

8k chapter. God these were hard to write lol. I hope you enjoyed them.

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## Chapter 333

Emmanuel was irritated. Contrary to his orders, Aiden hadn't returned from the border when told to do so the first time, even though he had personally sent the order to recall the man.

He wasn't even sure that the order had been what called Aiden back, and not the hint of a promise of further advancement for the man's Domain. "Hey, Boss man. You wanted to talk?"

Emmanuel just looked at Aiden and inspected him, letting the moment stretch until it was noticeably uncomfortable. The man didn't look fearful, like he was afraid of the scolding he must know was coming, but instead like a bright eyed kid who was expecting praise for his art project.

Seeing nothing but direct comments would work, Emmanuel spent a good ten minutes dressing down the Ascender in question, who, for his part, let each and every reprimand roll off his back like a duck ignoring the rain.

His father had warned him about the obstinance of Ascenders, but with Lila having been retired by the time he took over, he hadn't really understood until he had his own Ascender who refused to listen to anything but what he wanted to hear.

Sighing, Emmanuel just gave up. "Well, let's move on to something I learned recently. *Someone* managed to create an Authority, care to guess who?"

A few hundred years ago, Aiden had asked around about the next step in his Domain growth. However, all the Empire's records had stated was the name. There was nothing else, such as what extra piece of the puzzle that stage needed. Nevertheless, Emmanuel knew Aiden would know the word.

Except, for the first time he could remember, Aiden looked... abashed. That was the only word Emmanuel had for it.

Had he *known* that Hastor was going to create his Authority? Something here wasn't fully adding up, and he decided to let Aiden speak unguided.

"Oh... Uhh... Umm. I guess, I just... Uh... When nobody ever commented on it, I figured that the antimemetic was just that good? Which, if it took you this long, I guess it did. What, uhh... What... what gave me away?"

There were many, *many* possible responses that Emmanuel had expected. The one he got was so absurd he needed to look into the past to confirm he'd heard it correctly, and then again to make sure he had asked the right question when the first was confirmed.

Maybe they had been talking about something else.

When both of those attempts proved he hadn't gone insane, he used a barrage of other Talents to interrogate every possible meaning, only for him to receive a singular response.

Emmanuel unleashed the full might of his Tier 50 perception, scrutinizing the contrite Ascender before him.

Tier 1: You notice what others do not, from Demelza Coriander. Tier 3: Enhanced ability to discover the hidden, from Kuriel Tingkhen. Tier 25: See the Truth of the matter, from his own father.

His spiritual perception burrowed into the man's body and cultivation, pushing aside his innate defenses as though they were nothing but air to his steel. He scoured the very core of Aiden's Domain faster than he could even realize what was happening, finding the man's Domain laid out like a schematic before him. Water, Drowning in the Depths, Even the Shallows are Enough to Drown you. Each of those he saw and studied, looking for clues. Nothing. He was hampered by not knowing what exactly he was looking for, but he could take care of that.

Tier 1: Perceive the auras of those around you, from Ibhaka Strongfeather. Tier 3: Gain insight into the Domains of those you encounter, from Teti of Xuik. Tier 25: See through all illusions, from Ikeno Tuwasil.

Still nothing. Aiden's Domain was a true work of art, the polished masterpiece of the greatest Domain prodigy of the age, but there was nothing. Talent set after Talent set, Emmanuel swapped between them all as he bore into the man's spirit, looking for one single truth: *Did Aiden have an Authority?*

He would-

*I am not a tyrant.* Yet here he was, rummaging through the spirit of one of his most... if not loyal, certainly *fervent* supporters, simply because he needed an answer *right now*. Much of what he was doing would be tremendously painful, once Aiden had enough time to feel it. But the man hadn't even had enough time pass for him to so much as notice that Emmanuel had touched his spirit, but it would hurt when the pain finally caught up to him.

Emmanuel gripped his wrist, and a touch of his Aspect cleansed his mind, returning it to placidity.

Tier 1: Innate [Soothing Touch], from Eliane Coira. Tier 3: Your touch relieves pains beyond the physical, from Eliane Coira. Tier 25: Smooth turmoils of the mind and spirit, from Talmiya Es.

The pain would still hit Aiden, but it would be well within the bounds of normality. Emmanuel wished he could feasibly do more, but he would have to settle for mere words of consolation.

Now that he was calm, he assessed Aiden with a steadier eye, taking in the man before him. Talents moved in with his underlying whim, but Emmanuel dismissed them. The man deserved *his* attention, not the borrowed attention of others.

Water. Drowning in the Depths. The Shallows are Enough to Drown you.

That was it. There was nothing else.

But it wasn't that simple. There was undeniably more to the picture, and Emmanuel was simply missing it. This time, when he looked, he did so gently, seeing how each of them flowed into the other, admiring the masterwork for what it was.

His mind was subtly nudged, and Emmanuel's own Domain snapped to attention, breaking the hold the antimemetic effect had over him. Was he looking in the right place, then? Or was it simply a false positive, Aiden's Domain not making it so easy to spot what was hidden?

It was the latter, and Emmanuel found himself breaking through multiple antimemetic effects before he finally found what he was looking for. A tiny connective strand that didn't properly align with *any* of the three Domain pieces woven within Aiden's spirit that he only now noticed that he wasn't down there rooting around for it. In fact it was subtle and woven in such a way that forceful examination would *never* find it. Even if it was found, the antimemetic would encourage the watcher to overlook it. But now that he had found it, he traced it back thanks to the clues he picked up from his earlier examinations, and back, and back, and...

*Oh.*

*There it was.*

A trill of fear and excitement ran down Emmanuel's spine. Fear from the very potent display of power that Hastor had just shown, and excitement for the fact that his forces had become so much stronger.

Aiden's Authority interwove with *every* piece of his Domain, connecting them all. No wonder it was so hard to find it. Even the closest examination, unless you knew *exactly* what you were looking for, would simply make it look like you were studying his Concept, Intent, or Aspect. In fact, he *had* noticed the incredible strength and resilience of the man's Domain previously, but had never thought to attribute it to anything in particular. But now that he knew what to look for? Aiden's Authority was *incredibly* obvious, hidden nearly in plain sight, yet disguised from everything that, well, a higher-Tier would ever use to look down upon a cultivator beneath them.

It was a tool meant to *fight* those of higher Tiers, much like, Emmanuel realized, the rest of his Domain. Each and every piece of the Domain was tuned towards the grand adventure that was fighting those stronger than himself. No *wonder* he could fight his fellow Ascenders with a four-Tier disadvantage. Attempting to face Aiden with a Tier advantage would be like fighting a lava mage in a volcano.

The fear returned, but it was faint. Aiden was loyal, a good friend, and believed in the same cause as Emmanuel. Not that a betrayal would do *anything*. Ascender or no, Authority or not, there was *nothing* that someone nearly twenty Tiers below him could do to threaten him.

Not even at Tier 45. At Tier 49, *maybe* 48 he could present a threat, but below that, no amount of extraneous power could bridge the raw essence gap.

Specializing in fighting stronger opponents wasn't unknown, but it was rarely successful. Aiden, apparently, was one of the few people who made it work, and Emmanuel wondered whether it wouldn't be more fruitful to fight him at the same Tier. You'd have to deal with a full Domain stage advantage, of course, but at least you wouldn't be fighting him with his full powerset active. A better chance wasn't necessarily a *good* chance after all.

Aiden staggered slightly as he felt Emmanuel's presence land on him, the aftershocks of the thorough examination he'd just been subjected to. But physically, Emmanuel merely blinked, as though he wasn't bothered or surprised by the revelation at all. "No, I was talking about Sword Saint Hastor, who created *his* Authority, which triggered an inspiration, allowing him to reach Tier 51 before ascending."

Aiden nodded as if that made sense, sporting a sheepish smile. "Well. This is awkward."

Emmanuel allowed his expression to settle into a combination of stern and amused, fixing his gaze upon the man in front of him.

"How long?"

"How long what?"

"How long have you been hiding the fact that you had an Authority, Aiden?" Emmanuel was sure the man had to be playing with him, but Aiden genuinely looked confused.

"Oh, uhhhh... Since my last Tier up? I already had all the parts besides the last one during our last war. I finalized it at Tier 30, which was how I had my inspiration to reach Tier 31."

Emmanuel nearly cracked a tooth at the fact Aiden hadn't bothered to tell him something so monumental, but he repressed the feeling. Typical Ascender behavior. "So, you had it before you met with the other Ascenders, then? That makes sense, with how you were able to earn their recognition. Everyone wondered, but I don't think anyone would ever guess this was the answer. I sure didn't."

Aiden nodded as if that was obvious. "Yeah. I know. The antiemetic part was the first part I developed. It hides its own existence, hides the idea that I *might* have one or be working on one, everything. It's... not infallible. Medea's the only one who knows, but once I told her, she could sense it... most of the time. And, so long as I keep its uses subtle and self-contained, it's pretty much impossible to notice— as proven by you never noticing. Also it's harder to notice the more you try to figure out that it's there. There's more to it, but that's the core."

Emmanuel's pride as a Tier 50 wanted to refute that claim, but that was impossible given the circumstances. "I *want* to tell you to get out of my office, but you and I both know you aren't going *anywhere* until I pry every last secret from your hands. We'll start simple. What's your Phrase?"

Aiden grinned and started to speak.

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Emmanuel split his attention, using a Talent to grant himself a full six minds, each of which benefited from his full cultivation. Four of the minds were gauging the reactions of his fellow Tier 50s, one was watching Aiden's clone as the man monologued, and the final one followed the man's *true* body.

Operating at Tier 50 speeds made the entire fight practically stationary, but even without active precognition use, they could all see Aiden's intention as he began to slip through the shields surrounding the battle.

Emmanuel was happy to watch, but nonetheless turned his focus to studying his fellow Tier 50s with his magical and mundane senses, as well as his father's future sight. Their reactions were of utmost importance in dictating their next few actions. All of them had, the very instant the overwhelming presence unfurled, gone *very* still as they schooled their reactions and instinctively activated effects to make it even harder to gauge their emotions. But there was still information to be gleaned there.

JR, ever the curious raven, cocked his head and fixed Aiden with a *very* keen eye. Emmanuel didn't have much experience with reading the body language of birds, Mara often used human mannerisms even in bird form for comedic effect, but a quick Talent-swap took care of that.

He was, if Tade Atien's Tier 1 Talent was to be believed, thinking about making an enchantment or device intended to interface with the Authority. Emmanuel practically felt his vaults hurting at the mere thought of what such a creation might cost, and he hoped it wouldn't be too hard to turn the eager bird down.

Maybe he could get Aiden to pay for a part of it himself out of the buyout reward?

Tobias simply looked tired and thoughtful, as he always did. The extent of his expressed emotions was a slow blink of surprise, and he at least didn't look hostile. The man didn't care much for humans, but if Emmanuel was reading the zaratan correctly, he wasn't going to present any sort of challenge over Aiden's existence in and of itself. Though, as he inspected the turtle, he got a sense of stern defiance. But he couldn't source the feeling.

Aoife had tensed, and for a moment, Emmanuel feared she might grow angry. But after a while, her emotional state settled into a mixture of frustration, envy, and resignation. That was not unexpected, and he had some plans to hopefully bring her around, but it wasn't something he needed to concern himself about right this minute.

Allister, as his truest ally at this conclave, gave him an odd look, but otherwise didn't say anything. He was *certain* that they'd be having a very long discussion after this, but Emmanuel had been very careful to be forthright and honest with the Grandmaster. Their alliance might take a *bit* of a hit with this surprise, but he was certain it would weather this storm.

Janet was staying so exceptionally still that Emmanuel was incapable of reading *anything* from her through simple body language, and only after he called upon Ibhaka Strongfeather's Tier 1 Talent did he get any sort of a hint. The woman's aura had deflated, and Emmanuel got the impression of *resignation*, but he could glean nothing more.

Winter Hornet had his hands clasped firmly behind his back, but there was a glimmer around him, supported by his aura, that suggested he was thrilled. No doubt, as a firm believer in the might-makes-right philosophy that infested the Sects, he was pleased to see a fellow common-born individual make his mark upon the Realm.

Virgil, therefore, was the only one with a concerning reaction. Her eyes narrowed into a steely glare, and Emmanuel watched as her aura sharpened into a blade aimed at Aiden. It was bad enough that he scanned a million and one possible futures just to ensure she wouldn't do something stupid. Thankfully, she restrained herself before he needed to interpose himself. Fortunately for her, but there was an *impressive* amount of red and black malice and avarice consuming the woman's aura. In fact, it was so bad that Emmanuel worried that she *would* do something stupid and try to attack his Ascender, even if his future sight said she wouldn't.

But he was well prepared for that. It was why he was armed. In the blink of an eye, he could change from Maxine Teslovaka's ability to predict future outcomes to Hastor's ability to raise his Tier 25 sword to Tier 51. It would only last for a single strike, but it was more than sufficient to, if not *kill* any of his fellow Tier 50s, certainly wound them and protect his Ascender.

Questions would be raised about the nature of the weapon, but he had answers prepared. Even if it were to spark a true war, such enmity would likely be aimed at the one who broke the rules first. He didn't wish to chance that in such a fragile environment, though, as his active Tier 3 and Tier 50 talents each spoke of their own foreseen futures, and the chaos that could ensue from this meeting.

Thankfully, Aoife defused the tension by speaking up. "He must ascend the moment he reaches Tier 45. No exceptions or excuses. None of us will allow someone with an Authority to linger in this realm."

Assent rippled across the meeting room, though Allister replied with some enthusiasm, the metal spheres orbiting around his head speeding up. "I don't know. It might be interesting to see him take the throne from Manny. This dynasty isn't so fixated on blood relations."

It wasn't a *threat* per se, but it was certainly ill-received.

Tobias shook his head. "Absolutely not. That man is strong enough to fight his supposed peers at a four-Tier disadvantage. I cannot allow such a transparent ploy to gain strength on behalf of the Empire to play out. I will not allow such a threat to exist any longer than is required. If he does not Ascend as soon as he is able, the Monster Collective will treat his furthered presence as an attempt to prepare for total conquest and respond accordingly. We will not allow anyone to yoke us once again."

“I am disinclined to allow that much time for subterfuge,” Virgil glowered. “Waters must die, and I will not be content until his head rests before us.”

Winter Hornet instantly turned his attention from Aiden to Virgil so wholly and so rapidly that even Emmanuel couldn't follow it. “You overstep your bounds, *Virgil*. Are you truly so craven as to allow the *mere* thought of a power which you do not possess to drive you to destroy the one mighty enough to create it? *I* will not stand for such a transparent ploy to diminish well-won strength from its rightful owners, and will treat any such accusations as affronts to the honor of the Sects. If you can not bear the sight of someone accomplishing what you can not then be *gone*. Now be *silent*, I wish to properly appreciate this moment.”

The tension had returned in full force, but Janet spoke, stepping between her two allies. “Honored fellows. This is neither the time nor place to determine the fate of a single man. Waters is an Ascender, there is no concern that he would make a push for the throne. And even if there were, that is a matter internal to the Empire.”

She fixed Emmanuel with a piercing gaze for a moment, then politically turned back to the others. “Power at low Tiers does not assure power at high Tiers, and even if it *did*, there is precedent to allow any qualified candidates to take the mantle of leadership, no matter concerns regarding the balance of power. Should we decide to *alter* that, it is an *alteration* of our mutual treaties, one which would exclude the likes of our forebears Sword Saint Hastor, Grand Sect Elder Desolate Plains, and Empress Agatha as simply the most recent examples. Depending on the nature of such an agreement, it could possibly exclude even First Shepherd Toby or Grand Sect Elder Winter Hornet, and is that *truly* a path we wish to tread? Besides, such speculation is broadly pointless. He is a Gladiator. Without our intervention, he would Ascend at Tier 45 of his own volition.”

There was a bit of grumbling with that, and Janet studied Emmanuel with her spiritual sense in a way he couldn't parse, but the mood had at least been stabilized.

Aoife crossed her arms. “I suppose I must agree, with the addition that there's no more surefire way of *guaranteeing* that he'll stick around than by telling him he needs to Ascend quickly.”

Tobias narrowed his eyes. “I will not be party to your conspiracy, but provided he Ascends before he is Tier 47, I will not push the matter. I will, however, require my personal presence at his Ascension to be satisfied. But you are correct, one should not be punished for the mere crime of exceptionality.”

He glared at Virgil, as though daring her to challenge his statement.

JR squawked lightly, pulling everyone's attention. “Think of the opportunities this presents, regardless. The honored Sword Saint provided us with no information regarding his own Authority, yet with Aiden Waters' assistance, we may yet be capable of excelling and exceeding all previously thought limits of what is doable within this Realm. His mere existence is a tremendous resource, and one which I, at least, am quite optimistic for the future business



possibilities it represents. An entire additional Domain stage to work with carries vast potential indeed.”

Emmanuel didn't feel wonder at the idea, but instead trepidation for everyone's treasuries. Except his own, of course. If JR wanted access to Aiden, he would *absolutely* be paying for the privilege.

“With all that being said,” Emmanuel finally spoke, “I am not *opposed* to hearing proposals regarding Aiden's future ascension, and I am willing to discuss anything... for the proper price.”

He felt a pulse of approval coming from JR, and by unspoken agreement, they tightened their grips over their cultivation until the fight began to resume once again. Emmanuel noticed with some approval that Aiden was managing to slip past the containment shield, and was beginning to attack the armies responsible for its presence.

Tentacles, unseen and unnoticed, emerged from nowhere in particular, and pulled large sections of armies into a space which even Emmanuel couldn't look into. The Depths, Aiden had called it, an ocean just under the surface of reality which he could use to travel, escape, or hold prisoners. Already, the shield was weakening, though not in a way that most people would notice.

That was the thing about Aiden's Authority. It was so very, *very* hard to notice. It didn't stay hidden forever, but its presence and uses had a way of slipping from one's attention, something only magnified if one didn't know of its existence. Now that it was being revealed, it would lose some of its subtlety, but Emmanuel trusted that Aiden would be able to more than make up the difference in not needing to be circumspect with its use.

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Lila and everyone else sat in stunned silence as she watched the fight unfold before them.

She said nothing, for there was nothing to say.

The only sound breaking the silence was the faintest tinkle of shattering glass, echoing through the room since Max dropped her drink.

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Aiden cackled to himself as another army was pulled into the Depths, and the shield flickered and faltered. Nobody had noticed him yet, and that gave him *such* freedom of action. Once people started noticing their cohorts were disappearing, this would get harder, but until then...

Another army vanished beneath the waves, never to be seen again. Or more specifically, until he let them out. With their Tier advantage turned on them, they were trapped within the deepest oceans, floundering in the lightless void.



If they were really good at fighting up tiers, or closer to him in Tier, then *maybe* they could have escaped. His drowning had never worked as well on people at or below him in Tier, and he hadn't had the chance to test it with the Depths, but it made intuitive sense to him that it would work that way.

Three tiers was a good middle point, he felt. Four tiers had been utter murder on his willpower but immensely fun, and only one tier meant he just barely brought the full brunt of his Domain to bear. But two to three tiers, that was *just right*.

Fighting Maya or Yun Me... or the rune soldiers, maybe. They hadn't impressed him much so far, but fighting any one of them at Tier 31 had been an immense challenge that, win or lose, tended to send him into recovery for a fair amount of time. At Tier 32, his damage may not have increased, but fighting three of them became possible.

With the added advantage of using a new trump card and no longer needing to hide the source and nature of a massive chunk of his strength? Yeah, he had been pretty sure he could win.

But something he hadn't accounted for was what using his Authority fully would mean. Until now, he'd been very careful to only use it sparingly, but now that its full power was coursing through him, he found it... intoxicating.

This was his Place, being in the depths and attacking those stronger than him, and this power was a siren's song, encouraging him to genuinely become a monster, a lurker beyond the known and a danger to all who might venture into these uncharted waters. His flesh blurred and warped, wanting to twist him into a great and terrible shape. He would cast aside Aiden Al'Aegir and become Ascender Waters, truly.

But he restrained himself. He would not *gain* strength by losing himself to the monster; he would merely cut aside his rationality and humanity, limiting his ability to grow. All high-tier people had their quirks, that was true, but letting one's self become entirely defined by their Domain was unwise. Apparently, the call only became stronger with higher stages of the Domain. While Aiden could resist it, the call only grew in intensity the more power he called upon and the longer he fought.

Five of the fifteen armies had been swallowed whole, and the sixth followed with a triumphant roar from the Terror.

An Authority was a dangerous tool.

But Aiden *loved* danger.

[The Depths] had been a personal project of his for a long time, a skill based off his Domain's Place, and now that he was using his Authority fully, completing it had been almost laughably easy. It overlaid the Depths with reality and plunged them even deeper, where larger predators still lurked.

A silvery fish the size of his little finger darted through one of the rune soldiers, ending their life. More than half had perished at this point, and their bodies glowed with power, clean lines etched across their body. A wave of light blasted out, enveloping Aiden and giving him the impression of a mother's eye, looking at him disapprovingly.

Eh, it didn't hurt him and he wasn't really hiding anything at this point. With his true body before his main opponents, he shot forward a pair of sharpened water tendrils, spearing the two rune soldiers' leaders through the chests. Weirdly, they didn't resist, and simply died with no further fanfare.

Around them, their fellows also just died, no assistance or persuasion from Aiden needed. Instead of staying dead, their power flowed into a singular individual, a man armed with a crystal staff glowing magenta. The new conjoined rune soldier closed his eyes as the full strength of twenty people engulfed him, and he became *perfected*. His body became clear crystal and nearly doubled in size, multicolored light flowing through it like a river, spilling past his skin and surrounding him in a multichromatic halo. Instantly, he had become the biggest threat on the battlefield, and despite his cultivation *technically* not being Tier 36, he surely had the physical might of one.

This was going to be *great!*

Aiden's [Water Spirit] formed himself into the image of a great leviathan, and he reinforced the facsimile with his Authority's image, making him even larger than his wife's beast form and fully empowered with his Domain. Six questing tentacles ventured forth, traveling at such speeds they'd be as likely to impale as grapple whatever they struck.

Yun Me blocked one of the tentacles with her shield, gritting her teeth at the force he was exerting yet not being sent flying. The second tentacle she parried with her spear, deflecting it up and away from her.

Maya swapped herself with an illusion to avoid the first tentacle, only to find her new body face-to-face with the second, and it rapidly enveloped her within its inky grasp.

The Federation soldier spun his staff, summoning a shield of violet flames that burned through the first tentacle, and channeled white lightning across his body, frying the second tentacle and attempting to ward off the attack.

Aiden whispered his phrase again, reinforcing its existence.

***I AM THE TERROR OF THE DEPTHS.***

The raw *fear* permeating the battlefield redoubled, and even the flames and lightning froze in terror. Both of his tentacles landed, crashing through the crystalline chest of the rune soldier and sending fragments of metal across the battlefield.

Aiden smiled, a terrible sight in his current form. But, instead of dying, the soldier simply closed up the hole in his chest, severing Aiden's tentacles and pulling them in, dark blue-black magic joining the streams of magic pulsing through his body.

Aiden frowned at that development.

He reinforced [The Depths] around them with the full might of his Authority, putting a tremendous drain on his willpower and making the siren call of abandoning his humanity all the louder, but he could hold out for a few more minutes.

But he was the most fearsome thing at this depth, and the other monsters within his skill attacked his enemies surely, needing only a few tentacle whips to get the idea. The three of them- because of course Maya had managed to escape already, he wasn't entirely sure when that had happened- fought off the encroaching denizens with ferocity, but without further action, they'd likely outlast him.

His first focus was the rune soldier. A flex of [The Depths] separated the trio, giving him the ability to attack them one at a time. The rune soldier was accordingly first up, and he barreled through the water like a missile, wrapping himself with a blanket of pressurized cutting water. He crashed into the giant from an unseen angle with *immense* force, only to bounce off entirely.

A bit more finesse was needed, apparently.

He conjured a half-dozen razor-sharp water discuses and sent them in a barrage at the soldier, only for him to smash two into pieces with his staff, freeze a third into yellowish-green ice and reverse its course, shoot down two more with arrows of purple fire fired from his shoulders, and simply backhand the last, sending it back at Aiden, crackling with lightning.

Aiden smoothly dodged the lightning-coated discus, and...

Was immediately slammed with the lightning discus, causing his tentacles to lock up and spasm. What? Hmm. Some kind of disorientation effect. To avoid it, he simply swapped his position with a random bit of water somewhere else, letting him actually dodge the second reflected attack.

It had admittedly been quite some time since Aiden had run into a target he couldn't just brute-force into submission, but he still knew how to deal with it. He just needed a bit of time, which unfortunately he wasn't about to get.

The currents around him twisted and diverted away, forming a bubble within [The Depths] where there was no water. Along the edges, the deep waters became deep rock, and in the blink of an eye they were no longer in [The Depths] of the ocean, but [The Depths] of the earth, a massive cavern their new battlefield.

Aiden kept himself in the air with a light touch of his Domain, but a blinding light arced from a tiny hole that opened in the ceiling, striking down like Maya's golden sword and cutting his leviathan form in half. In that instant, Aiden felt the choice present itself as to whether he would dive deeper into the Authority and *stay* the Terror, or return to being Aiden.

He picked the latter.

Now back in human form, he threw himself to the side on a summoned wave, taking the form of an underground river and breaking through the rock walls of the cavern, narrowly avoiding a newly-reappeared Yun Me's spear aimed at his head.

It wasn't particularly difficult, but it put him on the defensive, and he was forced to relegate his offensive on the others to the back of his mind while he focused on defending himself from Yun Me.

Even in [The Depths] of the earth rather than the ocean, there were still great monsters to be found here, and Aiden sensed one such predator lurking just beyond the walls of the cavern. To lure it in, he quickly hid his full power and projected a feeling of weakness. Stone flew as the monster, some kind of rocky wingless draconic wyrm, broke through the floor and lunged at him.

He locked it down with his Authority.

Locking down space to prevent someone from moving was a simple tactic. It was still almost never used at their level because, without an advantage in Domain advancement or a *massive* skill discrepancy, your opponent could easily counter such a working. And no one had anything greater than an Aspect in this realm.

No one except Aiden.

Yun Me's forward movement stopped like she ran into a wall and Aiden drifted to the side as the wyrm came in for a bite.

With Aiden's dodge, it had only one target in its view, and it happily took a bite as it flew past her.

Yun Me conjured a spherical shield around her, but was swallowed whole nonetheless. She'd break free soon enough, but Aiden re-projected his full strength and directed a spike of fear at the wyrm, prompting it to dive back into the ground and burrow away as fast as it could.

Aiden would finish her off later. Of his three opponents, she was certainly the verifiably *hardest* one to beat, and while the rune soldier seemed to have greater passive defenses, he expected he'd find a workaround soon enough. But if Yun Me was still in play, that would be all the harder.

Maya brought down a golden sword whose blade stretched to the end of the cavern, and he threw himself to the side to avoid it while using [Abyssal Ablation] to deflect the bolt of ink-black lightning that the soldier threw at him. That attack still carried some kind of intense reverberation that rattled his body until he turned into water, at which point it became harmless ripples.

He created a water clone and split up, each one engaging one of the fighters still on the battlefield. He could tell with the corner of his awareness that Yun Me had escaped the wyrm, but its fleeing had brought it far enough from the battle that she would take some time to arrive.

The clone conjured a pair of whips and began harassing the rune soldier, for all that it was twice his size. Purple flames, arrows of light, toxic ice, all of it poured down on him in an unending hail, but he'd fought bigger and scarier things before. *He* was the terror here, the soldier was just an interloper challenging his Authority.

His real body closed in with Maya, only for the entire world to vanish in place of a pitch-black dreamscape. She was going back to basics, apparently. That meant she was getting tired.

Aiden closed his eyes, dodged an invisible knife and fired off a [Water Bullet], feeling the spell impact Maya. His clone wrapped a [Water Whip] around the end of the giant's staff and let himself go for a ride, being flung into the air as the soldier spun the weapon.

The call of the Depths was strengthening.

It was time to end this.

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Medea sighed with relief as the battle was reaching its conclusion and reached a tentacle over to pat the still shocked Cammie on the head.

They would be fine, just like she had said they would be.

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Maya dodged to the left while a copy of her dodged right, in case she needed to take its place if her dodge was wrong. Off in the corner of her awareness, she saw a clone of Aiden flipping around the giant rune idiot as he did... something. She had stopped paying attention to them once it became clear they were functionally useless beyond another meat shield.

Some attack was coming, but Maya just couldn't locate it. Aiden pulling an extra stage to his Domain out of his ass would be due for a lot of future consideration, but right now, she needed to concentrate. If only the palpable fear aura wasn't constantly wriggling at the back of her mind like an annoying little worm.

Right as the fear spiked, Maya felt the blow descend.

It was like a tidal wave, like the wrath of an angry elemental, like the descent of an immortal into a veil world.

It was coming right at her.

It was coming after all of them actually.

Yun Me crashed through the rock from where the wyrm had dragged her off, just as Aiden and his clone flew to be back-to-back, raised their arms, and pulled *down*.

The stone crumbled around them, and unfathomable amounts of water came pouring in, like a hammer from the heavens, a tsunami dropped directly on their heads. There was a lot of chaos, and she needed to spin up a rapid Law just to give her enough time to process.

Yun Me nearly had her arm wrenched from its socket when her shield got pinned between two boulders traveling at nearly supersonic speeds, and opted to ditch the shield rather than let her mobility be so impeded as more boulders came flying towards where she was standing. Her spear was also knocked from her hand, but she simply re-manifested it in time to stab a wave of water away. The giant rune idiot had two rocks break on his head before he went down, and even with **All the Time In The World**, turning herself into an illusion, and more, she felt herself being crushed under the immense pressure of Aiden's Authority backed attack.

She refused to let that be the end of it. She refused to let that be the end of *this*. She was Maya Embers, the Reality Warper. And with the last of her strength, she **pushed**.

### ***That Didn't Happen.***

Her willpower and mana dropped like a stone, and there was a good deal of chaos, but by the time she was aware of what was going on, they were back floating in space, no sign of the abyssal depths- oceanic or cavernous- they had been within. Instead, they were in the battlefield where most of their fight had occurred, but the arena shield had apparently collapsed. That was new.

To her sides were Yun Me- still missing her shield but less harmed- and the rune idiot. She hadn't realized that would be so area-of-effect, and wondered if next time she could make it more selective, to save power.

She felt the undercurrents of reality begin to stir, the sounds of the ocean beginning to stir as Aiden sought to bring them back to the depths, but she put a rapid stop to that.

### ***It Is What It Is.***

It would drastically cut into her own effectiveness, but it handily put a stop to Aiden's Domain shenanigans. Hopefully Yun Me and the rune idiot could take it the rest of the way, because while she was overstretched nearly to the point of breaking... she was *not* missing out on the rest of this fight.

She wouldn't stop and give up now, not in the best fight she'd had in her lifetime.

She needed to see.

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Aiden swore as Maya brought all three of them very nearly back from the dead. *That* was a new one, and it was lopsided enough of a law to revive her, but not restore the resources he'd had to pull out to try and score the blow. Still, at least he'd been able to separate Yun Me from her shield long enough to pull it into the Depths, and Maya's hasty recall hadn't been able to

return it to its rightful owner. That was an incredible relief, as much as he was impressed by the impromptu revive.

The call of the monster was growing strong, and his willpower was nearing empty. Using his Authority was taxing on it, who would have guessed? But that meant it was time to finish this.

It was time for his last, not really trump card, trump card.

Reaching into the gas giant they had been fighting over, Aiden connected to all of the hydrogen floating around.

Hydrogen was, after all, a big part of water. Two-thirds of it, if he was being generous. But that wasn't enough to allow him to control it directly. However, if he looked at the planet beneath him another way, then it was a giant ocean. Not one of water, nor of lava or sand, but of hydrogen. And he couldn't control just any hydrogen. And he couldn't control just any ocean.

But an ocean of hydrogen?

He could make that work. Barely.

His Domain and skills were stretched in some very uncomfortable ways, to the point he felt his body begin to crack and melt, but he reached out and commanded the planet to rise.

An enormous tentacle of hydrogen stretched out from the surface of the planet looming overhead, a swirling mass of storms the size of a moon. It seemed to move slowly, but that was simply the size and distance playing tricks on perception. The tentacle slammed into the battlefield like the entire ocean it was, winds created from the nothingness of space striking with the force of a mountain. While they enveloped Aiden harmlessly, they struck his foes with the force needed to pulverize a moon.

The rune soldier conjured a silver shield in front of them, and the hydrogen was deflected in every direction. Behind him, Yun Me conjured a very solid-looking shield, despite Aiden and Maya's ongoing war over the underlying working, which was locking down spatial storage as a matter of course, and began to envelop the group in a crackling red shield.

It took too long.

One moment, the rune soldier was defending against Aiden's onslaught of tentacle strikes stalwartly.

The next moment, the rune soldier had been replaced with a cloud of crystal dust and fragments of metal as he *detonated*. Multicolored waves of energy spilled out and interrupted Yun Me's nascent shield as the impact of repeated strikes overwhelmed him, causing his conjoined body to rupture and release twenty cultivators worth of energy in an instant.

Yun Me recovered quickly, and while he could see that she'd gotten a wounded leg somewhere, she still moved quickly. But instead of a skill, she manifested a massive and



ancient tree that resisted the onrushing tide admirably well. Maya's current Law poured into the tree as well, making it even sturdier and mightier than it would have otherwise been. Aiden pushed with his Authority and an ocean of hydrogen, they pushed back with their Aspects and reality on itself.

They were all tired. This fight had pushed them all to their limits.

But such was the nature of the Depths. Simply existing was a never-ending fight, a never-ending struggle to survive. It was a pressure he was so very familiar with. It was his home. It was his Domain. And it was his Authority which ensured that these interlopers within his waters would fall.

Blood poured down his face from his eyes as his willpower stretched to its limits.

No, not blood.

*Saltwater.*

He laughed maniacally. The sea was in his blood. Always had been. Always would be.

A wave crested the shore. The ocean consumed all. It rushed across the shoreline and slammed into the tall and proud tree on the coast.

The tree stood.

The waters rose.

And rose.

*And rose.*

***And rose.***

Soon, even the tips of the trees were underneath the waves, leaving no sign of land.

Maya and Yun Me were nowhere to be seen.

The Depths had claimed them.

Aiden sagged. He'd managed to trap them, but both of them were squirrely- Yun Me was already hammering him from the inside with attacks, and had somehow managed to find her shield, despite how impossible that should have been, and he didn't trust himself to hold them for very long. He needed to get to a secure war-prison and *fast*, where they could better restrain them and accept surrenders, or whatever.

More ships arrived in the system, and Aiden tensed for a moment before smiling. The Empire forces and newly-arrived Guild forces swept forward, enveloping the remaining armies before they could retreat.

They had won. *He* had won.

His Domain all but collapsed, his willpower pushed to its breaking point, but appearances were important. Aiden raised his hand above him in victory and surveyed the devastation he'd wrought even as he laughed.

Be it a rising tide, a rushing river, a stormy sea, Waters was unstoppable.

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Watching the wreckage of a once great armada and the surviving armies huddling inside as his own forces rallied around them, Emmanuel turned to Winter Hornet, Janet, and Virgil.

"We *did* convene this predicated on the idea that these would be the initial surrender negotiations. Shall we begin?"

Virgil ground out through gritted teeth. "We haven't lost in the Tier 25 bracket, so the war is only tied. Really, you've lost the Tier 35 bracket as well, just not as badly as you *might* have. Waters is in no shape to fight, and do you *really* think you can claw back enough territory to pull the upper bracket into anything but a draw before you have to release today's captures? No. I'm calling your bluff. Without your Ascender, you can't win forever."

Emmanuel raised and dropped a single shoulder in the most casual way he could. "It's inevitable at this point. Why drag it out? I'm willing to call it here and now, with a pseudo white peace. You pay out the Ascenders and we all go on our way."

He knew they would never accept that, couldn't accept that. He didn't even want that, to be honest. He wanted as long of a treaty as possible, but that was where his bargaining *should* start, so it *had* to start there.

Sadly, he knew exactly what Virgil would say when she opened her mouth. "We haven't lost yet." Not bothering to hide it, she sent an order with her AI. "Harmony Accords. Attack."

Because, of course, they would fight to the bitter end.

Emmanuel looked down to where what was left of Aiden floated, silently laughing at the destruction he wrought upon the Empire's enemies.

Emmanuel had faith in his Ascenders. No matter what pyrrhic victory their enemies tried to achieve, he trusted the kids to see them through the flames.

He just hoped the price they paid wasn't *too* high.