

Chapter 517

Matt floated in a sea of near darkness, weightless and still.

It was nice. Pleasant. Calm.

Stretching, he let his awareness settle.

It found nothing because he'd already picked his former image away piece by piece until he'd returned his Aspect's canvas to a blank slate. For him, that meant he was in a sea of almost darkness, illuminated dimly by his Concept, Intent, and Meld's distant presences.

It had taken a literal astronomical amount of work to get his Images to play nice with each other, but that was the problem. Or the opportunity.

Matt didn't want to stop making space-based Domains.

With a thought, his white hole and black hole appeared in the middle of his empty canvas, and he started to merge them. He didn't try to recreate his Meld, that would have been easy, he instead found the inverse connection between the two celestial bodies and created a wormhole.

The Image wasn't *perfect*, but he was confident that with enough work to build out the framework, he'd be able to make something that wouldn't kill him.

After talking with Aster, who struggled to build out her own nascent celestial image, he'd come to a realization. He liked space, and he wasn't necessarily done with celestial imagery.

He might not be preparing for making his Authority any time soon, but he already had a few ideas for his Image, and creating a wormhole was simply the easiest to make. His other ideas were far more ambitious and would have taken months to even get started on.

At least, if he wanted to use them for his Aspect, but he didn't. Not any more.

That was the conundrum for Matt.

He instinctively wanted to make his Image about space. Because whether he liked it or not, Domains that were larger than most people could ever hope to advance with came to him naturally.

That thought made him remember Aunt Helen's words so many long years ago.

Concepts were who you were, Intents were where you wanted to go. Those guidelines had served him well but they were only that, guidelines.

Domains weren't any one thing. Matt had spoken to Rah at great length about the lower realm's views on Domains, and while most hadn't been directly relevant, it had highlighted that nothing about that portion of his cultivation core was set in stone.

The truth was much simpler than any of that.

A Domain was a cultivator's connection to the Realm.

It was as simple as that.

Or, it was for Matt.

Few others would agree, but he didn't care about their opinions. Coming to that realization had been strange, but after increasing his own weight so much, he suspected that he'd always been destined to travel down a similar road at some point in his life. Not that he minded, but most things about his Domain were an order of magnitude larger than most people could contend with.

Matt, on the other hand, was still trying to fit himself into the Realm, like someone trying to wear badly fitting clothes. The worst thing was that he didn't see that habit changing any time soon.

His mana would continue to double as he advanced, making him a larger and larger... whatever it was that he was in relation to the Realm. Whatever that was, he didn't have any issues in making his place in the Realm, and unless he lost his affinity to large Images, that wouldn't change any time soon.

If anything, more celestial Images would be a negative thing.

Matt already struggled to use what he had. He had far more than most people ever had and it wasn't close. He had more than enough mana for most fights, more willpower than most opponents, and a stronger Domain than even his oldest peers.

He didn't need more.

Not right now.

Matt hadn't realized it, but his mindset revolving around his Domain had shifted after his augment. It shouldn't have been a surprise, his Truth had been solid and steady the entire time, but it also pointed out the flaw in his earlier plans.

I am the Master of my own Destiny spelled it out for him, but he hadn't been able to see it until now, after he'd discarded his Image.

His Aspect was about *controlling* what he already had.

His Truth was obvious, as was his Anchor, given it was his augment and all about controlling his mana, and those two had been incredibly easy to claim as his own.

Matt had struggled on his Phrase and Image, but he only now realized why. They weren't about control. He had enough skill to make nearly anything work, which was exactly why he'd gotten stuck in a rut.

His Phrases felt good and his Image was strong and powerful.

Either of them could work if he was willing to stuff himself into clothes that didn't quite fit properly. They would do the job. They would be... *fine*.

Matt waved his hand and let the wormhole fade away, returning his hyper-massive canvas to its near darkness. When he was finished, he pulled his perception in, narrowing his focus.

His original desires behind the dyson sphere's ability to tap into his former Domain stages' Images made sense, and he didn't want to give that up. In fact, he wanted to go the other way.

Matt didn't want to only be able to tap into his Concept, Image, or Meld, he wanted to be able to tap into all of his future Domain stages as well. It was foolish to build a singular structure only to harness what he already was.

Instead, he took an idea from mortals and beat it until he resembled the shape he wanted.

A dyson sphere was large and impractical to make. He had first hand experience, having just discarded one he himself made layer by layer. Others who were working in reality had long since realized they could do almost the same job with a whole lot less by making a variant consisting of satellites rather than an all-encasing shell.

The idea was called a dyson swarm, and Matt loved the visual of a lot of little things harnessing the energy of a star together. While he'd need to scale things up to work with his white hole image, the existing system already worked on stars, and that made things easy.

His black hole was a much harder hurdle.

He'd originally outfitted his dyson sphere image with an internal penrose process to be able to capture energy from his Intent, but that method wouldn't be as elegant for a mass of satellites.

At the same time, his new insights on the nature of his Aspect gave him a possible solution to the dilemma.

He already had a material that could perfectly capture every bit of energy he produced. Why would he limit himself to normal building materials when he already had a perfectly good solution as part of his Aspect already.

Blue paneling almost the exact same shade as his mana stones took the shape of nearly every other Empire-based satellite. Silver veins of neutronium wove their way throughout like...

veins. They weren't conduits, even he couldn't stretch reality enough to make that material a good choice to move mana around. While he used them for additional structure, they were only there because his augment had neutronium in it.

But it was okay. Serendipitous, even as he'd have needed to incorporate a stronger material for structure if he didn't have the neutronium to rely on. Even if he wasn't technically constrained by the rules of reality for his Image, he was too scientific to harmonize with such blatant impossibility, such as a satellite that couldn't hold itself together during its expected working conditions. It made him envy those with more abstract or conceptual images. They don't have to worry about silly things like tensile strength or heat transfer rates.

Matt played with the design, going through several iterations before settling on what felt right.

As far as satellites went, it was still fairly standard, though he'd designed it around harvesting any of his past or future Images and whatever energy they might output. Thankfully, unlike his first attempts, he no longer needed to solve the practical harvesting methods within his Image.

Using his augment as the base of his satellite made it easy to absorb anything he put it in front of, and he didn't see that changing any time soon. That piece of equipment had been tied to him so tightly, they were truly one and the same. Any Image Matt could make, it could absorb and handle; he was confident of that.

At least, it was able to absorb anything in his testing of his current Images and potential future ones. While he found no issues, he also got almost no feedback of what the powers would do. A little testing quickly proved the why.

He was still forming his Aspect's Image, which was why he had so much malleability in his Image. That allowed him to recreate whatever he wanted, but it also meant everything he was making was still part of his Aspect's Image, not their own discrete things.

Matt wasn't dumb enough to risk trying to merge things for real before he completed his Aspect, which left him with unavoidable question marks.

He didn't mind all that much as he continued with his testing and simulations. He'd find out when he finished his Aspect and got to use it.

With one satellite done, Matt closed his eyes.

He didn't need a single satellite, he needed tens, hundreds, thousands, millions. He needed a swarm.

A mass of identical satellites so large it could encase a celestial body of any size.

One by one, Matt scaled his Image up until he reached a point he could no longer count on his own without his Insight. Rather than use it, he was excruciatingly careful to prevent it from keeping track and ruining what he was trying to do.

Even his well expanded mind could only hold so much in it at once, and as occupied as he was juggling so many potential Images, that number was fairly low. Low enough to make his idea possible, if not viable.

Once he lost count, the Image started to expand at a rapid pace. He doubled the amount of visible satellites in bursts.

It was a pattern he had known since he'd started his journey on the Path. A rhythm so instinctive, it was as easy as breathing. He didn't need to count, he didn't need to track, he simply was.

Matt opened his eyes to find *nothing*.

It was one of the most beautiful things he'd ever seen.

His satellite swarm had become so dense, it captured every ounce of power from the white hole they surrounded.

Letting the power source fade, Matt felt the Image remain rock solid.

It wasn't yet truly perfect in the way that his Truth and Anchor were, but it was only a hair's breadth away from harmonizing with him directly.

Matt opened his eyes, bringing himself out of his Domain space to grin at Liz and Aster.

The two of them sat next to him on the bridge and were quietly chatting.

When he saw he wouldn't interrupt their own revelations, he reached out and grasped a hand to transmit his words.

"And just like that, my Image is complete."

Aster and Liz turned wide eyes to him with Liz asking. "Really?"

Aster may have been slower, but she was smarter, as she shoved Liz's hand off his to get her question out before Liz could. "What is it?!"

Phoenix Liz launched a feathery, if playful, assault on Aster, even as she rejoined by grabbing his and Aster's combined fist, locking them together. When she was connected, he explained.

"It's a nigh limitless swarm of satellites able to form an array around anything else and absorb all of its power. It will then feed that power back into myself, letting me double dip on all of my Domain. Or I think it might. Remind me to explain why later when I want to be annoyed at something. The Image itself is that swarm, and weirdly enough it's larger than my other two images in terms of raw volume at least. It should also, at least theoretically, be fully capable of scaling up should I need it to. I made it so I lost count and started thinking about it in the abstract."

“Does that mean you are ready to form your Aspect? I knew you'd be the first!”

Liz's question earned a small glare from Aster, but she didn't interrupt.

“Sadly, no. I've backslid a bit there. Part of my realization in making my Image was that the rest of my Aspect revolves around controlling what I have. My self, my mana, my images. While both 'I am Limitless' and 'Overwhelm' are good enough that I can resonate with them and make an Aspect with them, I don't think they are my answers. I think I need a word similar to 'control'. My Aspect is about applying what I have and my Phrase needs to encompass that too. Or, I think that would be the best, most fitting Phrase when taken in relation to the rest of my Domain. So while I need a new Phrase, once I've done that, I'll be ready to form my Aspect.”

Both Lizzes blinked at him, even as Phoenix Liz halted her pecks and flaps before dropping into Aster's lap stiffly.

The fox in question blew out a long raspberry even as she shared a look with Liz.

“I kind of hate him sometimes. Multiple working Phrases? What. The. *Fuck*?”

Liz didn't spare him either. “Yeah, he kinda killed my motivation to work on my own Domain. It's really not fair.”

“It's soooo not. He did the same shit with his Intent too, creating a perfect mirror image.”

Matt tried to interject. “I was the last one to make my Intent. That's not fair!”

Liz ignored him and continued to speak to Aster. “Which led to the Meld. Don't forget the Meld.”

“How could I not? Did we miss that aisle at the Domain store? I don't get it.”

“Clearly we did. Ugh. There is no chance I can concentrate on anything Domain related right now. Want to check in on our troops?”

Liz called up their ship's queue as she spoke, where she found they had another fifteen hours before they reached the next battlefield, which was just enough time to check in. Any less and they wouldn't get anything done. Any longer and Matt knew how distracted he could be when playing.

Together, they all joined the Ascender Chat and brought up Blades and Glory, a war simulator real time strategy game the other Ascenders liked to play during actual wars.

All of the retired Ascenders were playing, as well as Maya and On the Last Line. Even Allie and Zack were involved, though they'd been so occupied with their investigation on the previous dynasty they hadn't had much time to log in.

Roles had been assigned randomly and the three of them were actually playing as the Collective, much to their consternation.

Matt almost found it amusing as he reviewed the changes to the map since they'd last checked in on the game, no one familiar would recognize what he was looking at. Blades and Glory was a very popular and recognizable game, but they weren't playing that version. Theirs had been hacked and modded within an inch of its life by the last two generations of Ascenders, with Max and Ellen putting in serious work themselves.

Even then, all of that was more of a port from the group's previous game onto a better framework.

Unlike the normal player base, they weren't content to play with randomly generated troops or use publicly available data like the hard core fans. They used real data and troop counts, along with most of the not so hidden assets of each Great Power, and replicated them to the smallest degree.

Their version was any war strategist's dream, and if it ever got out, none of the Great Powers would be happy.

Not that any of them were in any danger. Everything uploaded was about other enemy Great Powers' capabilities and never one's own. If another Ascender found and uploaded the information, it wasn't their fault their Great Power had been lax in security.

Matt tsked as he saw what Lila had done to their western flank.

She and Olivier were tearing things up with the Federation, and he couldn't help but ask the game's general chat as the desire to pluck a strategy out of the history books nearly overcame him. He wouldn't break the rules, mainly because there was no way Max wouldn't notice and call him out. History books were *not* cheating.

"How is anyone supposed to stop Faith's Beast Zerg-rush? It's entirely bullshit that she can just sweep up the mortal populations of half of our planets and use them against us. Why hasn't someone put a hole in her head yet so we can take her off the board?"

Lila immediately responded with a jeer and an image of her polishing her claws, but Gideon was the one to give an actual response.

"You have to do the same thing we did in our war. Send the civilian beast populations into the rifts and have the humans stand guard as best as possible. If she's being chased by an equal number of high Tiers, that is usually enough to keep her numbers down. But you still need to burn through her defenders. There is no getting around that or taking the losses to productivity from anywhere she goes. Too bad you aren't Tier 45. Then maybe we could go put a hole in her head for real. I wouldn't mind finishing what we started in the liberation war."

Eclavorn moved the chat along before things got too depressed. "I know Lila and Olivier are eating your lunch, but as you three lose, can you send some troops to the Corporations? Amon Dai can complete a science victory in fifty more years if someone doesn't go kick Maya in the teeth.

“Fourty-seven years, eight months according to my *anonymous* source. No, I won’t be answering questions about them, so don’t ask. And it’s not Sly.” Ellen chimed in.

“Matt, why don’t you send Riley to go stomp on a few worlds in the Corps direction instead of having her fight Faith again. Go down swinging! Preferably somewhere useful.” Eclavorn continued, unbothered by the interruption.

“And don’t focus on their Tier 47’s to the point you forget about the 46’s. They can be just as scary in their specialties. I bet it’s Blake she’s using. Everyone should check their high level people and make sure he hasn’t replaced one of them.” Lila chimed back in.

The game itself was fairly standard, but when run on the Ascender chat it required the active war participants to queue up their orders and hope they’d covered every contingency.

Maya had been doing, well... doing what the Corporations did best, trying to keep the fighting out of their lands.

The three of them were knee deep in setting up orders when an excited Max popped into the game chat.

“All of you need to get the fuck out here. Now!”

Her presence vanished before reappearing for a brief moment where all of the Guild troop movements shifted subtly. As Matt was getting off, he made his own on the fly edits, hoping to minimize whatever she’d set up but they all knew who was likely to win.

As a group, they’d limited Max’s playtime to only a few minutes a day. According to the other Ascenders, if they didn’t, they all lost within the first few months, and that was boring for all of them.

According to them and most fans, Blades and Glory was best two hundred years into a match, as everything came down to the wire as digital reserves were truly drained.

Reviewing Max’s initial message immediately made him forget most of his previous thoughts.

“Woo, did one of you active guys do something weird? Every Great Power’s data analyst just shit their pants at nearly the same time. Sans the Republic, who reacted first by nearly an hour.”

When no one on On the Last Line confessed, Max went digging.

Her following message was what had caused a storm for the ones who saw it. “Oh shit, there’s a time anomaly in the place Tick and Tock died. Allie, do you have a waypoint near there? Can you go check it out?”

“No way! The Boss explicitly told me to stay away from the battlefields for any and all reasons. I’m being paid quite well and I can’t afford to lose this revenue stream after I just got in

trouble. I've got to collect at least a few decades of payments before I fuck it up. Oilvier, you should go."

Olivier's response was immediate. "I'm already on my way to investigate!"

One Step Behind was fast, but even he couldn't cross a Great Power in an instant, and the early speculation had run rampant for the few minutes it took him to get there.

"Ah fuck, something weird is going on, that's for sure. I got noticed and warned off by Allister before I got within viewing distance. I also got the feeling he wasn't alone."

"Don't be a wimp and go check it out anyway."

Everyone playing Blades and Glory re-entered the chat just in time to see Aiden's snark backed up by Sien. "At least edge closer or come get someone braver. I'm no coward and would rush in regardless. Or at least close enough to see."

Zack's response made things even more hectic as he pointed out a missing member. "That is unfortunate, but it does tell us quite a lot. I'd almost say it nearly confirms our original hypothesis. Has anyone seen Maya in the chat?"

Matt was going to check with his admin access, but Max had the information on hand. "She hasn't accessed the database in half an hour, so well within our window of fuckery. It even tracks, given the Republic's earlier move. Do we really think Tick and Tock are coming back to life? That feels... improbable. It's been over a hundred thousand years."

Gideon pointed out what they'd all been thinking. "They are time mages. If anyone could do that, it would be them."

"I know, I just... can't fathom it. What are the odds? Actually? Wun, is this your doing?"

The man in question immediately defended himself from Max's accusation. "I've kept my fingers *well* away from the war Tiers. I'm as confused as everyone else. Blame the idiots in the war, not me. I always get blamed when shit goes bad, but no one is ever thanking me when things go well. That's dragon shit and you all know it!"

"Wun, I will come over there and turn *you* into dragon shit. After the Rasdale breach, you have no place to speak on placing blame. You earn most of the indignation that gets thrown your way and dodge a lot more than you should. Don't complain."

"That's the problem, you sand eating lizard! I'm using my luck to *avoid* the consequences of my actions. That's why it's extra annoying when I get blamed for things I didn't d—. You know what, I'm going to stop speaking now. I must have jinxed myself. There is no other way. I hate *all* of you."

Matt didn't know what had changed, but he was more interested in looking everything he could up about Tick and Tock.

However, once more Max was faster and she dropped a small dossier on the duo. He actually recognized some of it from her memorial floor to the pair in her tower of fallen Ascenders. It made sense when he thought about it. It wasn't like the information had suddenly become out of date since she did her initial research.

As Olivier shared what little he could see, Matt came around to the fact Max would need to update the floor if their collective guess turned out to be right.

"Success!"

Maya's single word message hit the chat and caused everyone to spam her for more news, but no new information was forthcoming from her as she immediately dropped her connection.

Olivier, on the other hand, was far more useful. "Oh, I saw Maya's passage at least. She did one of her travel law things and stepped all the way to Republic space. She was also carrying at least one person, but it was possible it was two. This can't be happening!?"

They were left to speculate until they reached their destination, where the three of them were reminded they were still in a war.

Matt checked their docket and found the battlefield was hardly an important one, with no notable elites over the high designation. None of the combatants even had an Aspect, which made the prospect of fighting them a chore rather than a training opportunity.

Liz must have been thinking the same thing as her phoenix form flew off with a flutter of wings.

"Let me try to handle this."

Matt redirected most of his focus to the Ascender Chat, where they were waiting for news, even as he kept half an eye out on the outside world.

They were still in the inner system by the inhabited world that bound the essence node into chaotic space, but Phoenix Liz only asked for a [Portal] large enough to send quick messages to the Collective army instead of a ship sized one.

He nearly laughed at her message, though he knew she wasn't joking in the slightest. "There is something important happening, and we are more interested in it than we are in taking this world. However, our orders are to take over this world. That means we won't take the time to control ourselves and make this a good learning experience. We are just going to come in and kill everyone because it's faster. Or you can all surrender. The choice is yours, and you have ten seconds before we assume you are resisting and we go with option one."

The enemy general must have believed her as well, because not even three seconds later they got the system-wide surrender.

That would undoubtedly come back to haunt the general, but Liz's words were probably enough of an out that he'd only be sent to a grinder of a battlefield in a main push rather than killed outright. Either way, his easy days of the relatively safer outskirts were over, but it was that or death.

Liz hadn't been lying, and they had a job to do. As such, their ship quickly dipped back into chaotic space as they raced to the next world on this list.

They didn't make it there before word officially started to spread. They were the fastest to receive the updates, due to the Ascender net, but even civilian infrastructure started spreading the message.

Tick and Tock had returned.

For most of the citizens of the Great Powers, that information was met with a mild but brief case of foreboding as their enemies gained another Ascender. For the Republic, it was a day of celebration, with Olivier sending brief shots of planets celebrating before racing to the next.

The eleven of them, however, had a much more personal reaction.

"Lila, did anyone have an active bet on someone returning?"

"Sien did, but it was for Devon and Charl, not a general bet. No one had anything on Tick and Tock. Or not anyone here. I see that Jillian and Vestia both had bets to the effect before they ascended, but who cares? They aren't here to get paid, so screw 'em. Speaking of... Are we going to offer them an invitation to the chat?"

At the words, most of Matt's sudden good cheer vanished. He'd come to cherish the Ascender chat over the last few thousands years, and the idea of adding people whose opinions were so out of date made his hackles stand up.

He didn't necessarily know Tick and Tock were bad people, but he knew they'd have a very good reason to hate the Empire they knew. That the current Empire wasn't the same thing as that previous incarnation might not matter for something as nebulous as feelings.

"That's *hasty*. While they may not be newbies, I say we treat them like it. Let them go this war without access, and we can decide afterwards depending on a group vote."

Matt felt uncomfortable that he was not only siding with the same dragon that had taken umbrage to his addition, but that the knowledge of his hypocrisy didn't make him waver. It wasn't unreasonable to get a feel for new potential entrants. He drew the line that they should be judged on their own merits, not on assumptions as he was.

Sien made a very good point in response that caught him off guard. "Might they already have access, if only by a technicality? There was a Master Chat even in their times, and I'm sure they were in it."

Matt tried to go through the oldest archives of the Ascender chat, but such old information wasn't kept on their active server, only on the backups.

Max once again proved her worth, as she either knew or had looked up the information. "The chat of their time didn't have Brian to get instant comms between everyone, but they were a part of it. That said, they won't automatically have access to our chats. I rewrote our current systems when I took over as head admin and scrubbed any and all access keys left lingering around, and that accounted for them. I do think there is another angle you might be missing E, Tick and Tock just lost almost everyone they ever knew. And if my predictions aren't widely off base, I doubt more than a few years has gone by for them. They might desperately need any kind of familiarity right about now. We may not be the most caring lot, but we at least get *it*."

Matt found that argument much harder to refute, and had no easy solution that kept everyone happy.

Wun, however, made an equally valid point. "Which we don't know yet. Let's give Maya a few months or years to pop out of whatever rift she's recovering in. That video Olivier sent made it clear she would come close to bottoming out. Once she's recovered, we can get an update and proceed from there. Speculating is useless at this point and time."

Krodag brought up a very nearly good point as everyone else was mulling the luck-based Ascender's words over. "Hey Max, you said Tick and Tock probably didn't experience the whole hundred thousand years. Does that mean they didn't break the record for the longest time between being declared missing and returning?"

There was a small pause as the chat tried to process the logic.

While Matt sort of saw where the dwarf was going, Allie and Gideon weren't so open minded and ribbed the dwarf.

"That's the craziest thing I've heard all day, and we just learned two people came back from the dead a hundred thousand years ago. Did you hit your head and need healing?"

"Or should we hit your head so you need the healing? Allie, maybe we need a wellness check on the healer?"

Krodag didn't go down so easily. "No, hear me out, you dicks! Time in a rift isn't counted towards someone's age because you aren't really living that time. If they only experienced a few hours, then isn't it the same thing as being in a rift for a few years with only an hour passing outside?"

"Yes, Krodag, that's the *exact* reason they *can* count that missing time. We count real world time or shit's far too confusing. Besides, the claim to fame is all *about* real world time. It still counts even if it was only a few seconds for them."

Liz surprised none of them by stepping in and mediating. "Allie, Krodag is an idiot but he's got the shape sort of right. Maybe they won't be bothered by the time loss *inherently*, but by that very same token, it will make the whiplash of reintegration harder. They didn't just jump

forward in time, they jumped so far forward they probably lost most of their support groups, as Max said. Personally, I vote the time count and they come on.”

“All that blathered just to *disagree* with me? I’ll remember this, Liz! You’ll come to regret being on the wrong side of history!” Krodag immediately sniped right back.

Brian interjected with a picture of him cleaning out a skeletal ear. “Can we send this idiot a hundred years into the future? Maybe they can deal with him better there? Maybe they will have developed an intelligence ray that makes people smarter?”

“HA! Like I’d get trapped for that long. I’d string together a few skills and I’d be out in twenty minutes max. I’m just that good.”

Matt moved to archive the message for later throwing back in the dwarf’s face, but three images of the text chain were thrown back into the chat almost immediately, effectively doing the work for him.

Sien kept them moving, even as the dwarf realized he’d be starting on a double black mark with their newest peers, thanks to his mouth. “None of this matters *quite* yet. Given Maya’s message and what Olivier saw it’s safe to say the duo are, if not alive and well, they will be soon enough. Do we maybe have access to their previous Master Chat records? If they were combative or the like, it would make our decision a lot easier.”

Max jumped in as everyone waited for an answer. “I’m mid review now, but you *have* to remember they didn’t have Brian for comms. For part of Tick and Tock’s time, they were using dead drops for secure chats because they didn’t have anyone good with tech either. Only part of their chats were more like a group email chain. Still, I’m not seeing anything that stands out. They had a few pissing matches, but way less than the average for the time. And it would feel disingenuous to not remind everyone that it was a hostile period anyway. From what I can see, I wouldn’t call them friendly, but they don’t seem like dickheads or anything. If I had to boil them down to a single word it would probably be: private.”

Wun hadn’t waited for her to finish before he started whining. “Max cut to the important bit: do we like them or not?”

“Why can’t any of you accept nuance? My vote is that they get the invite. Both because I think they won’t stand out in our eclectic bunch, *and* they probably need the support if they want to make anything close to a safe and healthy transition back into the Realm at large.”

Matt once more found himself in agreement with Eclavorn, who interjected. “As nice as being nice is, we aren’t running a charity here. I don’t want someone in here espousing opinions that are a hundred thousand years out of date. I’m not saying we reject them, just that we don’t rush into things.”

The chat devolved into a bickering match when Matt decided to weigh in. “What about a middle ground? We let them into the general chat but limit overall access until we get a feel for

them? As much as I agree with E, we also owe it to ourselves to be welcoming to a pair of peers who experienced something traumatic.”

“Isn’t that a reason to give them full access, not half? A half assed reach out does fuck all for making them feel welcome.”

Ellen’s reply put a hole in Matt’s argument he didn’t know how to patch. He agreed with her, but that didn’t mean he wanted to change his stance. They were doing the equivalent of opening their home to strangers. It shouldn’t be rude to be a little cautious and ask them to keep off the second floor.

Despite telling himself that, he couldn’t help but wonder if it was a self fulfilling prophecy, where no matter what they did the result would be the one they didn’t want.

In the end, they couldn’t come to an easy conclusion as neither side won out.

No one had a clear majority, but most votes had fallen into either the half measure or full admittance. No one hard core defended the stance of making them wait out the full war, not even Eclavorn or Matt.

When the chat had settled into a mild state of lethargy, as all sides had made their cases, Aiden finally couldn’t hold it in any longer as he dropped a novel’s worth of complaints into the chat.

“Matt, Liz, Aster, Moe, Krodag, Ellen, and Brian I need you two to meet up and kill each other in a double murder, double suicide. Both of you need to kill each other’s teams and then yourselves at the *same time*. It will be brilliant! After all, we can’t let Maya show me up! While all of you want to worry about stupid shit, I’m left dealing with the important stuff, like having the most coolest war moment. And besides, it’s not like she probably did anything important inside anyway. It’s way less cool than having an Authority. Sh—”

Matt only got that far before Ellen killed the message, but everyone had seen it and his bitching had turned the mood jovial in a way none of the rest of them could so easily manage.

“As much as I hate to admit he’s right, Maya is going to be *insufferable* when she gets back online. Maybe we preventively mute her? All in favor?” Liz’s proposal passed with unanimous support, and Maya got hit with a two minute chat restriction that went into effect the instant she tried to say something.

Matt and Ellen even did a little custom work to ensure she knew *exactly* why she was muted, just in case there was any confusion.

“For all that I’m happy to see one of us come back to life in the abstract, why did this have to happen via the worst braggart of us all? For all of Aiden’s complaints, he’s right in that she’ll never let us forget this moment?”

Olivier tossed out an idea Matt didn’t mind. “Maybe we should pretend like it never happened with her?”

“No, that would just make her more smug. She thrives on pettiness as much as Aiden does.” Liz reminded both of them.

“I do not! I earned my— yeah, you guys are actually right. Fuck!”

“Yeah, I’m a little jealous she got to pull that off. Should we all be looking for other possible dead Ascenders to revive?”

Aster’s comment got a thoughtful exchange between the three in reality, but Allie ruined their plans.

“I already looked and I can’t see anyone even remotely likely. Not that Tick and Tock were likely to come back, but everyone else is either dead longer or there was a body.”

“Could have been a body double!” Aster shot right back.

“That just means someone doesn’t want to be found and probably ascended. We can’t rescue someone who doesn’t want to be found, dummy. Or at least we can’t do that and beat *Maya*.”

Aidien sent a picture of him on his knees crying into his hands. “Does that mean Maya is going to be as insufferable as I was when I revealed I’d created an Authority? Remember when I did that guys?”

A dozen variations of “Was?” came in from everyone in the chat.

Lila was the fastest to get an actual reply out though. “Hey now, he’s at least admitting he’s insufferable, which is an improvement. I almost feel like that’s a reason to celebrate alone. Max, tell me you recorded that?”

“Already on all four backups! Commemorative plaques will go out via the Allie Express in fifteen minutes. Sooner if I can get the filigree to lay properly.”

“I hate all of you.”