turning soil and water to sky, for a little bit.

Mark caught Isoko in a basket of adamantium, which was about as much as he could do these days. Her own Sky Shaper kept her in the air away from Mark's solid surface when she wasn't actively counteracting that impetus. Isoko floated in the basket, utterly spent.

Mark said, "You had it for a bit."

"It's fucking exhausting. My mental..." Isoko blinked, oriented, and sat in the air above Mark's basket catch, saying, "My mental fortitude can't handle all of that. Everything turns slippery after a while... But I really had it, didn't I?"

"Yup!"

Lola spoke up, "The rest is training, Isoko, just like Mark has already undergone."

Isoko grinned. "Yes, ma'am."

The dreamlands soon cleared, revealing the surface of an ocean that was not moving fast at all. A real layer. The water was super clear, but it was still clearly water, and underneath that water was solid darkness, riven with red light; an ocean floor with volcanic activity.

"Kabberjaw already?" Mark asked.

Seemed right.

The Dreadnought hit the edge of the layer and Isoko tried to hold onto the air as much as she could. She managed to dent the water with an air bubble, causing the Dreadnought to get stuck, just outside of the layer. Isoko rapidly apologized, and then let go, not thinking that ‘not being able to enter the water’ was even a possibility.

Soon, Isoko was hiding her face as she held on to a handle from Mark, as water enveloped all of them, the ship practically ‘crashing’ into an ocean’s surface.

And then something weird happened.

The Dreadnought bobbed on the surface, and air appeared overhead, and the dreamlands seemed to fade into the far distance beyond a brilliant blue sky with white, fluffy clouds. The ocean was deep ‘below’ them, the water dark blue with depths, and gravity was pointed that way.

It looked like they were a boat on an ocean, which seemed so very wrong.

Mark looked left and right, trying to find the edge of the layer and all the dreamlands beyond, but all he saw was ocean, everywhere, and a rocky series of islands ahead, lifting up from the waters like forest-covered teeth, or perhaps the horns and skulls and bones of a great dragon. Some of the bones floated in the sky, too, which was super weird. It had to be Kabberjaw itself.

Kabberjaw was too big to make any sense, and Quark estimated the distance toward Kabberjaw as 320 kilometers, meaning the island-like bones were each tens of kilometers wide and more than that tall.

“Oh my gods,” Isoko whispered, feeling a deep, amazing awe as she took in the sight.

Mark felt the same way. He was excited for *whatever this was*. According to the vectors of everyone else they were also excited, awestruck, and thrilled.

“So we’re obviously in Kabberjaw’s layer,” Mark said, “But are we, really? Where are the edges? Anyone?”

“No idea,” Tartu said. “Do you think those are actually dragon bones?”

“Big fucking dragon!” Sally said.

“Probably a dragon named Kabberjaw, ya think?” Eliot asked.

“Where is the way out, though,” Mark said, redirecting the conversation.

Derek said, “I think it’s an enclosed layer.”

Another Derek said, “I heard about them in a story once. Everyone was trapped in a... a what was it called—”

“Pocket dimension!” several Derek’s said at once, in recognition.

“OH!” Eliot exclaimed. “Ohhh! Neat!”

“Oh my gods,” Tartu said, “*It is a pocket dimension.*”

Derek continued, “If we try to leave we’ll get turned around and hit Kabberjaw again. So everywhere *away* from Kabberjaw is ‘into Endless Daihoon’, but we won’t be able to go that way... So it’s kinda like a trap, but not? There has to be a trick to it.”

Andria spoke out, “Purple Palace spoke of trading with Kabberjaw all the time, so I agree there has to be an easy trick... And I would like to know the trick before we go further in.”

“I agree,” Mark said, “Let’s turn around and try to leave.”

Tartu said, “It’s probably an ego-shield-switch to be able to leave. If you have it on, then you can leave, but if you don’t have one, then you’re stuck.”

“If *that’s* how it works it makes this place... Huh,” Andria said, like it was a question, “Really safe?” She asked, “Can anyone feel the Fear of Endless Daihoon right now?”

Mark smiled a little. “Not at all.”

“Awesome,” Andria said, relaxing well.

David asked, “We turning?”

“Yes,” Mark said.

An hour of testing later and the theories were proven correct.

When Mark and Derek did *not* have their Purpose going, sailing away from Kabberjaw had them entering open sea, and then eventually finding Kabberjaw on the horizon in front of them. But when Mark filled the Dreadnought with the Purpose of leaving Kabberjaw and then coming right back, they entered the dreamlands when they got out of sight of the dragon bones. They turned right back around and went right back into the open, blue seas of the pocket dimension that was Kabberjaw.

Salty spray and sea air broke against the hull of the Dreadnought, with Mark and Isoko leading the way at the prow of the ship.

Mark said, “Full ahead! Into the jaws~”