

“It’s about the shape of the propeller, Mark,” Eliot said, as he set down the potsticker of his suya.

Eliot’s plate was a massacre of wooden sticks and he almost went for another one, but he stopped and sat back in his chair, almost content. He was full of food, but also full of worry. Everyone was worried. It was the final day of the Attack the Gate scenario, and all the gods and the world were watching, but only a small portion of the people involved tonight, here at the gate district, and out there on the walls and otherwise, were aware of the real story.

The demons were planning a major attack in the War For Life and Thrashtalon was probably involved, and yet, the show must go on. This whole thing had become a tribulation. Memphi was trying to pry open the Veil, to enable easy transfer between Daihoon and Earth, and the demons who controlled the Veil did not like that.

Mark wasn’t too sure why the demons didn’t want people crossing the Veil in an organized manner, like they did over in Tokyo, but that’s what a lot of people were saying, including Titanfist. Mark had yet to ask the question of ‘why though?’ because he had his own concerns. The Shaper Decouple Ritual had helped him overcome the physical limitations of his Adamantiumkinesis, at least a little. Now, he could finally work on the next part of the ‘flying with adamantium’ problem.

With 9323 grams of adamantium to his name, aside from the maybe-3 kilos in his bones, that meant he only had around 410 cubic centimeters of adamantium to his name. That was less than half a liter of metal.

Sure, that much metal spread out really, really well, when he Decoupled himself and his adamantium melded with the threads of his Union, and he kinda poofed out into a kilometer-wide ball of monowire death. But Mark wasn’t Decoupled right now, and hopefully not ever again, because that would kill everything around him.

So he needed to be able to make smaller shapes. Actual propeller shapes would be really useful, because then he could fly with those shapes, and flying was the goal for tonight, before this Attack the Gate thing turned into the much more important War for Life.

And so, as Mark, Eliot, Sally, and Isoko were eating Nigerian and Mexican food in the conference room that Eliot had been using for his talks with Sentinel, Mark had asked about how Eliot made drones, and what he did for propellers. There were gadgets and drones and various mockups of turrets and other weaponry all around the room, but Mark was mostly interested in the drones, and their flight mechanisms.

Eliot decided to go for another stick of suya as he touched one of the holographic projectors in the middle of the conference table, bringing to light tens of different shapes. Propellers. Most with 2 props, but some with as many as 6.

Eliot said, “You got the basic propeller, which is what you were doing out there. It’s two balance loads on a pivot point. That kind is actually the least you can do, and it’s good if you don’t have enough material, but it’s not the best shape. I use a 3 prop design the most. Sometimes I put a ring around it to cut down on the vortices and thus the noise. The turbulence. Have you considered much of that? Tried it?”

“Not really, but I can,” Mark said, as he raised a drop of adamantium into the air, and he turned it into a 2-part prop. It was about 6 centimeters long. He spun the edges into a circle around the piece, to help cut down on turbulence, theoretically. “Let’s see...”

Everyone kinda watched and ate dinner as Mark spun the small prop over the conference table. It was easy to achieve a rather fast rotation since he Decoupled, and so as he spun it faster and faster, holding the prop mostly at the center, it began to pull on him, ever so slightly. Not much, though. It was like holding a fan in his hands and pointing it down at the table. Napkins floated away and steam billowed outward.

Eliot aimed some sort of tool at it, like a gun but for speed measuring. Mark didn’t know what it was called, but Eliot kinda hummed as he read some readout.

Quark must have guessed what Eliot was looking at, because he put some numbers on Mark’s vision.

**2-prop, 6 centimeter, 1800 RPM.**

Was that good? Bad? Mark had no idea.

It seemed bad, according to the tone of Eliot's hum and the feeling of his vector.

But for Mark, the sound the propeller was making was a lot lower than normal. It seemed pretty good for that reason alone. The ring around the wing helped... but it was inefficient, for sure.

Somehow, Mark was pretty sure this was the wrong direction for him, when it came to prop design. Addashield flew on his adamantium (Mark was pretty sure) and he never made noise. He had that invisibility/silence magic happening too, though, so maybe *that* was the answer to Mark's noise problem. Just make the props invisible/inaudible! Easy! Addashield would certainly never waste adamantium forming a ring around his props, either, if this was, in fact, how he did this at all.

... Mark kinda frowned, ending the spin, saying, "It pulls well enough, but I'd need hundreds of those to get anywhere, and I can't do that. I don't have that much adamantium, and this is still noisy. I still need to have weapons."

Eliot hummed, and this time it was a disbelieving sort of hum. He thought Mark could manage well enough with this design. He was still thinking, though.

Isoko said, "If you have hundreds of them, then you already have hundreds of weapons. Do you need to do more than that?"

Mark went, "Ah. Point."

Sally nodded along, but her focus wasn't here at all. There was a subtle golden glow to her vector. She shared that same golden glow with a bunch of the other paladins in the building; mostly the other paladins of the god of War and Murder, Drakarok. Sally and them were all poised, waiting for the signal. Sally managed to mechanically chew some agege bread that she had dipped into some sauces, though. She enjoyed the food and the company, but she wasn't really here right now.

Mark said to Isoko, "But these are still way too noisy and I would rather be as silent as I can on a battlefield."

Isoko hummed, nodding.

Mark said to Eliot, “But there’re better ways, yeah?”

Eliot shrugged. “Of course.” The air populated with a bunch more designs, from stuff that looked more like spinning blade weapons, to stuff that looked like a bunch of loops, to big tubes with a hundred propellers all stuffed inside, in a line. Mark had no idea what that last one was at all. Eliot said, “Generally, the more props you have in a propeller, the more lift you can achieve, but past a certain point the power needed to spin those blades becomes too great, and you’re better off adding another prop to the mix. So you gotta mix and match a bunch of stuff based on a bunch of physical requirements, though simplicity is always best...” Eliot was rambling, getting stuff out there, but now he found the thread he was searching for. He began, “How about we start at the very beginning. Do you know about Bernoulli’s principle?”

Mark shook his head. “Maybe?”

Eliot perked up. “Ah! Good. So we start there.” Eliot easily pulled up a diagram of a wing shape—

“Oh yeah! ... Uh. Shit.” Now Mark felt kinda stupid. “I should have been making wing shapes? I thought that... uh. Didn’t matter?”

Of course his wings needed to be wing shaped! Mark needed domes over flat land, and angled to cut the air properly!

Eliot smirked, and then he said, “These are small, basic improvements that shouldn’t matter if you have enough material, but if *you* only have so much material, and so you need to do everything you can with everything you have. And so, even with the material concerns, I don’t think you should stick with the 2-prop design. 3-prop might be best. 4 might be good, if you can handle the force needed to actually spin that much, for that long. Or maybe one of these toroidal pros would be best? We won’t know until we do a lot of experiments, and I can’t run these live action experiments in a simulator like I normally do, since it’s you doing stuff that you still need to actually do all the time. But! I want you to try this one: A 3-prop toroidal propeller.”

He conjured a hologram.

It was like 3 rings kinda squished together, with the edges tilted, forming something like... 3 scoops? No, those angles at the edges were kinda funky. Mark didn't really know what he was seeing, only that he hadn't ever seen Eliot use one of these before.

"You don't use these?" Mark asked, even as he tried reforming his ringed propeller into what he was seeing in the air.

"I do not," Eliot said, "They're great for reduced turbulence but I like the turbulence, because I can usually get rid of it just through Manipulation alone, and so, the *usual* reason for me hearing turbulence is that I lost control of something, or something or someone took control of my drones and they didn't think to spend that extra Power to make the drones silent. It's a good warning system. Doesn't always work! But it works often enough."

Mark paused.

Isoko went, "Huh!"

"I didn't know you did that," Mark said. "That's smart!"

Eliot grinned. And then he shrugged, dismissing the comment, though he was still inwardly proud even as he said, "It's nothing, you know. Just basic Techie stuff. Counter-Power use, etcetera."

Mark recalled going into the forests surrounding Memphi with Eliot, and hearing his drones occasionally make noise now and then, and then Eliot would focus heavily on those drones... And now Mark remembered something else. "You remember that LED wasp infection? We took that orange Slayer quest to eliminate them around that tower far to the southeast. Your drone scouts fell out of your control all the time and it always preceded the wasps attacking."

Mark always felt those wasp vectors before they attacked them or Eliot's drones, but Eliot had been scouting out the problem too.

"Oh yeah!" Isoko said.

Eliot looked a little embarrassed now, as he said, “Yeah we haven’t... uh... gone on enough hunts, have we.”

Mark grinned. “Not nearly enough.”

Eliot rolled his eyes, then he floated a drone to Mark that had four, 3-prop toroidal wings. The wings popped off, onto the table, as Eliot said, “Have an example.”

Mark happily took a wing and started touching it, feeling it out. It was smooth, but the upper sides of the wing were slightly domed, while the undersides were perfectly flat, except for where the wings curved onto themselves. It looked like Eliot had adapted some basic wing design into the toroidal design

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“You can also add little loops to the end of a normal 3-prop and reduce the turbulence and increase lift generation that way,” Eliot said, “But that puts weight at the end and that can be a problem. Solving turbulence will be great for your wings, though.”

“So many small mechanical problems to solve for,” Mark said, as he touched the real prop and manufactured a copy in adamantium in the air above his hands. “My main problem seems to be lack of material and the need to physically control where every prop is around me. I don’t have fixed wings like a drone. It’s like holding on to multiple giant dogs that drag me in directions that aren’t always the same.”

“Oh shit, yeah,” Eliot said, getting into it. “You have no frame to hold the props for you. You have to control where every prop is all the time! Huh! ... I’m not even sure how to solve for that one... but...” Eliot hummed, as a tentacle-armed drone came into being in front of him.

Eliot’s half of a suya stick and Mark’s single remaining triangle of a quesadilla remained uneaten in front of them as they played with their toys.

Isoko watched as she ate while Sally barely watched as she ate a lot, gradually working her way to the bottom of every container of food. Soon she was eating the last of the suya, and the food was pretty much gone.

Eliot and Mark had moved through tens of different scenarios.

“Props-for-water design is different from props-for-air design,” Eliot said, “Because of the densities of the material.”

“And then there’s the underground design,” Mark said.

“How was it going through the ground? I only ever saw you do that just the other day.”

“I’ve done it a few times. It’s pretty easy to move through the dirt on Earth, with the lower PL of the ground. It’s just big scoops and using a lot of force, which is easy enough to do. Moving in the deeper ground is a lot harder and pretty much impossible. Water is easier than dirt, but I can’t throw the water away like I can with the dirt so I have to actually go *through* the water and *that* makes it more difficult.”

“Yeah it gets inside everywhere.”

“Exactly! And air is a whole other issue that I couldn’t do a damned thing with until this Decouple thing —”

Isoko got up and grabbed Sally by the arm, and Sally jerked, coming back to herself as Isoko said, “Sally and I are going to do *anything but this right now*. Talk to costumes, I think.”

Sally got up, saying, “Yeah sure.”

The girls walked away and Isoko mumbled about aviation geeks and how hovercars and proper Air Shaping just didn’t care about this shit at all.

Mark and Eliot winced a little...

But the guys went back to playing with their toys for a while.

Eventually, Mark was spinning some 3-prop toroids in the air, constantly pausing them and adjusting them, getting a feel for them, as he asked, “Where is Sentinel, anyway? He said he’d be back, right?”

Eliot’s tentacle-based flying machine was still flopping onto the ground of the conference room as he tried to get the tentacles to be rigid yet firm, like an astral body. He offhandedly answered, “He’s somewhere out there. We talked about holograms and distractions mostly. He doesn’t think I’m doing enough with them, and he’s absolutely right. Invisicloaks, distraction lights, drone holograms. I did a bunch of that stuff back when none of us were good with our Powers to get every edge I could get, but narrowing down to turrets and actual-force-as-crowd-control has given a lot better results.”

“Ah, yeah. Illusions mess up party members,” Mark said.

Not their team, because 3 out of the 4 of them could see through Eliot’s illusions just fine, by pinging off of Eliot’s vectors. But other teams would have problems, for sure.

“You guys could handle it well enough, but I tried going with others a few times, you know? Training missions for settlement readiness.” Eliot let go of the tentacle drone with his direct control and the drone went rigid and flopped over, crashing into the ground and splattering again. Eliot looked at the splash pattern, and then he began gathering the pieces again, saying, “It was disastrous.”

“I remember you talking about that. Union helps a lot with that.”

Eliot smiled. “Yeah.” He lost his smile, and was a little serious as he said, “I like Castellan. I really do. More than I think I would have liked Union. But I’m running into issues that the Cybersongs don’t deal with. Coordination of forces is just something that... was explained to me, that Union did well and that Castellan did not, but I did not *understand* that at the time.”

Eliot’s family was a Union family, Freyalan nobility, with their main house in Citadel Freyala, in the land that had once been known as France. His mother and grandmother both had Man-Made Manipulation, and now Eliot did, too. His father did not. His father was Nigerian, with the last name of... Shit. Mark forgot.

Mark asked, “What about your father’s line... What was his last name again? Do they know about Castellan better?”

“Alexander Uche,” Eliot said, “The Uches are a lot more varied in Power. They don’t have any of the true versatility of Man-Made Manipulator can do, so they do what they can... I’ve talked to a few people in the Uches, but...” He shook his head. “They’re not big into godly help, either Freyala or Hearthswell.” Eliot grinned. “Dad was kind of a rebel when he went after mom.”

Mark snorted. “Cute.”

“Yeah they are sometimes. It’s sickening, really...” Eliot changed the subject, saying, “So are you gonna summon Addavein if it comes down to it?”

Mark kinda froze, shuddering, his 3-toroid props stilling in the air.

Eliot almost broke away from the subject, to talk about something else. Anything else. But he breathed, and maintained.

Mark cracked a little, saying, “I don’t know, Eliot. I really, really... Don’t want to do that. For so many reasons. Even if Freyala already said she would help that she...” He shook his head. “Sometimes I wonder why Freyala helps me so much. Yeah, she helped... initially, and then afterward and then... I’m not even sure what I’m saying. *She’s* more to blame for putting me into a coma than *Lola*, though Lola only blames herself. I don’t know who got the Color Drop for me. No one will tell me and the few times I have asked... I think Freyala is really friendly with Addashield. Or at least she was? I don’t know. This whole thing is a... A lot. And now she’s offering to help summon a dragon? Like holy FUCK, Eliot. What the FUCK does that mean? Politically? Spiritually? All of that is too—” Mark cut himself off.

He had been staring at one of his toroids the entire time he spilled his guts.

But now Mark looked at Eliot, and asked, “Should I do it? Would they kill him if he showed? *Do* I want him dead? All the world says they like him. And yet the empires want him dead. All governments want him dead... And I think *I* still want him dead, too.”

Silence.

Small breathing.

Eliot easily said, “Love ya dude! Can’t help you. I don’t know *what the fuck* do to with *any of that*.”

Mark laughed once, then sighed, saying, “Yeah. Me either.”

“I do know that I trust Freyala with my soul— Well... I *pledged* to Hearthswell, but I trusted Freyala with my soul first. So I would trust her...” Eliot kinda drifted off, and then he rapidly said, “And I think if you need to summon him then we’re probably super fucked anyway so you should just do it and damn the consequences. Being alive to suffer consequences is better than being dead.”

Mark kinda paused. “... Yeah. That’s... a really good point.”

“It’s a terrible fucking point,” Eliot said, “Everything about this is terrible.”

Mark grinned a little.

Eliot rumbled a deep sigh, and then he stood up rapidly, waving a hand to clear up all of the dinner debris to transform it into raw paper, a small jar of oil, and some smoke that turned into a black ball of carbon. He announced, “Let’s get you flying!”

Mark had no problem with that.

Soon, Mark and Eliot were outside in the freezing cold, with Eliot bundled up very well and Mark hanging out in the open wind, black toroids of many sizes spinning all around.

Mark lifted up off of the ground and it was easier this time, but just like Eliot’s floppy tentacle drone, Mark kinda flopped, too. The act of holding himself up above the center points of the toroids to spin them while *also* maintaining distances from each other, was difficult.

Eliot suggested, “Try the props above you, instead.”

“... Well shit. Yeah. I could try that. It’s just... not how I usually walk with the caltrops.”

Eliot grinned, saying, "Get to it, flyboy!"

A half an hour later Mark felt both thrilled and comically embarrassed as he hung below three spinning toroids that barely made noise and which he could spin really, really fucking fast. Those three props only used up maybe 1/8th of his total metal reserves, since adamantium was pretty much indestructible under normal action and he could make them hollow and as thin as aluminum foil.

Eliot had helped Mark to understand 'bubble metal', which drastically increased the size and decreased the weight of his props.

And now Mark was flying.

It felt fucking amazing to fly.

To be untethered to the ground, to be among the swirling snow and 30 meters off of the ground. He *could* go higher. He *could* fly faster. He could do aluminum-foil thing wings to the sides and a propeller in front. Maybe with a thin length of metal between both wings, so he didn't have to physically control the wings to a uniform positioning? And one single big tri-prop? Yeah. That was an idea. A good idea.

It was an idea he didn't have the time to explore. Not tonight.

Eliot had been watching the clock and he finally called it quits, just a few minutes before Mark would have. It was maybe 7:50. Episode 3 would be airing at 9. There was still other shit to do.

Eliot clapped at Mark's middling success, saying, "Yay!" And then he called out, "Now let's get the fuck out of this cold and *you* try not to fly around Isoko too much."

Mark landed on the ground, tempering his joy to a more manageable level. Was he too happy about being able to fly? Maybe. "We're getting her flight magic, soon enough. All of us are getting magics."

Eliot went, "... Ehhh."

Mark was a little surprised at that. As he started walking to the building, with Eliot beside him, he said, “I thought you wanted something from Sentinel?”

“I’m looking at holographic setups more because of him but our styles are too different to be compatible in a large way. He regularly works his stuff against kaiju and other stuff, but my stuff breaks down near kaiju and other huge monsters because I do too much constant Manipulation to maintain the power of my stuff. So my stuff tends to break when I’m using it to fight monsters.”

“You’re selling yourself short there, Eliot. All the stuff you built in the settlement does fine when you’re not there.”

Eliot grinned a little. “Maybe so. You know Sentinel made most of the cannons on the walls? He has a whole company that does that sort of stuff, contracted to the city, and he works with mana crystals and other stuff all the time. I need to go to an arcanaeum and get real mage training to learn how to do stuff like that, but I prefer being agile with my stuff. If I switched to a factor-like setup like Sentinel, with his Weapons Tower in the middle of Memphi, then I’d need to have staff and a whole bunch of other stuff and that is beyond me right now.”

Mark happily suggested, “I bet a flying castle is more impressive than a single tower!”

“Sentinel’s tower can fly if he needs it to.”

Mark scoffed. “I’ve never seen it fly!”

“ ‘It is ruinously expensive to make it fly for even short amounts of time’, to quote the man himself..”

Mark and Eliot spoke of wall weaponry and flying castles and techie powers as they headed back inside, out of the snow and the growing dark, back into the throng of showrunners and editors and designers.

Suddenly the costume designer JJ was there with Isoko and Sally and both of the girls looked happy. But they were not in costume—

“And now it’s your turns!” JJ said, eagerly. “So come on!”

Mark found Eliot hurrying on ahead, already talking about costumes with JJ, and so Mark went, too—

Isoko rapidly asked, “How did your flight go!”

Mark smiled a little. “I think it’s gonna work.”

Isoko was as solid as high-PL steel as she nodded, saying, “Good. You’re the anchor for the team, Mark.”

And that was it.

JJ was already gone, but not too far. Eliot almost got away, too.

So Mark kinda... went that way, after he nodded to Isoko.

Soon the boys were getting new costumes. The real ones. The ones JJ and the other costumers had been working on for the past 3 days, almost nonstop.

They looked amazing.

They had to take them back off because Episode 4, the whole finale, wasn’t for at least another... what? 20 hours? Mark wasn’t sure. The timing was kinda in the air right now, with some estimates being that they’d start at noon tomorrow, which was in 15-ish hours. They could start a lot sooner than that, in a mere 3 or 5 hours after the airing of Episode 3, maybe sometime around midnight.

For now, it was 8:47.

Time for Episode 3.

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Mark sighed as Episode 3 ended.

It had been pretty good. In the show, Mark and Eliot had infiltrated the Hero's Association, which was in actuality a big open place where people trained and guests visited all the time, but which, in the show, was a fortress with patrols and heroes walking around like they lived there. Sally and Isoko had 'fought' Grey Phantom and Credenza who had 'tried to sell them out to the heroes', which had sort of happened in real life, but not as a real fight. It had been a spar in the open fields behind the Hero's Association. In the show the fights had been in some back alley.

They never showed any footage of Mark fighting Kraigen Steele at all.

The B-Plot was all about Tartu's, still in recovery, and how they had 'almost caught' Mark and Eliot's infiltration that culminated in one rather nail-biting scene that was completely fabricated. Mark hadn't sensed Tartu, Lenny, Shawn, or Kardi anywhere near them when they had been doing that 'infiltration'.

The show ended with Mark and Eliot 'escaping', and they were 'now set for assaulting the gate'.

Mark, Eliot, Isoko, and Sally had watched the show in one of the rooms at the top of the gate district buildings that Eliot had converted into a full theater kinda room. Eliot had done a bunch of conversions like that here and there all over the place, for other people watching in other rooms.

Isoko sighed lovingly as the credits rolled, saying, "My gods. I'm going to be so fucking famous."

Sally burst out laughing.

Mark grinned.

Eliot got up, saying, "I want to see Noel—"

Isoko leapt from her chair, saying, "Yes! Let's go to the party!"

Sally said, "I can't believe there's an after party at all."

"It's a small one!" Isoko said.

Mark led the way out of the room, down the hall, knowing most of what he was going to find. A lot of the people here had been watching the broadcast, but a lot of them were specifically not. As soon as the show ended, there was the after party, and the guys who were not watching the show threw open the doors of the dining hall far down below, and all of the show staff were invited to partake of the catering and the corporate-like atmosphere. It was people talking about what went right, what went wrong, and throwing around ideas for the Attack the Gate scenario which was happening tomorrow. It was not a real party.

The real party would happen after Episode 4 aired, assuming, you know, Memphi was doing okay.

Mark and them had been invited to the afterparty, but it was a party for the writers and directors, like Noel.

Noel was down there, about 4 floors below the hallway Mark and them were in, radiating joy as he walked out of some sort of techie suite that was doing stuff with the broadcast. Mark wasn't sure what he had been doing. Tweaking the show or monitoring it, or something like that? Maybe actually broadcasting it?

... Where did they store the actual information for the episodes they uploaded to the internet? Mark had no idea.

... Whatever!

The hallways were crowding with people who were cheering about the show and someone was cracking open beers down in the party hall, and they were getting a lot of flak for that. Some guys Mark didn't know, but which he had seen around, were in the hallway with Mark and them, talking about how it was a great episode.

Someone casually and excitedly asked about Mark's actual plan for assaulting the gate.

He had no idea about the kaiju to come.

Like 80% of the people here, from the guards of Memphi in their black and yellow garb, to the HVP writers and staff, knew that what was coming was a big deal. The War for Life. But this guy asking Mark about the 'plan to assault the gate' was one of the 20% that didn't know the full story.

Mark simply said, "Play it by ear. Frontal assault. It's up to you guys to make it look good, and you certainly did make it look good!"

A lot of people were happy to hear that.

One guy, in a bright floral shirt, said, "Only because we have good talent to work with!"

"Powerful talent!" said a woman in sweatpants and a sweatshirt, who looked like she was about ready for bed, but she was headed to the after party anyway. "That's what everyone wants to see, yeah! Blowing shit up!"

"Carving walls apart!"

Soon they were down the stairs and at the party room, among the writers and staff, and Isoko was right there with Noel, practically gushing about how good they had made her look in her fight. Mark grinned as he listened to that, as he got a frozen virgin strawberry daiquiri from a drink vendor that Eliot had supercharged with some Manipulation. It was strange to have a frozen drink in the winter, but a lot of people were doing it. It was a good drink.

And then Mark got roped into conversations about his plans for tomorrow.

Sally was there next to him, getting grilled for her plans, too.

Floral print shirt guy was there again, saying, "Tomorrow's party is going to be much better."

Sweatpant woman muttered over her cola, "Assuming we all live."

The atmosphere almost turned icy. Concerning.

Some other guy —but only because he was the fastest— instantly said, “We’re going to be fine, Yolinda.”

But Floral Print guy tugged at his shirt, saying, “I got my lucky shirt on! We’re gonna be fine.”

He got a lot of eye rolls and a groan or two for that.

Yolinda decided, “You’re absolutely right. We’re gonna be fine!”

Some guy who had no idea what they were talking about, asked, “Why wouldn’t we be fine?” And then he jolted, looking at Mark in their midst, and saying, “Oh shit... You gonna, uh? Monowire ball?”

Mark let the misunderstanding stay, saying, “If it happens it’ll be far outside of the walls.”

The guy calmed down, while others tensed, worried about that. The guy smiled, saying, “You’re not a proper villain until you openly flaunt at least a few major laws! Ha ha!”

Some polite laughter.

Mark ended up smiling, despite the growing dread in his stomach.

Talking continued.

Gradually, the questions Mark got were less about ‘how’ the assault would happen, and more ‘do you have anything you want to showcase’ and ‘So here’s how I envision it happening, and do you like this idea?’.

It was almost like the prep for the first episode, but a whole lot more intense. Easier. Better.

Mark had worked with these people a few times now, but it was only now, after Episode 3, that the hurdle of ‘is this guy a crazy fucker who has the world after him’ had been vaulted. People had warmed

up and they wanted him to succeed. Mark hadn't really noticed how bad it had been that first time, but if this was normal, then what he had experienced before was abnormal, by a lot. The fact that Mark was accepted had finally nailed home after Noel got disentangled from others and ended up near Mark.

With a calm vector that was only barely pointed at Mark, with most of his focus elsewhere, Noel asked, "How you doing tonight, Mark? Ready to see this thing through to the end and to a full blown international villain career afterward?"

Mark was a little stunned at that bold declaration of the future, but he found himself saying, "I'm doing great, and yes I am ready for the future."

"Good man," Noel said, patting Mark on the shoulder.

Noel moved on.

Mark realized that Noel had gone from worrying about him, about what he would do and how he would act, to knowing that Mark would do and act in a way befitting a hero. Mark had gone from a liability to a security. Mark found himself standing a bit taller as he realized that, as he felt that same sort of feeling mirrored in the people around him, as their vectors pointed at Mark, at Isoko and Eliot, and even a little bit at Sally.

They expected him to help save them all.

Pretty much every person in this room, aside from Mark's team and a few others, had small Powers. Noel could do some techie stuff, and that was the second most prevalent Power set in the room. But Floral shirt guy —whom Mark picked up was named Charles— had some sort of nuanced Brawny Power, or he might have just had Healthy Body, like Mark, and that sort of situation was much closer to what Mark was seeing in everyone else. A lot of people were minimal brawnies, their tiny Strength modifiers showing when they gripped a spoon and TT'd it so it didn't break, or in their style of clothing, to where the cold didn't bother them at all.

A lot of people had Powers or Knacks like JJ, with his color changing Power.

Mark and his team were the real powers in the room, and everyone was more secure with them here.

He had never felt this feeling before. Not like this. Not like right now. Sure, he had saved people and they liked him for that. They respected him. Or else they were mad that they needed to be saved at all (which didn't happen as often as Mark expected it to). And these people, right here and now, believed that Mark would stop whatever was coming. Or at least he would help kill it all dead.

When had that happened?

Mark sipped his drink, had another one, and talked to people.

Noel called the party after an hour, climbing up onto a chair to stand above everyone and say, "Episode 3 was a complete success! 74 million viewers! That's all we need to know! Don't read the reviews or watch comments yet!" People clapped and hollered even though Noel had kept going, "Yes yes! Great job everyone! Tomorrow will be the big show, the finale, so get some sleep and get ready to go at 5 AM again! Mark's team! We want some early morning shots when the time is right! Party is over! We've got cots set up in the hotel building right across the third level bridge, in the next building over. Take the south exit outside of the hall..."

Noel made sure to break the party up fast, getting people moving on.

Mark ended up putting a lot of people to sleep because they asked him for that, since it was hard to sleep at the drop of a hat and they knew that he could do that.

Eventually, Mark ended up in the suite at the top of the hotel with his team, with Mark and Eliot signing off to sleep for a few hours while Isoko and Sally stayed awake. Mark didn't need to do much to make himself sleep. Just the lightest touch of sleepiness and wakefulness, and he was out.

It had been a damned big day.

--

"Wake up."

Mark jerked awake because something had slapped his foot—

And then he relaxed.

Sally was standing at the foot of his bed and there were no worried vectors anywhere. Eliot was awake and drinking coffee and Isoko yawned just a little, while the sky outside was a cold, dark blue.

“Shift change?” Mark mumbled, getting up—

“Nah. We let you sleep as much as we could,” Sally said, “We’re 20 minutes till first light of the morning and Noel wants some establishing shots. Time to get into our costumes.”

Mark blinked a bit, then nodded. “Okay.”

-----

“Tartu,” Mark said, standing in the early morning light, in fresh snow.

“Mark,” Tartu said, being all sorts of punchable, without really trying.

“You’re looking quite punchable this morning.”

“Funny. I was thinking the same thing.”

“... We got real issues happening now; not your stupid fucking vendettas that make no logical sense at all, so you’re not thinking of breaking out shavallian and potentially fucking us all, are you?”

“You’re not going to cripple us right before the kaijus come, *are you?*”

“... No, I am not,” Mark said, pulling back his anger. It was difficult to pull back, especially when it was him and Tartu, within punching distance of each other, and their teams were right behind their leaders, at about 10 meters away. But he pulled back anyway. Anger clouded the early morning and Mark let it go as best he could, saying, “This time it will be a normal fight. No tricks against each other.”

“We both know it’s more complicated than that. We’re not letting you take this space at all, Mark. If we do, then the kaijus will overwhelm us all.” Tartu said, “So fail in your assault and allow the Collective to take you in.”

Mark’s anger blossomed again, barely restrained.

There had been sort of a plan.

The outline had gone thusly: Mark+Co assault the gate, ousting Tartu and defenders because they were caught unaware. And then Eliot’s turrets would be put up all around the place and they’d hold off probing attacks until Tartu+Co came back with actual people to take the gate. Then the real battle would happen however it happened. If Tartu+Co won, then Mark would end up in chains and hauled off to the empires. If Mark+Co won, then they would sell the gate back to the city for X amount of stuff/agreements/whatever.

It was a loose plan with real consequences.

Tartu didn’t want to follow the plan at all.

All of his ‘and kaijus kill us all if you win at all’ nebulous shit was really, really angering.

But, just to be sure, to make absolutely *damned* fucking sure that Tartu was being Tartu, being a zealot with only one way of seeing the world, and not telling real-truths...

Mark asked, “To be clear, you *don’t* want to go with the ‘we win, then you come back with real forces and try to win’ plan? There is some sort of true worry about the ritual of it all and the kaijus coming?”

Tartu spoke through gritted teeth, “It’s really simple, Mark. If you win the first part of the event, then you would be in this place and time and at the center of it all when the kaiju start coming out, which means it would be *you* and *only you* as a defense to be taken down by the kaiju, for them to take the gate. Since you cannot do this alone, you will fall and the demons will win. Since I still believe you are a *hidden dragon*— stupid fucking costume by the way with all those dragon scales— I believe you would *open the gates for them*—”

Mark closed his eyes and let Tartu’s words batter him.

He did not want to see the guy’s face.

“—but if we take you in, take you out, then when the kaiju come it will be *humanity* and the *heroes* in the center place, and we will win against the kaiju, as we always have. The only danger present today is if you were to take the gate *at all*, so we cannot allow that to happen.” Tartu finished with, “Please open your eyes and see reason.”

Mark’s breath was black in the morning cold, as he said, “Death to all monsters.”

And then he walked away, dark lightning flickering from the surface of his new costume. You couldn’t really tell because it was all black, but it was there.

“What the fuck does that mean!” Tartu yelled at Mark’s back.

Mark raised a hand, giving Tartu the bird as he rejoined his team.

“... Very well then,” Tartu said, his voice lost in the morning wind.

Tartu and his team went toward the low, monitoring building that was built into the ground, in front of the gate, while Mark and his people went across the frozen surface of the gate district, toward an open space far afield. Drones from the HVP flew around them, catching every angle and word, just as they had when Mark met with Tartu out there in the middle of nowhere.

Mark was wearing his real costume now. It looked much like his original one, but instead of the whole thing being a print atop webweave that had been cut and burned into the proper shape, it was now woven and solid, with raised high-PL plastic adornment, like shiny black diamonds all over his chest, his back, and where the sleeves of his webweave ended at his elbows and below his knees. His skin was painted super-black where his forearms and lower legs were exposed, where he kept his adamantium stores against his skin. The adamantium was still darker than the super-black body paint, and if looked closely, then you'd see all of his adamantium was scales atop his skin.

He didn't cover much of his body with adamantium. Less than half a liter of adamantium was only enough to give him a few inches of coverage over his ankles and wrists, when he still had his whole helmet made of adamantium, too.

Mark was wearing his adamantium as scales now, and it felt strangely good to do that. It felt *good* to piss off Tartu even more by wearing scales openly, which was a new emotion for him. Mark was still figuring that one out.

Isoko was wearing a black lipstick, eyeliner, nail polish, and her black miniskirt costume.

Sally was in her skintight black suit that was fully solid, with her boob window and with exposed thighs. It did not look like her original costume, the one that made her look like she was covered in thorns. This one looked almost gator-skin-like, with the edges of her 'rough skin' being windows down to her actual skin. She was still fully covered.

Eliot wore his Techie Operative outfit, with his trench coat that was full of lights on the inside. He looked happy, even comfortable, as he said, "I'm *so* looking forward to making turrets that can't be destroyed by simple touches, when they counter assault us. You guys have *no* idea how annoying it is to fight monsters and have your Powers simply fail the second they encounter the enemy. This is gonna be great."

Sally was concerned, saying, "That whole... scenario he described doesn't bother you? With us as the ritual center of humanity?"

"He's a zealot, and though he has support he is still wrong," Mark said, still furious about it all. "The truth is that we're all on the same side and he's causing division, and no matter who is at the center of

this shit we're all going to work together when it comes down to it. *He* just wants to win. Him and Kardi and... And the other two are along for the ride. They're not really making their own decisions right now."

Mark didn't glance backward, but he almost did. Quark somehow knew what Mark wanted, and he turned on a camera on the back of Mark's helmet.

All four of Tartu's team were matching in their white and blue costumes, with their individual colors to each of them. Kardi was pink, Shawn and Lenny were yellow and green, while Tartu was white.

Tartu and Kardi were walking away strongly, short capes flowing in the wind, while Lenny and Shawn were a lot less strong, both of them trying to appear whole and healthy, but pain lanced through their lower bodies and up their spines with every step they took. Mark was already healing the two guys, but not Kardi or Tartu. Those two guys should be fully healed by the time they got out of range.

Really good healing was difficult to come by on Earth, even for heroes, so it was the least he could do for them since he caused the problem in the first place. Did they even know it was him? Probably.

While Kardi spoke to Tartu and Tartu said something in response, their vectors tying together even stronger, Lenny and Shawn walked a pace apart, feeling scared about everything. Neither of them were cut out for a real war with kaiju. Not many people were. Tartu and Kardi certainly weren't; they just weren't there yet. But they wanted to be, and so they acted like they could handle it. Shawn and Lenny wanted to believe their old friend, and so they did.

Isoko strongly said, "They'll all do the right thing when the shit hits the fan. They'll rush to basic positions. They'll fight properly."

"I want to believe that, too," Mark said.

They walked in silence to their staging zone, which was up ahead.

All of the land around the gate, for 15 kilometers, was paved and piped with the expectation that this entire place would eventually be used for shipping stuff. The largest portions of it all were simple staging

zones for final checks on ships headed through, or coming this way. One zone on the east side for exits, and one side on the west for arrivals

Mark and them headed to a drainage ditch on the east side that had been enlarged into a full on tunnel with the expectation that it would become an underground railway opening eventually. All of that stuff was still at least a year away, but some workers for the HVP and then Eliot had turned the drainage tunnel into an actual construction zone, with bare concrete pillars that might eventually hold up some upper floors for something, and a big hole and tunnel in the ground that might eventually lead somewhere. The only actual in-use part of the place were a few 'shipping containers' off to the side that hid a workstation for Noel and other writers and drone operators.

Drones floated all around.

Titanfist, as Punchman, leaned beside one of the pillars, wearing his usual loose gangster outfit and an unusually tense expression. He was playing a lot of roles right now, but he was just himself, as Ben, as he said, "First rivals are always terrible."

Isoko snorted. "They're not usually *that* bad."

Mark chuckled. "That would have been nice."

"True enough. Usually they're a lot better than him." Ben asked, "Do you trust him to stab you in the back, or to kill you?"

Isoko, Sally, and Eliot all tensed.

Mark was thrown for a loop, too, but he rapidly said, "Stab in the back, for sure. No murder."

Ben smirked, saying, "So pretty normal, then. Not catastrophic." And then he said to everyone, "You kids ready to get this show on the road?"

They were.

All of them walked into the tunnel into the ground, into a smaller staging area that wasn't anything more than one warm-ish stone room. The scenario that Noel had outlined for Mark and them was on the wall over there, and it was pretty much what Mark already expected. Tartu would have had the same sort of outline on the wall of his prep space, too.

Tartu didn't want to do any of that, though.

Fuck him, and Kardi.

Mark breathed out once more, and then he breathed in, and Blackvein intoned, "Time to secure passage back to my future kingdom."

With a hint of demand in his voice, Punchman said, "We're not actually triggering the gate. I didn't sign up for that sort of shit."

Blackvein walked forward, out of the warm tunnel and into the drifting snow, saying, "Of course not. I'm not insane. We'll simply capture it and control it for a while."

The gate loomed ahead in the brightening blue of the morning light, like black skyscrapers joined by an arching bridge at the top.

Platinum Princess walked beside Blackvein, her skin a mirror of the land all around them, saying, "And sell it back for a lot of money."

"As much money as possible, before we secure the agreement to *go back*," Miss Masher said.

"And if they don't like it, I'll tear it down," VeryHuman said.

... What?

Everyone looked at VeryHuman, who was very much Eliot in that moment.

Eliot simply said, "They built it without me. That's offensive."

Blackvein smirked, his mouth exposed under his helmet. "Fair enough." And then Blackvein strode out into the open land, the sky just beginning to turn from blue to yellow. Dragonscales slipped off of his legs like petals to turn into caltrops and press down on the ground. Blackvein rose into the air, floating forward, saying, "Time to go."

-----

Blackvein gazed at the field through the visor gifted to him by VeryHuman, though he was really looking through Quark. Positions, numbers, and threat descriptions populated in his vision.

The gate was 500 meters tall on the sides, 500 meters wide, and with an arch that joined the two frames of gate that rose another 100 meters into the air. Down below, in the exact center of the space, was a mirrored gate that was about 5 meters by 5 meters square. The *real* gate house, the one that controlled how the gate worked or not, was below that central gate. All of the tech and magic that controlled the gate was down there, in a room that was maybe 10 cubed.

The whole gate was on a northern/southern entrance/exit sort of axis.

A few hundred meters north of that gate was a low gate barracks and scanning structure, which was the operative center of the space. It was there that the soldiers and the scanners and the various other tech existed. That was where they investigated what left or entered the gate. Gate control hadn't been built yet, but eventually there would be towers on the western and eastern sides of the gate that directed air traffic flows.

The scanning building was maybe 50% done. Most of the scanning supplies weren't there yet.

That building held the only real defense of the place, though.

Taking that operations center was the goal.

The team was 'hidden' from that operative center by a snow drift that had been turned to ice 'days ago', but which had really been placed here for just this positioning.

Mark had expected this specific area to be trapped with something, thanks to Tartu, or whoever, but it was not trapped at all. Quark tentatively confirmed that, and Eliot confirmed it for real.

VeryHuman tapped away at an invisible keyboard as he looked up and around, his eyes far, far away from here, as he said, "Expected forces at the gate. I'm counting pop-up turrets all around the zone at the locations I am marking on your visors now, in a concentric ring pattern up to 200 meters away from the gate itself. Three rings between here and the barracks station. A minimum of 20 turrets firing at us. I'm expecting barrel turrets and rates of fire in the hundreds of rounds per second range. The gate is not fully operational, so of course it isn't fully defended. We should only need to destroy these 8 I'm marking out. Try not to destroy most of them. I will take over the ones we don't destroy."

Everyone was wearing VeryHuman's visors, and so they all saw what he showed them.

Blackvein watched as red circles appeared in the distance, on the ground; an overlay of his vision thanks to Quark and Eliot.

Other dots appeared further afield, at the low building that served as the main defense they had to assault, and on the gate itself. Those other dots rapidly shifted colors and soon the field was populated.

Platinum Princess asked, "Red is emplacement, yellow is an unknown issue, green is personnel?"

"Correct," VeryHuman said.

Punchman slammed his fists together, saying, "Time to get punching!"

Blackvein said, "Here we go."

And then Blackvein took off, flying across the land, caltrops propelling him forward. For a moment, nothing happened except for all of his team rushing at the gate.

Platinum Princess moved like she was on a stroll, moving like she was fast forwarding on a screen. Miss Masher launched forward, one step on the ground propelling her forward like a minor rocket. Punchman was keeping up with Masher, but making sure Masher took the lead. VeryHuman was on automated ice skates that might have also been chainsaws, ripping the ground and moving him forward just as fast as everyone else.

The turrets opened, popping out of the ground like silver trash cans that extended, extended, extended upward, and then they curved, and Blackthorn almost freaked out. Those were not normal turrets at all. They were barrels, each a meter wide, each on a tentacle-like protrusion that held those 10-meter long barrels into the air and pointed them at the team.

They were kaiju laser guns.

They were something special.

They had no vectors in them, either, so Mark couldn't—

And then Quark flexed himself in Mark's helmet, calculating angles of attack, forming lines in his vision that pointed at the ground all around them. The team faltered. It was still 200 meters to the operations building. There were 27 of these guns in the way, over a few hundred meters-wide angle of the gate.

VeryHuman called out, "They're not going to hit us right away! It'll be warning sho—"

"HALT, INTRUDERS! CEASE YOUR ADVANCE!"

The voice was booming, mechanical.

And then one of the kaiju tentacle guns fired a pulse of energy, like a massive flashlight turning on, only briefly.

A line of fire coruscated across the path of the team and the world turned to heat and light, flames flashing outward, obliterating the snow.

No one expected that. They were supposed to be bullets that would miss and that Miss Masher could tank, in a fashion.

Mark was in a Union with all of his team, but the land ahead was blocked from him by Tartu's anti-Union Domains. There was no one to actually target yet, otherwise Mark would have taken them down from here.

Mark made a decision, pulling on Sally with his Union, and Sally responded by running closer. Mark stood on her shoulders and grabbed Eliot with a flick of adamantium turning into a handle, pulling Eliot in. And then Eliot was holding on to Sally's back, and Mark huddled down with Sally grabbing his left leg to hold him there, while she Tactile Telekinesis'd with his black webweave socks to hold him better.

His adamantium was already out and forming large disks, thin yet still made of adamantium.

"Rush it," Blackvein said.

They had only slowed a little but now Masher put on speed, running fast, directly into the line of fire.

The turrets did not fire. Not right away. Mark caught a wisp of the intent controlling the tentacle lasers. They were surprised that Mark kept going. In the distance, far behind where Mark and them had come from, flashing blue and red lights spun on top of hovercars. Police cruisers, and also the Memphi Guard.

It was to be a pincer attack, then.

But Sally could run damned fucking fast when she really needed to.

All of the laser cannons were focused on them, now, and Mark had to turn his helmet into another shield, because the angles of attack from the turrets meant that—

It was light and fire, but that light and fire fell upon black disks each two meters across. Eight disks, eight turrets aiming directly at Sally, Mark, and Eliot. They had to be at low power. Just enough to give a guy third degree burns over their entire body and to put them down onto the ground until medics could arrive. Sally didn't care about the fire. She was tougher than that. Eliot and Mark were the only truly vulnerable people here, in the entire time, and Sally was holding on to their clothes, onto Mark's shoes and Eliot's trench coat with her TT, giving them solid surfaces to 'hold' onto.

Mark tanked the blasts 8 at a time. There were some overlaps of trajectory.

Isoko went wide while cannons fired at her, but the cannon fire was useless against her. It splashed away, reflected almost. Those two cannons rapidly focused on Mark.

Nothing attacked Punchman at all.

And then Sally was near one of the tendrils and Eliot was on the case.

Suddenly the tendril went rigid and then it focused and spun around, fast as a dervish, and focused on one of the other turrets in the area. A much, much more powerful blast of light flowed out of that turret and blasted the base of the other one, severing it to a stump.

The turrets changed angles and went for the one Mark was now guarding, that Eliot was now hacking. It was hot down here, at the base. Sally kinda chuckled as she looked up at the fire blasting all of them.

Isoko crashed into the base of another turret tendril, ripping it apart with her sword. It was not a clean cut at all—

"It's gonna blow!" Eliot announced.

Mark fell into a flow.

Sally sparkled gold as she ran fast away from the illuminating tendril turret.

Four other turrets in the area rapidly began to glow, their blasts cutting off. And then Sally, Mark, and Eliot were closer to the main barracks up ahead while a chain reaction of explosions took out turret after turret behind them.

Eliot yelled, “Yes! The chain reaction took!”

Mark tanked four more fire blasts while healing his people while Punchman and Isoko crunched their way through two other turrets—

All around the entire gate district the turrets suddenly flexed, like a ripple had taken hold, and then they shuddered to rigidity and slipped back into their holes in the ground.

Eliot had done that; had wrested control of the system from whoever was controlling it inside of the operations center.

Eliot dropped off of Sally’s back and skated on silver boots that looked remarkably similar to whatever the material was that made up the turret back there, saying, “I have control of the turret system. I’ll take an hour to repair and these ones won’t come back as strong at all.”

Blackvein reformed his helmet as he floated off of Masher’s shoulders, saying, “Advance.”

Masher and Punchman formed the tip of the spear, supported by Blackvein and Princess’s Unions, while VeryHuman tapped away at control systems in the air. Red emplacements in Blackvein’s vision began to flicker and turn blue.

Some of the blue flickers turned back to red, some turrets trying to shove back out of their holes in the ground, to turn and attack, some vectors inside of those turrets trying to reestablish control. But VeryHuman was on the job. His control didn’t work at that great of a distance, at the hundreds of meters between here and the turrets on the other side of the control building up ahead, and on the other side of the gate itself. He wasn’t a Techie, he wasn’t a Seer, and he certainly didn’t have a long range Power.

But with enough Manipulation and force, Eliot could break through most Techie control. All he had to do was replace the systems that were in the systems, make them loyal to him, and overwhelm any other system out there.

Masher reached the low building and with a seismic punch she cracked the concrete structure, the force of her blow like a splash of lightning into the concrete, spreading out her overwhelming attack, creating fault lines. The building cracked open, breaking down and in—

Some of Tartu's Domains cracked, inside, allowing Mark a glimpse of the forces arrayed against them.

It was honestly a lot less than Mark expected.

There were the actors, of course. Those people were spread everywhere inside, some of them in formation. Mark assumed that the people standing in formations were dressed in black and yellow like the guards of Memphi. Some of the vectors were separate from the rest, seated here and there around the place. Those vectors were stretched far and wide. Techies in the turrets? Maybe. Or were they acting for the cameras in there?

At least one of them seemed to be fighting Eliot directly.

Mark braindanced that specific person's wakefulness and gave it to his entire team, while giving that guy sleepiness in turn. That vector slumped on his chair, sleeping.

Eliot instantly gained the full upper hand on all of the turret internal-warfare.

Mark flashed sleepiness into everyone he could inside of the building, except for Tartu, Kardi, Shawn and Lenny, who Mark only glimpsed before Tartu put the anti-Union Domain back up. Tartu rapidly expanded that Domain, but not before Mark managed to drop half of the forces inside that building.

Punchman, Masher, and Princess had not been idle, and neither had anyone else inside.

While Mark floated guard over Eliot, the others broke the building, smashing and crashing. Punchman grabbed at least a hundred tons of concrete and otherwise and in a supreme act of power (which was

probably 1/100th of his actual power as Titanfist) Punchman flashed his Tactile Telekinesis through some support structures in the building, cracking them with subtle pressure, and then he lifted off a full 3/4ths of the building's roof into the air. He roared, he lifted, and he threw the weight into the distance, about a hundred meters further north.

It was not as much as he could have done.

Masher still giggled and exclaimed, "Holy shit, Punchy!"

Punchman's action had exposed a hive of bees that rushed out onto the battlefield. All of them were actors.

It was a melee where no one got hurt, but everyone got to show their shit. It was chaotic. It was a mess. 20 'soldiers', most of them with Healthy Body or Strength —just 'Strength'! That meant a modifier of 1.5x to 2x. Barely enough to qualify as 'brawny'— all went down to the backside of Princess's blade or Masher's punches, or Punchman's inability to be taken down. Punchman didn't fight guards, but he let them try to fight him. Eventually the girls came and got the bees off of him.

The melee lasted 45 seconds.

Tartu and his team waited, furious, just outside of sight. Punchman had broken the Domain with his touch, but then Tartu put his anti-Union Domain back up and they vanished to Mark's senses—

Quark flickered a warning in Mark's vision, behind them.

A hero was here? Ah, well. Shit? That shouldn't have happened until the second half of this scenario.

Lawful Goose was on the field, heading in on the police cruisers... but now that they were getting closer Mark realized most of the cruisers were actually empty. Lawful Goose's voice echoed across the land, "We're a bit tied up with issues right now, so could you cease your attack please, Mister Blackvein! Leave now, thank you!"

Was this part of the show?

Mark looked to Eliot, and also to Quark in his vision.

Eliot was deep in the manipulatable guts of the gate district, rerouting things far below, changing up systems with all of the care of a gardener with a Stoneshaper Power and a whole bunch of weeds to remove. He still managed to come out of it a little, to say, “No kaiju yet. Kaiju signs are growing. They’re being masked. The scenario is still a go.”

Quark confirmed as much with some text in Mark’s vision, reading, ‘Mayor Ramirez wishes you luck in the coming firestorm. She expects an eruption of kaiju in 3 hours. There will be at least 12 of them.’

Mark’s heart beat hard and his world focused.

They were telling him not to worry about the kaiju fight yet, to keep going.

Mark wasn’t going to do that.

Mark called out, “Scenario is over!” Quark whispered at Mark to repeat that, and then Mark spoke, his voice booming out of some speakers Quark had created on his back, “Scenario is over! We have MAYBE a few hours to prepare the place! Everyone stop fighting.”

Lawful Goose announced, “Yes! Stop fighting and leave the gate to us heroes!”

“Change of plans!” Mark announced, “Keep fighting!”

Isoko laughed loud and free as she leapt right at Tartu and company, crossing the distance fast—

Tartu shot her with the same slowing Domain as before—

But Sally was right there with her, and the slowing Domain broke when it tried to influence two people. Shawn and Lenny didn’t move, they didn’t fight when the two girls struck the anti-Union Domain, which popped that Domain and allowed Mark to pierce their defenses and send them all crashing to their sleep. Shawn and Lenny had heard Mark and now Tartu was mad that they didn’t try to fight Mark, but Tartu just sighed before he collapsed, too, anger filling his everything.

Kardi fought Mark's command to sleep remarkably well. Long enough to call out, "Beware the light..." And then collapsed to the ground, asleep.

Isoko scoffed at her, saying, "Scene stealer."

"She's fucking creepy, is what she is," Punchman said, walking closer to them, to look down at Kardi.

Mark wholly agreed.

Isoko looked down at the sleeping actors, then asked, "So we're, uh... helping them up and evacuating them, yeah?"

Mark began waking people up, saying, "Yes." And then he turned and looked up at Lawful Goose, who was standing on the roof of one of the empty police cruisers far away, remaining at the expected edge of Mark's range. "Quark, help me out here." Quark flickered a message that speakers were online and that he was connected into the main channel for the directors and such. Briefly, Mark heard people talking about camera angles on the downed guys, but Mark cut in, asking, "Is Lawful Goose coming to pick the guys up? We need to get them all out of here."

Noel's voice cut through the chatter, "It's a bit early but yeah. Full evacuation. Lawful Goose is coming in with some cruisers to pick them up. Can Eliot— Is Eliot here?"

"I'm here," Eliot said.

"Let Lawful Goose come in and take an exchange of prisoners. Make it a scene, please, and then put a bow shot from one of the laser turrets across the fleeing vessels. I'm getting a new warning from Mayor Ramirez that this thing needs to wrap up right now. We can resume it when the attack is over. Expected beginning of the attack is in 2 hours, at 9:50ish AM. And then when that's over we can finish the show!"

There was a lot of hope in Noel's voice, that this was going to be an easy day. That the city would not fall.

It was a pretty normal hope.

Mark said, "Copy that. Orders received."

And then Lawful Goose came in and Mark and the crew did a little forced marching of the 'Memphi Guards' into the getaway vehicles, along with Tartu, Lenny, Shawn, and Kardi.

Eliot had smartly formed some silencers that they wrapped around the hero's faces, preventing them from speaking.

But Isoko was closest to Kardi as Kardi stepped into the vehicle alongside Lawful Goose, alongside the rest of that team, and she wanted to make a scene. She asked, "What did you mean by that, Kardi? 'Beware the light'?" And then she unsnapped Kardi's gag.

Kardi grinned, her gag hanging from her cheek. "You think I *know* why I say what I say all the time? I do not. I am simply a conduit for the best possible results for everyone."

Punchman, as Titanfist, told her, "That's a fucking dangerous way to live your life, girl." He ignored whatever Kardi tried to say in response, shoving her into the cruiser, to fall into a bunch of the gagged guards. Titanfist asked Lawful Goose, "You're coming back?"

"Probably not," Lawful Goose said. "I am being deployed to the northern river gate. Wolf Bayou might come this way. Red Wolf might try to link up. She knows that Mark is here, and if the enemies have brains she can explode them quite well. Do not expect to face enemies with brains, though. The attack is highly planned." He looked to Mark and Titanfist. "You might need to go rescue Wolf Bayou, but maybe not. Keep that in mind." And then he slapped the roof of his transport.

The door closed.

They flew away.

Eliot had the turrets follow them like sunflowers following the sun, but he did not have them fire.

Isoko asked, "Why no fire?"

“I was getting power fluctuating error reports so I didn’t do it.” Eliot turned to the low building with the mostly-destroyed first floor. “I have to fix their entire power structure so that they do not overload at all, when I actually have to use them properly. It was too easy to make those ones out there explode. I think they installed these ones at the last minute.”

Sally grumbled, “Laser cannons weren’t on the list of things I was expecting at all.”

Mark asked, “What can I do, Eliot?”

Isoko, Sally, and Mark were prepared to help. Titanfist was prepared to help, too, which was a nice surprise, but not a real surprise, like the tentacle cannons had been.

And soon, all of them were doing something.

- - - -

Mark sat on a hovercart that didn’t have a roof, that floated only a meter off of the grounds of the gate district. Black lightning flickered from his body, out into the air, into Titanfist, standing just 400 meters that way.

The ‘Great Big Bee’, which was a nickname given to Titanfist due to his black and yellow costume, stomped the ground again. He was 500 meters tall right now. A match for the gate itself. His stomp sent a shockwave across the gate district, snow drifts cracking and turning to broken ice, snow billowing away. The snow did not come back, because Eliot was on the job.

Eliot, sitting at the other end of the hovercart with Mark, flexed his Man-Made Manipulation and the cracks began to seal, to turn from concrete to something stronger. Mark wasn’t sure *exactly* what Eliot

was doing, but it was some Castellan thing, making the land stronger and more responsive to him. It was not just Man-made Manipulation at all.

HVP drones captured lots of B-roll, as Isoko called it, though they were scrubbing Titanfist's involvement.

Isoko and Sally sat in the middle of the hovercart with Sally driving with all her focus, making sure she drove well, and Isoko was a node of Union, right beside Mark, helping to support his efforts to further heal the titan. Isoko was straining to keep up with Mark, but everything she did still helped a great deal.

Mark was currently healing the titan's feet, because he was stomping everywhere, renewing the 'man made' designation upon the district, empowering Eliot to make this place truly dangerous to kaiju.

Mark asked a question that just now bugged him, "Hey, Eliot? How long will the stuff you do here and now last when you're not here to maintain it?"

"A long time, probably, because I'm tying into the power already laid down by other Castellan people," Eliot said, most of his vector elsewhere. "And Mayor Ramirez is a very, very strong Technomancer. She's picking up almost everything I'm putting down, but her Power is mostly elsewhere right now. There are at least 6 kaiju signs coming from all around the city, with two major signs in the south and the east."

"The south and east ones are *not* a feint?" Isoko asked, trying to be less concerned, more cool. She was trying not to freak. But she had asked a variation of that question twice now, so she was freaking at least a little.

Sally's grip tensed on the steering wheel, muttering, "Hurry up and wait."

"Everyone assumes it's a feint because those signs are obscuring at least a few others," Eliot said, ignoring Sally. "But it could all be real."

Titanfist took another step and crashed another foot 20 meters into the ground. Shock waves blasted outward. He lifted his foot to take another step, ignoring the pain that was plaguing his entire foot, his leg, and all the way up to his lower back.

Mark focused on healing his feet and was amazed this guy could even walk, and that he kept going despite the pain, and even, weirdly enough, that he was happy. Very happy. Titanfist was having fun, and Mark was barely able to keep up with the healing, but he was having fun. Mark had realized some time in the last half hour that he had never seen Titanfist smile unless he was done with the day's fight, but—

“We can stop there,” Eliot said, tapping the side of his face.

“Is it time?” Isoko asked, tensing.

“No,” Eliot said.

Titanfist heard Eliot because he was wearing coms. Titanfist finished bringing down his foot, and this time he just stood there, not crashing into the ground. He tried to be quiet, but his voice poured out from him like thunder, “I’LL WAIT FOR AS MUCH HEALING AS POSSIBLE.”

... Ah? Well, then in that case:

“Heard and understood,” Mark said, thinking through several healing schemes... He kinda wanted to call up Lola right now. Or maybe even Grand Healer Badaira, at Citadel Freyala. They would know how to heal Titanfist faster. Would Titanfist want that?

Eliot said, “We’re done for now. We just wait. It could happen any minute.”

Mark asked, “Want to do a consult with other healers, Titanfist? I can call up COFR and a grand healer? See if there’s a better way to heal you.”

Titanfist’s vector focused hard. Excited. He said, “YES. DO THAT.”

Eliot said something about fixing up the hovercart some more and he got to work on that with Sally pressing a button labeled, ‘I’M HELPING!’, which did exactly what it said it did, and also not much at all. Isoko continued to help Mark.

Mark said, “Lola first. Quark, call Lola. Patch her into the group chat.”

Lola picked up fast.

“Mark?” Lola’s voice had a deep edge to it. A worried edge. “What occurs?”

“You’re on speaker with me, the team, and Titanfist. This is not about the upcoming problems at all. I’m trying to heal Titanfist right now. It’s me, Isoko and the guys, and the World and Titanfist. It’s slow going. Got any tips?”

Lola sighed a little, and then she spoke easier, “I’m not aware of Titanfist’s specific situation, and I do not wish to be made aware of it for various operative security reasons. I suggest you do a general Good/Bad healing. That catches the biggest problems first. I imagine whatever is wrong would take a long time to heal without a true, living countersink, but just keep plugging away at it and it should go away eventually. I wasn’t even aware he had an issue. Sorry I cannot be of more help. Try Grand Healer Badaria in Citadel. Please take me off speaker now, Mark. I wish to speak to you about you.”

Mark nodded, worry leaking into his mind. “Okay.” Quark switched channels in Mark’s vision. “It’s just us now?”

“You are a shining star, Mark Careed. Do well. Do good. Be your best self, just like I know you can. You have a good team with you. I’ll talk later, okay?”

Mark’s heart beat hard and sudden with something warm and fuzzy, and so very fragile. Mark breathed deep, then said, “Thank... Thank you. Talk to you later, Lola.”

“Later, Mark.”

*Click.*

Mark breathed out a little, and then he sniffled and said, “Quark. Call COFR and Grand Healer Badaira, if possible. Connect to the chat.”

The line rang.

Isoko glanced at Mark, having felt his own emotions in her own Unionsense, but she said nothing. Eliot and Sally knew something was up, but they said nothing.

In the distance, Titanfist quirked an eyebrow. But he said nothing.

“Hell... Hello?” asked an older woman’s voice. “This had better be damned important.”

Mark professionally said, “Greetings, Grand Healer Badaira. This is Mark Careed, and I have a superhero, Titanfist, who needs some healing. He is on the line with me, as well as my team. He transforms into a kaiju-sized hero to fight kaijus. I was hoping to get a consult, with Titanfist’s permissions.”

“YOU HAVE MY PERMISSION,” Titanfist boomed, though he was trying to whisper. “HELLO AGAIN, BADAIRA.”

Badaira’s voice completely changed, becoming something solid and sure, as she said, “I am aware of Titanfist’s issues as I have treated him before, with little success. Explain to me the issues as you understand them, Mister Careed.”

“He’s too big and he’s not healing properly. Groups of Freyalan paladins heal him all the time, but he’s only had real success healing through my Union, and only when I was draining another kaiju to heal Titanfist in his kaiju form. That healing caused me to become a conduit and break a lot of things around me, but Titanfist got healed rather well. During that time I did my standard adamant/weakness Union but I focused on healing the things that were most injured during the fight, going through the usual lists of things that needed to be healed in order to support all other healing efforts, from bone marrow to cardiovascular to muscles and the rest. It worked well enough.”

“BEST HEALING IN DECADES.”

Mark added, “Isoko is here with me, helping expand my connection to the world, doing a general good/bad Union.”

Badaira began, "I want you to follow along for a full healing lesson and we can see if you have better luck than all the rest of us. I suspect you will! It consists of 13 main systems and 98 subsystems. No one ever does the whole thing, but we will be doing the whole thing. We'll jump around a bit to hit the major things first, and then we will go back and go through the whole list. We start with the blood. I want you to do a Union of Healthy Marrow and Decay. 'Decay' is going to be the usual dumping Union for this entire operation..."

Mark ran through a full 75-minute long healing suite, targeting every aspect of Titanfist and shoring him up in every possible way. A lot of what Mark did had no results at all, but some had great results. It was a tossup between Healthy Cartilage/Decay and Healthy Body/Inflammation had the largest results of all, with Titanfist actually relaxing a great deal for both.

Mark's own Healthy Body allowed for most of these 'healthy' forms of full healing Unions, with few exceptions, like Mark's own common use of Adamant/Weakness—

"It's starting," Eliot said, from the command center of the hovercart.

"Cutting it here, Badaira! We have kaiju to kill now! Thank you so much!"

Grand Healer Badaira rapidly said, "You would be one of the best healers of our time, Mark! Please think about attending medical school! Good luck, and good skill!"

She hung up.

Mark felt some happy, worried, excited kinda way.

In the distance, Titanfist looked 20 years younger, his lined face not so lined anymore, his blue-grey eyes a whole lot bluer. He smiled, which was still an oddity, and then he slammed a fist into the ground, sending out a narrow shockwave across the land, as he shouted, "**SWORD TO ME!**"

Mark watched in small awe as he saw a familiar scene, but from a lot closer.

Titanfist's incredibly narrow shockwave raced off toward the center of the city. Or rather, it only looked like that. The HVP would likely splice in some B-roll of a shockwave hitting a prepared rocket, and then that supersonic rocket launching from the center of the city, carrying its payload to its owner, but there wasn't time for that shit today.

Mayor Ramirez had already positioned Titanfist's kaiju blade near the gate, for this very action here.

Titanfist's shockwave vector slammed into the compartment holding his sword, in the bowels of the gatehouse that he had torn the roof off of a few hours ago.

A gleaming silver shimmer spun out of the ground, twisted through the air, and slammed into Titanfist's open palm. And then the shimmer grew, expanding and expanding, filled with Titanfist's vector, becoming a dagger, then a short sword, then a long blade, thick as the superhero's fist, long as his arm. It grew even bigger, and then it was a true kaiju blade, tall as Titanfist himself, silver throughout but with a line of black at the front edge.

When Titanfist had that blade in his hand he was the second most dangerous melee hero in the lineup of superheroes of Memphi. Kraigen Steele was still #1, but the leader of the Hero's Association wasn't kaiju-sized himself, and he wasn't *here*. Kraigen was on the southern border.

Titanfist was here, like a warrior with a vendetta, staring out across the northern wall of Memphi as he challenged the world, "**COME AND GET IT!**"

The sky responded with a roar and wings and tentacles descending like so many cloud-sized kaiju.

Holy fucking shit they were already here. When the fuck did that happen?!

Mark instantly started a Union of Alacrity and Slowness, with just himself, his team, and leaving Titanfist out of it. Mark needed the time to think, to plan. Many things happened all at once, in a moment stretched to the breaking point.

Mark made sure none of his team broke with this speed, but they'd all be feeling headaches when it was over.

Eliot freaked the fuck out and he was about ready to slam down on the emergency descend button, to get the fuck out of the district, to burrow deep as he could go. That had been the plan if something like this should happen.

Sally wanted Eliot to descend right now.

Isoko, the only one with Speed modifier, managed to actually speak, to act in this long moment, though even her voice was drawn out because of the speed Mark was moving them all at. “Eeevaaaac squiiiiishhhies. Maaaark tooo Tiiitaaan wiiiith beeeelllt. Deeeelaay taaactiics.”

A fine idea!

Quark, who thought a lot faster than everyone else, and who was in communication with outside forces, rapidly realized, based on what he was seeing, that Mark had sped up time. Quark began to speak at a normal speed for this faster frame of reference, disseminating information for them all, “Mayor Ramirez is calling for a mayor reordering of the defense of Memphi. Teleports to change targets are happening right now. Teleports will take 5 minutes to occur. Titanfist and Mark will remain here, to be supported by Lawful Goose who is coming in shortly. Everyone else is to evacuate to the bowels of the gate district.

“There are 5 category 3 kaiju near Mark and Titanfist. All of them appear to be flying, camouflaging cuttlefish/octopuses. 3 of those octopuses are currently above the gate district, and 2 are in the west. The western ones are being ignored. Those cuttlefish will advance through the walls until they can be controlled. They are the lowest priority.

“When the kaiju at the gate are dispatched, Mark and Titanfist will head west. You will receive no support aside from Lawful Goose.

“Further orders to follow.

“Do not fall. You must succeed. There will be no support for a while.

“There are 2 cat-2 kaiju, 7 cat-3 kaiju, 11 category-4 kaiju, and 1 cat-5 jeweled beetle in the east that prognostication is expecting to be an immovable apocalypse type. Archmage Blackthorn to the east, to the beetle.

“Individual orders to follow.”

Quark had spoken half with Mayor Ramirez’s voice, half with his own.

It was a horrific arrangement.

Mark focused on his individual orders.

Time to fight.

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Mark switched his union of Alacrity and Slowness to Adamant and Weakness, running on all Unions, breath, blood, and brain. Black lightning flashed outward, threading through the world, into Titanfist in the distance, into his team.

Time resumed, fast as fuck.

Eliot, Isoko, and Sally all maintained composure, even through the time-stretched backlash of Alacrity, thanks to Mark already healing them.

Eliot slammed a fist onto a big red evacuation button.

Isoko broke from Mark's Union, connecting to Sally and Eliot and focusing on them.

Sally glanced upward, past the clear plastic roof, at the sky of kaiju octopuses.

Among Eliot's many preparations for the actual battle, he had made a lot of tools.

Mark had one of those tools around his waist, right now. It was a hoverbelt, scavenged from some gate-repair supplies kept in the security bunker. It wasn't perfect, and it certainly wasn't strong enough to survive a real fight, but it was good enough to get Mark into the air and he could use a propeller to do actual aerial maneuvers.

The hatch overhead blew open, exposing the hoverbattlestation to the sky, and Mark launched up and out, into the roaring morning light.

Below him, Eliot descended the battleship into the ground and the ground smoothed over as they all vanished, rushing down, down, into the depths of the world, into the bowels of Memphi.

Tentacle laser cannons began to curl up from the ground in every direction, all of them aimed at the monsters in the sky.

Mark focused on the battle in front of him.

The enormous kaiju cuttlefish reached for the biggest thing around, which was Titanfist, who was already swinging his sword and leaping backward from ten different grabbing tentacles. He severed and sliced and escaped the sudden confinement, his primary emotion an overwhelming worry because Mark wasn't connecting to him like he had before. Mark was about to, though. But the last time he had done that he had kinda lost himself while he also broke the world around him. Being a conduit of power between kaiju seemed to do that. It was dangerous.

But Mark would do it anyway.

Mark connected.

Mark became the flow.

Lightning connects to the kaiju in the sky, to the octopuses in the clouds, and to Titanfist, becoming a conduit of Union, taking adamant and giving weakness in turn. All the world becomes a collision of lightning and desire and Mark's hoverbelt breaks instantly, though adamantium propellers keep Mark aloft well enough, and the power! The power.

Enough to drown a god.

Slash! A million tons of sushi hits the tarmac.

Slam! A cloud hits a cloud and reveals itself as a many-eyed, many-tentacled abominations. A cuttlefish of the clouds. A clouddlefish.

Laughter! A man the size of a clouddlefish laughs in the face of death, even as tentacles grab his weapon and attempt to rip it from his hands. He carves away the tentacles instead. He spins! He leaps. He moves like he hasn't been able to move in decades, flesh breaking with every movement, and mostly healing back properly. It is the strength of a kaiju but granted to a human who is not a kaiju at all. He breaks himself to break the world, and he has been doing so for a long time.

Lightning! Black and giving and receiving, it strikes the clouddlefish and the man in turn, and heals the man in a way that actually works properly.

Screams! A clouddlefish becomes two, sliced in half, both halves trying to turn to clouds and succeeding. It escapes and comes around for another angle.

Sizzle! A hundred tentacles of chrome and light reach up from the gate district like this is the seafloor and they are bobbit fish. They focus on the clouddlefish coming up behind the man. Light bursts forth and scours the sky, diffracting, reflecting, refracting off of the hidden horror inside the fluffy white.

Light flashes against Mark's lightning, and Mark falls out of the flow, just a little.

His clothes were shredded. Adamantium danced across his skin, erupting from every vein that was close to the surface, and from the tips of every finger and toe. The absolute black metal flickered as it moved, becoming scales and then lightning and then scales again.

There were more scales than before. A lot more. The scales covered up to his elbows, up to his knees. The scales exploded into lightning again, and they came back as scales, as more of them.

Mark's propeller was gone. How was he flying? How was he hovering here, in the sky, connected to the battle—

“MARK!” Titanfist said.

Mark beheld the battle in front of him again, the vectors of kaiju like oceans warring with each other, three against one, but no. Not against one.

Mark was here, too.

Mark fell into the flow again, and everything seemed smaller.

He is a drone, flying in a scene in a movie, directing the battle with nudges of Union.

It is a small battle.

A simple man in a tight suit is fighting some flying fish with a big sword. If one was not aware that the 'doorway' over there was a half-kilometer high, and the 'trash' on the ground were all buildings and trees and places for normal sized people, then the scene between 3 cloudfish and one warrior would look like any basic brawny fighting any monster ever.

Slash! Flash!

Tiny tentacles stick out of the solid sand and shoot at the monsters, like tiny laser pointers that cause even smaller fires where they touch. They are distractions. The flying cuttlefish are distracted.

The man slices, dodges, seizes all attention, and he is untouchable, dancing through the air, leaping both a kilometer in the sky and just a few meters, spinning his sword and slashing outward. Some of the cloudfish vanish into mist, and then they come back. They regroup, three monsters acting in concert

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And then, an event occurs.

Everyone senses it before it happens.

The world tilts and something screams out far, far away, and yet the scream reaches here, even here. A trace of fire lifts up from way over there, in the east, the southeast, like a faint line of white light pointed at the heavens at a steep angle. Mark wonders what it is, and a vision overlays his sight.

In the east, a jeweled beetle the size of a skyscraper glitters against a man in black and gold, who is like a fly fighting against a house. The fly raises a shield a thousand times his own size, right before the beetle explodes with a line of light directed straight at the city. The beam strikes the shield and the shield holes, deflecting upward. The black and gold dot holds, though he does flake here and there, skin and clothes turning to ash and dust.

The vision ends, and Mark is back where he is, looking at a titan fighting 3 fish, still 3 fish, while a line of light finishes being reflected into the sky way over there, to the east.

Why hasn't the titan killed the flying fish yet? Mark has no idea.

And then something shifts in the battle before Mark. A new player.

A goose on a hovercar flies where it ought not to fly, but this particular goose does what it wants, and what it wants to do is curse one of the fish. Their vector is a tiny thing. A weak thing.

Black lightning connects to the goose, and the goose is suddenly a whole lot more.

A curse goes out, like the great honking of a harbinger of death, and color drains from the fish that the titan, the simple man, is about to strike, and this time the strike hits true, the fish breaks in half, real flesh falling down, breaking the world, instead of false flesh turning to clouds and then vanishing again.

One down, two to go.

The second cuttlefish falls much faster.

How long has it been?

Mark has no idea. He is a conduit for power, for taking and giving.

The goose honks.

The cloudfish loses all color.

The man kills the second cloudfish with revelry in his heart and a smile on his face.

The third flying octopus dies, severed in half, directly down the middle.

Lasers lift up from the ground like eels from the ocean floor. They fire light into the corpses of the octopus and millions of smaller monsters burn like tissue paper in an inferno. The lightning helps to kill the masses—

But now the man is running, faster and faster, and the lightning brings adamantium to bear, to make a propeller. The flying knot of lightning spins a blade faster and faster, scales becoming wings so he could move properly, without twisting himself into knots.

Mark flies fast, doing what he can.

The titan runs, the lightning follows, the goose trails behind.

There is a river below but the titan crosses the river with a single bound. Somehow that seems crazy to the lightning, but the lightning is following the titan and he isn't sure how he's moving so well, either. His hoverbelt is completely gone. He is moving anyway.

The titan flows into a rich neighborhood overrun with clouddlefish. Two main ones. Millions of smaller ones. The smaller fish are getting into bunkers and eating people.

Lightning overwhelms, spreading, striking tiny monsters.

Lightning kills.

And now the titan is alone against 2 clouddlefish.

One goose's honk later and now the titan is facing one clouddlefish.

The last kaiju suffers a debilitating honk, and then it, too, is gone from this world.

The flesh remains. It will be a long time cleaning.

The flow kinda stops. Not much. But...

Mark hovers—

Mark hovered a kilometer in the sky, high above it all, but still well within range of Titanfist and Lawful Goose—

Lawful Goose was in Mark's ears, talking about something, and then another person said something below Lawful Goose, and it was kind of a jumble. Titanfist was standing there, surveying the scene. It was a nightmare.

This was a rich neighborhood, with houses like mansions on every hill. A few major apartment buildings stood over there, though, while a whole minor city center was over there. A few dozen buildings in total.

Nothing taller than 5 stories. Big open spaces for parks and recreation. A kid's playground. The Mississippi River far over there, like a strip of winding, dark brown flat land. It was way too big to be a river, but that's what it was.

And in the distance, in the northwest, the Wall of Memphi, rising several hundred meters into the sky. Grey. Imposing. Broken.

The apartment building down below was on fire, half of it crushed under the weight of a kaiju cuttlefish. People were not dying anymore. Mark already healed every person and killed every individual monster he could. Mark had no idea how he had done that, but he had.

And the Wall was broken.

That fact was the most horrific, at that moment. The words in his ears barely feel real.

Mark's lightning began to falter and the adamantium the air all around him crashed into his body, forming scales that formed gauntlets and boots and a helmet, and nothing else. He started to fall, to tumble.

"Mark," Quark said, his voice cutting through the chatter in his ears. "Propellers. Stabilizers."

Mark twisted adamantium into a propeller and a stabilizer. It was not the best he had ever done, but he spun a 4-meter wide prop overhead as fast as he could, which was pretty fucking fast. Soon, he was hovering and spinning a little himself, but a second prop, much simpler and smaller than the first, let Mark maintain position.

"Mark?" asked someone. "Yeah he's there. He's back."

It was Credenza on the line. That was her voice. Oh. Okay.

Mark said, "I never left."

“Un-fucking-true,” Lawful Goose said, “But we don’t have time to get into that. We’re getting orders now—”

Mayor Ramierz spoke, “Mark. Pull your aura in completely and prepare for teleportation to the east to assist with Blackthorn and the jeweled beetle. Lawful Goose, prepare for teleportation to the south to assist with Sentinel and the grasshopper. Titanfist, prepare for teleport to the gate again.”

Mark was already aiming toward the ground the second he was told to do so, to set down onto an open space. He landed on broken concrete. Something sparked and exploded behind that house over there. Vectors abounded, and Mark could feel those vectors now that he was closer.

Flying cuttlefish monsters, each of them a meter long, had been hiding in the bushes. They were not hiding now. They rushed a man who was running down the street, trying to get away.

Mark instantly struck at the cuttlefish with a Union of vein decay and strength and the cuttlefish faltered —

Light flashed all around him, failing because Mark’s aura was out, because he was trying to save a guy’s life, but Ramirez yelled at him to pull his aura in, and Mark rapidly launched four scales of adamantium at the pursuing cuttlefish, striking them—

Light condensed.

--

Mark appeared in the sky over a blasted land where Blackthorn flew fast around a giant beetle that was all gold and jewels and shining, flashing light. Blackthorn waved a hand and vectors formed massive roots that shot out of the kilometer-wide kaiju, to wrap up and around its legs, to pull it to the ground.

The kaiju roared and its jewels flashed and the building-thick roots that trapped it all incinerated, turning to dust that flew outward on shockwave after shockwave of pulsing, hateful power. That wave blasted the world away, turning boulders and trees and everything within a hundred meters of the kaiju

into broken dust. The roar attenuated quickly, but when it was over the kaiju was completely untouched, unharmed, unworried.

It was still moving toward the city. It had never stopped.

This was an apocalypse kaiju, then.

When the roar reached Mark it shredded what remained of his clothes, but his adamantium protected him better than webweave. Mark was suddenly, distressingly mad. He had tried to save a guy's life back there, and he couldn't. He had seen a thousand bodies today already, but he didn't want to think about that.

How dare these things? These monsters? How dare they come into his life, into his world, and try to do anything at all! Fuck this monster, and fuck the demons behind it all!

Mark's adamantium vibrated with a roar of his own, and then so did the world.

Mark fell into the lightning flow again, striking Blackthorn and the kaiju.

The kaiju vibrated without vibrating, trying to shake off the lightning, but the lightning remained, dancing inward, taking everything that the kaiju didn't want taken. The kaiju didn't like it. It focused on the knot of black lightning in the sky, it dug its legs into the ground, and it began to glow—

But Blackthorn was there.

There was a very human, very male laugh that was full of power. That laugh overlapped with a feminine laugh of pure, unadulterated pleasure. And then came whispered words underneath it all. Power threaded into power. Intent ritualized.

A different sort of vine began to grow. Black as the lightning, and just as fast, those thorns grew out of everything, out of the ground, the air, the sky. They wrapped the beetle before the beetle could do anything at all, and then they *popped* open, like the sound of a thousand machine guns, each pop the sound of a spike growing on the vine, of a thorn piercing into the kaiju.

The kaiju's glow faltered, faded, and the vines kept growing, the whispered words kept threading together with more and more power.

Soon, the kaiju was entombed in black thorns, its light gone completely.

It was still alive.

Mark fell out of the flow and he had to make another propeller and a counter-prop to stay in the air, to keep supporting Blackthorn, who flickered with black lightning of his own. Mark was nude again, because of course he was. And yet his excess adamantium became scales that were good enough to cover his body. How much adamantium was this, now? Mark wasn't sure.

The scales covered his arms to his elbows and his feet to his knees. Some covered his crotch and all of his head, but it left all of his torso and most of his thighs exposed. It was layered adamantium scales upon pale skin that flickered with lightning, and he had no propellers holding him up at all, so how was he flying—

“Looking good there, Mark!” Blackthorn called out, from a few hundred meters away, in the sky. “And flying, too!”

“How am I flying!”

“Don't worry about it right now! How you feeling?”

“Exposed!”

Blackthorn and some woman laughed.

Mark ignored all of that and focused on the beetle, “When is this fucker going to die?!”

The jeweled beetle kaiju was still very much alive, even though its body was more black needles than flesh. The thing was basically entombed, but it was still alive.

Mark asked, “*How* is it still alive?”

Blackthorn said, “It’s a cat 5, Mark, and it has this vibrational destruction thing going on. The only reason my magic is actually reaching it is because I’m taking your adamantium strength for my own and casting it into this spellwork here, but if we stop then it will be out of there in a minute. Holding it down is literally all we can do right now, but if we let it go then it will start flying and enter the city and start blasting apart... a lot!”

That felt really bad. Ominous.

Mark commanded, “Battle status report, Quark.”

“Four kaiju are left. All of them are impossible-to-kill cat 4s, like the ice elemental that Aurora had to turn into steam to make it go away, but it was still alive when it departed. Three of the impossibles are locked down through various forces. The heroes and villains are focusing on a river elemental impossible to the south.”

Mark thought fast, and he had an idea. “Is Titanfist available? I need a countersink to use against this jeweled thing.”

Quark began, “One moment—”

The Mayor’s voice came through, “Mark. Titanfist will be available for transport in 4 minutes, but if you cannot kill the jeweled beetle in a minute, then I will be returning him to the gate. Something tried to attack the gate while you were all gone, but your team was able to fight it off with the turrets I put there and when Titanfist came back then the attacking force went away. We believe it was the Lightbody goblin you reported last week— Teleporters ready. Titanfist appearing in 30 seconds.”

Mark’s heart beat hard with worry—

“Focus, Mark,” Blackthorn said. “The apocalypse beetle is getting free.”

Mark felt the vector of the jeweled beetle —the *apocalypse* beetle— begin to struggle more and more. A few thorn vines, like bandages surrounding the thing, snapped and broke. Gold and glimmering jewels appeared, only briefly. And then Mark focused and more vines appeared, and more needles stabbed into the beast—

A minuscule vector appeared in the air far behind Mark, and then that vector expanded and expanded.

Titanfist crashed into the ground a good 800 meters from the apocalypse beetle, happily saying, “REPORTING FOR DUTY!”

Mark focused.

He dipped his toes into the flow once again.

Some minor scrapes disappeared on Titanfist and the beetle began to die, but way too slowly.

This was going to take more than a minute, for sure. In Mark’s ears, Blackthorn talked about how this was working, and the Mayor wanted a timetable, and someone else spoke up with 12 to 15 minutes—

“The gate is under attack again,” said an operator.

Mark wasn’t sure why he was hearing this. He had a job, and this was a distraction. He was terrified of his team being there without him. They would be okay, right?

Ramirez commanded, “Who can we send?”

“Against an elder goblin?” asked someone.

“Team Tartu and the second string for the second half of the Gate scenario,” said another guy.

“Do it,” Ramirez commanded.

“Focus, Mark,” Blackthorn said, blackthorn vines snapping on the apocalypse beetle like so many high-tension cables.

Mark refocused, draining, empowering, killing.

His team and Tartu’s people would be fine. They had paladins there to help, and whoever had been slotted for the second half of the gate attack scenario was there, too. Surely they had some other heroes with them. Mark and his team had recruited Titanfist and Grey Phantom, but Team Tartu had a few extra people too, right?

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Tartu tapped the side of his helmet, and then he breathed deep.

He was deep underground, in a bunker far below the surface of the gate district. People were everywhere all around him, from Noel and the writers, to the other people of the HVP. The bunkers were extensive and made to last a long time, with cleaner plants in every corner of the place and growing in a tall column in the middle of the main room, providing light and air to all 162 occupants of the bunker. The bunker was made for 250 people, like all the common bunkers in this area. There was a lot of space.

Most people were crowded around him and some screens on the walls, waiting for him to speak, to make a plan, or watching in horror as superheroes fought some of the worst kaiju any of them had ever seen. The wall was broken in 5 locations. Thousands were dead already.

And that beetle was an apocalypse kaiju, and Tartu still didn't comprehend that. He probably never would. It did not feel real. That Mark, Blackthorn, and Titanfist could take it down themselves didn't feel real, either.

But a Lightbody elder goblin attacking the gate? Trying to force it open and maybe cause even more kaiju problems? That was a smaller problem. A workable problem.

A Tartu-sized problem.

Light-based magics were easy to counter, and Tartu had studied the Lightbody goblin that got away after Mark let it get away.

Kardi, Shawn, and Lenny were ready to go, as well as a few other paladins that Tartu barely knew. Shawn was a paladin of Drakarok, but they needed more healing tonight, and they'd get that healing. They'd also have more power in the form of a few people that Kardi had recruited when Tartu had been sitting with Lenny and Shawn in the hospital.

Some gunner guy, some Dark Shaper, and an anti-Illusionist who was more of a paladin of Freyala than his anti-Illusion power. They were strong.

With the confirmation that they were facing that Lightbody elder goblin that got away from Mark and them, the array of people that Kardi had signed on to help with this scenario made a whole lot more sense. More sense than before, anyway.

Tartu said, "We're headed back up there, Mayor's orders."

Kardi was the only one not worried.

