

## Chapter 340

Allister waited in his office, fingers steepled and orbs spinning behind his head in an orbit so slow, they seemed to not move at all.

The inertial energy was harvested and then fed back into the orbs in case anyone was foolish enough to fight him. Allister wasn't bad at fighting, but that wasn't his speciality.

He was a planner, preferring well laid plans and careful execution to hasty action. It came from his time as a two bit villain, where heists and theft were his main source of income. Those early lessons were the ones engraved the deepest.

Though, just because he preferred indirect methods of problem-solving didn't mean he couldn't slug it out.

As more than a few heroes had learned the hard way, 'Orbit' was perfectly willing to brawl. Especially in the earliest tiers, when magical skills had been lacking and everyone was reliant on fists, blades, and ranged weapons.

His ability to harvest the kinetic energy out of the blows of his enemies had made him a force to be reckoned with. Their building leveling attacks had been as effective as a mortal striking a mountain.

Those had been the days, and the brawls had been exactly what an angry teen had needed. Slowly losing those advantages had also forced him into the man he was today. As they Tiered up and spells started to become more common, he became more vulnerable and started losing more and more. It wasn't until his Tier 50 Talent that the ability to steal the inertia in magic had developed, but by then, he had long since learned that the most direct path was rarely the best one.

Sometimes it was the only path, and that was why he had never let his combat prowess slip and why, even as a Tier 50, he never stopped storing inertia.

It was also why he was willing to play second fiddle to Emmanuel and the Empire.

Not that they were evil, since the last three Tier 50s had been the kind of leaders any Great Power could hope for, but that didn't stop their growth. Especially not in his generation.

His predecessor had copied a number of Empire policies, which thankfully ensured they were doing better than the other Great Powers in terms of finding elite fighters. But they had been categorically unlucky with their limited expansion, which limited their population growth. Still, they were growing slower than the Empire, which came with the threat of being consumed in the Empire's rapid growth.

If Emmanuel wasn't both competent and honest in his deals, Allister might have considered helping the other Great Powers slow the Empire's momentum rather than protect its flank.

It wasn't that he didn't appreciate the turn around from feudal control to civil liberties, as those were more in-line with the Guilds' ideals, but it was simply a matter of independence. Why would he spend his people's lives to raise a hegemon who would swallow them all?

Emmanuel at least had a good head on his shoulders, and could both scheme and act. Too many people could make plans but failed to execute them, while others never planned and simply did. The capacity to do both was what made someone competent, even if Heroes typically leaned to the side of brute force.

That could work, as proven in the latest war. The Empire had stalled the war and then staged a clean turn around in the third act, which let them end the war exactly where Emmanuel said he wanted it to end, all thanks to their Heroes.

If Allister didn't know better, he would have suspected that Emmanuel had planned the whole thing, but not even his father's Tier 50 Talent could so accurately read the strings of fate. With Tier 50s making decisions, everything was in flux and impossible to foretell.

The war at least had been a net win for the Guilds. The planets, once their cultures had been shifted, would be a handsome source of new expansion routes and sources of populations ready to contribute.

Emmanuel telling him to agree to a separate peace deal had been a bit of a shock. Allister had rolled with it, as it benefited the Guilds, but he wasn't particularly happy with the suggestion. It felt a hair too much like an *order*, and one didn't order allies around like subordinates.

It was why, when Emmanuel had told him they needed to talk, he had agreed.

They *did* need to talk.

And if the Emperor didn't have a good reason for his actions, Allister would do what was best for his Great Power and its people.

That was doubly true when he considered the true war that Emmanuel kept hinting at. No matter how expensive the Primordial Dragon blood was, it wasn't worth letting his Great Power burn.

He felt the teleportations and shook his head, interrupting his musings. The Tier 50 in the Empire had gone from their capital to the edge of the Great Power in a single move.

That Talent was *ridiculous*.

A few hundred more normal teleports later, Emmanuel arrived near the Guild's capital, and Allister waved him in with a pulse of spiritual perception.

Emmanuel phased into real space, sitting in the seat across from Allister with a nod.

“It's time I came clean.”

Allister raised an eyebrow, indicating for Emmanuel to proceed.

“I suspect you are confused why I asked you to make a separate peace deal, and the answer is simple. I wasn't joking when I said there would be a true war. Two reasons, really, but one main reason. I found *it*.”

Emmanuel paused with a small smile and Allister played his part, asking the obvious question. “Found what?”

“The answer to all of our problems.”

When it became clear Emmanuel wasn't going to say more than that, Allister raised his eyebrow again. “All of our problems? I have a lot of problems. And if the solutions will create a true war, I'm not sure I want the answer.”

“Sleight of hand. Hide the impossible behind the absurd. It's a trick that worked for Aiden, and it works for me as well. Of my Ascenders, who would you pick as the most disruptive?”

“Aiden, of course. The sheer breadth of possibility that has opened up by having a *functional* Authority before us is staggering. It doesn't matter how bad of a teacher he is, we'll learn incalculable amounts about Domain development simply through passive observation.” Allister answered without a second of hesitation.

“That's what I was hoping you'd say. Remember, I'm hiding the *impossible* behind the *absurd*.”

Allister narrowed his gaze. That the Empire had four Ascenders was already impossible *and* absurd. Were he to make a second guess, he would list Allison, of course. That wouldn't be his secret, unless Allison's teleportation was even more powerful than they'd thought. There *was* a not-uncommon theory that she could teleport anywhere she had a clear enough image of in her head, so the truth would have to be even more extreme than that.

It also wouldn't be the solution to *all* their problems. The solution to *all* their problems would be... some way to Tier up planets cheaply and easily. Create a Tier 50 world, raise up an army of universe-crushers, and conquer the known Realm in an unstoppable avalanche.

It couldn't be Lila. The dragon's toolbox was vast and powerful, but her existence wasn't something new. She could have found a new world in her explorations, of course, but that still didn't fit.

Zack, perhaps? The Empire had created *two* new mana types this war, and that was already impressive. But not the solution to all their problems, or even most of them. Hmm, hiding

the impossible behind the absurd. The absurd was the actions taken by Aiden Waters, Allison Shadow, and Zack Light.

So, the impossible was hidden behind them. Elizabeth Legion, Matthew Titan, and Aster Wraith, then? What could be impossible about them?

If he looked past the absurd and into the impossible, what was the *maximum* power that he could imagine each of the three having? It was difficult to speculate how a Hero could be even more powerful than they already were. Perhaps Elizabeth could raise the dead? Perhaps...

He looked at Emmanuel, meeting the man's gaze. He noticed, and returned a questioning look.

*Did you figure it out?* He seemed to ask.

Look past the absurd and into the impossible. Perhaps Matthew's Talent *wasn't* about wrenching every last drop of mana from that which was around him. Plenty of theories had abounded, of course, from taking the show at face value and assuming that his mana reserves were infinite, to those who dug just a bit further and found that he absorbed mana from mana stones, and those who looked even further beyond.

Allister hadn't given the matter too much thought, himself. There was no need to concern himself with the details of the boy's Talent, especially with all of the insanity the Empire was generally experiencing. But when he had thought about it, his primary theory was that he could re-use mana from his surroundings in some form or fashion, creating a feedback loop with his Domain wherein he gave mana to his fellows and took some portion of that for himself.

If he were to assess the *impossible*, then...

"Matthew. There's no trick, is there?"

Emmanuel responded with a small shake of his head.

"It grows, then?"

"Doubles."

Allister took a sharp breath, despite himself. Doubling? *Doubling*? There were practically no growth Talents that doubled each Tier. Those which did were incredibly restrictive, or functioned as some kind of cap to an extraneous method of growth. They were the kinds of tantalizing promises which the Power Assessor sometimes spat out, and some people would waste their entire lives trying to reach their theoretical limits. The idea that someone could double their mana regeneration every Tier was absurd.

No, not absurd. It was *impossible*.

Then a thought occurred to him.

He had just watched Matthew along with *all of the other Tier 50s*. A chill ran through him, and he glared at Emmanuel.

“Why would you ever let him enter a fight? Why would you let anyone see him? Why would you risk him or his secret? W—”

Emmanuel’s smile turned slightly smug as he interrupted him. “There’s a simple truth at play. I am not a tyrant. I refuse to rule over my citizens, telling them what they can and cannot do.”

The way he said it made Allister think he may have just learned a portion of Emmanuel’s Aspect, but he still couldn’t accept it.

There was one thing he needed confirmed. “What’s the timeframe? Per hour? Per minute?”

Instead of answering, Emmanuel started dumping mana into the office at a steady rate of forty two million mana *per second*.

Allister’s throat went dry as his mind raced.

“You’re an idiot.”

Emmanuel let out a deep belly laugh at the comment, but at least stopped dumping mana into the air, letting Allister think. His orbs spun with an unbecoming fervor but he didn’t have the spare mental capacity to control them right now.

Forty two million mana per second was impressive— it was more than he personally made a second— but it wasn’t realm changing. Not yet. But if it kept doubling, then it *would* truly be the solution to all their problems.

If the boy made it to Tier 50?

One quadrillion four hundred seven trillion was *beyond* realm changing. Even ‘just’ forty trillion mana a second, what Matthew would have at Tier 35, would be realm changing enough that anyone who controlled that much mana could catapult their Great Power into Hegemony.

A Tier 50 capital, or even just a few Tier 50 rifts on a Tier 49 world. The very thought was mind-boggling. The resources needed to just keep the capital planets running were enormous, but with Matthew’s Talent, they could finally not just fix that issue, but make strides to correct a fundamental imbalance in the realm itself since the Shattering.

It was undoubtedly the answer to all of their problems. And the cause of so many more.

It was there that his mind started putting together pieces of seemingly unconnected information.

Emmanuel alluding to his Truth was the first thing that came to mind, if he’d understood the man correctly. Emmanuel was not a tyrant. It was his Truth. It was a core fundamental part

of his being forged into his very spirit. Into his Domain. Into the core of his cultivation. It was the pillar on which everything else was forged.

Of course, that wasn't *entirely* true. Cultivators weren't wholly slaves to their Domains, though acting at odds to them could have consequences. Even then, could even that be sufficient for him to pass over the opportunity to stand Hegemon?

Allister genuinely couldn't say yes without a hint of doubt rearing its head.

What if Emmanuel wanted to use this to take over the realm? Could anyone stop him? With that Talent set and the ability to create higher Tiers without digging into reserves? Allister wasn't sure it was possible to stop the Empire's ascendancy any more.

And even if Emmanuel said he didn't want it, could he trust that? Could he risk his Great Powers' freedom on the word of a competitor?

Allister didn't know.

He did know that if Emmanuel was telling him about this he was, at least as of now, intending to share. But the villain inside of Allister was looking for a double cross or betrayal that he was sure would follow. A younger him would never trust anyone but himself with such a resource, and he would have fought to the death to secure or destroy it.

It was also the same thought that he was sure his fellow Tier 50s would have.

There was no chance any of them would be willing to allow another Great Power to have access to such mana. They would rather kill the golden goose than let someone else have its eggs.

There would be a true war, and it was just a question of where the Guilds would stand.

His initial, gut reaction was to try and grab it for himself. But Allister wasn't a fool, and more than that, he wasn't blind.

If Emmanuel was willing to mention it, he must be willing to share.

If the Guilds could get access to such mana reserves without a fight, why would they bother?

That was if that was Emmanuel's plan.

This could be a subjugation attempt.

Still, he couldn't get over the fact that Emmanuel let Matthew anywhere near a battle, let alone the frontlines, where death lurked around every corner. Hero or not, Allister would never let someone of that value out of his sight, let alone spiritual perception.

It did speak well to Emmanuel's willingness to put his actions to his words.

He wasn't a tyrant.

Leaning forward, he spat out, "I reiterate: you're an idiot."

Emmanuel nodded. "There is an element of risk, but Matthew's greatest fear is rightly being shoved into a box. One of his Minkalla folded reflection lives, where he had this Talent, revolved around that fear. It's realm changing, but I won't force anything from him."

A spike of fear at the loss of such a resource rippled through Allister, and he couldn't help but smile at it. He was a villain, through and through.

"Thankfully, Matthew is cognizant of his power and its intrinsic responsibilities. He sees his Talent as a way to help people and even intends to open a guild with that intention. While he was on the Path, he already created a way to mass produce aura rifts. He seems to have a knack for aperology, and was the one to create the rift that originally dropped the [Bandage] skill. With this resource, he intends to make other realm breaking discoveries and make them available for free."

Emmanuel tossed Allister a mana stone with a sample of mana and a data packet, which he quickly reviewed. It explained how to best use the provided mana to create aura rifts. The first pages of information were... sloppy, but the follow up tests were clearly done by a proper research team and were far more thorough. They pointed out a number of pitfalls to avoid, as well as best practices to maximize chances of successful aura rifts.

"Don't be surprised if there is an update to those, as Matthew intends to make that the personal focus of his guild, but it's enough to get started. I'm serious when I say I see the Guilds as an ally."

Allister nodded. There was now no denying Emmanuel's sincerity. "I still think it's the height of foolishness to allow him to fight, but I won't comment on it further. And you are right that this will kick off a true war. I have no doubts that even us Tier 50s will be pulled into direct combat, and while both of us are strong, I don't think we can fight six other Tier 50s with just the two of us."

Emmanuel's smile turned feral. "I won't pretend it will be easy, but I also managed to snag Hastor's Talent mid ascension. So I have a single strike Tier 51 blade. It will only work once, but it will let us seriously injure at least one other Tier 50. Besides that, I believe that we can get JR to our side. Access to that much mana should be enough to buy his allegiance. And I'm not looking to win the war, to be honest. I don't need us to be the final side standing. We just need to be strong enough that they can't take Matt or force him to Ascend. We need to be strong enough to negotiate terms. Terms which I offer to you now. After I raise the Empire's capital to Tier 50, I will raise your capital. Eventually, we can all have Tier 50 capitals."

Emmanuel's eyes narrowed and he caught Allister's gaze. "I don't want the Empire to stand above the others. I just want the Empire to better itself, and not be destroyed for daring to upset the status quo."

“The others will never agree or believe you. Maybe if we can hold them back long enough, some of them might come around, but Virgil is unhinged and Tobias hates humans. He’ll never let anyone get any perceived power over him or his. Janet hates the Empire something fierce, and Aoife will try to preserve the Clans as the strongest Great Power. I agree JR will possibly be willing to side with us, but even then, our chances aren’t good. Please tell me there is something more.”

Allister had bought in, but they needed far more power if they were going to survive this war, and suddenly, he found himself wishing they had lost this last war a little worse. It might have given them a longer treaty, and while treaties wouldn’t matter in the case of a true war, it would force the others to turn their blades to each other, which would keep them occupied and out of their houses.

Emmanuel nodded, a wry grin growing on his face, and Allister felt hope, only for it to come crashing down with his next words. “I have a healer whose Talent grants Overhealth to all cast skills.”

“Is that it?” Allister wasn’t sure why Emmanuel bothered to mention something so trivial. Every Great Power had access to Overhealth healing in some form, and Emmanuel should know that.

Emmanuel looked confused. “You sound disappointed.”

Wanting to clarify, Alistair asked, “You have only a single omni-skill Overhealth healer?”

“I feel as though I’m not explaining myself properly,” Emmanuel was smiling again. “It’s a Tier 3 Overhealth Talent that expands its range as it’s pushed before Tiering up.”

“Overhealth from anything but a cracked skill is immensely rare, yes but we figure each Great Power as at least one in some capacity as well as cracked skills. Mostly Domain based—the Clans are rumored to have a Talent based one, but its pure speculation. Ours is Domain based. Still, it’s good you have at least one. What’s their speciality? Domain healing? Is that how Aiden pulled off making an Authority?”

“No, it’s physical healing. But it’s completely perfect healing, no cooldown whatsoever. It can even cleanse existing healing cooldown.”

“What Tier range can they act on?”

“All of them.”

Now that was mildly surprising. “Okay, that’s at least something. So I’m guessing they’re Tier 44? 46? Is... is it Harvest Moon?”

That would make sense, but didn’t quite explain why Emmanuel was so impressed with it.

“No, it’s not Baxter. And they’re Tier 17.”



*That* caught Allister's attention. "They can heal people three times their Tier? How do they have the power to affect *anyone* at that Tier, nevermind provide Overhealth?" Allister had one Domain Overhealth healer, and that sort of range was impossible for them. The same was true for the few dozen with cracked Overhealth skills.

Emmanuel gestured and a healing spell formed in the air. "They act indirectly. They have a lingering heal effect, and it serves as a buff to any healing cast upon the patient, letting even very crude healing land with no cooldown and yet also with the full effect."

"And under Tier 25... I see. A healer capable of granting Overhealth, that would persist through all other healings... that *is* unique, and useful. As far as our *very limited* knowledge of the other Great Powers Overhealth users, none of them can do that much and need to perform the healing themselves to get the effect."

Allister nodded to himself. A proper skill to pair with the healer's Overhealth-granting, which he had no doubt that Emmanuel had already provisioned them with, unless they were *also* somehow on the Path of Ascension. With proper exposure to said skill, they could fight a war wherein: none of their losses were permanent, their Overhealth healer never exhausted themselves, they had unlimited mana, and with nearly as many Heroes as the rest of the Realm did combined.

It would still be an uphill battle, but it was looking *possible*.

Steepling his fingers and letting his orbs return to their slow circling, he nodded. "I'm trusting you. And this is a lot to go on pure faith. That said, are you sure you have no way of averting this war? Even if you think you'll win, the risk is almost incalculable and the damage will be tremendous."

Emmanuel looked off into the distance instead of immediately responding.

Eventually he spoke. "What other option do I have? Just ignore it and ask Matt to not use his Talent? To just keep the status quo by not capitalizing on the work of my father and grandmother? I can only fight hard enough that the others are forced to listen and not just react. Only when they know they can't win or take Matt from me will they be willing to accept any sort of compromise."

Allister shook his head. "Great Powers will burn. Mostly likely ours."

"Most likely."

There was a long silence before Emmanuel looked over to Allister with a gaze that asked if he was in or out.

It should have been a hard choice, but Allister had never been one to hesitate. Everything came with risk, and this was the greatest payday the Guilds had ever had.

"We're in."

Emmanuel stood up and proffered his hand, which Allister shook. "I'll deliver seventy-five percent of the mana I produce on our decade visits. That should be enough to keep you guys ahead of the curve, and I'll make sure you are informed of any new breakthroughs we come up with. But that will take a while with the post war stabilization."

Seventy five percent was a generous amount of the mana, especially given that Emmanuel would be providing his *own* mana, and the mana of a Tier 50 would be far more useful for what he had in mind.

Namely, his own war coffers. Without needing to concentrate lower-Tier mana to fuel the mana stones of himself and the strongest guildmasters, they could stockpile a truly immense degree for the war to come, and accelerate their delving by a fair degree while freeing up even more mana for other projects.

With a true war coming, he needed to bolster his more important worlds in preparation for attacks that would no doubt devastate core regions of production once the fighting really started. That would be where the lion's share of the new windfall would go towards. The rest, well, there were some previously rejected project proposals that might be worth reconsidering.

He also needed to do it without rousing too much suspicion from the other Tier 50s, but he at least had a few ideas regarding that.

"How quickly do you see Matthew reaching Tier 45? I hope you intend for him to advance quickly."

"No, I can't pay them to wait at Tier 35, but I wasn't going to do that anyway. I hope they voluntarily leave the war Tiers in the next few thousand years, but I know they will advance to Tier 35 quickly. After that, we'll see. I won't order them around, and even if I could, you know how Ascenders react to orders. And for Matthew, being ordered to Tier for his mana is a particularly bad sore spot. We have twenty five thousand years before we need to ascend, and I hope any war happens later in my reign."

"Time is on our side," Allister agreed. "That said, the faster Matthew advances, the more mana we make. I know you aren't a tyrant, but a good prod or two will help keep the boy moving in the right direction at the right speed. Seconds might not matter, but decades sure do, especially when considering the doubling."

Emmanuel simply nodded. "I have some ideas, but for now, I need to return and help stabilize the Empire. I'm also working on some ways we can really abuse the Talents we have without showing our hand."

After a little more small talk Emmanuel left, leaving Allister to sit and ponder.

Everything made so much more sense with the revelations made today. He even considered following Emmanuel's example of stopping funding to their Farm, but he couldn't bring himself to make such a drastic change. That was going all in, and would see their true destruction if their gambit failed. The Empire might be willing to go all in, but he wasn't. And

besides, if they succeeded and he didn't need the Farm any more, he would have a plethora of higher Tier worlds to distribute, so it wasn't a waste so long as the cores weren't harvested.

While Emmanuel hadn't outright stated it, Allister suspected he wouldn't be ascending at the end of his reign. Not if his ambitions to make all the capitals Tier 50 worlds was true. There just wasn't enough time, and no one would complain too loudly about Emmanuel lingering if he was Tiering up *their* planet.

Especially not if they had just won a true war. To the victor went the spoils.

Allister shook his head free of idle thoughts and got himself back on track. He needed to plan. For the upcoming true war, his careful attempts at an Authority, and most of all Matthew's mana. So much work. That was life though, the rewards could be enjoyed once they were in hand, and he needed to ensure they secured the rewards which meant work.

It would be his grandest heist, and he couldn't wait to see it play out.

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Janet pushed her palm into her eyes as she went over the fifteenth report from a senator who wasn't happy that she had sacrificed so much of their war score in 'ephemeral' demands such as limiting deaths on the Empire's Path.

Her campaign promises were apparently nothing more than dust in the wind to them. The people voted her in because she promised the improvement of lives, because she swore to fight injustice and ensure that *all* interests were represented, that all lives were protected, and that she wouldn't stand for the abuses from petty people in power.

Now that she'd *done* that, the petty people in power she had beaten out were *mad*. They wanted *resources*, and were angry they didn't get many.

Apparently, they had thought all of her indignation had been nothing but a show, a tactic meant for raising sympathy while she plundered the Empire's coffers to enrich her own pockets. They had supported her because they thought it would line their coffers as well, while taking down their age-old enemy several notches.

She'd be reconsidering who was in her cabinet after this. She'd been disgusted by the blatant hypocrisy of so many of her fellow politicians as of late. Not that she'd ever thought *too* highly of her fellows, but attacking her *because* she kept her promises was a new low.

With allies like that, who needed enemies?

Mere resource penalties were practically ephemera when extracted from the top of the incredible war machine that the Empire was. What was more, they had *agreed* with her that they needed to starve the Empire of its fuel, the blood of children that it ran upon. They had agreed with it, apparently, until the very moment they found out that the war was not to be won so decisively that they could cripple the Empire *and* line their own pockets.

Now, they were turning on her.

Not everyone, but an annoying few who pretended they could have done better.

No, Janet was sure they couldn't because there was nothing they could do that she hadn't as a Tier 50.

The stress was like a weight pressing down on her. It simply added to the stress and fear that another one of the Tier 50s would create an Authority before her and the internal struggles were adding to it in the worst way. She didn't dare attempt even poking around at an Authority until she was in a more stable mental space, and that would take decades.

Decades she didn't have. They only had a hundred years before the Clans would attack them, but it was to be a tame war, a means by which they could more evenly test one another's mettle and skills. It also helped each of them try to wrangle their Gladiators, tempting Maya and On The Last Line to not retire for a few more decades yet, and ward off any similar probes from the other Great Powers in the meantime.

But mostly, Janet wanted to use this as an opportunity to grow closer with the Clans, something her predecessor had been unable to do with Hastor.

The real question was, what to do with the Empire?

"Abigail, please compile me a write up of the Empire's history for the last three...no, four rulers. Make it as analytical as possible. Actually, no. Make one from a Republic perspective, one from the Empire perspective, and the last as analytical as possible." As her aide moved to prepare the documents, Janet turned her gaze outward.

She hated the Empire, that much was true. How much of that hatred was manufactured? The Empire of old, of her young womanhood, that certainly was worthy of dire contempt, a tangled nest of vipers that put even her parliament to shame. But this new dynasty *had* been doing things differently.

She couldn't deny what was in front of her eyes. It was the why of it that she was uncertain of. Her instincts told her they were true believers who refused to bend. Both Agatha and Georgios had been obstinate leaders who had never suffered a slight without reprisal, and Emmanuel, it was clear, was even worse. He was the type to let the Realm burn rather than to cede a single inch.

Still, she wouldn't let herself become blinded, stuck within her own ways. Emmanuel had used her distrust of him as a weapon, and she would not allow that weapon to be used twice. Given the only weapon against falsehoods was the truth, that was what she would arm herself with.

If Emmanuel claimed to care about those weaker than himself, she would put that to the test.

Was he a politician, a visionary, or a liar?

Only time would tell.

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Virgil ran her hand down the glass tube containing the first of Charlie Team. She'd reconstituted their bodies herself for this, their greatest service for her yet. They deserved that much from her. That and lab work should always be done from a baseline to normalize results.

Ah, such tender little masterpieces. Part of it was her Talent and its connection, but she felt far more attached to them now than before and they truly were beautiful. At the tips of her fingers, she could feel their spirits, the intricate sculpture of their Domain as familiar as the day she'd crafted each of them their Intents. This was, she thought, the best part of children. She disagreed with her Talent that the early stages were worth anything, when emotions were a mess and so were *they*, but by now...

Yes, these were some of her finest creations. A perfect sculpture, immaculate down to the atomic level. And so obedient and cheerful, just like perfect children ought to be. They'd been aghast at the idea that the Empire had managed to beat them with such trickery, but had leaped at the chance to provide her one final service.

It made her so proud. Their sacrifice would make this so much more convenient than creating new subjects from scratch. Though, of course, that would come in time. This experiment would take many, many iterations to master.

This one was her little knight, the eager little sword so delighted to be in her service. It was such a brilliant Intent she'd made him, it was a shame that he'd never have the ability to fully master her gift.

Oh well. Maybe the next one would. It was such a good template, no need to waste it.

Not hesitating for even a second, she reached out with her Aspect, cradling her delicate little flower in her Domain, then gripped it tightly. It spasmed involuntarily at her vice-like grip, but she ignored the reflex. This would require *intense* precision, and such squirming wasn't allowed.

The Image of him swearing vows of service to her was so precious, and she committed it to memory, a suitable memorial for the valiant little boy. It would also function quite well as his Truth.

*I Serve My Mother.*

She assembled the first part of his Aspect with care, fusing it onto his spirit as gently as she could. Yet she did *something* wrong, and needed to suppress a most undignified growl as the boy's spirit writhed and recoiled, collapsing. Damn fool. Too weak to be truly useful. She supposed she would need to be even gentler with the next. Granting an Aspect to Tier 25 fighters would be a tremendous boon, once she had mastered it. She just needed to find candidates sturdy enough to withstand her efforts while she refined her technique.

Ah well, no sense dwelling on the past. The glass tube that had once held the child was now clouded with black and red, but it began to clear itself as she moved onto the next one.

Ah, this one already was acting as her outstretched hand. Perhaps he would be more compatible.

This time, she began with his Image. His Intent's image had merely been her hand resting upon his shoulder, but now she would make for him the ability to *be* her hand.

He lasted no longer than his brother, and Virgil moved onto the next.

It hadn't been this difficult for her to create Aspects within her Alpha and Bravo children, but that was because their spirits were more resilient from the additional ten Tiers. That and she had substantial practice granting Aspects to those of the appropriate Tiers. Attempting to do so this early was novel, but once she had accomplished this, she could see about granting Intents to Tier 15s, maybe even Tier 10s.

Another failure, though perhaps she had some insight into the nature of the failure.

When she eventually achieves success, they would dominate the wars, were she to ever allow them to fight. But she couldn't, not when the other Great Powers had made such an unwarranted fuss over *these* children. Bah. They served their purpose, and it was a far higher calling than any of the countless no-names they each sacrificed in their war machines. They were simply jealous that she was seeing results.

Failure again. It seemed her previous insight had been incorrect.

Well, it was no matter. This war had proven beyond all doubt the validity of her tactics, and while the current war with the rebellious scum was annoying, it could provide its own opportunities. Proving that even battered, her people were better than mere beasts. If the old stone-headed turtle had thought he'd find them severely weakened and that he could take advantage of their vulnerability to exploit them, he would be sorely mistaken.

Another failure, but this time, progress had been made.

She would find many willing volunteers for her experiments in the coming decades regardless, those eager to improve themselves at any cost. Willing participants were always so much easier to work with, after all.

Of course, *willingness* was not *sufficiency*, and she moved on from the latest failure.

She should raise a new set of children. She had learned oh so much from her latest progeny, and her next set of spawn could be even more effective and far more subtle. No need to divide them into full teams of ten, standard squads of five to six could be sufficient, especially if she taught them how to operate in larger groups. Perhaps some alterations to their runes would be in order. And, perhaps, she ought to create their Concepts as well, giving her a firmer base upon which she could work.

She was faced with another failure, and moved on. She was improving, however lacking the material may have been. The first tube was all but clear now, no trace of her sworn soldier to be seen beyond her treasured memories of him.

Her experiments had been enlightening. Attempting to create a Domain stage well in advance of when the spirit could normally support it was tricky, but enlightening. The costs would be steep, but that was a price she was willing to pay.

Today, Aspects. Tomorrow... Authorities.

A grin stretched across her face. She would make the sacrifice of the children worthwhile.

For her Great Power, for her people, and for herself.

Seeing the last tube drain, she nodded. She had learned a lot from both the war and her tests. The program might have failed, but it showed her the right path.

Yes, this would do nicely.

A new round of elites, entirely her handiwork and with no weaknesses to be seen... that could work. She was also rather interested in how Minkalla might interact with her sculptures. Yes, her handiwork was already perfect, but Minkalla could improve upon even perfection. That was the premise behind the Paladins, after all. Perhaps she might find inspiration in that place of miracles.

She would certainly need all the assistance she could get, she noted, as she stepped away from the final failure. This experiment had been enlightening, but it was only the beginning.

Soon, the Federation would stand triumphant, calling the Realm to order and restoring the proper hierarchy.

She simply needed to find better base material for next time.

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Emmanuel couldn't help but be happy as he returned to the Empire. The Guilds were informed and Allister was all in.

The war wouldn't be easy, but it was looking more and more possible by the day.

As he returned to the Empire, he took a moment to float above the Capital. With Matt's Talents and a Tier 25 that gave him ten times more mana generation, he pushed his father's Tier 50 and started looking through possible futures. He wasn't looking for specifics so much as just sensing general trends.

There were disasters coming. There were *incidents* that his people would need to overcome. There was triumph and joy. All of that would forge his people into a steel strong enough to withstand what was coming.

The Emperor's job wasn't to coddle them, but to make them strong enough to stand on their own. Not just survive, but thrive.

Finally, he descended and made his way over to see Carissa; he had a little time before he needed to dedicate some time to another attempt at teasing out a part of his Authority. He had a head start he couldn't allow to be squandered but he would take this bit of time to spend with his wife.

The *Emperor's* job might be never ending, unrewarding, thankless, and impossibly hard, but *Emmanuel's* job was to see to their growing little family.

It was these little moments that gave him the strength to face what was coming.

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Wun Miloan stretched and yawned as he exited the rift. That had been an *excellent* nap. The rift challenge had given him an entire world of clouds to fight through, and there were some golden clouds that had felt absolutely phenomenal to sleep on. It had been the perfect end to a phenomenal fight, a wonderful set of loot, including an undoubtedly *epic* cracked skill he couldn't wait to identify, and just overall a stellar experience.

Absolute five-star experience, would delve again. Course, he'd never see it again, but that was just the winds of luck for you. The highest of highs meant you'd never hit the same thing twice.

He picked a bit of food out from between his teeth with his tongue while he scanned his messages. Buncha official correspondence about the Saint changeover, yadda yadda, the whole reason he'd gone delving then was to avoid that, what about what was *new*?

"Yo! What's new, dudes!" He sent to the Legend chat, "*Goldenrod is back, baby!* Ready for all your lives to be made exciting once again? Tell me about all the dull mundanity you've been putting up with while I've been gone!"

Max responded almost immediately. "Turn on your video. *Now.*"

Wun smelled danger. Something had happened, and he tried to scroll back into the chat's history, only to find that it cut off before he entered the rift.

"I disabled you from getting messages. Now, video or I spill the beans on *that* thing."

With a bit of hesitancy, Wun started projecting his reactions to the Legend group chat. Whatever prank they were about to pull couldn't be *that* bad, right?

As he read a sense of dread overtook him and he kept looking for the prank he was sure had to be there.



But there was no prank.

Five? Aiden. What?

...

...

...

That had been the worst nap. Ever.