

The offices of the Slayers and the Hero/Villain Program were both located in Central Citadel, on the western side, closer to the airfield. A lot of worldly corporations, guilds, organizations, foundations, and all the other ways that people could be organized, had offices there. There were even, surprise surprise, unions.

Mark smirked as he saw a sign for 'Steelworkers Union' with a sign hanging out front that spoke of magical item creation and getting good prices for work, both recurring and freelance, and helping new crafters get into good locations. They primarily worked with steelcraft, which was... some sort of way to craft magical items, Mark supposed? He wasn't sure.

The office was small, but it had a nice front window. A solid steel statue of Freyala with wings and a sword took up almost the entire window. It was quite pretty.

'Worldly Road' was the name of the road that Mark walked down, and that moniker showed everywhere. Firstly, the street was massive. Easily twenty meters wide. Big trees grew in the center, reaching high and shading the land from the bright sun. People were everywhere. The businesses on both sides of the street were broken up with cafes with seating under umbrellas on the street, and little shops that sold stuff from this part of Daihoon, or that part of Earth. The buildings on both sides of the street also had multiple levels. Mostly two levels, but as Mark walked down the street, he saw a few three story buildings here and there, and there was even a 20-ish story building further down the way.

Most of these places were satellite offices, with main offices located here and there across the world, from Tokyo to New London, to Nigeria and elsewhere. Maps held outside of most offices that showed where the satellite office's primary office was located.

A lot of the magical stores were a part of the Aluatha Empire. That place was located on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, where Mexico and Central America were located, but on the other side of the Veil on Daihoon. The Aluatha Empire had a bunch of smaller cities located all across North America. Not South America, though.

On their side of the Veil, Aluatha had built a rather famous wall across the land-bridge that separated North and South America, because of some horrors located in South America. There were no Daihoon cities down past that wall, though that was changing post-Reveal. They were trying to take back South America's Daihoonian equivalent... But Mark didn't know much about that whole *thing*, except for that... probably wrong bit of trivia.

The Aluatha Empire was the biggest empire on Daihoon, with the largest successes both in territory and population, so they had a large showing here on Worldly Road.

Next up was the Dominion of Okuana. They were located on the other side of the Veil right here, in the Europe-ish area. They were half the size of the Aluatha Empire, but their cities were the safest, since they were made of trees and stuff that all actively ate monsters. Most people didn't want to live inside nature preserves, though. Mark was pretty sure he didn't want to live in a nature preserve, either.

... But living in an Okuanan city would make using sustenance/deprivation a lot easier, and he did like plants, in a sort of 'yeah that's neat' sort of way. He could even do some basic magic with plants, too, supporting them. So Okuana had a certain appeal.

Aluatha was all about elemental magics and ripping the world apart to make it habitable for people. Not many plants grew in Aluathan cities.

The last Daihoon empire was the Settlement of Xerkona, but Mark didn't see any of their offices, and they were mostly about making sure places worked well, anyway. They mostly existed inside other empires. They did have a few actual cities scattered across Daihoon, though, located mostly on the other side of the Veil from the Earth nations of Kazakhstan and the Caspian Sea and those sorts of places.

The Xerkona culture was incredibly influential across all of Daihoon, because it was their generals and their mages and archmages who helped everyone they could, with politeness and aplomb, before they went on to help other people—

Oh! There was an office for Xerkona. Pretty small. Looked like an information kiosk, too, what with the great big sign on top saying that they would happily help people with information. They were even talking to some people right now.

Neat!

And then there were the offices for various Earth-based places.

The East Coast Union had a nice big office. Mark wanted to go in there and ask what was happening to Orange City, to find out what had happened to his former home, but... Mark kept walking.

Over there were offices for the Central Cities, and then California, which had taken over much of the eastern coast of the former United States of America and unified it into a country all its own. A lot of Old World major cities and states had been completely destroyed by the Reveal, but a lot of them came back, and in different forms. California was its own nation. Central and Eastern United States had been fractured hard, with the various powers that arose during the Reveal all deciding to go their own way. The Colorado Rockies was a whole nation now, too, which Mark almost wanted to go see, but not really.

Mark kept looking around, trying to find the offices of the Slayers, or the Hero/Villain Program, or Crystal Tower; whichever came first.

He saw signs for Nigeria, and South Africa, and—

Oh!

There's the Hero/Vil—

Ah. Nope.

Just a sign for Tokyo and Japan. Not Crystal Tower or the H/VP. They even had a sign out front that said 'Not Crystal Tower!' and an arrow pointing further down the street, saying Crystal Tower was that way. The sign was well-made on actual laminate, or plastic, or whatever it was, which showed that they needed to tell people this was 'Not Crystal Tower!' all the time.

Mark walked on.

There was a sign for some place called Lake Eyre, Australia, which had some really dramatic pictures from before the Reveal and after the Reveal, and the flooding of the world. Mark stopped and read. Previously, the lake was some sort of 'rainy season lake', and the land around the lake was a desert. But since the Reveal and due to a bunch of efforts, both personal and from the Dominion of Okuana, the lake had been turned into a year-round lake, and the desert basin was green with life. It was pretty far inland, and pretty shallow, so it was a rather 'a safe place to live!' according to the signs. Mark believed that. Shallow lakes couldn't hide much, while also allowing a lot of fish and other life to thrive.

Mark looked inside the windows and saw some guy on his computer, typing away.

Mark kept walking.

Some people noticed him, but not really. He was just a brawny-looking guy wearing basic browns, which... stood out a little bit. Most people had money and real clothes.

But! Of those who were wearing basic browns, brawnies were the vast majority. It was that growing-body thing they had going on, and which Mark sort of shared with them. Even his hair was changing. His hair was still brown for the moment, but it would be growing in black thanks to that dragon.

Maybe he should go get it buzzed right now.

Mark walked down Worldly Road, and eventually he found one of his two destinations.

The Slayers.

It looked like a bank.

It was a medium-sized office space, with some big double doors that were open. Mark walked inside, through a gently rushing air curtain that kept the cold air in the building. The floor was white-ish concrete and the walls were wood pillars and white plaster. An angled counter divided the front room in half. A series of poles and ropes further delineated the public space into a line that zigzagged back and forth. A few people were in line to talk to the people behind the counter, of which there were three.

Mark got in line.

He listened to the other people as they met with the tellers and got business taken care of, which seemed to follow a pattern that Mark had never seen before, but which was easy enough to understand. The customer would take out an emblem from around their neck, scan it by running it across a black box on the counter, and then they would start their business.

Mark listened to one of them.

“Yes, Mister Julioz. How may I help you?”

“Returning from rounds. Took a quest to kill some bears and some frogs and also did a patrol in the area. Frogs are impossible. Team can’t do it. They’re flying and invisible. We almost lost a member. She’s recovering in the hospital. Bears are gone, though. Round otherwise complete. Around 2,000 kills.”

The woman typed away at a computer, nodding, saying, “Understood. Looks like the frogs will be upgraded to a higher threat level and their quest will be reissued accordingly. I’m glad your team is otherwise okay...” She paused, then said, “Looks like you’re up for an honesty check.” She brought out a black stone that she set down on the counter between them. “Hand on the rock.”

Julioz placed his hand on the rock, without complaint or anything resembling anger at all, which kinda surprised Mark. To be called into question like that... But maybe this was a routine thing? It might have been routine.

The teller asked, “Where did your patrol take you?”

“Northwest #18 patrol route, COFR-made and approved variant to the normal route. We cleared out every monster along the way, except for the frogs.”

“How many monsters did you kill?”

“Around 2,000.”

“The outcome of your targets?”

“Bears are dead. Nest burned and young exterminated as much as our scout could find. Frogs had some sort of mutation that wasn’t listed on the threat ranking that made them invisible and maybe even intangible. They were definitely flying, too. Not just jumping real good. We had to get out of there.”

The teller nodded. “You can take your hand off, Mister Julioz.” The teller tucked the black dome-thing under the lip of the counter on her side, as she said, “That’s 1,000 gold leaf for a completed round and 200 extra for the bears. The frogs have been upgraded in threat from Red to Orange, and their bounty has increased from 200 to 400. We’re sorry your team encountered a mutation, but we’re happy you survived. Would you like us to split your funds between your members? Or all to the team leader?”

“Split ‘em up, but 100 from my account to Orneka..”

There were some more small words past that, but Mark had made it through the line and was being beckoned to stand before one of the tellers.

Mark walked forward to a man who was probably a brawny, based on his size. The guy looked to the scanner that held to the side, like some sort of card swiper, but Mark had no tag, or whatever it was people were showing off.

Mark said, “I want to sign up with the Slayers. This is my first time in one of these offices.”

The guy went, “Ah! We’re glad to have you.” He went right into a spiel, “Would you like to fill out paperwork yourself, or have an AI do it for you? If you’re an acolyte here, COFR can fill out the paperwork for you, and we accept COFR’s reports as valid. Otherwise we still need personal AIs and all information on the paperwork to be... verified through... a third party AI...” The guy kinda looked at Mark, and his speech kinda trailed off there at the end. He blinked. His eyes went wide. He said, kinda loudly, “Oh!”

Some people looked this way. Some people behind the teller, sitting at desks, also looked this way.

Some guy stood up in the back of the room and started walking this way.

Mark said, "I'll do the COFR-fill-out-thing, if it'll let me."

Mark saw a golden glow overtake the teller's monitor, but only from the side. He couldn't tell what was actually happening on the screen. The teller glanced at the screen, then back to Mark, then back to the screen. The guy who had been at the back of the room came fully forward by then.

The teller jolted at the appearance of the other guy, but then he relaxed.

The teller bowed toward Mark, and then stepped away.

The guy from the back, the supervisor, Mark assumed, took the teller's place. He smiled and said, "Hello, Mark Careed. Welcome to the Slayers. When we heard you were interested in us we hoped for the best, and we're glad to see that the best won out, and especially after that training mission video. I'm Slayer James Ietho, Yellow Rank. You can call me James, Mister Careed." James gestured to the side, to a hallway that led to a few different rooms. "Would you please join me for an interview? It will take 10 minutes, then we can make you an official Slayer."

Mark said, "Sure, uh, James. Nice to meet you."

James smiled a little and walked to the side, past an archway and into the hallway.

Mark followed, but he also glanced behind him.

A few people were bowing.

... Which was intensely uncomfortable. What had Mark done to deserve that?

James opened the way into a room, and Mark went in with the guy.

Mark found himself sitting in a comfortable, but sturdy chair, across from James, sitting in the same sort of chair, with a table between them—

“Do you know what Slayers do?” Jame asked, getting right into it.

“Mostly they do routes around cities and specific monster-kill quests, as denoted by the various powers-that-be inside of a city. You’re paid by taxes in the cities and you pay out to Slayers based on quest level, while only allowing Slayers of certain ranks to access certain levels of quests. It’s mostly working for money, and being honorable about it.”

James grinned. “There’s some nuance, specifically with the ‘honorable’ part, but that is pretty much the whole thing, yes. The Slayers organization goes back centuries, but it’s always been in existence in some form or another, to be crushed under the heel of some dragon and then rise under the auspices of a different dragon, to take care of problems that they don’t want to deal with themselves. You can replace ‘dragon’ with any great organization of power out there, and that covers 90% of our history.

“We’re mercenaries who have a good reputation.

“The version of the Slayers that exists these days mostly deals with the trash that cities and other organizations cannot be bothered to deal with themselves. Trash routes out into the middle of nowhere. Monsters that need killing, but which are hard to find and kill. Distant problems. Monsters that aren’t worth anything to kill. That sort of thing. Usually we’re just supplemental. If you go to a guardhouse or place like that, they usually outright tell us they have no work for us, but they always do. You just have to find the local office.

“And in some places, like here at Citadel Freyala, we’re one of the major backbones of the city’s normal defenses.

“This is for many different reasons, but it started off this way because Freyala loves us, and we love her.

“Because of that, we’re allowed to have actual power here. We have teams coming in here all the time, from all over the two worlds, to find acolytes of Freyala, or anyone with healing and protection magics, to take and go out into the rest of the Two Worlds and make real differences.

“We’re nomads that do bitch work that needs to be done, and who can fit in anywhere. Sometimes we take on the deeper threats, out there in the deep wilds. The ones that will only occasionally threaten a city, but which aren’t currently big threats.

“And we always stand up and fight when the kaijus come roaring. That’s the major difference between us and adventurers. ‘Adventurers’ is a bad word around here!” James said, with a grin. “And so, because we’re honorable, that’s the only reason we have much power here at all, but we don’t have much real power at all, Mark.

“If you came to us for power, that’s not how this works. Did you come to us for power?”

Mark felt a little weird at the mention of dragons crushing the Slayers and also raising the Slayers from the ashes, or whatever, but then James kept talking, and Mark felt better and better about this decision by the minute.

Mark answered, “I have power. I want to prove myself and fit in anywhere. Explore the Two Worlds. All of that stuff. And I need legitimacy. Can the Slayers give me the legitimacy I need to move freely?”

James solidly said, “We do legitimacy quite well. The Slayers routinely engage with City AIs to verify quest completions through truth magics and otherwise. We’re an honorable organization, and you’re expected to be honorable as a Slayer, in all aspects of your life. That means a lot of different things to different people, but the only actual laws we have are simple to list. No extrajudicial killing of fellow humans. No stealing from humans. Complete the quest, but if you can’t, then report that you can’t, and why. Lesser laws include ‘doing bitch work quests if they’re on the list for a while, even if they don’t pay well’, and stuff like that. We’re protecting humanity, and mostly that is messy, time-consuming work.

“Most of our work is on Daihoon, though we do have some here on Earth, though not nearly as much.

“Does that seem like something you want to do?”

Mark grinned. “Absolutely. I’ll be going to Daihoon, too.”

James smiled a little. “Glad to hear it. So everyone starts off as a Nascent Red Slayer, and you will, too.

“Our ranking system is the color scale, from Nascent Red, to Red, to Nascent Orange, to Orange, all the way to Purple. It’s only 6 ranks, with 6 intermediary testing ranks. You have to clear Red quests easily before you’re allowed to advance to Nascent Orange, and then take on Orange quests. As soon as you

can prove yourself on the easy Orange quests, then you can become Actually Orange, and take any Orange quest you want.

“And so on and so forth.

“F-rank Powers can usually clear Red quests just fine. E-rank Powers can usually do Orange quests. Etcetera.

“Red quests are killing nuisance monsters. Bears, flying fish, etcetera.

“Orange quests are killing dangerous nuisance monsters.

“Yellow quests are killing threatening monsters, as in threatening to cause a monster wave, or directly threatening a settlement. A lot of Orange quests turn Yellow if they’re not taken care of well enough.

“Green quests are *dangerous* threatening monsters. Goblins are Green quests. Most sapient, humanoid-type monsters are Green quests. Individual bands of goblins and such are lower ranked, but the goblin settlements are always Green rank quests. We usually do *not* go after those, because then they come after us, but we absolutely kill them wherever they are inside of our lands, or around our settlements.

“The majority of powerful Slayer work is done in Green, and it’s broken down from tier 1 to tier 10.

“Blue is for kaiju quests.

“Purple is for dragon quests.

“Slayers don’t usually go after Blue or Purple quests, because most places-that-exist have people that can handle kaiju or otherwise, or else they wouldn’t be places-that-exist. We do have more than a few rapid-response Slayers that can help in those situations, though. Those are the Dragon Slayers. You’d call them superheroes here on Earth.

“Most Slayers stop at Green, if they’re able to get that far at all. Maybe Green 5, Green 6.

“I would expect you to eventually become a Purple-ranked Slayer, but you’re an outlier.

“Everyone needs a team, but you don’t need to have everyone on your team be a Slayer to be allowed to do Slayer quests, or get paid for quests. However, when you register for a quest, that team registers, and everyone on that team gets a team ranking, based on the teams they are on. In addition, everyone has an individual ranking that is usually a lot lower than their team ranking.

“It seems like a lot right now, but it’s pretty simple in practice.” James asked, “Any questions?”

Mark thought for a second.

“I have... so many questions—” Mark paused. “Language! That’s first. I heard there’s about a hundred of them.”

James said, “English is spoken by most people because it was already spoken by most people on Earth at the time of the Reveal, but there’s also Mandarin, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish. If you can speak two of those, then you can usually communicate with someone over on Daihoon. As for Daihoonian languages, they speak Farnal, Getana, Dragonal, and Xerk. Xerk is perhaps the most widespread, due to the Settlement of Xerkona. They’re the Speakers and the major diplomats who try to make inroads with almost everyone. If you want to learn 1 language, I suggest Xerk.

“As for *actually learning* the languages, I suggest you seek out a Mind Expansion Minder. The effects of their Powers fade over a week or two, but that’s usually enough to start learning a language on your own. Most major cities have one at the entrances to the cities that will imbue their Power onto you for a small fee. The *really* big cities usually have someone at the intakes that can limit their Expansion to language acquisition only, and forgo the usual side effects of such a Power,” James finished with, “If you’re taking a boat to Daihoon, most agencies will throw in a good Expansion if you ask for it, and pay for it. It’s a 500 goldleaf standard fee last I checked.”

Mark grinned at that. “Thank you. That sounds...” Mark had... some money? He wasn’t actually sure what the banking situation was... like, at all. He had completely avoided even thinking about buying stuff or his parents bank accounts or any of that—

James asked, “Is everything alright?”

Mark blinked and came back to himself. “Yes! Sorry. That’s all of my questions, actually. Can I sign up now?”

James smiled, stood, and gestured to the door, saying, “Let’s see what COFR has to say about paperwork.”

Over the next ten minutes, Mark filled out some small parts of paperwork himself, which was mostly verifying that COFR had filled it all out correctly. A few thumbprints on a few different devices here and there, and then Mark put a hand to a truthstone and answered questions that all seemed pretty normal. ‘Do you have any intention to bring harm to other humans?’ ‘Can you uphold the Code of Conduct as described here, and which you already signed as read and understood?’

“Do you have plans to work with monsters to undermine humanity?”

Mark almost asked James if Addavein counted, but he figured a big fuck-off dragon who was trying to be a Hero of Humanity did not count, and even so, the question was about ‘undermining humanity’, which already had an easy answer.

“No,” Mark answered. “I will not undermine humanity with any of my actions.”

James subtly raised an eyebrow as he looked at his screen, and then he moved on to the next questions.

It was basic stuff.

Soon enough, Mark got a solid-state badge that was black hexagon with barely-red edges. It was some sort of computer thing, or something. Every Slayer had one. James made a big deal of telling him that it was not a recording device and that Mark did not have to keep it on himself at all points in time, and that it did not function as any sort of ID, except as a Slayer. They were easy to replace, too, because ‘they get destroyed in fights all the time, so don’t worry about replacements’. Mark could get another badge as easily as heading into any big Slayer office, and getting ID’d by the City AIs. They’d be happy to print Mark out another ID for just a small fee of 5 goldleaf.

“But the first one is free!” Jame said, like it was a joke.

Mark just smiled, because he didn't get the joke.

Not too long later, Mark walked out of the Slayer office with a badge around his neck, hanging from a stainless steel military-like necklace. It felt good to have it there.

It felt like a big step forward.

Mark asked his phone, "COFR? Is the Slayer badge a tracking device?"

His phone glittered gold and words appeared, *'The Slayer badge is little more than an artificial mana crystal that has a name, number, and ranking attached to it. The main use of the badge is to more easily link a person to the Slayer database, which contains actual information. The badge can be tracked by special means, but the same is true of practically everything. The badge has no specific tracker on it, in it, or near it, unless the user puts one there, which some people do. Your badge has none of that.'*

Mark grinned as he read that while he walked—

Mark paused.

He asked, "COFR? Should I get a personal AI?"

'Based on projections and standard situations that one might find out in the world, you need a Tech Minder of some sort to prevent your tech from being corrupted to foul ends. I can build you a personal AI from myself and accomplish much of this, which is a rather normal arrangement for most graduates of Citadel Freyala, but a strong enough Tech Minder could invalidate your AI anyway. As such, any AI I grant you will not be a living AI, but instead a link to me, which will allow me to contact you regarding various important information. Your personal AI would remain your own.'

Mark felt confident enough, after having dealt with COFR for a couple of months now, to say, "I accept the offer. Thank you."

The phone flickered gold and then faded to silver.

'Please name your Personal, non-living AI.'

Mark didn't know what to name it, at first, but that silver color sparked a memory. When he had been doing the Color Drop treatment, Orange City had installed a techno-organic silver box in the corner of the living room. It had burrowed roots into the house and been Mark's 'not really personal AI' for a brief time. And then the house had been destroyed.

Mark couldn't ever get that house back, but he could at least carry some part of it around with him, even if it had been a very new part.

Mark said, "Quark. That's your name. Quark."

The phone flickered gold and then faded to simple, solid silver.

'Hello, Mark Careed. I am your Personal AI, Quark. I am an offshoot of Citadel of Freyala Resources, and am here to keep your information in good working order, and to allow for easier verification at various checkpoints. Please bear with me as I update to functionality and gather information about your person. Estimated update time: 2.7 minutes.'

The phone faded to a simple black rectangle.

Mark grinned and put the phone into his pocket.

He headed down the road, toward the Hero/Villain Program headquarters, which was also the location for the Crystal Tower embassy.

It was the 20-story building.

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Mark walked into an atrium of glass and light and business, with people in suits talking with people in normal-ish clothes, and other people walking with purpose, with their heels clicking on the white marble flooring. Overhead, steel sculptures of superheroes and supervillains floated in the air... or rather they were held up by well-hidden cables and support structures. There was Glorious Man, rushing forward with a punch against Nightterror, who reeled back while Wandering Sage, Isoko's grandmother, twisted the battlefield with blades of wind. There were dozens of major figures, all supported from the ceiling, all fighting their own battles.

Mark didn't recognize many of the fights, but he was pretty sure that Wandering Sage's fight against Glorious Man up there was the one that happened when Wandering Sage grabbed that True Healer and jumped the line to get Isoko's mother treated for cancer. It was a big story, 13 years ago...

Oh.

No.

It was *not* a tableau of history.

The 'fight' Mark was seeing was more of a 'this is generally how it is' and less of a specific fight. Nightterror was Glorious Man's usual big enemy. Wandering Sage was there in the background... Yeah. This wasn't a historical thing at all.

All the other fights seemed the same way, actually. Was it a marketing thing? Maybe—

"Greetings," said a man in black, standing a bit away from Mark. He looked... kinda evil. Black suit, purple undershirt, slicked back hair. It was a look with a purpose, for sure. "I'm Gaston Lussier, AKA Shadowlock. I'm a liaison for the Worldwide Villain Program out of Crystal Tower, here at Citadel Freyala for various reasons."

Ah.

They had come out to meet him, then.

Mark felt a weight settle upon him. A weight of duty? Perhaps.

Mark said, "Hello. I'm Mark Careed. I'm here to sign up for the Villain program... for various reasons."

Gaston grinned a little bit. And then he said, "I know who you are, Mister Careed."

He gestured behind himself and a tunnel of shadows ripped through the air, up through the diorama of superhero sculptures, leading all the way up to the fourth floor, or maybe the fifth. The center of the tunnel opened up. On the other side, maybe 5 feet away from Mark, were the doors to an office labeled 'Crystal Tower Villainy Liaison' and also 'Shadowlock'.

Gaston walked through first.

Mark watched as upstairs, on the other side of the portal, Gaston stood, waiting for him.

Well then!

He was using his Powers in public and in a large way, huh? That was clearly 'villainous'.

... Yeah. 'Gaston Lussier' was a 'villain'; yes that made sense. Was his first name even his real name? Or his business name? Was Mark going to need to choose a better personal name? Like movie stars did sometimes? Maybe he would?

Mark stood tall and walked through the portal.

And then he was on the fourth floor, looking at all the superhero sculptures from above.

Mark watched the shadow tunnel collapse, saying, "That's neat."

Gaston chuckled a little, and then he began to cackle as he slammed open the doors to his office and strode through like some sort of demigod. Or something. Or probably just like a villain, actually.

Mark walked inside, asking, “Do I need to learn to cackle like that, too?”

“Absolutely yes!” Gaston said, without hesitation.

The doors shut with flickers of shadow, and Mark was alone in a room with a villain.

Better than being alone in the sky with a dragon, really.

The office looked great and professional. Big desk. Some computer screens. Big screen to the side, in front of some couches. And also a bunch of merchandise, strangely enough. Cups and mugs and bobbleheads and tshirts sat each in their own little cubbyhole, each perfectly illuminated by light sources, each of the heroes or villains looking colorful or dour or sharp or sexy, depending on the hero or villain in question. Mark knew almost none of the people on that merchandise, for superhero culture was *vast* and Mark was more focused on monster killing, but he did recognize some of those people. He recognized the theme of Gaston’s work... Maybe.

The Hero/Villain Program was different things to different people. Combat preparedness was major goal #1, but money, narrative, and culture, were all #2 through #whatever. A lot of heroes were in it to make a living as a minor movie star for action-oriented shows.

Big bay windows showed off the horizon of Citadel Freyala, and all of the big churches in the distance. Grand Central Citadel rose tall and strong, all Gothic and old/new at the same time, while the wall of the city loomed in the distance, like a solid grey-ish horizon.

Gaston turned around, grinned, and then his entire demeanor changed. His shoulders weren’t quite so straight. His back wasn’t so rigid. His eyes even seemed softer, as all of him seemed a whole lot more approachable. His voice even seemed nicer, as he said, “I was asked to spend some more time here in Citadel Freyala as of a few weeks ago, in case you came this way. I usually move all over the place, but Citadel is one of my normal haunts. Wandering Sage asked me to do this, and also Ivona Gusca, Mind Dancer. I believe you met both of them at a party at the Cybersong residence.”

Mark felt some funny kinda way at being told of small intrigues in the H/VP. He nodded. “I met both of them, yes. Ivona was the pink lady. She, uh, tried to get me to join the Hero Program, but in a way that

was... probably intended to make me not want to join. She spoke a lot about money and merchandising and I'm not sure what else."

Gaston nodded. "All correct!" He went over to a little refreshment station, next to some nice couches and a coffee table, asking, "Would you like to sit? And a cup of coffee? I brewed it a few hours ago. It's really quite good stuff. I'm having a cup."

"... I never really liked coffee, but I will certainly try it again."

Gaston grinned. "Let me make you one with cream and sugar."

"Sure!"

Mark soon found himself sitting and sipping some really quite good coffee. It was a wonderful shade of brown with a little bit of foam, and it tasted like caramel-milk-something. He smiled as he had a second and third sip. He had never had coffee this good, which was weird. He wondered what Gaston had done differently with his coffee. He had just poured it out of a coffee pot alongside his own cup, and then poured in some foam and sugar.

Mark said, "I think if this had been my introduction to coffee, I might have started drinking it more."

Gaston grinned as he sipped his own cup, done in the same style. "Thank you. It's not often I get to introduce someone to coffee. I grew out of the flavorful stuff decades ago and I mostly take it black these days, but it's always nice to go back to my roots." He had another sip, and then set his cup down. "So you're being more or less forced to be a villain."

Mark gave a tiny, wry grin. "I would honestly not participate in any of this stuff if I could leave it behind, but yes. This is happening."

Gaston nodded, looking secure. "That's just about the best attitude that a future villain can have about this job, because that's the attitude that allowed this whole hero/villain thing to develop at all. The original villains, Timegrabber and Sunwallower, were all real heroes who saw the need to train the

younger generations outside of the death traps that were normal hunter routes in the wilds. They also had a great love for the old comics.

“So Timegrabber and Sunwallower became ‘villains’. This whole idea started with the villains, because you have to have people willing to take the fall to raise other people up. Everything else developed from there.

“We do this job because we must, though we usually end up having a lot of fun, too. And yes, we rob banks and we usually end up getting beaten by young heroes all the time, but this is important work. There’s not a single villain out there that hasn’t helped lift young heroes up, and prepared them for proper take downs of actual villains, or, more usually, monsters.”

Mark smiled a little, and this time it was kinda real. “I heard something like that from a few different people.” He added, “I don’t want to actually do any villain work for a while. Hopefully not ever, but I know that’s impossible with what’s-his-face demanding... Whatever he wants to happen. I’m going to Daihoon in like, a month. Maybe a week. I don’t know when, but I do know that’s where I want to go, first. And then I’ll do the villain-thing later. Years later.”

Gaston nodded. “We don’t want the dragon involved in anything yet, either, so that’s a good play. I understand that you, Isoko Kanno, and Eliot Cybersong, are all embarking on a city creation mission, headed in the same general direction, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know what Empire? What general part of Daihoon?”

“I don’t know anything yet, but I have read up on the general order of events. Eliot is going to be the one making the city, I assume, alongside a plethora of other people. I heard he’s in the middle of a great big bidding war right now. I’ll become one of the roamers there, alongside whoever else comes along, and Isoko will be there with me, too. I think they’re making it a really big event, drawing in a thousand people and tens of organizations, or something like that. Larger than a normal settlement thing.”

Gaston nodded a little. “That’s about all I heard, too. If you had known a direction, then I could have tried to set up a H/VP in that direction...” He came to a decision, saying, “We’re not putting you into a

villain role, anywhere, but we can go through paperwork and nominally set you up as a villain. Normally, there would be psych evals, history examinations, vouchings, and a host of other concerns, but the big, overriding concern is, *ahem*, your brother. So you're getting fast-tracked through all the important stuff and then stalled out on area selection and integration into society. We'll still go over the major details of what it means to be a villain for the next hour, but how does that sound as a general plan?"

Mark smiled. "Sounds great!"

Gaston nodded. "So to start with, you can either be a villain that makes a lot of money through merchandising and being in a narrative that our writers create — the 'spotlight' track— or you can be a background villain that works on the weekends and isn't in the spotlight at all, though you are required to show up as a henchman for a bigger villain now and then. That's the 'lowlight track'. All villains routinely train heroes anyway; that's just a given. This is the part where I would give you a choice of spotlight, or lowlight, but your brother has already chosen to be a superhero, so you're getting the spotlight track.

"That's still a few years away, though, and..."

Mark felt surreal as Gaston spoke of his future as a villain, and what it would entail, which was mainly just fighting for real, but also for a camera. He spoke of a baseline salary as long as Mark fulfilled his training missions with nascent heroes 3 times a month, to bonuses based on how much he could steal from pre-planned vault-heists.

None of it seemed real. This was not the life he wanted. This was not the life he imagined. Mark was—

"Mark?" Gaston asked.

Mark blinked. "Uh. Sorry?"

Gaston nodded a little, then said, "I can tell this isn't what you wanted, so let me try a different tact. If you want to fight against specific heroes, to learn how to fight against those people, then you can do that. You can target specific Powers, like Mesmer, Mage, Pure Body, which are all rare and incredibly strong. You can learn to fight truly dangerous foes as a villain, instead of the heroes, who only learn how

to fight villains so that they can stay in shape, or prepare for bigger fights, or —and this is most of them — so they can look good for a camera.

“We can set up fights for you every single day if you want.

“And that’s how you can learn to become an Inquisitor, which is what I think Freyala is pointing you toward. So you can fight demons and the Fallen.” Gaston lightly stared. “So you can fight dragons.”

Mark felt *present*, in that moment. He said, “That sounds more my speed.”

Gaston nodded. “Then let’s do some paperwork, Blackvein, and stall you out on area selection.”

Mark felt uncomfortable again.

That name. The name that the goblins had called him, somehow.

“Is that really gonna be my name?”

“Yup,” Gaston said, grinning.

They did some paperwork.

Soon, Gaston spoke of opening a bank account, saying, “Crystal Tower has banks in every city on Earth, and also in Daihoon, and we don’t cave to external pressure. We just up and leave places if they get dangerous to humanity in a detrimental-society sort of way, but that’s pretty much true of everyone.

Mark took a moment to think.

He decided that he probably needed to get his banking squared away. But first—

“I need to, uh, check my finances. I have no idea... about any of that. I kinda put it out of mind.” Mark added, “I need to make a new account, yes, but... I need to check on stuff.”

Gaston asked, "I can leave the room, or escort you to a private room?"

"The latter, please."

Inside a plain office space, Mark poked at his phone and, with Quark's (and COFR's) assistance, he found out that his parent's assets were frozen by Orange City, and that Mark would need to go back home to unfreeze any of that. Mark rapidly decided that he was not doing that. Not for a while. His parent's banking was similarly frozen, and his own small bank account was also frozen, though COFR was willing to help Mark reclaim that one. Ten minutes and a few AI phone calls later, and Mark had 113 goldleaf waiting for him in escrow at COFR.

113 goldleaf! That was it!

Getting that done had been the most emotionally draining thing he had done in the last... few days?

Or not. Mark wasn't sure.

He took another 10 minutes then went back into Gaston's office and made himself an account with the Hero/Villain Program, with 'Crystal Banking'.

A while later, Mark shook hands with Gaston, saying, "It was nice to meet you, Gaston Lussier."

Gaston smiled. "It was nice to meet you as well, Mark Careed. *Blackvein*." He plucked a card off of his table and handed it to Mark, saying, "My contact information."

Mark took the card—

Gaston gestured to the door, and a tunnel of shadows opened up. Behind the tunnel lay the entrance of the building, four stories down. "The fast way, if you wish."

Mark desperately did wish to get out of there fast, but he tried not to be obvious about it. He probably failed, though.

So Mark just smiled, said, “Thank you. Bye.”

And then Mark rushed through the tunnel, to once again stand under the steel sculptures of superheroes

—

Gaston chuckled. His chuckle rose to a laugh, which fractured into a cackle that echoed out of every shadow in the place.

And Gaston announced, “A villain for the ages!”

And then the shadows all dimmed.

Some people in the atrium politely clapped toward Mark. A few people were very, very confused.

Mark was confused, too, but he had places to be.

He walked outside, into the sun, onto Worldly Road.

Mark found himself grinning, feeling pretty good about the weird, wide future.

— — — —

Mark looked in shop windows as he walked down the road. The air smelled of cheese and bread, for a pizzeria was making a brisk business right over there, and Mark kinda wanted a slice, but he didn’t have that much money. But he did have 113 goldleaf, which was honestly not as much as he should have, right? What was going on there—

His phone rang.

Mark hadn’t gotten a phone call in... in a while? He looked at the number, which was restricted, and then he looked around. The phone continued to ring. Mark stepped to the side and answered the phone, saying, “Hello?”

“Mark! Brother!” said Addavein, the dragon. “You registered!”

Mark almost hung up.

In fact, he had pulled the phone away from his ear and had a finger almost ready to end the call... But he breathed in resilience and pushed away weakness, his heart beating black veins down his skin, and outside of his body.

He answered, “I did register... What...” He wasn’t sure what to say. He went with, “What are you... uh... up to?”

Is that really what he cared to ask?

The fuck?

Addavein happily answered, “I went back to Daihoon and killed a bunch of kaiju that had been hanging out for a while, unkilld. Talked to some dragons on some more equal footing than Dad had as an archmage. Killed some old threats. Came back. Killed some more old threats. I think the next few hundred years of humanity are looking up up up!” Addavein said, “There are always going to be problems, of course, and Endless Daihoon is impossible to clear, so more monsters will always come down the mountains. But the big enemies that are here are mostly dead. This is, of course, still a problem. Just of a different nature. And so now we’re at the ecological-conservation and ecosystem-organizing part of the process, instead of at the survival-of-humanity and threat-management steps. It’s a big step!”

Mark went with the flow of conversation, and asked, “So the Dominion of Okuana is getting involved, then? The ecosystem management stuff?”

“I’m trying to get them involved! A great deal of trying. They are unmoving, which is to be expected. It’s still better to kill the big enemies, though. I assume most places will experience some unknown hardships. Weird monster waves and the like. But they’ll pull through, and everything will settle down. It’ll be a great expansion!”

Expansions, huh?

Mark had a profound moment.

Mark decided to share something of his own... that Addavein probably already knew.

Mark said, "I'm joining an expedition out there... I think. A settlement thing."

"I know! I heard! Those are always great learning experiences. I've done a few in my time. But do you know what's an even better learning experience?"

Mark felt suddenly, very alone.

He was still on Worldly Road, in Citadel Freyala. The sun shone brightly. People were walking this way and that, though a lot of them were avoiding him, for Mark had a rather visible Power display going on.

But now, as Mark tried to sense the world, to get a feel for whatever Addavein was saying-without-saying, or possibly threatening, Mark's black veins extended out even further—

There.

Above.

Far. Far above. Too far to see.

... But also not above Mark at all.

There was something above him, but it wasn't actually there. It was not like the time when Addavein had been invisible, and then suddenly visible. This was... different. Weirder.

Mark tentatively asked, "What's a better learning experience?"

“Finding your way to civilization yourself! Forging your own path through the woods. Killing anything and everything that approaches you. As a proper power does. As expected of a tri-Talent, and especially one like you, who I have chosen to call my brother.”

There was a beat.

And then something like illusionary lightning flashed down from the heavens, out of the clear blue sky, and slammed into Mark. It wasn't lightning at all. It was a thread pulled from the very fabric of the world, unraveling light itself, revealing a land of forests and danger. Something like a strong wind poured over Mark as the not-lightning skittered across the ground, right at him, like a doorway swallowing him.

It had moved as fast as a blink.

And now Mark stood on grasses in the middle of nowhere, and the hole in the world vanished behind him.

He dropped the phone into his pocket as he stared upward, at a sky that held a dragon in it. He was big, silver, and with black spikes on his back and in the air around him, like normal. The sky itself was all fucked up, but Mark didn't pay attention to that right now.

Mark yelled at the bastard, “THE FUCK, ADDAVEIN?!”

Addavein laughed loudly, vibrating the world, his mirth like a bomb going off far, far overhead. That shockwave slammed into the forest all around Mark and broke branches, and Mark's eardrums popped from the pressure. It stung, and that was all.

Mark healed himself—

In a moment of inspiration, he Union'd with Addavein, and his body turned solid as adamantium, probably. He felt strong. He felt invincible—

And then Addavein chortled and broke the connection, leaning down to look at him from a few hundred meters away, like a giant cat lounging in the sky. He whispered, and the world crackled with shockwaves. “You’re strong enough to be on your own, so go ahead and be on your own for a while. It’s fun! Your phone still works somewhat. I’m sure you won’t be out here in the wilds of Daihoon for more than a few weeks.”

“I repeat: THE FUCK?!”

Addavein grinned. “I’m glad to see you acclimated to your kinesis as fast as you did, because I really wanted to see you out and about on your own, instead of ingratiated to a bunch of nobles and such. I didn’t know if I would get an opportunity to do this before I went and slept, so I had to do it now.”

“... Sleep?” Mark asked, again, “The fuck?”

Addavein chuckled. “It’s really quite a funny thing! You see: Dragons hibernate when they use too much power. I always thought of it as something that only happened to older dragons, but I’ve been tearing it up out there, Mark.

“I couldn’t wait any longer.

“I need to sleep. Maybe for a few months. I’m not sure. Maybe half a year or more.

“You’ll be fine out here! You got your adamantiumkinesis up to an acceptable level, but it could always be better, and what better way to get stronger than being thrown into the fire! You’re in the fire now, but I wouldn’t drop you off without some real help.” He added, “And so: here.”

A tiny book slapped into Mark’s chest.

It was black, and it had a drop of adamantium on its binding. Mark instinctively grabbed for the adamantium but he felt some sort of resistance, but only for a moment. And then the adamantium was his. The little book was a thin thing that Mark didn’t get a chance to read—

Addavein said, “A bit more help with your adamantiumkinesis, or really, the whole Kinetic branch of magic. Broadly, there’s the actual kinesis part of it, but there’s also sensing, so you can learn how to sense deposits of the stuff. Good luck finding any, though! There are a lot of miners that look for metals of all kinds, and you’re not a miner; you’re ‘just’ an adamantiumkinetic! HA!”

Addavein giggled some, vibrating the world.

... He seemed not-okay.

Mark was still furious.

Addavein sighed, and then announced, “And now! I need to sleep! Before I turn hysterical and sleep-deprived. You don’t want to see a dragon like that. That’s when dragons start to get weird...” He paused. “Oh. I think I might already be sleep deprived.” He tried, “I preemptively apologize for this?”

“ ‘PREEMPTIVELY’? ‘*Preemptively*’ requires you to not have already started shit, Addavein! *Put me back.*”

Addavein *giggled*. “That’s not how this magic works! Malaqua does a much stronger version of this than I can manage, but he has the whole demon System helping him. You see, I *summoned* you— Oh no. I was about to go on a tangent!” Addavein chuckled again. “I need to go away and sleep for a few... whiles. Yes!” He stared at Mark, like a demon-dragon-god, filling the world with his power, his presence, as he said, “I planned this all out, yes! It certainly didn’t happen on whims. I’m not like those other dragons... Later!”

And then Addavein flew away, and all the world went flying at his exit.

Mark tumbled through the air. Rocks flew. Trees uprooted.

Being casually tossed around, Mark thought, as he was being casually tossed around, was not as bad as he expected it to be. Rocks slammed into him, tree branches struck his face. All of that happened. But Mark had a Body rating in the 50s. He managed to grab onto his phone and the black book that Addavein had thrown at him, and somehow he landed, or more like rolled.

Mark found himself blinking out dirt, in ruined clothes, dust settling down everywhere.

A boulder crashed. Trees finished breaking.

Mark uncurled on the broken ground. His phone was cracked but it was still illuminated. His AI Quark was still there. His Slayer badge was gone, though, along with most of his clothes.

Mark stared at the dusty sky. Dust kept raining down, and, since the air was rather horribly full of debris, Mark was careful about breathing in purity and breathing out impurity, all so that he could cleanse the air directly around himself. As he continued to do that, dirt and dust continued to rain all around, but the sky started to clear. Mark didn't feel nearly that dirty anymore, even as dirt continued to rain all around him.

Mark had a complicated set of emotions.

Mark stood up, muttering, "I can still hate someone who does good things for other people, yeah? It wouldn't be ridiculous to hate him for doing this, would it? *No*. I *can* and *should* hate him over this..." Mark looked to the sky, and he felt a sense of wonder. He whispered, "And yet..."

He was on Daihoon, now.

The sky was blue, the clouds were white, but the entire atmosphere was also ten million ribbons of light, like auroras, but more solid. Here and there colors appeared, as though soft fabrics were twisting in the sky, allowing their surfaces to be seen when those surfaces were at heavy angles. It was like watching clouds, of a different sort. There was movement. It was slow movement. The fabrics shifted and moved. The fabrics layered, and unlayered, catching on the light of the sun and dimming the sun, but only just enough so that Mark could look at the sun, directly, without hurting himself. It was strange, the light of the sun, here on Daihoon.

Everything was so beautiful.

Gradually, Mark's sight turned back earthward, or rather, to Daihoon.

For this was Daihoon, but this specific part of Daihoon was plains and open land, with mountains or something like that over in that direction, and something like... Mark wasn't sure, more plains? in that other direction?

Everything was thoroughly ruined by Addashield's passing, though—

The dragon was on the horizon again, and he was coming this way.

Mark hadn't noticed him with his eyes, but he had noticed him with a gentle pull of Union, telling him that he was being targeted. At least it didn't feel like a dangerous target... Not intentionally, anyway.

Mark steeled himself, his heart beating with the world, drawing in resilience and expunging weakness. Mark almost expected that Union on Daihoon would have different results than on Earth, but nope. Union of Blood and Breath both beat with a normalcy that Mark had come to expect from his Power.

And Addavein returned.

Wind carved across the world, rushing and twisting, and then a minor hurricane blew at Mark, but Mark was ready for it, this time. He held up his adamantium slivers and widened them out to small wind blockers. He secured himself to the ground with his other bits of adamantium. Dust and stone slapped against those tiny shields, like rain off of a tin roof. Most of his body was still fully exposed to the dragon's wind. Gravel struck, and bounced, and Mark healed up the tiny wounds that Addavein caused.

And then Mark stared at Addavein, at his 'brother', up there in the sky.

Addavein spoke, and he was unable to modulate his voice. His voice boomed like a roar and a rage, and yet it was just a voice. Mark eardrums popped again, but he healed them up and reinforced himself against vibrational damage. Union seemed able to do that well enough.

Addavein's voice turned softer, intelligible.

“—Ah. You didn't hear the first things I said. Uh,” Addavein said, “To repeat: I shouldn't have summoned you like that. I just now realized that this is the exact same shit that made us all stand together and out

the dragons the first chance we really got, late in the Reveal and during the Rise of the New Pantheon. In my defense, I did pick out a good spot here!

“I can send you back to Earth, but I can’t pick the spot.

“If you want me to send you back, you’d end up close to here. It’s in North America! Pretty central to the continent. Here on Daihoon you’d find the Not-Mississippi River to the East if you went that way. We call it The Shine, here. Do you want to stay? Or go back?

“To help you make this choice: Daihoon civilization is about 800 kilometers north for some settlements around the Not-Chicago area, 2000 kilometers southwest for the beginnings of the Aluatha Empire, or just follow the Not-Mississippi down south and you’ll run into something smaller eventually.”

Addavein waited.

Mark asked, “Are there big monsters around here?”

Addavein turned in the sky, looking this way and that— He flinched a little, then he hummed, and then said to Mark. “Maybe some... too-big ones, yes. But you could run from them. Probably even shut them down.”

Mark wasn’t happy about it, and his phone died in his hands which made him even less happy about it, but he was hopeful, and he really, really wanted to kill something. Anything. Something needed to die!

So it was fine to be here!

PERFECTLY FINE!

Mark declared, “I can survive this! I can thrive here!” He said, “But you need to *not* pull shit like this. See you in some months or a year. Have a good nap.”

Addavein smiled some— He paused. “Oh no no no. You’re way too vulnerable here. I have to send you back.”

Lightning descended again, and Mark popped out of a hole in the world.

Daihoon vanished.

Mark landed on his ass on stone and water, splashing down into some sort of tributary or small river somewhere, in the middle of some forested-like place, in the middle of nowhere. His phone sparked in the water and then fully died. His shirt was completely gone and his pants broke all the way, his belt snapping and his underwear snapping, too. Where were his shoes? No idea. They probably got knocked off in the first gust of wind.

There was no time to be mad, to process what had happened. Not yet. Not right this second.

Mark stood up and pulled off the tatters of his shirt, and there went his pants, falling off without him needing to even pull them off. They got tangled on his left thigh, though, so he did have to rip at that, and off they came. Tatters of clothes in the water. Fun.

This was why heroes wore webweave, taken from spiders at big farms and all of it at least PL15, for about a year. A brawny with tactile telekinesis could even use normal clothes. But Mark didn't have TT, and those tatters had been basic browns.

And now that Mark was up and uninhibited by tangled clothes, and there were no visible monsters anywhere, Mark allowed himself to think.

Mark made one decision, first.

Mark roared at the sky, "FUCK YOU, DRAGON!"

That felt good.

Mark decided he was going to be mad at that fucking dragon for a long time. Not anxious, when he inevitably showed up again. Not scared at his size, or his... everything. Just plain mad. Mark could be personable for the fate of the world, but he'd be mad as fuck at that fucking fuckhead, and for reasons

completely unrelated to the tangled mess that was demon-afflicted Addashield, who had killed his parents.

Mark took a breath.

He looked at the empty land all around, at the normal, Earth-blue sky with its normal clouds and no fabric-like auroras at all, at the clear waters of the small river, and at his slowly-flowing-away tatters of clothes—

Addashield's little black book was in the water.

Mark sighed, then muttered, "This is certainly *one* way to avoid thinking about my life and where it's going."

Mark slipped into the waters to grab some fabric to try to save his dignity as much as he could, and he picked up the wet book, too. The water was cold, but the air was... cold. Mark had a Body in the 50s, though, so he was okay.

Surprisingly, the book was okay, too. No water damage at all. Mark didn't really look at it yet, though, because he was nude in the wilderness, and that seemed like asking for some monster to chomp at parts of him he didn't want chomped.

He was going to fix some of his clothes... if he could.

The belt looked... difficult to fix. It was severed at the right hip where something had clipped Mark's hip and broken his clothes. He had barely felt whatever it was, but he was pretty sure that it probably should have cracked his pelvis, or maybe broken his skin some, because the cut line was pretty clean.

Mark had some extra metal, though, and not his adamantium. He needed that to defend himself. The belt had two rings that held the belt together, so Mark grabbed the metal clasp and pulled at it... Nope. Not strong enough for that. Mark used his adamantium to break the clasp, though, and that was much easier, though it was still kinda tough.

Healthy Body didn't give Mark any sort of extra strength, but he would have assumed that he could... he didn't know... bend metal with his fingers? But no. Adamantium and his Kinesis, though, were good enough to bend the small metal rings that made up his belt. From there, with some applied pressure and slipping on the rings a few times, Mark managed to remake the 'belt'. It looked stapled together, but it was fine!

This was fine.

Several minutes of small crafting later and Mark was missing Eliot a lot, but he had, like, a loincloth, or something.

It functioned.

Parts that dangled were now firmly secured.

That's all that Mark needed it for. He wasn't going to be one of those guys who got lost in the woods and made it back to society all grubby and nude and with parts missing... Though that was the general theme of getting lost in the woods outside of cities...

Because it was incredibly fucking dangerous to be out here, unprotected...

Alone.

Mark hummed and worried about his safety.

He was on a big rock sitting to the side of a river, half in the shade half in the sun. Mark had picked this spot because it offered vantage points to everywhere, and his Union was running strong, allowing him to sense if anything was aiming his way. Mark wasn't sure how his Union sense actually worked, but he was working his Union well, to 'scout', and nothing was 'aiming his way'. Sometimes, Mark even got feelings associated with that 'aiming his way', which was really helpful. Feelings like 'kill kill kill that thing!' or 'I need to eat that thing', seemed like normal monster feelings to have, with regard to humans.

Maybe there was a better way to use Union to scout, but Mark hadn't been taught that secret yet. Knowing that some monsters were 'pointed at him' or 'pulling on the fabric of reality in Mark's direction' was good enough, for now.

And speaking of 'good enough'!

Mark tapped his feet on the warm stone underfoot, and he could feel the stone, the heat, the sharpness of that part right there, but his feet were perfectly fine. He leaned down and made a fist and lightly punched the stone, and his hand felt fine, too. He punched the stone harder. Still felt good? Still felt good. Mark reared back and slammed the stone with maybe half-strength.

He thwacked the stone good, and it stung, but Mark was inundating himself with resilience as he expelled weakness, so it didn't hurt that much at all. As he stood up, Mark felt that his feet were perfectly good for 'shoes' right now, which was kinda weird, but also really cool.

He looked at himself, at the black lines tracing down his entire body and into the air. It looked like a really bad magical infection, but it wasn't too out-of-line with what a person, alone in the woods, might look like when they were actively defending himself. His adamantium needles kinda blended into the black vein-like structures, too...

Mark breathed in sustenance, then breathed out deprivation, connecting to all the trees and plant life all around. He had no idea how long he would be out here, or where 'here' even was, but he certainly wasn't going to get caught flatfooted or starving out here in the woods. In the *wilds*.

Mark grinned a little.

"This was not how I wanted to explore the world, but..." He chuckled. "This works?"

Sure. This works.

How to get around, though?

... Well...

Mark grinned as he turned his adamantium needles into flat sheets of metal, each about 5 inches square.

He wasn't going to walk.

He was going to *fly*!

... Or probably just hover, really. Hover-run? He wanted to stretch out the adamantium into, like, wings or something. But there was not enough here for that at all. So! Pressing-against-the-ground running!

Mark pressed the metal against the stone—

He caught himself as he flopped to the side, because he forgot to do a three-point push against the ground. Also, one of the sheets slipped. Maybe a sheet wasn't so good for movement...

Hmm.

Mark looked down at the ground, at the little black book that Addavein had given him.

With a sigh and a reluctance, Mark picked it up and looked through it. It was wet, but not really. It was 10 pages long, with rather average-sized *print*, not script, and it was densely packed with 'Understanding Shaper Magic', according to the front text. There were even little pictures. It was not a book that Addvein had made himself. It was a mass-produced copy, and it came with all-too familiar warnings in the front against allowing people under Curtain Protocol to read the book. Some of those warnings even spoke of how the book was 'ancestral quality' and 'made of mage paper', which meant PL 50, tier 5, if Mark was recalling a bit of Daihoonian trivia correctly. So the book was just a bit weaker than his skin.

This was a mass produced booklet of tips and tricks for all Shapers, of all kinds, and it was meant to be a primer and in-depth overview of Shaper Magic, that was meant to be passed down through generations. It was probably very expensive. Tier 5 paper? Yeah, that was expensive as all heck.

In a way, Mark was a lot happier that Addavein had given him a basic Shaper/Kinetic book. It seemed less insidious, or whatever.

Less maleficent.

Mark looked around some more, judged himself fine right where he was, so he started reading a bit more in depth.

Surprisingly, nothing bothered him while he read. It had been mid-afternoon at Citadel Freyala, but over here, the day was much younger. It might be noon in a few more hours. Mark had plenty of time to read and absorb the book and then figure out what to do next.

He did not think too much about Addavein.

He was in a survival situation, now... Which he kinda loved.

The book of Understanding Shaper Magic was all pretty normal stuff. It was just a primer at a mere 10 pages long, or 18 actual pages, front and back, with some pictures scattered throughout.

It was still hella informative.

Mark stood tall like the picture suggested—he glanced down at the book he had propped up on a rock to read—and then he held up a hand and moved the adamantium around his hand, using only his kinesis. He watched as he moved his body to make the black needles move, fingers twitching, hand slightly turning, and he was surprised. He hadn't even been aware he was moving his body to move the metals. Mark hummed. He picked up the book and read a bit more, and moved his adamantium around a bit more.

He tried specifically *not* moving his body at all as he moved his metal, and that was tougher for some reason.

“... Huh. Looks like I *am* mixing up my body with my astral body.”

Moving one's body while moving one's designated material was a common pitfall of many early Shapers. Almost everyone had to be trained out of it, too. In almost all cases, a person did not *need* to move their fingers or toes or even their eyes, to properly shape their material.

Mark read about the next test, which which involved taking some small bits of adamantium and then holding it out as far away from himself as he could. A 'good distance' was usually 'an arms distance away for every tier of Power', though denser materials like metals usually had a shorter range, and lighter materials went very far, because the airyness of one's astral body directly contributed to the distance one could achieve.

A person's astral body was about 2 to 3 times the size of their body, and though there were a lot of tricks to extending one's range, one's range was pretty much set by the size of their astral body.

With his feet firmly planted on the ground, Mark stood with his arms to his side and with a big drop of metal hanging in front of him. He moved the metal forward, meter by meter... by meter by meter... Okay. Now the metal drop was a good 10 meters away, which seemed too far, but Mark knew he could go further. Easily. 10 meters was as far as Mark wanted to go with it, though, for now. It still felt firmly like a piece of him, so he didn't think it would fall out of his influence, but he didn't want to accidentally lose the metal drop; to have it drop out of his senses and fall into leaf litter. It was currently floating over the river bank, so Mark could probably find it easy enough if it did drop out of his control.

In fact, he waggled the droplet around and found it easy to move back and forth, and rather secure.

Obviously, something was going on between Union and Adamantiumkinesis to give him this range, that was plain to see... or maybe it wasn't plain to see at all, because there was no visual indication that Mark's range was that far, but it *felt* right—

Mark waggled the stone a bit too far, and then something broke in an 'I accidentally held my cup at the wrong angle and all the water spilled out', sort of way.

The stone went flickering into the water and Mark shouted, "NO!"

He raced for the stone, rushing forward across rocks and leaping over an embankment. He dashed into the water and felt—

There.

Up to his thighs in cold water, Mark laughed as he kinetically pulled the adamantium stone out of the water. It had drifted downstream a few meters, but Mark brought it right back to himself. Mark's heart was racing, darkness threading into the world all around him, but it calmed down fast enough.

“Holy fuck,” Mark said... And then he paused. “I think I might have a skewed idea of what is scary, or not.”

Talking to dragons? ... Also terrifying! But Mark was ‘getting used to it’.

Losing treasure? Truly terrifying!

Mark plodded out of the waters, onto the shore. With the sun shining brightly overhead, Mark started walking back up to where he had left the book.

Ya know? It honestly felt pretty great being out here, alone, wearing just a loincloth. Very ‘manly’. Primal, or something. Dangerous, in a fun kinda way. The sun felt great, too. Mark would have expected monsters, and yeah, there were monsters out there. Probably. None had disturbed him yet. Other than that, Mark expected bugs. The outside world was sometimes full of horrible bugs that—

Mark slapped the bug dead, splattering goo, before he even had a moment to realize what was happening. A beetle-like thing had been trying to eat Mark's thigh, but it couldn't do anything but try, and now it was splattered green and black goo.

With a soft breath of purity and impurity, Mark cleaned himself off—

That's when he heard the buzzing.

On the shore, beetles lifted off of the banks, revealing bones. What Mark had thought were river rocks were actually beetles, and yeah, that's what Mark had been scared of when he thought of monsters outside of city walls. Swarms of bugs that could consume creatures whole, that that swarmed even harder when one of them died—

Union twitched, and Mark felt the world kinda *flow*, but not really, a thousand tiny pulls in reality aimed in his direction. The beetles saw him, and they wanted to eat him. Also maybe vengeance? Mark was feeling weird things with Union.

Mark slammed into them with a Union of vein decay, at the speed of thought, taking all of their vein integrity in turn. Black lightning briefly connected Mark to every single bug, and every single bug dropped dead, some of them even popping as Mark somehow destabilized their entire insides. Or something. He wasn't sure what happened to make them pop, exactly. Perhaps they were set to pop if they ever died, so that they could stink up the air and make their brethren realize that something had killed one of them.

And now the shore was strewn with dead beetles and the bony carcasses of deer and other woodland things. Some bugs had splattered onto him.

Mark did another round of cleansing, and then he went back to his book.

Mark told himself, "I feel better now that I have seen a monster. Less anticipation. Less worry."

Over the next hour, Mark found out a few things about his kinesis.

Number One; he had to break himself from using physical cues to achieve astral movement.

This was the same problem as his Union, though. According to Lola, Mark should be able to divorce physical action from astral action. He should be able to 'breathe' with his Union' and not have to actually breathe, with his body, in order to make his Union breathe. But also according to Lola, most people don't achieve that break for a very, very long time.

So maybe Mark was okay with having physical action inform his kinesis, at least a little.

But that was when he ran into the next problem.

Number Two; he couldn't maneuver his astral body as fast as he should be able to, because it was still linked to his physical body.

Mark made a spinning blade of adamantium and tried every trick in the (very small) book to get that propeller to spin *fast*. It was like trying to rotate his hand fast, but without the limits of his physical body, so that he could actually rotate his entire hand around, if he wanted. This was not a fast speed, though. This level of speed barely allowed Mark to make a breeze with the fan.

He tried to make needles rotate around his body *fast*. This was like trying to move his hand fast. Sure, he had range, and that helped with speed. Mark could swing a needle around quite fast at 10 meters out, but if he struck anything with that needle, like a tree or a rock, or whatever, the needle went out of his control 5 out of every 10 tries. Mark rapidly found out that anything within 4 meters was a lot more solidly attached to him.

Mark also discovered that the fear of losing his adamantium was a lot less powerful as he continued to fumble the adamantium when it was too far from him.

Mark swung a hand, just like he had seen kinetics do all the time on shows and movies, and the single needle he was concentrating on whipped through the air, as if he had an arm 4 meters long and only existed at the needle. With a crack and a loud ‘tok!’ Mark punched down at the river, the needle crashing through a large river rock. With a yank—

Mark tipped forward, for whatever he had struck held on to the needle.

Some compensation later, with some other needles turned into coins that Mark pressed against other stones to hold himself secure, and Mark pulled back. The thrown needle was heavy as fuck, but Mark pulled and his quarry came up from the waters. Stones tumbled in the river, burbling dirt and bubbles into the flow—

And then a small boulder crested the waves, spilling other rocks and water away from it. The rock was brown and it had a hole in it that spiderwebbed across the surface. Mark yanked the rock around and then smashed it onto another boulder. The rock eventually shattered, releasing the black needle. Mark kinda smiled a little, feeling really good. That had been a very weighty rock!

“Rock yank,” Mark said, chuckling...

A moment passed in thought.

A breeze drifted through and the sun felt warmer for a moment.

Mark went back to reading the book.

He had gone through the testing phases of a 'new kineticist' and now he was moving onto actual applications.

Mark swung his fist, swinging three needles around his body, slamming them into stone and then ripping them out of stone, each in different directions so that they didn't counterbalance him. He soon found out that he needed to throw down three of his needles into the ground so that he could get some better angles for the three needles he used to attack, but that was fine.

So that was how you attacked with Shaper Powers.

Now for movement.

Mark slammed the needles sideways against the ground, and he lifted himself up off of the ground, unsteady at first, but then he started moving forward— and then backward. He struggled. He tossed himself around way too much. He fell on his ass, knees, and back to his feet a few times because the orientation of the needles sometimes made them punch into the ground, instead of laying on top.

6 needles was a bad idea.

Mark switched out 3 of his 6 needles for 3 large rings.

The rings worked a lot better as 'feet to stand on', up until the rings started slipping off of surfaces.

Mark adjusted his tools again.

3 caltrops and 3 needles.

The caltrops worked remarkably well, actually. Each one was basically two smaller needles bent at 90 degrees, and then stuck onto each other by their centers. They were kinda small, but 3 of them supported Mark's weight, and while they pressed easily into the ground and they sometimes got stuck, Mark could use his moving bodyweight to yank them back out of the ground just as easily as they went in.

Soon, Mark was floating forward and back and this way and that, figuring out how to move, to pluck his caltrops back out from behind him, and then shove them forward to support further forward movement. It was bouncy. It was uneven. Mark had no shock absorbers, except for learning how to manually move his astral body to absorb his bounciness.

Mark crashed into a tree.

He fell into dirt when a caltrop went into the ground instead of on top of the ground.

He tore his loincloth from one particularly bad crash, but he fixed it back up, and then he kept going. It was weird to have his skin and body be a whole lot stronger than his clothes, but the whole experience was weird and fantastic.

An hour after he began learning how to move around with his caltrops, Mark tucked the Shaper book into his loincloth-belt and made a plan. Addavein had spoken of the Not-Mississippi in Daihoon being close to where he had summoned Mark, and how he couldn't return Mark all the way to Citadel Freyala, but how he could put him on the other side of the Veil, somewhere around the Mississippi.

Mark was next to a small river.

Since the Mississippi River was the largest river in this part of the world, this tributary, or river, or whatever it was called, probably went to the Mississippi... Maybe. Probably. Adding to that: the river flowed that way, to the west, according to the sun moving in that-ish direction, in the sky.

So that meant that the Mississippi River was *probably* in that direction, and so civilization was *probably* in that direction. And if not, then people usually camped out or built cities at the mouths of rivers, as opposed to upstream.

“So we follow the water!” Mark announced to himself, as he lifted up from the ground on semi-steady ‘legs’. And then he tilted forward and started racing forward, laughing, shouting, “WOOOOO!”

Flying, even if it was technically just advanced-hovering, was the most exhilarating thing Mark had ever done... Except for maybe hopping around in that spider-glider thing that Eliot had built. That wasn't fun past the first few jumps, though.

But flying with kinesis?

Pounding caltrops down, pushing off the ones in back, and then slipping forward to hover across uneven stone and rock, and fallen wood terrain? Almost flying? Flying, but only a meter off of the ground? This was fantastic. Newly-learned movements rapidly turned from fledgling-faltering to rushing-racing. Mark soon pulled apart one of his needles to make another caltrop, taking him down to 2 needles but giving him 4 ‘legs’, and suddenly he was off to the races. Barreling over rockfalls, slipping a bit but also catching himself just as fast. He rushed over fallen trees.

Something in the forest suddenly tweaked his Union-sense, but Mark was outrunning whatever it was, and that unknown thing back there didn't even make an appearance, its tug on reality lessening and then vanishing. Mark raced on. Mark's heart beat hard and he swore that even the plant life all around him seemed to blossom with the thrill that Mark was feeling, in that very moment, as he flowed across the ground.

He reached a cliff and waterfall. From this, upstream angle, it looked like a short drop. Mark went for it, racing across the edge—

His heart thrummed as his eyes went wide, as he realized that the ‘short waterfall’ was actually about 20 meters down to a large rockfall. Mark giggled as he pushed all four caltrop ‘feet’ at the rockfall, directly ahead of him.

It was like landing on legs he didn't know he had; he absorbed the entire fall, not even striking the rocks with his body. But he did push off with his feet, breathing hard, heart thrumming, as he launched himself back into the air, just a meter.

Mark kept flying.

The next cliff came up fast. Mark aimed at the edge of the cliff and hunkered down as he leapt—

Mark skidded off of moss, his caltrops gathering a big hunk of slippery moss and some sort of algae. He flopped over the edge of the cliff, which was only 3 meters tall. He landed on a leg and a hand, and also all of his rapidly reoriented caltrops, laughing as he righted himself. Stone sparked under adamantine grip.

Mark chuckled.

And he flew.

There was a large pool ahead; a natural occurrence of where the river twisted.

Mark had learned how to leap rather great distances by now, so he got close to the ground, going down to his actual feet, and then he physically and kinetically pushed off of the ground, making sure to flick and twist his caltrops so that they didn't catch on anything. Mark sailed across the big pool—

Something was below. It aimed at Mark.

It felt very angry.

A big turtle lifted up, water spilling off of its big brown shell, as its head poked above the surface, followed by three more heads looking up. All four heads— and then a fifth!— opened their maws and shot tendril-like wrappings at Mark, like they were some sort of spitting-spider hydra-turtle. Mark was in the middle of the air over the pool, over the turtle, by then. The turtle moved fast.

Mark returned fire with a heavy drain of resilience and a giving of weakness, as he slashed through the oncoming, expanding web-shit with his two free needles, rapidly slashing through the attack, but it was throwing needles against liquid; it didn't do much.

Mark landed just how he expected to land, before the jump, but he got webbed. The web rapidly began to expand on his skin, pulling at him in every direction as it tried to trap him, as it expanded and expanded. Mark briefly, quickly, did a Union of Brain with purity and impurity.

Black lightning shattered the containment, cracking against the ground all around him, splattering the foam everywhere else but on Mark.

The foam continued to multiply on the ground, turning from off-yellow to deeply golden in rapid seconds, hardening to the consistency of rock. Or maybe harder.

The hydra turtle hissed more foam at Mark, but Mark battered it away with a Union of Brain for purity-impurity again, and then Mark went on the attack.

Mark had really, really wanted to kill something, and this thing was an ambush predator, so it qualified so very, very much. All the rage Mark had been feeling, all the pain he had been bottling up, came out at that moment. He didn't even have to advance on the beast, to go into the water, because the hydra turtle was right there, trying to take a bite out of him.

With a whip of kinesis, Mark slammed a needle through the nearest turtle head, right into its skull—

And then Mark promptly lost control of that needle.

It was like a splash of cold water.

He had *lost* the needle. He had lost a sixth of his reserves! And it hadn't even killed the monster, because the monster had 5 heads— 7 heads! 7 heads, all aiming Mark's way. The single head he had attacked just flicked its head this way and that and then kept on keeping on! It wasn't dead yet.

How high was its Body to be able to shrug off that! Had to be high 80s! Shit!

It was a lesson.

Mark pulled back, using his caltrops to pull away, and then he hit the monster with a Union of Brain, for vein integrity/decay. The hydraturtle didn't seem to care. It was going to take a while. The monster had an incredibly high Body.

The monster hauled out of the water, chasing Mark.

Mark did not *run*. He needed that needle back. He was going to get that needle back. Mark repositioned, keeping out of the way of the—

Oh shit that's a fast turtle.

Mark scrambled to back up, rapidly gaining distance. The turtle advanced. Black veins connected him to the monster as Mark raced backward, down the riverbank, and the monster spit foam as it roared tiny roars and chased him. Foam landed on Mark's chest and legs, but he flickered purity/impurity, and the foam burst off of him. When that expanding threat was gone, Mark resumed vein decaying it.

Two minutes later, and the damned thing was *still* harrying Mark and not dying, but it had stopped shooting foam. That was the only real positive of this scenario. Mark had learned the terrain, too, so that was another positive, but not really. Another positive was that Mark was confident he could *eventually* kill the monster.

Most other people in this situation would have simply died, either from not being able to fly, to being caught up in all of the snapping turtle heads, to how fast the bastard moved. This thing was the size of a hovervan and it moved across the land with about as much power, plowing *through* the trees, *through* small rocks, and almost through boulders, too. The boulders had enough integrity to stay *mostly* intact, but they went flying just the same.

And Mark flew on adamantium caltrops, staying ahead of the beast.

This wasn't working, though. Mark needed to attack it more.

Mark was reluctant to use his remaining needle of adamantium, but he could make the turtle bleed, probably, so he turned his needle into a scalpel. A scalpel wouldn't get caught in the creature's auric body... Would it? No. But if it didn't work, then Mark would need to do something different with Union, maybe.

Mark turned one needle into one scalpel, and he waited for one of the heads to snap at him—

The turtle put on a burst of speed, for Mark had slowed down when he transformed the needle, and the turtle noticed. The turtle snapped with five heads, each the size of Mark's own torso. But Mark darted backward, and like a kid trailing a finger through a wedding cake, Mark lifted the scalpel up across the nearest long, wrinkled neck.

Black metal easily parted flesh, like a zipper opening up a jacket, revealing red underneath.

Mark didn't lose control of his blade at all.

The hydra roared and flinched, pulling back its injured neck backward as it launched its other heads forward, again, giving more chase. Mark took an eye here, he carved another wound there. But still, the turtle tried to get him to eat him. The wounds Mark inflicted even began to heal, which was just plain fucking infuriating.

This thing must have killed so many people.

Mark made it bleed with as many cuts as he could inflict.

Minutes later, with Mark flying around at a good speed and kiting the monster well, the monster finally started to slow down, and this time it wasn't a fake out, meant to lure Mark closer.

It stopped.

It was not dead, as it lay there on the shore, bleeding so very much and *still* not dying.

Mark got to killing. The turtle snapped at him. It spat a bit of webbing. But it was already dead; it was just a matter of time.

Mark's Union of Brain for vein integrity/decay was doing work, and his Union of Blood was pulling at the monster's resilience and giving it weakness, but not fast enough. The monster simply didn't care that it was bleeding from every orifice and roaring out foaming blood, so Mark began to dismantle the creature with an adamantium blade the size of a pinky. Mark focused on the head that had his adamantium needle, first. He scored marks across every head that came his way, snapping, as the creature rotated around to try and keep up with Mark.

But then it laid down, too tired to move anymore.

Mark focused, and soon the desired head rolled away—

The instant it came loose, Mark felt his adamantium inside the head return to him. He yanked it out of the dead turtle head, and then he turned it into another scalpel.

Mark finished killing the thing with two small adamantium scalpels.

More than once, Mark was pretty sure he had killed it, but it kept regenerating, or something. Even from death. Mark eventually popped its shell off and started blendering its insides. After killing the *fourth* heart, it died. Mark knew it died because his kinesis encountered no difficulty at all cutting through it, and then *continuing* to cut through it. Its astral body was gone.

That had taken a good 20 minutes! The fuck!

“Monsters are still dangerous!” Mark told himself.

And then Mark turned his attention to the hydraturtle's pool.

How many people had it killed? Mark was probably nowhere near Memphi, or else this thing would have been dead a long time ago. But people had probably tried to kill it, anyway. There might be bodies

in the water, for monsters only ate a little of what they killed. Mostly they defended territory, or they aggressively expanded, and they let smaller things eat what they killed.

And Mark needed to kill any turtle eggs, if they existed.

Mark floated over to the waters and went in, embracing the chill as he opened his eyes underwater.

It was honestly too murky to see, so Mark briefly pulsed a Union of purity/impurity through the water, like lightning crashing out in every direction. The water cleared instantly, and it was still early afternoon, so there was plenty of light.

Bones.

Lots and lots of bones, and little fish eating on the bones. Or rather, they had been eating on the flesh, but Mark had cleared all of that away. That flesh had been tucked into the world, into all the plant life out there. And all that was left was bones. According to Union, the fish reoriented on Mark, but they were not man eaters. They were scavengers. Just normal fish, really. The turtle did not suffer other monsters to live near it, at all.

... Those were bones down there.

Mark looked at the bones again, and he tried not to freak out. It was a lot different seeing this sort of thing in real life than it was on television.

Human skulls. Animal skulls. Ribcages and backpacks—

Oh! Backpack!

... Maybe it had a working phone? Maybe a map?

Was it wrong to loot the remains?

... Yes, but also Mark was out here in survival mode, so... he was going to loot the remains, and he hoped that anyone who might find his body, if a monster should ever kill him, would do the same.

Mark grabbed the bag with a twist of adamantium latching on, and then he hauled out of the water.

The backpack was one of those strong ones that could last forever in the wilderness. It was even still sealed, but water had gotten in somehow. Mark opened it up and dumped out a bunch of stuff that might have been under water for... only months, Mark supposed? A week? Maybe just a few days...

Oh holy shit.

The sudden realization that there were *human skeletons down there* slammed into Mark's mind and Mark had a difficult moment. Mark breathed a bit, shuddered as cold water evaporated from his skin, and then he got back to looking at the contents of the bag.

Underwear, shorts, papers that were unintelligible. A wallet with an ID.

'Mark Chambers of Memphi'.

Mark dropped the wallet. That was his own first name, but on a corpse's things—

Another realization, like lightning from an empty sky.

Mark breathed out, "I told Addavein that I would have been fine on Daihoon on my own, didn't I? Of all the arrogant, stupid... Oh gods..."

His voice trailed off as he stared at the bag's contents.

A moment later, Mark pulled out what he could from the bag.

He went back down into the waters and grabbed two more backpacks and a third one that was bitten through. He dumped stuff onto the shore and separated out what was useful versus what was not. There

was one waterlogged diary that was readable and Mark flipped through it a bit to see what was there. According to the IDs, all of these people were from Memphi, which was one of the major cities on the Mississippi, so that wasn't too surprising. According to the diary they were roamers, cleaning up monster infestations outside the city.

Mark read the last entry, specifically.

*'We've scouted the turtle and Penelope thinks we can take it. Famous last words, right? Anyway. Preliminary attacks show that it has a high regenerative ability, and it can run really fast. It has that sticky foam ability, but it hasn't used that with us, yet. It's probably out, having spent that ability on some other monster, though we will try to bait it into using that ability before we go in for the kill. So we're going for it! Update you tomorrow, diary. **Or not!** LOL!'*

... Mark took another minute.

Then he got to pulling out all the IDs he could find. When he was done, Mark had 2 IDs, but the diary was the real score for identification; it contained the names of everyone on the roaming kill squad, which had been 6 people. With that done, and checking all the electronics and finding them fried, Mark scouted the clothes. A pair of shorts looked like they would work, but they were a 38 waist and too small in the thighs and ass, which did not fit at all, so Mark ended up wearing some rather short swim trunks that were a deep blue color. No shirts, though; none of them fit.

Better to go shirtless than wearing something super tight.

With new, much better clothing, along with the most salvageable of the backpacks strapped to his back along with all of the identifications that he could scrounge up, Mark once again took to the air, holding a map in his hands.

Now, he wasn't exactly sure, but he was pretty sure that this river he was on was... this one. Or maybe this other one...

Mark hummed.

“I’m maybe 30 miles from the Mississippi, and there’s either a big lake between here and there, or not, or there’s the Ohio River first, or not,” Mark said to himself, to check if it sounded correct, or not. “... I’ll run into one of them, I’m sure, and then follow them downstream to the big river, which runs directly into Memphi.” A moment. “... Yes. This is the plan.”

Follow the water. Civilization existed at the end of the water, usually.

Hopefully Mark didn’t run into any lakes with any truly dangerous monsters. The list of powers that could no-sell him was probably longer than Mark imagined it to be, but it only really included speedsters, mind monsters, weird arcane things, and any truly dangerous S-rank things, but monsters (of the non-humanoid variety) usually only got strong knacks, like that hydraturtle. They didn’t get Mind Control, like humans did, and even if Mark met a Mind Nudger, like those goblins, he was rocking at least a tier 5 Mind right now, what with his resilience working so hard. The strength of his Mind would hard-counter most controlling knacks or even Powers—

Ah! But monsters *also* got illusionary shit all the time. Attacking through camouflage and along weird angles? Yes! That is what monsters did. That could be difficult.

... But Mark had his Union sense, and most monsters could only influence along the senses they already possessed, and since they didn’t have a Union sense, Mark could always know when something was aiming to kill him. He was never truly blind... somewhat. And there were also his kinesis-enabled Shaper senses, which Mark was still developing. He could only really sense his own adamantium, which was already an incredibly rare metal, so he didn’t expect to run into any of that out here... or anywhere, really. But he could still *feel* the world through his adamantium caltrops and whatnot. That would probably come in handy... eventually, right?

It was weird to put ‘fingers’ down into the muck and grab onto stones and propel himself forward, but Mark was getting a really good feel for that new part of his Power, which was really pretty great, in his opinion.

Mark got moving.

Mark was theoretically making good time.

He was certainly doing more than 30 miles per hour, too, so he should be at the Mississippi or the Ohio River before sunset, and from there... Maybe he could move even faster, once he wasn't in such a wild area?

Finding a 'less wild' area didn't take that much longer.

Mark came across bridges that were mostly wrecked, which led to streets that were completely overgrown, which he did not take. He continued on with the river, checking his map every so often, trying to figure out where he was.

Monsters started popping out of the forest, or the water, or even the invisible air itself, every now and then. Mark killed them all, and he felt so much better after every kill. So much more secure in himself, out here in the middle of nowhere. It would have been hubris to stay on Daihoon, so Mark was kinda glad that Addavein had thrown him back to Earth, but Mark would never tell him that. No no no.

Mark took out his rage on all the murderous monsters that he could reach.

Everywhere he looked, there were monsters.

Cat-type beasts in trees that wanted to take his head.

Deer-type monsters that looked innocent at first glance (hence the name of the type; these ones were technically bunny-shaped) but then mutated into hooked horrors that tried to eat Mark's face.

Wolf-types that hunted in packs but did not resemble wolves at all. These ones were more scaled than furred and they had swords for tails.

Something slammed into Mark's mind, trying to tell him to sleep, but Mark raged and found the spider on the tree that had tried to catch him in its web of mind magic. Mark killed that fucker dead. When Mark found a nest of the same spiders along with human remains stuffed into the bottom of a tree, he pulled out the remains, grabbed some backpacks, squashed bugs, and figured out how to run his adamantium through a tree fast enough and solid enough, like a blender in the middle of the dead wood, to make the tree catch flame.

Mark burned down a small part of the forest and killed every single mind spider he could find with a few pulses of Union of Brain.

The only things that really survived well in this hellscape were the prey beasts that multiplied fast; the rats, squirrels, bugs, and many small birds, and lots of fish. Everything else was just an offshoot of a previously-established monster species that either stayed the same, or had offspring that mutated in different directions.

Were there bunnies out here that *weren't* collections of fangs, tongues, and mouths, on the inside?

Possible!

Mark hadn't seen a single real bunny!

So far 100% of bunnies, over 80, at least, had tried to jump at him to eat his face. Those bunnies got real dead, real fast, and not to Union at all. Mark could whip adamantium through those little beasts easily enough, mincing them to death, without fear of losing his adamantium. So far, of all the monsters he killed, only the hydra turtle had possessed a strong enough astral body that he had truly blocked Mark's adamantiumkinesis.

Everything else just fell apart.

Mark was using scalpels, though. Not needles. The scalpel shape allowed him to cut things up, instead of pierce things through. Piercing was stupid! Cutting was best! All the way.

He did experiment with grabbing big rocks and hitting monsters with those, but simple rocks were PL 0, while adamantium was PL 79; it was no contest which one was better.

Other discoveries included the fact that Mark much preferred using Union to heal himself and weaken his enemies, than to use it to kill his enemies directly. Somehow it felt dirty to kill with Union; to hurt with a power that was used to protect and heal. But adamantium, though, had a much more visceral, cutting/deadly/murderous feeling to it. There was *feedback* when he carved open something. He knew when he had hit something important. He could *feel it* through his adamantium. There wasn't any feedback to Union.

"But that's all kinda... true villain-ish" Mark mumbled, as he flew down the river, which was rapidly getting wider and wider—

Suddenly the river opened up into a lake—

No. Another river. It was moving from right to left, and it was massive. Mark grinned.

"The Ohio River, I presume!"

The river was full of monsters, of course. They noticed Mark as he sped down the riverbank, but Mark barely noticed them, except by their tug on his Union-sense. Was Mark making too much noise? It didn't seem like it. Maybe the monsters were just hypersensitive to displays of power, or something. Whatever the case, the southern bank of the Ohio River was rather overgrown and right up against the water, except for where normal animal/monster traffic had carved the land into sandy or rocky areas.

A lot of things used the water—

"Ah!" Mark said, "Right!"

Mark was rushing down a riverbank on a major river, where predator and prey often gathered in order to drink, and in some cases, be eaten. Of course everything was looking at him, even if those things were far away. They were threat-assessing him. Most of those things out there just took one look at Mark, and though they all had brief ideas of 'kill kill kill!' or 'eat eat eat!', Mark was too fast for them.

They ignored him when he got out of range, which happened rather fast, and Mark was already ignoring them to start with, for they were too far away to kill and they didn't try to attack him first.

Maybe Mark could have crossed the land and gotten away from this transitional area, but that seemed like even more of a crapshoot for true danger. At least here at the riverbank there was always tons of movement, all the time, so it was expected for things to be dangerous. Not like in the woods, where spiders could prepare traps, or turtles could become demigods in their domain and actually defend their territory.

Mark sped along, down the riverbank, though he did note a few places on the map where the riverbank curved hard, and it would be easier/faster to cross half a mile of land, than it would be to cross 5 miles of curving riverbank.

He took a chance on one of those detours.

When Mark popped out the other side of the one land detour, he even managed to find the same river again. Which was a miracle! A small miracle, really. It was *still* incredibly cool to be able to read a map, plot a shortcut, and then *actually achieve* that shortcut.

Mark chuckled and kept flying, hoping to make it to a city before nightfall.

He had to be flying at 35 or 40 miles per hour, unless he was wildly overestimating his speed, which was completely possible. He knew that he couldn't run with his real legs at half of this speed, though.

Maybe the turnoff to the Mississippi River would be soon?

And then Memphi would be around one of these corners.

Maybe they'd have towers out this far, though.

Memphi was a major metropolitan area—

“HALT! FLIER! HALT!”

Mark laughed at the voice, which came out of a bundle of trees and bushes to the left, and at the four different pulls on the fabric of reality, aiming his way. He had noticed the pulls a while before he got here, but he was rather visible, running out here in the open, and many different things had been looking at him with intent to harm, so he hadn't paid any attention to the pulls. Whatever was in those small woods could stay in those small woods; Mark wasn't falling for it.

Mark kept on flying, shouting back, "Listening to voices in the wilds is a bad idea!"

But then the air froze around Mark, ice rapidly crashing up and around him.

He had sprung a trap.

Mark adjusted the threat from 'weird voice' to 'credible problem'.

He reached out with everything he had, spinning his knives through the ice, shattering the developing cocoon, launching himself toward the threats, reaching with Union into the four *people* and sending three of them straight to their knees—

The fourth one just toppled over, face planting into the dirt—

Oh shit.

People.

Metaphorical ice stabbed into Mark's chest even before he rapidly reoriented, healing the people and flicking away the ice around him with some purity/impurity, healing the women on the ground (probably brain injury, fuck!) and righting whatever wrongs he had done to the other people. They were all wearing normal wilderness gear, but they also had yellow and black armbands with 'M' on them.

Mark took a moment to look at them; a very fast moment.

It was four people, two men and two women of various ages. The women looked cleaner than the men, but one of the women, the much younger one, had just plopped into the mud. She was coming around

though, groaning and holding her head. One woman stood in the back, looking maybe 50-ish years old. Mother to the one who had fallen over? Maybe. But she wasn't making any moves to help the fallen woman. She was staring hard at Mark, and so was everyone else. The woman that Mark had downed groaned, as she got herself out of the muck. The two men were just a pair of guys, maybe 25 or 30, hard to tell. They watched Mark. Brown hair was watching Mark's adamantium flicker around, the other was just watching Mark.

To Mark's Union, they were... something adjacent to hungry? Some weird emotion? But also scared and reorienting and very human. Those were human emotions, for sure. And then came the anger.

All of them looking really fucking pissed—

Anger turned to hate. To harm. A *lot* of intent to harm. They didn't move to enact their desires, but Mark recognized that pull on Union. There was something else in there, though. Some sort of pull that Mark didn't recognize. That hunger-adjacent emotion was right there, and Mark couldn't tell what it was.

The muddy woman was still in pain, and now she looked at herself and shook her arms out, saying, "Fucking *mud* every **fucking** where!"

Mark flashed out purity/impurity in a Union of Brain and all of them cleaned up in an instant, and then Mark pulled back his cleaning and simply healed them, drawing power from the world and from all the monsters lurking quietly in the Ohio River. In that instant, all of them jerked, all of them realizing that they were clean... Or maybe they had needed to go to the bathroom, and now they didn't.

The younger woman was surprised, and then she was looking at Mark with a weirdness in her sight.

Mark hovered about 20 meters away, feeling simply terrible. He said, "I'm so sorry about the attack. I did not mean to react with such... force." He kinda just stopped there, because now the team was rallying and they must have had a Thinker in them, or something, because Mark felt something strange happening in the fabric of the world.

The team was all Union-pointed at each other, the vectors of their existence wrapped up all together, bouncing and—

And then they Union-pointed at the bits of adamantium that Mark had floating around.

Suddenly their drive to kill Mark went through the roof—

And then the older woman's vector slammed into Mark, making a wedge, prying him apart, just a little.

Just enough.

The old woman's voice was the nicest thing, as she asked, "You can give us some of those metal trinkets, can't you? We're so poor, and we need so much money to pay for my son's cancer treatments."

... What the fuck?

Mark, of course, wanted to help them with their money problems, but he was just as poor as them, and it was crazy to ask for someone's weapons. That was just an insane request. Completely off-the-wall wrong. Did you ask for someone's sword in the middle of the wilds in order to sell it off to a city and pay off debt, or some shit like that? No, you did not.

The request honestly made Mark a bit mad.

... But Mark still wanted to help them.

Mark smiled a little as he got closer, asking, "How about I heal the guy's cancer? I'm pretty sure I can do it. Any Freyalan could, really..."

Mark quirked his head to the side a little, as that truth of cancer healing felt pretty true.

... But of course there were truly dangerous things out there that Union couldn't heal, and you needed a True Healer for.

They probably had one of those bad cancers; the magical ones.

Mark said, “I have an uncle in the city that does True Healing, if you need that instead. Maybe I can talk to him on your behalf! How close are we to the city, anyway?”

The old woman stared at Mark, and her eyes were the world.

But Mark still sensed the two men walk to the sides, their vectors of KILL KILL KILL moving to flank Mark, while the younger woman stood there, and the air got chilly. Supercooled, maybe? But not really. The young woman was pointed in every direction, all around Mark, specifically not pointing at him, for the moment. But all of her chilly winds curved through the air. They were guns aimed in Mark’s direction.

Mark looked to the old woman, though. She was the only one that mattered...

But now the young woman was pointed at Mark to KILL KILL KILL, too.

Why were they so scared of him? They didn’t need to fear him.

... He probably did look pretty scary, though, hovering here and with black veins pulsing into the air around him. And also almost nude. He was wearing shorts, though! And he had a backpack. He was clearly a good guy ‘out for a day run’—

The old woman spoke with the most pleasant of voices, “We have our own contacts, honeydew. We just need some money, and our scanners tell us that you’re truly rich. You wouldn’t mind sharing, would you? Just a little bit?”

“I can’t,” Mark said, feeling a bit of anger over being asked to sell his weapons for these people. Of course, if they wanted actual help Mark was right there for them, but even kindness had limits, right? “I’m not rich at all. I can help you find some people to heal yourselves, though— Oh! Do you need an escort? It’s dangerous out here.” Mark smiled. “I can help escort you back!”

The old woman frowned, her voice taking on a deeper edge as she bled from her nose and eyes—

A familiar tone. A familiar look. A familiar face.

Mom was here.

Mom stood on the grassy bank of the Ohio River, saying, “We just need some money, son. Can’t you spare some? Maybe some of that metal you have flicking around, pouring out of your veins? Spare some money for your mother, son.”

No.

Unreal.

Impossible.

The illusion did not break, but Mark knew it was an impossibility, anyway.

Sure. He could accept his mother was alive and wanting money. That wasn’t the issue.

But Mom would never want to kill him, or disarm him in the wilds. This woman and her companions were all angled toward Mark, looking to make a kill. And *that* was impossible to accept.

Mark backed away—

Mom’s face turned ugly as she snapped, “Now!”

Mark simply flew away.

That had always been a choice, it seemed.

The air turned to ice, but Mark crushed the ice and purified it away.

A sword stuck into his side, through his stomach and organs and toward his heart, but he barely felt it, though he did feel it when he hacked off an arm attached to the knife; it was like running a finger through gelatin, but with frozen bananas inside. The bananas must have been the bone.

Something confused the world, turning up to down, and down to up, but Mark still understood where his body was in relation both to his adamantium caltrops and his sense of Union with the world. There was a big river with monsters over there. The grass grew strong underneath him. The people who wanted to kill him were still everywhere around him, though he was leaving them behind rather fast. That was more than enough to let him know which way was which.

Mark ran away, down the sky, over the river, up the mountain and down the canyon, though none of that was true at all.

That illusion broke when Mark got far enough away, and then he was just on the grassy river bank, rushing forward.

Trying to forget the angry face of his mother.

He barely remembered pulling the sword out of his side, but it came out and Mark healed up the wound.

The severed hand fell to the ground.

Mark held on to the sword for whatever reason. He wasn't quite sure. It was shiny and silver and looked valuable.

And Mark flew away from the fight. Away from the face and voice of his mother. Away from the first real conflict he had ever had with other people.

He had no idea how to process it.

As he flew, he began to realize all the little bits about what had been wrong back there.

They had tried to kill him for their own gain. They had used their *Powers* to try and *force him to give them money. MONEY!* Just for monetary gain! They had tried to kill him for *money!*

That had been a real, *actual* attempt on Mark's life.

Not just a scammer, like what Addashield had done to all of his previous apprentices, and how he decided *not* to do with Mark, to let Mark go with a tri-Talent and a few words wishing him well in his life, and to take the dragon-shaped exit from his demon contract. It wasn't anything like what Addavein had done, either, who had shoved himself into Mark's life and then summoned Mark across the world and into Daihoon on a whim, and then sent him back to Earth on a different whim. Addavein was going loopy from lack of sleep... or something. That sort of shit could *almost* be forgiven. All of that shit was just really big things happening around Mark. Big, global events.

Was it even wrong to hate a demon for what it had done to his parents? Demons were just demons, after all. They were completely amoral.

... No.

It was okay to hate demons, *because* they were amoral.

Mark held onto that hate just fine, it seemed.

But those people back there, with those black and yellow Memphi armbands, had just tried to kill him, straight up, for his adamantium. They were not monsters trying to eat him, which was pretty normal for monsters so Mark didn't begrudge them that; not really. They weren't demons, that had forced Addashield to do a bunch of truly horrible shit, and which caused Addashield to finally kill himself and dragonize when he found a good opportunity.

Those people on the shore of the Ohio River were just people.

And they had tried to kill him for reasons of greed.

That had been that hunger-adjacent emotion he had been sensing.

Greed.

They hadn't been wearing basic browns, either, so they were already above the poverty line. Memphis was a tier 4 city, with a whole lot better basic amenities than Orange City, so those people should have had good lives... right?

Mark had no idea how to process what had just happened.

So he flew faster, as the sun began to lower in the western sky.