

Mark hovered high over one of the main, 350-meter-long hoverships of Okuana.

The port side of the ship had a gaping hole through several different decks. Some people were evacuating out the back on smaller ships while others poured out of that hole to flow to the sides. Some people were flying, aiming to flank, or to posture. Mark watched every single one of them, for Mark had strung himself out into multiple bodies, and multiple partials, just a head, or just a mouth, or just some eyes. He had trouble navigating some of the sensory input, but not much. Quark had no trouble at all, and through him, through Crystal Tower and their connection to Aleph One, Quark rapidly pointed out and discarded the people that Aleph One considered non-threats, highlighted some which were maybe-threats, and directly marked others which were archmages, hanging back, or hanging out beside the main ship.

The dryads on the ship were still revealing themselves, uncurling from their invisibilities and minimizations. They unfurled like trees suddenly growing to stand fully revealed, looming into the air at a level with Mark, who was still about 200 meters up and away from the bow of the ship. The dryads easily reached that height, and their roots, dripping down below the ships, made them even taller.

The enemies on the ship were silent. Perhaps they had said something to Crystal Tower? They said nothing to Mark. If they cared about his ultimatum telling them to surrender, they did not seem like it.

Rain fell hard everywhere but here. Hurricane winds buffeted around the battlefield. Behind Mark, 2 kilometers back there, was Isoko, Specter, Tempest, and Derek. One of Mark's eyes caught that Isoko and them were in a battle right now, but it was a battle happening 200 meters from the black bowl of their hoverplatform... and that black bowl had some dents in the adamantium. Some personal hoverbikes flew fast, lightning zapping them, platinum glitters breaking as they broke through those glitters.

Isoko and them looked like they were having a normal amount of problems. Nothing dangerous yet, but...

Hmm.

Mark would need to reconvene with them and fix the black bowl, at least, but Quark had Isoko, Specter, Tempest, and Derek's readouts in Mark's vision, when he looked their way. They were all in the green. Tempest had some damage but she was receiving active healing. She would be fine.

Mark focused on the archmages, the dryads, and the captains and leaders in the battleship ahead. He called out again, voice echoing upon itself and driving deep into the very soul of the enemies, **"Surrender and be spared your lives, and nothing else."**

The dryads rippled with rage, wood creaking like snapping branches in a storm, tendrils lashing, green crowns growing even larger, their astral bodies touching Mark's and poking at him. Mark poked back with Energy/Entropy, his strung-out body suddenly bursting with new bodies further away from his spread-out self as he gained energy, the dryads wincing away as though they had tried touching fire and had gotten burned—

“Foolish boy!” yelled one of the archmages to the left.

The guy's black and gold robes fluttered in his flight spell, in the light rain here at the center of the storm. He had dingy yellow hair and pale eyes, and was otherwise unknown to Mark— Oh wait. Mark knew him. Quark knew him, too. Archmage Amberstone! That's what his name was. He was some top guy in Okuana who Mark had heard about once or twice. He had seen the guy maybe once on the screens, but Mark hadn't even thought about him until now. He was a 'Medium Name'. No Addashield, but more like Blackthorn, before Mark knew that Blackthorn's demon was some 'demon king'... or maybe that was a perfect analogy. This guy was an archmage. He had tricks, for sure.

'Demon king level' tricks?

Probably not.

Quark named the other guy as some unknown, lesser archmage, and probably freshly made, too, because Aleph One told Quark, who told Mark, that the guy had been recorded as a Sky Mage of Okuana. He had Sky Shaper, and he had visited New Tokyo years ago. He wasn't doing much in the air right now, though he certainly had the range. He was probably keeping away from Mark, and for good reason. According to Aleph One his name was Hotano, and he should have been 87 but he looked 20.

That was pretty typical archmage-longevity on display. Demons didn't want their shells dying to mundane things like age, unless they specifically wanted that to happen. Most archmages Contracted against that, though, because every time an archmage died, even if it was from old age, they turned into a dragon, or, as Mark had recently learned, a Living Spell.

Of the two archmages, Hotano was probably weaker and more dangerous than Amberstone, because Amberstone had a known Contract on record at Crystal Tower (Note from Aleph One: Probably a fake Contract, of course) and that Contract would turn Amberstone into a dragon that would rage and kill whoever killed him.

Hotano's Contract, which was NOT on file at Crystal Tower, could be anything.

Amberstone continued, “You have been deceived by your own desires for power—”

“You have made your choices in life,” Mark intoned, interrupting the asshole. **“One of those choices was to assault Crystal Tower. Therefore, you have forfeited your right to try and persuade me of anything at all. The time for speeches will come after the battle, when you have been stripped of all of your power. Surrender, or prepare for devastation.”**

Disgust filled Amberstone’s voice as he called back, “I will rip that soulhouse from you and make you watch as I tear through all of those who would fight Dominant.”

“What a fucking stupid threat,” Mark Called back, getting the last word in even as Amberstone and everyone else started moving.

Mark dropped into a weak Alacrity/Slowness, powered by a few hearts, keeping power in the tank in case he needed it later, as he slammed into everyone *except* Amberstone and the other archmage 300 meters away with a full power Energy/Entropy. Time vaguely slowed as vectors and astral bodies crashed into Mark, and he crashed right back into them. The collected people in the sky, over 30 of them, each had a handful of tricks ready to go.

Most of Mark’s strung-out astral body completely disintegrated, leaving him inside his strung-out adamantium self and blind to the vectors outside of himself, his Union gone. Isoko’s connection breaking in a shattering of platinum sparkles, half the sky clearing and turning suddenly-calmer. Something had disrupted him. Had to have been Wands of Destruction. Mark hadn’t recognized those on the battlefield, and they didn’t fully work on him anymore, but they had to be here—

A void bomb went off in the middle of his selves, and then two more bombs off to the sides. Mark slipped down as those 50-meter black voids hung in the skies, as Mark scrambled to remake his body below the destruction, time flowing almost normally, but he spun his body into monowire, and then Unioned with the world through that monowire.

Hairs of adamantium strung into the world as Mark recovered his strength, his astral body and Alacrity/Slowness kicking back in. Mark re-strung himself down, closer to the prow of the hovership

The void bombs began to implode, and time slowed. The implosions halted for a moment as Mark pulled too hard on Alacrity/Slowness, and then Mark let up on that, stringing his Union, along with some adamantium needle-wires, into the bodies of the enemies before him. The implosions above continued in slow motion.

Mark held the strings on the extra 30-ish people in the sky, including the dryads but excepting the archmages. He felt their pain of the intrusion as he began draining them with Energy/Entropy. Some people attacked him with Shaped water or Shaped other things. Some tried to pry Mark off. All of them

failed as he drained them fast, but he felt and saw as a few of them aimed small, weird-guns at his body, as their own Powers failed them.

Those guns had to be the 'wands of destruction' Mark, Aleph One, and Quark had missed.

The soldiers pulled triggers, darkness sputtered, and mostly they failed to do shit, because Mark was inside of his adamantium body right now, partially protected from disjunction. But a few of them had aimed better than the rest and they struck pieces of Mark that escaped the confines of his adamantium. Where the darkness struck, Mark's astral body collapsed. The rest of him remained strong, and so Mark reconnected fast, jamming adamantium-covered limbs into stomachs and chest, ripping into those guns and ripping out more adamantium from their cores, Energy/Entropy pulling power out from enemies, out from the world, and into Mark.

He was still pretty strung out, but he had enough of himself left to slice apart every little special gun.

This was a concentrated, orchestrated attack. Mark was surrounded. They'd have more tricks. Mark decided to retreat and regroup.

Isoko's Union was still gone, which was the real concerning thing here— No wait. There it was.

Isoko's touch returned with a surge of platinum, ripping across the tops of every dryad, like chainsaw whips, cutting branches and tops off and away, the dryads only able to fight back inside of their bodies, like what Mark was doing right now. Isoko shifted the whipping storm on a thought, crashing through the entire sky in great, spiraling curls. Had she figured out Energy/Entropy? Maybe!

Ships dropped out of invisibility, cut in half or in pieces.

People fell in pieces.

The people that Mark had grabbed onto fell in pieces, because Mark let go of them without care at all.

The archmages were making moves toward Mark, but they did magics that killed his Unionsense, so he had no idea where they were, exactly, for he was still strung out under and around the bow of the ship, searching for them again—

Mark's Union reached the ship and he felt vectors moving inside, even as he was actively Energy/Entropy'd them. Holes opened up in the front of the ship and cannons loosed blackwhite voidfire like napalm fountains, as another vector, probably Hotaro's, directly countered Isoko's and Tempest's control of the sky.

Voidfire washed out into the world in expanding spirals of storm, eating at the rain, consuming stringers of lightning and platinum glows like it was all fuel for the flames. That blackwhite fire touched Mark's strung-out body, and Mark moved down and awa—

Amberstone pointed at a single part of Mark's body and suddenly everything sped up, Mark's mind barely moving at the edge of the fight, blackwhite fires burning everything, even Mark. But Mark was still there at the edges. He saw what Amberstone had done.

A shatter of amber light glowed at the center of Mark's body, the main body. That light enveloped him, traveled down his extensions, and locked him down.

"I have him!" Amberstone yelled, voice almost too fast for Mark to hear his words.

Hotano burned Mark, holding the fire to his body with control of the sky, burning him as much as he could. He called out, "I have him, too!"

They didn't have him. They didn't know he was also 400 meters below himself. That's probably the only reason he survived what came next.

Void bombs cascaded front the ground, hit the sky where Mark was, and erased all of him in one great explosion of void, carving out a small part of the world—

Time resumed fast as Mark came back to himself 450 meters below the great implosion happening overhead.

The entire battlefield looked different. The main ship was kilometers away from where it had been. Smaller ships had come forward, unveiling themselves from invisibility. The storm overhead was gone; Hotano had probably cleared it so everyone could have good sightlines on Mark—

Isoko's Union and Tempest's touch was missing.

Mark grew back to full-size and spread out again, going into Alacrity/Slowness as fast as he could, asking Quark, "What happened?"

Quark kept pace with Mark, saying, "You were out for 3 minutes and 28 seconds. Timeweaver said they would fail to get you fully due to Clean House and not to worry, and for everyone to focus on helping Isoko, Tempest, and Specter, and to focus on the ingresses they're making on the other side of the blockade as they rift to Earth. People are dying, and now is the time for no mercy."

No mercy, then.

Mark reached full Alacrity/Slowness with the help of brains scattered in several parts, Unioning in full with the world, with everything nearby. He angled upward, burning the air as he grabbed into the four remaining large vectors up there.

Amberstone briefly paused as he recognized someone was attacking him.

Hotano didn't understand anything. He was the more dangerous one to kill, though, because Mark was sure his Contract was against Mark or against whoever might kill him, just like Amberstone's Contract. But now that Living Spells were on the table, Mark didn't want to trigger Hotaro.

A dragon that wanted to kill Mark was preferable to an unknown.

So Mark ripped into Amberstone's adamantium robes, crushing into their magic, bursting through Amberstone's chest from behind and flowing through all of him, draining the man of all possible speed—

Amber light sparked bright.

For a moment Mark was in the real world.

And then Mark was in the dream.

He stood in his soulhouse, looking at an amber sky beyond all of his black.

Amberstone stood on his lawn like a man made of yellow, ripping at the world itself, turning the ground amber at his touch. He sweated heavily and a gaping hole in his chest oozed amber light that bled into the environs, catching on the black and turning it yellow.

The Clean House statues of Mark swept the yellow away, but more and more yellow appeared with every moment.

Time to rip him apart, Mark supposed, as Mark flickered himself into his extraction house and slammed giant black Union hands into Amberstone—

Amberstone laughed as he lifted a hand and held it out, freezing Mark's black hands in place as he taunted, "A boy with tricks will have his tricks stolen each and every time! Your house will be mine, usurper!"

Mark slammed more hands into Amberstone's face, but Amberstone grew new hands for each and every hand Mark tried to slam him with.

The archmage laughed as yellow spread across the land—

“Oh,” Mark said, realizing something. “You have specific tools against Union. Duh. Well good thing I got this.”

Amberstone laughed louder, beginning to say something, another taunt.

Mark strung purple Death past all of his yellow hands, right into his yellow-bleeding chest.

“No,” Amberstone said, not seriously, not understanding what was happening to him. And then Mark funneled Death across his black Union hands, crushing the archmage's specific defenses against adamantium mana, or whatever it was. Mark turned his purple-rimmed black hands into fists and poured Death directly through the yellow on the ground, into the archmage. The archmage screamed with two voices. “NOOOO!”

Yellow burned with purple and Mark poured in the Death, purple shining out of Amberstone. His yellow hands weakened without warning, Mark's Union-hands crunching inward. The man screamed and Mark ripped into the archmage, turning him into so much scattered, dusty dreams—

For a moment, Mark saw another presence inside of the man.

It was a reflection of the man, but hollow. And then the two screaming voices separated into one yellow man, still screaming as Death turned him into a mockery of himself, replacing everything that was yellow. The yellow dream outside of Mark's house became a purple hellscape full of Death.

The other person was a demon.

The clear demon's features melted away, turning him into a blob of something clear with two arms, two legs, and a head at the top, but his arms were too long and there were no elbows or fingers, and his legs were flowing this way and that, and his head was not a head at all, but a central core. The demon, inside of the dream, was little more than a collection of possibilities both eldritch and vaguely human—

The demon clicked.

Time froze everywhere, the purple invasion of the yellow suddenly stopping, the wind on the grass dying, the ever-shifting dream beyond Mark's soulhouse stilling to solid, dark rainbow.

“Hello, Mark,” said the demon. “Attack me and I do my worst.”

Mark had been about to attack the demon; to do what, he had no idea. But the attack had been coming. Black hands and coiling, instinctive Death, and a Union of Entropy/Energy to try and burn the demon to nothing, transforming it into something else and maybe, in that transformation, killing it.

But Mark paused.

“... Did you stop time?”

“We can stop time for Contract formation, which is what I have invoked. It will last until we come to a conclusion one way or another. Here is the short version: I like your house. I want to move in and live vicariously through the actions of one of the strongest people in the known worlds. I will answer questions in exchange for specific experiences, none of which will violate the largest parts of your moral code. You had a similar situation with Archmage Blackthorn. This will be more direct. I will not impact your house. I will not endanger your life. I will not hinder your desires in life as a man, as an inheritor, or as a hero. That is the gist of the Contract. Specifics can be ironed out if this first step to entertaining my offer is crossed.” The demon added, “The other option is for you to not accept any sort of Contract at all, continue to kill Amberstone, and I will turn Amberstone into a death dragon. I will get to experience rampaging through New Tokyo and killing many different superheroes and creating hordes of undead thralls until I am taken down. I estimate 40 million dead.”

Mark rapidly began healing Amberstone with a Union of Good and Bad.

Purple flowed away from the yellow of Amberstone—

“Ah,” said the demon, as his clear body began sucking back into Amberstone, the archmage’s features reappearing out of the clarity of the demon’s unformed self. He spoke with a clear mouth, “My name is Rokera. Do keep me in mind if you change your mind. As a show of good faith, and because I don’t want competition as a guest of your house—” The demon slipped fully into Amberstone’s body, but he stuck his clear head out a little, and continued as if he wasn’t disappearing at all, “—If you kill Hotaro he and his demon will become a Living Kill that will not stop until 20 million citizens of New Tokyo are dead at its hand. Many other new archmages in this battle are the same.”

Time suddenly resumed—

Mark came back to reality as a stream of strung-out adamantium, hearts beating hard inside of a few different bodies 150 meters behind and below Amberstone. He was already moving with Alacrity/Slowness, trying to think, to come up with a way around this new issue.

The piece of Mark that remained jammed through Amberstone's chest was still locked to the archmage with yellow magics. Those yellow magics were flaking away, but they'd be there for a little while as long as Mark was moving this fast.

Killing *any* of the archmages was not an option—

“We have reached phase 2, Mark,” Timeweaver said in Mark's ears, even though Mark was now moving at super speed. He must have recorded it earlier. “And yes, I did record this earlier. You have seen the traps in the blockade, from the archmage/demon death triggers to your personal soulhouse traps, which have not yet proven capable of stripping you of your house, but they've gotten very close. I hope you can figure out how to overcome all of that, but for now, rescue your people and take care of *all of the other ships in the blockade*, for they have become staging grounds for ingress into New Tokyo through rifts. We need those staging grounds gone. Ignore all archmages. Let them chase you. Hopefully this is the last time I have to go through this!”

Mark was already headed toward Isoko.

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Mark burned the air as he traveled in a spiral of lines, carving through the sky toward Isoko and the guys, hearts beating hard, mind racing with worry. Timeweaver's recorded message spoke of the blockade moving onto Earth, into New Tokyo through rifts. Half of the danger of all of that was not just the ships, the dryads on the ships, and whatever they were doing to the people living on the other side.

Rifts also lured and created kaiju.

Mark couldn't hear all of that past the clearing storms, past the time differences, but he tried. He strained. And so, Mark heard a low rumble far, far below the storms, in the distances, in the fabric of reality itself. Maybe they were too distant to hear properly, or maybe they were still small.

Mark desperately hoped for the latter.

Small rifts didn't draw kaiju.

Mark wasn't on that task right now.

Up ahead floated the black bowl of Crystal Tower's loaned hoverplatform. The adamantium Mark had left behind was only PL79, since he wasn't controlling it, so it was dented and torn, pieces missing. But it remained. It was still adamantium.

Isoko, Derek, Specter, and Tempest, faced off against flying speedsters.

Mark moved fast enough to rip at the sky with flame and thunder.

Isoko was moving, too, and so were all the enemies. Isoko danced across the entire ship's space, one arm curved in front of herself like a bar of platinum used as a shield, an airshield made of platinum Tactile Telekinesis holding steady on that arm. Her other hand gripped a flail of storm winds that she ripped across the battlefield, at 4 different targets, each of which flickered in the sky and reappeared elsewhere —

Specter kicked someone out of the air over the platform.

Mark reached the platform, and his Union reached a moment later.

Tempest was almost dead on the floor, wounds unknown to Mark, because a literal pile of Dereks held her together, keeping her alive, because Derek was so concentrated on keeping her alive with Good/Bad. But Derek was moving at normal speeds and this was a speedster battle.

Isoko noticed Mark.

Mark noticed Isoko.

Union told him just as much as her tense eyes did. She couldn't break through the PLs of the people fighting them now. Mark could. Mark joined Isoko with his own adamantine strength, both of them piercing through the defenses of the 6 speedster attackers, hitting them with Slowness and bringing further Alacrity to Isoko and Specter.

The battle switched on that single moment.

Isoko strung her platinum winds and prismatic Union alongside Mark's adamantine strength, burrowing into the 6 speedster attackers, cleaving 6 heads from 6 bodies. In the very next moment, she was on the deck of the hoverplatform, channeling a sky's worth of healing into Tempest and Derek.

Mark slipped slightly into normal time, hitting Tempest with several beating hearts' worth of the standard healing Unions; Blood/Bloodless, Good/Bad, Purity/Corruption to get rid of any possible poisons or catastrophic compounding issues, and then back to Good/Bad, and then a few more nuances.

Tempest burst back to life in 10 real-time seconds, gasping strong as Derek stepped away, or died off, or merely disintegrated since he realized he was no longer needed in a meatshield capacity. Derek took to the helm again, and Tempest gripped the sky, her fury writ large upon the weather and the rain.

A true tempest unfurled like a pyroclastic cloud from an erupting volcano.

Mark repaired the black bowl of the hovership, Unioning all of them together with Glory and Fear, stepping into normal time. The team and the heavens radiated brilliance under a deepening hurricane sky, as Specter stood inside of the adamantium on the edge, and as Isoko flared to Prismatic brilliance, turning all the rest of the world Boring in comparison.

Mark Called out to all onlookers, to all those watching on the incoming battleships, and to the two archmages slowly flying their way, still a kilometer out, **"Death to the Godking! Disgrace to all of you!"**

Hotaro flinched as though struck, his path through the sky barely altered.

Amberstone screamed back, furious that his prize had been stolen.

The archmages glowed with power, Amberstone amber and Hotaro a weird sickly green. They were going to strike.

But then lightning scattered overhead, an attack from Isoko and Tempest, and collapsed straight through both archmages, and while Hotaro pulled back, green spell fading, Amberstone turned his spell toward the lightning, grabbed it, and suddenly the lightning was rimmed in amber light that connected across the sky, all the way to Isoko and Tempest in the back of the ship.

Tempest froze in amber time, her control of the skies broken.

Isoko frosted over with thin amber light, but she struggled and the light cracked. Her PL was too high to be overtaken that easily. Mark helped her shrug it off with a Union of Glory and Fear. The amber archmage's freezing spell did nothing to Mark. Mark wasn't close enough.

And then Amberstone got in range of Mark's Union and he knew it. He was prepared to do the same amber-locking to Mark, another amber spell already burning in his grip.

So Mark strung himself out across the sky, toward Amberstone and to the sides, hitting the archmage with Fear as Isoko and Tempest broke out of the spell behind him.

Amberstone screamed in absolute fear, but something was wrong. Something was broken inside of him, sort of how it was broken inside of Mark. Mark didn't react normally to fear. He fought. Amberstone fought hard, too, and suddenly Amberstone's yellow glow doubled.

Mark discarded part of his body, stretching back to the ship, right in time to watch as Amberstone released his amber spell onto Mark's old, stringy body. A kilometer of black adamantium frosted over in time-locked amber, almost reaching Mark on the ship, even as Derek was pulling them away and Isoko was pulling them away a lot harder.

Isoko said, "Hope you got a better idea than fear, Mark!"

Mark was already considering all of that. 'Fear' wasn't that useful. Oh sure, fear still worked very well for most applications of Glory/Fear, but some people didn't react at all to Fear and some people went crazy, like Mark, and apparently like Amberstone.

Who was Amberstone, really?

All Mark really knew about the guy was that he was some archmage completely devoted to Dominant and Okuana, and that he was something like 200 years old. Addavein would have known how to take him down, for they had surely tangled as Addashield and Amberstone, but Addavein wasn't here— Oh.

... Well.

If Fear didn't work, then how about 'Disgrace'. Glory and Disgrace might work very well on a lot of the targets here. Dominant was terrifying to almost all of the people who worked for him, or near him, making people more scared about failure than anything else. So. Yeah.

Glory and Disgrace.

Mark thrummed with Glory and Disgrace, sending a spear of himself into the distance, cracking through Amberstone's defenses—

The archmage suddenly balked, his glowing amber spell shredding under Disgrace, while Hotaro activated some sort of big defensive magic, suddenly displacing himself a kilometer directly away from Mark, back closer to the big ship.

Mark instantly told Isoko, “Glory and Disgrace, or whatever kind of Disgrace you want to use.”

Isoko thrummed the sky with platinum Prismatic and drab Disgrace.

Amberstone tried to rally spellwork into the sky, into Isoko’s power, but his spellwork folded in on itself and he faltered in the sky, and then he went running back to the ship.

Mark told his team, “We’re making straight-lines to the closest rift to Earth, somewhere to the north. Derek, find out the target.” Derek gave a salute and he drove fast, Isoko and Tempest both marshaling the winds behind them and carving the sky with active defense to keep the void bombs off of them. Mark continued, “Isoko keep up the battlefield control. Tempest hit through the shields. Specter on defense. I’m back to being the head of the spear. We avoid archmages and close rifts to Earth.”

Tempest spat, “I *cannot* **believe** Dominant is really going through with this! FUCK OKUANA! DEATH TO THE GODKING!”

The sky roiled with her rage.

Mark focused ahead.

A group of four ships were all angled with sterns butting up against each other, the shields of each ship joined into a great sphere around them all. Dryads grew from the deck of each ship, swirling into that space between all of the ships, making magic. Mark couldn’t see it from here, but Quark was able to connect to Earth right now, to get the image from the other side, because a great hole yawned open between those four joined dryads.

The actual incursion was a bunch of soldiers with guns and flying equipment, making a beachhead atop some forest space north of Takasaki in New Tokyo, while the dryads reached through into those forests. According to Quark and Aleph One, the incursion was turning trees into spell-throwers and forest wildlife into monsters, into Green Death Ecology.

It was a horror of necromancy. Mark was pretty sure that some of the things Quark was showing him were some actual horrors made out of people who had been in the forest, because one of the horrors had on a fluffy pink shirt. Maybe a child’s shirt.

The superheroes and the New Tokyo Defense Force were on the other side, pushing back the incursion in the skies with a whole lot of different strengths. Most of those strengths were ineffective, including the Castellan defenses. That golden fire of Hearthswell blasted across the land, trying to burn things, and failed.

Mark saw that golden fire here on Daihoon. Flames burned the hole in the Two Worlds, trying to shut it down, but the dryads grew into that fire, soaking in the power and turning it into shielding for the rift itself and probably for the ships.

Or at least that's what Aleph One was telling Quark.

All Mark saw from his angle were ships with guns blasting their way, trying to slow them down, but Tempest and Isoko were already sending giant blasts of lightning at those shields and into the gunfire. Trailing bullets and spells twisted in the Shaped sky, pattering out before they got turned all the way around. Lightning struck golden shields and skittered away—

“Concentrating,” Isoko said, staring ahead.

Mark felt her Union focus alongside her Shaping, alongside Tempest. They had been doing probing strikes. Now came the big one—

The world cracked as a giant pillar of platinum lightning struck the center of the shields and then pounded inward, cracking the shields and burning through a dryad and an entire battleship. The portal remained intact. The dryads were spatially locked, somehow, and through the fourth one was half gone the other three rapidly began healing the fourth one.

Mark glanced backward for just a moment.

Amberstone and Hotaro were at the head of their battleship, pursuing Mark and the hoverplatform.

Mark told Isoko, “Don't kill the archmages. We can't do it until everything else is taken care of.”

“OH SURE!” Isoko said, keeping most of her battle mania under control. “YOU GOT IT, BOSS!”

Specter was less controlled, yelling, “WE CAN'T KILL THEM?!”

Derek told Mark, “Go,” and then he told the guys, “They all have deadly triggering Contracts and—”

Derek could handle explanations.

Mark spun through the sky, toward the ship, to kill the beachhead.

He slipped into the hole in the upper shield before it could close, and he saw, for a moment, a hole below that opened up to Earth. Dryads surrounded it, coiling and undulating and growing through the hole,

even though golden fire burned them. They were sort of like Dominant in that way. Smaller, for sure, each only 50-ish meters large, but they were keeping themselves small to keep their power requirements low. As long as they had power then they could keep operating.

Mark hit all of them and every single person on the four ships with Energy/Entropy.

The Castellan fires blossomed to full strength, burning the dryads away as the dryads screamed. The portal winked out, and then the shields out there winked out, too, and Mark fully joined with Isoko once again, right as the dryads wound up some Death spells.

Death flowed into Mark, and Mark felt energized, his adamantium flesh multiplying.

One grand soaking of Death later, and Mark had stripped the ships of their power. Mark didn't have time to strip everyone of their Bindings, though, so Mark went for the dryads, pulling out their Cursed Abomination Powers and killing them in the process. It was the fastest way to kill them, and then they were dead.

Mark opened his eyes back to the real world to see the rift truly close, and to see a bunch of people attacking him. They fired bullets and spells at the black bowl of their transport, too. Tempest and Specter and Isoko were doing fine. Disgrace was doing A Lot against the people here.

Soldiers cowered and archmages failed to close the distance.

Mark thrummed with Glory and Disgrace, and every single attacker on the ship cowered as something a whole lot stronger than fear curled into their minds, telling them that all of their worst fears were coming true. Mark fulfilled a fraction of those fears, stripping the Bindings of the 20 people directly attacking him with spells and weapons, and then hitting up the guys in the leadership positions, ripping out Leaders and Commanders and one Tactician, then moving on. He made sure to circle back on a few guys who had distinctly solid Power Levels and who ran instead of fighting.

Mark ripped out Battleminds from each of those people who ran, who had the sense to run. Now that they didn't have Battlemind, Mark had no idea what they were going to do. From their heavily confused vectors, they had no idea what they were going to do, either.

And then Mark rushed into the sky to help Isoko and the heroes. His very approach was all it took to drive off some speedsters who had gotten there while he had been busy.

Isoko and them had been busy, too, churning the sky against the encroaching archmages and their dryad backups on the big ship. A whole lot of lightning and platinum bursts prevented those ships and their assailants from coming much closer and 4 kilometers away.

“How’s Disgrace working out for you?” Mark asked, eyeing a trio of flying speedsters about 2 kilometers out, to the east. Mark had trouble keeping them in sight, but Quark did not. “Speedsters trouble?”

“It’s working out better than I thought!” Isoko said, concentrating on what was going on out there.

Tempest and Specter were whole and strong, and Derek was funneling Good into them and into himself. Derek’s personal range was small, but his body was strung out over the Two Worlds, seer-style, and so he had plenty of resources to Union with.

Derek gave a thumbs up, already shifting the ship forward, toward some other location, while the ships behind them were dead-locked together with 4 dead dryads strung throughout their decks and innards. There was no more rift back there.

Another rift loomed ahead, Quark marking it as 20 kilometers forward.

5 blockade ships hovered in the sky between here and there.

Mark said, “I’m going to deal with those speedsters. I need full speed, Isoko, in 3, 2, 1—”

Isoko shifted her Union in a fraction, and so did Mark.

The world stopped.

Mark did not.

Fire detonated quietly, almost frozen, as Mark strung himself forward and in multiple directions, moving kilometers in a relative instant. He hit the first speedster flying on the wind, wrapping him in an adamantium shell and draining all of his speed that he could. Mark moved faster. The second and third speedsters moved like coma patients. They stumbled in the sky, their astral bodies barely moving at all. Mark enveloped all of them in adamantium, and then he locked all three of them together.

He had to drop his own Union of Alacrity/Slowness to Skill them.

Suddenly, he had three vibrating adamantium bubbles that dented out from the inside, but Mark hit them with Energy/Entropy and the dents stopped. Hopefully they wouldn't get their mana back fast enough to matter.

Mark dove into the dream, and then he ripped out Wind Shaper x3, Accelerator, and Speedster x2, and then he took back his adamantium shells and let the guys drop. Their PLs wouldn't lower that fast, so they weren't going to die on impact.

They still went screaming to the sky, praying to Dominant and pissing themselves, because Isoko was back on her Prismatic/Disgrace Union and now these guys were defenseless against her ingress.

Mark flowed back to the black bowl, arrived, and said, "That's some impressive speedsters for New Tokyo." He looked to Specter, offering, "You only have Ethereality as Natural and some low-Brawny Body Power, right Specter?"

"Fuck!" Specter said, not knowing how to react to the implied gift. And then he solidified and said to Mark, "No. I can't. I have Strong Body and I don't want to trade years of my life for fast power now."

"Battlemind?" Mark offered instead.

"FUCK YES," Specter said, half-maniac.

"I want Speedster," Tempest said, vector furious at the world.

"You only have Sky Shaper and Weather Manipulation, right?" Mark asked.

Large machine gun fire skipped off of the black bowl around the ship, sounding like simple stops as arcing trails of bullets traced across overhead. The Derek at the top of the tower lost his head, gore scattered to the sky. Another Derek took his place as the Derek down below shifted the boat into evasive maneuvers.

Mark made some handles here and there and everyone held on.

Tempest held her security bar hard, saying, "Yes! Just those two is all I have!"

"I also have Acceleration from one of those guys," Mark said, "Might be better than Speedster."

"Which one came from the guy who took my fucking arm!" Tempest raged into the sky, blasting apart a lot of things far out of sight.

Isoko said, “Probably the Accelerator. I didn’t catch the whole thing.”

Derek said, “1 minute to safe contact with the next rift. Lots of shit in the way.”

Mark said, “Specter first. Here we go, dude!”

Specter flexed into the real world, locked to space by Mark’s adamantium Union and by a few grips he had on the guy's waist to make sure he didn’t flop around a whole lot. Mark dove into his soul and put Battlemind into his existence.

Mark pulled back and Specter gasped as Mark loosened his bindings.

Specter gripped his head, his vector expanding inward and outward. And then he shot his gaze up and out, saying, “Holy fuck this is a bad battle.”

Derek almost laughed.

Tempest was almost ready for her turn but she had a question, “Accelerator has better TT, right?”

Timeweaver spoke through the ship’s comms, “Yes.”

Mark repeated, “Yes?”

He had no idea if that was true.

Tempest saw the hesitation, but she said, “Accelerator.”

Mark dove into her, giving her Accelerator.

Mark came back out—

“Attack,” Derek told Mark.

Mark oriented himself and took to the sky once again, facing off against a kamikaze ship aiming directly at them, dryad flailing like a thousand krakens on its surface, while the sky over there—

Oh.

Mark rapidly retreated back to the ship, to stand on the railing as the hurricane *shifted*.

Tempest fully woke from her Skilling dream, Prismatic flows joining her, Disgrace leaving her.

Hurricane force winds suddenly began to spiral into tight bands of shifting sky, like a thousand different streamers joining one great river that circled and circled and circled for kilometers around. Platinum lightning sparked on those streamers, trying to help control what Tempest could not control at all. Winds echoed, howled, and then *accelerated*—

The power jumped tracks as Tempest lost brief control of herself, Isoko had no way of helping her, and that great stream of wind carved out the kamikaze ship, and then a mountainside and all the land below and the sky above, like a snake suddenly bunching up, or a train piling into a crash. That sky crash ripped through a few different ships, aiming at the rift-bearing ships ahead, ripping right through their shields and crashing all the way through, leaving two and a half ships hanging in the sky and 4 dryads hanging onto those broken pieces. The rift remained between the spatially-locked dryads, but the ships were gone.

It was the destruction of a mountain's worth of stuff, and it was awesome, but heavily flawed.

Tempest had no idea how to control her new Power well at all, for even with all the Unions around her, supporting her, Tempest still faltered against a few Dereks, almost passing out. She'd get the hang of it, though. Isoko stood right next to Tempest, needing to yell to be heard over the storm. Mark couldn't hear them at all. Tempest nodded, almost drunkenly, and Isoko seemed she was telling Tempest to focus on the archmages behind them, to keep them at bay and not kill them.

Mark wondered how well that would work out for their team.

Didn't seem like she could hold back much at all, or even get herself going in the right directions, but she'd learn fast. Mark could do a Union of Understanding with both Isoko and Tempest later, if he needed, before phase 3.

Specter saw the danger of Tempest's new power, too, so he looked at Mark and Mark knew they were in good hands.

So for now—

Mark lifted off of the black bowl of the hoverplatform and threaded through the sky, aiming at the remains of the rift-bearing ships, and the still-living dryads.

5 minutes later Mark flew back to the hoverplatform, which was in a stalemate of winds and magic with the archmages and their larger ship.

Mark announced, "NEXT!"

Derek got going, Isoko and Tempest covered the exit, and four sleeping speedsters lay tied up to the sides, knocked out and with Specter watching over them.

Specter gestured at the unconscious guys, yelling over the winds, "More speedsters for New Tokyo!"

Mark was surprised. "How'd you knock 'em out?"

Specter lifted a hand and buzzed it with ethereality, saying, "I can knock out a guy pretty easy when I can tell where they're going to be!"

"Neat!" Mark said, as he began reaching into the sleeping speedsters. A minute later, Mark came out and said, "I got 3 more Speedys, some assorted other stuff, and one *Lightspeed*." Lightspeed wasn't *directly* as impressive as it sounded. Mark knew a guy back at Dawncoast who worked for the Sacredcuts who had Lightspeed. Basically, the guy could move anywhere as an immaterial 'ghost' of light, at actual light speed, and then reappear. He couldn't do shit while in 'lightspeed', though, so what he did was flicker in and out of lightspeed and drop bombs made by the Sacredcuts where those bombs needed to go. Mark asked Specter, "That had to have been an interesting fight?"

Derek rolled the ship to get out of splashing gunfire.

Mark, Isoko, Specter, and Derek held on. Tempest almost went flying, but Specter reached out and casually grabbed her boot, and dragged her back to the ship's cover.

Four sleeping guys went sailing out of the ship which was callous but... Mark had trouble caring about the soldiers of Okuana right now.

Specter said, "I missed the Lightspeed guy the first two times, but I got him the third time!"

"I almost went flying again!" Tempest said, slightly freaked out, gripping onto the railing hard. "But I have Tactile Telekinesis now! Right?! How the fuck isn't it working?!"

Mark did a little Union of Understanding, leaving himself and Derek out of it, but helping Isoko and Specter to connect, for both of them had TT.

Isoko began, "It's like this..."

Winds howled.

The ship flew on and the disgraced archmages pursued.

Serge Garin, Justicar, stood with hands pressed onto the Round Table. It was going well, but it was also a complete fucking disaster. One of the worst disasters that New Tokyo had seen in recent memory, not counting last week's aborted Gate Day.

10 portals open from Daihoon.

Necromantic constructs flowing into the city and turning forests both inside the city and outside the walls into Green Death Ecology.

Infiltrators inside New Tokyo had activated and the AIs were mostly fighting that battle, and winning, but the fact that there was a battle *at all* was horrific. Four bunkers had been compromised and turned into necromantic nests. 20,000 dead, just by those places, alone.

Everyone had been hoping that one good strike against the blockade would have them breaking up and running, or at least gracefully retreating and then the diplomats would take over once again. But that hadn't happened.

What *had* happened was portals from Daihoon, filled with people and monsters with average PLs in the 50s. That meant that they were tearing through walls and *ignoring* standard-issue bullets.

Mark's team had closed 2 portals so far and the word had gotten out not to kill any archmages, because someone had killed an archmage on the southern wall and that archmage was currently a Living Kill spell that the archmages of New Tokyo were still untangling.

Anything that got within the Living Kill spell's radius, or that drew its direct attention from a much larger range, simply died.

Some of Serge's friends had already died.

Teams Orichal and Iron, along with Glorious Man and Captain Titan and the New Tokyo Defense Force, had managed to break 6 portals. They didn't close them, though. They just broke the portal in the sky and then the ships on the other side repositioned higher or lower, in some direction, and they reopened the portals. One portal had been opened inside of a high-rise building and no one had noticed for 10 minutes.

3,000 dead in that one building, and now it was full of necromantic constructs at PL 35 to 65, tearing through all resistances and the other nearby buildings.

Serge was silent, Union connecting him to everyone else, a Union of Life thrumming with Order and discarding Chaos. The entirety of Crystal Tower's response against this aggression was a well-oiled machine, and Serge kept that machine in tune, looking at the maps and directing attentions where they were needed.

He could still talk a little.

Serge asked, "Is this truly the best possible result?"

Timeweaver, Zaid al-Ishak, stood beside Serge, hand on his simple cane, gazing out at the battle. He flickered every so often, vanishing and reappearing in slightly the same location. Serge had worked with Timeweaver for over 25 years now. He knew enough to recognize that the guy was working overtime, and that was scary.

Zaid's voice was still partially cheerful, though, as he stopped blipping long enough to ask, "What could have gone better?"

"You couldn't have told us about the archmage triggers."

"Nah," Zaid said, "Then they just get sneaky. This is the best option, Serge. Mark is here and so they're committing to the fight. They really want to kill him."

... So they wouldn't fight if Mark wasn't here?

Serge almost lost his temper. “I thought you said that we needed him to survive. But you brought him here just so we’d have this battle?”

As if just waiting for his cue to talk, after having teed up Serge, Zaid said, “In 10-ish more days, when Dawncoast has their own Gateday, the blockade would have been at 20 kilometers away from Crystal Tower and able to jump to a 10 kilometer radius within minutes. Once that happened, they would have activated a ‘grand gate’, transporting all of Crystal Tower *and* central New Tokyo to Daihoon, effectively killing us as a major world power. That death toll would have been 400 million and Crystal Tower would be gone from the world stage within the month, or pieces consumed by other nations, all of us refugees.” Zaid flickered once, and then again, his joy draining from his face with each flicker, until finally he did one more flicker and he came back like a dead man walking. With dark circles under his eyes, Zaid stared Serge straight in the eyes, and said, “I’m cutting losses, now. Expect disasters across all battlefields.”

While other people nearby panicked in small ways, and one intern over there knew enough to panic in a large way, Serge maintained.

“You will have earned a break after today.”

“I know,” Zaid said, exhausted. “Believe me, I know.”

“What are we giving up?” Serge asked, though he could already tell what had happened, based on the map in front of him. The Living Kill spell was advancing through Yokosuka, unchecked, now that its main inhibitor was gone. Retreating. Serge could practically hear the fury in the guy’s voice, over there in the command center. Serge breathed out, “You told Glorious Man to retreat.”

“The fucker barely listens,” Zaid said, scowling, voice quiet, “You know how many fucking time’s I’ve fucking saved his fucking life? And I don’t mean over the course of years. I mean *today*. Too fucking many!”

“Ah,” Serge uttered, gallows humor in his voice as he said, “We’re in the ‘cursing everyone’ part of your exhaustion, huh?”

Zaid straightened up, bags still heavy under his eyes, as he said, “I’m good, Serge.”

“I know you are.”

“I’m gonna make Mark give Ren either Battlemind or Leader. I haven’t decided yet— Ah.” Zaid flickered. “Neither, then. Okay. Weird, but okay.”

Serge almost asked what that meant.

But there was a battle to be had.

Serge asked, “Could I use Leader?”

“I’m not checking that right now.”

Serge just nodded, Order flowing in, Chaos flowing out—

A third portal winked out.

Aleph One confirmed, “Third portal closed. 4 more dryads dead. 2 more archmages in pursuit of Mark’s team. Isoko’s Union is keeping them from committing to a real attack. Confirmed Battlemind in Specter and confirmed Accelerator in Tempest.”

Serge asked Zaid, “Did you put him up to that?”

Zaid grinned, a bit of his exhaustion fading, saying, “Nope. He did that all on his own, but one option worked out better than the others, so I angled him toward Accelerator instead of Speedster. I really, really like working with him, Serge. I want him *here*, but I can’t push that hard alone, and I won’t.”

--

Aeri Kanno, Wandering Sage, flew with her family in the skies over Takasaki, where the portal had died off 20 minutes ago but the Green Death Ecology was still going strong. They had contained the incursion to the forests outside of the city, and they had scoured the sky of all fliers, but the forest still remained.

‘Clan Sage’ of Wandering Sage was just what they showed people on the screen, when they played up their roles as small-time villains of the main supervillain Wandering Sage, back when Aeri was still getting bookings through Crystal Tower. All of those roles were as henchmen, except for Chimiko, who

Aeri had hoped could join her as a true supervillain, but after that ‘cancer’ had hit her years ago, they had needed to burn out the infection with Castellen fire.

Chimiko had taken her loss of power just fine, since it happened around the time that Riku had perished in the Tutorial, and that still consumed all of her thoughts. Back then, Chimiko had a whole lot more to be sad about. Isoko’s relationship with her mother had never recovered from that loss, which was what it was. The almost-loss of their second daughter Endless Daihoon, just half a year ago, had hit Chimiko extra hard, but Isoko’s return had not alleviated any of that trauma at all.

Aeri had wanted the whole family to have a resurgence on the big screen, but now *this shit* was happening. But for a moment, she saw some of that resurgence there, on the battlefield, 5 of the ‘Wind Masters’ of Clan Sage active in the full defense of New Tokyo.

Aeri whipped the skies into funnels.

Chimiko and her sister Ome turned those funnels into burrowing drills, cutting out horrors from the ground.

Isoko’s father Hokichi used his Mist Shaper to rip the moisture out of one horror after another, making them so dry they just fell apart, turning to dust on the winds. He was the real power in this sort of battle, along with Isoko’s cousins Sofu and Shiki, who had mastered ‘Cutting Wind’, spiraling their Wind Shapers into thread to slice and dice enemy after enemy as they floated down streets and through the forests.

Aeri tapped her comms, requesting an update on the battlefield below her. It looked cleared enough for secondary actions, but she wasn’t sure. She couldn’t feel everything in every direction nearly as well as Isoko could. Maybe 50% as good, and it felt—

Aleph One responded, “Fire teams inbound. Highlighting the fire source.”

Aeri said through the sky, “Here comes the flame,” as she felt the updraft of heat about 3 kilometers away from the Green Death node. With a casual tornado, Aeri grabbed the flames from whatever source was making them. Felt almost like a team of Flame Shapers, but she didn’t know for sure. “All clear!”

Clan Sage pulled back from the forest, sounding off all clears of their own.

And then Aeri funneled heat from kilometers away into the edges of the forest.

The flames burned slowly at first. It wasn't a whole lot of fire from those fire teams, and they were fighting off something else over there, so Aeri didn't take too much. But it was still ignition. It was enough.

Aeri funneled the sky into the flames, and the flames grew with the power of a clean, hurricane-sized bellows. It was an incredible roar, and it brought Aeri back to younger days. She hadn't done this in a long time.

The fires by themselves didn't do much, of course. The PL of the Green Death trees was too high for normal fire. But Wandering Sage's Sky Shaper fire drilled into arcane constructions easily enough. The fire just helped to rob the necromantic monsters of their resources and their homes.

With a blasting wind, over 20 minutes, Aeri turned a once-beautiful forest into ash, coal, and blasted sand, all the way down to bedrock and stone—

“All clear,” Aleph One said, “Delivering new directions. Kaiju appearance at Sagamihara. Do NOT engage the tall purple Living Kill spell.”

“Kaiju time,” Sofu said, looking uncomfortable.

Shiki tapped her visor, adding, “Glorious Man main; Clan Sage backup.”

Chimiko declared, “And if the Living Kill even looks our way we're escaping! UNDERSTAND?!”

Rounds of agreement.

Aeri had already lifted her team into the sky, headed southward, saying, “Ren will take care of most of it. We're on backup and cleanup. Let him work and do not get in the way.”

Rounds of agreement, again.

--

Renjiru Furusawa, Glorious Man to enemies and acquaintances, 'Ren' to his friends, hated leaving behind an enemy, but that damned fucking Living Kill was apparently too dangerous to grapple with.

Timeweaver had made that very, very clear to him, and to everyone else. Only people with Death mana Talents could even hope to touch it without dying. They were, each and every one, basically Cat 7 kaiju for everyone except someone like Mark, and thus they were basically Cat 1.

Crystal Tower had a few Death Mana heroes and villains, but they were few and far between. That stuff just didn't play well on the screen, and most of it was actually outlawed, so there had never been a big push for any of it from the recruiters.

Dominant had angled his hit well, and Ren was sure they'd have to break out the nukes, soon, and on top of civilian populations, too, but if the Living Kill spells were anywhere near any civilian populations then those populations were already dead. So nukes were 'okay'.

And so Ren stood on the 10th hole at Hodogawa Country Club, shuddering in a building rage, waiting for Aleph One to give him new headings—

“Kaiju spotted, cat 3,” Aleph One said in Ren's ears. “West. It's a tree. Not a dryad.”

Ren let a fraction of his power out, gripping the world, and the world cracked.

Glorious Man floated into the air before he even took a single step, and then he took that step and the world cracked in his passage, air breaking, land erupting. The golf course had seen better days compared to its tiny time briefly hosting Glorious Man. But this was a great spot for him to land, and Ren had landed here many times before.

He had also played some rounds of golf here, as a charity event.

The country club would survive... Hopefully.

As long as the people survived, New Tokyo would be fine.

And yet, Ren already knew that tens of thousands were dead.

In one great leap, and then a few tugs of the sky, Ren saw the kaiju tree. It was a red maple tree, and it was already expanding in every direction like a plant kaiju made by Hexbreaker. Just a cat 3, though. Ren judged it as having at least size as a special effect... and 1 other special effect, if that. Was its special thing 'size'?

Ren asked, "Special effects? It's already a kilometer tall?"

"Telekinetic leaves. High PL. They spin and cut," Aleph One succinctly said. "Clan Sage is containing the spread."

"Got it. Tell 'em thanks!"

And then Ren was inside of the aura of the big tree. It felt his presence instantly and it reacted in the same amount of time, shedding bright red 5-meter-wide leaves that spun like sawblades directly at Ren. None of them touched Ren at all as Ren grabbed forward, reaching ahead into the center of the tree-kaiju even before he hit the trunk.

He clenched his fist, and the entire 100-meter-wide trunk clenched in a 5 finger grip, wood splintering, sap gushing.

Yank and mulch, in the same twisting grip. Leaves fell, spinning and trying to cut and getting nowhere. Ren grabbed the canopy and ripped it up, shredding the lifeforce inside of it, and then Ren turned his attention to the remaining trunk as it tried to regrow.

Yank, crush, mulch, and splinter.

Ren 'landed' beside the gnarled, 'chopped-down' trunk of the tree, his Tactile Telekinesis acting as feet, keeping him a good 10 meters off of the churned soil. And then Ren concentrated his feet into the ground, stabilizing everything for a kilometer around, except the land where the tree itself was. With a great grip of both his hands and stabilized footing, Ren gripped and tore out the entire living root system of the tree, and then he gripped it in the middle and ripped it apart down the center. Sap fell everywhere.

The kaiju tree died; Ren could tell because it's PL had dropped and now it was disintegrating in his very presence.

Clan Sage was already burning the remains, too, as its PL began to drop even further.

Ren gave a salute to Aeri, put on a smile because everyone needed that, and then he asked, "Where too next?"

Aleph one said, "To the wall, south and then east, avoiding the Living Kill, to head up to southern Chiba. Green Death Ecology has taken hold of the Chiba Airbase."

Ren launched himself into the sky, asking, “How many portals are active? How many has Mark’s team cut off?”

“2 active portals remain. The one at Chiba and the one Mark is closing now. We are nearing phase 3. The final portal will be over Chiba. Estimated 12 archmages in total to clear, with many of them expected to be living spells made specifically to harm New Tokyo.”

“That means you escape *when I tell you*, Ren,” Zaid said, directly into Ren’s ears.

“Heard and understood!”

Ren pulled himself along the Southern Wall, barely harming the upper surface at all, moving at mach speeds.

The Living Kill was still out there in Yokosuka, looking like an emaciated purple man 100 meters tall. The damned thing was still shooting Kill beams at everything it saw and sensed as it floated down the streets, while the guys in the sky weren’t able to do much at all except get its attention every now and then...

Ren found he could hate something else as much as he hated kaiju. That damned Living Kill spell had gotten tens of soldiers so far, and it had even gotten into a bunker, killing... killing way too many.

Synapse and Seraph were dead. Geugi and Karl. Two people Ren had worked with for decades.

Dead.

The people he knew and worked with and shared beers with were dead. It had happened before. It happened today. It would happen again.

Ren’s hate for kaiju and Living Spells hadn’t tripped over into hating Okuana yet, but it was a close thing.

It was too easy to sympathize with Mark. That’s probably why the boy was so popular in the media. He was going to be super popular after this, for sure, and Glorious Man had an inkling that he would help boost that popularity.

Ren hit the Ocean Wall and kept zooming along, down the way toward Chiba.

The portal was over the densest part of the forested mountain, where the big air ships docked for the Defense Force, and Ren hated Okuana just that much more. He knew so many people that lived and worked there. Those were *his people* before he became Glorious Man, back when he was just a kid growing up with parents in the army.

He loved walking through those forests, too. He had gotten drunk and made out with his gradeschool crush in those forests.

And now dryads reached down from the sky, turning trees into monsters and people into horrors—

“One portal left,” Aleph One said.

Timeweaver spoke to everyone through the comms, “I will be taking over directly now, with major news...”

The battle had gone on for 3 hours. It was almost noon.

Mark gazed out at a secondary blockade over the island of D’Chiba.

A central quad of ships and their dryads held open a wide, horizontal gate. About 17 ships surrounded that gate, funneling all of their warriors and dryads and personnel through that gate to make a true beachhead on Chiba. Archmages flew freely between Mark’s team and the gate, serving as another main block.

Amberstone and Hotaro had pursued and harried Mark and his team all the way around the north and then east side of the blockade, as they cleared up gates. The speedsters had stopped trying to kill the black bowl team after Mark stole even more highly valuable Bindings from them. Most people who would have defended those other portals had mostly escaped ahead, racing to this location, to fortify and support here, instead of becoming fodder for Mark.

The dryads remained at those portals back there that Mark had closed in the last 2 hours. They were a delay tactic so that Okuana could fortify this place, but 4 dryads were pretty easy to kill when no one was able to work in concert to keep the ship shields active and strong. Amberstone and Hotaro and those two dryads on those main ships had stopped trying to truly attack, too. They just kept up the pressure, making sure Mark and them couldn’t backtrack too easily.

And now the final fight of the blockade was here—

“I will be taking over directly now, with major news,” Timeweaver said, into Mark’s comms, and into the very air itself, his voice vibrating out of the black bowl of the hoverplatform, filling the air. He must have been using some magic to do that. Timeweaver’s voice continued on the ‘loudspeaker’, “Every single person who is in the blockade has been either forced to be here due to their families being held hostage, or due to mind control, or due to some other shit that I don’t care to investigate... ah, well no. It’s just too complicated to explain—Ah fuck it. I should have practiced this more. Well whatever! This probably isn’t the last time I have to go through this, so let’s continue:

“There was never any hope of reconciliation, and every single person that has been spared will never stop trying to kill New Tokyo, for if they return home they face a disgrace worse than death. The vast majority of them will be turned into horrors, or into new dryads.

“And so I declare full lethality mode against the people of the blockade, authorization Timeweaver’s Absolute Protocol: Defense of New Tokyo, Full AI Unleash... Oh yeah, and Derek Kevins. I need you to throw yourself against the Living Kill spell in Yokosuka. It takes 40 million deaths to stop it and it’s only gone through— Ah, I’m too tired. Should have sent that one privately... Oh well! You got enough— Oh! Send the nukes, now, for sure. Light it up, Aleph One!”

Behind Mark, Specter said, “Oh that’s not good.”

“May the gods have mercy on us all,” Aleph One intoned. “Countdown begins: 10, 9, 8...”

Mark said, “High altitude, now.”

Derek pulled up fast while Isoko and Tempest pulled up and away faster.

Mark stared over the edge of the black bowl, expecting the archmages to give pursuit, but they had heard everything, too, and so Mark only saw one shining streak of yellow —Amberstone; identified by Quark— shooting far away from the deck of that pursuing Dreadnought-wannabe. Amberstone was escaping. The main ship flew forward, directly into the secondary blockade and the ships encircling it, the dryads atop reaching forward to join limbs and roots with the 21 other surviving dryads.

Mark watched as people who were too slow got crushed between gripping, twisting vines and roots and branches. They screamed, Mark was sure, and then the trees grew over them—

Detonation on the other side.

Mark solidified the adamantium at the bottom of the ship as high-PL nuclear warheads detonated in the center of the gate formation, high-PL nuclear fire ripping across dryads and ships a like. It was nuclear

armageddon and Mark closed up the adamantium over the ship, burying them in floating darkness, lit only by the soft glow of diodes on the platform's controls and by the lightning glittering off of Tempest's body.

"Blast wave coming," Mark said, part of him extended through the shell, eyes still active out there.
"Three, two, one, here."

Everyone was prepared for it.

Tempest ended up on the floor, Isoko strained, Specter vanished through the floor, and Derek practically died, body breaking as he hit the floor and a whole bunch of himself at the same time. Derek only survived because he rapidly filled a good portion of the floor with bodies.

Specter came back more ethereal than ever, zipping back into the shell of the ship. He looked terrible; barely able to hold himself together as he coughed out pain that hit him even in full ethereality.

Mark was already healing them all with Good/Bad, but there wasn't much Good outside right now. Everything was on nuclear fire. Mark stuck a few eyeballs out there, looking around as the ship started to tumble, but Mark threw out a good rotor overhead, through the adamantium shell, catching them all and righting them.

"Is it clear yet?" Isoko asked, in astral-body pain but keeping it under control.

"Not yet. I think they're detonating more bombs, too—"

Another shockwave passed through and Mark spun the rotor overhead, catching them a bit and riding the wave as much as he could. It wasn't much.

Tempest groaned as she held against the wall, holding on to handles. "Fuck. That's... that really fucking hurts. It's losing all of my limbs, all over again."

"High PL nuclear bombs do that," a Derek said.

"What does full release do?" Mark asked Tempest and Specter, trying to get their mind off of the impotence all of them were feeling right now. "Or whatever it was Timeweaver said."

Tempest groaned.

Specter said, “Full AI release is... The city has restrictions on AI, on where they can go and what they can do. They mostly respect those restrictions. They’re not real restrictions. You can’t really contain True AIs. They’re people, you know, but... There are understandings on what they cannot and will not do. Timeweaver essentially told them it was a free-for-all to defend the entire city.”

Tempest gathered herself a bit, and so she was able to say, “They’re building turrets and shooting shit, no doubt. You did something to Aleph Two, right? Before we left?”

Mark nodded. “I did. Do you know Aleph Two? I didn’t know about him at all.”

“He’s a good kid. Been around for a few years,” Specter said, holding on to the wall.

“I bet he’s leading the charge into Chiba,” Tempest said, looking at Specter. “He wanted a land of his own, right?”

“Maybe so,” Specter said—

“Another shockwave,” Mark said, right before it hit them again.

Everyone grunted.

Tempest chuckled nervously, holding on to the wall, saying, “I would have expected a metal box to be hotter considering all the nuclear fire!” She groaned a little. “Ouch.”

Mark said, “Adamantium doesn’t get hot unless it’s specifically Shaped to be hot. Otherwise it resists everything. Doesn’t even feel cold, right? Just feels like touching a physical mirror.”

Tempest paused, mind going around a few times as she gripped the railing on the wall. “Huh. I guess that’s right?”

“It’s hard as fuck to get through, though,” Specter said. “Kinda hurts, actually.”

“I’m holding on to most of it right now,” Marks said. “Sorry.”

Specter shook his head. “It’s okay.”

Isoko said, “I can kinda feel the sky again?”

Mark said, “The radiation cloud is mostly vanishing— Oh shit.”

The speakers crackled with Timeweaver's voice, "He—hello? Hello? Can you hear me— Oh! There we go," the guy said, voice appearing in Mark's ears. "Connection reestablished with Quark. Hello, Mark. It's time for phase 3. Only 1 necrodragon! So that's good. I knew the nukes were the right call. Shame about Chiba, but whatever. It's also 3 normal dragons, and 7 Living Kill Spells. Almost over. Figure out how to kill the 1 Living Kill Spell that's still on your side, and then all of you come through Small Torii, back to Earth. Time to finish this."

"How bad is the Living Kill?" Tempest asked.

Timeweaver did not answer; he had already moved on to his next task.

Specter said, "He told us enough. I imagine we stay far away from the Living Kill spell, anyway."

Derek said, "That's about right. It's fucking... people are just *dying*, touching it, or having it touch them."

Isoko said, "I can work Union outside of myself, so I should be fine."

"Thousands already died, Isoko," Derek said, warning her.

Mark told Isoko, "Heat sink strat first. Ready?"

Isoko agreed, Union extending past the edges of the adamantium shell, into the flaming sky. It hurt her to do that, to touch that corruptive flame. But Mark was there with her, and he stared Unioning with Agitation and Homeostasis, pulling in all of the heat he could while giving back all of the normalcy that was possible in this nuclear sky.

Mark's skin started turning black as he soaked in the heat, skin bubbling and then softening back to normalcy. Mark said, "Don't anyone try to touch me. This is going to get very hot for me."

Specter stepped a little bit away from Mark.

Tempest asked, "What's the heat sink strat?"

Mark and Isoko concentrated, with Mark partitioning off droplets of his fingers, taking all of the heat with them that he soaked up with Isoko. He rolled those drops of adamantium to the sides, to pile up like superheated marbles. They did not burn the floor where they touched. Instead, they kinda vibrated through the floor. So Mark made a big bowl of adamantium and then dumped the balls into the bowl. They rang with dull movement inside the bowl as Mark filled it up.

10 seconds so far, and now Isoko's Union rushed out into the hot air, no longer singed by its very existence.

Tempest asked, "What's the strat?"

Derek answered, "Adamantium's heat sink index is so high that it starts to vibrate rather than melt things, unless Mark lets the heat out, which is specifically what he is *not* doing. So he and Isoko are clearing the sky of nuclear fire, and also shifting us out of the main heat column—"

"Full range achieved," Isoko said. "I feel the fire column. I feel the Living Kill spell, too. Backing off so it can't hit m—"

Something Deadly invaded Isoko's vector and she became a filter.

It happened too fast.

Purple Death clung to her left arm, up her neck, around her face, and down her left side in a single half-beat of her heart. And then her heartbeat completed, and all of her life had been replaced with Death.

Whatever a Living Kill Spell was, it should not have been able to do that to Isoko. Not with her able to work vectors outside of herself. But. No. Mark knew, after the fact, that he was bargaining with the world, telling himself this wasn't real, that he didn't already know what had happened in the back of his mind, lingering lessons on Necromancy not quite surfacing in the heat of battle.

Mark acted on instinct.

He Unioned with Death, trying to pull out what was inside of her, but Death was the only thing supporting Isoko. Mark realized, after the fact, that he should have tried giving back life. He could have done something besides just pulling out Death, for doing that was like pulling out a knife from a beating heart and now the heart beat and all the blood went outside.

Isoko dropped dead.

One moment, she was alive.

And then she was dead.

Mark stared at her corpse as her platinum skin turned pale, as her hair flexed to black, as she collapsed into his arms, because Mark had moved to touch her, to hold her. Someone was crying. It was Mark. Something was burning. It was Isoko's skin, as Mark's skin vibrated against hers—

No.

No.

No no no.

She was dead. She shouldn't be dead.

No.

Mark focused. Mark had a plan for this. For the deaths of his teammates. He had a cohort of 2 possible people open on his Status. He did not have Capture, which would have made this easy, but he felt Isoko's corpse with Necromancer, like it was dim with possibility. That possibility rapidly grew as her cells fully died, one right after the other, the Living Kill spell having targeted her deeply and—

No.

Mark said to everyone there, "I'll be moving the ship fast for a minute. Please keep up."

And then he whipped the ship through the sky, over to the north, to the ground. It took 20 seconds he didn't have, and then he opened the top of the ship. Fire licked in but Derek was already getting Tempest and Specter out of there—

"I'm sorry, Mark," Specter said.

Mark didn't look away from Isoko as he laid her on the floor, saying, "She's not dead yet."

Mark closed the black dome back up.

Isoko was dead, but she wouldn't be dead for long.

He knew the theories. He knew what needed to happen. Resurrection magic, in the soulhouse's perspective, was done with books of life, which were sympathetic-based magics of like-to-like, allowing the drifting, dead soul, to come back together into the soulhouse, to be refitted together like a tabletop puzzle sifted out of an ocean one piece at a time.

Isoko's body was perhaps the most connected object to Isoko that Mark could possibly possess.

And so...

The first step was to...

"I need some help, Quark."

Quark flickered into the air, to stand like a miniature person on the other side of Isoko's body. "I am here, sir. What should I do?"

"I am going to attempt to bring Isoko's corpse into my soulhouse, as though it was an enchanted object."

"You have never done that before, sir?"

"Correct. But I can move adamantium into my house and out of my house, and she would be reborn from myself if I had her book of life, so, in theory, if she can come out, she can go in, just like my adamantium. And you, too, can come in and out of my soulhome, and that elf, Eria of the Central Spire, said I should be able to put enchanted objects into my soul, and I already know I can bring Bindings in, so it's all possible. I just need to make it happen. What I want from you is to construct a full narrative of Isoko's life, as known to both public and private. I will be recreating that narrative in my soul, and... and maybe she'll take a while to come back, but I'm not losing her. *I am not losing her—*" Mark suddenly laughed through the tears, adding, "And Timeweaver isn't doing anything for us right now, so this is part of the plan, right? Right!"

"... Okay, sir. I am compiling the requested history now."

Mark concentrated on Isoko's body, trying to figure out where to start.

Mark needed to get something physical into something metaphysical. Reality into the dream. The dream and reality were a lot closer than one imagined they were. Dream, reality, mana; it was all connected—

Mana.

Mana was the connection between dream and reality, so Mark needed to draw Isoko's body into his soul, using his mana, and put it underground like he would have done with some statues of his parents, and then Isoko would come back to life eventually. Sure. Okay. So...

Using mana...

Mark couldn't touch her with adamantium... but with Union? Yes.

Mark tried to touch the corpse with Union, but it was just... part of the world, now. And the Mark saw the burns on Isoko's arms, and that was terrible, so he Unioned with Good and Bad, trying to heal the wou—

Isoko's body flexed as Mark erased very small parts of it, because it was all 'Bad' now. It was just a corpse.

Black spots dripped onto Isoko's pale flesh, and that was wrong. She shouldn't have people crying on her. So Mark wiped off the black tears on Isoko's arms, and he thought again.

Okay.

How about...

Dream and Reality.

Mark grabbed the nearest 5 meters, the entire inside of the black bowl but especially Isoko's corpse, and he Unioned with Dream, pushing away all Reality.

The darkness mutated into a flowing rush of color and imagination. Mark saw things out there that defied explanation. Were they trees? Were they rocks? No. It was just a color in the darkness, and then, suddenly, black grasses grew from the deck of the hoverplatform.

The darkness expanded into the distance, revealing purple flowers growing on black grasses. His house was over there. Quark was a silver reflection of another kind of Mark, standing tall and scribing a thousand pages in a book every second, pages appearing and then folding onto each other, layering into a book of life that might work—

No.

It was going to work.

And then there was Isoko, lying on the ground in front of Mark, dead—

No.

This was a dream.

Mark made her breathe, and she breathed. Good. She could Union with herself out there, drawing herself back into herself. This was good. And now what?

Mark knew Isoko.

... What did he know? Oh gods. Mark had forgotten everythi—

Isoko liked fancy things, and stardom, but she was also a warrior and snarky and she told dirty jokes and she knew so much more than what she told others. She was a watcher, and a planner. She was a best friend. She was also a girly girl who liked to wear pretty things, and who looked great when she was Full Platinum and ready for a fight and the fires of battle reflected on her perfect, unmarred surface... Oh. She was wounded. Mark brushed those wounds away.

He thought.

“You need a room in my house that is all your own.”

Mark started building Isoko a private room south of his own house—

You have reached maximum utilized space

Mark tore out a bunch of blueprints for Powers—

Sky Shaper. There was a Sky Shaper in his captured Powers.

Mark took that one, saving it for Isoko. There was no Platinum Body or Union, but Sky Shaper was good, for now, and so Mark ripped out a bunch of Powers that didn't matter at all, and now he had space for Isoko's room.

Black floorboards went down, but Isoko wasn't a 'black' kinda girl except when she was trying to be goth, so Mark turned the black to nice brown wood.

Then Mark crafted a perfect 4-poster bed for Isoko to wake up in. It was pink and firm, with blackout curtains all around, and it had her phone on a wooden stand to the side, under a small reading lamp. With a little 'ting' a few good notifications appeared on the phone about how her newest video had

reached a million views. She loved it when that happened. It had only happened twice, but it was sure to happen again, after today, after she came back to life.

To the side, on the left side that she normally laid on, Mark put a dresser and a stand to hold her armor. The room had no walls, but when Isoko woke up she would step off of the left side of the bed, anyway, so she'd see this stuff when she woke up, when she opened up the curtains over the bed.

Her winged necklace of Freyala went on her bed, on the headboard. She put it up there every night. She didn't always get a chance to put it back on because sometimes she had to wake up fast, but it was there, waiting for her when she came back—

The little wings glowed golden, and Mark did not do that.

Mark put Isoko on the bed and tucked her in, making sure she laid on her left side with her left arm up and just under the pillow, gripping it a little. Her right leg went up a bit, her left leg straight. She bunched the comforter in front of her, and Mark made sure her back and neck and some of her head was covered, along with her arm. Mark tucked the covers up under her feet, and then he slipped Sky Shaper into her existence.

Mark turned, and there was Quark with a book.

Mark took the book, and he said to Isoko, "This is not all you are, Isoko, but please follow it back here, to me." He put the book into Isoko's body, praying, Calling out to the dark, "I need you, Isoko. **I love you.**"

The darkness resonated—

A golden glow appeared at the edge of Mark's soulhouse.

Wings spread wide and a golden hand knocked on the edge of his property.

Who the—

Oh!

Mark suddenly stood by the edge of his property, by the golden wings, looking out at Freyala.

The goddess Freyala stood in the dream, holding two scrolls, but she did not reach out with them. She warned, "Remember the words of Eria of the Central Spire."

“Wha— Oh.” Mark remembered how Eria had said to never think that what he was seeing in the dream was actually out there, and if he wanted a visitor to come inside then he needed to specifically invite those people in. Inviting in something that he saw outside of his house was asking for a horror to invade his soul. It was a sobering moment. So Mark Called out, “Freyala! If you are there! Please come to me and help me bring back Isoko!”

Freyala took an ephemeral golden step into Mark’s house, her golden sandals touching black grasses, saying, “You must put these into her and then Call out to her until she stirs, and then let her rest and wake on her own. Necromancer will protect you from the Living Spell, but no one else. The Living Kill spells are specifically targeted against Union users. Thousands of my paladins have died already.” She handed Mark the scrolls, a small rage in her voice as she said, “You will need to kill those personally.”

Mark took the scrolls, sobbing uncontrollably, knowing they were Union and Platinum Body, and then he was back by Isoko’s sleeping body. He put the scrolls into Isoko, and then Mark roared out a Call to the universe,

“ISOKO KANNO! COME BACK TO ME! ISOKO!”

The darkness vibrated.

Isoko stirred in her bed—

She breathed, and a bit of something prismatic platinum glittered on that intake of breath, filtering into Isoko’s body.

Mark almost lost it again. She wasn’t back yet, but she was here. Her soul had slipped into her body. Mark watched as Isoko took another breath, another flicker of prismatic platinum flowing inside of her chest—

Her heart beat.

Something sparked in her head.

The room Mark had built for Isoko somehow flexed.

The curtains on the bed slipped shut, blocking Mark from seeing her—

A notification appeared.

Rebuilding cohort, Isoko Kanno.

16%

Estimated rebuild 8 minutes.

Mark pulled back from the dream, waking up on his knees on the tilted deck of the hoverplatform, skin pale grey and with tears streaked all down his face and chest and arms, covering the wooden floor with black. It was dark down here at the bottom of this blackness, and Mark was surely irradiated.

But what about Isoko?

Was Isoko in front of him?

Mark opened up the roof, letting in the horrible, red, nuclear light—

Isoko wasn't here.

She was inside of Mark's soulhouse.

... She was coming back, right?

Mark's throat hurt as he choked out, "System Call, time to cohort revival Isoko."

Rebuilding cohort, Isoko Kanno.

17%

Estimated rebuild 8 minutes.

Mark took a deep breath of the burning air, looking up and around at the burning black sky beyond the rim of the black bowl. Lightning flickered up there. Mark asked, "Derek? Your comms working? Tempest? Specter?"

Derek answered, "They're busy. Stragglers from the destruction. You good? Isoko coming back?"

Mark almost sobbed again as he said, “8 minutes, maybe. I’m, uh... I have to kill the Living Kill now. Don’t get involved. It’ll kill you and the guys, too. They’re targeted against Union users.”

“Breathe in the Good, breathe out the Bad,” Derek softly said. “And that would explain why I’m dying so fast to them.”

Mark breathed for a good 10 seconds, black tears flaking away. He was nude again, but Isoko liked it that way, and so Mark just hung out, and said, “Can you make it back to the platform? I don’t feel you out there. I’m glad you’re okay.”

“We’re far away, and we’re okay. Timeweaver told us to wait by the gate. You go get that Living Kill.”

“... Yeah? Yeah, I should get that Kill. You’re safe... Yes.”

Mark lifted off into the sky, reorienting himself fast due to the column of nuclear fire still burning in the south.

The Living Kill spell was like a stick of purple light on the burning mountainside, wavering in the heat mirage, long purple limbs stretched out and down. Wherever it passed its long limbs, purple light flickered across the burning ground. Mark couldn’t see what it was doing from here, from 5 kilometers away, but Quark could. He noted undead monstrosities crawling out of the ash and burning with purple light as they flowed away from the nuclear conflagration—

“Hey Mark,” Timeweaver said, sounding tired, “Pull back when Isoko has 20 seconds left. Pull Death from the Living Kill spell to kill it. Save the yelling-at-me for later, but know that we have *had it out* in alternate timelines, and you have said your pieces many, many times over. This is the best timeline right now. I promise.”

“... Yeah sure, Timeweaver.”

“I know it’s not satisfying. You can be satisfied later! And all my friends call me Zaid, so try it out sometime and see how you like it.”

Mark was furious, but also grateful. It was a weird mix of emotions. Mark knew he was being used right now, and heavily. And yet...

Mark defaulted to politeness, saying, “Thanks, Zaid.”

“Again! Terribly sorry. Also we have about 65,000 dead right now and rising fast. A few superheroes dead, too. So hurry the fuck up.”

“Yeah yeah,” Mark said, focusing. “Yes.”

Mark knew he would be an absolute mess as soon as Isoko came back.

And so, Mark moved fast, because he couldn't let Isoko come back to a war. Those Living Kill spells had targeted Union users, and that meant that this was an entirely new part of the war Dominant had starting, and that Mark was not going to risk Isoko again.

With a terrible, cold rage, Mark launched into the burning sky, burning it more as he sped right at the thing that had killed Isoko.

The Living Kill spell was purple, a hundred meters tall and emaciated, skeletal hands reaching down into the burning land, filling the world with Death, surviving on Death, propagating Death everywhere it touched. With long limbs it turned nuclear-fire skeletons into minions. With tiny, beady purple eyes it noticed Mark.

Mark crashed into its emaciated chest, screaming with rage, reality rippling as he roared, hands becoming claws, legs becoming claws, face distorting into a maw filled with swallowing purple depths. The Living Kill buckled under Mark's violence, under Mark's Union of Energy and Entropy, and Mark gobbled it all up. He drank in the Death, and he drank in the fire, he swallowed the energy of the world itself and frost rimmed the barren land, necromantic constructs flash freezing over like fire had suddenly turned to ice.

Mark's skin burred into scales, into horns and a tail and spread-wide wings, black and purple.

The Kill was dead.

Mark glared at the sky from eyes that lined his body, and he saw something weakening. It was the Veil between worlds. It had been cracked and now it was tattered.

“OPEN.”

The world opened, ash-filled auroric skies replaced with ash-filled blue skies.

It was too small.

Mark roared louder, and the sky opened up wider, cracking, rifting.

Mark crawled through and now he was in a war, in the back lines, hovering over a much smaller nuclear wasteland than the one on Daihoon.

Three dragons, a blue, a green, and a red, advanced across the skies of Chiba, toward Crystal Tower, hanging back while the ground troops, 7 Living Kills, slowly advanced off of the beaches and into Tokyo Bay. One dragon hovered above them all, twice the size of the rest of its monstrous forces. It was black and white and tattered.

The necrodragon.

The Living Kill spells were wading into the water, their smaller ground troops moving the slowest of all, deer and bears and so many people looking like they were drowning as the Living Kills dragged those souls along in their wake. Fish were dying in the waters, and a ghost captain of a fishing ship floated alongside one of the Living Kill spells, shaking its fishing pole in a skeletal hand at New Tokyo up ahead, like a raging mascot for an unfeeling master.

The necrodragon astrally grabbed the dead monsters made by the Living Kill spells, and the dead mutated in its touch. Bears became flying sharks. Deer and humans became centaur-like things that pranced across the water, moving unnaturally across the water's surface. Fish and humans and whatever was left became crawling abominations with bone-sickles for claws and legs and faces, like centipedes that swam just as well as they could kill.

The city had condensed, forming strong lines of defense in the bay.

Explosions rocked the air, but the dragons cast spells and turned nuclear fire into breezes. Castellan fire burned the ocean and the skies, but the dragons turned that fire into little crystals that they flickered into beams that lanced out into the defenders, on the other coast.

Those beams broke on golden flames.

Missiles still filled the sky, but it was New Tokyo versus 3 organized dragons, 1 necrodragon wrangling the Living Kill spells below, and then there were the Living Kills themselves.

One of the giant floating blue cubes shot a concentrated laser off of its nearest edge, directly at one of the Living Kill spells. That beam of perfectly straight, violent light, curved and died under the smallest touch of purple Death, becoming nothing, not even a return blast. The Living Kill spell didn't adjust its slow, wading course to do that. It just *happened*.

All of the dragons were well within the protective shield of the allied Living Kill spells.

The organized forces of Okuana were advancing, inexorably, toward the city center, toward Crystal Tower.

2 seconds had passed.

Mark had seen enough to know his angle.

The necrodragon overhead almost looked backward, noticing the rift Mark had made, and then Mark himself.

Mark moved with Alacrity, moving his body faster than reality kept up, adding ten more hearts to his body and a whole line of brains down his spinal cord. Mark expanded as he slammed into the nearest of the 7 Kill Spells and drank it deep, his body boiling with heat and Death as the Living Kill spell suddenly failed to exist. Mark expanded in turn, wings spreading wide with even more death. Necromantic constructs faltered and broke apart, freezing into saltwater that became a growing iceberg.

Mark kicked off of the iceberg with long legs and crashed into the second Living Kill spell, opening his maw wide to bite off the top 10 meters top of the thing, crunching down on Energy and expanding once again.

Overhead, the necrodragon glared down, opened its claws, casting a giant circle magic—

Gravity crushed Mark into the ocean, plummeting him through the ice, deep into the murky waters of Tokyo Bay.

Mark opened five maws and grabbed the Energy of the gravity spell itself, breaking the power of that spell directly. Mark grew another several meters as his range increased, his rage doubled, and he was

suddenly able to reach two more Living Kill spells. Or rather, they reached for him, now that he touched them with Union. He drank those ones down, too, icing a large portion of Tokyo Bay and locking the remaining 3 Living Kill spells into that ice.

Mark was trapped in the ice, too, but semi-natural ice was nothing to Mark. Ice was vaguely stronger than water, which was vaguely stronger than frozen mud and dirt. He churned through all of it, flash boiling the ocean as he grabbed at the remaining three Living Kill spells in a crashing moment.

Their focus on Union piggybacking was their undoing.

Mark doubled in size, purple shimmers joining his black scales as he broke from the ice and lifted his head to the sky, to the deathly-white necrodragon overhead.

The necrodragon glared down, and then it did another spell. The other three dragons opened maws full of fire and power. Perhaps, some of that might have mattered.

Mark drank in the Energy of everything; of life, of death, of power, and of mana—

The black dragon roared defiance and rage and domination.

The black dragon matched the corpse dragon for size, and the tables turned in a moment.

Claws lashed dead flesh. Dead flesh parted, revealing purple bones and fires. Black maws cracked through brittle bones even while a tail of bone and blades slashed through the middle of the black dragon. One black dragon became two for a brief moment, and then the black dragon became a cacophony of crunching, raging teeth, cracking through the necrodragon's flesh, biting, raging, biting, raging.

The black dragon roared and three living dragons fled, fast as the sky could take them, but the city had been waiting for them to break formation.

Blue diamonds floated over the bays and opened up with lancing beams of light that cut straight through the green and the red dragon. The blue one managed to turn just a bit, the laser going off-center, clipping the back of the wing.

And then a small man of shimmering body, much larger than his own tiny self, was on the blue dragon, buoyed there by the wind. The small man gripped and tore until the blue enemy was dead.

Every enemy was dead.

This was a triumph!

The black dragon raised his head to the sky, tiny missiles from the human lands over yonder doing nothing to his immaculate scales. The dragon was unassailable, in a position of utter domination over all he—

A notification appeared in front of Mark's face.

Rebuilding cohort, Isoko Kanno.

99%

Return to the point of death to finish resurrection, or proceed as-is.

Mark jolted, and then he looked backward at the closing rift.

He abandoned his dragon self, ripping out of the 10-pointed crown at his skull, leaving behind a collapsing pile of adamantium and lingering Death mana as he zipped through the sky and then back through the rift, back to Daihoon.

--

Nuclear fire burned quietly on an ashy mountain, partially covered in frost.

Mark landed in the ash, feeling something tearing out of his soul.

And then Isoko appeared, waking up in Mark's arms, as if she was always there and she just needed a moment. She blinked, and she blinked again, and then she rubbed her eyes and looked up at Mark.

"Why are you crying?"

Tears flowed faster, but Mark smiled. "A lot of reasons. Mostly because of you."

"Whatever it is, I didn't do it."

Laughter. And then... “What do you remember?”

Isoko almost said something, her lips opened slightly, and then she paused, her face getting cute as she was worried, but also thinking deeply. And then her eyes went wide in realization.

“I died.”

“Yeah, you did, but the blockade is broken.”

“I hope I went out suitably heroic.”

“You were absolutely magnificent.”

Isoko’s eyes went a little wide. And then she looked at Mark, and then she held him closer. He held her closer, too. She had a long, joyful, quiet moment, sitting against his legs, his arms around her chest and shoulders, her own arms around his hands and forearms. She pressed her face against his chest and neck, and he put his head onto hers.

“So... We gonna hold each other in what appears to be nuclear ash all day long?”

“Just a little while longer.”

“I gotta admit, I don’t mind any of this.”

Quiet, happy laughter, echoed on the barren, ashy mountain.

“Nicest resurrection I’ve ever had!”

Mark tried not to cry.

Isoko let herself cry.

They held each other closer.