

Awirren

Awirren entered her sleeping chamber, the massive room in the tower of her palace. The tower was a hundred meters across and hollow, which allowed her to fly around freely even while inside. The base was covered in mirrors, letting her see her magnificent form and enjoy it. She looked at her own reflection, as she took off the cumbersome garments that covered her. Her golden feathers sparkled in the light that was being given off by gems that hung from perches and beams all around the inside of the tower. It painted the room in a pale light and dark shadows around the furniture on the bottom level. It was dark outside, so the light of the moon was insufficient to illuminate the inside, even with the many windows adorning the walls.

She sighed as she looked upon herself, daydreaming about how she was going to show her glorious form to everyone soon. The tournament drew near, and this time even the High Rankers would participate. As they should, the decision for them to refrain from fighting each other was foolish in her opinion. But now, she would finally get to show everyone her beauty, to let them all know how glorious she was. The tournament was a place where fates of sects and other factions were decided. A good showing would garner a lot of influence, and Awirren already had many of her people preparing. She hoped to have as many of them as possible to win their categories or at least finish in the top 16. That would show the others that her sect was strong, and would discourage attacks. On the other hand, a poor showing would reveal weakness and might show others which factions or sects were easy targets.

She couldn't wait for the tournament, only a bit over a year and a half left until it started. It was a grand event, lasting for almost a full year, and it was only the first of the three. The tournaments were held in sets of three, every five hundred years, three tournaments every ten years, approximately two and a half years after the arrival of a new Iteration. It was a place where all could demonstrate their power, where they could seek power greater still, and where the newly arrived Rankers were shown just how small they were.

She ran her clawed hand across her feathers, enjoying the metallic feel of them. All of her feathers were the color of gold, shining, and as tough as the

strongest of metals. She extended her neck to get a better look—and then she froze.

Awirren did not have any sensory skills, but her body was at the peak of power, her stats were high. It had never been necessary for her, with her stats and her trained body skill she could utilize her body far better than most. All her natural senses were enhanced by her stats. She could hear far beyond the ordinary range. She turned around, looking across her room to a corner filled with shadows. She could no longer hear her people beneath her in the palace, no footsteps of her guards nor the idle chatting of her servants. It was as if suddenly she was alone in her tower, the outside world no longer existing.

In the shadow, she saw movement. The intruder took a step forward and revealed himself as a cthul, dressed in a tight fitting armor that almost seemed malleable as it moved with him, yet it was clearly made out of some type of metal. In his hand was a short blade attached to a chain that was fastened to his front in a bundle, the end of the chain was in his other hand a wicked ball with spikes dangling from the end.

As with all of their kind, it was hard to determine age. She narrowed her eyes and twisted the ring on her finger, and windows appeared in her vision.

Name	Fethum Starseeker
Age	111 years old

Class	Chain Storm (L)
Level	237

Main Path	Path of the Storm Lash (E)
Aspect	Lightning Storm
Realm	Peak Heavenly

Secondary Path	Path of the Chain (R)
Realm	Mid Heavenly

Skills	6
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Tier 6	/
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Awirren frowned at the man. She was no stranger to assassination attempts, but as far this one went, she was not impressed. The intruder was weak, and yet he was inside of her tower. She decided that at least his equipment had to be of extreme high quality. Then, her ears picked up more movement. She turned her head and saw more people stepping out of the shadows in her room, from behind the shelves, from beneath perches.

A human woman with pointed ears, wearing chainmail and carrying two long swords in her hands looked at her.

Name	Maya Rebadotter
Age	201 years old

Class	Cutting Wind Shear (L)
Level	386

Main Path	Path of the Wind Currents (E)
Aspect	Wind
Realm	Mid Lord

Skills	6
Tier 6	/

The third person was a ravzor woman, her fur as dark as night and a long wooden staff held in her hands.

Name	Tellisa Oakcalled
Age	301 years old

Class	Nature Caller (E)
Level	221

Main Path	Path of the Wood Calling (L)
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Aspect	Wood
Realm	Early Immortal

Secondary Path	Path of the Nature Spirits (E)
Realm	Mid Heavenly

Skills	6
Tier 6	/

The fourth was a Skreen, one of the champion forms, tall and wide, with red chitin and a massive hammer in his hands. His back covered with his beetle-like wings.

Name	Exiled Shell
Age	97 years old

Class	Hammer of Solitude (L)
Level	397

Skills	9
Tier 6	2
Tier 7	2

Awirren frowned as she read their windows. Their ages and their power did not make sense. Most were too young for their power, only two among them could've achieved what they had. But still... four assassins, even if they weren't exactly on her level shouldn't be too much of a problem. Whoever sent them had sent them to their deaths. She opened her beak to say exactly that, to offer them mercy in return for the knowledge of who sent them, when another footstep made her stop and turn to look. From the shadow beneath a window on the wall across from her, another shape stepped out. He was large, a drake with wings stretching from his back. She couldn't yet see his features only outline, but that was enough. Her ring saw and windows appeared in her vision.

Name	Kaeliss Cloudwrought
Age	38 years old

Class	Essence Wraith
Level	89

Main Path	Path of the Primal Wrath (Re)
Aspect	Tranquility
Realm	Mid Immortal

Secondary Path	Path of the Primal Dream (Re)
Realm	Early Immortal

Skills	6
Tier 6	/
Tier 7	2
Tier 8	1

She read the windows and knew immediately the answer to the power of the others.

“Pilferer,” she spat at the man as he came into the light.

Once visible, he gave her the second shock of the night. He looked as a drake, wide and tall, scales the color of cyan covered his body, but there at the top of his head, at the edges of his wings, at his wrists, on his neck and probably spreading beneath his combat robe, feathers the color of the sky grew.

“Abomination,” Awirren grimaced and recoiled in disgust at the hybrid, the offspring of a drake and karura. The man was anathema, a heresy and a blight upon this world. Unnatural in every way. It was only less than four hundred years ago that someone with a breeding class rose high enough and gained the power to allow cross species breeding. She wished that she had the foresight to root him and all those who followed in his class out, to end the blight that they had unleashed. But she had never really thought that so many would be so perverted and disgusting to want to breed with other races. She thought that just the thought of needing to pay a breeder to allow such a

thing would be enough to halt most of the deviants. And yet, things like the monster in front of her existed. Thankfully, not in great number, but they were still a blight.

Even as she spoke, she got ready, her mind reaching into her storage ring ready to pull out her equipment and her perks and techniques ready to be used. The Pilferer was young and therefore inexperienced, but that did not mean that he was weak. All Pilferers were powerful, one could not get a pilfering class so easily. A person had to be broken, they had to have lived through a deep emotional and physical torment. She was very well aware of the power of Pilferers. They rarely lived long, in great part because of their class. The more they evolved it, the more they leveled, the more twisted by it they became. They lost control and went on a rampage, trying to gather as much Essence as they could, slaughtering all in their way. It was the job of High Rankers to put a stop to them. And while Pilferers were always greatly talented, geniuses seen once in a generation, they inevitably ran into someone stronger. They always bit more than they could chew.

A part of Awirren believed this to be the case here as well, yet there were things that made her wary. The man had come with other people, comrades, that had obviously been raised by the Pilferer himself. But the thing that worried her more was the fact that the man's class was not higher level. The Pilferer had stopped leveling it at the right point, its influence couldn't be high enough to push him to self-destruct as most other Pilferers did.

And then there were his skills. A tier 8 skill meant that the man had been shattered before, and had managed to pull himself together. It spoke of great knowledge of himself. His Path and his Aspect which seemed contradictory to one another, but were both of a greater rarity than hers.

Still, Awirren could not let the intruders get the upper hand.

The drake's pale white eyes looked at her calmly. "You call me an abomination, Golden Phoenix, simply for being born. Yet you sit here in your room filled with mirrors, gazing upon your plumage and preening at your beauty and wealth, while your people get scraps. Tell me, which one of us is truly an abomination?"

Awirren's eyes narrowed and felt herself grinding her beak, she opened it to speak but then stopped. A memory came to her, and she pulled back the window showing the drakarura's name. She remembered where she had heard it.

"Kaeliss Cloudwrought," she said softly, only a bit impressed. "You are the **Speaker for the Blind**, the leader of **the Unchained**... you are so young."

The drake inclined his head, and Awirren admitted to being a bit taken aback. He was nothing like what she had imagined. She looked at the others, truly seeing them for the first time, recognizing them.

The cthul, Fethum Starseeker better known as the **Stormlasher**, the youngest member of the **Unchained**.

The human, Maya Rebadotter better known as the **Wind of the East**, former eighth wife of the **King in the East**.

The ravzor, Tellisa Oakcalled better known as the **Wild One**, former caretaker of the Elder King's grove.

The skreen, Exiled Shell better known as the **Tide that Broke**, former champion of the Triumphant Hive.

And finally the drake-karura hybrid, Kaeliss Cloudwrought, the self proclaimed **Speaker for the Blind**, the leader of **the Unchained**, the order that had been formed only a decade ago. So little was known about him, and no wonder. The man was barely more than a child. And yet... Such a short time, and they had made their presence known, their teachings spread. The **Unchained** opposed everything about the natural order of things, the way that the strong ruled. And they had made it their mission to bring down the established order, by killing High Rankers.

Now... seeing them before her, she did not know if she should laugh or be frightened. They were so young, and yet... other High Rankers had fallen to them before. She would not underestimate them. She knew that their order had more members, and a few were missing, one would explain why she couldn't hear anything beyond this room, at least if the rumors of their power were true.

She needed to be careful about this.

“So, you’ve finally decided to come after someone stronger than the lowest of the low?” Awirren said, they had taken down High Rankers down before, true, but they had only ever attacked the bottom ten on the rankings, or former High Rankers. And Awirren was most definitely not in the bottom of that list.

“Ah,” Kaeliss sighed. “All I have ever seen when I look upon you and those of your ilk is sadness. For such greatness you could’ve all been, and such depravity you have become.”

“Foolish gnat,” Awirren snapped at him. “You dare insult me in my own home? I’ll burn you all to cinders. I am the greatest there is, and soon all will know. Perhaps I should thank you. Once the word spreads that I had taken down the **Unchained** my influence will soar. All will venerate me, all will wish to serve me.”

The leader of the **Unchained** shook his head. “I have walked through your lands, Golden Phoenix, I have seen your people and heard their woes. How small does their suffering look to you, so weighed by your desire for power, by your promise of eternal life. You do not even see what it is that you are doing. We live in this life, in this world that is but an illusion, a glimmer of light in the darkest of night. We dance to others tune, and you are playing your part splendidly. Worry not, oh great pretender, for I will break the play and shatter the stage. I will free us all.”

He made a gesture with his hand, and Awirren snapped into action as his people attacked. Her armor manifested around her, and she snapped with forward with her wings, heading straight for the Cthul—the **Stormlasher**. Her **{Unbreakable Feathers}** technique surged through her as he threw the spiked ball of his chain toward her, wrought in dancing lightning Qi.

She focused and her **|Perfect Trained Body: My Feathers, Golden Beauty|** made her feathers sparkle with light and harden further. The spiked ball hit her and bounced off, the **Stormlasher** tried to pull his chain back, but she was faster. She snapped forward with her fist and used her **|Titan’s Strike|**. She punched him in his chest and he flew back crashing through one of her bookshelves and hitting the wall of the tower with a resounding thud that sent cracks flying around the wall.

She turned mid-air, just as the wooden beams above her bent and grew and snapped toward her, intent on grabbing hold of her body, commanded by the **Wild One**. Awirren moved her Qi and **{Burring Feathers}** exploded around her, her body wreathed in Soulfire that turned the wood into ash in seconds.

A hammer caught her in the side as the flying **Tide that Broke** appeared next to her and she was sent crashing into the wall, cracking it, but barely feeling the attack. She needed more room to maneuver and as a cyclone of wind headed toward her, she beat her wings and pushed off the wall, soaring higher. The **Stormlasher** was still recovering from her strike, but the **Wind of the East** was sending air blades at her. Awirren evaded them as she watched the **Tide that Broke** flying toward her, buzzing with his wings in mockery of the glory of flight, behind him, the **Speaker for the Blind** spread his wings and flew up quickly catching up. Awirren was most worried about him, little was known about him and his powers, and that tier 8 skill would be a powerful ace.

She changed how her Qi moved inside of her body, and charged her fruit technique. A moment later she unleashed a **{Blast of Feathers}** and Soulfire forged golden feathers flew down on her foes. She saw them smash into the **Tide that Broke**, melting his armor and then chitin beneath, two feathers burned through his wings sending him tumbling to the ground where the **Wind of the East** created a cushion of air to catch him. The **Speaker for the Blind** continued flying, her feathers thrown to the side by his wings. Her attack didn't seem enough to injure him, but it had slowed his ascent. Awirren breathed, and her Qi obeyed. A moment later the branch technique of her main path was ready. She put her hands in front of herself and unleashed the **{Field of Everburning Fire}**.

Golden flames exploded out of her, filling the inside of the tower turning every perch and beam to nothing but ash, liquefying the stone walls, shattering the windows and sending golden fire blasting outside the tower. She didn't see what was happening below her, but she heard a stone shattering sound and felt the tower shake.

Her fire stopped and she saw the red and molten stone illuminating the inside of the ruined tower. The base of it was shattered and the flames had

spread beneath, to her throne room incinerating her throne and her servants down below, her fire had spread throughout her palace. Anger filled her as she realized what she had done and she screamed in anger. A scream that turned into a screech of wrath as she saw a hole in the wall through which the intruders had fled.

She let everything go, and screamed as she used her **[Clear Sky Dive]** she smashed through the wall of her tower and out into her city. She saw her people running around, an alarm sounding all over the city. Her palace was on fire, done by her own hand. Down beneath her, she saw the intruders, running over the rooftops. Kaeliss Cloudwrought flying above them turned and saw her in the sky.

Awirren raised her hand and prepared another technique, not caring how many of her own people she would burn in the process. Before she could let her technique go, the **Speaker for the Blind** snapped his massive wings and soared faster than she could comprehend. He smashed into her, his fists raining blows upon her body, each feeling as if she was smashed by a hammer.

Awirren beat her wings, trying to get distance, but she was unable to shake him. His eyes were calm and composed, yet his body fought with a primal ferocity of someone that had lost all control. She couldn't even block, and with each strike she felt his blows getting stronger and stronger and she felt herself getting weaker, so much so that she was starting to feel the damage inside her body.

She screeched in his face and activated her **[Wind Shield]** battering him away. For a moment she nearly pulled out her lance, but she didn't have enough distance to use it properly. Instead, she let herself go and her body pulled itself apart as she assumed her evolved form. She grew into a **Golden Phoenix** made out of Soulfire and her Qi moved through her body as she prepared to attack.

Kaeliss Cloudwrought didn't seem phased at all, his wings spread apart as if he was waiting.

Awirren opened her mouth and fire blossomed in her throat. She saw the man's eyes widen the slightest amount and she nearly smiled as a word sounded inside her head.

—Golden Dawn—

—
—*Reject*—

The word echoed in her head, and then power left her. Her evolved form dissolved as if it was blown away by a light breeze, and she was back in her usual form. She couldn't touch her Qi, or her abilities or perks. Nothing was responding to her call.

And then, the **Speaker for the Blind** was above her twisting in the air and kicking down with one of his legs. The blow caught her on the shoulder, but her high stats and tough body held. She felt her bones creak but remain whole as she was sent flying through the air and then smashed through a roof of a building on the ground. She smashed through two stories and finally hit the ground with a resounding thud that shook the ground and collapsed the building down on her.

It took her a while to smash through the debris and get free. Immediately she took to the sky and looked around, but there was no sign of her attackers, only the fire that was spreading through her city. Awirren screamed into the night as her powers returned and she burst into light and fire of her Evolved form, flying and burning the forests surrounding her city.

Kael

The spatial technique released him and Kael stumbled on the cold stone, getting down on his knees as his feathers smoked.

"Kael!" Maya said as she reached for him, but he waved her away.

"I'm fine, just singed a bit," Kael lied, the fire had nearly burned through his scales, and the skin beneath had been singed so much that every movement of his wings hurt. He had known that the Golden Phoenix was strong, but her techniques were on another level.

He shook his head and stood up, pulling his Tranquility Qi through his body to help him hide the pain. Appearances after all, meant a lot.

He looked at his people, Fethum's mythic armor was cracked and he was coughing up blood from just one of the High Ranker's strikes. Maya and Tellisa both were covered in grime and breathing hard, the smoke from the fire had nearly suffocated them. Exiled Shell was worst off, his wings had been destroyed and he had two big wounds in his torso. He would live, but it wasn't going to be an easy recovery.

Two people approached them hurriedly, the old man, a demasi with a cane and a long white beard. He started treating Exiled Shell and the others immediately, while the young looking minotaur looked at Kael.

"I'm sorry for not getting you out sooner. We run into some issues," the man apologized.

"Tell me that you got it," Kale said.

Berion nodded his large head. "We got it, getting into the vault took some doing, but I managed it."

Kael sighed in relief. At least their mission was a success.

Suddenly, the sky was filled with light and a massive screech filled the air. Kale turned and looked in the distance at the massive flying creature blowing fire all around her city.

"Wow," Berion said.

Kael nodded in agreement. They were pretty far away in the mountain, Berion's spatial technique had quite the range.

"Could you have killed her?" Berion asked then added. "If you were serious I mean?"

Kael shrugged. "She is the worst kind of an opponent for me, she is... insane. My dreams don't work on people like her. And if she had really let loose? She could've killed me, probably burned the entire city to ash and most of the valley in the process too."

Berion swallowed audibly and Kael shook his head. Berion was so powerful, but he wasn't a fighter, his heart wasn't in it. It was because of people like him that he did what he did. It was for them that was willing to go to such lengths.

It was for them that he was going to tear this world down and let something new grow in the ruin of the old.

He watched the Golden Phoenix indulge in wanton destruction of her own land, and he knew that his cause was just.