

9k chapter. Enjoy.

Chapter 332

“You owe me! You owe me! I want the *entire* drop of Misery in a Bottle, before you leave!” Lila triumphantly cheered for her victory as Aiden Tiered up. Her voice was only barely audible over the other cheers and hollers, of course, but it made it to the person who mattered.

“You disgraceful, cheating cur! He told you in advance,” Sien spat at her.

Lila gave the woman a toothy grin. Aiden *hadn't* told her, but there was no need to rely on that. “Shouldn't have made the bet with me, then.”

“It's not a loss just yet!” Olivier came to Sien's rescue as well as his own. “Technically, we bet he'd Tier up via inspiration, and that's still possible!”

Sien regained her hope even as she nodded along.

Lila crossed her feet and pondered the technicality while she wiggled her toes. That hadn't been in the spirit of the bet, but they were technically correct, and that was the best kind of correct. Fuck it. Active bets added to the excitement.

“Sure, let's let it ride.”

Sien steepled her fingers, and her shadow started whispering the word ‘inspiration’ over and over.

Her pleas were overshadowed as Ellen collected her winnings from the bet that one of the Ascenders would use some obscure half-forgotten technique.

Olivier wiped his forehead. “The stress is killing me,” he claimed before chugging his... two hundred and thirteenth—fourteenth?—cocktail. Lila wasn't certain she'd caught all of them, and she hadn't paid attention to how many had been stocked by the caterers.

Moe threw an arm over the speedster and faux whispered, “And this is why secondary bets are dumb. Only bet on the outcome.”

Olivier shoved the skeletal arm off his shoulder as Max cackled. “Anyone want to take my bet now? Come on, I have an enchanted Mind Spike that will, guaranteed, punch through any Tier 47 or lower defense. Wager something of equal value, and I bet that Aiden shocks all of us in some way we never expected.”

Lila considered it, but the terms were just too vague and Aiden always tried to act mysterious. He, if anyone could, would surprise them of all people.

Sien distracted her musings with a more interesting bet. “Bet on both Aiden *and* Maya pulling some new abilities out of their asses. I have a Tier 40 gem that I can't identify. Take it or leave it.”

Lila mused on Sien's offer before agreeing. Oddities like that were rarely powerful, but they *were* usually pretty. And Lila liked gems.

Brian's jaw rattled as he reoffered his own bet for a third time. “A personal undead servant made out of a Tier 40 corpse on Maya making a pun rule.”

Like the last two times he'd offered, nobody took him up on the bet, and Gideon spoke up with a new bet of his own. “Any bottle of wine out of my personal collection. Bet is, Aiden gets to use his boots in the fight.”

Krodag perked up at that. “For or against?”

“For.”

“Done!” Lila jumped onto the bet with both Sien and Max. If Gideon was intent on throwing away good wine there was no reason to refuse.

Olivier raised a glass. “Speaking of boots, I have a Tier 5 growth pair of boots that triples one's speed. Betting them that Aiden gets punched so hard bubbles come out of him.”

“Define bubbles.”

“Define *punch*.”

Lila was distracted from that bet as Ellen offered her own. “A Tier 45 Stone Milk on Maya doing something to strip Aiden or Yun Me.”

Krodag cocked his skull at the odd side bet. “Why include Yun Me? She's ostensibly on Maya's side.”

Lila answered for the younger woman. “Because it's *Maya*. I'll take that bet. I have an old set of scales lying around. I—”

Eclavorn slapped the table next to him, shattering it and giving what Lila thought might be an attempt at a flirty growl. “I'm in, that she fails. I offer a thousand pounds of Tier 45 Stygian Venison.”

Lila rolled her eyes as Max started to giggle uncontrollably. Even in his humanoid form, the man couldn't contain himself.

Lila was tempted to back out of the bet, but decided to let it ride.

As she watched Aiden punch the melee rune kid in the face, she murmured loud enough for everyone to hear. “You better not fuck me, Maya. Strip 'em.”

Maya twisted, dodging a nigh invisible burst of rain that tried to cut through her body and spirit. Pushing an illusion a few miles to the side, she transposed herself to that location, which let her avoid the follow up explosions that would have torn her apart.

They had expected Aiden to Tier up, but when he didn't do it immediately, they had hoped he wasn't as far along as they feared. That had been proven wrong, and she felt the spike of danger in her spirit the moment it happened.

Him going up a Tier should have been *rough*, but then again, Aiden didn't use his cultivation very much. He always relied on his Domain to enhance him. Still... with the degree he strengthened himself normally, it should have resulted in a nearly instantaneous win, or at least a *ton* of damage. He was pacing himself, trying to not tire himself out. But what was he waiting for? It was *unlikely* that he could wear them all down, and she didn't think any of them were below half on any of their resources... so what was his game?

She didn't know, and it annoyed her.

Aiden had done *something* that made it so she had to look *up* at him, no matter what angle she was at. But she couldn't figure out what, and that *also* annoyed her.

Of slightly more immediate concern, though, were the strands of water trailing in his wake. Three had Yun Me's spear locked tightly in their grip, and as Aiden spun to build up momentum, he wrenched the weapon from Yun Me's grasp. She recalled it instantly, but not before Aiden managed to impale a Federation soldier on it. The whips trailing his wand were all the deadlier, black abyssal water carving furrows into Yun Me's pauldrons.

Aiden dodged a lightning bolt, backhanded a trio of water disks at the offending soldier, reversed his grip on his wand, and then brought it down like a dagger. The enormous wave it conjured in his wake crashed down on Yun Me, *knocking the shield out of her hand* and sending her flying.

This was not good.

Aiden felt like a new man as his cultivation settled in and his power expanded. He was so high on newfound power, he was practically laughing as he flipped over attacks, circled around spells... And got peppered by a pair of long-range attacks as the support armies decided that they could maintain the shield surrounding the battlefield *and* attack him.

At least the spells cut off when he positioned himself in the middle of his enemies.

Reveling in the lessened willpower costs needed to keep up with his opponents, he fell back on his old reliable- [Water Manipulation]. Even as a Minkalla-granted innate skill, it had rarely been opportune to use in most situations. But there was something nostalgic about the

way it made water *truly* act as an extension of his own body, and with newly-empowered cultivation behind it, it felt *amazing*.

Epic spinning kick, hydro-enhanced punch, twirly water block, crescent moon water-kick, swooshy attack redirect... he was *on fire*. Water. Whatever. Tiering up felt good. It had been too long since he had done so, and he had almost forgotten how good the increase in power felt.

He just wasn't sure it was going to be enough on its own.

A pulse of plasma appeared right beside him. It was clumsily hidden by an antimemetic spell, which Aiden wasn't affected by at all, though he pretended to only notice and dodge at the last moment.

It was almost amusing to see someone try that with *him*, but he didn't have enough spare brain cells to gloat or showboat.

Even that idle thought nearly cost him a leg as Yun Me retrieved her shield and threw it like a discus, its edges gleaming a reddish-black as it tore his shin off. The wound was far more painful than that kind of attack should have inflicted, but Aiden let it wash over him.

To his eternal shame, the pain caused him to be a moment too slow to avoid taking a deep cut from the glaive-armed rune soldier. In turn, that let Yun Me use her [What Was Once Complex Returns To Simplicity] to break apart Aiden's counterattack, putting his [Water Manipulation] on a fairly long cooldown.

That cost him enough time that he found himself between a hammer and an anvil. Or more accurately, a hammer-wielding rune soldier and The Unyielding Anvil. He tried to dodge, but Maya turned his spell into an illusion, popping it like a bubble as the attacks landed. There wasn't much room to work with, but [Water Hammer] didn't need much space. It clanged into the onrushing hammer and sent some very painful reverberations up the handle of the weapon.

[Tidal Wave] crashed down on him and Yun Me. The Sect woman kept her footing, but it let him wash *himself* away, and he coated himself in enough water to serve as a battering ram where Maya was trying to manifest. Unfortunately, she appeared safely despite his interference and *spoke*.

"Everything Hits Its Mark."

Instantly, the armies around the edge opened fire, as too did the seventeen people within. And *every* attack hit him. It wasn't even a matter of homing, there was simply no possibility other than spells striking exactly what they meant to. Even if they collided with something else- such as Yun Me, the rune soldiers, or one of his defensive spells- they either passed through entirely or bounced off at an angle that re-oriented it at him. His Domain was *sorely* tested to defend him from everything, and without his newest Tier-up, he'd have to reach rather deeper into his bag of tricks to survive that.

Well, he could at least express his *displeasure* at the reality mage's meddling. A wave of giant [Flotsam] projectiles slammed into her, followed by the fastest barrage of [Water Bullet]s

that he could manage, alongside a point-blank [Washing a-Wave] and [Siphon] to strip her protections and land what was otherwise a *very* tricky to use finisher. For good measure, he also brought his Intent to bear, piercing her overstretched spirit with the sudden need to breathe.

A gleeful grin spread across his face as he watched the reality mage try to balance an already-tricky Law with defending against the full power of water.

Then the rules changed.

Panting was more a force of habit than needing air, but it was one Maya *always* gave herself. Tying oneself to mortal things like that was a great way to keep in touch with reality, which was something she *particularly* needed. Essence helped one exempt themselves from the laws of reality, yes, but sometimes what you needed was a tight bind *with* said laws.

Her spirit insisted that she breathe, in accordance with the natural order. She was living, she must breathe. Who was she, to challenge the laws of reality? She fought it, for she Rejected Aiden's Reality, but...

No.

No, he was right.

She should need to breathe. She was, after all, only mortal. Tier 5, at that. Tier 5 people needed to breathe, sleep, eat, everything. She was also, without a doubt, the strongest person fighting.

The Reality practically wove itself. It had been a long, *long* time since she'd been Tier 5, but your experiences as a mortal felt more... concentrated, than anything as an immortal. She couldn't go below Tier 5, she didn't think, but Tier 5 was plenty.

Of course, no Tier 5 would be fighting in deep space, surrounded by an enormous containment cage. They'd be fighting in an arena, on a large, flat ground filled with sand. There were more powerful people watching, more powerful people outside the arena, but they weren't in the pit. They were just spectators. Here, it was just Tier 5s.

“Memento Mori.”

You are mortal. You will die.

That was the one truth. And that was the truth she leveraged, alongside Aiden's own pseudo-Law. Yes, she needed to breathe. She was Tier 5, and so too was everyone she was fighting.

Aiden stumbled, as did Yun Me and the rune idiots.

But she had substituted reality, and she was borrowing Aiden's own strength to do it. It worked... less well than she would have expected, given the normal weight of Aiden's command

to breathe and drown, but Aiden's Domain was of such immense size and power that the inefficiency barely mattered... and that helped anyway.

The Reality built itself up. Dry sand underfoot. Their fanciest arms and armors were gone, leaving them all equipped according to their station. Very little armor, though. Shields were alright, armor less so.

This was a show, after all, and the crowd cried their approval.

Deep breath. They needed to breathe. That was fundamental because they were Tier 5.

Red stands, and a red sky. Interpreting reality like this was interesting, as she could pick out many of the people in the stands that would otherwise be invisible. But that was but a distraction, as it always was.

You focused on the people in the arena with you.

That was the simple truth. You fought. You focused. You bled. And if you were lucky, you didn't die.

Memento Mori. All of them had but one life to spend.

Glaive-soldier guy was the first to move, sprinting forward with his glaive glowing with arcane might, aimed at Aiden's oh so mortal, oh so vulnerable heart.

Yun Me was even faster and came in from the other side, her spear's edge glowing with a deep silver that felt like a million years of training distilled into that single thrust.

Aiden's legs snapped as he tried to move faster than he could as a Tier 5 and lost his footing on the loose sand, sending him sprawling. He grabbed a handful of sand and flung it in the face of the rune soldier, then rolled to avoid Yun Me. They were roughly the same speed now, but Yun Me was by far the more experienced warrior.

Aiden conjured a globe of water and fashioned it into a whip. The magic was stronger than what Yun Me could easily bring to bear as a Tier 5, and her spear was quickly grounded.

That was... hmm. She couldn't get *rid* of water. That was favoring one competitor too heavily, and she'd needed to borrow a fair amount of weight from the idea of a fair competition to form this Reality. If she let it go, Aiden would release his own Domain's attempt to dictate laws, and she'd lose that leverage. No, she needed to figure out a proper way to maintain this Reality, yet still hinder Aiden.

Deep breath. They needed to breathe. That was fundamental because they were Tier 5.

An idea sparked, and she gave her addendum. One skill per person. What kind of Tier 5 had more than one skill, anyway?

She kept [Cast Illusion]. [Lawmaker] *could* have counted, if she enforced the Reality in the right way, but she didn't.

Aiden's water vanished, as he apparently didn't elect to keep [Create Water]. Yun Me seemed to keep some kind of physical boost, and the rune soldiers... who cared?

She had bigger things to focus on. With every passing moment, Aiden was challenging her Reality in a hundred different ways, and she needed to keep one step ahead of him. She also needed to keep herself invisible and an illusion of herself running around, to keep anyone from interrupting her.

Deep breath. They needed to breathe. That was fundamental because they were Tier 5.

Maya ran through the foundations of her Reality again, even as her eyes began to waver and conceptually fade once they were pinned between the Reality that Was and the Reality she Beheld.

As a Tier 5 with only [Cast Illusion], that was a pretty dang impressive job, she had to say. But it needed to be done.

The others should be able to finally defeat him with everything she was doing.

Aiden was running, but Yun Me was faster. She scooped her spear into her hand and took off in rapid pursuit of *her fellow Tier 5*, seeking his life.

Deep breath. They needed to breathe. That was fundamental because they were Tier 5.

Aiden mummified his left arm to get enough water to form a small tendril. He was pulling out some pretty impressive acrobatics to keep Yun Me at enough of a distance while keeping the rune soldiers at bay. He was *definitely* on the run, and he couldn't keep it up forever.

Yun Me caught up with him, stumbling as Aiden slammed a small bucketful of water into her side but carrying through with her attack.

Aiden took the spear through the chest and coughed a mouthful of blood all over Yun Me.

Red spilled upon the sands and Maya hoped they had managed a decisive blow.

Emmanuel watched as Aiden was stabbed through with a small furrow of his brow. He flickered through Talents, and while even Innate Understanding-type Talents had their limits, especially when it came to Ascenders, he was fairly certain Aiden would be alright.

Janet pulled his attention back to the negotiations. "Come now, Emmanuel. Concede the battle, spare your Gladiator, end the war. There's no need to prolong this any further than needed, and the terms are perfectly fair."

Emmanuel nodded slightly and felt everyone else tense as they thought he was going to concede to save his Ascender from serious harm.

Instead, he very obviously pushed his perceptions towards the blood trickling through space between Aiden's mouth and Maya's face. "Aiden is living his life the way he wishes. Would *you* wish to tell Maya that she is to stop fighting now, pull her out before she's the one dead or crippled?"

With their perception jacked to Tier 50 speeds, they got to watch in slow motion as Aiden's blood started to condense and formed into a needle aimed at Yun Me's eye.

"An impressive attempt, but ultimately too little."

Emmanuel didn't bother with a response. He trusted his Ascenders. He was, on paper, stronger than any of them. Stronger than *all* of them, thanks to his Tier. But there was more to an Ascender than a strong Talent, or a powerful Domain.

He didn't have the same drive to look at the impossible, scoff, then do it. Who would have thought that a boy from a low Tier, archipelago heavy world, a boy whose Talents were best suited for a veterinarian or farmer, could beat out geniuses and prodigies, scions of noble houses and the inheritors of grand bloodlines?

Emmanuel wouldn't have, not in a million years. That was why he was so careful to not be a tyrant, deciding the fates of his people. It was his duty to protect the people under his care, to let them become the person they had the desire and drive to become. It was not his duty to undercut their efforts, their struggles and their fights.

Eight spiritual perceptions watched as the needle of water pierced Yun Me's eye. It didn't punch through and enter her brain, but it did drain the water out of the organ, where it flowed back to Aiden just in time to avoid the rise of the shield which would have destroyed the water's connection to him.

Sliding back in the sand, Aiden ripped himself off the spear and corralled the water in his blood to clot the wound.

JR fluttered his wings and chirped, "Truly impressive. Both of them. Controlling reality to this level at Tier 35 and still being able to fight inside it."

Virgil snorted at the snub to her pets and possibly Yun Me, but Emmanuel agreed. Yun Me was impressive, but mostly for her dedication. She was like an ancient world tree, imposing and mighty beyond all else yet with no grand specialities beyond raw survivability.

Then again, that was impressive in its own way. She certainly knew how to use every last ounce of the prodigious strength she'd accumulated, and that was more than he could say for the rune soldiers.

Those troops had an unfortunate life, and while they were impressive, it wasn't *their* strength. Rather, it was the strength of Virgil and her crafters, expressed through what were practically children. Again, it wasn't an *invalid* source of power, but it was certainly inflexible, and nowhere near as robust as more naturally-developed strength, like that found in Ascenders.

As if trying to prove his thought wrong, Alexi lunged forward despite the hole in her heart draining away her life. Within Maya's constructed reality, many of the benefits that the soldiers enjoyed had been lessened. But that was balanced out by the fact that at low Tiers, their cybernetics were just as potent, if not more so than normal.

Brett, the rune mage, circled around behind Aiden and cast an [Earth Lance] into the mage's bare back.

Alexi slashed out with a tight series of blows that left no way to dodge without being struck by the follow-up. Arthur threw his spear, merely crackling with lightning instead of being made of it, further penning in the Ascender.

Even with all those disadvantages, Aiden still managed to twist out of the way just enough to avoid being skewered. He was, however, cut to the bone by Alexi, but he reared up to kick her in return. In the instant before the attack landed, Brayden wrapped his whip around Aiden's ankle and pulled him off-balance.

Janet folded her hands, picking up their negotiations where they'd left off. "Let's be reasonable here. Even *if* Waters survives, even if he isn't captured, he won't be in any condition to reclaim your worlds. You have no *hope* of retaking all the territory you've lost, and there's no reason to make this even worse for you than it must be."

"Yet your proposal would put the onus of retiring Light and Shadow solely upon those *not* participating in the war," Toby pointed out, stroking a scaly chin. "It is not a proposal I would accept."

Aoife nodded in agreement. "I will not see my treasures emptied in response to *your* misfortune."

"Fine, fine." Janet waved their complaints off. "We can increase the return rate of the planets to ninety percent and reduce the retention rate of the Guild captures to fifty percent, which should functionally cover the projected buy-out rate for an Ascender duo. If there's excess beyond that, then the Empire can handle that internally. The sanctions on the Path of Ascension would remain the same, but we *won't* push for the audit of existing Ascenders." She glared suspiciously at Emmanuel with those words, but he wouldn't allow that great a risk to Matthew's secret at this time. He didn't care how that influenced her perception of him.

"And all planets in contested space will be immediately ceded for the next ten thousand years. That's *more* than fair." Janet added a moment later.

Emmanuel *did* agree that, given their respective standings, cutting their losses by a full order of magnitude *was* quite fair, especially as it would entirely prevent the possible loss of the Citadel. Buying an Ascender duo out might prove expensive, but it was unlikely to be *too* bad. The Path sanctions might prove irksome, but as much as he hated to admit it, it wasn't a *bad* thing to cap Path deaths... though it would add a great many levers for minor noble factions to pressure him on. If his faith in Aiden was anything less than ironclad, he would have been *sorely* tempted to accept.

Winter Hornet gave a small nod of assent. But, fortunately for him, Virgil was unsatisfied.

“Absolutely not. The damage which you have wreaked is worth far more than a mere *tenth* of the planets which *we won*, that *we control*. To say nothing of the penalties to be extracted from your bloodlust. I *will* be repaid in kind. No clemency for Waters. Once he falls, if you wish to avoid having the loss of your own regional Capital weighing upon the scales, you’ll have no leverage, and I want no less than two hundred Tier 30 planetary cores. I will concede that you possess sufficient weight to regain *half* your lost planets, but not one more beyond that. All Guild captures will be returned, of course,” Virgil said with a sneer, reveling in her perceived higher position.

Janet made no outward expression, but the Talents Emmanuel was running let him see the feeling of betrayal and contempt wash over the Republican as Virgil entirely shot down the possibility of an early peace.

It would have been hard to explain why he refused the previous offer, but with Virgil pushing for blood, it was easy to dismiss.

Emmanuel calmly took to his feet, turning away from the conference table to face the massive crystal wall overlooking the fight. “There remain battles to be fought, both here and elsewhere. I would be doing my people a disservice if I assume they will fail, and while I appreciate your offers of mercy, I have faith in my people. I have faith in my Ascenders.”

He tried to add just enough emphasis to get the other Tier 50s to read it as desperate hope for a turn around, and seeing Allister’s orbiting spheres speed up slightly, Emmanuel thought he had hit the right note.

He was sure of it when Janet focused on Allister and tried to settle the war between them with a separate, smaller peace treaty. Somehow, Virgil stayed silent, so in other circumstances, perhaps Janet may have had a chance.

Emmanuel listened but didn’t speak, and he was happy as Allister resisted all attempts to get him to abandon the Empire.

Instead, his attention went to the fight happening below.

Aiden *hated* low-Tier fighting. It didn’t carry the same gravitas, the same weight, the same pressure. Whatever Maya had done felt like he’d been flipped over by his Domain, and it was still sore. He’d been essentially pinned, with none of his primary suite of baseline abilities. It had taken quite some time and a *lot* of wounds before he’d managed to track down where Maya had been lurking invisibly and attack her *properly*, returning things to the way they should be.

Specifically, with Aiden three tiers weaker than everyone else.

It was a marked improvement.

Of course, Yun Me hadn't left him alone in the arena, and she wasn't leaving him alone now.

He'd known she had a dozen lockdown spells, of course. She liked to use them as finishers, but he hadn't known she had one that locked both of them down. He suspected there was some kind of Talent abuse going on, because he was making *no* headway in breaking free.

They were only half a mile apart, but that was more than enough room for the armies around them to unleash a bombardment that could have glassed a planet directly on him.

He'd bubbled up, using his Anchor as a shield, and then layered that with [Bubble Shield]. [Whirlpool], [Water Armor], [Water Shield] and [Abyssal Ablation], all cast to try to mitigate the onslaught of damage he was taking.

[Phantom Armor] flared into existence, narrowly deflecting the glaive of the rune soldier who just *wouldn't let him be*. That opened up an opportunity, and Aiden materialized his glass of ocean inside his mouth, downed its contents, then spat the glass itself at the rune soldier, catching him off-guard enough that when he refilled his Anchor, he directed the miniature ocean into a high-pressure jet of water directly up the man's nostril.

It ricocheted off of his skull, bounced off his spine, and struck his heart.

The call of the ocean.

It was a bit of a novel application of a few of his skills and Domain powers, and probably only workable thanks to the artificial-like nature of the man's Domain, but Aiden saw an opportunity and took it. The rune soldier was momentarily confused as a deep-seated love of the sea took root, and in his heart, he felt a sudden wish to see the ocean.

Aiden promptly granted the wish, slipping the *rest* of the ocean into the man's heart.

Alas, there wasn't enough room in his heart for it all, and he exploded.

Ah, blood-tinged sea spray. Aiden's eighth favorite scent.

The water of the ocean was quickly used to wash away the other rune soldiers crowding around him, giving him a moment to collect himself.

Maya at least was off to the side and trying to recover from her last move. Aiden had to admit that he was impressed, but he let his anger fuel his flex of his Aspect.

He grabbed Yun Me and pulled with everything he had.

She stayed locked in place, so Aiden let go. She didn't go flying back like he hoped, so instead, he cast [Mist].

Water vapor spread out, and if they hadn't been in the vacuum of space, it would have dampened sound. Instead, all it did was dampen spiritual perception and block sight.

With a painful push, Aiden swapped just under half of himself with some of the water, ready to pull the rest of himself over the moment Yun Me realized he'd slipped her leash.

Aiden channeled a portion of his presence through a drifting water droplet near one of the further-off rune soldiers. Two [Water Claw]s later- *man* these guys were tough- and the woman in question was short roughly half a head and all her essence.

With his movement now obvious, Aiden pulled the rest of his body from Yun Me's tether.

She tried to reconnect it, but he already had that spell's measure and it sank right through him like a stone dropped into a murky pond.

Narrowing his focus to the pesky soldiers, Aiden cast [Tidal Wave], and with a push from his Domain, he sent it racing at them. The ever growing wave caused the armies to scatter as they avoided the massive spell, but that was all Aiden needed.

Their flight was all the opening he needed to dart forward, trying to get at Maya.

If he could finish her off, the rest of this battle would settle into place nicely.

As if the realm would ever let things go his way.

Yun Me kept her breathing steady. When fighting a Master, it was of utmost importance to show neither pleasure nor pain. Boredom was nearly as bad, but any sign of difficulty was worse. Taunts were important, but they should be done with care. Too much vitriol or too much dismissiveness would incite further fervor from a Master.

And a fervent Master was a *terrible* opponent to have. They drew strength from adversity in a way unlike any other, and provoking one of choleric temperament merely exacerbated such issues. *Never* make a fight truly personal. End fights as swiftly as possible once they began to flag, but do not overwhelm them from the very beginning.

Masters fought with the ferocity of a cornered rat, yet could instantly turn and flee without a moment's hesitation. Very few people survived a single fight against even one, but Yun Me had made a career out of it.

This fight had been going approximately as well as she'd expected. Her prodigious willpower reserves were largely untapped, and while her mana was being steadily worn down, she had conversion arrays to refill her. [The Unyielding Warrior of Eternity] ensured that her body would never be worn down, and while her allies in this fight likely weren't in such a fine state as her, she was unconcerned.

Maya was a Master in her own right, and therefore stronger the closer she was to defeat. The rune-soldiers *were* steadily being whittled down, yes, but they were better off dead than alive.

Waters had already Tiered up. As something that had quite clearly been planned in advance, it was *unlikely* to be the only trick he had. But it was undoubtedly intended to be a fairly major turning point in his strategy, and therefore, the current pressure was wearing him down just like they planned.

It was a delicate balance. Insufficient pressure would enable him to recover and find his footing, yet too much pressure and it would merely temper him, giving him a far more fearsome arsenal once his position grew truly dire. Therefore, they walked upon the sword-blade which was giving Waters a *sufficient* challenge.

The Master began some form of working with his Domains, but Yun Me struck it with her spear, calling upon her Second Revelation to cut through the ability before it could materialize.

The spear and the shield were the most fundamental armaments in the entire Realm. A spear to strike, a shield to be struck. Eons ago, both Vanara and Aegis had been more elaborate. Vanara had been immaculate ivory-white wood, inlaid with lacquer and gilding in the way rift items were occasionally wont to be. Aegis had been shining silver, pristine yet decorated with tassels, silk, and paint in a way that represented her home. But they, like her, had changed. Vanara was now dark, stained with sweat and blood, and a black spearpoint cloying with the millions, billions of lives it had taken. All traces of her home were gone from Aegis, leaving nothing but the burnished and multicolored metal it was today. They'd grown with her, the only points of stability in a Realm that changed far too fast.

But the spear and shield were eternal. Her Talents for the shield, her Revelations for the spear. Combined, they were the ultimate tools for any warrior.

Her [What Was Once Complex Returns to Simplicity] technique enveloped her spear, further empowered with her Revelation to penetrate all of Waters' defenses, but instead of cutting him in half as she had hoped, she merely skewered his lungs and grazed his spine.

She quickened her limbs and sharpened her mind. Waters was no less dangerous wounded, and the more she pushed, the closer he came to becoming *desperate*.

Nonetheless, her actions had already presented Embers with sufficient time to recover, and the mage twirled a staff, engulfing the battlefield with gold and silver rainbows.

You are home.

She most certainly was.

Waters succumbed to the calming influence of the delusion for just a moment, which was all she required to drive her spear into the man's back, mirroring the last time she'd skewered him.

[Vicious Winds of the East] blew down her arm, slicing into Waters and attempting to rend him apart. Yet he deflected the attack by manifesting his bubbles, turning the airy blades into the breaking crests of a wave. He twisted himself off the spear and summoned a [Wave Rider], using the board to carry him out of her easy reach.

[The Twirling Leaves Carried Upon Autumnal Gusts] carried her in swift pursuit, and she attacked the man again and again, wearing him down. Embers and the rune-soldiers attacked when they were able, and she was appreciative for the assistance which Embers provided, yet she spared no additional thought for them beyond what was needed to coordinate with them.

A rainstorm lashed out from Waters, seeking to give him some reprieve, but she would not be deterred. Surging forth, her spear struck with a rapid staccato, piercing each droplet in turn to disrupt and disperse its magic. While those around her either evaded or were pushed back, Yun Me advanced through a deluge using nothing but her spear to keep her dry.

Then, an opening. She took her stance as Waters' magic began to ebb, preparing [A Finger To Tear a Hole Into the Sky] for the moment she had an opportunity to use the technique.

It was time to strike.

This could be done.

Crimson light filled Aiden's vision. How much of it was from the cage around him, and how much was from blood creeping into his eyes, he didn't know. He supposed it didn't really matter much. He was on the brink now, the crest of the wave as it crashed towards the shore.

He remembered being a child, sitting on a rocky cliff overlooking the ocean, the warm, salty breeze pushing through his hair. There was such wonder and beauty in the ocean. It was so vast, so incomprehensible, and so mighty. There was an endless amount of beauty to be found within it, an eternity of awe and wonder. Danger as well, to be sure. The depths of the ocean held monsters large and strong enough to eat a boat whole, and the pressure alone would crush you if you let it.

Not that the shallows were safe, and even when people kept to the shoreline, there were still *plenty* of hazards to be wary of. It was like delving, if he was being honest. The truest wonders were in the depths, and while it was almost certainly fatal to go too far out... even the most innocuous things could be dangerous.

The cliff was gone now. Nobody had intentionally destroyed it or anything. But fifteen hundred years was a long time, and the power of water wasn't something to be underestimated. The erosion of centuries of crashing waves had redefined the coastline he'd spent so many hours at as a kid.

In the distance, all the colors first of the sunset, then of the rainbow, shone through Aiden's tinted vision. A sun, dying for the night. Or perhaps a rune soldier, gathering power for a massive attack, the likes of which would *surely* overwhelm him.

Aiden remembered when he'd first formed his Concept. He didn't even know what he *had* done at first, but he had been fighting his way through a rift in a supply run. He'd been stuck at the peak of Tier 4 for months, trying to save up for the potion he'd need to break through to Tier 5. Being on the Path was tough, even with a skill from his sponsor, and he'd been uncertain

how much further he'd be able to go. Trying to progress felt like fighting the ocean in a storm, sailing upwind while nature itself fought you every step of the way.

He'd been fighting a dragon-like creature at the time, with a powerful presence - what he later learned was a Concept - pressing down on him. It made his every action feel like he was underwater, his magic slow and lethargic and his armor heavy and encumbering. It was like he'd been sailing, and had been thrown overboard. Now, he was underwater and slowly drowning.

And when he'd thought of it that way, everything just... made sense. The monsters were nothing more than rogue waves, seeking to overpower him. The moment of clarity had been something special, it invigorated him. This rift was simply another wave, and there was nothing better than cresting a wave with a whoop and a holler.

The monster began to pelt him with wind, stinging sand whipping his face and pelting his armor, but it was nothing but seaspray against his face. He'd laughed, and the pressure had melted away. His counterattack was made with the full might of the ocean behind it, and suddenly, Aiden didn't need the potion he'd been so desperately trying to afford. It was just the seaspray in his face, the freedom of the wind at his back, and the start of the grandest adventure there was.

He tasted the seaspray again. This time, the blonde monster before him was waving her hands like a conductor, channeling massive clouds of golden glitter. But it was just another monster, another fight, another wave to conquer and move on.

Once he'd had his Concept and his mindset in the right state, the Path suddenly became less of a giant chore, and more of a fun sailing adventure. He was but a tiny, tiny man against an incomprehensibly vast ocean... but what did that matter? He could conquer one wave at a time, no problem. He wasn't trying to *beat* the ocean; that wasn't how life worked. But instead, he used it to take him wherever he wished to go, and to plunder its depths for treasure.

Being underwater could often be more peaceful than on the surface. There were currents and monsters, yes, but the waves were less distinct. A constant pressure, rather than a continuous bombardment. It was easier to deal with everything being massive than constantly adapting for *some* things being huge, and others being tiny. Even if it were more hostile on aggregate... it was predictable, and oh so profitable.

It was an idea that his spirit found compatible, too. There was no doubt in his mind that his Domain deserved to be expanded below the surface, and his Intent made the connection readily. It was important to respect the Depths, for you could so easily drown, the faint bubbles anchoring you to life being lost to the inky abyss. But if you knew what you were doing, it could almost be comfortable.

And delving up Tiers was so, so much like diving into the Depths. It was hard to see, the pressure was unending and relentless, and a single mistake would cost you your life. But those were all things that Aiden could deal with, and so he did. Other people rarely did well when reminded of how deep they were, but hey, that was just the ocean for you.

Aiden was a creature of the Depths, through and through. Unimaginable power loomed above him, casting him in its shadow and redoubling the pressure he felt, yet he'd never run. Be it the darkening presence of miles of water, or the shadow of a massive tree as Yun Me collected power within her and her spear, it was all the same to him.

The thing with being in the depths was that, ultimately, they weren't him. They weren't his home, and there wasn't much he could do there. Other people didn't do well there, sure, but that didn't make *him* do any better. But the shallows... oh, the shallows. How he could play, and sail, and fish. The shallow waters were where life was, and that was something that never bore forgetting. But where life was, so too was danger, and that which was common and oft overlooked was frequently the most dangerous. Even those that were comfortable and had adapted within the depths could be harmed upon returning to the surface. Divers, getting the bends as returning to 'safety' fouled their very blood. Sailors, catching their foot under a rock and drowning in less than two feet of water.

That was what Aiden called upon for his Aspect. Even the shallows were enough to drown you. You didn't need to be far within the depths to be in danger. Even a simple glass of water could be deadly. Or, as he preferred to use for his Anchor, a glass of *ocean*, the full might of the greatest part of any planet in the palm of his hand, ready to be used as a refreshing drink. From the sunlit shallows to the abyssal depths, it was an immense amount of power to be held in his hand. But he hadn't stopped there. Why would he have?

He had tamed the ocean itself. Mastered it. Embodied its greatest secrets and most fearsome power.

A massive wave built and began to break. Golden seaspray began to pelt him, the multicolored light of a rainbow being cast through the water, and the overwhelming solidity of an unstoppable force were all he could see, leaving no place to run.

And how refreshing this was. Here he was, a piddly little kid, happy to take his boat and crest waves, tangling with the greatest deep-sea powers in the entire Realm. And *what* depths he'd made it to. He'd become a menace, a *terror* to those so, so many tiers above him, living in such deeper water. The depths were where he made his home now, the unseen horror lurking in the darkness.

It was so hard to find anything within the Depths. The ocean hoarded its secrets jealously, and that was a quality he'd inherited upon taking one as his Anchor all those years ago. Yet while the unseen Terrors could nonetheless be mighty, there was only so much to be done from the shadows.

It was time, he thought. Time to show them what he'd become. It was time to remind everyone why he was the greatest Domain expert this realm had ever seen.

Besides, there would *never* be a better time to show off, and he'd been waiting for ages.

An explosion of power rippled out from where the three attacks landed, leaving behind no trace of the man known as Duke Waters.

“Where’d he go?” the rune-soldier demanded.

Yun Me kept her face steady and her shield raised, sweeping her gaze across the battlefield. This, right here and right now, was always the most dangerous part of fighting an Ascender. The instant after it seemed like they had lost, when they looked dead to rights. These were the times that they returned with some new power, or finally stopped holding back. Those powerups weren’t unbeatable, and she’d won even after a fair few of them in her time, but it was in these moments where the battle *truly* hung in the balance.

Her senses, keenly honed across countless battles just like this one, didn’t tell her the shape of the threat yet, but there were no tremors, no accumulation of power that could signify a new ability. There were *always* tremors when something new came, yet she had felt none. But there was a threat nonetheless, even if she couldn’t properly tell what it was.

“**The Lost Are Always Found,**” Maya declared, and a ripple of light pulsed through the battlefield, bouncing off the outer walls and returning to her. “Hmm, that usually works when Aiden is skulking around somewhere. He wouldn’t have run away, though. Even if he could.”

“We’ve backed him into his lair,” boasted a different rune-soldier, this one with a pair of whips extending from his wrists. “If he’s fled, then he truly is no dragon, just a cowardly worm!”

A dark chuckle echoed throughout the battleground, sourceless but menacing. The rune-soldiers stepped back in fear, but it rolled off Yun Me. The showboating had begun.

The same rune-soldier flicked his hands, and lightning crackled along the length of his whips “Come out and face us, you-”

He vanished. The only sign that he had been there at all was a fine mist of blood, and a severed and torn whip, still crackling with red lightning. His spirit rippled out, returning to his fellows but he had vanished before any of them could realize.

“Do not falter now, for the battle is not yet finished!” Yun Me encased herself in [The Lion’s Pride Hunts Undaunted], the translucent energy-hides of the lion projection around her rippling with muscle as the warrior and her projection stalked forward as one. “His presence darkens this battleground yet!”

The blow came suddenly as the battlefield seemed to rouse itself. Her defenses couldn’t adjust in time, and the lion reared back on its own hindquarters, missing a foreleg and dripping turquoise blood. So the power had arrived. Yet there had been no tremors in the fight’s cadence. Whatever Duke Waters was doing was something he could have done all along.

“You think you’re such high and mighty knights, don’t you?” Duke Waters’s voice rang out, crisp and clear, but with a distinct undertone of growling.

“Find him!” the leader of the Alpha rune soldiers called out. “Don’t let him get away!”

Another one of the rune-soldiers vanished, a chromed forearm all that was left of them.

“Come to hunt the wicked dragon where he lairs, then return high and mighty dragonslayers, killers of the famed Waters?”

“**What I can’t see can’t hurt me!**” Maya called out in a wavery voice that spoke of the first hint of panic, an instant before the vague impression of something *massive* swept through everyone, some dark and terrible beast of the untamed world in a long forgotten time. Its scales and teeth were that of the dark waters beyond civilization, where no eyes had laid sight upon its ferocious visage.

Waters’ voice sounded almost manic, right on the verge of a full mad cackle as he continued. “I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but your ideas are flawed!”

“Hold fast! Form up! Don’t let him keep picking us off one by... one?” The rune squad mage’s voice wavered with a frisson of fear, as the head of his second-in-command, previously standing right next to him, vanished in a spray of bubbles.

“You are no dragonslayers.”

Yun Me encased them all within [The Sheltering Emerald Of Seven Heavens] as they formed into a defensive ring.

“But even if you were.”

The voice sounded from *within* the spherical shield, a whisper in both ears. It was accompanied by an unnatural surge of fear, but [The Unyielding Anvil of Eternity] steadied her spirit. She did not yield. Ever.

“I am no dragon.”

One of the rune-soldiers yelled, as an unseen force grabbed his ankle and began to pull him out of Yun Me’s defenses. He got halfway through the green shield before Yun Me released the technique. She swooped in, her spear surrounded by thousands of glittering red motes of light, and struck at the space around the man’s foot. A sudden wrenching feeling struck the battlefield, but the Federation man stopped moving.

The Realm trembled around her, and she at last saw the truth of the matter. What her senses had dismissed as merely a part of the battle’s background, a presence so vast that the thought that it might have been *alive* was incomprehensible. That it might have been a part of Duke Waters was astonishing. Yet the shape had been revealed, and Duke Waters stood before them fully, an existence long since lurking in the shadows only now deigning to unveiling itself with an undeniable declaration.

I AM

Words, imposed upon reality not through spiritual perception but something greater. Deeper. More fundamental. It was a declaration beyond mere spoken word. A force beyond all

others. A massive wave of water crashed from nothingness. An impression of flashing teeth. A screech of broken metal and flesh torn asunder.

Two rune-soldiers lost their hands, ragged stumps left from where they had been previously sustaining a spell. Their healer swooped in and gave temporary replacements of shining silver with a tap of her wand, but where the magical flesh tried to regrow it was dissolving into bubbles. And no matter how many times she cast the healing spell, it did nothing to stop the wave.

THE TERROR

The voice, beyond all voices, trembled in her ears and chest alike. Mere sound could not contain its might, and even the lingering effect threatened to tear reality apart. Something great and terrible awoke. Scales and darkness, sights best left unseen. A vast ocean, unknowable, unfathomable and untamable. Holding great secrets sufficient to drive those who dared to comprehend its depths to insanity.

Maya's face fell, her eyes grew wide, and her breathing grew ragged. An inky tentacle appeared from nowhere and smashed into her, only a few golden-white plates holding it back from crushing her torso. There was a moment of struggle, and then the appendage vanished back to where it came from. It took a concentrated effort to stop her shield from dissolving into bubbles.

OF THE DEPTHS

Duke Waters reappeared, floating above the battlefield and the prison he should have been trapped in, his proclamation complete. His hair streamed out like a wild mane, blue strands catching the light and surrounding him with an oceanic halo. Bubbles streamed from his shoulders, granting him a seafoam cape that stretched out into something long and sinuous—an unknown monster of the deep finally awakened.

An unnatural Fear gripped the battlefield, unhindered by the grand cage designed to hold those within fast. Even those watching held their breath at the undeniable pressure of a true monster, an insurmountable, corporeal representation of all the grandest terrors lurking beyond the mortal ken. It was the truest Fear, that which gripped the hearts of all who beheld it for a moment that stretched into infinity and lasted the blink of an eye, for there was no end to the weight of Duke Waters' unveiled Authority.

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