

## Dane vs Megas

The ruined part of the city was always empty as far back as Dane could remember. They said it was turned to rubble in a storm back in the year 2000; the old woman who owned the sweets shop next to the bus station said it happened in 2010; the local gossip at the café said 2007. No one could decide on a date, so it made sense that no one could agree on how it happened either.

One man, a drunk Dane had met at a party with his Firefighting team, told him a slurred tale about how a shady secret organization caused it by upsetting natural steam vents for some diabolical plot. At that same party, contrary to the first man, a goat seven drinks in made a theatrical display about how it was the fault of aliens who miscalculated and landed their craft on top of the buildings. Just as Dane managed to leave that party and find his rest on the apartment balcony, a thin and dapper cat joined him in the night air.

He had the third, and most interesting, reason for why the east side was abandoned.

Dane remembered the cat offering him a cigarette, which he did with full knowledge of Dane's profession. A little irony to lighten the mood, he quipped, and instead offered Dane a stick of gum with a smile. They talked about their respective jobs. Dane, a firefighter for the city and an amateur inflationist attempting to go pro. The cat, a purveyor of magical items, sold at a reasonable price, he assured.

Magic made Dane's skin tingle warily. He had nothing but bad luck with the arcane. One time, as a kid, someone had enchanted his bike as a prank. It ended in a small concussion, but Dane made sure the punk who cast the spell wound up with a broken nose. His other, more recent encounter with magic, was on the job. He had put out a raging inferno in the southside of the city to the chagrin of the pyromancer who started it. Dane's unique aqua hued amphibian skin gave him a resistance to fire. He bull-rushed the ornery firestarter, only to have the old geezer cup his hands around Dane's throat, and cast a spell that made him swell with hot air.

He tried not to dwell on how that fight ended. He came out the victor, but not without injuring his pride in the process. Dane shook his head, banished the memory, and returned his attention to the cat.

"I hope this isn't offensive, considering your line of work, but you're quite the firecracker," the cat said to Dane. "Bold, brash, bigger than life. Most inflators can talk the talk, but they go to pieces under pressure. Literally, sometimes, as I'm sure you're well acquainted with the idiosyncrasies of ballooning."

Dane nursed his lemonade. He preferred sobriety over drunkenness, and the only high he chased was a full-bodied one delivered at the end of a bike pump. "Yeah, y'could say that about me. I've got a big mouth, but I've got bigger muscles," Dane flexed his free arm. His

well-fed bicep bulged, and the grooves along his arm deepened. He strained and forced a greater swell, and paused for the cat to drink in the sight.

“You’re full of more than just hot air, as they say,” the cat giggled.

There was an odd look in the cat’s eyes. One that Dane was wary of, but intrigued by. He looked like he knew something. A secret that no one else knew, but one that could be pried from him with just the right persuasion. Dane was never good at that sort of sneaky, clandestine wordplay stuff. So he just went with his gut. “Alright, you approached me for a reason. What is it? And what’s your name, anyway?”

“Jeremiah,” he said. The accusation didn’t phase him. His face was a neutral, polite and smiling mask. If there were any cracks in it, anything deeper, Dane wasn’t able to pick up on it.

“And what do ya want from me, Jeremiah?”

“I want you to retrieve a rubber suit for me.”

Dane blinked. “Uh... I think they sell those in the backroom of that dirty mag shop on 10th street.”

Jeremiah shook his head. “It’s not just any suit. It’s special. Magic, you might have already surmised. It’s in the eastern ruins, the part where few people dare to venture, and fewer stay when the sun goes down. All those rumours about ghosts and marauding sorcerers who will turn you into goop for looking them in the eye. Rumours spread, because I don’t want my competition getting to the ‘actual’ cause of its abandonment before I do.”

Dane finished his drink and placed it on a small table to his left. He looked the cat square in the face and spoke. “What’s in it for me if I get this suit for you, eh?”

“You’ll be the talk of the town, the city, even. The mighty Dane who went deeper into the collapsed buildings and supposedly haunted ruins, all the way to its center, and retrieved the very cursed device which brought calamity to the east side in the first place. Your reputation as the toughest frog on the firefighting force would swell, almost as well as you do in competition. And if you do it swiftly, I’ll even compensate you for your time.”

Jeremiah reached into the pocket of his pinstripe trousers, and fished out a cheque book with black pages. He used a gold-nibbed pen to write down something, signed it with a flourish, and ripped the leaf from the book for Dane’s approval. He waited for a response with a forward lean, and a confident smirk.

Dane had never seen so many zeroes and commas outside of a video game.

“You got yourself a deal buster,” Dane was going to be the richest frog in the joint. A bunch of crumbling buildings, a rubber suit, and a quick delivery back to Jeremiah’s store. He had this in the bag.

\*\*\*

His muscles blew thicker and stronger until he was able to grip the overturned slab of concrete. He dug his fingers into the hard, rugged surface, and felt the edges dig into his palms. If he was a less experienced inflator, he might be worried about springing a leak, but he was Dane the Brute; the only thing which could pop him was himself, and that one time in August, which didn’t count. He grit his teeth and pulled. His grunting and the pumping of his own heart were so loud in the silence of the east side, it felt like they could be heard from the inner city. There was the distance shifting and settling of buildings, maybe one or two bird calls, and he thought he heard a car earlier but that could have just been the wind. Dane knew that people were afraid to come this way, but it was strange that it extended to the animals too.

Dane’s arms began to twinge with pain. He considered stopping to bring his thumbs back to his mouth and pump them up another few inches when the concrete slab finally moved. It capitulated to his strength with an awful grinding noise that made Dane grind his teeth. He opened his mouth and expelled the air in his arms, and lamented their deflation, even if remaining inflated for too long was bad for you. He didn’t want to come down with a case of pressure-madness after all.

“Alright, how much further?” Dane clicked his tongue and looked around. He was in the foyer of a fancy accounting building. The company logo was a huge stylized dollar sign. It was rusted brown now, and laying on its side. If that wasn’t a bit on the nose for the dangers of capitalism, Dane didn’t know what was. “Huh, I think I got refused a loan here once.”

Dane had taken to talking to himself. It made him feel safer, his voice was big and strong, and hearing it made him feel the same way.

The map Jeremiah had sent to him on his phone was accurate so far. It helped Dane navigate the labyrinthian sections where multiple buildings had collapsed, and merged with each other, creating large superstructures that were too easy to get lost in. He continued through one of those structures, using his powerful legs and built-up arms to swing and bound across the flipped geometry. He used a bolted secretary’s desk, which was now horizontal and six feet in the air, to springboard himself against the edge of an open elevator.

Dane held on with one hand and stuck his right hand in the small opening between the rusty doors. He inhaled through his nose, kept his mouth shut, and with a series of concentric tenses channelled the air into the hand between the elevator doors. It pumped up like a latex glove, then continued until it was puffy enough to force the doors apart. He deflated his hand, then climbed inside. With the building on his side the elevator shaft was just a square tunnel. Dane checked his phone map. The elevator was to his left and he was being instructed to go right. Things were going well so far.

A brand new pump set-up would be a good first spend. All the bells and whistles. He could afford to get an extension to his current home pump-gym, with reinforced walls to save on the repair cost of those days where he just couldn't resist overfilling the room. There was a particular classic style auto-pneumatic training array he had his eye on ever since it was posted in the latest Blimp'd magazine.

Dane's daydreams helped him power through the tunnel's growing incline. He had been walking non for what felt like a solid ten minutes. He felt the tendons in his ankles burn where the elevator shaft became steepest. "Alright, let's apply some pressure," Dane inhaled and pumped his body until he became semi-spherical and it adhered to the square confines of the tunnel. He deliberately stopped himself from becoming too firm, and left his puffy body with enough slack so that he could pull himself along with a little bit of elbow crease. This method of forward movement wasn't elegant, but when was he ever? He pulled and hauled himself until he saw sunlight.

The overturned elevator shaft ended, and left Dane staring out over a vista of nature-claimed office blocks and warehouses. And a crater. With something deposited in the middle of the basin. It was far away, but the sunshine was intense, and the thing which glinted at the crater's centre had the same dull reflecting power as some of his friends when they over-strained. Which meant rubber.

His target was in sight, now he just had to get to it.

Dane looked down and vertigo returned his stare. He felt dizzy once he realized how high up he was. It didn't matter how experienced you were as an inflator, the realization of being closer to the clouds than the dirt could still upset your equilibrium.

The structure tilted diagonally with him poking out of its bottom end, a balloon overflowing the square hole for a defunct elevator. He overflowed its edge like a muffin top over its paper cup. He could deflate, but he was too impatient, and decided on a quicker route for his descent.

Dane retreated backwards into the elevator shaft like an animal into its burrow, then grabbed the edges where the shaft let out. He kept retreating, a natural combination of his amphibian body and constant inflation had elasticized him. He deflated a few inches, pulled until his arms were like rubber bands, and stopped fighting the tension.

He shot out of the building like a gunshot. Dane swallowed air before he flew, knowing he wouldn't have time to inhale once he was in motion. He swallowed and directed the pressure to make himself spherical. He arced over a bisected skyscraper and smacked into the side of another accounting building at an angle, which sent him hurtling toward the crater below as a blue basketball.

He slammed into the ground and his, about to gasp at the impact. He resisted the urge, and bounced. If he broke the seal on his lips, there was every chance he could reflexively over-inhale. And with the beating his body had just taken, a sudden increase in pressure could rupture him. Dane screwed his eyes shut, and thought of himself as indestructible. He deluded himself hard enough that it became reality. The bouncing slowed gradually, Dane's body making a hollow 'bloomp' noise on the blast-sheared floor of the crater.

It looked like a rubber suit, it smelled like a rubber suit, it even tasted like a rubber suit. Dane recoiled his tongue. He squatted down and inspected the deflated pile of royal blue latex. The suit Jeremiah had been so insistent he retrieved was just a standard, muscle-suit, with the countenance of a horned bull with a pompadour. A separate valve had been installed into the hollow chamber which made up the hairpiece. Dane couldn't help but laugh at how feeble the thing looked. It was probably very impressive when adjusted to its proper PSI, but all Dane saw was a floppy-horned bull with lifeless eyes and a permanent scowl.

A red pole taller than Dane had been thrust through the suit. It thrummed with the low rumble of magic. And magic put Dane on edge. He pulled out his phone and dialled Jeremiah, who answered promptly. "Are you enjoying your trek into the 'haunted' ruins?" He said. "My app tells me that you're at the centre, did you find our dearly deflated friend?"

Dane rolled his eyes. He touched the rod, gingerly, by poking it with lead pipe he found half-stuck in the dirt. It crackled red, and jolted, and a stray arc licked Dane's wrist. His skin went red hot and he dropped his phone and the pipe in alarm. His heart pumped and his temper flared, he fished the pipe and pumped his right arm to thrice its size. He swung with air-empowered force and broke the pole in half. When the thing stopped crackling, he picked up his phone and continued.

"Sorry. There was some real evil looking rod skewering the suit like it's the final boss in a bad JRPG, or something. It had the nerve to give me a shock so I went and gave it a smack, but I must have pumped too hard 'cause uh... it broke in half. Hopefully I aint cursed or nothing now." Dane relaxed his limb and exhaled the excess air through his nostrils again. "You're a magic sort, right? Know anything about them?"

Jeremiah was quiet for once. Dane kept waiting for a quip that never came.

"Hey cat boy? Hello? Ugh, am I losing signal. Hello!"

Dane's nose wrinkled. The scent of ozone rose steadily. He looked up and squinted past the reflection of the sun on what remained of the wrecked finance building's windows. Sky was as clear and blue as the damned suit, not a cloud in sight. "Jeremiah, is it raining over in central?"

Jeremiah sighed so loud it peaked the microphone's audio. "You found the suit and it had a big, clearly magical, red rod stuck through its core. So you decided to touch it without

protection. Then, because it gave you a whack on the wrist for touching it, you BROKE it. Is that right, do I have everything correct?"

The smell of ozone grew stronger in Dane's nostrils until its pungency made him spin around to confront its source. A looming figure, or to be more precise, the foot of one met his eyeline. He slowly tilted his head until he exchanged looks with a bull made entirely of rubber. He was still partly crumpled, even at the height of a two-story building. He had four visible valves. One on each pectoral in place of a nipple, one on the side of his pompadour, and one on his pelvis where a flesh and blood man's genitals should be. All four were open and vacuuming air to feed the behemoth. Who grew shinier, and more awake with every breath sucked into him through his valves.

"When you said the suit was enchanted, you didn't by any chance mean it was like, alive. Did you?"

Jeremiah sighed, again, and Dane could feel him roll his eyes. "Its name is Megas. The suit 'used' to be inanimate, but someone bought it from my store in 2009 for some Greek mythology themed escape-room experience. Even though it has humanoid feet, they still passed it off as a minotaur. To make a long story short: The disgruntled employee fused with the suit, turned his minimum wage indignation into air pressure, and his rampage is why the east side of the city is in ruins now."

Dane laughed. Normal frogs didn't sweat, but apparently he did. "Aha I've screwed up reeeeeeeal bad haven't I?"

"I hope you can get out of the ruins as quickly as you got in."

Boom. The giant's footstep made a clamorous bang, it was hard to believe he was full of nothing but air.

"I hear him," he rumbled. "Mm, Jeremiah... you coward. Your lackey had me stuck here... for over a decade!"

Megas glared at Dane with simmering rage. He was fully inflated now, almost tall enough to rival the halved skyscrapers around him, with each muscular hill and valley pushed to a tautness that displayed the inflatable's seams. They groaned in time with the giant's breathing, always so tight it seemed like they were a step away from bursting open. But that was probably just how they always looked, if it were that easy to push a monster of a balloon like this to its limits, Dane wouldn't be so nervous.

Dane took off running. He pumped, carefully lightening himself so that he could offset the drag of his muscles and his baggy clothing. He didn't look behind him, but he didn't need to, the sound of stretched rubber and the crumbling of the earth behind him spurred his egress. Dane could be zippy when he wanted to be, but he probably wasn't speedy enough to outrun a giant.

“Why is he so pissed off at you?” Dane shouted down the phone, leaping to a nearby lamp post and bounding off of it to shoot his tongue at another further ahead. He wrapped it around the rusty fixture, and cringed at the taste. He jumped off and swung himself forward, uncoiling his tongue to gain momentum and soar forwards. He kept that speed when his inflated feet bounced off the grass-covered sidewalk, and he had no intention of stopping.

“Well that’s an easy question to answer, I’m the one who had his rampage cut short.”

“Then why didn’t you warn me about that stupid red rod keeping him pinned to the crater!?”

Jeremiah clicked his tongue. “Ah, that. I hired a third party to do the dirty work, and I never inquired about the particulars of how he took Megas down.”

“That seems REAL out of character for a prissy cat like you bud!” Dane shot his tongue, and coiled it around a pillar up ahead. He pumped up his feet with a huge blast of air, and got the airtime he needed to slingshot himself around the corner. He did it just in time to see the giant crash through the buildings in the corner of his eye, closing the gap by brute force. His demolition approach to catching up to Dane destabilized the precarious overlap of toppled buildings, bringing chunks of concrete, glass, and metal raining down from the grey canopy above.

“I had to take inventory that day, and my inventory ledger only works until two o’clock. I wasn’t prepared to offer overtime, so when the assassin came to report the job was done, I just paid him and sent him on his way.”

Dane snorted, hot air streamed out of his nostrils. “So I’m about to be a thin cut slice of frog salami under some bull’s heel, all because you wanted to be CHEAP!?”

“This conversation has reached its conclusion. I’ll be frank D--”

“The last time you were frank with me, I wound up going on a crazy mission for you!”

“If you’d let me finish,” Jeremiah said. “Somehow defeat Megas, and I’ll double your reward. Good luck.” The call went dead. Dane was left with a flat beep, and the most incredulous face he had ever made in his life.

“Double of nothing... eh?”

He put as much distance as he could between him and Megas. When he couldn’t see the bull, he ducked into the shell of an old bakery which was still mostly intact. The buildup of grime and dirt on the window had rendered the pane opaque, so he tucked himself into a corner with his head pressed to the wall. He could hear so much rumbling that he couldn’t tell if it came

from Megas, or the collapsing ruins. He exhaled, completely deflating his legs and feet, and thanked whatever inflatable god there was for a moment to think.

Dane had two options. Both ended badly for him, but one of them let him keep his pride intact. He looked around the dilapidated bakery. The glass counter had been pillaged, so he wouldn't have to deal with buzzing insects and rotting pastry. That was good. He squinted at the symbol on the wall and stood up. He brushed away the dust and laughed. It was the image of a fat, blue cat's face, with a hose stuck between his massive cheeks. He wasn't in just any bakery, he was in a Bigga Biggs bakery.

Dane hopped the counter and punched the supply room door open. Inside he found a weapon which could turn the tide on his pursuer. His smile couldn't get any wider.

\*\*\*

Megas punched through another mound of rubble. He growled, and shouted. "Where are you!? Lackey of Jeremiah!? Come out and face me, man to man. Or are you as cowardly as his last minion?"

He punched, and punched, pounding the world around him into fine dust. His rubber grew splodges of red that started to grow across his synthetic skin and join up, until he was a wash of crimson from his chest to his stomach and it continued to spread. A haze of heat began to emanate from his core, his anger made manifest in sweltering temperatures that only continued to rise. His nostrils twitched and blasted hot steam, and he roared so loud it shook the earth.

"Up here you big guy!"

Megas squinted his eyes past the sunlight. He saw a figure standing heroically on top of one of the few intact buildings left in eastside. He recognized the silhouette and stomped towards it, his impotent rage bulking him up as he approached. His sculpted thighs had become overblown and rubbed together, making his rubber squeal after every footfall. It ruined the beast of a balloon's intimidation, but really, Dane wondered why he had ever been afraid of him to begin with.

After all, Megas was just a balloon, and if Dane knew one thing, it was how to make a balloon pop.

Dane stood on the lip of the building's roof. His arms crossed, like a proper badass, posed for an awesome orchestral arrangement of the theme song which only played in his head. He had pumped himself up to twice his height, and almost achieved the same feat in width by puffing up his belly and chest for core support. The majority of his pump went to his arms, which he could have maybe chosen a better pose to accommodate for. Keeping his arms crossed when they were thick as medieval battering rams was a real workout.



His skin had the low lustre of dull rubber, aqua hued, with orange slashes across his arms and down his back. His vanilla coloured belly and pectorals served to highlight their bounciness, and just how much air Dane had pushed into them. And his baggy pants, the ones which usually sagged so low they exposed his boxers, now hugged his expansive waistline.

Dane could have blown up to this state at any time. The thing which made him feel so confident enough to do it now was the array of candy red canisters he strapped to himself like a gunslingers bandoleer. Each tank was a shot at pushing Megas over the edge, and into pieces. The Bigga Biggs bakery he hid inside was known for its 'swell' pastries. And the gaseous agent which gave their cream puffs, eclairs and profiteroles their infamous bloat potential was stored inside the metal cylinders Dane strapped to his torso. One bite of a pump-gas aerated cream puff could have an average sized person struggling to fit through the doorway. An entire store room's worth of canisters should be enough to deal some damage to Megas, he hoped.

Megas broke into a light sprint. His steps whipped up a storm of powdered concrete and sent abandoned cars flying out of his way. "I'll send you back to Jeremiah as a stain!"

Megas opened his mouth to roar. Dane bounded on his powerful frog-legs directly toward his opponent. He removed a cylinder of pump-gas, crushed its regulator, and dropped it hissing from overhead, as he careened over the behemoth. The silhouette of the gas tank was visible through the bull giant's thinning, reddening rubber skin. Dane watched the metal expand, unable to contain the explosion of pump-gas, which had been brought on by the raging temperatures inside of Megas.

Dane had been counting on the tanks unloading their payload over time, but now that he knew they'd explode on ingestion, his confidence at surviving the encounter rose.

With the explosion roaring inside of him, Megas lost another notch in his musculature. His harder vinyl-like abs became a uniform, bulging curve. He pushed down on his midsection, trying in vain to make his body return to its herculean proportions. "My beautiful bod!" He swung his arm and destroyed the bakery as he turned, and charged in Dane's direction. "I'll make you pay for ruining my muscles, you TOAD!"

Dane landed on a bus mostly covered in moss and rust. He broke two pressure regulators, threw the tanks far behind him and let his arms stretch like rubber bands, then slingshotted them into Megas's mouth while he talked. The explosions were instantaneous, and the bull fattened up with enough pump-gas to pop a hundred inflators.

His head must have been partly made from vinyl and less elastic rubber than the rest of him, because it refused to swell like the rest of his anatomy. His cheeks and chin, however, did puff up. Dane was reminded of Ghostbusters and the Stay Puft man, as Megas waddled forward intent on his ruin.

“Stop... it!” Megas strained, his toned abdominals a thing of memory. His spherical belly did more damage to the ruins as he waddled, forced to precariously place one puffy foot in front of the other, in order to make himself move forward. The buildings which refused to yield to his globe flattened its sides, creating a sustained creaking that Dane recognized.

It was one of the most ominous things you could hear as an inflator. It was the warning creak. He looked up at his overloading pursuer, and while he envied his sheer size, he knew it came at cost. Another tank, that was all he had to deliver. So he pumped his legs as full as they could get, and rocketed to meet Megas at eye level. So close, Dane was equal to the height and width of one of his nostrils. He performed the same slingshot maneuver, throwing the last two tanks into Megas’s mouth. But it seemed weird to him that the giant would just be standing there, mouth agape, knowing what Dane had in store for him.

He knew what Dane was planning.

Shit.

Pressurized hands clasped around Dane’s body, and forced the air out of him. He made sure to fully exhale, or the grip strength of the bull would pop him for sure. He braced himself for what was coming. The tanks exploded inside of Megas, and pushed him to a new state of rotundity that left him semi-spherical and all of his limbs bloated like a parade balloon with the wrong measurements. Dane watched his shoulders disappear into the bull’s rounder, more spherical body. The bulge proceeded along his arms, practically just fat cones, which he had somehow managed to bend far enough to bring together. The blast reached his hands and inflated them, and Dane thought his head was going to pop off like a champagne cork.

Megas snorted superheated air in Dane’s face, and shone a brilliant latex red. The colour of classic balloons, and anger. He pulsed larger, yards at a time, quivered, and then deflated but remained more pressurized than he had been before. The cycle of pulsing to his limit, and deflating to a less comfortable size, continued to hasten. He was already popped, but he was holding the detonation back by sheer force of will. Dane respected that.

“I’m not going to burst,” he said and pushed his enormous muzzle to Dane’s wide mouth. “You are!”

Dane expanded too fast. He blew up into a nigh-perfect sphere, shredding his clothes and sending the makeshift bandoleer flying in all directions. Megas’s hands were forced apart, and his conical arms snapped to his sides, too rigid to remain at any other position without the interlocking of fingers to hold them together. Dane felt himself approaching a size he had never known he was capable of, and by the way the sunlight passed through him, it was probably a size he wasn’t meant to be stretched to.

He quivered like a soap bubble, rapidly getting pumped up by a red-hot pressure kiss from his pursuer. His proud arms and his reliable jumping legs retreated into doughnuts of

rubber-like skin that used to be his shoulders and his thighs. His stubby little tail puffed out like a ball. And his cheeks and vocal sac rung his face, like the worlds sparsest balloon arch. He closed his eyes and thought deeply. He was never the valorous sort, but he knew that he couldn't let this blowhard get loose. If he kept puffing into Dane, he might manage to keep himself intact long enough to deflate.

He was a firefighter, and if he warped his logic just enough, the red-sheened Megas was just a fire that needed to be extinguished.

Dane waited until he was so tight his skin had the hardness of steel. He was big enough for the furthest curves to touch the sides of the double-wide street. He looked Megas in the eye, without breaking the pump-kiss, and refused to let the bull win.

"If I'm going to blow like the superstar going supernova like I am," he thought.

Dane inhaled through his nose, he started spouting pinprick leaks of hot air across his body. The point of no return.

"Then you're coming with me, blowhard!"

Dane blew in response. His throat burned, but he pushed, and pushed. Until he forced Megas into a stalemate, and then pushed past it. He shot one final gust of air down the bull's throat. His eyes went wide, and his elasticity finally gave. His body yawned, rapidly losing all definition, and becoming a series of squealing crimson balloons fighting for space. As they enveloped Dane, and he felt his own hide give out, he smirked. "Worth it."

KaBOOM!

The shockwave could be felt from the central district. Jeremiah watched the clouds part from the boom from the window of his quaint antique shop. He could see scraps of aqua blue mixed in with the sheets of steaming red latex that rained down across the entire city. "Mm, I suppose that counts as a job well done," he said and picked out a book of reformation spells from his collection. "I suppose I'll include this cantrip as a bonus for dealing with my negligence, Mister Dane."