<Alex, Real - ???, Docking Atrium 678 on Dorgon Siege Platform #3458>

The six-armed associate regarded Alex for a long moment. “You state the ability to quickly apply changes to your bones with such confidence. Hmmm… Maybe you have a specialist in your unit, or rights to use an item…” He was nodding to himself before waving the thought off. “The method doesn’t matter though. I think I understand better now what you are seeking.” He smiled. “Any magics in your bones are, by their very nature, very powerful, but limited. You cannot project anything so anchored past your flesh… Not in any way that is positive. Tattoos can do so, but they are flimsy things, even accounting for their *very* temporary nature, they just aren’t able to channel enough power for any truly potent effect. The tattoos for self-funding, for example, give less, lower quality aspect, and have to be refreshed monthly. They’re cheap to apply, but it’s barely net-positive in the end.” He shook his head. “But you’re asking about bones. Don’t try to project energy outside of yourself using magics in your bones, or you’ll destroy everything between the bones and the outside, while ruining the magics in the process. There’s a few soldiers who have bone-work for hiding a weapon in sub-space, but those are things of last resort and are painful to access.” He chuckled to himself even as he continued. “There’s one crazy beast-man I heard tell of, who had metal claws in such a space, but he designed them to simply extend as he willed. Potent? Yes, but painful with every use.”

Alex tilted his head to the side. *Do they have super-heroes in the Imperium?* But he shook his own head, not willing to be distracted. “So, I couldn’t get bone-carvings that would let me harvest aspect from my kills?”

Gangaso huffed a laugh. “No. Even if you could figure out a way to make it work at all, your flesh and magic in the way would taint anything you got as a result. You might be able to parse out the result, but it would drain you dry in just the attempt. Go buy a harvester like a normal person.” His smile returned, sly this time. “We sell a wide range of quality harvesters right here in the store.”

Alex brightened, and tapped out a message on his cuffs. “That’s good to know. Do you sell accumulators as well?”

“Of course, but that’s not my realm of expertise.”

“Of course, of course.” Alex looked back at the tablet. “I’ll take both.”

Gangaso looked a bit put out. “You fully understand that you can’t use both of them, right?”

“I understand that they cannot be used at the same time, yes. They are mutually exclusive.”

“They are mutually *defeating*. You can’t just put them on different sides of your body and hope to get a mix of results. Either will create a full-body effect.” He hesitated, then looked Alex straight in the eyes. “I only say this because you mentioned that you are a runewright. These are not as powerful as they could be made. *That limitation is intentional*. If you modify these to be much more powerful, you will de-aspect yourself. Not might, *will*. You might even strip portions of the System from your very being if you survive at all. I’ll also note that you can’t do that to anyone

else, but applied to your own bones? At your choice, and with your full knowledge? Yes, you could do permanent damage if it isn't just straight up lethal."

Alex's eyes widened, and he nodded. "Understood." Then, he grunted. "Are there bone-carvings that, instead, concentrate aspect and reinfuse it into the person?"

"Of course, they generally enhance a person's power, but it's not predictable what portion will be amplified. For a flaming spearwielder, it might just make their fire brighter, or even just more 'red'. It might cause their abilities to be more restricted, only working on a spear where before they could use them with a knife in a pinch. It's generally accepted wisdom that if that is your goal, you should get the divided aspect harvest and re-absorb the portions you wish to focus on with the proper assistance. You'll even get just as long-lasting results with the proper procedures."

When Alex's eyes lit up, the man sighed, a smile spreading across his features once more. "Come on, let's sit. I can see this won't be quick."

It was close to an hour later when the other Initiates came to get Alex. Kaylee spoke on their behalf. "Are you ready? I paid for the items that were flagged as for you. Three schema, right?"

Alex nodded. "I'm ready." He stood and offered his hand to Gangaso. "Thank you for all the time that you took."

The other man stood, shaking Alex's hand with his middle set. "It was certainly an interesting discussion."

Around more general topics, they'd done a few analyses—with Alex pulling back his resistance to magical examination—so that the man could refine and generate the schemas for him, specifically.

The result was three crystals that contained dynamic magical structures. They would seemingly alter to fit on whatever bone they were pressed against as a template, assuming the bone was large enough.

Gasgano glanced to Blith-nal, and the woman gave a nod. He then handed the crystals over. "Remember—"

Alex chuckled, speaking over the man. "Mutually exclusive, don't empower the accumulator portion, and never try to project magics outward from the bone."

Blith-nal looked back and forth between Alex and Gasgano but didn't comment. The six-armed man brushed off his blue robes with one hand. "Very well. I'm glad you understand."

And that was that, the group departed.

As they all had Inventories, they'd all gotten the more expensive versions of the magic that took advantage of that. They'd all also opted for items for their self-funders; all save Alex, of course.

Lenka and Grant had gotten rings, Kaylee and John had chosen necklaces, Pilar had opted for a broach of sorts, and Natasha received a belt-buckle.

They were helped by the fact that the item versions were less specialized, which meant slightly less effective but also that they could be resold or used by others later.

They each also received a harvester and an accumulator, the former being for extracting aspect from specific, non-sentient or non-living items, the latter for pulling it more slowly from the environment.

The total had actually been rather considerable, but Kaylee had gotten the expense to fit within their means, leaving them, collectively, with little aspect left for trade.

That was fine, as they each had yet to receive their load-outs or their personally negotiated rewards for the upcoming drop. Moreover, they would each now slowly accumulate more funds through the generation of their own aspect.

Once they were outside of the large store, Kaylee held out a flat-packed case—about a foot-and-a-half square and six inches thick—with a harvester on top. "The accumulator is a fold-out design. A bit of a pain, but far more efficient."

Alex nodded. "Thank you."

"Of course. Come on. We need to get to the briefing."

They moved through the atrium once more, this time with alacrity, not pausing to gawk or browse as they headed toward the check-in location for their briefings and such.

It was time to learn what the drop would entail.

Kaylee led them to a large cleared square, covered in runes and magics that were above Alex's understanding even if he could pick out each individual part with relative ease. Still, it pushed at the edge of overwhelming his senses with the sheer volume and complexity.

The group simply walked on, and a prompt appeared before Alex's eyes, asking if he was willing to be transported along with Kaylee Bell and at her direction.

Alex selected 'Yes', and the world flickered.

They were suddenly in the midst of a cacophony of military tumult.

As their surroundings changed, a powerful *something* swept through their group, momentarily suppressing all magic and energy flows within them.

Alex even felt his Vortices of Power flicker, and he'd all but forgotten that aspect of himself. He became quite grateful for the automatic continuance when it spun back up, all on its own.

Around him, more than just his group was reacting to the clearly defensive measure.

Most of those arriving seemed to be non-Initiates by their very standardized appearance, but some were more… unique.

A tiny woman had something that resembled a gatling gun hung on a strap over her shoulders, both hands bracing the firearm that was larger than she was.

It reminded Alex of the weaponry he hadn't chosen. *I wonder if she's had trouble getting ammunition…*

She wasn't alone. An Asian-looking man had a kite-shield on his back and a broadsword at his hip stood to one side. A darker skinned woman felt like ice to Alex's mana senses. Finally, an average-sized man with unkempt, red hair was staring straight back at Alex, hands on the knives at his belt.

Alex gave a smile and nod. The man narrowed his gaze before the ice-woman put her hand on his shoulder, nodding to Alex in turn.

Around Alex, his companions had each staggered slightly upon arrival, but they were already looking in various directions, unwilling to be taken unawares. Natasha was returning the fiery man's gaze, her own stoney.

"Clear the arrival zone!" The voice boomed over the large, cylindrical space, and caused even those already moving to jump.

Kaylee cleared her throat and guided her group toward one of the hallways that led away from the surroundings.

Alex took a moment to see the totality more clearly.

A large, circular space was cleared of all save personnel at the bottom of a two-hundred foot cylindrical shaft; circular balconies could be seen at every level all the way up.

The circle itself was a multi-layered, three dimensional jumble of the language of power, all set under what seemed to be about a foot of some clear substance that was seemingly magically inert, utterly transparent, and provided excellent traction, going by the others that were arriving in a constant stream.

Alex, of course, didn't rely on the traction provided by the surface, his green hexes keeping him just off the ground and providing all the footing he needed.

Many of those arriving were the grunts that were reminiscent of those that the Innominate had carried, and Alex did indeed see both male and female units. Though at their size and muscle

mass, it was harder to tell them apart than might be expected. Even so, they weren't androgynous, just more uniform than might have been imagined.

He also finally caught sight of the magical units, again either all male or female.

They, similarly, were more alike than might be expected, but in an entirely different way. All were thin and fine-featured. They didn't seem frail, and Alex imagined that they had at least 10s across the board in their physical traits just like the physical grunts had in their mental ones.

Yet, they still look… small? The tallest wasn't five and a half feet. They moved a *little* clumsily as well.

A final type of widespread non-Initate—though not as common as the grunts and mages—were in smaller groups, maybe five to a set. They were physically as small as the mages, but felt as magically empty as the grunts. More telling, their heads seemed oddly large in proportion to their bodies.

Mentally focused, then? One had a knife floating beside her, doing figure eights in the air. *Wait… Psionics? There's no magic coming off that.*

Though, to be fair, in the cacophony, it was entirely possible that he just couldn't pick it out.

Maybe it's like my Life? Another energy type, source, or aspect… Huh.

As Alex and his group departed, the other Initiate group was lost in the constant flow of arrivals. Those arrivals made it clear that the basis for this teleportation was different than the jump-drives used by the Innominate and other vessels. The people teleported in simply appeared with a bit of mana radiating off of them like a haze. Thankfully, it didn't seem like the grunts lacking magical attributes prevented them from using a magical means of travel.

Eight massive tunnels led off and away from this teleportation pad, and Kaylee had command of their little group of seven, leading them with purpose and confidence.

The tunnels were easily twelve feet tall, likely to accommodate some of the larger species that Alex had seen. They were wide enough for nearly ten people to walk through, shoulder to shoulder. *Or five of the brutes…*

Regardless, it was the path toward the next steps of this apocalyptic adventure, and the end of their group's collaboration, at least for the moment.