

Mark hadn't been on Earth in more than a year.

He didn't realize this, at first, as he rode in the hovership across the Pacific, as he did nothing much but catch up on calls as some generic news attempt played on a big screen in the background. None of the news was about Daihoon, or about the Reset Quest, or even about the Winter Ball Attack. Mark had kinda wanted to see what Earth was saying about all of that stuff, but *of course* the news wouldn't be relevant at all hours of every day, but, well...

Mark checked in with Eliot, Sally, and Dawncoast, telling them about the assassination attempt and finding out about what had happened on their end of things. Apparently, Addavein had opened a portal to Earth to get Eliot and Sally to Memphi, to help them repair their gate. The repairs took 20 minutes, and then they took the Small Gate back to Daihoon. Memphi was fully repaired, and ready for new events.

Then he went over the responses to his emails, via Quark, that he had sent out about missing his obligations for Skilling. The Collective understood, the People were happy to know he would be at Crystal Tower and breaking through the blockade soon, and Walaria gave a rough estimate for sending people to Crystal Tower for Skilling in about 3 days.

All the while, the news had played.

There had been a story about the rising cost of raw materials for appliances, of a return of bears in the wilds of North America (which Mark almost found interesting for Good Bear reasons, and wasn't that an odd coincidence), and then there was a whole bunch of superhero news from around the world.

None of the attack at Memphi's gate was on the news, and the war brewing on Daihoon was completely absent.

"It should be breaking news, right? Current events?" Mark complained.

"The Small Gate attack will be on the evening news," Aeri Kanno said, sitting on the couch opposite of Mark, flipping through her phone.

"Does Earth even *know* about the brewing Worlds' War?"

Aeri asked Mark, almost rhetorically, “Do you believe there will actually be a Worlds’ War?”

“... Yes?” Mark asked/said, not understanding how Aeri could suggest otherwise.

Aeri looked at Mark, worried. “Isoko talks like it’s a sure thing, too, but everyone on Earth is hoping it all blows over.”

“Do they know about the Purge of the Church of Drakarok?”

Aeri emotionally cringed. She had heard about it, but she didn’t want to believe it.

Melanie Moore had been in the next room, on her phone and with a laptop she had picked up from gods knew where, but she stood up and walked into the room when they spoke of the purge. She said, “Tell me about that purge.”

Mark didn’t understand how Moore didn’t know all about the purge already, but based on her vector, she was serious. Based on Aeri’s vector, she was settling in for a serious talk that she never expected to have... And Mark realized they did *not* want the news. They wanted Mark’s personal perspective.

“Okay so...” Mark wasn’t sure where to start, so he said, “When we left Endless Daihoon, Dominant tried to mind control everyone on the ship to get them to come through peacefully and right into a major trap. He phrased it as an invitation. I saw the trap because he was stressing Eliot’s Castellan shields, so I cleansed the group, and that’s when... Kardi and the goblin Grax appeared. Grax grabbed the energy from inside the gatehouse, or whatever we were, and he threw that energy at the Godking, doing fuck all but opening the way forward. Those two assholes escaped, and then Sally shrunk the ship for us to escape, too. We dropped a lot of adamantium out of the hull because it was resistant to her shrinking and I had stockpiled it because I was expecting to lose easy access to adamantium.

“We escaped, the Death mana lasers came on, and I shielded the ship.

“Addavein rescued us, and in the process he killed some Death mana turrets and spun up giant adamantium shields to protect us from the ones he couldn’t destroy. Those Death cannons spilled the Death all across the land.

“I died. I got better.

“Hundreds of thousands of people died in the capital of Okuana because of the spread of Death mana in a concentrated capital space. This was Dominant’s first true disregard for humanity in the modern era, for this was all Dominant’s fault for using those weapons against an interior target that wasn’t even a kaiju. It was all an assassination attempt by him, against us, and he did not care who he hurt in the crossfire.

“He will never care about people. We are mana resources for him. Aluatha knew this for centuries before the Reveal, and now we’re all learning this all over again.

“... And so we escaped, and then... That’s when everything really started, when the Documentary went out and a whole lot of truths came out. Mainly, the truth about how Dominant took over after the Dragon King sacrificed himself, how Dominant killed pretty much everyone out there, he turned the elves into goblins, and then, later, how he tried to kill us and silence us.

“So many small parts of history and of personal actions came to light after that, like how Dominant was personally trying to turn me into an adamantium farm, and how he was lying about how to kill demons with adamantium. The assassination attempt was just the crystallizing factor. Even before the Winter Ball Attack, we knew he had to go.

“And Dominant is against the Reset Quest, and apparently he’s willing to kill the whole world to make the Quest go away.

“And because the God of War and Murder, Drakarok, is all for killing tyrants like Dominant, Dominant has fully turned against the Church of Drakarok, and though some Chosen of the God of War and Murder have suicided at Dominant’s request, that made all the rest of them even more furious.

“The Church of Drakarok apparently had a big outpost in the Main Outpost of Xerkona, as well, so when Dominant sent the dryad in to kill everyone there, a lot of paladins of Drakarok stayed behind—” Mark suddenly paused because he remembered that guy from the Winter Ball, Xander-something, who had been from the Main Outpost and who wanted revenge, too. Mark winced a little, having forgotten about him until now. He would have to send him a letter of introduction to Dawncoast. Mark continued, “And that’s where we were, even before the blockade, or the Winter Ball Attack.

“The Purge has been... horrific, really.

“The Pantheon has been divided because Hearthswells love their locations and their power is wherever they are invested, and they are caretakers who have revolutionized city defense, and, for the most part, they’re a big part of Okuana’s defenses. Same as anywhere. They don’t want war. Freyala is in a semi-similar boat, and especially because Citadel Freyala is just on the other side of Verdant Citadel, on Earth versus Daihoon, so that’s pretty close to attack, actually, if Okuana opened up the Worlds for real strikes. Dominant could do it, too. Rifts and stuff like that. Verdago wants to be gone from Okuana, but farming is important for people, so he’s staying.

“Pluta is gone from Okuana, as far as I know.

“And then you have Drakarok, who is absolutely furious and ready to make heads roll. A lot of heads.”

Aeri listened, and it was like he was hearing of horrors that she knew were out there, but that she hadn’t seen until that moment. She hated the story Mark told, and she hated him in a small way, but mostly she was scared.

Moore’s emotions were more guarded as she instantly asked, “What about Thrashtalon? What’s going on with him? Do you know?”

“Thrashtalon...” Mark frowned a little...

Isoko stepped into the room, hanging out at the edge.

Mark looked to Isoko and then to Moore, as he said, “I don’t know about Thrashtalon, but I am *guessing* that Thrashtalon is loving all of this. If all the world allies against Okuana then he’s happy. Thrilled. He’s probably got a whole bunch of feelers and agents out there, trying to get people to Contract with him with suspiciously good Contracts. We’ve already seen at least one of them.” Mark thought of the Contract that Thrashtalon would have offered Cade Waterson, with the Transcendent series of Powers, to make that series into a soulhouse and Cade into an archmage with only one goal. All Thrashtalon wanted with that Contract was for Cade to always be moving toward the complete destruction of Okuana and Dominant. Mark said, “But those Contracts are poison. When Okuana is finally dead and gone, Thrashtalon will use those Contracted people to fuck over Aluatha next. And then Thrashtalon comes for every citystate on Earth.”

Moore sat back a little, sort of like Aeri. Both of the older women had seen something that they didn’t want to see in Mark’s words, but which they recognized as truth.

Mark asked his own question, "How come none of this stuff is on the news right now?"

Moore said, "Curtain Protocol, mostly."

"That's getting to be a thin shield," Aeri said to Moore, as though it was all a conversation far beyond Mark even though he was right there.

Moore told Aeri, but also Mark, "Crystal Tower doesn't get involved in politics, and our airwaves are the ones most accepted in the Two Worlds, so what we say has big meanings everywhere. We save everyone and defend our own, and that's more than good enough. We are not the worldwide police. We are saviors."

"Then it's time to save the worlds and kill a tree," Aeri said.

Moore told Mark, "We want the blockade in Daihoon gone and sovereignty re-established over Sidecity and D'Japan. Once we have that breathing room, we can talk about supporting the war against Dominant. It's quite possible that as soon as we make our first strike against the blockade that they'll back off. As such, I want the first strike, led by you and several of our people, to leave behind full survivors. Strip them of their Powers, but let them keep their lives."

Mark told her, "That's fine by me."

Moore paused, not fully believing Mark would do that... but then she calmed, as though realizing that of course Mark was like this. She seemed a bit less tense as she said, "From what I have heard about you and seen in the reports, I expected that response, but I also expected you to be ready to go out and make an example of Okuana's soldiers."

"People help other people," Mark said, echoing the words of Glorious Man from almost 20 years ago.

Moore gave the slightest grin. "We try to."

"But with that said..." Mark looked at the news playing on the screen. He pointed. "That's a lot of propaganda."

Aeri told Mark, "Not everyone likes to see war and death all the time."

“And this isn’t Daihoon; yeah, I get it,” Marks said, “But I’m sure that people in New Tokyo are wondering why Gate Day never happened, right? Or was that spun, too?”

“It’s being spun as a contractual delay, which is true,” Moore said, “Okuana did pull all of their shipping contracts, after the fact, though they did try to pretend that they weren’t blockading us with their ships still sitting in dock, waiting to turn traitor.”

Mark’s eyes went wide as he had flashbacks to Kardi turning traitor in the middle of everything. “Holy shit, yeah... they would have been sitting by the gate for weeks, ready to go, wouldn’t they?”

Moore just nodded, not wanting to talk about all of that.

“Most of those people didn’t do anything, but the official tankers? Ha! Fuck those guys... Those incidents are still going through the courts,” Aeri commented, scoffing a little. She told Mark, “As if the courts matter anymore. The whole social contract is broken.”

Moore said to Mark, “We aim to re-align the social contract through the complete obliteration of the blockade and the re-capture of our territories on Daihoon. The plan is roughly to arrive at Crystal Tower, to have a small meeting with you and Isoko and Team Mithril, with Captain Titan, Tempest, Spectre, and Justicar. Probably more. Captain Titan and Justicar will remain behind at Sidecity, but Tempest and Spectre will go with you two to break the blockade. Specifics will be determined later, but recapturing Side Depot D’Takasaki is a large priority. We hope to have first action by evening, and rescue of our people at D’Takasaki by midnight.”

Mark had no idea what ‘Side Depot D’Takasaki’ meant, but he could imagine that it was a place on Daihoon roughly in line with some place on Earth, and that it meant a lot to Aeri and Isoko.

But Isoko gasped a little. “They got *D’Takasaki*?” She looked at her grandmother, asking, “*How?*”

Aeri was quietly furious as she looked at Moore, saying, “‘An act of non-aggression’, that’s how.”

Moore said, “They had 10 dryads standing outside the place, ready to go, and another 20 in the sky, so it was either capitulation or we lost 10,000 lives and all of that infrastructure.”

Mark asked, “I only need to know if infrastructure actually matters.”

Moore might have continued the conversation, but her phone pinged. She told Mark, “The only thing that matters is lives. Excuse me.” And then she picked up her phone and started talking to someone else as she walked out of the room.

Mark asked Aeri and Isoko, “What’s D’Takasaki?”

Isoko said, “Right on the other side of home.”

“A little bit off to the west of the other side of home,” Aeri said, mostly agreeing with Isoko. She told Mark, “D’Takasaki Side Depot is a major training facility for Crystal Tower, on Daihoon. It would not be wrong to call it a permanent ‘settlement project’, where a great many young talents from Tokyo go to cut their teeth on real monsters. Most learn that they never want to set foot outside of the major walls ever again. There’s a resupply there every month, when Big Torii opens. It’s about 80 kilometers from Crystal Tower and the Big Torii. I took Isoko there months ago for Christmas.”

Mark knew that New Tokyo was one of the largest cities in the Two Worlds, and the only tier 10, though there were more than a few tier 9s. But hearing ‘80 kilometers away from city center’ and ‘right on the other side of the place where they lived’ meant that New Tokyo was at least 80 kilometers wide, and probably more like 100 kilometers, in every direction, stopping maybe 10 kilometers out to sea. Which was kinda crazy.

Mark, of course, knew that New Tokyo was freaking massive, but...

He was going to see it in person, and soon.

Even Crytalis wasn’t technically that large, even though it did cover the whole D’Yucatan peninsula, if only because Crytalis was technically many separate cities in a trenchcoat. New Tokyo had districts, though, but there was no space between them; just emergency walls that had gone up long ago and which never got tested except in the beginning.

... And now that Mark was thinking about distances and districts...

Mark asked, “The blockade is technically inside New Tokyo’s airspace, but on Daihoon,” and then he guessed, “And there’s a Small Gate at Side Depot D’Takasaki, which they could use to get to New Tokyo from inside its walls.”

Aeri brushed past all of that and said, “Church Hearthswell has confirmed that the Blockade could come inside the walls of New Tokyo whenever they wanted, just by casting rift magics! I’m sure they don’t *want* to, and I haven’t *heard* them threatening as much, but I am absolutely sure that they *are threatening as much*, but Timeweaver cut that away when he canceled Gate Day. But yes, there is a Small Gate at D’Takasaki. It’s already shut down and the Hearthswells of New Tokyo are fortifying our dimension against lateral attack, but the whole thing has a whole lot of people in an uproar. When we get back I’m sure the actual assault will happen according to Timeweaver’s decisions.”

Mark accepted that —horrifying, but yeah, that’s how it was— and then he asked, “So about Timeweaver? What do I need to know?”

Aeri focused on both of them, but mostly on Isoko, as she said, “Timeweaver is a semi-perfectionist and a mostly-good-guy. But he’s still *Timeweaver*. If Timeweaver is near you then he’s making decisions about you and others. He probably killed you in a different, abandoned reality, just to see if he could, and you should not take that personally. If he’s not near you, then don’t worry. If he is within your realm of interaction, then know that *you are being handled*. Actively handled. He handled all of us to come on this trip to get you two. That’s why I’m here, and Moore came, and why Isoko is here with you, Mark. Timeweaver probably categorized Isoko as ‘a local that you know’, more than anything else she or I could provide...” Aeri sighed, long suffering, and finished with, “Who knows, though! Only him, and he’s not talking unless he’s manufacturing possibilities. Other than that... Do not worry overmuch if Timeweaver is jovial. He’s just being a fucker most of the time. BUT if he’s *tired*, then act fast, because that means he’s run the day through so many different times and he’s running up against a wall and he’s going to decide to cut something from his itinerary.” She warned them, “*You do not want to be cut.*”

Mark connected something with before, saying, “That’s why you said he wasn’t serious before; because he was jovial, or at least sarcastic.”

Aeri nodded, leaning back, saying, “Yup. You two should probably sleep. You might not get sleep for a few days. I’m on overwatch right now and I can fly the hovership into the city, too; Isoko’s not cleared for that sort of flight path yet anyway.”

Mark stood up, saying, “Sounds like a plan to me. I’m taking one of the berths.”

Isoko said, “I’ve only been up for 4 hours, but... yeah.”

Mark looked at Isoko.

She was a bit shaken up.

Mark... ignored that and went to the hallway with the rooms.

For a bit, Isoko sat with her grandmother, talking softly.

Later still, Isoko showed up, looking shaken even more.

So Mark hugged her, and Isoko hugged him and she softly spoke of worries about bombs and dryads and that black/white fire, and if she had died before, and Mark held her through her worries, her thoughts matching his own. They breathed together and Good/Bad flowed on the blue, blue sky.

And Mark chuckled, as he looked out a port window.

“What?” Isoko asked, feeling better.

Mark pointed his chin toward the window, since his arms were otherwise occupied. “The sky is blue. I forgot that the skies were normally blue.”

Isoko laughed... and then she asked, “Can I sleep in your bed?”

“Yeah.”

Isoko fell asleep before Mark did, laying in his arms, both of them clothed, with Mark as the big spoon.

Mark found he liked being the big spoon.

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The flight took 4 hours, passing through night and into the next day, 14 hours ahead, and Mark woke up a little bit before Isoko. He left her in the bed, in the warmth, and she sighed, awake, but not ready to get up.

Mark felt messed up for months after his first assassination attempt, back on that tram between Mage Society and Dawncoast. They had tried killing him a few more times that very same day, and Mark ended up killing a whole lot of goblins instead of dealing with the aftermath... and then he had gone on to Endless Daihoon, Mark supposed, recalling all of that time just half a year ago.

Both Mark and Isoko had been in battle before. They had walked under kaiju, and fought Kardi, and edged around death and complete destruction... But it was different when it was an assassination. They had gone from peaceful times, to a knife in the dark headed right for them. No warning. No prep.

Mark grabbed a pair of bagels from the fridge, made them, and grabbed some caviar and cream cheese and what looked like smoked fish of some sort. Along with some fresh coffee, Mark made an afternoon snack/breakfast for himself and Isoko, who was still in bed. So Mark delivered her meal to her in bed, waking her up with a gentle nudge of Union.

Isoko startled awake anyway, flickering grey. Not Full Platinum but edging toward it. And then she saw Mark, holding a tray of food, she realized where she was, and she sighed and went back to pale skin and black hair, saying, "We're close?"

"20 minutes till we have to slow down for the wall crossing." Mark set the food down onto an adamantium tray over her lap, saying, "I heard Moore talking about getting people set up, too, it's probably go-time as soon as we land."

Isoko smiled at the food, and said, "Fancy!"

"Not nearly as fancy as it could be! This is some rich-guy's pleasure yacht, so if you want fancier we got it."

Isoko shook her head, saying, "This is plenty great already... I wish you could have come to New Tokyo without this war happening, Mark. It's so nice. Life is... It's different. The old timers say it's like it used to be, back before the Reveal."

Mark scoffed a little. “I have a hard time believing it’s like Pre-Reveal. There are superheroes flying in the sky and the oceans are 23 meters higher.”

Isoko rolled her eyes, saying, “There are a lot of committees that keep the old world alive as much as possible. Grandma used to be on some of them... Not sure if she still is.”

They ate. It was pretty good stuff. Artisan bagels and some truly expensive smoked fish. Not at all like the smoked fish Mark used to have back home in Orange City that Dad made sometimes. He had been a great fisherman but only an adequate cook, which was funny to think about but only because Mark actually thought about them without hurting too much. Mark had a bite of the caviar and decided he didn’t like it very much, so he gave the rest to Isoko, who loved the stuff.

Isoko said, “You’re up for sushi, right?”

“You *better* show me the best sushi places in *New Tokyo*.”

Isoko grinned. “We’ll have to go low-brow first, so that you don’t make a fool of yourself at the prime locations.”

Mark smiled—

“Approaching the outer walls of New Tokyo,” Quark said.

Mark hopped up, rushing out of the main bedroom, past luxury and Aeri at the helm, and finally up to the deck, to stand next to Melanie Moore. Isoko came up behind him to grab the railing beside him, not saying anything right now, just watching Mark and hoping he liked what he was seeing. Mark did like what he was seeing, and Isoko smiled.

Moore was on her phone, talking to someone, and vaguely surprised by Mark, but not really. She just grinned a little, seeing Mark’s own excited face, as he looked to the west, to the blue, blue sky, piled high with clouds.

The Pacific Ocean was dark, the sky was bright with morning sun, and there, on the horizon, were the first signs of civilization. It was a low grey line; a separation between earth and sky. The hovering on the back of the hovership spun lazily, parting the sky from the ship’s egress, aided by Wandering Sage at the helm, so there was no wind even though the ship was flying at thousands of kilometers per hour.

Wandering Sage pulled back on the speed slightly.

The Water Wall, also known as the Outer Wall or Main Wall, came into sight. It was a kilometer tall and more like a grey haze than a real wall. As they got closer the entire Water Wall turned clear-ish. The amount of power necessary to turn an entire wall, thousands of kilometers long and tens of kilometers tall, resting deep, deep into the ocean, and high into the sky... Well, Mark would have imagined that it took a lot of power. But maybe it was more artifact-based.

Mark said, "Once, I was told that I could purchase something called an invisible diamond, or whatever it was, if I wanted permanent invisibility, but that those sorts of things were mostly used for city defense, to make a place invisible. It was something like 60 million for one diamond. Is the entire Water Wall powered by those expensive diamonds?"

Isoko wasn't sure.

Moore put her phone away, saying, "Yes, but only halfway. True invisibility attracts certain kinds of kaiju, so even we don't have the invisibilities fully active all the time. So the invisibilities are only fully active at sunrise, for about an hour. It's the same situation on the other coast, at sunset.

Mark smiled at that... And then he had a lot more questions, asking, "Monsters attack the walls all the time anyway, right? How do you guys deal with that?"

Moore said, "That's slightly complicated because we're in a constant state of cold war with the demons that cause the monsters. That cold war is the reason that New Tokyo became the center of power on Earth."

Mark felt ignorant. "... You're in a *cold war* with the demons? Do they not attack the walls?"

Mark was sure that he had heard a story about some expansion to New Tokyo that failed because they tried to expand too fast and then the monster waves at that new expansion forced them to collapse that expansion. So surely they had monster issues, right?

Moore explained, "The demons stopped trying to kill us all the time a while ago because we can actually wipe the surface in every direction whenever we want, but they still attempt what they can when they can. But constant, low level threats like you have outside of every other city in the Two Worlds? Doesn't happen in New Tokyo—" Her phone vibrated. "Excuse me... Yes... No, Ashley. I want..."

She went off on her phone call.

Mark turned to Isoko, not believing Moore's story at all... or rather, only partially.

Isoko shrugged. "There are always monster attacks but you'd never know it from inside the walls. That's why the base at D'Takasaki is so relevant. There's no normal monster spawning in the city— No! Wait. There are some kill zones in the city. Forgot about those. They're release valves for monster spawns? They're basically defunct, though. I haven't heard of any of them activating as release valves... ever."

"... So a cold war, huh?"

Isoko shrugged; she wasn't going to countermand *Melanie Moore*, of all people.

Mark nodded a little, watching the Water Wall of New Tokyo coming up, like a thin, translucent mountain range. And then they were going over the invisible wall, and it was thick as fuck. At least a kilometer wide! Holy crap! And then there was an ocean just outside of the outer banks of New Tokyo, which was like a rolling mountain range of trees and small cities and *so many different districts*, all without any major walls. Sure, there were emergency walls, but those walls all had yellow/black striped sections to them that could be raised whenever, to block monster flows, or whatever—

Fishing boats on the open waters.

Mark felt something like amazement, envy, and quiet joy, to see fishing boats on the city-side of the Water Wall. They plowed the small waves like nothing was wrong, like there weren't so very many monsters just beyond the translucent barrier below—

There was a damned fishing village and resort, *right there*, on the edge of the mountainous greenery that was the outer banks of New Tokyo... Right? Or... It wasn't New Tokyo yet, was it? Where was Crystal Tower? Where was Big Torii; the gate?

Mark asked, "That's not New Tokyo yet, is it?"

"Technically it is," Isoko said, "But it's just Chiba. I forget what they call it elsewhere?"

"Oh!" Mark said, "Outer Banks Chiba?"

“That’s it!” Isoko added, “It’s a bunch of open, flat land, and mountains, and the Ocean Defense Force is there— There’s it’s hoverport. Big ships!”

Some huge hoverships floated above mountain forests, above a bunch of towers and flatter spaces and prep zones. It was a military installation, for sure... Which was a concern, wasn’t it? There were other hoverships in the sky around here, but that was clearly a military zone.

Mark turned toward Wandering Sage, currently sitting behind the steering wheel about 15 meters distant, inside the ship. Mark wondered toward Isoko, “Aren’t there usually guide ships? Escorts?”

“Grandma has it handled,” Isoko said, “And also *Moore* is here, so... Are we really violating anything at all?”

Mark and Isoko were both a little giddy, like kids in candy shops. Isoko was a lot better at hiding it, though, because, in that moment, Mark suddenly realized that Isoko might have already met many of the heroes he would be meeting today. Crystal Tower was trying to recruit him, after all. Maybe after Mark’s tenure was up with Aluatha, and assuming the war went well, maybe... Maybe New Tokyo would be a pretty awesome place to live?

The ship moved over Chiba, and then there was the second bay New Tokyo, located where much of Old Tokyo used to be, and Mark started to recognize things.

When the Reveal happened in 1969 and the oceans rose, billions died. Much of Old Tokyo was reduced to rubble. But it had been rebuilt, bigger than ever before. There were about 5.3 billion people in the Two Worlds, and 530 million of them lived here. 1 out of every 10 people lived in New Tokyo! That was about 65% of the population of Aluatha, and about 50% of the population of Okuana, but all of those places were spread out over continents.

New Tokyo was one city, and what a city it was.

Mark’s breath fully failed him as he saw New Hope Bridge, giant and white and arcing between Chiba and New Tokyo proper, connecting the island underneath to all of *that* over there.

Skyscrapers abounded, each art-pieces of their own, like sound waves had been captured for all eternity and then marked out with building heights. They were tall. Shiny. Hovertrams connected everything to

everything else. Giant floating weapons platforms, like blue cubes floating on their points, hovered over the waters—

And there was Crystal Tower.

It was a kilometer-tall spike of white crystal surrounded by supporting crystals of the same color and nature. Like a spike of a bunch of different quartz crystals that tapered to a single spire, and then to a sharp tip. And then, to make it even cooler, someone had floated a sphere of crystal on top of that tip. The whole thing had been created by some major powers in the Reveal, right outside of the Imperial Palace of Japan, and later turned into the center of superheroing in the Two Worlds.

All of the myriad silver and glass skyscrapers of New Tokyo had nothing on Crystal Tower.

Mark's breath failed him.

It was like he was 10 years old again, before all the horrors of the Two Worlds, before Addavein, before training for the Tutorial, there he was, sitting too close to the screen, watching Saturday morning cartoons. There were tons of different shows. A lot of them started off with establishing shots of Crystal Tower.

And there was Crystal Tower, right there.

Mark smiled softly, feeling real good.

Being older and wiser, though, he noticed things about Crystal Tower that he never noticed before. That crystal sphere on top was either some sort of targeting system, just like the blue diamonds floating in over the bays. In the shows they never talked about that blue/white sphere, or about the blue diamonds. They were always just part of the show that was left to the viewer to wonder about.

Those things had to be Death mana lasers, though, right? And if New Tokyo could 'wipe the land beyond the walls clean whenever they wanted', which Mark certainly believed Moore when she said as much, then there were probably Death mana gathering sites inside the city that could power those sorts of weapons that Mark saw, and also that he didn't see.

And if they had those weapons on *this* side of Big Torii (which was something Mark had never seen on Earth because the mana density here was cripplingly low; all spells faded fast unless they were specially

made) then they probably had the same weapons on the Daihoon side, at Sidecity. Which meant that the dryad fleet was approaching Sidecity with all of its death lasers...

Mark hmm'd.

Moore was softly smiling to the side, loving the look Mark was giving the city... Or at least she had been. Now, she was wondering what was up.

Mark asked, "Do the dryads coming up against Sidecity have Necromancers or other anti-Death mana precautions?"

Moore hmm'd, judging Mark's direction of thought for a moment, then she said, "Dryads are all basically necromancers, in action if not in Talent. So blasting them away with our Death defenses *is* a possibility, but they're too far away from our guns on Daihoon and they could pull at that energy and mitigate the damage. If they popped onto Earth, then we *could* blast them, but even the best case would be like you appearing in the middle of Verdant Citadel in Okuana; a lot of death spread indiscriminately. We hope to avoid that." She added, "We expect you will need to change your loadout in some way in order to deal with all of the Death mana that the dryads are expected to use."

Mark briefly considered slotting Necromancer in his fourth slot right then and there. He could even spend some time with it in his soulhouse, tuning that power toward defense against Death mana. And yet, if he did that now, then he couldn't deploy it as a surprise tactic against anyone else, and Mark was sure he would need to have a few surprises up his sleeve for the blockade.

Chances were that he could survive any Death mana blasts, anyway... unless they were from a city cannon, or from a bunch of dryads linked together and cutting him down. Hmm. That was worrying. Maybe he should slot it right now, just so he wasn't taken unawares? Mark wasn't sure.

Mark suggested, "We'll do probing attacks and if it's a problem then we'll have Timeweaver tell us, right? Because I have something I can do against that."

Moore deflected the implied question of direction, saying, "I'm the commander who gets trusted people into the positions they need to be in, and then lets them go to work. The people who will be overseeing the blockade breaking are probably Justicar in the hot seat and Timeweaver off to the side." She looked toward Crystal Tower. "Speaking of which, there's Justicar."

Crystal Tower loomed overhead like the kilometer-tall spike of crystal that it was, the jumbled crystalline base as thick as an arcology back in Crytalis. It was probably shorter than Crytalis's glass dome, but it was all out there, and it was massive. It took Mark a moment to locate Justicar, flying just outside of a gap in the crystal. Mark noticed the gap first. It was a docking port between a few crystal structures.

Justicar came right on over, flying up and over and landing on the ship, his Union snapping into Mark's and Isoko's, flowing with Good and erasing all Bad. His was a calming presence, really. Just like his mother, High Priestess Julia Garin of Freyala. The light bent around him, too, almost golden. Divine. He was not actually Chosen by Freyala, though. He had True Union, like his mother, and like Mark and Isoko.

Justicar took off his silver paladin helmet and smiled a little behind his thick beard, looking at Mark and Isoko, reaching out a hand and saying, "Thank you for coming, Mark, Isoko."

"Glad to kick some dryad ass," Isoko said, shaking Justicar's hand.

Mark smiled as he shook Justicar's strong hand, too, saying, "I've seen you a few times already, but it still feels neat to actually shake your hand."

Justicar laughed just a little, saying, "Imagine how I feel! You came back from Endless Daihoon with gifts and danger a plenty, and I heard you've been Skilling a lot of Chosen from the Collective?"

Wandering Sage effortlessly slipped the ship through a twist of cavernous crystal where sunlight reflected everywhere and turrets of floating crystal hung on the tips and corners of every crystal facet. Flat land existed behind the towers of crystal and Wandering Sage floated them toward it, toward guys hanging out by a dock that looked like their destination.

Mark told Justicar, "I have 130 Healthy Bodys for anyone at Crystal Tower who wants them. In addition to that, Second Princess Walaria wants me to do whatever Skilling work you want done for the next few days, whenever we're not fighting the blockade. Anything you supply through volunteers I can re-Skill into someone else, but the stuff I have from Walaria goes back to her, unless you directly get her clearance for it." As Justicar breathed deep, taking all that in and feeling somewhat good about it, Moore had a much tighter, mental reaction, like she was doing advanced math in her head. Maybe she was. Mark continued, "Anything I take from the people in the blockade that is not on the list of Powers we're gathering for the war against Dominant I will be using for Aluatha, and I expect Walaria to send a team

here to gather some of them in the next few days. I imagine Crystal Tower will get a lot of those Powers, too, though.”

The ship docked.

Justicar said, “I had heard the stories through the Collective, but I did not... Come. We will speak of tactics in the war room and then begin to break the siege in a short while.”

Moore spoke up, “I’ll have those 130 people ready in an hour, Mark. I’ll make a room for you. Might have a few takers to get rid of their Powers, too.”

Mark asked, “Are you planning on getting rookies Skilled? Because if they already have a Power they might be able to evolve Healthy Body into something useful— And you’re already completely aware of this. Sorry.”

Moore smirked, just a little, and started walking off the ship, saying, “We’ll get those people to you, Mark, and yes, we hope the people who get Healthy Body will be able to evolve it into something better.” And then she tapped something at her belt and she flew off, deep into the crystalline halls of Crystal Tower.

Justicar pointed up. “We’re going up there. The Dock Dudes will take care of your stuff.”

Mark suddenly jerked, and so did Isoko, as both of them looked over the edge of the railing, both of them recognizing where they were— and there were the Dock Dudes, or at least two of them. Sebastian and Trainer, from the show.

Isoko waved at them, saying, “We’ve been watching your show! It’s fun!”

Sebastian and Trainer both ‘eyyyy!’d at them, and Sebastian called back, “We watched your shows, too!”

Mark told them, “We bought the ship from some rich guys! We have no idea what is on it!”

“Can’t be that bad!” Trainer called back.

Justicar chuckled as he said, “Okay okay.” And then he took off, into the sky.

Mark rapidly held out a hand to Isoko as he said, “I don’t want to blow a lot of wind here.”

Isoko easily took Mark’s hand, smiling brightly and Full Platinum, and then she zoomed up into the air, and Mark dangled. Isoko had a whole lot of strength, though, and soon Mark was right there with her. Still kinda dangling, though. She was smiling.

Aeri floated beside them, saying, “Please focus more, lovely, wonderful, *alive* granddaughter of mine.”

Isoko put on a straight face and Mark did, too.

It still felt awesome to be here.

They landed on a giant balcony of ice-white crystal and Mark kinda geeked out.

Isoko gave a tiny squeal, too.

This was a special place.

Wandering Sage had been here many times before, but she truly enjoyed bringing Isoko here. Mark was good to have here, too, Aeri supposed, but Isoko was the one she truly cared about, and seeing Isoko Kanno on this balcony, in this place, obviously brought Aeri Kanno a treasure of emotions.

Justicar led the way.

And then they walked through the big archway, and Mark felt a chill as he walked down a grand hallway that he had only ever seen in the *really big* movies and a few, scarce shows over the years. Specifically, the 750 million goldleaf movies, and the shows that were 10 million an episode. Could Mark

name one of those shows? No chance in hell. If someone put one of those voidfire cannons directly against his chest and asked him to name a single one of those shows, he would fail.

The floor, distant walls, and high, pointed ceiling, was all ice-white crystal. A wide, sturdy blue carpet with gold embroidery filled the hallway, leading from that giant balcony back that way, to an archway ahead. Smaller, similarly-colored carpets rested outside of doors to the sides of the main hallway. Those other rooms were filled with rest areas, talking spaces, and other on-call areas for the Big Heroes of the day, whoever that might be. It was a rotating cast, as far as Mark knew.

Right now, the place was filled with a lot of Big Damn Heroes, all of them in their costumes, some in armor, some walking ahead, some pausing to look at Aeri, or to look at Justicar. A lot of them stared at Mark with open wonder, or apprehension, or straight up worry.

Mark spotted Blazeheart with her shockingly red hair, and then there was Aqua Guardian— Oh shit. He was from the People, wasn't he? Mark needed to talk to him. And wow over there was Solstice— Mark really needed to talk to her. She was a precog—

And up ahead, beyond an archway, lay the Round Room.

A variable number of round crystal seats surrounded a variable-sized round table. It was an uncomfortable space, with little ornamentation, but it was able to be filled or emptied with room for as many or as few heroes as needed.

Mark did not notice Glorious Man.

A few camera drones hovered here and there, shooting film and monitoring everything. This was a real event, though. Not an HVP production.

Beyond that central round room with too many big heroes to think about, lay the Innards. A bunch of techies and people who lived and worked in the tower in the Innards dealt with all of the organization of the tower. Those guys were also responsible for getting superheroes wherever they needed to be in the Two Worlds—

“Okay, people!” Justicar called out, slamming the world’s attention onto him with Union. “Team Mithril on front, my show in the hot seat, and prepare for full defense of New Tokyo when the battle is joined. Four hours!”

And then Timeweaver appeared, right beside the round table, calling out, “Point of order! *Everyone* needs to be on alert. *This is Full Alert*. I will attempt to keep the blockade from spilling over onto Earth, but this is a major operation.”

Ah.

The dryads were going to trigger rifts, huh?

Well yeah. They were.

Fuck.

Captain Titan, Specter, and Tempest, were all there in the room with Justicar, forming the full Team Mithril. Titan had the same Titan’s Strength as Sally and Titanfist back in Memphi. Specter was an ethereal person, more suited for infiltration than anything else, but kinda like Grey Phantom back in Memphi. There were a lot of repeated Powers in the worlds, which Mark knew, but which he felt like he was finding out all over again. Tempest had Sky Shaper *and* Weather Manipulation, though.

Tempest and Captain Titan were the two macro-hitters on Team Mithril, while Justicar was general support with his Union and unknown Body Power, while Specter was the scouter and the infiltrator.

Justicar had said that Tempest and Specter were going with Mark and Isoko, right?

That was a lot of sky-sized battlefield control in that grouping.

Mark was the spear, of course.

Specter, Mark imagined, would be pointing Mark at stuff, but maybe not. Ethereal stuff didn’t work too well around Mark, due to Unions of Adamant/Ethereal, so if Justicar pointed Specter at targets alongside Mark then Mark would need to make a call against that.

That’d be on Daihoon, though.

Everyone else was on Earth, on the defense of New Tokyo.

Not everyone here was a part of a major team. Most were independent actors or the main members of their own personal teams. A lot of them were in full costume, but some were in actual warrior armor. Mark could name them all, if he wanted. Most of them were background characters in HVP productions, in the way that the army and such were background characters, but a few had actual shows. It was really, really hard for Mark to imagine that with this much firepower in any one area that anything bad could ever happen to anyone nearby.

... But New Tokyo was a full slice of the island of Japan, from Chiba to the other coast, including Mount Fuji and a whole lot of former national parks, covering about 30,000 square kilometers.

It was a lot of space to cover.

Some shit was going to fall through some cracks, somewhere.

The people here would be dealing with that.

Mark was here to be a heavy hitter and strike against the blockade itself, and to also fulfill whatever Healthy Body stuff that Melanie Moore wanted—

An elevator opened up to the side, and Melanie Moore stepped out, calling out, almost on cue, saying, “Mark! This way. Everyone else begin final preparations.”

Mark felt so very weird as he walked across the room, under the gaze of people he truly respected and grew up watching, to step into the— Mark forced himself to pause, because words needed to be said, so he said to everyone watching, “I look forward to working with you to destroy Dominant’s tyranny.”

Some people responded in quiet ways.

Mark had no idea what they said.

Mark was already in the elevator and riding down with Moore, trying not to feel embarrassed as fuck about speaking out in the *Round Room*. Holy fuck. Mark took a breath as he relaxed, as he Unionsensed the small bomb he had set off overhead. People were arguing now.

Mark focused elsewhere, in other elevators in other parts of the building, and all around a bunch of blank spots to Mark's senses. Everywhere he sensed people were working fast. Preparations were officially underway. Perhaps, Mark would have thought about all that a bit more, but—

Moore hmm'd, and said, "So if Timeweaver let that stand, then I guess that needed to be said."

Mark jolted. "What?"

"Assuming we're in the final timeline, which is always the proper assumption to make, then that means that throwing that gauntlet against Okuana, and specifically Dominant, is how Timeweaver has chosen to handle this political fiasco."

Mark picked up a lot more than what Moore was putting down as the elevator (which he had seen on many shows and was now *actually riding in*) descended down through illuminated crystal.

Mark said, "People here are split on Dominant's tyranny, huh."

Timeweaver stepped into the elevator, saying, "The problem is manifold."

Moore hmm'd at Timeweaver, but she said nothing.

"Hello, Timeweaver," Mark said, feeling remarkably more settled with the Redo Hero in the elevator with him, for some reason.

Timeweaver told Mark, "Wars don't reach us. That's the first problem. The second problem is the HVP, which is good in a whole bunch of ways, has a real detrimental effect on getting people to believe that bad things really do happen to good people. And then you also have Dominant's propaganda and trade with New Tokyo for a very long time, *which was also a trade of people*, so people here have a hard time seeing reality for reality. Dominant has even tried to make that propaganda more serious by robbing us of D'Takasaki Side Depot, not allowing our young to find out what monsters actually are. It's part of his super long game, like you know, *how Dominant is threatening our airspace*. Hmm!"

Timeweaver wasn't huffing at Mark.

Mark said, "Sometimes you can't convince people the sky is blue."

Timeweaver smiled softly. “I try! But yes. Also, you should just do that thing with Necromancer you’re thinking of doing. On the whole, it’s better when you have that out there, though I’m only gaming 5 days out from the battle, so who knows what the distant future will bring.”

Moore sighed, because—

Mark suddenly felt unmoored. “I thought you had complete and total control of... of a lot! Not 5 days?!”

“I’ve tried. I go crazy when I do that and then someone kills me and I lose years of time reviving back to when I wasn’t crazy.”

“... years?” Mark quietly asked.

Timeweaver paused a little, and then he said, “Oh. So this is the good timeline, huh?”

Mark paused.

Timeweaver looked at Mark curiously.

Mark was probably double the guy’s size, maybe only 15 centimeters taller but a whole lot stronger both physically and in actual power... maybe... but Timeweaver seemed bigger. Like Mark was gazing upon something that occupied more space than it should—

“Huh!” Timeweaver said, “There are a lot of good timelines out there, but some are better than others.”

And then Timeweaver vanished.

Moore said to the air, “Timeweaver erase-tapes protocol, authorization Moore.” And then she told Mark, “Never repeat any of that.”

“Understood,” Mark said, not really understanding all of Timeweaver, but he understood enough, and he especially understood that Moore had a protocol for erasing Timeweaver’s presence when needed. As the elevator slowed its descent, Mark asked, “How many people am I Skilling?”

“130 Healthy Bodyys and thanks to a quick discussion I have had with your Second Princess Walaria, if you would allow, we’ll also take that Ice Shaper, the Tamers both Plant and Normal, all with Healthy

Bodys. We'd love your Etherealitys, too. We also have a special request for Technopath, Web Control, and Technosis Body..." Moore added, "And I can see that Technosis Body is a frightening ask, so I would like to know why."

The elevator stopped, and Moore pressed a button to halt the doors from opening, to give them a bit more time. Wherever they had landed in the Crystal Tower, Mark could tell there were people out there, a few of them lined up like guards, but the others...

That was the grand entrance hall—

Focus.

Mark didn't want to give anyone Technosis Body, and that was aside from the fact that he had just gotten Technopath from that assassin not half a day ago. Adding in Web Control into all of that? Mark said, "Technosis Body is a complete corruption of the body into technology. Technopath is already all of that, but different, and Web Control, too? That's like... That person would turn into a spider, for sure."

"We want to give it to the son of Aleph One."

Mark jerked. "One of the command cores of Crystal Tower— Wait no. The *son* of Aleph One? *Not* Aleph One."

"Correct. Aleph One budded 7 years ago and his son, Aleph Two, takes over for his father sometimes, but he doesn't have clearance for Crystal Tower and Aleph One isn't moving on, so Aleph Two wants to move on. We can give him clearance in other parts of the city. We could use him if he had more Power than he does now."

Mark had to think. "I don't know if I can Skill an AI, but... Maybe I can? I don't..." Mark had to think about something else. "Why do you want all the Tamers?"

"Great monster controllers."

"Okay fine. Let's uh, do this. Aleph Two, too."

Moore pressed the button beside the doors and the doors opened, revealing the grand entrance hall a hundred meters wide where bronze statues of heroes and villains hung on the ice-white ceiling in heroic

poses, and a giant globe of Earth floated, illuminated, in the center of it all. It was the entrance hall for Crystal Tower. Mark had seen it before in shows, but now he saw it from this direction, from behind a pair of low velvet ropes, where the main elevator led directly to the round room overhead.

It was disorienting.

It was enthralling.

Moore walked forward, Mark walked with her, and some guards Mark hadn't noticed eyed them a bit as they walked forward. Some tourists far ahead, beyond a second set of ropes, and near the merch tables and the visitors' booth, were flashing cameras at Mark and Moore, gasping as they called out 'Vilefire!' and then, suddenly, some teenager girl screamed—

“BLACKVEIN IS HERE?!”

Everyone looked their way and it was like the world flexed upon Mark, thrusting him into the center of attention. Guards far beyond this location were alerted by the scream and Mark felt them move to act, but then settle down. A bunch of people crowded that second velvet rope, moving fast to take pictures.

Mark put on a calm face as they called out his name, as he moved to the side—

Someone told him to say his catchphrase.

Mark accidentally Athercalled out, “Death to all monsters!”

His Call went wide and deep.

The crowd surged with energy, roaring back at Mark, some screaming with joy. A few people fainted but Mark hit them with a bit of Good/Bad, the air around him gaining some black veins, and the crowd of a thousand people surged again. The guards had some trouble, but they were on duty. They handled it.

And then Mark moved beyond a hallway, beyond a door, into a slightly quieter part of Crystal Tower.

Moore smiled a little, saying, “You handled that well.”

“Give me some people to help and some dryads to kill, pretty please,” Mark said, breathing out anxiety— He paused as he recognized someone up ahead, and as his brain felt like it reset, like he had forgotten something and then, there it was. “Derek! Fuck! I wondered where you were!”

Derek smiled, stepping forward, saying, “You forgot about me completely.”

Mark admitted, “I am meeting a lot of new people right now.”

Grinning, Derek said, “And I’ll help you meet more.”

Moore said, “I’ll leave you here,” as she got out her phone.

Soon, Derek introduced Mark to some leaders from the army, from other places, and then Derek admitted to Mark, privately, that he had never seen these people before, either, but he learned fast and they had only allowed him into the building in any real capacity in the last hour. Mark took that all in.

And then Mark met his clients.

Mostly, they were soldiers, aged 20 to 24, but a few of them were dressed as civilians.

Mark didn’t get many of their stories at all, except in general ways, and except for one.

The would-be-Tamers were a part of a rapid monster response team that was full of Tamers of all kinds. These guys were all Knacked or Knowing assistants to the Tamers, but they wanted more, they qualified for more in every possible way except for their Powers, and so they were getting more. There was drama about who was getting Plant Tamer versus generic Tamer, but Mark only found out about that as he got going, and they didn’t talk to him about any of it at all. Mark just breezed past whatever drama was going on there.

New Tokyo had a deep winter, and so the Ice Shaper was going to be needed during those times of the year.

The Ethereality guys were all army guys, and they were all serious people. Mark imagined they were spies, or something similar, based on how they were pleasant on the surface but their minds were going in a hundred directions at once. And, since Mark saw their core memories when he Skilled them, pulling

those relevant dreams from the dark of their souls in the very application of Ethereality and Healthy Body, he saw how they all worked deep in the shadows.

They'd be working deeper in the shadows from now on.

And then there was Aleph Two.

Aleph Two stepped into the room like a normal 20 year old man of Asian/American descent, but he was clearly an AI. AIs in bodies liked to have exposed circuitry somewhere on their flesh, usually underneath some sort of protective glass, or glass-silicone, to mostly mimic a person and to display their obviously non-human nature. Aleph Two had blue-colored glass-silicone on his forearms and neck instead of skin, showing shiny metal bones, silicone muscles, and flickering lights, while eyes were 'normal' save for a light blue illumination to his irises.

Mark had asked Quark to talk to Aleph Two and Aleph One and whoever needed talking to, to see if he could Skill an AI at all, and they seemed to think it would.

But Mark still asked Aleph Two directly, "So you really think this will work?"

"Yes, sir!" Aleph said, and then he explained, "I've discarded the Tutorial as an option, like most ensouled AIs, but I have cast some spells in the Sigildry way and with other methods. The only way in which my soul varies from a human's is how I connect to my body."

Mark moved on. "Technosis Body is dangerous, but... The person who had it mostly had issues with turning non-human. Since you're coming from the other direction... Are you sure you want these three Powers? You'll be truly strong in a lot of ways, but Web Control will... I can't help but think you're going to turn into a spider with *that one* when it's combined with all the others."

"I would truly like to try the full set, sir, and if it doesn't work I would love to be able to visit you at Dawncoast and get Web Control removed. I want to be a Hero of Humanity, just like my father."

"... Okay. Ready?"

Aleph Two stood strong, and then he said, "Ready!"

Mark dove into the dream and he took Aleph Two along for the ride.

Three dreams surfaced out of Aleph Two, as Mark slipped his Knack for Technology out of place and installed Technopath, Technosis Body, and Web Control.

The first memory was of Aleph Two seeing some giant construct of silver and LEDs swirl into being, connecting dead systems to each other and reviving everything, bringing the turrets online, and helping the heroes to save the day. The second memory was of Aleph Two waking up in his own body and feeling limited in ways he had never been limited before, but then he reached out and he connected to others, and all was good. The third memory was Aleph Two learning programming for the first time. It was like learning how to speak.

Mark pulled out of Aleph Two and Aleph Two sagged a bit.

Aleph Two blinked, the glowing blue in his irises expanding to fill all of his eyes, while his glass-silicone flesh flexed outward, down his arms and into his short sleeve shirt, and then up his neck. His entire body shifted a bit— And then he took a real, actual breath, gasping as his eyes flickered with more and more light, and then the light went out and Aleph was still breathing, chest moving up and down in a way that did not happen with AIs unless they spent a lot of money to get that rather esoteric feature. AIs that didn't pretend to be human never bothered with 'breathing', and Aleph Two was certainly in that category.

So his breathing was a part of Technosis Body, for sure.

The guy's vector stabilized, the lights in his body fading away to nothing, his skin clouding into blue, hiding his exposed muscles just as veins began to beat underneath that skin—

Aleph Two grabbed his chest, startled, as he said, "I have a heart?"

Mark grinned, as he felt an avenue of vectors inside Aleph Two light up to his Unionsense. "I suppose you do." Aleph Two wanted to ask a lot of questions, all of a sudden, but Mark said, "I have no idea what is going to happen to you, and I wish you the best of luck. Quark, please authorize Aleph Two to call me whenever he needs something, and you two can talk for a while. Aleph Two? I have a war to fight, so I need to get ready for that. Are you okay? Or do I need to take it all back?"

Aleph Two took a moment, his vector flickering fast.

Quark's power-drain on Mark's astral body flickered in time to Aleph Two's vector flickers. They were talking quickly. Mark let them talk for a while—

Aleph Two said, "I believe I am good. Thank you, sir."

Quark said, "It seems that everything is okay, sir."

"Good enough for me—"

A screen to the side flickered with a real vector. A face appeared on the screen, not unlike Aleph Two's face. The guy looked fully human except for trailing blue lines all around him.

Aleph One.

Mark jerked to attention.

Aleph One said, "Thank you for assisting my son, Mark Careed. We are ready for you upstairs."

"Okay!"

"Please take the main entrance."

And then Derek stepped forward, saying, "You'll like this one."

Mark hadn't Unionsensed outside with any real focus for the last hour, but now he did.

"Ohh."

In the shadows of the hallway just outside of the main lobby of Crystal Tower, Mark stood in darkness, breathing softly. Prepping. It was just a minute long meeting. That's it. Derek stood behind Mark, in the

lights that had been left on in the hallway. The lights over Mark, and the lights on the other side of the main lobby, down past the main elevator, were dark.

Mark felt the person down there, in the dark. His vector was controlled with absolute strength, but he still leaked out a presence that stabilized the world.

The main lobby was filled with people—

The other person moved forward, hints of gold glinting on his costume, hints of white showing in the darkness.

Mark walked forward before he was ready, but it was time. He wore a copy of his black suit with the white high-vis lines on it that someone had given him. Mark had no idea where the costume had come from. It fit well. Skin tight, except where that would be bad for optics. No one needed to see the outline of his dick, after all, though a lot of people—

Mark stepped into the light opposite Glorious Man.

Mark felt like a child walking up to a real superhero.

Glorious Man had dark hair and dark eyes, and he looked almost ageless, or maybe just 30. He was a bit taller than Mark, and a bit bulkier. Imposing. He grinned a little, and Mark realized that Mark was smiling too much, perhaps, so he toned that down. Someone chuckled in the audience just beyond the velvet ropes, and some guys and girls were screaming out joy, and then Glorious Man held out a hand and Mark gripped his hand.

Strong.

Glorious Man would break the world around him if he didn't move carefully, but he was old-hat at being careful, just like Aurora.

There was a real kindness in Glorious Man's eyes, face, and posture, as he said, "It's been a long while since Memphi. I'm glad to see you're doing well."

"Thank you, sir. You're doing, uh. Are you doing well?"

The audience chuckled as Mark stumbled over his words.

Glorious Man merely grinned, letting go, saying, “I’m doing very well. And after today, after your assistance with some ‘diplomatic problems’, I’ll be sleeping a lot better. Ready to go to work?”

“Absolutely, sir.”

“Glad to have you here, Mark.”

“Glad to be here.”

And then there were some poses for the cameras, with Glorious Man putting an arm on Mark’s back, hand on his shoulder, and Mark awkwardly putting an arm around Glorious Man’s waist, which was the absolute wrong thing to do, so Mark reached up, crashing his arm against Glorious Man’s big lats, to barely touch Glorious Man’s shoulder, which seemed marginally better. Mark felt like a complete and total idiot. Glorious Man chuckled, and it seemed genuine.

Cameras flashed.

And then Mark and Glorious Man were somehow in the elevator going up together—

“I’m so fucking sorry for grabbing your waist,” Mark blurted.

Glorious Man shook his head, still grinning, but an emotional weight seemed to descend upon him.

“Don’t worry about that. Worry about the fight. Are you going to aim to kill?”

Mark found it easy to talk about battle, as he said, “I’m going to rip through their ranks with my shavallian aura, rip out the Bindings of everyone who even remotely resists, and then move on to the next one. I’ll figure out something to do with the dryads on the fly, which will depend upon whether they resist anything or not. Based on a previous encounter, I expect the dryads to have a lot more morale so they won’t break fast, but the individuals on the ships might break when they recognize me in my suit. With Isoko there we’ll both be moving at around 10x speed, to start, but she and I can both move a lot faster if we need to. The only ones I’m unsure about are Specter and Tempest.”

Glorious Man still had that weight on his shoulders, but it had shifted. He accepted Mark’s words, saying, “I suppose you have fought a war all on your own, so... I’m glad you’re here.”

Mark was confused. “What war do you mean?”

Glorious Man arched an eyebrow. “The goblins?”

“OH FUCK. I... yeah. *Those* guys. Yeah. Uh... That... A lot has happened.”

Glorious Man kinda paused, and then he laughed. It was a glorious sound—

Timeweaver blipped into the elevator, stumbled just a bit as he landed on the ground, and then he stood tall, pretending he hadn't stumbled... But he had gotten the blip correctly before, right, so why—

“He times the elevator ride right half the time,” Glorious Man told Mark, smiling as he did so.

“Or that's *what* I want you to believe,” Timeweaver countered. And then he told Mark, “You haven't upgraded yourself yet.”

“Ah, fuck, I... I won't forget!”

Glorious Man arched a questioning eyebrow again—

“Do you practice that eyebrow thing?” Mark asked, looking at Glorious Man with genuine curiosity. “I always wanted to... to ask...” Mark fell silent, thinking he was being stupid.

The guy grinned, and then he wagged both his eyebrows up and down independently, saying, “It's a trick I can do and that the screen guys liked how it played, so I practiced.”

“Neat!”

Timeweaver interrupted, “Mark can do 4 Talents but he's hesitating on pulling the trigger.”

Mark winced hard, saying, “*Seriously.*”

“Oh cool!” Glorious Man said. “And you can just switch out everything, right?”

“Uh... yeah. I can. Theoretically. I kinda like my setup, but... Necromancer seems necessary for Dryad destruction.”

“It will be necessary for *survival*,” Timeweaver said, and then he blipped away.

And then the elevator slowed down.

Glorious Man told Mark, “If you need a moment there’s a prep room up above. I’ll make sure no one disturbs you.”

“I’ll take that moment up there but, uh... don’t, uh, tell people, please.”

Glorious Man nodded with all seriousness as he said, “Of course.”

And then the door opened and Glorious Man walked ahead, and it was like he walked into a room of coworkers instead of superheroes, but Mark followed, supposing that of course they were all just coworkers, so *why wouldn’t* Glorious Man walk out there like that—

A twin map floated above the round table. The lower map was yellow with ‘Daihoon’ on the edge and with colored lights of importance scattered over the Daihoon-side of the map. A small walled city was in the center, about where Crystal Tower was on Earth, near the very center of New Tokyo. The upper map was bright blue and it was covered in cityscape, and labeled ‘Earth’. Giant walls separated the entire urban sprawl of New Tokyo from the waters surrounding the city, while each district in the city was separated with smaller walls.

In between, inside the city walls of New Tokyo but outside of the city walls of Sidecity on Daihoon, were bright green dots, each one a dryad-supported hovership.

Justicar was at the helm.

Glorious Man gestured Mark toward a side room, beside a pair of superheroes that Mark knew, but could not name at that moment. And then Glorious Man called out to Justicar, “Where am I headed, boss!”

Justicar huffed at him, “Don’t ‘boss’ me, but you’re on Earth rapid deployment...”

Mark went into the side room.

--

Mark quieted his mind, breathing out Bad and breathing in Good, and then he faded into elsewhere, into the dream, into the dark.

Mark stood on the porch of his soulhouse, and then he turned and walked toward his Skilling room, telling Quark, "Please record everything you see, Quark. I have no idea how this is going to work."

Quark flickered silver and then walked with Mark like a strange reflection of Mark's own body, saying, "Yes, sir."

Reaching the archived abilities in his Skilling room, Mark picked Necromancer out of his stored Abilities. The blueprint was a mess of Death and channels for Death and so very many different hooks for spellwork that would allow Mark to take control of Death mana already out there. It was the most extensive, most basic form of all of that sort of magic. Like an operating system for a computer that had no programs at all, but which would allow the user to eventually create everything else that was aligned with Death mana.

Mark was absolutely not going to Skill himself, even if he was pretty sure he knew what he'd need to do. No reason to risk actual self-soul mutilation if it wasn't necessary, right?

"System Call," Mark said, to the dreaming dark beyond, "Slot Necromancer into my fourth Binding slot, please."

Updating Status

Mark felt a weird sort of flex and then Necromancer vanished from his hands and slotted it into his Status, like System Prime had dropped a *something* into a *nothing*.

It was the addition of another color to the dream.

Purple flickers appeared here and there on the edges of the outer bits of Mark's soul, on the curves of the brooms in his Clean House ritual, on the edges of the roof, and deep in the soil underneath the black grasses and on the grasses themselves. Everything alive was dying all the time... except for Mark's house, except for the wood, the foundation, and Mark's Adamantine Immortal bed and kitchen and

other central parts. But there on the edges, in the toilet and underground, decay occurred and death abounded right beside life.

Mark felt... pretty okay?

His new Status appeared.

Mark Careed, Age 19, human (Elf, as per System) [Inheritor]

Physicality set to: Weak, [Variable], Full

Mana Type: True Adamantium

House: Foundation

Extra Lives: Secure

Utilized: 55/199

Cohort: 0/2

Bindings: 4/4

Active Ritual: Clean House

Body, Adamantine Immortal: 099

Shaper, Adamantium: 099

Mind: 99 (Unusable; Familiar Detected)

Natural, Union: 099

Soul, Necromancer: 099

Arch: 99 (Empty)

Archived Abilities: [Expand]

Getting rid of a whole bunch of Archived Abilities had given him some good breathing room in Utilized.

Mark asked, “Anything different on your end, Quark?”

“Yes. The dream around the house is slightly Death-tinged. Your body in the real world seems the same.”

Mark nodded, then he went looking for the core of his Necromancer Binding, to see what memory lay at the center.

It did not take long to find that core.

It was that video recording left by his parents in case of their death.

Mark fell out of his dream, to lean against a wall in the small break room and have a deep moment. Of *course* the center of his Necromancy Binding was a memory that pushed him to get back everything he had lost.

... Mark almost made some tombstones for his parents along with statues of both of them, underground. His almost-thought was that, over the years, he would add memories about his parents to those statues, to those tombstones, and maybe they’d come back, like the goblins did, their souls gradually gathered together back into the bodies underneath the black soil.

And then he could resurrect them.

Sure, they’d come back without any memories at all, but maybe Mark could solve that problem, too, eventually. But the process of bringing them out of the dream, out of the disparate ether that everyone dissolved into after death, except for those who worshiped the Pantheon, could start now.

Except Mark had no real idea how to do that. He only knew enough to know he didn't know anything.

So he made a little fountain to the north of his house, Death mana flowing in from everywhere, up a central pillar, then falling down onto waterwheels that were Union, that turned that Death into something usable for the grasses, and for the environment of his soulhome. It would probably help him turn Death into power, if nothing else, and that is what he needed right now.

When Mark stood on the edge of his balcony, he could see that glowing fountain out there, he could hear the water sprinkling, falling, splashing, the wheels turning, and it sounded pleasant. The land soaked in Death. Some of the grasses around his house became fully purple, like softly glowing flowers creating a low fog of sparkling lights.

It was kinda beautiful.

Mark asked Quark, "What do you see, Quark?"

"I see Death mana flowing around pleasantly?"

Mark smirked a little at the question at the end of Quark's statement. Quark wasn't sure what he was seeing, but that was fine.

Mark pulled back to reality and then he stepped out of the room, into the end stages of the plan for the blockade. People were lined up on the sides of the room while Justicar spoke, mostly directing the preparations for any possible rifting into the middle of New Tokyo. He wasn't talking to Specter or Tempest or Isoko, all of whom were about 5 meters away, standing together, with Wandering Sage right behind Isoko. Aeri said small things to Isoko about the battle ahead.

Mark moved over to stand with them, softly asking, "What did I miss?"

Isoko almost said something... but then she looked at Mark with questioning eyes. "You did something to yourself?"

"Can you tell?"

"Not directly... is it Death mana protections? It feels weird. Like how Dawncoast feels sometimes when Eliot is doing weird death stuff."

“It’s just a precaution that I wasn’t ready to trigger in public, but Timeweaver sussed it out and so I’m doing it now. Sorry for not telling you earlier.” And then Mark frowned and scoffed a little, saying, “Dawncoast doesn’t feel weird with Eliot’s ‘Death stuff’.”

“Maybe at *your* pitiful range you can’t tell what’s going on, but I can, so tell me what is up with you.”

Mark shook his head at Isoko. He couldn’t tell her right now, right here.

Isoko lightly elbowed him. “Tell me.”

Other people were looking at them.

Glorious Man grinned their way.

Justicar paused his speech to glare in their direction.

Isoko and Mark stood straighter.

Justicar moved on.

Mark mouthed at Isoko, ‘No.’

Isoko stuck out her tongue at him and made a face—

“OKAY!” Justicar announced, clapping his hands. “5 minute countdown. I hope everyone knows their standing orders. If any sense of propriety remains in Okuana, then we will give them a warning shot and they will back off completely. If not, then we are prepared to defend our home.” He raised a fist. “For Humanity!”

Oh fuck.

Mark’s heart rang like a gong as he realized—

Every single superhero raised their fists and joined in a sudden Full Call of the superheroes of Crystal Tower. Mark shot his fist up, thrumming with energy, joining the chorus, Calling out—

“FOR HUMANITY!”

Mark could practically imagine the visual effects added post production that would ring out from the tower, in the aftermath of that Full Call. But there, in the moment, there was no need for effects. The world thrummed with power, and the people in that room were the cause.

Woe be unto the enemies of humanity.

The trip to Big Torii passed in a blink of flight on a duty-bound hovercraft of the Crystal Tower, as indicated by the white and blue flag flying from their back end. Derek manned the vessel. It was mostly a very sturdy flying platform for superheroes, and sometimes for camera crew.

Isoko stood with Mark, both of them standing with Tempest and Specter.

Big Torii was a giant red gate with kilometers of open space on both sides. It had an East/West orientation as opposed to Dawncoast’s North/South. Other than that, it was almost identical to the gate Mark knew and worked with all the time. Big Torii had a ‘Small Gate’ too, right on the ground in the middle of the main gate.

The guys down below were already working the gate.

Derek said, “2 minutes to activation.”

Mark said, “We’re going through with a full adamantium shell except for the top.”

“This hovercraft is rated for an extra 100 tons, so pile it on, Mark!” Derek said.

“We have extra shields on it, too,” Specter said, though there wasn’t much emphasis to his words, or desires.

Specter and Tempest were kinda wary in a lot of ways.

Tempest was blond with blue eyes, and a descendant of the Russian nations, of which Mark had assumed were fully wiped out and reintegrated into other nations, until he had met that woman at the Winter Ball who wanted help with her Russian nation... whatever it was. Mark had given that other woman money, or rather Andria had. Mark hadn't spoken to Tempest much at all.

Tempest was their heavy hitter, alongside Isoko.

Specter was a pale guy from Antarctica, from the green lands opposite of the southern tip of South America. He lived in a city outside of the Southern Crossing, and now he was here as a superhero for Crystal Tower, with a specialization in avoidance and ingress.

Specter was going to be rushing ahead of Mark, scouting and reporting, but...

Mark asked Specter, "Do you want to hang back? Because someone is going to counter attack Isoko and Tempest, and I'd like to know that they have extra defenses."

"Fuck fuck fuck," Tempest slightly muttered, fear gripping her. "This shouldn't be happening."

"But it is," Specter said, looking away from everyone.

Mark looked at Isoko.

Isoko said, "Specter and Tempest and Derek are with me. Tempest and I will be Sky Shaping for lightning against the main forces, but neither of our control is micro-sized at all. I could use the extra defenses from having Specter nearby."

Those weren't the orders that Justicar had given them.

Specter looked unsure at both of them.

Tempest, however, said, "Yes. Please. Yes." And then she looked at Isoko, asking, "Can you really tear into a kaiju with your lightning? I've never been able to do that much."

"Yeah. It's a physical force. Tactile Telekinesis, actually," Isoko said, "And with 10x speed when I get going."

Tempest sighed out a bit. Mark did a Union of Good and Bad and she sighed out better, more secure. She said, “Thank the gods... or thank Freyala, I suppose?”

Isoko grinned. “Thank Freyala.”

Specter said, “I can move at 5x. I can do faster if you can speedboost, Isoko? I know Justicar can.”

“I can do that, easy, but that will put a strain on Tempest, so I’ll keep it minimal. I’ve been experimenting with a Prismatic/Boring Union that hits pretty much everything in a small way, so that’s what I’m doing most of the time.”

“I won’t have to ration power?” Tempest asked, very seriously, “Because that’s always the limiting factor.”

“Oh heck no!” Isoko said.

Tempest felt better. She looked better, too.

Specter knew he could defend Tempest and Isoko, so he was good with that.

Mark said, “I’ll be the head of the spear, running full speed Union usually, but stopping suddenly to do Binding Work. Do not expect steady Unions from me, which is yet another reason why Specter should stay with you two. If it gets really bad we’ll retreat and I’ll summon some kaiju of our own.”

“10 seconds,” Derek said.

Mark threw out a whole bunch of adamantium, stabilizing it to the surface of the ship, coating the hull and then raising barriers along the edges, 3 meters up. He made a little lookout tower for Derek up front.

Derek multiplied at the helm, multiplied into the lookout tower, and then a few of him vanished, leaving the one at the helm and the one up at the top of the tower, and a backup inside the tower, fully enclosed in protective adamantium. Derek said, “Gate activation.”

Timeweaver spoke on the comms, “Full speed you guys.”

“Acknowledged!” Derek said, readying to gun it.

Tempest tensed, Specter turned slightly ethereal as a threat response, and then the world parted, opening up and flooding Earth with mana from Daihoon and with a Call to war for all nearby monsters and kaiju. It was a very tiny Call, though, so no kaiju responded.

Mark merely tensed, and then he let the mana and the Call wash over him, rippling over the edge of the adamantium, and it felt good.

Derek slammed the throttle.

Isoko and Mark stood tall but Tempest fell back just a bit and Specter caught her.

They were through, back to Daihoon, into Sidecity.

Mark saw the tops of buildings way out there, beyond the edge of his adamantium wall, beyond the loading zone of the gate. He lifted off into the sky, Unioning Isoko’s Prismatic/Boring with his own Good/Bad. He did not want to disrupt Specter’s Ethereality, so he didn’t do Adamant/Ethereal—

“Incoming!” Derek announced, from the tower up front. “Slow fire! I’m evading it.”

Derek slammed on some rockets and spun the whole vehicle off and to the right, and Mark saw, for a moment, the small gate, right as some trailing black/white flames coated the land. The gate winked out before the fires got through, but the fires still killed everything nearby, which was no one and nothing.

Derek spun the vehicle to the sides, avoiding the voidfire, and briefly Mark saw Sidecity.

It had been evacuated, mostly, over the last few days, but Mark felt terrified people out there, and he saw a bunch of cargo hoverships that had been mostly abandoned at port, and he felt people outside of the loading zone, on the buildings to the sides—

Black/white voidfire caressed over the edges of the adamantium shell and Mark fortified those locations, discarded others, and Derek spun the hoverplatform high into the sky. It would have been disorienting for most people, but the people here on this platform were not most people, and all it took was actual action to get Tempest into the game.

"I feel them out there. You feel them with me, Isoko?" Tempest asked.

"I do," Isoko said, "Northwest, in some buildings on the edge of Side City."

"Aiming ship," Derek said.

"Sighting," Mark said, as he stepped up into the air, to see, flexing the adamantium around the ship, refreshing the shield. He saw trails of voidfire still streaming through the air, like bullets from a machine gun. It wasn't a sniper emplacement. It was just a turret, probably deployed by some techie who was now hiding far away from the turret. The only thing left there was probably the ammo, which was the big deal. Quark informed Mark that the building should have been evacuated, so Mark said, "Tempest and Isoko; Take it down and alert HQ that we have a techie running around fucking shit up."

Tempest and Isoko wordlessly acknowledged Mark's command—

The sky suddenly roiled with prismatic lights, the auroras of Daihoon far away, but seeming so very close in this mid-morning battle. Platinum glitters soaked into clouds, and then came the lightning.

Platinum light blotted out all sight, and the sound, oh the sound. A building *had* stood there, the turret on top of it firing fast as it could empty its magazines, Derek avoiding everything and blackwhite fire erupting around the ship. And then the fire stopped, light enveloped the world, and one building became debris and a towering inferno of blackwhite fire.

Mark asked, "Is the fire in the city a problem for us?"

"No," Justicar said, in the comms, "Ground crew is on that and on finding the infiltrators. Continue on to the blockade."

That was the call Mark wanted to hear. He nodded at Derek.

Derek aimed northwest, toward D'Takasaki about 50 kilometers away, which was beyond the blockade. As the ship rose above the walls of Sidecity, Mark couldn't see the blockade, but Quark could. Quark highlighted tiny green dots in the sky, above the mountains of D'Japan, encircling Sidecity in every direction.

At an average of 40 kilometers radius from Big Torii, each ship was about 2 kilometers apart from each other, though they were closer together near the D'Takasaki base. According to standard intel, most of the ships were standard-fare battle cruisers, each about 50 meters long and equipped for short bursts of speed and with long-range and short-range weaponry. A few ships, like the one over Side Depot at D'Takasaki, were bigger.

According to Timeweaver, their main weapons were renewable fireball spellcannons, as you would find on any wall in any city, with variable loadouts. Mostly fire-based loadouts. Some voidfire was to be expected. Super hard targets required kaiju-void bombs, like the ones Mark had encountered in Memphi, that voided large diameters of space. Each ship should have 3 of those, but they did not want to use them except on high-value targets. Each ship had shapers and techs and a whole lot of personal defenders, and each ship, most of all, had one dryad.

Some ships had 2 dryads, like the mothership far ahead, hovering to the left of center between Big Torii and D'Takasaki's Side Depot.

Mark commanded, "Six ships left of the mothership. 12 kilometers away from the big one. That one first. Then we're headed *away* from the mothership, counterclockwise. This is the plan, as of right now." As Derek shifted the direction, Mark continued, "I am the only one getting within 2 kilometers of a ship. Isoko can reach me from there, and that's enough—"

Timeweaver spoke up in the comms, "Full brunt defense, Isoko, right up, push it away."

Isoko flickered the sky with platinum and for a moment she was bewildered, and then she saw something that Mark did not see and she focused. Tempest saw it, too, and she gasped. Isoko cracked the sky with platinum Tactile Telekinesis, detonating a void bomb far overhead and to the side. The bomb ate a 50 meter black hole in the world and then came the implosion.

Fire filled the aurora-blue daylight sky.

"I won't let that happen again," Isoko said, "Deploying harsh winds."

The sky around them began curling and twisting, filling with Isoko's vector with overlapping layers of spheres.

Derek said, "Maintaining course."

Timeweaver said, “Handing you off to other prognosticators.”

Aleph One spoke into their comms, “I am present and guarding.”

“What’s happening on Earth?” Mark asked, though he was mostly focused on the present.

The remnants of the void bomb implosion dissipated behind them. As long as Isoko kept on it, they’d never get that close ever again, and as long as Mark kept himself strung out over at least 100 meters then a bomb couldn’t kill him, either.

Jusicar said, “The blockade is not spilling onto Earth, but we are on high alert and several systems have been attacked inside the city. Do not worry about us, Mark Careed.”

Tempest and Specter worried.

Isoko, Derek, and Mark focused, and so, Tempest and Specter focused.

5 kilometers left.

The sky clouded over, Tempest on target, the wind picked up, the ship flew faster and rain began to fall far away, obscuring the vision of the ships to the left and the right, but leaving the target zone and ships unclouded. Tempest lived up to her name as twisters spun down from the sky in every direction, aiming at the ships, touching upon shields. She wasn’t just a Sky Shaper, she was *also* a Weather Manipulator. Lightning cascaded onto distant battleships, skipping across shielding, preventing them from getting clear shots on anyone.

Isoko focused before Mark expected her to. Suddenly, platinum glows shimmered in the sky in front of them and to the right, where the main mothership flew—

Void bombs went off, erasing the world in 50 meter black spheres that collapsed in a second, leaving behind implosions.

“I feel good about this!” Mark shouted, as he lifted off, into the air. “See you all on the flip side!”

The battleships easily saw Mark in his black suit with high-vis white lines, but then Mark strung himself out, Alacrity/Slowness beating hard, thrumming his existence, touching upon Isoko's Union all around him. Mark sped up.

Prismatic flows felt pretty fucking awesome.

Mark spiraled forward, through the wind and rain, the very sky itself helping him as he reached the first ship and latched on like an Energy/Entropy vampire. It was a standard battleship with a large deck, turrets on top and on the sides, and hard shields. Mark slammed into those shields, into the invisible dryad strung into all of the machinery, into the personnel, into the soldiers, and the shield cracked. Mark flowed into the battleship itself, stringing himself out to two bodies, one 100 meters away, one right in the thick of everything, and the dryad screamed, uncurling fast.

There was resistance.

Spells fired.

Death bloomed, laced through the dryad like purple veins, into Mark, and Mark felt a surge of power that was completely unlike everything he had ever felt. Giddy; that's what this much Death mana did to him, now. Mark ripped that Death directly into himself, letting out an echoing laugh as he couldn't contain it all, as his Union of Energy and Entropy killed all other Powers on the ship.

A blast of pure Energy, purified and rarefied, echoed out with every beat of Mark's multiple hearts, directly into Isoko's Prismatic Union.

The sky burst with platinum rips, with thunderous lightning, and with a hurricane blast.

The dryad shuddered, turning dormant as every part of it failed at life, its vector slamming inward, energy stolen. Mark followed that inward slam, opening himself up to attack as he Unioned with the dryad, following it into the dream.

Mark stood in his Skilling house, gazing upon the sleeping dryad.

It was a dead person wrapped in vines, Death flowing all around it, something like glowing green Life curling inside that Death. They were dead. They were alive. They slept and Mark pulled them apart,

ripping out a Binding that shimmered like a black, green, and purple star. The star started to writhe in his hand, grabbing his hand, trying to change him.

It got nowhere with that.

“What the fuck is this?” Mark asked no one in particular.

The System chose to answer.

Ability identified: Cursed Abomination of Okuana.

Note: Occupies all slots.

Mark crushed the writhing star and obliterated the remnants of the powerless dryad still sitting in his soul, saying, “Well that’s fucking horrifying.”

Mark woke up.

He had spent 10 seconds under, and so some people had come out of hiding to shoot him with big guns filled with weak strength. There was fire and ice and arcane energy, and none of it mattered. With his body on fire and the dryad fully dead, vector gone and body moldering, Mark turned to the new people.

“Surrender.”

They screamed in fear and hate, some pissing themselves, some fainting, some managing to hold onto their weapons to keep firing, though they missed every shot. Some of them were puking and dying from exposure to Death mana.

Mark ripped out their Bindings.

Timeweaver spoke in Mark’s ears, “Okuana is trying for a cease fire. Do not cease.”

Mark moved into the sky, leaving behind a whole lot of newly-powerless people who scrambled to put out fires, to not die to the flames or to the Death mana the Dryad had loosed onto the ship. As Mark threatened to leave their space, they decided that death was a better option than disgrace.

Or maybe someone on some other ship had decided that.

A void bomb went off, erasing Mark's body near the ship.

Mark opened the eyes of his body about 100 meters away.

He flew to the next ship, to the south. Tornadoes and platinum lightning touched down here and there, wrecking havoc, weakening battleship-strength shields, while hurricane rain obscured all further sights. Mark reached the next ship with Alacrity speed, Isoko and the rest catching up but staying far away from the actual battle. Mark cracked the ship's shields—

A laser of pure Death erupted from the gathered tips of the invisible dryad on the ship, burrowing right into Mark's soul. Sure, his adamantine flesh blasted away, *a little*.

But it was like a warm bath.

Mark took everything the dryad gave him, soaking in the Energy for him and Isoko and giving back the Entropy of the entire battlefield. Mark grinned as the dryad suddenly went to sleep and pretty much everyone on the ship almost collapsed. A few more ships like this, and Isoko might start to understand what Mark was doing with Energy/Entropy, without Mark ever violating Freyala's edict to never tell anyone about the secret of shavallian.

Mark descended on the auto-turrets that were firing even without control, slicing through them. Explosions rocked the ship and vectors vanished below, but they were already vanishing from the outpouring of Death, thanks to the dryad... People were dying and that should upset Mark, but Mark was in a battle-high right now.

Mark called out, "This Death mana making you feel weird too, Isoko?"

Isoko spoke in Mark's ear, saying, "Yes! But in a good way! What are you doing over there— OOP!"

She cut herself off.

The sky to the north of Mark shattered into an almost-solid platinum displacement. A void bomb shattered the center of that displacement for a moment but more platinum glows surrounded the black hole in the world, pushing it back. The black implosion collapsed down to normal red fire beyond a platinum curtain of rain and power. The hurricane swept it all away in the next moment.

Mark answered, "I'm purifying it! Somehow!"

"Somehow!" Isoko responded, half-sarcastic.

Mark ripped out the Bindings of the insensate and the trying-to-resist, and then he found the captain shouting into his comms about how they needed to leave. There was a big argument in the blockade right now. Whatever!

Mark took the captain's Binding while he was in the middle of screaming about support. When Mark left the captain, the guy looked hollowed-out as he tried to grab for his Wind Shaper and Leader Powers and he found them absent.

"Gods of Dark and Light, we are forsaken," the guy mumbled, as he collapsed against his command station.

He would probably live, but without his Powers his Power Level would gradually fade down to nothing, so any little thing could kill him out here, including the Death mana in the air. And now that his Power of Leader was gone, he would never again have a place in the army of Okuana.

But at least he had his life, and the second ship did not vanish in a burst of void.

The third ship was already running away, the blockade breaking—

"Turn around and hit the big one over D'Takasaki," Timeweaver said in the comms.

Mark ripped backward, flying at a normal, fast speed, saying, "Hitting up the big one."

"Right behind you," Isoko replied.

"Any assassin teams yet?"

--

Isoko stood on the hover platform, in the center of a directed hurricane, with four bodies on the ground around her, some of them in pieces. Most of the attackers hadn't made it anywhere close to their black bowl of a hoverplatform.

Specter was covered in blood, all of it from other people, as he floated halfway in the adamantium all around them, head on a swivel.

A few Dereks funneled Good directly into Tempest, holding her upright as she struggled to keep the storm going through her broken legs and missing arm... Well. No. Her arm was over there, in a corner of the ship. So not really missing at all.

Isoko brushed some blood out of her eyes, and replied, "We're good."

--

Mark floated in front of the big ship, about 700 meters out, gazing down at a pair of dryads uncoiling like eldritch squids with trees for bodies and so very, very many roots for legs, shifting on the deck of the battleship, aiming turrets and spellwork at him. They did not fire, yet. Mark did not advance. For the moment, he hovered there, ominously, adamantium spread outward in many directions, knowing that the people on the ship were making calculations on how to hit all of him with void bombs while also understanding that they'd *never* get all of him.

Mark non-seriously asked Isoko, "You're good, huh?"

"What? You think *I* wouldn't tell you valuable battlefield information? Perish the thought! To change the subject: Do you need me to crack open that Dreadnought-wannabe, or can you handle it yourself?"

Mark loved Isoko.

"Give it a few taps, would you? If you're not busy."

"I always got time for you, Mark. Pick a side: Port, starboard, bow, or stern."

"Port!"

The port side seemed like the most open for smaller hoverships to spill out, if they were going to spill out, so that seemed like a nice entry way. Mark hadn't seen any small hoverships because he was sure they were under obfuscation magics, but—

The sky roiled with platinum glimmers and prismatic auroras.

And then the sky opened up with platinum thunder and coruscating lightning, ripping down the port side of the ship. The shields flared to life, blocking some of the physical force, breaking in that blocking, the entire battleship shifting starboard to get out of the main blast still raining down from the heavens. Wood blasted away. Metal melted into bright sparks that spread like fireworks. Something inside the ship exploded, and then the shields flickered and died. The lightning stopped a moment later.

From ten different mouths and sets of lungs, Mark Called out, "Death to the Godking, but *you* can survive! **Surrender!**"

--

Behind adamantine walls that were dented open with bullet wounds, under the rain and covered in blood again, Isoko stood in Union with Tempest, Specter, Derek, and especially Mark. It was a terrible battle. Mark barely saw a fraction of any of it, but he was the center of attention right now.

And in that attention, in that joining of Unions, Isoko realized that Mark loved her.

It was there, and then it was gone. Did he even realize he had felt that way, for but a moment? When she had made big moves in the sky, when Mark had seen her, whatever weirdness was going on with his everything had tripped over into love, like it had tripped over into love that one time when Aurora had defended the settlement from 3 kaiju at the same time.

Happy tears fell, disguised by the rain, and Isoko cut the comms to Mark for a moment, saying to Specter, "Incoming on hovercraft behind us, at least 4."

Specter flew off, fast and ethereal, Isoko guiding him where he needed to go, and soon she felt vectors winking out as the guy literally tore through reality as he moved, ripping disguised ships apart.

Isoko's platinum skin glittered with reflected auroras, black shielding, and a bright blue sky sparkling with lightning and rain, as she organized the battlefield, letting Mark run wild where he needed to run.

Gods, she loved him, too.