

The night sky spanned from horizon to horizon as it usually did. The dragon was just a dragon. Large as a skyscraper. Big as a hundred buses. Silver, mostly, but also a black that was blacker than the night, that gonged gently, while all the rest of the dragon merely existed. The dragon was not as large as the sky.

Somehow, the dragon took up the entire sky, anyway.

Mark had hit the dragon with his best, strongest attack, and the dragon had said 'no'. And so, Mark was here, standing on wreckage in the sky, about to die and full of unknown feelings. What was he feeling at that moment? It wasn't rage. Not really. Perhaps an emotion that was a brother to rage?

Frustration?

"Good first try but I'm a bit beyond you, my happenstance brother," the dragon cheerfully said, "Let's talk!"

Frustration gave way to absolute rage.

"TALK?!" Mark found himself yelling, "ABOUT FUCKING *WHAT?! HOW YOU KILLED MY PARENTS AND AREN'T TURNING YOURSELF IN AS A MURDERER?!*"

The dragon rolled some giant eyes and then said, "Go ahead and scream and rage and hit me if you want, and then we can talk some more."

Mark did exactly that.

Nothing he did could touch the dragon at all.

How long did he keep trying? A minute? 10? An hour?

Probably not that long at all.

He crashed to his ass, onto the wood and the plastics that Eliot had turned into a floor, or something, which was in turn held up by black adamantium.

Mark looked at the black.

He wondered... about a lot.

Eventually, the dragon asked, "Ready to talk?"

Mark found himself saying, "After... After I learned of his crimes, I wanted Addashield to repent for his crimes, but no. That's not... That's not why I did it. I did it because it was the right thing to do. To help Addashield be a Hero of Humanity again." Mark looked up to the dragon. "Are you him? Did it work?"

The dragon's wings did not beat. He did not struggle to stay hovering exactly as he was.

The dragon simply was, and all the world bent to his will.

"A complicated series of questions, really," the dragon said, softly, in a speaking voice, though Mark knew he could probably roar and blast Mark apart with his simple voice. Kaiju were like that, and the dragon was a kaiju, for sure. The dragon continued, "I am not him, and yet I am him in most ways that matter. I know all of the secrets of his life. I know ways to bring humanity crashing down, and, by that same measure, I know how to save everyone, and how I have saved as many people as I could, over and over and over again.

"I know how to secure humanity's victory over the monsters for the next thousand years, give or take a thousand years. Stuff could change tomorrow, or never again. Hard to know those sorts of things. I doubt there's a *third* hidden world out there, but you never know! That's one of the things that could cause a true Magefall again, like the one that separated Daihoon from Earth 5,000 years ago.

"But more important than hypotheticals of destruction, is that I want to continue in Addashield's footsteps. I like people. I like building. I like creating and founding. So I think I am close enough to him to count in most ways, except for the ways of guilt."

Mark wasn't sure what was happening right now.

But he was sure of at least one thing... or maybe two.

The dragon was either a very good actor, or he was sincerely not Addashield, because he certainly didn't sound like Addashield... Though Mark had only known the archmage for... what? Half an hour of talking before the mana vein flavoring? And then for a few hours during that Color Drop thing, when he was under the thrall of the demon, Kanda?

Mark asked, "Are dragons good actors? Or bad actors?"

The dragon's eyes flexed, dilating then squinting. And then the dragon chuckled, rumbling the world. "I think you mean as actual actors, and not as 'people who do things', but the terms are closely linked anyway. Yes; dragons are 'good actors', but they usually don't bother. It's an insult to a dragon to couch their words or hide their intent in any way, unless they are encountering an equal, or something they want out of a person that they cannot get through force. Full disclosure: I want things from you that I cannot get through force, so I qualify for this caveat. You should know now that I won't knowingly act in your worst interest, though, so that should answer most of your major concerns."

Mark yelled, "You're acting in my worst interests right now!"

The dragon did not look ashamed at all, as he said, "But you wanted to be among those who fought and killed kaiju, so you only have yourself to blame now that you are among your own kind, and are being used in this arena.

"But that's really not important for interactions between you and I, Mark, because I will never knowingly act in your actual worst interest, which means a degradation of your personal abilities or position in the world.

"The fact that you don't like how you ascended is only *partially* a concern of mine.

"So what do you like in recompense, and in life, Mark Careed?"

Mark was having difficulties.

A lot of difficulties.

He distracted himself by looking around... And he noticed that the dragon was just hovering there, in space, and the city was down below, and there were lights over there where David, Eliot, and Isoko had... 'crashed' to the ground? Or they had been set down? And the dragon was hovering. Not moving at all—

Oh.

It was probably too dark to see, but the dragon was probably propping himself up by his adamantium spikes. Strong Shapers could just as easily rest on 'arms' or 'legs' made of their attuned substance.

Mark looked up at the dragon, and said, "I like killing monsters and making the world a safer place for people I will never meet, or know. That's why I did the whole..." He gestured at the giant kaiju, not 50 meters away at his closest point, which was one of his silver and black eyes. And then he stopped gesturing. "But I suppose Addashield is truly dead, because you don't act like I remember him, though I did not interact with him for long, or deeply."

The dragon smiled some, showing off big fangs, and Mark wasn't sure if that was a threat display for dragons or not—

"Is a smiling dragon a good thing, or a bad thing?" Mark found himself asking.

"Ha!" The dragon chortled. "Dragons are the product of humans, who have bodies, joined to demons, who have no bodies, so most of our innate actions stem from the same sort of biological makeups as humans, which are wholly responsible for innate biological reactions, as demons have no innate bodies.

"Smiles are smiles. Grins are grins. Eyerolls are eyerolls. A lot of the normal imperatives are different, though. Humans are no longer sexually interesting to me at all, but there are quite a few pretty dragons out there, and even a few kaiju, which is a *very* weird thing for me right now. Dragons are interested in power and aesthetics. I never really understood this until I became one. Still coming to terms with that."

Mark accused, "So you are Addashield!"

“Well... I certainly don't feel 350 years old anymore, or, for that matter, 25,000 years old, if you want to believe a demon about their age. Kanda is pretty much gone, though; thank the gods. I probably ended up 99% Addashield. A very young Addashield that I could barely remember until recently. I feel like I'm a teenager again. It's quite strange.”

Sitting on his ass, Mark looked up at the dragon, and said, “Huh.”

“I am surely some new life form, created from the union of my father and that demon. The fact that Father is 99% of my makeup is a quirk in the matrix, but not much more than that. I am not my father, or that demon,” the dragon said, finishing with a nod.

Mark spent maybe a minute staring at the dragon.

A lesson from the Empire of Foodstuffs cropped up.

Mark said, “Nations who undergo a change of ownership need to adhere to the old laws and customs of those nations in order to be accepted as a true change of ownership, and as a valid nation... Or something like that. Is that what you're doing with the donations of adamantium? Are you doing enough?”

The dragon hummed. “I could do more, but I am not accepted as my father's replacement. Not yet. I am working on it, though.” And then the dragon asked, “You partook of a Xerkona playgame, didn't you?”

“I'm not sure what you mean exactly, but it was called the Empire of Foodstuffs, and it was overseen by a Xerkona ambassador, yes.”

And there was a dragon in that scenario that Mark had never gotten a chance to yell at.

The dragon chuckled. “That would be a Xerkona playgame, yes. A lot of good lessons there.”

Silence.

Mark wasn't sure what to say anymore.

Mark defaulted to being polite, saying, “Well hopefully you... uh. I don’t know what to say anymore, except... I don’t think I actually hate you, now that you’re here and... you. I guess. But it’s still tough. You... giving all that adamantium away to all those people and killing all those kaiju makes it a lot easier not to hate you.”

The dragon grinned. “Would you like to organize some of my interactions with humanity and be my mortal agent?”

“Fuck no.”

The dragon laughed. “You are rather young for it, anyway. I’ll ask someone else. How do you feel about the Hero/Villain Program?”

Mark frowned. “The Hero/Vill...” His voice dropped away, and then he said, “I’m going to Daihoon for at least a few years, but I’ve already been asked to be a villain by those people.” He suddenly asked, “Do you truly need a partner on the other side of the fence for that whole thing? Is *that* why you’re asking?”

“I don’t want to be a part of Daihoon. That was Dad’s whole thing. Now *Endless* Daihoon? I might go exploring that sometime, now that I can truly survive the deeper parts. But not Daihoon itself. I’m rather sure I’m sticking around here on Earth. You see, Dad not-so-secretly always had a certain fondness for the theater of the hero system you have set up over here. It’s spectacle and fun, and no one really dies unless things get out of hand, and that rarely happens. Daihoon is so much more serious.

“So yes, I will likely become a part of that whole Hero/Villain Program. Still not sure in what capacity, but it seems fun.

“More importantly: I wish to be seen as approachable and good. I have way too much power and that scares people, as it should, but I don’t want to be scary. I want to be a Hero of Humanity.” The dragon added, “And so yes: I do want someone on the other side of the aisle to legitimize me. You seem to be able to hold your own and not fall over like most people. For that, and many more reasons, you qualify.”

The world felt surreal.

Mark felt compelled to point out that he was sitting down, and that he had attacked the dragon already, so he was certainly not able to hold his own, or not fall over, but that felt unnecessary. Instead, he said, “To be honest, I am rather overwhelmed right now and I’m rather certain you’re just going to do whatever and what I say doesn’t matter. This doesn’t seem real— Can you resurrect people?”

The dragon paused, then said, “Let’s begin with the first point there. Yes. You are overwhelmed. But you’re handling yourself well, but probably only because I’m extending so far to reach you, because you’re a good ticket for me to be legitimized in this world. You’re one of the only people I have a connection to at all. Kanda made Dad kill almost everyone he cared about, and the ones she let him keep are the ones that now hate him, and me. But you’re starting off, and we’re talzarki, and that does mean something to me. To Dad.”

Mark looked up at the dragon. “Talzarki, huh?”

“Happenstance brother. ‘Two or more people forged in the crucible of a similar horror, and then walking through life as something close to family’. It’s a chosen-family sort of thing.”

Mark wasn’t sure what to say about that, so he said nothing.

The dragon nodded, like a silver battleship gently bobbing in an unseen ocean. He continued, “And yes, I am going to do what I want, and what I want is to have a connection to humanity. I certainly won’t be accepting human laws on my person, but I will be an ally to humanity; a hero, once again.” The dragon looked at Mark, adding, “And once you get enough personal power, you would do well not to accept all the laws they try to place on you, either.”

Mark nodded, unsure.

What would one really say to a dragon, in this situation, in this time, in this place?

Mark had already tried attacking.

So he nodded.

“As for resurrecting people, there have always been stories of that sort of thing but Dad never found any credible evidence to support the stories. It was always some animated horror, or a Natural power that faded if the caster ever stopped, or necromancy that cobbled together an astral body and then stuffed that astral body back into a physical form which always resulted in nightmares made manifest.

“Transferring *living* astral bodies from one form to another is possible, and actually rather horribly easy if you set it up right, but actually bringing back the dead is not possible, because the astral body, the soul, the mind, are all gone when a person dies,” the dragon said, “But if such a thing is possible, then the elves of Endless Daihoon might know of it, if the elves even exist. Chasing after elves to learn of resurrection magics would be like chasing after two impossible dreams. You might have better luck approaching the Old Dragons that we kicked out of the ruling halls of Daihoon to see if they know something about resurrection. Chasing dragons would be too dangerous for you as you are now, or in any other normal capacity.

“But you could survive all of that by declaring yourself as my brother, with all the attendant responsibilities thereof.”

Mark stood up.

He wasn't sure how he stood up, but he did it.

“Ground rules!

“You are a hero in public and private and in your heart of hearts! Don't bother me! Get a phone and call before you show up! I don't fucking know what else but probably some important shit! Very important shit! I am still mad at your father, of whom you are 99% of! I don't know what that means! Brothers means we yell and fight and don't actually want to kill each other, I think! But I'm pretty sure I want to kill you for some reason! And I'm yelling for some reason! I'm going to end up doing some shady shit in my life because of you and I'm going to hate you for it!” Mark roared, “I WAS SUPPOSED TO BE A HERO! Not a tool of a thinking kaiju! AND I WILL NOT BE YOUR TOOL.”

The dragon rapidly, delightedly said, “All accepted! Also! In the Hero/Villain Program the villains are basically just trainers for the heroes. The television part of it is all just fun and theater. You should still go to Daihoon.” He grinned. “We'll be traditional brothers, too. Not those noble backstabbing brothers

that they do in the royal families of Daihoon. Real talzarki! I was thinking you could get a girl, too, or whoever really, and eventually have kids! And I can be their uncle! It'll be great! Anyway! That's the whole thing I want. Nice chatting with you, brother. Here's some starter weapons for you, ~*Blackvein*~. I'm still thinking of my own name, and I kinda like Silvervein, now? Not sure, really. I'll figure it out. Addavein? I am a great source of adamantium, after all."

A tiny wooden box tapped Mark in the chest, and he grabbed it.

"I'll protect you as a good brother should when I'm around, but I won't be around you most of the time, so...

"Don't go dying!

"Later, brother!"

The dragon vanished and Mark's platform rocketed to the ground and then stalled out, slowing, before it slipped into the side of a hole cut into another dirigible. Mark barely felt any change in direction or gravity at all while the whole thing moved as fast as it did, which was odd, looking back on it, on this, on everything. Everything was so odd. Mark's twisted plastic-and-wood platform slapped onto the floor of a cabin that was slightly different from the previous one that Eliot had built.

Eliot, Isoko, and David were there, staring at him.

Mark gestured to the hole in the cabin. "There's a hole in the cabin, Eliot."

"Oh yeah," Eliot said, nonchalantly. "A dragon made it so it's kinda hard to fix. Astral body contamination, and all that."

Isoko casually said, "He had to remake the ship already." She asked Eliot, "Need to remake it again?"

"We're good," Eliot said, as he glanced at a tablet. "And the hovervan is close. It was circling while Mark spoke to his brother, but it's coming in now. And oh! There it is."

Mark looked back to the hole in the wall.

A hovervan was just beyond.

David walked that way first, and then everyone else went, too, and soon, Mark watched from a window as the dirigible fell apart and turned to scrap, to continue falling down into the ruins of Rome.

An undetermined amount of time passed in silence.

A minute?

Four minutes?

Maybe only 30 seconds.

Mark looked at everyone else, and said, "So I'm probably going to freak out soon and—"

"HOLY FUCKING SHIT, MARK," Eliot said, as cameras floated around. "HE'S YOUR FUCKING BROTHER NOW?!"

Isoko laughed maniacally, throwing her head back and guffawing, chortling into the back of her hand as she waved off Eliot's camera, generally being unintelligible for a good 5 minutes.

Meanwhile, Mark just went still, as Eliot asked even more questions that Mark didn't know the answers to, and David merely sighed a little, looking out the window, ahead, in the direction they were going.

"So you're *not* his mortal agent?" Eliot asked.

"I don't even want to talk to him."

"What's in the box!"

“The box?” Mark looked down at his hands. He was holding a small wooden box. “Oh. I don’t know.”

“Open it!”

“No thank you.”

Isoko called out, “Okay! Okay! I’m not giggling anymore. I think I fucking pissed myself, too. Sorry. So that was fucking terrifying.”

David continued to look forward as he spoke for the first time, “You handled yourself well, Mark. I have no idea how you managed that, but you handled yourself well.”

Eliot watched and Isoko giggled some more.

Mark said, “I did try to kill him, like... for a good 10 minutes there.”

Eliot whispered, “I have it on camera if you want to see.”

Mark continued, “So I am pretty sure I did not handle myself well at all.” He managed to breathe easy, and he also managed to realize that he wasn’t running Union right now, so he turned Union back on and started beating resilience and weakness.

The amount of black coming out of his body was a lot right now.

Everyone noticed.

David turned, eyed Mark, and said, “The fact that you attacked him on sight, and that the dragon wanted something from you, is the only reason you’re alive right now. I’m not exactly... qualified to speak on this, but I believe that dragons wouldn’t want to be brothers with weak people. He would have killed you out of shame if you would have cowered. But the fact that you attacked him allowed him to show himself as the true power in the relationship, which calmed him down a lot, and made him more secure in picking you as a brother.

“You tried to fight, and the dragon saw that, and respected you for it. He respected you for telling him off, too. But the fact that you put an onus on him to act like a true hero now obligates you to act in your chosen role as well.”

A moment passed in silence as Mark thought.

Mark asked, “What does that mean?”

“You’re officially his brother, now, for one. Other than that you need to sign up for the Hero/Villain Program as a villain. Probably under Crystal Tower itself. Then we’ll get you some help to leave for Daihoon. What will likely happen is we will want you to disappear into Daihoon and allow the dragon to play out whatever realities he has away from you.”

Isoko smirked as she spoke up, “And he wants Mark to have kids!”

Mark felt his stomach drop all over again. Exasperated, he said, “The fuck is that about!”

David said, “Ignore it and walk away from it, Mark.” He looked over to Eliot. “You send the video off, yet?”

Eliot said, “I sent it to COFR, like you said.”

David nodded. He said to Mark, “There’s nothing more to be done about anything, except, I need to know how you felt up there. Did you really try everything against him? All of the tricks that Lola taught you? *Everything?*”

The moment crystallized.

Mark felt ice in his veins and his astral body pulsed with even more blackness, veins tracing into the air around him. With a small voice, Mark said, “Yeah. I tried... everything. My... I think my astral body was too weak... or something. I couldn’t reach him.”

Would he be able to reach that dragon with a few more years of training? Of life?

Or was that a foolish pursuit?

David said, “Lesser dragons would be easier to kill, but ‘easier’ just means that you might be able to actually touch them. They all have the same full-spectrum-resistant astral body that an archmage or a demon has, and it takes skill and experience to be able to piece something like that. Isoko has a version of that type of Body, too.”

Isoko giggled again. She waved them off, not able to speak right now.

Something else crystallized for Mark.

Mark asked, “How would I go about learning how to kill a dragon?”

David said, “The Slayers, that organization you wanted to join, has a Dragon Slayer division. The Dragon Slayers are the top ranked people in that organization. The ones they send after dragons; if that wasn’t obvious. Part of reaching that rank is learning which dragons to kill and which ones to work around, because they are not a monolith, Mark. Some of them do help humanity. There’s actually a whole culture still devoted to dragons over there.”

Mark rapidly decided to ignore whatever his ‘brother’ had done to him and his life and the idea of a ‘culture devoted to dragons’, and said, “I was already going to the Slayers, so that makes it easier, right?”

David didn’t want to lie to him, so he said nothing.

Everyone else kinda just fell silent—

“Open the box?” Eliot asked, eyes focused on the box.

Mark looked at the box, clutched in his hand. It was plain wood with a slide-in top that was secured with a small spike of wood driven into a hole in the lid and the box itself, acting as a lock for the box. The whole thing was half the size of a fist. Some things softly rolled inside, clicking and clacking, as he moved the box around.

Mark stared at the container for a little while.

And then he pulled out the little wooden wedge and opened it up.

There was a bunch of black marbles—

“Oh,” Mark said. “That’s adamantium.”

David was looking in the box with Mark. He stepped away, saying, “Don’t lose it. It’s hard to get more.”

Eliot whispered, “Easier than ever, though.”

Isoko commented, “I heard he’s up to 15 tons given away?”

Eliot said, “17.5 at last count, which I have just done. That’s only the public number, though.” He whispered, “Private number is likely estimated to be 21 tons. How much would that be? Just a few spikes?”

Isoko added, “And he *grows* them, too.”

Mark swirled the box to isolate one of the marbles to the side, away from the other ones, and then he poked a finger at that isolated one—

It was like someone had thrown a pile of bricks onto his body, weighing him down, crushing him into his seat.

It was an existential weight, pulling at his every soul.

He dropped the box and the marbles ran across the floor of the hover van.

Eliot cried out, “Fuck!” and he started picking them up—

David, moving too fast to see, suddenly had a handful of marbles. He put all the marbles from his hand into the box, and then he closed the box and handed it to Mark, saying, “When we get back to Citadel you need to focus on Adamantiumkineis, Mark. Use the next few days or weeks to gain proficiency. You might spend a week longer in Citadel, but you’ll be moving on fast and you *need* to be able to use this part of your Power.”

Mark took the box and he could already feel his astral body wanting to connect to the adamantium. Had there been a spell on the box, to prevent that sort of connection, before he opened it? Or was simply being aware of the contents enough for Mark to try and instinctively connect to it?

Whatever the case, Mark held the box without trying to connect to it, and the rest of the flight back to Citadel was relatively quiet.

Mark sat in his room, staring at the box of black marbles.

Perhaps, if the dragon hadn’t shown up, then he would be out partying with Eliot and Isoko.

For some reason, that specific loss of joy caused Mark to turn incredibly, incandescently angry.

It was now 3 am, and Mark had spent an hour in an interrogation room with David and Orissa about what had happened out there with the dragon. They had asked him a bunch of angering questions that Mark knew they had needed to ask him, but which he did not appreciate. Everything from ‘are you a hidden dragon?’ to ‘are you in league with the dragon?’ and ‘are you planning on using the dragon to enact some sort of power over this or that part of humanity?’. All of that sort of thing. The Mind Reader, Doctor Cheryl Appell, had been there.

They didn't need him to actually answer, but answering felt important, so Mark had given answers that were as correct as he could make them. They were the same sorts of questions that he had been asked when he first came to Citadel, apparently, though Mark did not know that, considering he had been incredibly out of it for a whole week after the Tutorial.

After this most recent interrogation, Cheryl, who had told Mark to call her Cheryl, had said that Mark had done very well with the dragon. Mark had achieved the 'best sort of outcome possible, when dealing with alien intelligences born from dead archmages and demons'.

None of those questions had bothered Mark. They needed to protect humanity, and Mark was fine with being questioned in that way.

But here, alone in his room, Mark had missed out on celebrating the win over the goblins.

And *that* pissed him off way too much.

Mark got to his feet. "Fuck that fucking dragon. I'm partying."

He called up Eliot.

Eliot answered instantly, excitedly, "Mark! They let you out of interrogation yet?!"

Mark was glad to hear the guy's voice. "They did. I need to hang out and watch stupid television shows, or something. Want to do that? I need to call up Isoko, too."

"Yes! Isoko is here with me at the house. None of us can sleep. Her grandmother is on the phone with my mother right now. *The dragon showed up at Crystal Tower and signed up for the Hero/Villain Program!* He called himself 'Addavein'! He filled out your paperwork—"

"I don't want to talk about it," Mark said, cutting off Eliot's probable rush of information, and feeling some weird kinda way about everything. "Not over the phone. In person: yes. Not on the phone. I'll hop on the tram and come over there."

“Yes! Come over here!”

Mark hung up.

And then he stuffed the adamantium pellets under some books and papers in his desk.

He was on the tram in minutes.

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Mark sat by the pool, watching the sun come up, as he had a really nice omelet. Eliot and Isoko had their own food, similar to Mark's, and they all had mimosas.

After Mark showed up they had spent the first hour drinking and talking wild shit about dragons and kaiju and what they meant as real threats, and how it was so much different to see one in person. The second hour they had watched documentaries for aspiring kaiju hunters, and how the pure *terror* of a kaiju, and a dragon, were the hardest parts of fighting them. People were truly so small, no matter the powers they might have, when compared to beasts the size of several city blocks. Literally the only way to survive a kaiju was to be faster than they were, which was a problem because all kaiju showed up with entire ecosystems growing on them that made up for all of their deficiencies.

And now Mark, Eliot, and Isoko were out here, watching the sun come up.

Isoko sipped her champagne and orange juice, the bright yellow drink sparkling in the sunrise, as she said, “So those goblins were pretty terrifying, yeah?”

Eliot burst out laughing.

Mark grinned, and then he started laughing, too.

Isoko smiled as she laughed, too. “They kinda got overshadowed!”

“A little bit!” Eliot said. “Holy fuck Addavein is big!”

Mark got suddenly disgusted, then weirded out, and inundated with all sorts of tangled emotions, that came out black veins rushing down the skin of his arms and in the air around him, his constant flow turning up just a notch, taking in resilience and pushing out weakness. He gave an exasperated, “And he’s just picking *that name*, huh!”

Isoko smirked. “What? You wanted it?”

Mark found himself disarmed, his veins retreating. “Not really! ... I guess!”

Isoko grinned some more. “So I got Chosen about 20 minutes ago.”

Mark’s eyes went wide at the change in conversation.

Eliot smiled. “Congrats!”

Mark asked, “What’s your mission?”

“I have options,” Isoko said, “I can continue on to the Grand Guard in Crytalis, like I originally planned, or I can join any of the empires of Daihoon as one of their roamers. The Aluatha Empire, the Dominion of Okuana, and the Settlement of Xerkona all need warriors, anywhere. She even told me I could work with the Slayers, if I wanted. She just wants me somewhere killing monsters and protecting a team. Any of those work for Freyala. She’ll grant me Union of Breath and soon Blood, after a trial period. But! I don’t actually have a team yet.” She asked, “So I was wondering what your plans were?”

Mark went wide-eyed. His heart beat hard and his black veins faded by half. “You want to party with me?”

“I *can't*,” Isoko said, throwing water on Mark’s fire. “Not really. I cannot keep up with you. That’s a simple fact. You’re an exponent above me, Mark. I already know how it’ll happen, too. You’ll eventually gain the ability to fly with your adamantium stuff, and I’ll be on the ground, and a liability. Maybe I’ll be able to fix that eventually with flying magics, or something like that. I don’t know. But that won’t happen for years. Maybe not ever.

“But I’ll be at some sort of home base, if you want to work out of Crytalis, or somewhere else. I do want to work with you, even if I can’t keep up with you. Maybe we can party for small monster kills, though, until you find some people who are at your level. That is something I would absolutely want to do.”

Mark felt all warm inside. “Yes! I absolutely want to party with you— But why do *you* want to party with *me*? That damned dragon is going to... I don’t know what he’s going to do, actually. I have a feeling that I need to *vanish*.”

Isoko grinned. She said, “I want to party with you because you’re a guy who I can trust to have my back out there in the wilds.” She stopped smiling. “And... Well. Addavein is something I need to *not* be scared of. I might not be able to fight dragons or kaiju myself, but I can at least not be scared of them. If I’m not running, screaming, then I can support others with Union.” She shrugged. “We might not stick together forever, but you’d be a good person to step onto Daihoon with.”

While Mark was having a bunch of really nice, funny and light feelings in his chest—

Eliot said, “People are always asking grandma to go out and build cities in the wilds and I have her same Power, and she asked me if I wanted to take over some of her workload. There’s this city building program that all of the empires have. If you two are interested, I’d like you two to come with me to those places. I’d like to build cities in the wilds with a competent team backing me up. I’m shit against monsters, as you saw, but city building is... It’s something that I am realizing that I could be very, very good at. But monsters are fucking terrifying and I need to be, uh, not exposed to monsters, ever again. Not without some heavy meat shields in front of me, and preferably self-healing meat shields.”

Mark felt all kinds of good.

Isoko grinned as she teased Eliot, “Mind goblin got your courage?”

“Yes,” Eliot said, emphatically. “I think those shits might be more terrifying than the dragon! At least that dragon was willing to talk. *The goblins just want to eat you.*”

Isoko smiled. “I think the dragons want to eat you, too.”

“At least they come at you directly! They don’t hide... oh shit. Addavein was completely invisible before I shined the lights on him, and you called him out, Mark.” Eliot’s brown features turned almost pale. “Oh fuck. Invisible kaiju.”

Isoko laughed.

Eliot whispered, “I need to get a whole lot stronger.”

Isoko laughed loudly, like happy bells chiming.

Eliot eventually grinned, though it took a minute.

Mark felt a bunch of butterflies as he practically giggled. He smiled. He wiped away some tears. “I’d love to head in both of your general directions, too.”

“Good!” Isoko said, and then she raised her glass. “To heading in the same general direction!”

Eliot and Mark both laughed, and said the same sorts of words.

Breakfast was good.

At the end of it, Mark asked Eliot, “Are you doing the Chosen program, too? I forgot if you said so or not.”

Eliot hummed as he winced, then he looked around at the house, to see if anyone was watching, or something. They were pretty much alone out here, for his mother was elsewhere, his father and the butler had left them alone, and his siblings were out for the day, too. Right now it was just Eliot, Mark,

and Isoko at the house, and also the butler. Eliot had been the one who actually cooked the food, and prepared the meal.

Eliot still looked unsure about what he said next, "I'm still Freyalan... but *Hearthswell* is all about emplacements and stuff."

Isoko's eyebrows went high up, and then she drank down her fourth mimosa. "Shit."

"Oh fuck! That's right!" Mark asked, "How did you guys end up as Freyalan when *Hearthswell* is the Castellan, *the Empire Builder*?"

"I'm still learning the story," Eliot said, "But grandma is the one who had Man-made Manipulation to begin with, and she was all about adventuring, back before that word gained a bad connotation in the 90s. Grandma is still out there putting up outposts in the wilds, too. She loves it, and she has a whole team that helps her. But... But I've gotten some really, really good offers in the last few hours since I handed the goblin extermination video over to COFR for final approval. And I want to explore those offers."

Isoko refilled her mimosa, as she asked, "What kind of offers?"

"Possible Castlekeeper of *Hearthswell*."

Isoko's eyes went wide.

Mark asked, "What's that?"

"It's a step below Freyala's 'high priest'," Eliot answered. "I wouldn't start there, of course, but instead I'd be a Housekeeper. Which would be... simply amazing, really. At a base function it would make all my buildings grow in Power Level depending on... A lot of factors, really. I'm probably going to have a fight with my whole family about it, but..." Eliot paused. "My family never wanted me to be a 'bard', anyway. They told me that I'd be wasting my Power and dying in some hole." He frowned a little. "And I think they were right. The goblins really woke me up. Mind shit is awful."

Eliot looked distraught.

Isoko was unsure.

But Mark smiled, and said, “That sounds awesome, Eliot! Diversity in Power is good, and I’m not quite sure how Union would be the best fit for you, anyway. I have absolutely no idea about Castellan, but even at the surface level it’s a much better fit, right?”

Eliot looked a bit more secure. “Yeah. It is.” He smiled, adding, “I even got a good offer from Pluta, the Goddess of Wealth and Prosperity, but I’m a lot less certain about that one than Hearthswell. I think Pluta was just putting it out there to see if it worked at all, so she won’t mind if I forgo it.”

“Hearthswell, huh?” Isoko asked, “That’s gonna be a *big deal*, isn’t it?”

“Oh yeah,” Eliot said, looking more worried by the moment. “All the Cybersongs are going to freak.” He gestured at the world with a wide, open gesture, saying, “But we’ve already got Hearthswell people here, in Citadel, keeping the place secured. Every city has some of her people in it. A city isn’t a city without Hearthswellians there to hold it down. And the cities I make... I’ll be able to make a place and then actually secure it all on my own... Theoretically.”

Mark smiled wide, saying, “Sounds great to me!”

Isoko *tried* to sound confident as she said, “Sounds excellent, Eliot.”

Eliot grinned a little, looking better.

Isoko moved on, “So you finished the goblin extermination video?”

“I think so,” Eliot said, falling back into a more comfortable topic. “Soon as COFR gives final approval then it’s published. I expect to get more offers after that. I really showed off what I can do. You both are probably gonna get big offers, too, as soon as the personal AIs of the powers-that-be poke at it and send it upstream to whoever might be interested in what we can do. Do you want me to organize those

communications for any of you?” He rapidly added, “To be clear, I’ll send them your way, or tell them ‘no thanks’. I don’t want to be anyone’s agent.”

Isoko downed the last of her mimosa, saying, “I need sleep, and I also need those offers, yes. Send them to my email, through COFR. All of them. Just put my email onto the video— Actually. I’ll make an account, too, and then set that up with a first video and you can link to that. Can you hold off on posting the video until tomorrow?” She stood up. “I need sleep first.”

Eliot grinned and stood up, saying, “Sure. I can hold off. How about you, Mark?”

“No offers for me. I already have a good idea of how that will go, and I don’t want to stick out there too much and deal with people trying to... woo me, or whatever.” Mark stood up, saying, “I’m gonna have a few more meetings with Inquisitors, or whoever. After that I’m just signing up with the Slayers... Unless a really good offer comes through? COFR can sort through that stuff, right?”

Eliot shrugged. “You might want to consider investing in a personal AI unless you’re going to stick with Freyala for a long time.”

Mark said, “I’m pretty sure I’m gonna stick with Citadel Freyala forever, really. Lola wants me to declare for Freyala and become a Paladin because I need the legitimacy. Before last night my need for legitimacy was rather high, but not a burden. Now that I’m ‘a dragon’s brother’ I need that *good* legitimacy.”

Isoko said, “You need to sign up for the Hero/Villain Program too. You could have Crystal Tower sort your inquiries... And now that I say that, I need to sign up for that stuff, too. I’m going the villain route, too. ‘Platinum Princess’.”

Mark had some mixed emotions on that, until Isoko mentioned her ‘villain name’. He grinned. “Pretty pretty princess.”

“The prettiest!” Isoko said, grinning, as she flashed platinum for a moment, to shimmer in the morning light like a golden goddess, all reflective and glittering.

... Mark suddenly felt burdened for a whole host of reasons.

He said, “Still have no fucking clue what being talzarki with Addavein means... And I’m sorry for dragging you two into that.”

Mark almost asked them if they were ‘going in his general direction’ instead of ‘partying with him’ because of that dragon, but Mark didn’t actually want to know that answer. Not really. It was better not to know that the dragon was fucking up his life that much.

Eliot smiled softly. “Not your fault.”

Isoko teased, “I already had very good reasons for not partying with you directly, Mark. Eliot is the one that got scared off.”

Mark’s face felt a little hot. Was he that easy to read?

Eliot’s face got a little red, too. “We’re still going in the *same direction!*”

Isoko grinned, and then she led the way out, saying, “Great food! Better than fish soup.”

Eliot walked with her, and Mark hurried to follow, as Eliot said to Mark, “Sorry. Facts are facts and she’s... not exactly wrong.”

Somehow Mark’s heart felt lighter, even though the facts of reality felt heavy.

Mark said, “I’m glad we got to hang out, though.”

Isoko scoffed. “Don’t say that like it’s the end! This is just a start.” She yawned as they walked through the main foyer of the house, then said, “Let’s try to end up in the same settlement expansion area. We’ll figure it out.”

Mark grinned. “Sounds good to me. And yeah. We’ll figure it out.”

Eliot asked, "It might take a month before we leave, but that gives us time to do paperwork and stuff?"

"Sure," Isoko said.

"A month or something," Mark said.

They parted ways at the front door, with smaller words of 'next time', and thanks for the food.

Mark ended up on the tram with Isoko, headed back to the dorms, where they soon parted ways, with Isoko yawning again.

Mark got back into his room, and found his adamantium pellets still there, in the little box in his room.

He crashed out on the bed.

Mark woke up to a notification from Eliot. The video was live.

Mark texted back a 'thank you for telling me!', then proceeded to finish walking up. It was 6 PM, and after getting dinner in the mess hall, then taking a nice shower, Mark went back to his room and turned on the video, on his big tablet screen, as he took out the box of adamantium pellets.

Eliot's voice started blasting over the video, "Welcome back to another episode of Very Human! I am your host, Eliot Cybersong, and this is the story of how my friends and I nearly got killed by mind goblins, and then we met the dragon! So without further ado, here're the main protagonists!

"Me! I'm Eliot Cybersong..."

Eliot did big intros for himself, and then also Isoko, who were both trying to sell themselves as heroes, or monster hunters, or something along those lines. Mark was pretty sure it was a general 'hying', which was good for both of them. Eliot even included some history about both of them that Mark was sure was

going to get them noticed by... professionals? Or someone? Mark wasn't sure, exactly. Eliot came from a line of city builders, which was not that surprising. Isoko came from a family of villains and supervillains, which was news to Mark; he had only known about Wandering Sage, but there were others of the Kanno family who did villainy all across the globe.

And then Eliot introduced Mark.

“And oh yeah. And then there's Mark Careed. Let's not bother him. He knows what he wants out of life.”

Followed by a scene of Mark, raising a fist to the sky and yelling, “DEATH TO ALL MONSTERS!”

It was kinda cringe.

Mark loved it anyway.

The video was 2.5 hours long, and there were secondary videos on the channel, linked to the main video, that contained all of the recorded heat map of the entire battlezone, as taken from Eliot's scanners. That second video had timestamps to connect to the first video, but other than that, the second video was straight up 30+ hours of recorded mapping.

Mark didn't watch more than 2 minutes of that secondary, bigger video. There was a pop-in of the battlezone map when there was an actual battle, and that was enough to see what had happened from a logistical standpoint.

A third video was the 2.5 hour video condensed down into 20 minutes of action, and Mark imagined that one would get a lot more views, but he watched the 2.5 hour one, anyway. The smaller video was a highlights and 'story' video, but the 2.5 hour one was done in a style that Mark had never really seen before, called an 'extermination video', and it was meant to fully illustrate how the team approached every encounter, and how it all shook out, and the various influences on every single battlezone. It was more 'documentary' than 'killing video'.

Mark leisurely watched the video, only cringing a bit here and there when he saw himself make mistakes. Eliot didn't linger on those mistakes at all, so maybe only Mark would notice them, but he was sure veterans would notice those slips, for sure.

And all the while, Mark tried to pick up a single bit of adamantium.

He had to use a fork to pick up one of the metal pellets and then drop it on the bed in front of him.

Honestly, it kinda scared him to pick up the metal, because one of two things was going to happen.

He was going to crash and be unable to move while he held the metal, for sure. That much was not in question. That was simply going to happen.

But, either he would be able to move himself enough to drop the metal and thus dislodge the weight from his astral body, and be able to move again.

Or, he would simply be locked in, unable to move his hand or his body, until his astral body grew accustomed to the weight, and he was able to move it around. That might take hours. A full day, maybe.

He had been told a few different times that if he simply took the adamantium he had from the Vault and held it for half a day, allowing himself to be incapacitated, then he would figure out how to lift it one way or another. With that in mind, Mark would *technically* be 'fine' if he couldn't dislodge the weight.

But...

Mark had been locked in a hospital bed, in a coma, for 107 days, and then his recovery had taken... It had taken an archmage almost falling and all of Addashield's shit and then a Color Drop treatment to be able to walk and move and *be himself* again.

Mark stared at that little black dot of metal, sitting on his bed sheets, as Eliot's video played in the background...

He found himself thinking of Addavein again. Specifically the sound of those gonging metal spikes on the dragon's back. It was a deep sound, a rumble, just like the dragon himself, like an avalanche. A hillside falling down—

Mark grabbed the pellet and instantly regretted it as he slumped to the side, on the wall, his hand locked around the pellet.

Ah, he thought. It's the 'stuck in the hand option', I see.

He wondered when that would happen. He was surprised it hadn't happened already.

Mark sat there, gripping the pebble, listening to the video play as his head hung down and his shoulder pressed against the wall. He couldn't stop himself from slumping forward, and face planting half onto his tablet and half onto a pillow. The tablet tumbled to the rug in the middle of the room and continued to play.

Mark would have mumbled 'fuck' if he could have.

And then he realized that he couldn't use Union, either.

He couldn't control his breathing. He couldn't control his heart. He couldn't even flicker Union of Brain with the world, to draw in resilience and expel weakness.

Mark did not panic.

He merely realized that all of his astral body strength was being contained by the little bit of adamantium in his hand, and thus, there was nothing to panic about at all.

He was still breathing. He was still alive. He was fine. Autonomous functions for the win!

He was Perfectly Fine!

Mark wanted to scream.

He was pretty sure his breath was coming out ragged now, as he breathed against the pillow, his body crumbled down onto his face and his right arm, while his left held the drop of adamantium and would not let go.

Mark did not panic.

Okay! Okay. Focus.

Focus, Mark.

You can do this.

Mark thought of his recent Scan, as of 12 hours ago, when he came back from the training mission and got debriefed by David, Orissa, and the Mind Reader, Cheryl.

Body, Healthy Body: 038

Shaper, Adamantium: 051

Mind: 37

Natural, Union: 062

Soul: 35

Arch: 29

Or something like that.

Adamantiumkinesis was up to tier 5, PL 51. This meant that he should be able to lift some adamantium just fine. Even with just his body. Therefore, he should be able to lift this little bit in his hands.

Mark struggled. He grappled. He couldn't move a finger at all.

He couldn't mo—

He could still blink. Mark blinked, and realized he could do small things. And his body was still working just fine.

Five minutes later, Mark managed to move his body, just a little. He rocked a bit to the left. He listened to the recording of David talking about the two goblin heads he was holding, and Eliot paused the video to talk about how goblin biology worked.

Five more minutes passed, and Mark was able to move a bit more.

His astral body was not growing that much stronger, that fast. No. Quite the opposite, really. He was only able to move because his astral body was experiencing an overload-type event, and when his astral body overloaded, then... Well. His kinetic Power simply didn't work when he overloaded, right?

Maybe.

It was like his body wasn't his own. The world felt fuzzy as he moved. Indistinct. Like he was slightly drunk, in a bad way. No euphoria at all; just inability to control oneself.

Five more minutes passed, or maybe one, or maybe seven, and Mark tensed his arm, and his arm actually moved.

Five more minutes passed, and Mark's astral body had gotten weak enough from trying to hold the pebble that his Power sort of just gave out. Mark's hand opened and the pebble fell away and Mark launched upward, feeling so fucking weird that he was finally free of the pebble. He almost flopped onto the ground. He managed to stay standing, breathing easier. Feeling better.

The pebble was still there on the bed.

Mark got into a better position, laying down properly, and then he put his hand on top of the pebble—

And was sucked back down into the weight of the pebble, that wasn't really a weight at all.

Eventually, when the pebble grew to be too much, he was able to use Union again, in a small sort of way.

This proved to make everything much, much harder.

When he healed his astral body, strengthening himself back to full Union power, it also healed the stress that the pebble was causing him, so the *full weight* of the pebble *once again returned*, because his astral body was 'strong enough' to get sucked back into the pebble... maybe.

It took time.

It took patience.

A full hour later and Mark gripped that damned fucking pebble in his hand as he stomped on the ground, hunched over, glaring at the ground, because that was the only thing he could see right now.

He breathed out weakness, a miasma escaping his body as thin, wispy black veins beat from his body, into the world. He breathed in resilience. The pebble got heavier as strength returned to his astral body, but that was fine.

Mark was handling it.

His black veins gathered in his palm where he still gripped the adamantium, and Mark opened his palm.

The pebble hovered in his astral body.

It hovered. An inch from his palm, the pebble hovered.

Mark chuckled maniacally.

The drop of metal hovered there, connected to him by wispy, shadowy tendrils, his entire astral body focused on that damned pebble, like lodestone gathered metal filings. Mark breathed and beat with a flow of resilience and weakness, and his black veins shot through the pebble, into the world, like light through a lens, distorting and refracting.

He almost collapsed again.

He maintained.

Mark stayed like that, Union active, struggling to hold the pebble in his astral body—

The pebble slipped.

Mark's black veins scattered to the winds, the tiny drop no longer containing his demand for healing and protection. His Union flashed wide, filling the room, but Mark pulled it back. He breathed easy, though sweat still poured off of him. A few beats of purity/impurity cleaned his body up, and then he looked down at the ground, at the pebble.

He reached down with a hand—

He paused.

Mark reached down with a weird, *new sense*, that he was just starting to understand. He had an astral body that he could control like limbs, so he used that to pick the pebble back up.

Tentatively, like moving hairs, or maybe pushing out with a breath that was not a breath at all, Mark touched-without-touching—

It was like picking up a 300 pound full-body weight.

Mark grinned as he struggled, his astral body locked back on to the tiny bit of metal, practically sucked inside of it...

But 300 pounds? Big deal! He was *benching* 300 these days!

Mark stood as tall as he could—

The pebble fell out of his astral body again.

Mark laughed as the pebble dropped onto the carpet.

With limbs and muscles he never knew he had, Mark reached down, astrally, to the bit of metal, and he picked it up again. Instantly, the weight was back.

It was a lot damned easier than lifting weights, that's for sure. With actual weights you had muscles you were using and vectors of gravity, and all of that junk. This tiny little pebble felt like an entire world, like grappling with gravity itself. It didn't matter where it was in Mark's astral body; he felt it everywhere. That's because it wasn't actually a gravity-based demand on his body at all. It was an astral demand, and the tiny pebble sucked up his entire astral body, the whole thing...

Or at least that's what it *had* been doing.

Mark grinned.

Mark's astral body was too strong for one pebble anymore.

As his Union danced to a rhythm of resilience and weakness, all the strain of the pebble remained at full strength. His astral body did not weaken with too much of a load upon it. All it did was get stronger.

It was like lifting weights and resting at the same time.

It was *not* the most mentally taxing thing that Mark had ever done.

But it was close.

With a smile, Mark tried moving his astral body, moving that tiny bit of adamantium, to reach down and press the pause button on the video. The black pebble bounced off of the tablet, and nothing happened.

Huh. Well. Guess that doesn't work.

Mark almost stumbled as he moved his actual body, to grab the tablet and set it back on to the bed, and then go back 20 minutes to see some of what he had missed.

On the video, Mark watched as Eliot and Isoko went out into the city, while Mark was incapacitated, and got some metals from some old cars.

In his room, Mark floated one pebble in his aura, gently orbiting it around a hand, and then up over his shoulders, and over his head, hitting the side of his head a bit because he messed up his 'new proprioception thing' happening here. He was a baby learning he had fingers and toes, and everything about this was so odd, but also really, really fucking cool.

Mark was moving around a tiny bit of the strongest metal known to man, with some sort of extension to his body he still didn't understand. The tiny bit of metal was like a lodestone to his nearby black veins, as it floated over his body. The absolute strangest thing about it, though, was that... Mark could *feel* the adamantium. Like. It was a finger. Or something.

Mark touched the carpet with it, and felt the softness of the carpet on the metal, though it was a dull sort of feeling. Mark touched the stone walls, and the stone was harder, but Mark accidentally put too much pressure on the adamantium and his whole body tilted the other direction. The adamantium was very

strong, but the floor was reinforced, and Mark's body was easier to move than the floor was able to be moved.

It was like pushing off the ground with a pinky finger. Mark had only been moved because he hadn't been ready for it.

Also, maybe that wasn't the strangest thing about it. Mark knew that kinetics used their various attuned things as 'parts of their body', so, tactile feedback? Sure! Why not.

And, perhaps more than anything else, Mark instinctively knew that as long as his astral body was strong, no one would be able to remove that bit of metal from his control. It was like a disconnected finger, that was still very much connected. If someone yanked on that metal, Mark would find himself yanked instead. They couldn't take it from him...

Which was pretty cool!

Mark made the mistake of trying to pick up a second pebble.

He crashed to the ground.

Air escaped him like a groan of annoyance, because that's exactly what it was.

- - - -

David frowned a little at the video feed, showing on the screen to the side. It was midnight, and Mark had moved on to his *third* pebble, and then promptly collapsed onto the ground again. That boy was... driven. Sure. Let's go with that. 'Driven'.

David thought he was trying to do too much, but that was the singular defining feature of all superheroes, so was he really doing a lot? Probably just enough to stay ahead of all the new demands placed on him, really.

He turned back toward the other Inquisitors in the meeting of the Collective.

Most of the people at the meeting were on tele-conference, and the conversation had not stopped when COFR had alerted them to Power use inside Mark's room, but it had briefly paused to ascertain the situation. David wasn't worried about Mark using his Powers. In the opinion of practically everyone here, the situation was fine.

But some hardliners from Daihoon were unconvinced, and those people were the ones that demanded this new meeting after they saw the public video of Eliot's training mission. It showed basically the same thing that David had transmitted, but in a bit showier way. That showier show had led to this.

Eliot certainly had the bardic spark, but David was glad that Eliot was giving up his bardic career for the good of humanity. In an odd sort of way, he was even glad that Eliot was in talks with Hearthswell's people. Castellán would do a lot more to keep Eliot safe than Freyala.

It was still a major upset to a very powerful political bloc, though, so David dared not speak those sorts of words and get involved in that sort of schism. People were already half-blaming David for Eliot's newfound appreciation for never-leaving-the-house.

David ignored those outside problems and focused on the present, for Lola was speaking again.

Lola, ever poised, repeated the same points she had already hammered on several times, as succinctly as anyone could hammer, "He's growing at a disastrous rate, but he's not an actual disaster, and I do not believe he will ever become a disaster. His own basic nature as a human-who-values-humans will not allow him to do such a thing. Adding to that: the simple rule of law is that we don't censure or control based on 'what ifs'. That goes triple when dragons try to control how humanity moves and acts."

David found himself nodding—

Lola did not drop it, though. She advanced, saying, “I move to formally close the case against Mark as a possible future threat, or hidden dragon, and deescalate his case from an 11 to a 5, with further deescalation to follow. Furthermore, I formally request for Crytalis and the Aluatha Empire to figure out some sort of plan for a settlement creation somewhere that Mark Careed, Isoko Kanno, and Eliot Cybersong can participate in, together. I know you already have tens of these plans already. I ask for one of them to be enacted.”

There was a moment.

Any paladin of Inquisitor rank was allowed to participate in these sorts of meetings, but most did not. Due to the nature of this particular event, and how far-reaching Mark’s whole deal went with ‘Addavein’, a lot of people were here in this meeting, though most everyone was tele-conferencing.

There were only 100 screens in the room, but those hundred screens showed 335 different groups, or individuals. Over a thousand people.

Even the gods were watching, though only through their people.

A lot of people tried to speak.

Moderator Chambers was the first to press a pause button, though the other Moderators were close behind. On Chambers’ screen, Chambers became illuminated in COFR gold and his image grew larger. He was an older man of normal looks from Crytalis, dressed in his normal mage robes and looking proper, as he said, “As one of the parties responsible for carrying out Inquisitor Lola Turner’s secondary request, I will be speaking of her first request, first. All of those in favor of deescalating the case of Mark Careed to a normal level of Inquisitor investigation, from an 11, world spanning threat, to a 5, a mage or superhero-level oversight, please say aye, now.”

David, Lola, Orissa, the Mind Reader Cheryl, and Holy Mother Julia Garin’s stand-in, a man by the name of Chase, all said, “Aye.”

Rapidly, votes started coming in.

David thought it was too premature to completely remove oversight on Mark, but dropping down the investigation from an 11 to a 5 was a good common ground. Lola probably could have gotten away with a 3, which was the common number for all *trainee* superheroes. Mark would warrant a 5 eventually, but he was still a trainee, right now...

Eh!

Mark was going to end up a 5, for sure. Might as well go for the end result right now.

As expected, when the votes came in and the AIs counted the votes, Moderator Chambers announced, “With a 78% agreement of the lowering of Mark Careed’s threat level, Mark Careed is lowered from an 11 to a 5. Breakdowns of the final votes will be given to all voting parties. Heavy dissent of this lowering has been noted by the Inquisitors of Crytalis.” With a calmer face, Chambers looked to Lola and said, “As for your secondary request for placements of Mark Careed, Isoko Kanno, and Eliot Cybersong, into a settlement program, I foresee this discussion taking a long while and ultimately arrive at no conclusion at all, for Eliot’s inquiries to Hearthswell have sparked something of a bidding war over him. I wish to table that discussion for a week.”

Lola was obligated to respond, so she did, “I request to be informed when that topic comes up for discussion in a week. Thank you.”

“So noted,” Chambers said, “Moving back to the discussion of Addavien, and since we’re here at the discussion of settlements, it should be noted that the dragon has spoken of founding a city since none of our cities are willing to take him in, in any capacity at all. I move we center the following discussion on this fact— Yes. Inquisitor Saikou Jawo, from Crytalis.”

Inquisitor Saikou was a purple-tinted man with bright blue hair and an angry expression, but that was just how he looked. Perhaps he might be slightly angrier than he truly appeared, though, because Saikou had been Addashield’s secondary oversight for the last 20 years. More of an oversight of tens of different cases than a true oversight, though, for Saikou was one of the main overseer Inquisitors located in the Aluatha Empire.

During his Fall, Addashield had killed his primary Inquisitor oversight, the understudy of the primary oversight, and everyone within a kilometer of them. Saikou was one of the survivors of that disaster, because he had been located far away from that disaster.

Saikou spoke with a calm voice, “There are many factors to consider with regard to Addavein and his desire to become human-adjacent, and thus live inside of a city, or at least nearby.

“Primarily, public sentiment is split about the dragon. Some of the Old Houses, built upon the bounty of benevolent dragons, wish to support Addavein. Many do not, considering how almost all of the dragons abandoned humanity once new lands opened up, and once unknowing subjects became available to subjugate and control. The few dragons who remained on Daihoon attempted to subjugate all of the people who remained—”

Some images on the screens lit up, for some people wished to speak on this matter.

A few people who wished to speak were almost furiously pressing their buttons.

Saikou had a few minutes to speak, though, and he was going to take his time.

“—and a few of those dragons would have been perfectly fine to have as rulers. Gedahowla the Bright. Darvonika the Obsidian. But those dragons fell to usurpers, and so we banished all dragons, and things have been a lot better since then. We no longer have to devote 20% of any and all city output to placating and honoring the whims of any dragons. We have equal say in our homes.”

Some of the people who ‘absolutely needed to speak’ based on the light around their images, sat back down, and decided to say nothing.

Saikou continued, “And so, I would not be surprised if, in the Aluatha Empire, House Ordell and House Varash attempt to support a dragon-led city. And especially one led by Addavein. There is already a lot of talk over here about how ‘disrespectful’ we’re being to a ‘Hero of Humanity’ who managed to make the ‘best dragon we’ve seen in recent history’, according to popular opinion. Addavein has yet to approach what Gedahowla and Darvonika have done for humanity, but he is headed in that direction.

“But I believe that anyone who allows Addavein into their cities or empires will open the gates for other dragons to come back into our lives, and thus we must guard against even Addavein gaining a city.

“That said... I believe the dragon will make major attempts to get a foothold in any city where Mark Careed goes, because I firmly believe that Mark, as talzarki to Addavein, will invariably invite Addavein into that city, and those new cities will not have the capabilities to resist that sort of pressure. He might not mean to, but his actions paint him as an uneducated good man, and he will try to cause the least harm, which means not inviting a dragon’s wrath.

“So perhaps we should focus the conversation on *containing* the problem of dragons and cities to a single city, somewhere, and thus solve and create a bunch of problems at the same time. Addavein’s creation has ignited a great deal of simmering sentiment about dragon overlords, and so, Addavein is going to get a city, one way or another.

“We should expect whatever happens with Mark Careed, Eliot Cybersong, and even Isoko Kanno with her connections to Crystal Tower, to make a city that both causes a great deal of problems, and also a great deal of solutions to a lot of current problems.”

Saikou finished.

David found himself deeply worried about dragons coming back into all of their lives, and he knew he was not the only one feeling that way.

Moderator Chambers said, “I believe that might be enough said on that entire subject for a while, for that is a lot to think about. Thank you, Inquisitor Saikou. A vote then, to move on to smaller topics, or to remain discussing Addavein. Please vote now.”

Soon the votes came through and Addavein as a topic was dropped.

297 groups faded from the screens as Chambers began reading off the next topic.

David stood up, and told his people, “I have places to be. I’m glad Mark got lowered in threat.”

Lola smiled softly as she stood as well. She told Holy Mother Garin's stand-in, "Thank you, Chase, for the alert."

Chase nodded. "I'll let you all know if Mark or the dragon come up again."

Eliot sat down across from Mom and Grandma in a small room on the third floor.

This was going to be the third discussion about this stuff, but the first one with Grandma here, and so far it was already feeling a lot more serious.

Elysia Cybersong was a 25-year-old-*looking* woman, with bright auburn hair, piercing blue eyes, and an agelessness to her that could only happen through demons, or True Healer treatments, and Grandma had opted for the True Healer treatments. She could afford that, and a hundred times over, too. She was actually something like 80-ish, but she did not look 80-ish at all.

Grandma opened strong, "I don't think you understand the main draw of Freyala, Eliot. Hearthswell's Castellan can make a city more protected and organized and run smoothly, and at first, that seems like a good thing. And it is! I have three Hearthswell Inquisitors that work for me. You've met them.

“They empower the walls I build. They make the computer systems flow better. They basically take the cities I make, and make them function better. This is great!

“But Freyala’s Union does something that few other Powers do. *It allows you to work endlessly.* You can put up a city wall that’s 20 kilometers in diameter in a day. You can protect yourself outside of your city, too. You’re never without truly good healing, Eliot, and you can learn to defend yourself, too. That’s a *big deal.*”

Eliot calmly said, “I hear and understand, Grandma, but you could have a Union Paladin heal, protect, and sustain you, couldn’t you? That’s what Mark did. If I went with Hearthswell, then I could do all of a city all by myself, and make sure that I’m actually protected behind very good walls.”

Grandma frowned a little. Mom gave a tiny, unhappy hum.

Eliot added, “One Freyalan Inquisitor, and then myself, is all I need to build an entire city.”

“A city that you would have to leave to other Hearthswellians,” Grandma said, “Because it needs people there to maintain what Hearthswell can do. You can’t maintain it from far away, or from another location. You’re locking yourself into one city if you pick Hearthswell.”

“I know that, but I can hand over the cities to other people and let them maintain it just fine.”

Mom added, “Didn’t you want to travel, Eliot? To see the two worlds? To be a bard?”

Images of mind goblins assaulted Eliot. The air itself felt prickly with teeth, but there were no teeth at all. Eliot knew he was safe, but... Was he? Really?

Eliot softly said, “I *did* want to see the two worlds.”

Mom and Grandma both got quiet.

Grandma said, “It was bad, wasn’t it. Mind goblins are the easiest ones to counter, too.”

Eliot exclaimed, “Yes! Exactly that! It was terrifying! They just... They just put me to sleep, like it was nothing!”

Eliot didn’t want to think about it, because thinking about it was like pulling off a bandage and seeing that his skin was rotten underneath, or maybe it was like touching a stove. It was bad.

Grandma nodded, knowingly.

Mom got a look of disbelief on her face as she looked at Grandma. “Mother?”

Grandma said to Eliot, “Thanks to Freyala, I haven’t needed to worry about mind monsters for 50 years. I’m a High Paladin, Eliot. You would be a High Paladin, too. You could still travel the world as a Freyalan. Hearthswellians put down roots. Do you want to live in one city forever that will make you dependent on that city? Or do you want to put up cities anywhere and everywhere, and never be beholden to those who run those cities? Because that’s what roots gets you; it gets people tugging at you, and you unable to leave them behind because you won’t want to leave them behind.

“I still remember bouncing you on my knee, talking about all my adventures on Daihoon, and how you wanted to see the grand falls, and the floating mountains, and the Half-There Ocean. Hearthswellians never get to see those places, except on television.

“Freyalans get to see all those places, and more.”

Eliot frowned a little, in thought.

Mom just waited.

Grandma waited, too.

... Dammit. Grandma was changing Eliot’s mind right back to Freyala, wasn’t she.

Isoko had been Chosen by Freyala.

But that was just the Goddess accepting Isoko, if Isoko wanted. The other half of the Choosing still needed to be done.

But how?

When she had left Mark and Eliot at that breakfast the other day, three days ago, she had been thinking of a great many things. From her uncertain present, with her burgeoning connections to Mark and Eliot. To her past, with Tokyo, and to Crystal Tower through her grandmother, Wandering Sage. To her future, and wherever that might take her, and to be allied with Mark and Eliot in ways that she was unable to fully reach, for her future was not nearly as big as either of theirs.

But Isoko had made peace with her Platinum Body, and it wasn't just lip service anymore.

During the goblin clearing, Isoko had come to terms with her Power, and she loved it. Mark would get laid out with overexertion. Eliot would need actual protection from constant threats. But Isoko would never stop. She would survive everything. There was a place for Isoko, wherever she wanted to be, because she did want to be a healer, a protector, and a killer of threats.

She liked being untouchable, and she could do that with Freyala's constant help.

She never spoke about her own history much with Mark or Eliot, which was a bit of a one-sided part of their partnerships, so maybe she should talk to them just to keep things even. Isoko had good reasons for wanting to be untouchable. It wasn't anything deep, though. Not like Mark's trauma, or Eliot's big obligations to his family, and the world.

Isoko just didn't want to be annoyed by other people anymore.

Growing up attached to Wandering Sage, the supervillain, had put quite a few stressors on Isoko, that most kids probably never felt. Fingernail polish dumped in her school bags, hair-pulls in hallways that dropped Isoko to the ground, tampons in her shoes, and even schoolyard fights. Isoko had experienced a whole bunch of childish shit that bothered her, but only because people were *trying* to bother her. The only truly terrible thing that had ever happened during her first 18 years of life was when her older sister, Riku, had gone into the Tutorial 5 years ago and never came out.

For a long while, the family assumed that she had just gone to Daihoon without telling anyone.

But then years passed, without a word.

So Riku was dead.

Honestly, Isoko had wanted to talk about her life with both Eliot and Mark, but Eliot always had cameras on and Mark... Well. He would have understood and commiserated, but Isoko could never talk to him about that. It would have been rude to talk to Mark about her own troubles when Mark had so many of his own.

Eventually, though, they would talk about it.

Because Isoko wanted to search for those mythical elves who could bring back the dead.

Mark hadn't latched on to that part of Addavein's words (because it was insane to try and bring back the dead, or search for elves) but Isoko certainly had latched onto those dreams uttered by a dragon. Even if she succeeded she fully expected to find it all nothing more than rumors that never went anywhere. But she wanted to try,

And so, Isoko needed power.

A lot of power.

Which had led to today, to choosing the path through the Freyalan Church that would get her the most power possible.

Some people went to Freyala in a System message, clicking off a box and declaring their attentions and choices in a private matter. Some went to a church, where they spoke to a priest who then asked questions and guided a person into the faith.

Isoko had been fraught with worry about her future. About what it all really meant, and about how she could ever hope to stand on the same stage as future superheroes... or supervillains, she supposed.

Isoko chose a traditional method.

Or rather, the traditional method chose her.

She had gone to bed last night, still wondering, sort of, what would happen next.

She woke up at 3 am due to a knock on the door. There was a clothing box sitting outside. The box had contained a simple white shift; basically a pleated white cotton bag, with holes for the arms and head. It was the traditional method of being inducted into the Church of Freyala, and now that the box was here, and the white shift felt soft in her hands, Isoko knew that she had made all the decisions she could.

It was time.

Freyala was calling, and Isoko would answer.

Isoko wore that shift now. She was not the only one wearing the same thing. 17 people stood near her, all of them wearing just a shift, and nothing else.

The ground was grassy and soft. The sun rose beyond the horizon, turning the world from gentle blues into true light. A golden sky glowed, announcing the start of a new day, alongside birdsong echoing in the trees.

The cleansing pool was brilliantly clear. Its banks were solid white marble. The basin was pure white stone, and a small fountain bubbled in the center. Tall white stone pillars stood around the pool, like the pillars of a roof of heaven.

The golden sky held the most colorful, beautiful clouds that Isoko had ever seen. The kind of clouds that Grandmother could only make when all things in life aligned correctly, from humidity, to time of year, to framing the sky from the proper viewpoint.

The beauty of today felt like something special, but also incredibly plain.

A comforting sort of beauty.

Instructor Charms was there, in the waters, wearing the same sort of outfit as everyone else, and nothing else. She was the half giant of a woman who sat on the far left of the instructor skybox. Here, the waters came up to her waist, and she looked a lot more gentle than usual. She smiled softly.

Isoko hadn't attended the last few days of Brawny Sparring, so she had kinda missed whatever had happened there, but she was glad that Charms was out here again. She always seemed like the best one of the instructors—

The first rays of sunlight touched the tops of the white pillars around the cleansing pool—

The first acolyte, a man Isoko's age, went in, walking across the grasses, stepping into the waters. He gasped a little as he touched the cold waters, as he stepped down into the basin, and his white shift clung to his skin, but also kinda floated.

Isoko watched as Charms said small words to the man, and then she took one of his hands into her own, and put a hand on his back. In a smooth motion, Charms dipped the man into the waters, hand too, all the way under. And then she brought him out and the guy was smiling, bushing off his face as though he had been crying, his face reddening a little bit as he chuckled and then walked out of the pool, away from everyone else.

One by one, people walked into the waters for a dip and then a walk out the other side.

No one rushed to get in. No one rushed to get out. Everything happened as it should.

Isoko recognized the dance after the third dipping. The air felt like Mark, but vastly wiser, and infinitely more powerful.

Freyala was here, and she was happy.

And then Isoko walked forward, right in time to the dance that was life.

The water was cold and Isoko's Platinum Body reacted to the stimuli, her body briefly flickering platinum and then retreating as Isoko recognized the stimuli as just cold water. She stepped down the step, into the basin, her shift floating around her, up to her chest, as she walked to Instructor Charms.

Instructor Charms smiled gently. "Hello, Isoko Kanno."

"Hello, Instructor Charms."

Charms took Isoko's hand in one of her own, and then she put a hand on Isoko's back, saying, "I'm glad I got to be the one to introduce you to Freyala."

And then Isoko splashed through the world itself.

--

Isoko opened her eyes.

She was sitting on a park bench, next to a woman in a sundress.

The woman was dark skinned, but also made of light. She was pale as alabaster, and pink like a sunset. Purple, now. And then green. She was every range of human coloring, and also just herself. Just a woman. No confusion about her at all.

She was the world, and the world was her.

She was Freyala, and her voice was Unity Itself.

“What is your choice, Isoko?”

Isoko breathed out, “A Slayer, and a killer of monsters. To travel the world and kill what needs killing, to save what needs saving, and to explore what needs exploring.”

Freyala nodded, as though Isoko’s decision wasn’t a thing she had just decided yesterday, but in fact the revealing of a truth that Freyala had seen long before Isoko had ever known her own destiny.

Freyala said, “You will start off a Nascent Red Slayer, then rapidly advance to Orange, to Yellow, and then to Green. A distant goal for you is to become a Dragon Slayer, or to belong to the team of a Dragon Slayer. That is what I need from you. That is what this Choosing demands from you, Isoko Kanno. There are no individual goals for you; only the big one at the end, and then a life fully lived as a Dragon Slayer, as best you can.

“You begin with the Union of Breath, *and* the Union of Blood. Good and Bad, Durability and Weakness, and Resilience and Weakness. You will have access to lesser versions of Purity and Impurity, Sustenance and Deprivation.

“In time, your limitations will be lifted, and expanded.

“You expected to be a simple Chosen, but I need you to be a Paladin, Isoko Kanno.

“The world needs you.”

Isoko’s eyes were wide as she felt an ineffability press down onto her and then pull her upward in a swirl of bliss that showed her all of reality.

Colors clashed.

Pain was forgotten before it was even felt.

Isoko expanded in every direction at once—

--

Strong hands pulled Isoko out of the water and Isoko brushed away tears and cold, clear waters from her face. She looked up at Instructor Charms, and wondered if the last moments with Freyala had happened, or not.

And then Charms smirked, an eyebrow raising, before she whispered, “Welcome back, *Paladin* Isoko.”

Words filled Isoko’s vision.

Attention Isoko Kanno!

You have entered into the Chosen System for the Goddess Freyala.

Current benefits: Union of Breath. Union of Blood.

Limited to these forms of Union: Good/Bad, Durability/Weakness, Resilience/Weakness,

Limited to these lesser forms of Union: Purity/Impurity, Sustenance/Deprivation

Current mission: Become a Nascent Red-ranked Slayer.

Distant mission: Become a Green-ranked Slayer, a Dragon Slayer, or a part of a Dragon Slayer’s team.

Charms patted Isoko’s back, saying, “Time to sign up for the Healer Club.”

Isoko grinned so very much. She wiped away a tear or two, and then she slipped on the bottom of the basin, flopping into the water some, only to laugh under the water, and then start swimming over to the exit.

She rose from the cleansing pool, feeling wonderful for her brief foray into the divine.

And then a priest of the church was there, handing out towels and a bag of Isoko's clothes that she had organized earlier, and ushering people into dressing rooms. Isoko slipped back to normal life easily enough, but nothing was the same. Nothing could ever be the same.

She felt *present* in a way she could not articulate at all.

That feeling would ebb and flow, and never really go away, from that moment forward.

There was an exit interview with some clerics, and Isoko got placed into the system of the Church easily enough. Soon, she had a badge, an ID, a rule book to follow for best practices, and a question.

“How much do you wish to be involved in the organization? At the lowest level, which you are now, you'll get big updates through COFR and be tied into the system for small updates, in whatever area you happen to be in. It's a whole thing, and you can check it out. All paladins get that. You can raise your position in the organization through accepting quests and such. Mostly, though, paladins are all driven by their own quests, so you don't have to be bigger in the organization at all, if you don't want to. But there's always work to be done and we can certainly find you some, if that is what you want. Taking on actual work pays actual money, too, so that's a good reason to increase your standing in the organization.”

Isoko shook her head. “I know where I'm going. I'll be paid money as a Slayer, too.”

The cleric nodded. “Very well, then. Now, as for learning about Union. Healer Club is always taking members, and...”

Mark had only left his room to eat. Isoko and Eliot, David and Orissa and Lola, had all visited, but Mark had not gone out to do a single thing. He was busy.

He was 'bodybuilding'. Astral bodybuilding, to be specific.

And now, four days after getting the pellets from Addavein, Mark felt accomplished.

He held up a hand and 7 droplets of blackest 'water' melted into one big drop that Mark then split into 8 pieces, to become 19 pieces, to become 37 pieces. His control over the exact form of the droplets was less than perfect, but it was good enough, for now. The drops still pulled at his black astral veins, but the pull was a lot less today than it had been when he first started. It was as though his astral body was stronger.

Because it was.

As the liquid drops floated in his astral body they deformed his black astral veins just a bit, and only when the drops swirled close to his veins.

It was harder to make them liquid than it was to just use them as-is, so Mark released his deep hold on the drops, and suddenly they turned as solid as, well, adamantium. They rolled across his skin like tiny marbles, in several lines of control, not deforming Mark's black veins at all.

Like he was moving a whole lot of fingers he didn't know he had, Mark moved the marbles into lines around his wrists, and then he turned them briefly liquid, joining the 'strings of black pearls' into bracelets. He released his control on the adamantium, not moving it around at all with his adamantium kinesis... but the adamantium was still firmly embedded in his astral body. To shake his hands, in an attempt to shake the adamantium bands on his wrists, was like... well. Like shaking his hands. His hands were still firmly attached to his body. The adamantium was still firmly attached to his astral body.

Sure, it wiggled some, but only because... Mark wasn't sure why it wiggled some, actually.

With a tension in his astral body (which was still weird to think about, and which was very different from using Union) Mark held the adamantium solidly in place, and wiggled his arms. This time, the bangles just held there, without falling any sorts of ways either up or down or this-way-and-that his forearms. It was like he had 'tensed his muscles', or something.

With a twist, Mark turned one of the bangles into two long needles, and then he poked the air, as though jabbing with a punch. He stepped left and right in his room, jabbing the air with his fists, and then with the adamantium spikes—

He accidentally pulled back too far, and one of the spikes crashed into Mark's shoulder, while the other slipped through his shirt, to impact his ribs. Briefly, Mark panicked, but there was no pain, because of course there was no pain. Mark sighed a little, and then he looked at the fresh set of holes in his shirt, and also at the bent black spikes, hovering in the air.

He couldn't hurt himself with adamantium, but it was still kinda freaky to hit himself with it and not be injured at all.

Mark reformed the bent spikes into solid metal... He grinned.

He looked at the floor.

Carefully, very carefully, Mark made four 'coins' of adamantium, each two inches across, and then he pushed against the floor. It was like trying to do a handstand, but with his astral body, and not like a handstand at all. Mark tilted left and almost fell but he concentrated on his weird 'new muscles', and he balanced himself out.

"Hehehehehe."

Mark lifted into the air, just an inch, and that was almost too much. His astral body tired, his adamantium felt almost outside of his control. But Mark's heart beat with resilience and weakness, and Mark lifted himself off of the ground.

A full 6 inches!

And then a full foot!

Mark giggled maniacally as he hovered on legs and arms that were not legs and arms, but was more like an amorphous blob of astral body that was not his maximum distance at—

Mark faltered a bit, flopping back down to the ground, feeling exhausted. He smiled and laughed and gathered his adamantium back up into bracelets.

... But were bracelets really the best form to keep it in?

It took concentration to change the shape, and was actually kinda hard to change the shape. It had taken Mark two entire days to realize how to make the stuff liquidize and become something other than pebbles. That whole process made what Addashield had done with the rapid transformation of a droplet of adamantium into a whole bunch of different shapes that much more impressive.

Actually moving the stuff around was as easy as moving an arm, or a hand, or whatever. It wasn't like the adamantium couldn't actually pierce his body unless Mark really tried to do exactly that. There was a reason that Addavein used big spikes of adamantium; they were weapons when they were shaped like that. Mark transformed the bracelets into spikes that he...

Well.

Where was he gonna put spikes?

Behind his ears? Might help to protect his head, some.

Could he turn them into a bunch of spikes and hide them in his hair? That would be better for protecting his head than ear-spikes...

Mark made six needles and he laid them on the insides of his forearms. They sat pretty flush with his skin there, so that seemed good. Mark practiced moving around the needles with fast deployments and more methodical defenses, and kinda just had fun with it—

Mark had a moment, looking down at the adamantium that touched his skin.

This was technically like... 36 million goldleaf worth of adamantium, wasn't it. Mark wasn't sure what the current going-rate was for adamantium, because the dragon had certainly crashed *some* of that economy. But this was still a lot of adamantium.

... Mark just stared at it for a while.

He thought of Mom, and Dad, and Dad's fish yank, and Mom's cleansing waters.

Mark concentrated on all of his adamantium to turn a black blob into a fish. Making the body of the fish was easy enough, but delicate features proved to be impossible. Mark tried to make fins, and he ended up pulling blobs away from the main body. He tried to make scales and he divided the fish in half. Eventually, he managed to make short, stubby fins and attach some blobs of black to make exaggerated eyes. He couldn't make the scales with his own sense of pressure, or touching, for he wasn't that refined yet with his kinesis. But he could use a fingernail to press crescents into the adamantium, to give the little fish some 'scales'. That worked quite well, so he proceeded to sculpt the rest of the fish with his actual fingers.

Soon, he had a perfect, tiny little fish. Like a bait fish. Like one of Dad's fish clips.

The tears came, and they didn't stop for a while.

Mark held onto that little fish in his hands and curled up around it, crying, and then he lay down on the carpet, and he kinda just stared at the ceiling as he floated the fish above him.

--

It was Christmas, and Mark was a kid, watching Dad decorate the tree, while Grandpa made popcorn for the movie, and Mom sat with Mark, trying to figure out which movie they were going to watch. Mark remembered looking over and watching Dad finish off the tree. He had done most of the decoration two days ago, but he had found some tinsel and he wanted to put it up.

Little fishclips swam through the colored lights, though the air, fluttering with collections of streaming silver tinsel among the green boughs and hanging decorations. The fishes landed here and there on the tree to leave their streamers behind, while the air smelled of popcorn and cheese, and Mom said something about this or that movie being a good one.

Mom saw Mark looking at Dad decorate the tree.

Mom called out to Dad, "Markus! Curtain Protocol!"

Dad had just smiled and said, "What! He's all the way on the other side of the room."

Grandpa had come in with all the popcorn, floating on little disks of water, saying, "Popcorn! Popcorn! Popcorn~"

And the conversation about the fishclips flying around the tree had never finished.

--

Mark watched a black, adamantium fish float above him, solid and inflexible. It did not glint in the light at all. Mark tried to make it move using just his astral body, to flex and shake its tail as though it was actually swimming, but he just broke it in half. One crudely-made fish broke into several differently-sized clumps of black.

With a sigh that was also a breath of Union, Mark cleansed himself of his drying tears.

Mom would have been happy for his cleansing/healing/protecting Union, and Dad would have been proud of his kinesis.

He wanted to talk to them so much.

... Which is probably why Addavein had spoken of both resurrection magic, and elves, and also how he wanted to explore Endless Daihoon eventually. Maybe he wouldn't have spoken of those if Mark hadn't asked. But...

"Chasing the dead, or moving on..." Mark whispered to himself, as he tried to remake a fish with just his sense of kinetic touch. It did not go well. He managed to make a crude fish... which was just as well. Mark turned the fish into needles and held them against his forearms, and then he sat up. "I need to sign up for the Slayers, anyway."

Mark got up.

He had not really known it before it had happened to him, but there was only so much pain he could think about before those bad feelings just started rolling away from him. He was absolutely sure that Union was helping him cope with the hardest hitting parts of his feelings of loss, too. But was that okay? Was it okay to start feeling good about... about anything at all?

Mom and Dad were dead.

They would want Mark to be... happy... right?

His parents were dead because he tried to help out an archmage, and all of the world thought that the outcome was a good one.

For a while, Mark just lay there, thinking about emotions and motivations and the future.

Mark had promised himself that he wasn't going to turn villain because all the world was pointing him in that direction, to be consumed with vengeance, but... Shit.

"... I need to sign up for the Hero/Villain Program, too."

Mark lay there for a while longer.

And then he got up.

He'd sign up for the Hero/Villain Program soon enough, and the Slayers, too.

But first! A trip to the Healing classrooms, for a Scan.

After a walk in the sunshine and a little bit more cleansing magics applied to himself to wipe away a stink of despair, Mark stepped into the Healing Hall, walking past acolytes and professors who were headed this way or that way.

Not a single person who got within ten feet of him ignored him. There were small glances. Bigger glances. Double takes. One woman dropped her books when she saw Mark, which was quite odd. She gathered them up fast enough, though. Mark didn't even get a chance to help her pick them back up.

Mark made it to the scanning closet just fine. The lights lit up inside, and soon, he got his readout.

Body, Healthy Body: 056

Shaper, Adamantium: 077

Mind: 41

Natural, Union: 068

Soul: 39

Arch: 32

"Neat!" Mark said, dismissing the glowing lights in the air.

Healthy Body was more than double what it usually capped at, which was bound to introduce some weirdness...

... Why had people been looking at him funny?

Mark left the room and went to a nearby bathroom, with a big mirror.

“Ah. That’s why.”

His complexion had changed.

He used to have brown hair, brown eyes, and with a pretty normal white-guy kinda coloring. His skin had remained the same... probably. His irises had turned from brown to silver and black, though, while the roots of his hair were turning black. Darker than black, actually. Adamantium-black.

So that was the dragon’s fault, probably.

Mark would complain to him the next time he saw him.

Mark’s face looked... Hmm. That was his face. Yes. But also a bit... Hmm.

His body looked... Hmm. The same? ish? He lifted up his shirt. Still had great abs. His clothes did feel a little tight, though, so maybe it was time to get a larger set of basic browns. Maybe Healthy Body was increasing his mass and size, like most brawny Powers did. Healthy Body didn’t have a strength modifier, but Healthy Body usually didn’t go above PL 25, and yet Mark’s Healthy Body was already at PL 56.

Adamantiumkinesis was barely at the minimum required level to work on adamantium, which was a PL79 Shaper material. Adamantium was also partially Body and Arcane... And, actually, Mark needed to research that more, to find out what, exactly, adamantium was, and if different sources of adamantium had different properties, or if it was all the same. It was a biometal. Surely there was nuance to it.

Union had actually fallen behind Adamantiumkinesis, because a person needed to work their Power against a PL-equivalent or stronger opponent, and Mark wasn’t doing much of that right now, but Mark had been using Union to recover his astral body faster, so he could lift the adamantium better. So that still helped there.

Mark's Mind, Soul, and Arch levels were all raised due to the other three growing stronger.

... He hadn't changed that much?

"Do I look that much different? ... Not really. You can't even tell the eyes are silver without... Well. Actually. Yeah. You can tell— Oh."

Mark was probably a little famous, or something.

Yeah.

Mark walked out of the bathroom, and then out of the Healing building—

He caught sight of a scale and a height measuring stick just inside of a classroom, to the right. It was an empty classroom for the moment, so Mark went and checked himself out.

Three minutes and a few double checks later, and Mark was now absolutely sure that his clothes were probably too tight. They were meant for someone who was 6'3" and 220 pounds, but Mark was now 6'5", and 252. Which was a lot higher than it felt like! Even his shoes felt tighter now that he was really paying attention to that. The adamantium was only half of a pound of the stuff, too, so that wasn't much of anything at all.

Mark walked, a little self-conscious, toward the tram. He got off at Citadel of Freyala Resources, the main depot.

Half an hour later, Mark walked out into the sun once again, wearing looser basic brown clothes that felt a lot better. People still eyed him, but not overmuch. He looked more or less like a brawny, and not one that was trying to show off, or something weird like that.

... He kinda wanted to go to the gym and see where his other numbers were at.

No no no. Work first. Get it done, Mark.

Mark rode the tram to Central Citadel, to the offices of the Slayers and the Hero/Villain Program, and tried not to wonder how much he could bench press now.

Maybe 375? I had been pushing 310, but... Maybe 350?

Maybe a lot more!

That'd be neat!