

The goblin from Daihoon bled from ten different wounds, red trickling down green skin onto white webs, inside the hive mind spider's lair.

Hundreds of its brothers lay broken and dead on the ground. All of them were a little fuzzy and with big eyes and many legs. Some of them were wrapped in silk, the results of the last weeks of probes and failures. Most of them had no weapons at all, the result of the last few days of attack. Some had spears.

The goblin from Daihoon had a rusted sword, and it had been enough.

It advanced toward the enemy.

The hive mind spider, the size of a large room in a small dwelling, was crippled even worse than the goblin. The goblin grabbed at an almost-dead brother and bit his head off. He nibbled on the rib cage. He ate the heart. Within moments, the goblin from Daihoon was healed and walking tall. It raised its sword and advanced.

The spider was legless. Eyeless. Most of its sharp needle-hair was gone. It had one fang left, but it was using that one to crawl away. Its juicy, juicy body was untouched. No wounds at all on that big white butt. It was fat and white and the goblin leapt onto the big part of it. The hive mind spider chattered in impotent fury. The goblin got a few stinging hairs into his feet for his trouble, but that was no trouble at all.

His mouth salivated, his transformative power gathering strong.

He bit into the prey, drawing ichor from the beast. The beast hissed loud, and weakly.

The goblin leapt away.

Hidden deep within an old human city of columns, arches, stone, and destroyed homes, the goblin laughed, and he waited. His brothers gathered out of the gloom, to watch the death of the enemy.

The mind spider's body eventually stopped moving.

And then its insides started wriggling.

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“We’re going to my ancestral home!” Eliot said, standing outside of Mark’s room.

Eliot had brown skin, brown hair, and amber eyes, with a wiry body under expensive, yet kinda trashy-looking clothes. He was casual right now.

Mark was in his boxer shorts.

Mark blinked out sleep from his eyes and looked past the short man, to the dimmed hallway lights. The sun was not up, and in fact everything was rather dark. Reddish. Citadel was primed for night guard. Mark looked Eliot in his happy face again. Mark tried to be enthusiastic, as he asked, “Sorry? What?”

“We’re going to Rome for the training mission! In 8 hours! The details just came through the wire! I had to fly the drone over and tell you!” Eliot chided him, “And why are you in boxers? Why are you asleep this early? It’s only midnight!”

“The real question is ‘why are you awake?’, because you should be sleeping, too.”

“I sleep enough! And I’m excited! Rome is amazing! Lots of weird monsters. Maybe we can even find and kill that giant hive mind spider!”

Eliot got real enthusiastic sometimes, and normally Mark loved it, but not right now.

“They told us that we’d be headed out tomorrow and sleep was important, and details would follow. We don’t need to know the details right... Eliot...” Mark blinked again, eyed some weirdness with Eliot, and then he reached out and touched Eliot’s face. His hand went through the face, disturbing the hologram and flickering broken light into the air. He pulled back and sighed. “You are in bed right now, aren’t you.”

“Yes! But I can’t sleep. Let me in. I want to talk about Rome!”

“If I let you in you’ll talk for hours...” Mark smiled sleepily. “No. I’ll see you in 4 hours, Eliot.” He closed the do—

Eliot pleaded, “I want to talk about Rome! And what you’re going to wear for the camera!”

Mark scoffed. “See you later, Eliot!”

Mark shut the door, scratched his abs, and yawned.

He heard Eliot’s mostly-silent drone fly away outside.

... What time was it, anyway? Mark checked his phone. Oh yeah. 1:12 AM.

‘It’s Midnight’, huh, Eliot? Phhsh!

Mark collapsed back in bed and he hoped that Eliot put down the phone and did the same.

Hours later, Mark woke up refreshed and excited.

It was time for a training mission!

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Mark hopped off of the tram near the hover port. Cars and vans took off into the sky, picking up and dropping off people from designated circles on the wide, open ground. A lot of the people were acolyte white, hugging people goodbye and then flying away, or people in civilian clothes coming into Citadel with a paladin or instructor escort, their eyes looking everywhere that they could. Paladins in silver armor hopped into big hovervans, the large, brick-like vehicles rushing off with their armored force to wherever it was they were needed.

To the side were assorted buildings; prep areas, mostly. Mark headed that way.

He checked his phone and navigated past paladins in armor, healers in silver-trimmed robes, and families who had their kids in tow. Mark wasn't sure what was going on with that last one, because kids needed to stay *inside* cities, but the parents or whatever probably knew what they were doing.

Mark found the designated meeting room. Down a hallway, at the end on the right, was a small room that held a long table and some stools in the corner. A projection screen held to the side of the room. It currently showed a projection of a last-taken aerial composite photograph of Rome.

In the Old World, Rome had been a major metropolitan area, scattered with the ruins of ancient Rome right alongside modern pizza places and whatever.

In the modern world, almost 80 years after the Reveal and the flooding from Daihoon, and the complete melting of the ice caps of the poles, the ocean had risen something like 23 meters. Or at least those were the agreed-upon numbers according to the Two World History that Mark was studying, now that he was beyond Curtain Protocol. The flood took years to happen so people saw it coming but it still killed a *lot* of people. Maybe even more than the monsters, according to some sources.

A lot of people scoffed at that idea.

The World History books kinda threw their hands up and said that no one really knew final death counts.

The flood had come through Rome pretty strongly.

It was a city divided by an ocean. The River Tiber, the river that ran through the city, had become an inland sea more than a real river; the Mediterranean invading the land like fat lightning.

Rome was uninhabitable now, but people still flocked to it to steal whatever they could, or die trying. It used to be a great place of art and stuff, though Mark didn't know anything about it, for sure. And so, since Mark was the only one here, he took out his phone and started researching.

Ten minutes later an exhausted Eliot stood in the doorway, his eyes dark, his voice haggard. "I stayed up too late. Please help."

Mark smiled, and then he activated Union, the veins of his astral body flickering out from his skin with every beat of his heart, pushing out the bad in vein-like strands of miasma and taking in the good. He linked to Eliot, and soon, Eliot's haggard demeanor began to shift softer. His eyes brightened, his shoulders unslumped. He smiled and walked into the room and plopped down in a chair across from the projection of Rome, his baggy cargo pants not crunching at all, which, based on how much stuff he kept in there, was still strange that it never made noise.

Mark said, "Welcome back to wakefulness."

Eliot said, "This right here. This is why I want Union the most. No more sleep!"

Mark scoffed. "Union is not a substitute for sleep!"

"It could be, but you like sleeping too much. Honestly I do not see the appeal if you can just flow away the bad and breathe in the good. Never have to sleep! Never worry about being tired! No worries about going insane from lack of sleep!"

Isoko stepped into the room, asking, "What's going on with Eliot making bad decisions again?"

Eliot scoffed. “They just look bad if you don’t know me, but I plan and prep for everything!”

Isoko hummed, believing him, but not really.

Isoko was pale, strong, and Japanese, with starkly black hair in a layered bob cut and vaguely grey eyes. She wore basic brown clothes, like Mark. She had yet to become an acolyte of Freyala, even after being here for a few months and completing two training missions. This was going to be her third training mission, and Mark kinda wanted to know what Freyala was waiting on. Isoko was almost tier 3, if not already there.

“Eliot needed to forgo sleep again.” Mark linked to Isoko, too, helping her to recover from anything that might be affecting her, but she was fine, like usual. “And he wants to never sleep again, if he could help it.”

Eliot told Mark, “Traitor.”

Isoko sighed and summed up a conversation they had already had, “Everybody needs sleep, that way you can stress your astral body and physical body to your limits when needed and you won’t find your limits to be limited.”

“Blah blah blah~” Eliot said, “I was already on mission 8 hours ago.” With a dismissive, kingly wave, Eliot said, “You two are just now catching up to me. Therefore, I should be blessed with all the refreshments and no-more-bathrooms-or-showers that I require. And speaking of which! Please, Mark, if you would be so kind.”

Mark chuckled and then pulsed purity/impurity, the black veins under his skin and in the air of his astral body turning much blacker for a few beats of his heart. Isoko relaxed into it, letting her arms shake out, as Eliot put his hands behind his head and grinned, leaning back in his chair, eyes closed. Mark felt a bit cleaner, too, which was just plain nice, and then he went back to drawing in resilience from the world, for all three of them, and expelling their own weakness back out in exchange.

For the past two weeks, Mark had been working the arena of Brawny Sparring 101, right alongside the rest of the Healer Club. People rotated in and out of Healer Club, their numbers sometimes increasing to 30 or dwindling to 15, while the numbers of people on the arena floor had mostly decreased, with people

moving on or doing something else. Some got promoted to acolyte of Freyala, and they got to sit up on the arena stands and practice Union with everyone else.

Mark's Union was truly strong, but then again Lola told him that was the case to start with.

Apparently Mark's *directed* healing, with the good/bad dichotomy, was overkill, really, for normal battle.

So Mark had started to focus on a half-healing/half-protection style that suited him a lot better. The words/feelings of resilience/weakness were great, allowing him to make sure that everyone's astral bodies kept going strong, and that Mark himself never needed to actually drop Union. So that's what he did most of the time. It offered repair for the body and a host of smaller benefits, like being able to look directly into the sun and not burn your eyes, or being able to walk (quickly) through flames and be fine.

And blood never really stopped moving, but it did have periods of faster and slower times, so there was no 'turn around time' between resilience and weakness in his blood Union, like there was in his breath Union. Lola had told Mark that Mark should use breath Union when he wanted to provide a steady stream of 'good' or 'bad', or whatever, and Mark found that to be a great suggestion.

All of that stuff was nuance that Mark would need to learn his way around, out in the field. That's what today was for, really. Training missions were for learning about oneself, and monsters.

Mark asked Eliot, "What did you want to talk to me about Rome last night?"

Isoko laughed. "What time did he come for you?"

Eliot defended himself, "A scout scouts no matter the time! Informs no matter the situation! And we have the capability to ignore sleep schedules a little bit. Therefore, I did what I needed to do." He looked at both of them, saying, "You both should have started briefing with me last night."

Isoko asked Mark, "He came at me at 2 AM."

Mark said, "1:12; I remember the clock saying."

Eliot scoffed.

Isoko continued, “So he couldn’t get you, so he went after me, and then I denied him too, and now he tells us that we should just ignore sleep schedules. Obviously he is raising good points about scouting—”

“Obviously,” Mark agreed.

“—but what could he really tell us aside from the lay of the land, which is not what we really need to know except to make plans around, and that takes 2 minutes, and should be done on site.”

Mark said, “I have no idea about all that. I just knew I needed sleep before a mission. That was my personal prep for the mission.”

Isoko nodded, “And also exactly how we were told to prep. ‘Sleep well, because you might not sleep well for 4 days’. That, and the location reveal, was the entire prep that we were told to concern ourselves with.”

Eliot defended himself, “I went above and beyond.”

Isoko looked at him and straight-up told him, “If you *ever* wake me up to talk about how I look on camera out in the field I will be *extra* mad, Eliot.”

Mark laughed.

“I’ll fix you both in post and you’ll be fine with it!” Eliot declared. And then he said, “You’re going to have an *evil* look going on, Mark, with darker eyes and deeper black lines. Isoko is going to be a pretty pretty princess!”

Mark smirked. “Sure.”

Isoko said, “Sounds good.”



Eliot eyed them for a moment, an eyebrow going up. And then he smirked and opened his mouth to say something—

But Paladin David Turner walked into the room, and Eliot stood at attention. Isoko's eyes went wide. Mark just grinned. He hadn't known who was going to be their escort for the training mission, but now that David was here it looked like one of the overseers to Mark's possible demonic influence was going to be their guide... Hopefully.

David was wearing his armor, like how Mark had first seen the guy. Blond hair that was a bit reddish, blue eyes that were a bit purple; the guy had daihoonian blood in some sort of way, for sure. His last name was Turner, though, which painted him as one of Freyala's truly trusted paladins, and in David's case, Inquisitor. Just like Lola; Mark's teacher for Union lessons. Neither of them were actually related to Freyala, but the Inquisitors were her most trusted people.

Eliot and Isoko had both been kinda weirded out to see Inquisitors around Mark now and again, but so was everyone, once they knew that Lola, David, and Orissa, were Inquisitors. They were all pretty great people in Mark's mind, though.

He still didn't believe they murdered people who turned to evil. That was probably Mark's personal failing; he understood that. His just didn't believe that one person could hurt another in such a way, even though Addashield had—

Mark didn't want to think about Addashield right now.

It was enough to know that Inquisitors only dealt death to those who became enemies of humanity, and no one here qualified for that classification at all; no one was linked to demons in an unapproved way, and no one was talking to monsters, and *especially* no one was talking to dragons.

David was personable as he said, "Hello, initiates and ward, Eliot Cybersong, Isoko Kanno, and Mark Careed. I'm Inquisitor Paladin David Turner. You may call me David. You are here for a training mission, in order to prove yourself as capable in the field, and maybe as someone that Freyala would want to patron. You will be in real danger, but I will be there at all points in time in the mission, and I will rescue you if you get too deep into problems. Other than that, I will hang back and let you experience what it's truly like out there in the wilds.

“The training mission will be undertaken like a real mission at all points in time. We are off the ground in 2 hours. Usually you get a lot less time than what you have been given. Please keep that in mind for the validity of this training mission.

“Please direct your attention to the screen,” David said, as he tapped at the backside of one of his gauntlets, at a protected phone screen. The image of ruined Rome began to shift and light. Grey areas appeared, and also a blue area, to the left of the inland ocean, in where the middle of the city used to be, right beside a giant crater. “The city of Rome was heavily ruined in the Reveal, due to many different factors that are unimportant to know. I am sure Eliot has stories that he will be speaking of during your mission, if you have much downtime for any of that.

“I don’t expect much downtime.

“For your mission, you will be investigating this area here, north of what was once a religious center of the Old World, called the Vatican.

“A corrupter goblin from Daihoon showed up right there maybe a week ago.”

Mark felt the weight of the mission settle upon him at the naming of the threat. Goblins were a big deal. All goblins could bite something and transform that thing into more goblins, but corrupter goblins had especially potent transformative venom.

It all came down to a Power Level numbers game. Goblin claws and venom usually failed against anything that was at PL 10 in Body, though PL 20 was considered the minimum to be *truly* safe against any normal goblin. If a person was weakened by wounds and poison, or anything like that, or if they fell asleep while wounded by a goblin, then they would be influenced by the goblin venom. A lot of monsters and wildlife out were at 10-20 in Body, though, so goblin claws and bites usually couldn’t penetrate skin or hide, and especially not scale. Most healthy monsters could shrug off one goblin bite; even a bite from a corrupter goblin, sometimes.

Goblins were dinner for most monsters.

But a corrupter goblin was stronger. Maybe PL 25 or 35 in Body. They would come in and bite monsters and run away, letting their corruption infection transform the bodies of the infected into more goblins.

Isoko and Eliot stood a little straighter, their eyes a little wider, just like Mark.

David continued, “Your task is twofold, all designed to give you the full goblin experience. The first task is to eliminate all the goblins until you find the corrupter goblin. The second task is to talk to the corrupter goblin and offer them passage back to Daihoon, or to hash out a different agreement where they stay in some sort of reserve, or something. The final shape of that outcome is left up to you.”

Mark almost scoffed as he could not believe what he was hearing.

And then he realized that David had not been joking.

Disbelief all around.

Mark was the first one to voice, “You CANNOT be serious with that ‘talk to them’ shit!”

Isoko stared at David, letting Mark’s words hang as enough. Eliot did the same.

David fully expected this, so he easily said, “When you are out there with others of Earth, you might come across those who are unable to understand that monsters are monsters. Therefore, in this training mission, you will be charged with acting on behalf of one of those kinds of people. The purpose of this is to show you exactly what to expect when you come at goblins with talks of peace.”

Isoko scoffed. Eliot frowned.

Mark said, “Leaving aside the fact that we’re coming at them disingenuously, and therefore they would never believe us anyway... No wait. Let’s start there.”

David said, “That’s a problem with this scenario, yes. The goblins view us as food that they need to be tricky to get though, so they take the bait. You will still try to make inroads at peace.”

Isoko spoke up, “Peace is a literal impossibility. They eat us. They LIKE to eat us.”

Eliot said, “They like to infect us and have our bodies turned into incubators for their young. Eating is secondary.”

“Both of you are correct,” David said. “You will still make one attempt at peace. You are allowed to offer that area of Rome as the new goblin home. We could even open a hole back to Daihoon to let them through. And then, when they do what they’re going to do, you kill them all. Every single one, to the last. 100% clearance rate.” He added, “Consider this a primer on unreasonable requests from your leaders, because that’s also part of the mission; clear the mission, as requested, and then fix the actual problem, as seen on the ground. We expect it to take you about a week. Longer if you scare the goblins into running. Potentially less, if you manage to make them all race at you to see who gets to bite you first.”

Silence spread in the room.

People spoke outside, walking in the halls. A door opened and shut. Hovercars hummed and thrummed in the near distance, as a door in the hallway opened to the outside for a moment, before shutting again.

Mark asked, “Do people actually try to talk to goblins?”

Eliot was the one who answered. “All the time. It’s a real problem. Every video online that shows the goblin problem —that they see us as food and baby makers— is always met with disbelief among the young and the unknowing. They can’t envision a world where bad things actually happen to good people.” Eliot looked at David. “We are killing them, though, right? I’m making an extermination film, yes?”

David nodded once, as he said, “You will do as you will do in a normal mission, and for you, Eliot, that is being a bard, since that is what you want to do. Don’t let it overtake your scouting duties. Isoko is a frontliner, since that is what she wants to do. Mark is the healer/protector, though you can flow around the situation as desired. I imagine Eliot will need to be the most protected, since he is at PL 11, in Body. Isoko is at 30 in Body and a little lesser in everything else. Mark is at 22 in Body, which is enough to survive small injuries. You can expunge a normal goblin infection through a typical resilience/weakness Union, so I’ll let you do that. If the corrupter goblin bites you, then you should consider yourselves dead if I were not there, but I will step in with my own Union and clean up the infection.”

Mark centered himself. Okay. This was the mission.

He could do this.

The others had similar body language.

David nodded, “Now... You all know your powers but we’ll go over them again, as though this was a team you did not know. After that, we’ll go over your supplies for the mission, and that’s enough for now.

“I’m David. I’m a general speedster rated at times-35 speed, Rank S. Full melee weapon clearance. Frontliner and scout. Tier 9 in Body and the usual spread in the other categories. Freyalan Chosen Union at tier 7, so Natural is at tier 7. I’m qualified in Union of Blood, Breath, and others that don’t need to be spoken about, since Mark is still learning. Mark, you’re up.”

Mark reeled a little bit from hearing ‘times 35 speedster’. That was a lot.

The rest of it was what Mark expected of a man at the peak of his power and with a good Talent.

Tier 9.

‘The usual spread’ for a One Talent (which was the normal amount of Talents), who had reached tier 9, was something like tier 9 in their category, then tier 5 in the categories next to their category, tier 2 or 3 in the other two, and then tier 1 in the category directly opposite their own main category. So, since David was a speedster of some sort, which was a Body Talent, then that meant that he was something like...

095 Body, 50-ish Shaper, 25-ish Mind, 15-ish Natural, 25-ish Soul, and 50-ish Arch, in the hexagonal grid form.

But since David was in the Chosen System, of specifically Freyala, he had a 75-ish in Natural, which put him artificially at something like:

095, 50-ish, 25-ish, 75-ish, 25-ish, 50-ish.

That meant that anything below those levels of astral body strength would have a hard time affecting him, but anything above would still hurt him. There was a lot of nuance to that, with specific materials and the insidiousness of those materials to consider, with Union as an example of something that was ‘insidious’ if used that way, but generally, a person with a 95 in Body who tried to injure person who had a 25 in Body would be like a diamond scratching a fingernail.

Or, more importantly, that fingernail *ain't* scratching that diamond *at all*.

As a side thought, Mark considered Curtain Protocol, and how most people on Earth Awakened with a brawny, Body Talent. A lot of Earthlings —a lot of brawnies— went into the Chosen System, too. This was wildly good for a person, because the Chosen System was a way for them to supplement their natural astral body. For David, who was a speedster, becoming a Chosen of Freyala erased his main weakness as a brawny, which was any monster or person of the Naturally-Talented sort.

Most of the other gods had arisen on Natural Talents, too. Drakarok’s Retribution, Hearthswell’s Castellan, even Verdado’s Farmer.

Mark was still kinda mad at Curtain Protocol hiding stuff from him, but it was easy to understand why things were hidden once you understand the reasonings, and why the powers-that-be wanted most people to be brawnys. With any normal brawny Talent, and entering into the Chosen System, a guy erased their worst weakness. Of course they had to devote parts of their lives to working for the gods, but they got a ‘Second Talent’ *and* the accompanying Astral Body benefits.

David was really strong then, huh.

The others raised eyebrows at David, too, but they got professional a lot faster than Mark.

Mark recovered. He said, “Mark. Healthy Body, an unusable Shaper Talent as of now, which means not this mission, and Union. Tier 2 in Body, Shaper, and Mind. Soul and Arch are tier 1. Union is at tier 3. Blood and Breath Union... And I’m not sure how much further to go with that.”

David said, "Weapon skills, place in the group. Say you don't have tactile telekinesis yet. They expect brawnies to be TT capable, or not."

Mark added, "Good with most weapons. Spear is the best. I think I'm healing and protecting. No TT"

David nodded, said, "Think of a way to shorten that while including all the necessary information." He looked to Isoko.

Isoko said, "Isoko. Platinum Body. Tier 3 in all categories. Frontliner. Shield and sword. No TT"

David nodded, then looked to Eliot.

Eliot said, "Eliot. Man-made Manipulation, high tier 2 Arch, normal spread. 13 in Body. I'll be using a mana shield to up myself to defensive-20 in every category. Big time scout, trap master, defensive fortifications. Anything you create, I can manipulate. Anything you are around... I *might* be able to manipulate. Anything the monsters touch degrades out of my manipulation fast. I can gradually influence the environment..." He paused. He continued, "Ehhh... There's a lot."

David nodded. "That's enough, anyway. I was going to ask you to cut it off. It's important not to dump too much information onto a team, too fast.

"I'm electing a team leader now, and it's Mark. Healers are team leaders and shot callers. You don't know how to do it yet, Mark, but you'll eventually be able to gauge the health of your team, or rather, the depth to which your healing or protections are being taxed, which is usually the result of enemy action. That's how you gauge your team. But for now, brainstorm how you will enact the given mission, and the true mission, which is *always* to eliminate *all* the monsters you see, *anywhere*.

"You have the floor, Mark."

Mark stood straight, thought, then said, "So... Eliot scouts everywhere and builds fallback locations outside of the incursion zone, and... And we'll go from there?" That was not enough, and now Mark was kinda flowing into the question, so he said, "Eliot is familiar with the area so we rely on him to pick a starter location and build defensive with the expectation that the enemy goblins have co-opted some of

the local wildlife to goblinhood. Do we have readouts on any scans taken of the areas over the last month? Can we get those?”

Eliot said, “I have those! Let’s go over them?”

David spoke up, “It’s your job as Scout to have all the information you can and when called upon that information, you need to be succinct, Eliot. No hour long chats about monsters and whatnot unless you have that sort of downtime. If you have an idea for a starter base and monsters that are in the area, then point out three locations, and you should limit it to three best options. Also, I assure you that unless you picked up information this very morning, as of an hour ago, then it’s out of date already. Goblins move fast and reinforce faster, and monsters always move through locations, changing everything.

“You encountered a hive mind spider a few weeks ago, but you were surprised by that, because monsters move fast and eat faster. You need to scan on location to have any hope of being prepped.

“However, knowing the previous information is a good start. Don’t give too much information, though; we’re on a mission here, not making a documentary. Keep that stuff for the Bard career, Eliot. That goes for you, too, Mark. More information is better, but too much gets you bogged down from the mission. Also, since this interaction is between you, Mark, as leader, and Eliot as scout, you need to get Isoko’s input as well, after Eliot gives you the initial three locations.” David added, “Continue.”

Mark appreciated the quick lesson on how to run a group, he supposed.

Mark looked at Eliot, and then to the picture on the screen on the wall. “Uh. Projections?”

Eliot was bubbly as he pulled out a drone from one of the pockets of his cargo pants and set it onto the table. With a flicker of Power that Mark could only guess at, the drone unfolded and began to project a holographic image of flooded Rome, on top of the table. Bubbles of color, mostly grey, began to form over this and that part of the holographic projection. There was the blue territory of the goblins, centered on the map, but Eliot’s map also had red, yellow, and green territories, right next to the goblin area, surrounding it.



Eliot said, “There were some hive mind spiders there last time I was in the area. The goblins cleared them all out, according to the high-powered scans from our satellites. I’d get better information on-location, but this is what I know:

“The new breed of goblins that spawned from the corrupter goblin are good at blending into the background and coordinated action. The goblins that came out of the corruption of the big mind spider are probably lieutenant class goblins. With any luck, most of them went through the Monster Tutorial and died, but probably not. So we might have 2 corrupter goblins or more. They’re mostly just very smart.

“They might have gotten a Mind knack, or Power, but hopefully not.

“They will want to expand. They’re probably going after the other monster areas here, shown in red, green, and yellow, in order to take them over. The reds are a bunch of wyvern-class monsters; a colony of flying lizards about the size of dogs. The yellows are toxic slimes. The greens are poison slimes. The goblins will probably be going after the lizards next, because those are meat and goblins can’t transform slimes very easily, and maybe they can get some flying gobos out of the wyvern dogs.

“My suggestion is we set up in the slime areas, but... They do make the air hard to breathe, so... Can you clear the air, Mark?”

Mark wasn’t sure he could.

The blue area was north of something labeled ‘The Vatican’, while that place was all yellow with toxic slimes, and the space to the northwest of the goblin land was green with poison slimes. The red area was by the waters, which was either a good or bad thing.

Mark wanted to go after the wyvern fliers because they couldn’t let the goblins get flying goblins.

David had opinions; Mark could tell.

Mark asked Isoko, “Thoughts?”

Isoko said, “We can’t let the goblins get flying goblins. We need to take over and scatter the flying lizard area, at least. That will allow us to hinder them on all sides. What’s around the lizard area? Aside from backing up against the river/ocean?”

Mark nodded. “Eliot?”

Eliot smiled, happy he was able to talk about what he had researched, “The river/ocean is filled with fish, some of them flying. We can’t let the gobos get to the fish, either.” Eliot gestured to the holomap and red-ish colors illuminated all along the banks of the river/ocean. “The coasts of the Tiberranean, if you would permit the portmanteau, from the Mediterranean all the way to the inland sea over here, is chock full of wyvern dogs. If we took over this red territory by the goblins, then I am rather sure that we could hold it, but being near open water is always dangerous. Stuff comes out of the ocean all the time. It’s mostly a *river* here, though, which means it's a transition, thin sort of space, and we could see most big monsters coming.

“The inner sea is packed with wyvern dogs that took over that place long ago and kept it under their control. There are actual wyverns in the inner sea, but we won’t be going that way. The smaller ones like to hunt in packs, with most of them being semi-aquatic. They avoid the big predators and hide out around their big cousins, while they work to kill and eat anything that is remotely their own size. So if we clear this red land by the gobos, we might send the dogs scattering to the other side of the river, and make them not-our-problem anymore.

“Knowing goblins, as soon as the red territory is clear, and if we make a big shining castle on a hill, then they’ll surely come to us. They’ll want to eat humans most of all, after all. That way, we can let them come to us, to die, and maybe the corrupter goblin will appear, and want to talk!” Eliot was excited. “That’ll fulfill our mission, too! It’s brilliant!”

Mark thought about it, and it sounded good. Could Eliot actually make a big defensive structure, though? Something that could survive smart monster attacks? There were other concerns, too.

Isoko looked concerned, too.

Mark said, “I am unsure about having a strong central location. Can you really build... something like that, Eliot? Something that can withstand smart attackers?”

Eliot said, “*Absolutely*. As long as I have help with the initial construction; Killing plants and monsters in the area, stacking some rocks here and there with me that I can piggyback off of with Man-made Manipulation; that sort of thing. Painting walls is actually really important, too.”

Mark realized something. “We haven’t really gotten to see your Power shine yet, have we?”

Eliot smirked. “No, you have not.” And then he got a concerned look on his face and added, “I have a very big weakness to concentrated monster attacks. I cannot hold any location by myself at all.”

Isoko laughed once. “Don’t worry; I’ll protect you.” And then she asked David, “So what kinda supplies do we get to start?”

Mark and Eliot looked to David.

David said, “First, Eliot empties all of his pockets, and then changes into some basic brown clothes, and then we all get dropped off into the wilderness with practically nothing.”

Mark paused. Isoko’s expression went blank.

Eliot scoffed, disbelieving, “You’re not serious.”

David smirked. “I am very serious.”

“But... !” Eliot asked, “But how can I record anything without... without anything?!”

David said, “Find some rocks and smash them together to make some silicon and then scrape the oil from your hair for plastic and go from there. Or go a different way. Scavenge. Whittle spears, too.”

Eliot lost all of his words.

Mark spoke up, “Will you still be able to scout like that, Eliot?”

Eliot took a moment, looking up at the air, at nothing, and then coming back to himself. “I can make it work— I’ll lose hours of footage, though! All of the initial mission!”

Isoko asked David, “No rations? No weapons? Armor? *Anything?*”

David said to the three of them, “The three of you, together, are strong enough to overcome any sort of problem out in this mission. It will be dangerous. You will be injured. But Eliot can make weapons and fortifications, Mark can support you all with sustenance, wakefulness, healing, and protection, and Isoko is an excellent frontliner. I could dump you three into any wilderness and I would expect Eliot to come out of it wearing power armor, Isoko to be covered in the blood of your enemies, and Mark making sure everyone looked even more healthy than when you left into the wilds.”

Eliot complained, “But my shield! How can I go out in the field without a shield! My PL’s are going to be too low!”

David said, “You’ll be fine. Mark can buff Body instead of you relying on a shield. And your Body isn’t that low, Eliot.”

Eliot looked to Mark, pleading with his eyes.

Mark said, “I can protect you but... but this is kind of worrying.”

David told Mark, “You’re fine, too.”

Eliot looked to Isoko, trying to find support.

Isoko shrugged. “I am actually okay with this. You can make all the weapons and stuff we need, Eliot.”

Eliot breathed in. He calmed himself. He stared at David and bargained, “I want one drone for camera work.”

David said, “Sure. It can’t be used for anything else and I’m destroying it myself after 5 hours.”

Eliot relaxed. “Okay. I can deal with this.”

Isoko asked Eliot, “Have you ever forged weapons at all?”

Eliot excitedly said, “I’ve read about it. Extensively, even!”

Isoko withheld judgment. She did nod, though.

Mark said, “I think this is good, actually.” Isoko and Eliot looked to him, while David grinned a little bit.

Mark said, “We can do this.”

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“I’m not sure we can do this,” Eliot said, as wind blew hard through the open door of the hover van.

The split city of Rome awaited below, cut in half by the Tiber River that was more accurately a narrow part of the Mediterranean. The whole ruin was festooned with trees and craters of many sizes. Round and oblong lakes were everywhere, and it was easy to see that they had once been craters. Many of the old structures survived the bombings and monster waves of the Reveal, but no one had ever moved back here.

The area directly below the hovervan was some sort of residential district. The *ancient* city of Rome was actually on the other side of the Tiberranean. The only truly ancient part of this side of the river was the Vatican area, down south from the goblin infection. With any luck, they wouldn’t need to go to the Vatican area, or north, to another slime space. Toxic yellow slimes covered the half-broken buildings of the Vatican, while poison green ones infested the area to the north, both of them spilling out miasmas of various sorts into the air.

Directly below, on rooftops and in trees, were wyvern dogs. They were tan, brown, or red-scaled, and mostly mottled. They barked at each other, and at the hovervan overhead. Their calls grew and grew, and Eliot was looking scared.

Mark looked at Eliot, trying to understand why the man was so scared. Was it really because he had been stripped of all his tech? Mark said, "I once saw you make a phone from trash out of the bin. You can do this, Eliot."

Eliot's single drone camera gripped his shoulders with a few spider-like limbs that he could turn into propellers. Eliot said, "That trash was charged with humanity. There's nothing down there, Mark. *Nothing.*"

Isoko said, "Correction! Nothing *yet.*"

Mark said, "We can make stuff."

Eliot frowned at the land down below.

Inquisitor David watched from the slit of his helmet. He still had all his gear on, but Mark, Eliot, and Isoko, had all been stripped of everything but basic brown clothes. David was going to take away Eliot's initial drone, too, in 5 hours.

Isoko put a calming hand on Eliot's shoulder, saying, "Rely on us, Eliot." She stepped to the hovervan's opening, hand to the handle, half of her body practically hanging out of the vehicle already. She turned, smiled at Eliot, and her whole body flashed to pure, platinum silver. The hovervan lurched a bit with the added weight of her transformation, which was something she was just getting a hang on herself, but everyone recovered fast enough. With a chuckle, Isoko said, "Everything I kill and the destruction I do is 'man made', right?"

Everyone knew the answer to that, but Eliot didn't want to say it.

Isoko turned dramatic, taking her hand off of the handle by the door, and putting the back of that hand to her forehead. She tilted outward. "I'm feeling faint! Oh noooo~ Come rescue me, Eliot!" And then she finished tilting out of the vehicle.

With another dramatic flourish she kicked off of the hovervan's floor, getting a bit of distance before she tumbled in the air and righted herself.

Mark rushed to the edge of the hovervan right alongside Eliot. They watched Isoko plummet 15 meters to the surface of what had once been a road made of square bricks. She cracked the stone she landed upon. Two wyvern-dogs stalked at her from the shadows, not willing to commit just yet.

Mark made a move. He dropped over the edge of the hovercar, his heart beating with a Union of resiliency and weakness, his eyes focused hard on Isoko and the enemies around her.

Isoko squared up against a wyvern dog and the dog-sized thing screeching loud as it stalked into the sunlight, its scales glinting red and brown as it spread its wings in a threat display. Isoko screamed back at it, “YAAAAA!!!”

The one behind her, 5 meters away, leapt at her, its wings tucked in close, its mouth and claws reaching, grabbing.

Isoko turned around and kicked the thing's face into the ground, pinning it there and then putting all of her weight onto the thing's head, crunching it into the ground. She was 650 pounds on a 140 pound body, so she could just do that. Mark smiled, and then he breathed out weakness, focusing on the wyvern with the threat display that was about to pounce on Isoko's now-turned back.

Mark landed on the ground, his body stressed a bit from the heavy drop, but he was running a Union of resiliency and he landed on two legs, the shock absorbed and shunted away by his Power. He was still breathing out weakness, along with his heart beating out the same, all of it leaving Mark and Isoko and going into the wyvern dog.

The monster collapsed at Isoko's feet, barely able to make the distance toward her before it fell. Isoko stomped its head in and then continued crushing it just for good measure.

Mark looked up—

Eliot landed in Isoko's initial crater, the ground softening at his fall, buoying him into an easy landing. He had just dropped 15 meters, too. He winced. It had been a hard-ish fall. Mark's Union cleared away his problems soon, though, and then he stepped onto solid ground. His drone recorded everything it could.

David was there, standing to the side, in bright silver armor.

Everyone jolted at David's sudden appearance.

David said, "Good showing. Now what?"

Wyvern dogs barked all around them, some of them howling.

Eliot instantly said, "I can't scout for shit right now! Let's get to that crater/plaza up ahead and kill everything and start stacking bricks!"

Mark said, "Isoko on point, Eliot in middle. I got the back." He pointed down the street, toward an openish area ahead. That was their destination to start with, but they couldn't land there directly because it was a main nest. "Let's do this. Isoko please mangle that rusted car up ahead for Eliot."

Isoko walked that way and gleefully, briefly, dimmed from full-platinum to just grey, before she leapt into the air, toward the rusted car. Her skin flashed full-platinum right before she landed, the arc of her leap cut short as she gained a not-literal ton of weight. Mark breathed in durability for both of them while his heart continued to beat a Union of resilience and weakness.

Isoko landed with a tearing, ripping crunch, her feet burying into the rusted steel, her hands coming down and ringing off of the metal frame. She had plunged through the side of the vehicle, but gotten stuck on the metal frame. She winced, but just out of reflex, Mark hoped. She looked at her perfectly fine hand, and then she punched the resistant metal. Mark made sure she stayed protected and healthy and soon she cracked the metal frame.

Eliot whispered, "Oh thank the gods," as he grabbed hold of the air and the car with his astral body. He pulled out metal from where Isoko crushed and broke the vehicle, creating ingots of pure steel, a basket of plastic and steel, and glass rods. A whole bunch of miscellaneous materials reinforced the basket and its contents, and soon Eliot was looking less freaked out. He grabbed an ingot, "What weapon, Isoko?"

"A blade spear maybe later," Isoko said, as she punched the engine block, ringing her hand. "Big ball hammer first!"



Eliot handed her a big hammer that he would never have been able to hold himself, if not for his Man-made Manipulation. It had a handle a meter long with a counterweight at the base, and a head that was a solid orb of steel that melded with the handle. "Here!"

He tossed it, more with his Power than with actual physical strength, and Isoko caught it, the steel ringing in her platinum grip. It weighed, and she tipped a little bit as she gripped the weapon. She smiled wide.

And then she got to smashing.

The car never stood a chance.

All the while, the wyvern dogs prowled down the street, growling, barking. They clambered over the broken walls of the buildings all around. They snapped and yelped at Isoko, and her fuck ton of noise.

Mark saw most of them, but not all of them, for sure. He focused Union, pushing out weakness from himself and his team, while drawing in resilience from the world. Gradually, imperceptibly, he linked to the monsters, and he trickled weakness into all of them while drawing out their resilience. Just a little bit. He didn't want the monsters to realize something was up, and to run.

The monsters barked louder, meaner. They knew something was happening but they were surrounding their prey and they didn't *really* sense anything wrong.

Isoko continued to destroy the car, though her eyes were all around her. The car was half gone.

Eliot grabbed all the resources he could, his eyes wide, his breath unsteady. Iron ingots scattered on the ground all around him.

Isoko worriedly asked, "We're surrounded by 8 of them! We good, Mark!?"

"There's 9!" Eliot called out. "Maybe 10!"

The wyvern dogs barked loud. They didn't like the humans talking.

The street was a good 10 meters across. Walls held on both sides. Five wyvern dogs were walking at them from the courtyard, the nearest one 10 meters away. Mark had only seen two on the broken buildings on the left, but he saw two more on the other side, hiding in the rubble, sneaking in from the backside. Those ones were 15 meters away. They had flapped and fluttered over there to attack from the back. One of those ones was big and red. The size of a tiger, rather than a dog. It had been the main wyvern dog at the courtyard up ahead. That one absolutely had to die, but hopefully last, and then they could mop up the pack instead of watching them scatter and make problems later.

Mark said, “We’re twice as strong as them and they’re not aware they’re *SLIGHTLY* weakened. We’re good. You’re on those five up there, Isoko.” He softly said, “Blade spear, Eliot.”

Eliot ripped a blade spear out of the ingots at the ground. It was two meters long, thick as two fingers, and with a punching dagger for a head. Eliot floated it to Mark, and Mark snatched it out of the air. It was basically a weight bar, for bench presses, but as a weapon.

It was not light.

Mark easily held it, his grip tightening. He might not be a brawny with a basic strength modifier, but he was pretty solid with resilience stolen from the monsters right now, and Mark’s version of resilience at this particular moment was all about strength and resistance.

Mark said, “Eliot. Open with some spears of your own. I’ll drop the back ones when they—”

The fight began with a scrabbling of clawed hands suddenly gripping stone and street underneath, one of the lead monsters on Isoko’s side jumping at her. The monster spread its wings wide, gliding in just a bit, before it dropped its wings to the side for a straight-on tackle/pounce. Two others did the same thing, all of them aimed to take down Isoko at the same time.

Big Red stayed back, maybe 20 meters away. Two of the back liners leapt at Mark and Eliot; one each.

Mark breathed in all of the durability he could from each of the five attacking monsters, granting it to his people instead.

Eliot crafted three spears with a sudden transformation. The only problem with him using his Power like that was that he couldn't actually throw them with any real strength. He was not a Shaper; his power was just Manipulation. He could, however, toss them in the general direction of one of the beasts, the one attacking him, and hope for the best.

Three spears clattered deep into the flesh of that one wyvern dog, one of them going right through its chest and halfway out the other side. Eliot made a surprised sound and also a tower shield that he stomped into the ground in front of himself. That wyvern dog crashed into that solid shield, dead.

At the same time, Mark brought his blade spear down through the attacking wyvern dog gliding at him. The monster didn't think Mark's weapon could hurt it at all, and in a normal scenario that was true. Eliot had been surprised his attack had worked on the one he had killed for very good reasons. Eliot had scouted these things, and they were all between 15 and 25 in Body, and normal steel was Power Level 0.

But Mark had taken all of this monster's durability that he could, dropping its Body rating low; Mark wasn't sure how low, actually. It was low enough.

Mark's spear cleaved through the creature's head before getting stuck on its chest. The creature's wing-claws tried to grab onto Mark, and it succeeded, but Mark was at somewhere like 28 Body right now, and so was everyone else in the party, if they weren't higher. Eliot was the lowest in Body right now, because David had made him leave his shield behind, but even Eliot was probably at a 20. And Mark was actively protecting everyone, too.

The creature's claws ripped at Mark's clothes and skidded off of his skin, leaving little welts that rapidly vanished due to Mark's healing Union.

Mark breathed in all of the durability he could from 2 of Isoko's secondary attackers and they kinda faltered in the air, but he left the first one alone for her to absolutely crush, her giant ball mace slamming into the creature's head and pulping it against the ground.

The fight turned from worrying to cleanup in a scattering second, because the next thing Mark did was breathe out weakness, focusing heavily on Big Red, who was looking worried and ready to bolt, or something. Mark wasn't sure. Mark's weakness connected to Big Red and Big Red faltered and fainted. He stayed down. Isoko murdered the other wyvern dogs up front.

Mark moved his breathing of weakness and durability around, hindering the monsters who looked like they were trying to counter attack, while letting go those who were already dazed, or out of position. Those ones he had dazed took a whole lot of seconds to come back around to the fight, so dazing them for a single breath or two was good enough to keep them out of the battle.

Mark had a personal limit of how much he could affect at once, and it was a lot easier moving his focus around, purposefully disrupting the enemy forces, than it was trying to keep them all contained and controlled at the same time. Big Red stayed down, though; Mark made sure of that. Big Red might have had a Knack, or Power of some sort.

Once Isoko was done bashing in skulls, Mark didn't need to concentrate on his Union of Breath so much. He could just focus on his heartbeat, and on his Union of Blood.

Soon enough, Isoko, covered in blood, that was not her own and smiling a lot, walked over to Big Red, holding her bent warmace over one shoulder, and then she splattered Big Red. Thwam! Crack! Splat! Ever the triumphant warrior she stood tall, clothes shredded some, boots completely gone, and warmace fully bent out of position. The head of her mace was deformed and gouged by the monster scales and a few lucky scratches.

Eliot shook a little bit, saying, "Oh thank the gods."

Isoko and Mark both paused.

Mark walked to him, asking, "You okay, Eliot?"

Eliot breathed in, then out, and Mark helped him with some Union of Blood, to expel weakness and take in resilience. Eliot breathed easier, and declared, "I *hate* being unprepared. HATE." He flicked his hands out, dismissing his concerns, saying, "But we did that okay. Great thwomping, Platinum Princess. Great Union work... Err... I'll come up with a name for you soon enough— Unionizer! ... No." He said to Isoko. "That mace is unusable now. It touched too much monster stuff. Also, we're all covered in monster stuff. It makes it impossible to repair clothes."

"Right!" Mark hopped to, breathing in purity and breathing out impurity for the whole group. Gradually, slowly, blood and gore evaporated and turned to dust to filter into the air and away. The environment

loved impurity, so it was easy to filter away all the blood and viscera from all of them with 10-ish breaths, but Eliot and Isoko didn't want to wait that long, and neither should they.

Eliot gestured to another rusted car down the road that had crashed into a wall and covered in rubble. "Can you please, Isoko? I need more supplies."

Isoko slapped the mace in her hands, shaking the drying debris off of it, asking, "Should I use this?"

"No. The monsters had a hand in creating that. Use your fists."

Isoko flicked the mace overhead where it crashed against the wall of a house and clattered down, making a great big racket. Wyvern dogs barked in the distance, but they had been doing that a lot. Isoko happily skipped toward the next broken car, saying, "Your Power is very useful, Eliot!" As she punched into the vehicle's frame, near the windshield, she asked, "Is that other mace gone for good, now?"

Eliot floated his supplies taken from the other car around him, moving slowly, like he was carrying a big weight. "Mark's purity/impurity helps to clean out the astral body influence of the monsters—"

Mark gestured to the big basket of supplies, asking, "Need help? Also wheels?"

Eliot blinked, laughed once, then added wheels to his basket, and Mark started pushing it like it was a weird shopping cart. The ground was uneven, but Mark made do. Eliot continued, "I could get that mace back into shape in a few minutes, but it's much easier and I can do better work with new materials, and Breath of Purity doesn't actually get rid of the problems of monster contamination. You think it would, but you would be wrong. This isn't a Natural Power; this is a dictated power based on ancient decisions made by demons and then reinforced by Malaqua in the Reveal. Even if you purify everything a monster has touched, that mace is still a day away from being manipulable again." Eliot floated debris from the new car demolishing into the basket. "Did you like that mace?"

"I did, actually," Isoko said, as she crashed further into the vehicle, attacking the engine block under the rubble of the wall. Everything she touched floated away as either resources or it simply melted out of her way, becoming sand at the side, once Eliot could manipulate it after Isoko 'marked it as man-made again through the act of destruction'. Isoko said, "I managed to reinforce it with a bit of tactile

telekinesis, too, so once I actually manage that power in truth maybe the next ones won't break so easily."

Mark kept their astral bodies strong, pushing their weakness out into the world and bringing in resilience with every beat of his heart, enabling Eliot to continually work his power and Isoko to keep her body in 'Full Platinum Mode' as she beat up the broken car.

Soon enough, the shopping cart was bigger, stronger, and it had some nice rubber wheels that rolled smooth over the ground, over all the bumps and problems in the road. A large pile of ingots —mostly steel— rested in the center, surrounded by glass bricks and bottles of oils and other liquids. Plastic bricks rested in the front, piling high. There were even some wooden planks and leather and cotton.

Mark looked at the piles grow, asking, "All of this was in those two cars?"

"Yeah. These old cars have a lot of weird things. It's mostly plastic these days." Eliot looked into the bin. "... I guess that's enough. Let's move on."

Isoko stopped beating up the car, smiling as she stepped out of the remains of the metal frame, saying, "This is really quite fun! I never smashed a car apart before."

Mark asked, "What's your strength modifier up to, anyway?"

"1.7 times normal human strength while in Full Platinum," Isoko said. "Need help pushing?"

"Yes," Mark said. "I'm baseline strength."

Isoko pushed the cart with Mark, as Eliot crafted a new mace out of a few remaining parts of the vehicle. The new mace looked just like Isoko's first one. Isoko gripped it with one hand and pushed with the other, asking, "Got any idea of what's ahead?"

Eliot was already looking through a pair of glasses of his own make, but it didn't seem to be working out how he wanted. He frowned, then said, "At least 6, and also hatchlings. This stuff doesn't work right. I need to work on actual tech to get proper scouting."

Mark glanced at the camera drone flying around them, then looked out for monsters, asking, “It’s still weird you’re getting any tech at all out here. You said you worked off of radio waves in the air, or something?”

“Yes. That’s the only way I’m able to make anything high-tech at all, actually; piggybacking off of ambient humanity in the air.” Eliot showed off his glasses. They were illuminated with lights on the insides. He put them back on and looked around, “Unfortunately, I cannot hand these ones off. I need to make better pairs for you two— Incoming! Three from the left!” He glanced behind. “None behind that I can see!”

Eliot rushed to the right, getting in front of Mark, and allowing Isoko to rush ahead to the left.

A wyvern dog crested the roof of the building and barked as it leapt right down at Mark.

A second one curved around the building and rushed straight for Isoko.

A third one followed the second one, heading for Isoko.

Mark dropped all three of them to the ground, fainting them instantly. And then he cut off the neck of the one that collapsed onto the ground in front of him. Isoko made quick work of the other two.

Mark breathed deep and exhaled impurity, flowing the blood away from their weapons, cleaning them up a bit to make Eliot’s job easier—

Eliot panicked about the goods in the cart. He looked at it, exclaiming, “FUCK! There’s blood on it. Dammit... It’s fine!” He took one of the metal ingots and turned it into a cover, while sealing up the plastic sides of the cart as much as he could. There were holes in the cart where monster blood had splashed, but Eliot said, “It’s fine.” He said to Mark, “You’re very good at putting down monsters.”

Mark laughed. “I can only do three at a time because we only have three people, so keep that in mind.”

Isoko said, “You should do less, Mark. Save it for when we need it, like with the 10-pile back there.”

"I tend to agree," David said, speaking up. "Also? You can *only* do three?"

Mark said, "Well... It's a matter of balance. They're our size, so yeah. Three is a good number. And if I stretch it too thick or thin then they might notice... Err... What's their Scan like, Eliot?"

Eliot rambled off, "Same as it was on the big info from COFR; 20-30 Body. No real Talent, but a knack for flight. That Large Red one back there had some sort of plant-thing going on; Natural Power."

Mark was glad he had kept Big Red down. He said, "So yeah, I can only do 3—"

"Main pack incoming," Eliot said, looking ahead.

They had reached the edge of the road. Up ahead, in the large circular area, the road transitioned into a big crater with a shallow lake on the right and a forested area on the left. That 'forested area' had looked like a bunch of trees all warped together, but now that he was here, Mark saw it was really one tree that had crawled up some buildings. The tree gnarled into the roads and the stone, and wyvern dogs made homes in those roots and tangled branches.

Mark guessed that the tree was a monster—

Eliot looked through his glasses, saying, "Tree is alive; monster class." He looked down. "Roots extend below us, but they're small things. Don't get closer to the tree. Three dogs from the front—" He whipped around. "Two up there!"

The monsters were already attacking from the front.

Mark crashed the wyvern dogs to the ground, one after the other, taking everything that made them resilient and giving them weaknesses in turn. Isoko cracked heads. The ones behind Mark and Eliot tried to dive bomb them but Mark switched focus and dropped them to the ground next, leaving Isoko alone with two combatants. He called out his shots and Isoko grunted as she took on two weakened monsters on her own. Mark cut off the heads of the monsters who attacked from the back, but his spear broke on the neck of the second one.



Eliot said, "It's a multi-strength one! It's dangerous!"

Mark locked the dangerous wyvern dog down and eventually smashed its head in with his broken spear. It did not die until Mark drove his broken spear into its chest.

Isoko had managed to disorient one of her opponents with a lucky head smack, making it back up and shake its head, but the other one was gnawing on her leg and she couldn't dislodge it. It couldn't bite into her leg at all, either, but it did rake at her clothes.

Mark sent the biting one fainting to the ground.

Isoko killed it after that, driving a knife-like hand into the creature's brain. The cleanup went fast from there.

Mark asked, "Where did your mace go?"

Eliot said, "It snapped in half." He looked embarrassed. "Sorry!"

Isoko shook her head. "I couldn't hold it under my TT. My fault." What little wounds she had sealed up, and Mark started breathing purity and exhaling impurity, cleaning all of them up. With ripped clothes dangling from her, and not caring about it at all, Isoko thumbed at the tree, asking, "We doing anything about the monster tree?"

Mark said, "Let's not, because I can do this." Mark extended Union into the world, connecting to the fish in the water, the plants growing on the bank, the monster tree, and everything else nearby. He breathed in sustenance for himself and his people, and breathed out deprivation, while his heart drew in resilience and expelled weakness. It felt like he breathed in dinner and expelled a desert with every breath. Mark felt refreshed with every breath, and he knew Eliot and Isoko did, too. Mark asked, "David? You want in on this? Do I need to provide for you?"

David said, "Technically no, but actually yes."

Mark smiled, and then he included David in the Union. As he did that, Mark asked everyone, "How does that feel? I can do that for a while, and 30 minutes of breathing sustenance/deprivation in a good environment is equivalent to 1 workable meal. So like 750 calories. That tree makes this a good environment, so that's why I think we need to keep the monster tree. Otherwise we need to go somewhere else with other trees."

Everyone looked at Eliot.

Eliot was looking at the ground with his glasses. He hummed. "... I think it's fine. The wyvern dogs nested in the tree and it's all scratched to hell because of that, so... maybe the tree doesn't mind?"

David spoke up, "Except for mobile trees, trees are pretty relaxed when you're not actively hurting them. Since the wyvern dogs were nesting in it, that means that it isn't one of the actively murderous trees, too. That Large Red one had some sort of Natural power, though, which is a bit concerning, but not overly concerning. The tree will eat the bodies that you all dropped, but that's pretty normal. Just don't die around it and you'll be fine."

Eliot said, "I'm reinforcing the lower walls we build anyway." He pointed at one of the ruined buildings to the side. "Let's get that one cracked and remade. It looks like we can make it secure, and there aren't any other buildings near it... not much, anyway." He looked at the water. "Is it too close to the water, though?"

Isoko said, "We don't need water, so we don't need to take the risk. Let's move away from the water." She pointed out a different building. "That one. It's standing alone anyway."

Mark said, "I have no objections to Isoko's suggestion."

Eliot nodded... And then he looked to David. "Thoughts?"

David smiled. "It's a building that fits your plan."

Eliot nodded. "Right. This is *our* plan."

Isoko opened and closed her hands toward Eliot. “Mace, please!”

Eliot made two of them and handed the second one to Mark.

Mark hefted the thing— and it was fucking heavy. He put it down on the cart. “For when Isoko needs it. I’ll stack bricks. That works too, right?”

Eliot said, “Yup!”

While Isoko bashed in a wall on the lower floor of the building and toppled part of the second story down to ground level, sending a plume of dust up into the air, Mark grabbed some stray bricks and just started piling them up into a rough wall shape. Mostly, Mark sustained the party, and also David.

Eliot said, “Please smash the ground too, Isoko.”

Isoko grinned as she started smashing even more.

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It was fun watching Eliot’s Power at work.

Every smash of Isoko’s mace caused the ground to break in small sections, and then repair stronger than ever. She broke a wall down and the wall sorted into piles of bricks that Mark started stacking. Once the bricks were stacked well enough, the bricks began to grow into a strong wall of 10 bricks for every 1 that Mark laid down. Eliot recorded everything on his camera drone, as he stood at the center of the destruction, closer to Mark, looking sleepy, his eyes half-lidded. It didn’t look like much, but he was doing the most of anyone right now; all of the heavy lifting. He just needed other people to set up the dominoes so he could make them fall properly.

Within 20 minutes the 2 story apartment, which was already half broken, was fully demolished, and 20% rebuilt.

Pristine, grey stone bricks lay in giant stacks to the sides. Metal reinforcements and nails and wood were all stacked in their own piles, as either ingots or 2x4's. Glass got its own section. Insulation got disassembled and made into foggy glass. Miscellaneous stuff got placed into a large stone bowl; It looked like plastics and some bits and bobs. A big pile of plaster got dumped out as dry, white-ish powder. A similar pile of brown powder appeared, and it might have been clay; Mark wasn't sure—

Eliot crashed onto his ass, saying, “Okay! I need a minute! Mark is already stretching me way too far. I need a minute.”

Isoko laughed. “He doesn't swing that way, Eliot!

Mark's face turned red.

Eliot stammered, “I didn't mean— You know what I meant!”

Mark discarded the redness to his face, and focused on Union, trying to get Eliot back up and running by expelling all of his weakness into the world. He deadpanned, “I'll get you ready for round two, Eliot.”

Eliot's face went red this time.

Isoko laughed once as she stepped closer, wagging her eyebrows. “Maybe he does swing that way.”

Mark laughed.

Eliot breathed in, and relaxed, saying, “Okay. Ready for round two. Let's get those bricks stacked!”

Isoko began stacking bricks alongside Mark, and soon the piles of materials began to drain from the piles and reappear as walls. Wherever Mark and Isoko placed bricks seemed to be good enough for Eliot, even though where they built the walls was not where the walls ended up getting built. Once, Mark made a stack of bricks across a way, and the wall ended up getting built two meters away, which was not how the plan looked to Mark, since he thought he was following the plan that Eliot had described earlier. But obviously he was not. Eventually, the same thing happened to Isoko, and Isoko asked about the general layout of the hideout.

“It’s basically what I planned out earlier, but a little bit bigger. Isoko? Can you grab your hammer and smash the street up some, around the wall? Yes. Just like that. Thank you. Anyway. It’s gonna be a square with two rounded towers on the north and south, so that we can watch the goblin territory, in the west, from the towers. We can also watch the waters. I’m just expanding it from the original designs. Three stories, meter-thick walls. Side house to the south, reachable through overhead, covered walkway. I want to build a wall around the whole place, too. We’re gonna need to demolish a few more buildings to get it done.”

David spoke up, “You have 3 hours left with your drone camera.”

Eliot rapidly added, “And I need to make electronics. I should be able to make it with what I have. And then I litter early warning systems everywhere and make a grand scanner at the top of the tower and a secondary one at the top of the second tower.”

Isoko banged up the street, enjoying herself, stomping with her feet and with her mace, saying, “I want a palace room for my princess persona!”

Eliot laughed. “I’ll produce the most professional princess palace you can picture!”

Isoko smashed a ruined scooter that turned into various materials to float into piles at the bottom of the structure, saying, “Perfect!”

Mark stacked bricks and kept everyone in top shape, and also refreshed with water and nutrition, while also making sure no one had to take a break for the bathroom. Occasionally he glanced over at the big monster tree. Once Eliot was done with the base, it would rival the tree for size. Mark wondered how the tree would react. The tree seemed happy right now... though Mark couldn’t tell why he thought that.

It was just a feeling.

Soon, Eliot stood on the second story of the building with all the supplies located under cover, on the sealed first floor, while Isoko smashed into the walls of a nearby structure. Mark stood on the second floor and stacked bricks on the edge of the solid structure, while David hung out, just watching, occasionally flickering as he moved super fast, and then came back.

Mark gestured at the big tree, asking, “Do you think it likes me using it for Union purposes?”

David said, “Yes. I’ve been checking on it, and it’s growing fast. Look up at the top. It’s almost fall, and that is not an evergreen, so it should be cycling down in preparation to conserve resources for the winter. In a month or two, it should change colors. But those leaves up at the top are bright green. New growth.”

“New growth, huh?”

Mark was a little concerned. Plant life didn’t work like human/monster interactions worked when it came to Union work. Not fully. In a general way, and unless Mark was purposefully blighting the area, plants simply *liked* being connected to a larger system, even if they had to give up stuff to that system. They usually got a lot more back. Fungi liked Union work too, for much the same reasons. For normal magical plants, this was not a problem.

But for monstrous plants, ones that could decide how they wanted to be and then attack if they didn’t like a thing, this could be a problem. According to Lola, some monster plants attacked if they really *liked* a thing, too.

Mark asked, “Is it a problem?”

David said, “It’s not a sapient monster tree, just sentient. It knows it’s connected to a larger system right now, but it doesn’t know where that connection is coming from. Not yet. If we’re still here in a week, we’ll reevaluate. The wyvern dogs lived in it, bringing their meals back to it all the time, while not killing the wyverns, so it’s probably not a dangerous monster. It’s the monster trees that have no wildlife in them at all that you really have to watch out for.”

Mark nodded in thought.

He continued to breathe in sustenance and breathe out deprivation, while also beating his heart with resilience and weakness. The tree probably didn’t like the deprivation that Mark was giving it, but it *loved* the resilience and weakness, and Mark didn’t have to adjust his Union too much to match with the slower-beating ‘heart’ of the tree. It was a monster tree, after all.

An hour later Isoko had barreled her way through every nearby building and Eliot had completed the second story of the building. Eliot stayed down on the second floor while Mark climbed onto the third floor to stack bricks.

Isoko paused her destruction for a moment, calling out upstairs, “I haven’t heard the dogs barking in a while! Got an overview, Eliot?”

Eliot said, “Not yet, but I’m looking now.”

The drone moved up—

“Nope!” David said, and then he had the drone in one hand, saying, “That’s for camera work only.”

Eliot frantically said, “Okay okay! Don’t break it yet, please!”

David said, “Sure. Scout without it, though.” He held onto the camera.

Eliot shook his head, and then looked down at the floor, at a tiny hole in the stone between the first and second floor. Plastics and metals, Mark assumed, flowed out of that hole, into Eliot’s hands, while the stone in front of Mark extended tall, like a column growing out of the building. Mark looked over the edge of the building and watched as the wall thickened out into a proper column that extended high, high above.

In his hands, Eliot crafted some sort of geodesic ball out of metals, glass, and colorful red plastics. A minute later some wires dropped out of the bottom of the thing, coiling long and thin. With a gesture, Eliot floated it to the top of the column and buried the wires under the stone, where they came out on the second and third floor. With a few more gestures he crafted some basic screens and keyboards. He set up a station right where Mark stood, and Mark moved to the side to let him do that, while he focused on his own Power, keeping Eliot’s astral body and his real body in top shape. Eliot sweated a little bit while he worked, tapping away at a keyboard that wasn’t there, but which sprung into being at his touch.

Mark cycled a purity/impurity breathing Union for a little, Eliot relaxed a bit, and then Mark went back to breathing sustenance/deprivation. Eliot began to work easier as he typed at nonexistent keyboards.

Ten minutes later, Eliot had created three touch screens set up around the skeleton of the second and third floor, and one main scanning station where he stood, at the second story 'base' of the scanning column. Overhead, the geodesic scanner seemed to glitter under a dome of solid glass that then turned solid opaque. Another meter of stone appeared on top of the scanner, giving the whole thing a false top, and then a second 'scanner globe' went on top of that secondary top.

Mark smirked. "That's some smart camo. The second fake scanner."

Eliot tapped away at the keyboard below his main screen, nonsense scribbles dancing across the screen every button press and becoming something more intelligible, becoming letters and numbers. Eliot said, "There're lots of tricks to protecting a space, but what I did up there was make a second scanner; it's not a fake scanner."

Mark looked up and reevaluated what he was seeing. "Just double scan things? Redundancy?"

"You have to triangulate and each sphere triangulates on its own, but the double system can sort through a lot more than a single system. And yeah; redundancy is good."

Mark watched as Eliot typed away at the keyboard. The things on the screen started to make sense. Mark managed to make out that Eliot was basically typing 'work faster please I need to scan this place' and variations of that, which was kinda neat. Soon, the screen showed a map of the area, zoomed out to maybe a mile around them? Mark wasn't sure. But it captured the entire area and then some, from beyond that Vatican area to a good hundred meters across the river.

Ten minutes later, and the scanner seemed fully operational. The screens were wide and detailed.

It was like one of those underwater scanners that Mark had seen on the fishing boat—

Mark tried not to think of Dad and Mom and how everything had been destroyed, as he saw a screen that was mostly black with pale green squarish outlines here and there. Some greenish craters were



everywhere, too, and the river was a big outline in green. Little red dots were everywhere, and four white dots were at the center; those would be monsters and the four humans here, in the middle.

Mark had seen Eliot drop a computer core system, or something like that, down through a hole in the first floor, too, so he had pretty much... pulled tech from the radio waves in the air, or something like that? And then copied it all down there into a robust, redundant system? Mark wasn't sure, but it was all very neat—

“Keep stacking bricks, please,” Eliot told him, and then he yelled out to Isoko, “The wyvern dogs cleared out! All clear in every direction, 100 meters! Please keep smashing shit!”

Isoko had taken a break, but now she got back to smashing shit, grinning as she did so.

Mark resumed brick stacking as he told Eliot, “This is so cool, Eliot. Glad to have you here.”

Eliot smiled. “Glad to be here.”

An hour later and the castle, the walls, and the nearest twenty meters of space beyond that, were transformed. Eliot built a 3 story fortress out of the ruins of this small part of Rome, ensured the inside was lit with lights and had beds, and it even had some rudimentary wall turrets on the roof, behind rotating shield walls. And also the cameras. Lots of cameras, everywhere. A whole big bank of video screens sat on the second floor, looking like a security guard station.

Eventually, when Eliot had a bunch of extra drones, he told David that he was done with the initial camera drone.

David took Eliot's initial drone and zipped it away, to place it right inside the broken eggs of the wyvern dog nest in the monster tree. Covered in drying monster goo, it was completely beyond Eliot's ability to affect. Eliot had three more drones perched on the walls and floating around the building by the time David came back.

David asked the three of them, “Now what?”

Isoko rested against her big mace, saying, “We’ve got a few hours of daylight left. Want to go make a lure tower?”

Mark said, “I agree to that.”

Eliot looked a lot more secure in his options and power, as he spooled fishing line into one hand, expanded his pockets back into cargo shorts, and asked, “I remade basic brown clothes for us all, but how do you two feel about outfits? Personal branding?”

“No thanks!” “Not at this point in time.”

Eliot scoffed. He pivoted, “How about names? Platinum Princess, for real?”

Isoko said, “Grandmother already suggested that one, so yeah, that’s probably going to be the name I register under.”

Eliot smiled wide and clapped his hands. Then he pointed at Mark, “Steelstream! How about it? It’s a pun and an allusion to the adamantium thing you can eventually do.”

Mark... discovered he didn’t hate it—

He realized something about the abbreviations. “Nope. Not having ‘SS’ as a branding logo.”

Eliot almost scoffed, but then he paused. “Yeah. Maybe not. Technically, your name should be Addastream or Adamstream, but the first is not great and the second just sounds bad.”

Mark frowned. “Not doing those sorts of names.”

Eliot moved on, “Okay okay! How about—” He spread his arms, flickering lights into the air, writing out and saying, “Vitalis! One word! Big meanings!”

David smirked.

“... While I don’t hate it,” Mark said, “That name is probably in use already.”

“They all are, Mark,” Eliot said. “But you could take that one! Especially if you go Villain. You can ‘assassinate’ the hero that has it and take it.”

Isoko suggested, “Dark Vitalis!”

Mark scoffed. “No way.”

Eliot said, “It’s not a bad one!”

Mark went to the door that led to the stairs down, grabbing his spear from the wall, saying, “Let’s get to luring goblins, please.” And then he stepped out into the afternoon sun, facing one of four solid stone staircases that led to a walled, dry moat, and then out past the wall to the land beyond. He started walking down, toward the west, saying, “Daylight is burning, and we gotta enact some very dumb attempts at peace.”

Eliot grinned wide. “That’s a perfect villain line!”

Isoko laughed as she followed Mark down the path, saying, “He doesn’t need a writer after all.”

Mark frowned, but only to stop himself from chuckling.

David left the building last, and then he vanished off into elsewhere. Wherever he was, he was probably still close.

With a wave of his hand just to show that he was doing something, Eliot sealed up the building, asking, “How about Blackvein?”

Mark scoffed. “What’s your name, then, Eliot? ‘Human Bard’?”

“Close! It’s my channel name, ‘Veryhuman!’” Eliot added, “Three wyvern dogs ahead. They’re headed this way.”

Isoko hefted her big mace, saying, “Time to get killing.”

Mark said, “Also a very villainous line.”

Isoko held up a shimmering platinum arm, saying, “Okay! Okay! I can be a hero. Let’s be heeroooes~” She rushed forward onto the street and then smashed her mace against the ground, cracking the air with the sound of it all, before she projected her voice to the sky, yelling, “DEATH TO ALL MONSTERS!”

Mark smashed the butt of his spear into the stone street and took up the cry, “DEATH TO ALL MONSTERS!”

Wyvern dogs started barking up ahead real loud, and then flapping toward Isoko.

Mark dropped them and Isoko splattered them.

As Eliot walked through the gore, following Mark and Isoko down the street, Eliot commented to his cameras, “So yeah, kids. We have a *good* team. Much better than going out on my own! Remember kids: venturing alone in the wilds might be great for the thrill of it all, but it greatly increases your risk of death~”

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As the monster lure tower went up, sunset lingered on the horizon.

A good 15 wyvern dog bodies slowly cooled in the evening air. The tower reached high, and soon lights appeared on it, along with words repeating in a loop and written down in a few different languages on stone around the area.

*‘Attention goblins! We’re requesting peace!’*

Mark thought it absolutely insane, but it was part of the mission.

Isoko moved her scanning glasses to the top of her head and told Mark, “You know. We’re not learning anything if you drop them before we get a chance to even fight. I’m not complaining, mind you. Just pointing out something.”

Mark looked around, studying the street intersection.

Eliot had set up their glasses to show them goblins as blue glows, and Mark saw no blue glows.

Eliot could not actually scan for monsters, either. That’s not how his Power worked at all. He could only affect man-made things, and that meant that he couldn’t touch monsters at all. But he could take in information from around the nearby world and sort it based on if he could manipulate it, or not. *That’s* how Eliot scanned for monsters. All of Earth was filled with radio waves and human-made pollution and this was even a former human city, so the very air was ‘tainted’ with humanity.

So Eliot scanned for absences.

Mark spied the world through his glasses, and saw differences.

Spider webs dried in the broken windows of the streets ahead, rimmed in grey on the screen over Mark’s eyes. Some spiders lingered in the dark, not wanting to venture into the open at all; they were rimmed in solid white. The wyverns, dead and cooling on the ground, were rimmed in red that was already fading, because they had been killed by people so they were no longer ‘monster made’. Not wholly.

Eliot had marked the goblins as blue, and Mark did not see any real blue presences. He did see some faint blue impressions on the ground far ahead, but they were just smudges. Footprints. Handprints.

Mark continued to look around with the glasses, searching for threats, as he said, “Of course this is terrible for real world experience, Isoko, but we’re all still stressing our bodies a lot. I think Eliot is growing the most, but you started off at PL31, yeah? The scanner was reading you as *barely* tier 3 before, but it’s reading you as clearly tier 3 right now.”

Isoko watched as Eliot tinkered with the lure tower. A smiling goblin took shape in holograms in the air above the tower. The holographic goblin waved toward the west, toward the goblin territory. And then a person appeared. The holographic person stood with the goblin, and then they shook hands— And then the light show flickered and messed up.

Eliot hummed in annoyance. He fixed it. Soon, the lightshow was working properly, the goblin and human shaking hands and then the goblin walking away through a portal, back to Daihoon. The human waved goodbye.

Now if that didn't count as an attempt at peace, then fuck the attempt at peace.

Isoko added, "I meant like battle experience."

"We'll get a lot of that soon enough," Mark said, "And with enemies that aren't just monsters."

Isoko hefted her mace and flipped her glasses back down, saying, "I just want to kill a wyvern without assistance once."

"Sure." Mark pulled his Union back from her.

Isoko suddenly slumped a little, her Pure Platinum form fading a bit to grey, her mace turning too heavy and falling almost to the ground, but she rallied. She gripped the mace and held it off the ground as she said, "Ah, fuck. You were buffing me *that* much?"

"More like all the monsters watching us right now are buffing you that much, and I am just the vector for that. Mostly spiders, though. They're too far away to think about attacking us." Mark asked, "You sure about that?"

Isoko said, "Not so much at the moment, but yeah. I still am. I think some dogs are coming this way, down the street." She pointed.

Mark looked that way and saw some small signatures down the way; outlines in red on his glasses. "Pretty far." He looked up at the glowing goblin tower. "The light attracts them, yeah?"

Isoko said, “Light, noise, etcetera. Some monsters are thermal detectors, too. Most reptiles are heat-seekers. The wyverns are like that.”

Eliot patted the side of the lit-up tower and the electronics he had been working on slipped into the tower and then covered over in stone. The illuminated goblin-hologram at the top continued to wave and chuckle and beckon on a loop, toward the west. The human continued to appear and shake hands, and then send the goblin back to Daihoon.

Eliot said, “Okay! We’re good! Peace attempt established and connection established. Scanners active. Back to base!”

Eliot led the way back east, with Isoko and Mark following, and then Isoko taking point.

David walked to their sides.

Mark asked, “How are we doing so far, David?”

David said, “Unless something strange happens this mission is honestly way below all three of you, and especially together.” He frowned. “So let’s hope nothing strange happens.”

Lisa walked beside Mark, asking, “Why would anything strange happen?”

Mark shrugged. “Always a possibility.” He looked down at Lisa, and the small woman was getting kinda close, out of formation, which was rather weird of her.

Also...

Something else was wrong.

Mark’s glasses, from Eliot, rimmed Lisa in bright blue, and also Lisa was wearing... well. Nothing. But she had been in a battle, right? And so her clothes were ripped. And yet, Eliot should have fixed that, like he did all their other clothes.

... And the glasses rimmed her in blue, and blue meant 'goblin'.

That's how Eliot had set it up.

That's how it still worked.

And then Lisa opened her mouth a meter away from Mark, and that was probably the only reason that Mark instinctively leapt away from her, pulling his hand back as her teeth snapped on empty air.

Mark slammed Lisa with all of his negative Union, dropping her to the ground, while connecting positively to Isoko, Eliot, David, and Juan.

Lisa fell to the ground, fainting.

Mark looked at his group. Eliot, David, and Isoko were all untouched by the scan of the glasses, but Juan was rimmed in blue.

Juan was going to bite Eliot's right thigh.

David moved fast.

Suddenly he had two heads in his hands.

Lisa and Juan's heads.

Mark felt a terrible sort of itch in his head as he saw the heads of two of his friends in David's hands, but he also saw them as green-skinned and with big ears, bright yellow eyes, and nasty, pointed teeth. Eliot gasped as he grabbed his head, while Isoko blinked a little.

Eliot groaned, "No no, stupid fucking... mind shit. Fuck."

Isoko yelled, "Where the FUCK did they come from?!"



David said, "Listen up."

All eyes turned toward David.

David had several goblin heads sitting on the ground around him, and also Lisa and Juan's heads still in his hands.

Mark felt his stomach drop.

David said, "The goblins have been observing us for the last hour, but they have been in the area for days now.

"The goblins infected a hive mind spider and colony. This was *in the briefing*. You all should have been wary of possible Mind Powers.

"This sort of shit is normal out there in the wilds.

"You will meet problems like this in the future, and especially among goblin populations. If they didn't view humanity as food and Power sources, then perhaps they could be reasoned with, but they are what they are, and we are what we are, and so, they cannot be reasoned with, ever. They will always attack, and you will always kill them whenever you can.

"Things like this are why people stay in walled cities as much as possible, and why those who hunt monsters are respected and valued, and never killed, unless they are killers themselves.

"Mind powers like this are pretty normal among monsters. Hive Mind being the most common one. I would classify this particular variant as 'Mind Nudge'. Power Level 35, max. Mind Control is exceedingly rare, and almost never shows up among the monsters. It is mostly a human thing.

"Isoko," David said, as he looked toward the girl. Isoko seemed worried, but then again, who wasn't. David said, "You would have been immune to their Mind Nudge if Mark had been connected to you and passively buffing you just as he already was. You will rise above being susceptible to this when you get past tier 3, and enter tier 4. That said, the goblins *specifically* waited for you to remove yourself from

Mark's buffing, and they correctly guessed that you would try that, because you looked like you were getting bored with easy kills.

"Mark. You *should* have been immune to their Mind Nudge if you were focused on resilience against mind effects. As it was, you were just somewhat immune. They took a chance when they decided to attack, because they saw openings and they had to take them.

"Eliot. I have no notes for you. You did everything well, but you'll always be weak toward mind stuff; it is your main weakness. In a normal mission, you would have a circlet of clear mind, at least." David dropped the heads onto the ground with the rest of the pile, and left them there. "Also, all of you were talking about skills and shit out in the open. I won't blame you for that; not overly so. But you shouldn't do that in a normal monster hunt, for variants like these two goblins show up all the time. Keep that sort of talk hidden behind walls. Ideally, you all would have helmets that could keep your voices to yourselves."

Mark was already frantically adding the idea of resilience against Mind Powers to his ideas of Union, along with removing the weakness of being affected by Mind Powers.

The full brush of the danger they were in revealed itself in a rush of blue light all throughout the vision of the scanners. Blue light lingered all over the street. Everywhere, really. In the windows, on the edges of rooftops, and by the bodies of the fallen wyvern dogs.

Mark saw bites taken out of the wyvern dogs. Those bites had not been there before.

David continued, "In light of this development, and your discovery of it, I'm declaring that your illuminated offer of peace is good enough. Only the most idiotic of sponsors would ever demand more of you past this point, and any such sponsor should be ignored completely if they would continue to suggest such a requirement. Except in the most extraordinary of circumstances —of which this is NOT— such a person would be considered under mind control themselves, and should be quarantined.

"This is now an absolute extermination mission. They'll come at us at night, at full strength with dark to cloak them, and we need proper defenses.

"Let's get back to base."

Isoko started running, her face solid with focus. Eliot followed, looking a bit panicky.

Mark took up the rear, feeling uneasy.

David moved with an easy walk, letting everyone get far ahead of him, and then he reappeared in front of everyone, before he reappeared to the side. He was looking at everything, but also not really looking at anything at all.

Blue was everywhere on the scanners, and Mark was absolutely sure that he saw goblin heads duck down behind broken windows here and there. Mark thought that the goblins might be especially wary of David, but more than willing to attack him, Isoko, and Eliot, if they could. Which was just insane of them. But they didn't care about losses, did they. They could always make more goblins.

Mark and his people reached the base.

The base had some blue markings on the walls and going up the stairs, but the goblins had not breached the interior. They hadn't even gotten near the doors, and there were no openings for them to get inside any other way.

Eliot easily opened the doors, into the bright lights of the central room of the base—

Isoko rushed ahead. "Let me check!"

Isoko got into the room. She looked around.

Eliot looked panicky again. He busied himself with smoothing out the walls of the place, making them shear surfaces, only for his eyes to go wide when he saw where little goblin hands had gripped onto the rock, preventing those parts from being affected by Man-made Manipulation.

Mark calmed himself and he tried to calm Eliot, too, breathing out the bad and taking in the good—

"Clear!" Isoko said, inside the place.

Eliot went inside, saying, “Thank the gods!” He couldn’t wait for everyone to get inside before he exclaimed, “FUCKING HELL?! Mind goblins?!”

Mark went inside and David followed, closing the door behind them.

Eliot was already rushing toward his scanning machine. He got to it, and then paused.

Mark saw that the screen was flickering weirdly. All of the screens on the security guard wall were being weird, too.

Eliot exclaimed, “FUCK! They broke it—” He pulled back and declared, “I can fix this! I can fix this, for sure.” He started flowing parts out from a hole in the floor.

Isoko chuckled nervously. “Ahh! Good news; you can fix it!” She muttered, “They broke it that easily, though?”

Eliot said nothing.

David spoke up, “The *other* good news is that we won’t have to seek out the goblins. They will come here to attack us. The only thing you have to figure out is how to kill them all. Honestly, that was your main plan anyway, and now they have no element of surprise. So this is good.”

Silence.

Mark clapped his hands. “Yup! This is good! Love a clear mission! Kill the goblins.”

Isoko and Eliot had a moment.

And then Isoko asked Eliot, “Can you make spears on wire that I can throw and pull back from the roof?”

Eliot said, "I can do that. I need to make traps out there on the other nearby buildings, so I'll need you to get some practice throwing against the far buildings. Are you able to Tactile Telekinesis yet?"

"Not fully, but I'm hoping to get there fast."

Mark started breathing in sustenance and breathing out deprivation, including the monster tree in the Union, while his pulsed resilience and weakness to his party, and also David. He asked David, "How do you do detection with Union? I can generally tell the distance out there to that giant tree, but I haven't been able to figure out actual detection yet?"

David said, "I can't help you with that. I have the power gifted to me; I don't know how it actually works. I can just feel where my astral body touches. Can you do the same?"

Mark frowned a little, trying to sense what he could.

Once, on his first day at Healing Club, Mark had been able to 'see' the threads that made up his astral body. They had appeared to him even when his eyes were closed. He hadn't been able to replicate that situation since then. He had needed visual clarity to a target, or at least to know where a target was, first. He hadn't been able to target anything when he didn't know where it was...

Oh.

Wait.

There was a bank of screens over there, that security guard station.

... Mark wanted something better.

Mark said, "Eliot. I need a holodisplay of the nearby scan for goblins, please. In the middle of the room."

Eliot perked up. "Good idea! Much better than all the cameras."

David said, "I like the cameras."

Somehow Mark felt safer with David making jokes.