

Matt's spiritual sense didn't even have enough time to properly register what was in the safe room before he rolled to the right. At the same time, Susanne's and Aster's AI linked with his own, giving him a wealth of information.

He came out of his initial dodge and sprinted to the right while arrows and spells peppered his newly resummoned [Cracked Phantom Armor].

He appeared next to the Clan's gathering point, so while the attacks weren't absent, they weren't full-on, either.

Thankfully, once he neared the Empire's portion of the safe area, he was able to slow to a walk and join his Power's side.

This wasn't a surprise, and it was exactly why they set up this contingency before they left.

The first people into the safe room would be those who weren't going for the theme reward. While that population predominantly featured Tier 14s, it also included a fair number of Tier 12s and 13s from the other seasons that just wanted *out*, whether or not they had enough for the exit reward.

With the exception of the Sects, each Great Power had managed to convince enough of the people that were exiting to stick around for three hours in their own 'territory.' If only to give additional protection to those taking the theme challenge as they reoriented themselves to their real bodies.

There would be no repeats of the previous floor's safe room if Matt could help it.

Three hours, translating to three months in-challenge, should be plenty for most people to get their upgrades and move on.

Anyone who took longer than that was on their own.

Matt noted that Liz wasn't here yet, which implied that she ran into some difficulty, but he wasn't overly worried.

Jill wasn't out yet either, while Bradley was chatting with the first-place solo winner of his own Tier 10 tournament, Statue.

The woman was a metal mage as well but had gotten a [Metal Body] ability far earlier than Bradley and had used the impressive amount of control she had over the nigh-invincible state to great effect.

Statue saw Matt appear, and after inspecting him and nodding, she turned her attention back to the surrounding Great Powers.

Aster exuded smugness at her growth item's upgrade, but as they had decided to lean into the idea that she was Susanne's bond, didn't jump into his arms.

All of them wanted to show off their new abilities, of course, but by prior agreement, they would hold off until all four of them were together.

He did feel out the Boon settled into his spirit, familiarizing himself with it. It felt like...well, like a new limb. Something that hadn't been there before but was wholly one with him.

Its effects surprised him though. He had gotten a far stronger reward than what they had recorded. He'd expected a better than average reward but something this good was beyond his expectations even after single-handedly powering the faction to victory but there were harsh diminishing returns on the favor to final Boon conversion so he hadn't expected anything quite so impactful.

Matt had heard that very rarely, an upgraded [Manipulation] skill could gain a truly incredible amount of finesse and feedback while becoming almost free to use, and he was reminded of that as he tried out his new abilities.

[Ice Manipulation], [Air Manipulation], and [Shadow Manipulation] still cost the normal amount to use, but they were responsive in a way he'd never felt before.

As a quick test to check the changes he could feel, he made himself a finger-sized ice sculpture of a songbird and found that not only was he able to effortlessly imbue it with detailing on each feather, but he could make the ice flex and flow in a way that it could flap its wings and fly like a real bird without cracking and shattering like normal ice.

There was more to it as well, but before he could experiment and find out how else the Boon had impacted his skills, Liz appeared right outside the Federation's territory and was bombarded by attacks. Fortunately, when people were put into the spatially expandable safe area, it was a good distance away from other people so no one would appear inside anyone's formations.

Thanks to the degree of separation, Liz was easily able to escape the attacks and join the Empire's group. With her there, the four of them wasted no time in racing to the pillar leading them to the next floor and were quickly whisked away in a swirl of motion.

Luna watched a woman celebrate exiting Minkalla after an inspiration to Tier 15 when she felt the ripples of space fluctuate around all eight Great Powers' moons and ripped a hole through reality at the same time.

She and every other high Tier were caught off guard at the sudden influx that implied that the fourth floor had been conquered. Normally, that took at least six months when there were only *two* courts. A two-court fourth floor was...unlikely. And even then, it had only been three months.

Something had happened, and she had a good inkling of what exactly it was.

She and Carol moved, appearing in the midst of a small crowd of incoming cultivators and diverting more teams to the space she had chosen until she had about a hundred in total. She gave her chosen mouthpieces a few moments to orient themselves to being outside of Minkalla before she *spoke*, with her Domain leaving no room for misinterpretation or delay.

"Explain exactly what happened. All at once and leave nothing out." To ensure there wouldn't be any complaints, she pulled a Tier 16 mana stone out of one of her spatial rings for each of them and placed her bribe in front of each respective 'volunteer.'

It only took a second for all of them to start rambling over each other.

At Tier 43, she had no issues hearing and dissecting each and every one of the delvers' stammering, cutting out the wasteful information and gathering the pertinent bits she wanted.

A smile crept over her face as she got the gist of the situation.

The children had gotten a four seasons theme for Courtly Warfare, beyond perfect for Aster.

As more people chattered, she started to paint a better picture.

Seemingly out of nowhere, Winter had attacked Spring and took the city in a surprise ambush.

They thought it was a fluke, but the season had a general before anyone else, and then turned and attacked Fall.

While it had been a harder fight, they had defeated a general in a great battle that wrecked a sizable portion of the city.

That information caught her attention, and an eyebrow rose as she heard of the general's prowess.

The pinnacle fighters having most of an Intent was stronger than usual, but nothing she hadn't seen before in a Courtly Warfare floor. Minkalla never made any monster stronger than Tier 14, which meant if it wanted to make a real challenge, it was limited in its ability to do so.

It also couldn't, or at least had never, made a monster with a full Intent, but making monsters with some combination of Phrase, Image, and Anchor wasn't unusual. Though a monster of that ilk appearing at floor four was rare indeed, and a monster with a *strong* pseudo Intent was unheard of on the fourth floor.

Still, from the babbling of the cultivators who exited, she was able to determine that her charges were part of the team that defeated the general, and that they hadn't taken any casualties.

Susanne and her Queen identity had been identified and targeted, but she was alive and well. While unfortunate, her cover being compromised was entirely expected. She would've been hard pressed to kill *everyone* who saw her Concept manifestation.

She kept an ear out for anyone talking about a blood mage, but no one mentioned it, which meant that Liz had managed to remain hidden thus far, which was good.

It would've been better if she had stuck to fire skills, but with the talk of a water mage fighting the general, she suspected that the girl needed to bring out her real skills, even if hidden. Though she couldn't be certain of that as water mages were all too common of an archetype to identify one of them as Liz from the third or fourth hand descriptions.

There were rumors that Quill had been in the fight as a massive ice spell she recognized was used to battle the general, but that seemed more rumor than fact and she had fully expected the children to be pegged for their masked identities.

That was their purpose after all.

With her curiosity sated, she provided each of them with their promised mana stone and allowed them to go on their way. They could now go Tier up and enjoy their immortality. The smart ones would buckle down and progress as fast as possible, but that wasn't any of her concern.

The children were.

And things were going well on that front. Now, they just needed to see what the latter half of Minkalla would throw at them.

She chuckled as she thought of the fact that Kurt and April might miss them coming out because of the incredibly fast fourth floor.

With a flex of her Domain, she returned to her house and her vigil, Carol joining her a moment later.

This time, she was in a much better mood. Her little monsters were growing up and showing their fangs.

Killing a peak Tier 14 with most of an Intent?

Winning Courtly Warfare in a fraction of the normal time?

Her smile only grew as she thought over the debrief she would get when they came out.

She could *not* be more pleased.

When they landed, Matt cast [Cracked Phantom Armor] and [Bulwark], preparing for any attacks, but none came.

He noticed what was wrong the same time as everyone else.

Their skills were slowly, but noticeably becoming more expensive.

Dropping his active skills, Matt cursed, but Aster said it first with a sad whine. "Taxing Skills confirmed."

That reminded him to drop his AI, and he knew he wouldn't be able to understand his bond for the foreseeable future.

Taxing Skills would increase the cost of their skills the more they used them, and Minkalla had the habit of throwing huge groups of monsters at people to force skill usage. Fortunately, none of them were completely dependent on skills like a pure mage would be, though Aster was the worst off. Bloodlines and Concepts weren't affected which, in their case, just lowered the burden that Aster and Liz would need to put on their mana for their skills.

Still, the reward would be *very* useful. Especially for Matt.

At this depth and Tier, Matt expected to get three extra Core skill slots, fifteen Inner ones, and forty Outer slots from the reward, and not a second too soon. Constantly delving fully charged rifts meant that they were flush with skills, and Luna expected him to be proficient with *so* many of them. Most of his Manipulation skills were in his Outer Spirit, and if he could just bring a handful of those into his Inner Spirit, he'd already be much better off.

There were only a few other floors that Matt would rather have gotten over Taxing Skills for its reward. Its floor restriction on the other hand was going to pose a serious challenge.

Liz tapped her leg and asked, “Chances Minkalla shuts down our talismans again?”

Matt thought for a moment as he scanned their surroundings. “Not sure. I think a total shutdown is unlikely, but they might get less effective if we overuse the same ones.”

They were in a narrow corridor with brass walls covered in tubing boxing them in on each side, but it was open to a dull, violet sky above. Matt flexed his Concept, trying to get airborne, but his feet stayed planted on the ground.

“Can’t fly with my Concept. Cover me as I try a flying device.”

As Matt spoke, the other three changed positions to cover him, but it turned out to be useless.

The instant he brought his flying sword out, it clattered to the ground.

Liz looked back and cursed. “A labyrinth? Fuck me sideways. Well, this is quite the pickle.”

Matt couldn’t help but agree. Labyrinth rifts and ruins were annoying at the best of times, let alone in Minkalla, when time was of the essence.

Susanne shrugged. “It could be worse. At minimum, we shouldn’t need too many skills for a maze, and at best, we might be able to totally bypass it.”

Liz was already one step ahead of them, feeding an essence stone into their seeker-compass and waiting for it to settle. Matt, meanwhile, pulled out the key they’d found at the same time, seeing if it had any resonance with their surroundings. It didn’t, so it returned to his ring a moment later.

Aster pointed out the problem with their compass even though Liz had to translate, “How much could it really help? Pointing to the most valuable thing may almost be *bad* because of how many treasures would be in the middle of this place. Even then, it won’t tell us the correct path.”

Liz’s voice was rough as she put down the compass with a raspy sigh, “Well, how did everyone do with their upgrades and Boons? Everyone get something good?”

As they went around and explained their upgrades, Matt inspected his sword. As the old man Jeffrey said, he was able to change his weapon’s enchantments with a thought. Or rather, it was like the blade in his hand had two different spirits he could swap out at will.

It was something like flipping a switch, and when he did, the melee-focused abilities that he had enchanted the blade with vanished to show his longsword clean and pristine.

A little poking around the weapon’s enchantment capacity also revealed that he had more room to enchant his weapon than he had before, even if it

was relatively minor in comparison to the ability to swap enchantment sets all together.

“I’m going to need a little bit of time to enchant my weapon once more. I can store two forms now, but the second one is blank. I got more room with the upgrade, too, so I’ll need to re-enchant the first form anyway.”

Liz looked around at the gleaming walls. “How long do you need?”

Matt thought for a second before saying, “Give me five hours. I want to fix the blade up half-decently since it can help counter spells getting more expensive. But I don’t want to take the half a day that it would normally take to really plan everything out correctly.” Thinking about it more, he changed his mind. “Actually, I don’t want to change the current enchantments with the floor theme. So, for now, I’ll just add spells to the other side.”

Before he got too far into it, he pulled out a stack of talismans and handed them out, saying, “Attack talismans.” He pulled out some of the items he had prepared for Minkalla in case they got this floor and continued, “And attack items. The bracelets have simple [Mana Bolt] enchantments, but if we play it slow, it should be enough to not rely on our skills at all. I have staves with more varied skills. Let me know if you want them instead.”

Liz mirrored his action with a few potions. She didn’t have that many universally applicable ones, but not many still wasn’t none, and they could use all the versatility they could get.

He wasn’t willing to use his AI on this when it could be such a decisive advantage against other delvers in the very near future, but Luna had seen to it that he could make something worthwhile without it. A few additional spells added to his suite could help out immensely here, and it wasn’t like they hadn’t prepared for this floor beforehand.

For the time being, Matt applied a few temporary enchantments to his blade, free handing the runes required by copying them straight off a spare staff. They weren’t his best work, not by a long shot, but they’d serve him well enough for the time being as a backup, just in case they ran into any more spatial locks.

His first choice was [Fireball]. It was a simple spell that had endless uses, and he actually knew the rune form of the skill without the assistance of his AI, since he used it more than a few times with his talismans.

His other choice was [Mana Barrier]. It wasn’t a flashy spell, but he wanted a defensive spell in case Minkalla decided that his use of talismans was cheating once more. As far as he knew, items were never hit with the same restrictions as consumables and were the main way people dealt with the floor.

Matt finished up with a bit of a grimace. It was *far* from his best work, and half the runework had a decent shot of blowing out, even if Minkalla *didn't* impose any restrictions on them. But he didn't want to hold them up any longer. His crafting skills were already taking up a truly *obscene* amount of mana with each cast as Minkalla began exacting its toll. The others had spent the time familiarizing themselves with their Boons and new growth item features as well, but none of them could *really* afford to waste skill casts at the moment.

Further unfortunately, none of them had gotten any Boons or growth item upgrades that would help them in this situation. Liz's Boon gave her skills something of a mental effect, which made it harder for people to notice they were bleeding or feel the wounds that her blood inflicted on them, Aster got the ability to affect more kinds of ice with [Ice Manipulation] in a way that Matt didn't fully understand but was assured was quite important, and Susanne gained the ability to 'cut' light with her Concept sword, making herself invisible for brief periods of time.

Matt still hadn't figured out what his Boon did beyond the upgrades to his Manipulation skills, but he could feel it was there.

Still, they would make do. It was a slow trek, as labyrinths and traps were nearly synonymous, and none of them were crazy enough to walk forward without checking for danger.

Liz took point, using her elephant summon to lead the way in the hopes it would trigger any weight-based traps. Matt, meanwhile, used a fifteen-foot pole to probe suspicious-looking spots while Susanne and Aster watched their rear, keeping an eye out for illusions.

It didn't take them long to encounter their first trap.

As the elephant walked over a seemingly normal spot of floor, there was a loud *crack* in the air as a flurry of spikes appeared embedded in the wall. Metal chips pinged against Matt's armor, causing the elephant to dissipate in a burst of mana. The holes they had flown out of definitely hadn't been there a second ago.

Considering that Matt couldn't even scratch the wall with [Metal Manipulation], those spikes weren't normal, and neither was the trap.

Carefully, he tried to use the holes they created to get a grip on the walls of the labyrinth but, once more, his spell slipped off as if it wasn't metal at all.

Susanne whistled. "Well, fuck that. How quick was that attack? A millionth of a second? No way to react to that at our Tier."

Matt shrugged. He simply didn't have an answer for her. None of them kept their AI running, as even reserve AI would slowly increase in cost, so

wasting that build up time would be stupid this early.

After checking the area for even more traps, they found nothing, and they stopped to look at the trap's mechanism.

Even after checking the holes in the wall with a mirror and seeing they were empty, Matt felt incredibly uncomfortable being in front of them. Thankfully, they weren't attacked when they removed the spikes or when they passed the holes in the wall.

To their surprise, when they passed the danger zone, they actually felt a small stream of Genesis Energy flow into them from the walls of the labyrinth.

Being rewarded for passing the trap successfully wasn't unheard of, but it was surprising.

It also caused their wariness to increase a hundredfold. The mirror that had broken every illusion they encountered beforehand didn't even react, which meant that the traps weren't hidden with magic. Either that, or they were simply *stronger* than the mirror. Matt added on a possibility after a little thought; Minkalla could just be suppressing the mirror to ensure that its challenge was completed without their bypassing the true nature of the test.

Matt shifted his grip on his stick and moved forward, checking each step until they had walked hundreds of feet forward in the plain, concrete hall.

It felt like an eternity, but they eventually found themselves at a crossroad as the path they were walking ended suddenly, prompting Aster to hop up and make a mark on the wall with a bit of chalk.

Everyone looked at Liz as she consulted her spherical compass. "It's pointing in a sort of right direction."

She hadn't sent her elephant more than half a dozen feet down the new corridor when a stream of flame came out from the floor, scorching and burning the elephant half to death before it managed to escape.

They shared a glance as Liz dismissed and re-conjured her summon, and Matt tapped the newly revealed rune with his pole, prompting another plume of fire.

Liz retrieved a few handfuls of dirt from her spatial garden and tossed it onto the ground. With a pulse of his Concept, Matt sent the loose soil skittering across the ground, unveiling a checkered pattern of runes across the floor.

Liz took the lead, with her phoenix bloodline giving her the best chance of skill-less fire resistance. She tiptoed across the safe zones with a [Water Bubble] talisman clenched in her hand, reaching the other side after only a few hair-raising moments.

Before the others followed, they double-checked that the runes hadn't moved, which they were happy to see had not. With Matt and Susanne's superior physical cultivation, jumping between safe zones was eminently doable.

Once they had reached the far side, Aster whined and tapped her paw twice on the floor, indicating that she had something she wanted to say. Susanne pulsed her AI on to receive the message, and smiled as she translated, "All this stress is bad for my fur. Can we go back to killing monsters?"

Matt fully agreed. He was decidedly *not* having fun with this ruin.

It seemed that Aster had jinxed them, as not long after she said that, a horde of Tier 14 kobolds came bursting out of the wall and attacked them.

Seeing them, Matt cursed the other portion of this floor theme and how it changed their encounters. Monsters would come in packs to push them toward using spells in their engagements.

Matt cast three [Fireball]s with his sword before he swapped the form over into his old melee enchantments.

Cutting downward, he cursed the fact he hadn't left either [Mana Slash] or [Mana Charge] in the melee form, as he was reduced to using his sword as a mundane blade while casting [Mana Bolt]s with the bracelet on his left wrist.

Thankfully, he and Susanne were able to fight the monsters with assistance from Liz and Aster as they cast basic spells from behind.

The kobolds had spells of their own, but Matt and Susanne both had plenty of experience fighting the little monsters. Despite them being Tier 14 inside Minkalla, they didn't have any new tricks, just their normal arsenal of [Mana Claw], [Bite], and [Fire Breath]. With that small collection of spells, so long as they were on their toes and ready to dodge, they were able to retreat and avoid every attack.

Which was exactly how they handled the two dozen little monsters. With Liz and Aster watching their retreat to prevent ambushes and keeping them out of the flame runes, they were as safe as possible while also not using any spells that would increase in cost.

Matt did use his gauntlets twice to prevent attacks from landing on Susanne, and his own repulsive field once when he was too slow in dodging, but they still made it out of the fight without taking a single hit, which he considered a win.

As they cleaned up the battlefield, Matt smiled as they got four essence stones, two items, specifically a spear and a ring, and a skill. For being nearly swarm level, the monsters were generous with their deaths.

Aster chortled as she used the mirror to inspect the area the monsters had come from, where a hissing, mechanical room expanded from the labyrinth's normal tight corridors and a decently large metal box sat conspicuously in the center.

Inside sat a greataxe enchanted with [Mana Slash] and [Acrobat's Finesse], which Liz tossed into her ring, alongside what the kobolds themselves dropped, for later depositing into their loot vault.

After about a day of maze-hunting, Liz called their attention to her compass, which flickered between two different directions as though it couldn't decide which was more valuable.

Matt wasn't surprised that they'd run into another group—floor 5 was *small*, usually about the size of an average moon—but that they had both appeared in the same ruin as them was a bit unusual.

Carefully, they crept up to the intersection and checked for traps, not wanting to use the elephant in the hopes of not giving away their presence.

They didn't find any, but Matt used a small mirror to check around the corner. A few hundred feet down the corridor, there was a team of Monster Collective delvers.

Two were beasts, a very obvious lion and a deer, while the two humans with them were basic as those things went.

Pulling back, they had a whispered conversation and decided to announce themselves in the hope of avoiding a fight, which was likely to happen if they kept this close to the other team.

Liz directed her elephant to audibly approach the intersection, its footfalls preceding its entry to the intersection of the two corridors. Once it actually entered into the open space, a voice called out in the beast language, "Who is there?"

Liz responded in the Empire standard, "Empire delvers."

There was a long silence but, eventually, the same voice called out, and Liz translated for them, "We don't want a fight. Who moves first?"

"You can go ahead, and we'll move back into our corridor farther so there's no suspicion," Liz called back, directing her elephant to return to them.

It took a few seconds, but the other voice called out, "Okay, that works."

After the lion checked that they had in fact moved back with a quick peek around the corner, the team moved across the hall after checking the ground for traps.

The four of them waited until they couldn't hear the group moving forward anymore.

Matt used his pole to stretch the mirror around the corner, where they met eyes with the four delvers who had decided to wait in ambush.

Matt wanted to curse but there was no time for that.

With their trap exposed, Matt opened the fight with a pair of talismans, bathing the corridor in flames as he cast [Fireball] through his sword. The deer's antlers sucked in the fire and came alive, flickering like they themselves were red-gold tongues of flame.

Then, the fire rebounded, and a wall of red-gold fire flew down the corridor at them.

Matt gritted his teeth and cast [Bulwark], blocking the attack in exchange for functionally weakening the skill for the rest of the floor.

Then, he let the barrier fall, and he and Susanne rushed forward, using their physical boosts to close the distance. Susanne pushed past him with a burst of wind, her sword aimed at the lion. It dodged the attack and pounced on Matt with a single movement, claws glowing, but Matt sidestepped the attack with a flickered teleport and brought his sword down on the lion's head.

Flesh and bone split under his blow even as he flicked both layers of [Cracked Phantom Armor] for half a second, blocking the knife the second human drove into his ribs. The second layer of his spell blocked the attack, and his gauntleted fist hit the man in the face, crumpling his helmet and sending him tumbling into the wall.

Susanne engaged the deer, blocking a pair of attacks before swinging her sword in an odd way that seemed to obscure Matt's view of her, vanishing into thin air.

A [Blood Bullet] from Liz whizzed by him and struck the deer on the flank. It didn't react, preoccupied as it was with looking for Susanne and bathing everything in front of it with golden flames, but it still met its end a moment later as she appeared behind it, grabbed a hind leg, and hacked it in half with a few brutal chops with her sword.

The final man tried to run, but Matt made a quick calculation and shot him with a [Cracked Mana Spear].

There was no retreat after trying to kill his people.

After the man fell, he got back up to his knees, but a [Mana Bolt] from Aster caught him in the heart and through his spine, ending his life.

Kicking the lion's body, Matt asked, "Why be greedy? We were nicer than most. Fucking idiots."

He knew why, but he was still angry.

The Monster Collective wasn't hostile to the Empire, which didn't even give them the excuse that the Republic, Sects, or Federation cultivators had. They were just greedy, and confident in their combat prowess.

Too confident, as it turned out.

Grabbing the lion's body, he felt around the mane and looked for the spatial item he assumed was there.

It was a necklace, as he suspected, and he sent a thought into it to find a relatively normal assortment of items for beasts, along with a number of natural treasures and other items from Minkalla.

Aster ripped a similar necklace from the deer as Liz came back with the ring and gear of the man he shot.

"Can you help me? The antlers have some special metal on them, and it seems like I can't just pull it off."

Matt wasn't happy with mutilating a sapient's body for their items, but he still brought out a small hand saw and cut the antlers at the skull. If they didn't take it, Minkalla would just eat the items, and he really wanted to know if the antlers and their fire absorbent properties were a natural treasure or something more ephemeral.

He continued his search for whatever the compass had been pointing for and found a loaded skill shard holster. His curiosity got the better of him, and he pulsed his AI to try and identify it. Annoyingly, it took a few seconds before his AI returned any results, pulling up a secondary data pack that Kurt had passed him in preparation for Minkalla.

[Kar'tan Greets His Foes] was an air-aspected area debuff skill, usually only found in the Monster Collective, but had been picked out as especially good for Aster. It was like the opposite of [Tailwind], inhibiting the motion of enemies even if they tried to use their Concept to part the air in front of them.

He happily tossed the shard to Aster as he continued his search, eventually coming on to a small ruby containing an even smaller flame within. None of them recognized it, but it was packed with enough essence to warrant later inspection.

The humans didn't have anything so impressive on them, so the four of them continued their trek into the labyrinth.

After another day of spotting and avoiding traps, fighting monsters, and navigating the maze, their compass suddenly started spinning like it couldn't figure out where it ought to point. It took about an hour, but they eventually uncovered a hidden trapdoor set into the floor below them, opened by turning a nearby pipe knob three and a half times exactly.

It swung open, revealing a lush, green room containing a single, larger bush sitting atop a small hill. It bore a single blackberry streaked with a lighter purple.

Liz was the first to say something, though from Aster's whines, she probably had recognized it about the same time. Her voice rasped as she piped up, "Oh! A void blackberry! That's a nice find."

"A what now?" Susanne poked her head in.

"A void blackberry," Liz repeated with a smile before relenting and elaborating. "It helps with internal void resistance. Lots of people with void-aspected bloodlines, or who otherwise have void affinity, can suffer from health problems, but void blackberries help mitigate them...a lot, actually. It's also key in a lot of potions and enchantments that utilize void mana, makes them more resilient and less likely to corrode. *Really* good alchemists can even brew void resistance potions from them. So yeah, it's nice and valuable."

Matt quipped, "Also, the flavor is apparently divine. I'm almost tempted to take a nibble just to find out what all the fuss is about. It wouldn't lose much from one single drupelet missing I'd bet."

Liz whirled on him. "Don't you dare!"

He laughed. "I'm kidding, I'm kidding. None of us would do that. That means you, Aster."

He nudged the fox away from the trapdoor before her drool could drip down onto the bush below, and she tapped twice on the ground while yipping. Liz translated her message this time, "It smells like cold and sharpness and ice and nothingness and ice cream and..."

Liz dropped into the room below, carefully coaxing the bush into her garden orb. In the instant before it vanished into the expanded greenhouse, it dropped its fruit into Liz's hand. He couldn't tell if the bush itself had survived—natural treasures were notoriously difficult to transplant and grow—but he hoped it had. Maybe Liz would be able to crossbreed it with normal blackberries, preserving the flavor if not the magical effects.

He was *really* curious about what made it taste so good.

Reaching down he gave Liz a hand back into the main labyrinth, and they carried on their quest for the exit.

Matt walked through an alley and shied away from the shadows that reached out to try and touch him. It was just an instinct, but something told him that if he allowed the shadows to touch him, he'd never be able to leave.

At first, it was easy to casually walk along, but with each step he took, it became harder and harder to progress. Soon, he was jumping and flipping, using every bit of his Tier 1000 body's prowess to avoid the grasping shadows.

Just as the shadows were about to finally entrap him, he felt someone push him from the side, and he woke up with a start.

Liz had her face buried into her pillow and murmured, "Bad dream. Tossing and turning."

Matt kissed her forearm draped across his chest, then slipped out from under it and into the living room.

There, he found Aster standing guard. Which meant she was curled around a carton of ice cream and using her spiritual perception to watch their surroundings.

With their shielding, their house was nearly impervious from attacks, but *nearly* impervious wasn't enough this deep in Minkalla.

Aster felt him arrive then whined in what he interpreted as a question, and he quietly explained, "Weird nightmare. I was super strong but trapped in an alley, and shadows were trying to trap me forever. So, yeah, I'll give you some company for a bit until I settle down."

His bond picked up her ice cream and settled into his lap, where he brushed her fur while she ate her treat.

While he sat there, he contemplated his dream and the implications it carried, and what they said about himself.

If his fading memories of the dream were right, he had been something like Tier 1000, and impossibly strong. But despite all that power, he had still been cornered and captured like a mundane human, in the end.

He interpreted the dream as his brain trying to reconcile the danger of Minkalla and the realization that eventually, the emperor and other high Tier people like Luna wouldn't be able to protect him. Soon, he would be in danger everywhere he went, every waking moment.

Minkalla was the first time since he had gotten a manager that his life was in immediate danger, and there was no one who could pull him out of the fire if it got too hot.

The idea of death had never been far, but Matt and his team had been seriously wounded, and now, they were on a floor where they could actually run out of mana for their skills if they weren't careful.

Even his Talent couldn't fix the issue when the cost of a skill became more than an entire mana pool.

This floor had the possibility of being a hard stop for them if they weren't careful.

It was a degree of danger that Matt had known about but hadn't really conceptualized as he should have.

But while they were in Minkalla, there was nothing they could do but push through. So, after he mulled over the feelings he was left with, he did his best to push them out of his mind.

Without his AI to translate Aster's yips, he was forced to rely on their bond, but they didn't really need any more than that. She was comforting him and wanted him to know that it was just a bad dream, which was quite appreciated. The follow up thoughts of her wanting a warm brownie with her ice cream were also meant to comfort him, he was sure.

Aster didn't have a selfish bone in her body after all. Not a single one.

They were watching a movie when Susanne came out to take over the guard shift, and Matt took the opportunity to go back to sleep himself.

After brewing Susanne some coffee, he slipped back into bed with Liz and the leg cooler that was Aster.

When he woke up the second time, after a dreamless nap, they set off quickly after a small bite to eat.

The second level of this floor was better than the maze they had been stuck in, but the waves of rats that they were up against had forced them to dip into their spell usage despite their trying to rely mostly on items.

It could have been worse, admittedly. The rats were swarm monsters, and were quite weak individually, meaning Liz could just cast [Blood Sprites] and

allow the multiplying nature of the spell to wipe out most of the horde.

Even then, they had to deal with the next wave as they pushed forward, which quickly made the tactic untenable. Though, after clearing an area of the rats, they were able to slowly bait the rest into the room and finish them off in smaller numbers that they could safely handle.

Susanne got to test out [Crescent Sweep] for the first time, and she seemed to deeply enjoy the ability to make her sword spin through dozens of rats at a time. The ability to summon a second copy of her manifestation and use *that* for a potent short-ranged attack, while also attacking normally, would catch a lot of people off guard.

After they finished the labyrinth ruin and entered a forest, they decided to retreat and take a break for a few hours to get some sleep.

Without their buffing spells, they were spending more energy with each fight, and without [Endurance], they were unable to magically purge the exhaustion from their bodies either.

They could use potions to help, but that would burn through their limited supply, and even potions couldn't be used one after another without side effects.

So, they went without.

It slowed them down a little, but everyone should have nearly the same problems and restrictions.

As they moved into the forest, Matt gripped his sword with one hand, and his staff in his off-hand, prepared to cast spells the second something attacked them.

Except, there was nothing.

As they sped up slightly, they discovered the aftermath of battle in the form of trampled trees and shrubbery, but it had been long enough ago that Minkalla already reclaimed everything.

At nearly the same time, they felt a bright beacon of Genesis Energy ahead of them, like a shining star to their spiritual sense, as soon as they came into range. It felt like one person, but they couldn't be too sure.

It took the four of them nearly half an hour but, eventually, they encountered the nude man they had seen in the second floor's safe room, fighting a swarm of monkeys with various colored fur.

Not wanting to seem like they were going to attack him, they stopped and watched. As they did so, Matt whistled.

The man was a fantastic fighter, which he would have to be without any weapons or armor.

Each attack missed him by inches; the man was just a bit faster than all his opponents and somehow was able to keep track of the entire troop during the skirmish.

After dodging the dozen or so monkeys' attacks for roughly fifteen seconds, he finally launched his own counterattack, and his fist lashed out like a falling meteor that sought to wipe out all life on the planet.

As his fist landed, all the monkeys exploded at the same time in a display of gore.

Even before the bodies hit the ground, he spun and faced them.

In the corporation language, he asked something, but seeing their non-reaction, he changed to the Republicans' language. Seeing their blank stares, he finally asked in perfect Empire, "Is there something I can help you with?"

Once more, Matt was surprised. The man's Empire was textbook perfect despite the man not using an AI to translate, which was impressive. Luna had taught them the basics of each of the other seven major languages spoken throughout the Great Powers, but their Guild wasn't as clean as this man's Empire.

The man seemed to be avoiding confrontation by denying anyone the ability to determine where he was from, which was an interesting strategy. Few people would be willing to attack members of their own nation; national loyalty ran strong in many cultivators, so plausible deniability on his origin would at the least give people pause. Just like what was happening now.

Matt assumed that the man must have a spatial storage implanted in his body somewhere, as there would be no way that anyone would be willing to go through Minkalla without the ability to carry items around. In addition to being a waste of loot, all the growth item floors wouldn't do anything if one didn't have an item to use them on.

Liz shook her head. "We were just looking for monsters to fight and stumbled upon your battle."

The man nodded and pointed to their right. "From your direction, I assume you came from the rat caves?" At Liz's nod, he continued, "There's a Horse-Lizard ruin that way, if you wish. Or if you would rather fight for this ruin, I will welcome your challenge."

Liz shook her head. "Not necessary. We'll take our leave."

Having said that, the four of them turned and started walking in the indicated direction while keeping a portion of their spiritual sense on the nude man. He didn't make any aggressive moves, and after they passed through the tree line, he similarly turned around and moved deeper into the ruin.

As they went in the direction he had indicated, they were attacked by a few of the monkeys that hadn't been defeated by the naked man, and they slowly killed their way forward.

Upon reaching the dividing line between ruins, the surroundings went from a lush forest to a grassy plain, where they found a herd of horses with scales and long, thick tails.

Matt shot a [Mana Bolt] at the nearest one, and the entire herd of twenty turned on them and started charging. If it had been a normal rush forward, that would have been fine, but they all used [Charge] to accelerate their mad dash. They seemed to be *pouring* mana into the skill because they continued to run even faster as they came closer, each step carrying them farther than the last.

Matt and the others simply took to the sky and used the height advantage to kill the monsters that tried to curve upward with their Concepts. While [Charge] was a dangerous move, it had the weakness of making it hard to change one's direction, and they ruthlessly took advantage of that fact.

Sadly, the horse lizards weren't mindless beasts. Seeing that their first collective charge only yield aerial counterattacks, they canceled their spells and turned in various directions before trying once more to use [Charge] and attack them. Being in the air and having three different attack vectors to worry about increased the threat of the horses' advance, but Matt and his team didn't have any issues dodging the monsters, even without their AI tracking them.

There were a few close calls, but they finished the horses off and started to loot the items they dropped, when all four of them felt the new arrivals with their spiritual senses. A group of ten people came out from the forest and immediately started casting spells directed at them.

Matt didn't hesitate to cast [Bulwark], relying on the spell to defend his allies. Even still, he was staggered by the damage that the spells did to his own. Their attackers weren't holding anything back in their initial bombardment.

Aster immediately cast [Hail] and used the ice as a screen to cover the follow up attacks, while gathering the ice on the ground and sending it forward at their attackers in a small wave.

Their attackers split at the sight of the wave, and in two groups of five, tried to flank and pincer them. But Matt and Aster broke off to face one group, while Liz and Susanne held off the other.

A five versus two wasn't impossible, but it would be a hard fight, and Matt disregarded any concept of rationing his spells usage during the engagement.

As he closed in on the group, an arrow glowing with silver mana raced toward him, but he summoned a shield from his spatial ring and used it to block the attack. He was forced to toss the shield away with his Concept as he sensed danger from the arrow. Before it did anything, he quickly pushed it into the group of enemy cultivators. Half a second later, it exploded in a blinding flash, which unfortunately didn't seem to harm the other group.

However, it forced them to scatter, and he charged at the closest attacker, a woman who was blocking for her team with a massive tower shield.

Matt wasn't willing to deal with these people, and quickly slapped a talisman on the shield before deflecting their retaliatory attack with his sword. Spinning, he rushed to where two of the attackers were trying to overwhelm Aster.

The fox in question darted around the battlefield, keeping a number of their enemies tied up in fending off her [Snowblind] afterimages, which were empowered by a fog of snow coming from her tiara.

Using that slight distraction to his advantage, Matt drove his sword forward in a lunge that skittered off the armor of the shortsword wielder.

The other woman tried to rush Aster but was met with a snowflake the size of her chest that appeared and impaled her, then spun and cut through the woman like a saw blade.

That seemed to earn the group's ire, and while a healer went to see to their mutilated teammate, two of the others tried to attack Aster in retaliation.

Seeing the woman's body start to pull itself together, Matt lashed out at the healer with a [Mana Slash], but one of the men attacking Aster threw themselves in front of the crescent of mana, trying to protect their healer.

Seeing his attack blocked, Matt started casting [Shield Shatter] and allowed a few hundred mana to flow into the spell before he brought the blade down on the man's shield.

The resulting explosion sent the man flying, gravely injured, but he wasn't dead. To make matters worse, the healer had already repaired most of the obvious damage for the first woman who Aster nearly killed.

The same woman punched out at Matt and broke one of his ribs with the strike despite the protection from [Cracked Phantom Armor] and his physical armor.

Caught by surprise, Matt dodged the next attack, and was about to bring his longsword around at the woman when he caught an arrow in his arm that interrupted his swing.

Cursing, he pulled back and tossed a half-dozen [Fireball] talismans out of his spatial ring and activated them with a thought.

The streams of fire went in nearly every direction, and seemed like a chaotic and uncoordinated attack that would miss each of the attackers. But Matt used [Fire Manipulation] and, at the last second, caused all the spells to turn and slam into them.

That earned him a second of reprieve and gave Aster a second to cast [Ice Spear] at the healer, who recoiled from the ball of fire that had just hit her in the chest.

The shard of ice exploded inside her from Aster's [Shatter], and Matt ensured that the woman was dead with a swipe of his blade. Unfortunately, he had had to take a [Shield Bash] to the arm in order to secure the kill.

The woman who Aster nearly killed with her giant snowflake tried to punch Matt in the side again, but he kicked out and tried to break her overextended knee, only to find her body was made out of what felt like concrete.

With his failed attack, he caught a punch to the face and felt his jaw pop out of place, spitting out a tooth a moment later.

Despite that, he didn't allow the pain to overwhelm him and quickly brought his longsword up and around, cutting the woman's arm off at the elbow.

The precisely aimed strike ignored the woman's stronger than usual bones and earned him some breathing room, which he used to twist and swing his sword around at the man who rushed his rear.

His [Mana Slash] was cast at the last second, and he used its resulting explosion to tackle his remaining assailant with a burst of [Mage's Retreat]. With the extra boost, he was able to overpower the woman. He had to send more mana into the spell than he expected, as the woman was far stronger than he had initially thought.

She felt like a Tier 14, despite only being a Tier 12, and when Matt felt her strength increase as she activated her own spell, he sent mana into his gravity gauntlets while morphing the first layer of [Cracked Phantom Armor]'s gauntlets into spikes.

His fist landed on her like a falling star, brutalizing her face and shoving her nose into her brain, hopefully bypassing her abnormally tough bones. Quickly turning his gauntlets off, he repelled her head with his Concept, then reversed the polarity of the force to land a second blow that should have liquefied her brain. The finishing strike left him absolutely *covered* in blood and gore.

Before he could revel in his victory, he had to deflect a glowing shield that sought to decapitate him, diverting it with his sword to land on the neck of the

woman he had just killed.

He had been taught well to never let a good blow go to waste.

At the same time, he felt a burst of happiness from Aster and an accompanying burst of Genesis Energy, which told him that she had finally succeeded in taking out the archer who had been peppering them.

Regaining his footing and sliding back, Matt took a slash on his leg in order to lash out with a heavy chop that carved a furrow through the opposing man's breastplate.

With a moment's reprieve, Matt cast [Cracked Mana Trap] without any additional mana in order to delay the man for a few seconds while his latest assailant's ally closed in on him.

Even with that, he was forced to drop his blade as the remaining woman tried to impale him with a short sword. Using both his Concept's repulsion effect and his forearm, he deflected the blade upward and punched with everything he had.

Matt felt a bone in his own fist break with the impact, but followed through with the attack properly, and felt the woman's ribs give under his blow.

Fighting defensively, he exchanged a few more attacks, buying Aster enough time to come back and change the fight from a two on one to a two on two. With her assistance, it only took them a few seconds to overwhelm their attackers and finish them off.

Picking up his sword, Matt and Aster rushed over to help Liz and Susanne finish off their two remaining opponents.

After a few bloody minutes, the final attackers fell, but they didn't go down without leaving a few injuries on the four of them.

Aster had an arrow through her left rear leg, Liz had a set of needles that peppered her front like she had a run-in with a pin cushion, and Susanne held her intestines in with her hand. She had nearly been gutted in the initial exchange when a woman she cut didn't go down as expected.

Matt had to gesture at his jaw to get Liz's assistance in setting the bone back in place with a *pop*.

He was just about to thank her when a group of five rushed out of the forest at them. They had likely been waiting for the fighting to finish so that they could finish off the weakened survivors.

"Nope, fuck this, and fuck you." Matt accompanied his words with a short burst of [Cracked Mana Spear] that cut through the five charging people. They threw up their defensive abilities commendably quickly, but Matt was out of patience for half-measures and narrow wins.

An [Earth Wall] cracked like it was made of flint, a [Water Bubble] popped almost as soon as it formed, and the last man's tower shield managed to hold Matt off for nearly a quarter second before it buckled.

Liz clearly agreed as their blood crawled out of their bodies and started stabbing them. A few bursts of Genesis Energy told them the group had finally died.

Despite their injuries, they took a few seconds to loot the slowly fading bodies of their gear and items.

Dropping their house, Matt staggered inside and started charging the reserves to counteract the shielding he had going at full power, even as Liz cleaned off his island in the kitchen, where she helped Susanne lay down.

Instead of cutting away her armor, she simply retracted it into her spatial ring, allowing Liz to get to work and Matt acting as an assistant.

They weren't by any means professional healers, but they needed to do more than dump a healing potion on a gut wound. While the risk of sepsis and its related infections wasn't high for someone of their Tier, they still needed to flush her abdomen before they started properly healing her.

As they worked, Aster limped over and nuzzled Susanne, who scratched the fox.

Matt only kept half an ear out as Susanne talked to Aster despite not being able to understand her yips and chortles.

The only good thing about Susanne's injury was that it was large and gave the two amateur healers more than enough room to reattach and heal the cut intestines. The gaping wound also made it a little easier to wash the waste that had leaked from her abdomen.

Once they double and triple checked that Susanne didn't have any remaining waste, they dumped a healing potion in her and stapled the wound closed before pouring a second healing potion on a bandage and wrapping her stomach.

After that, a sore Susanne helped him pull out the hundreds of tiny needles that had perforated Liz's body with tweezers. While it was slow and tedious work, none of the needles were in her face, which would have been a real cause for concern. They had seemingly gone through her armor as if it wasn't there, though they didn't seem to have done much damage to her healthy flesh.

Meanwhile, her black arm had yielded completely to the needle barrage, the projectiles having passed completely through the limb and out the back. Ironically, those were the easier ones to deal with. It took them quite a while

to find each and every one of the tiny needles, but the work itself wasn't all that demanding, which at least allowed them to chat.

"I agree. That group was way too strong," Liz murmured as Aster yipped something.

Susanne agreed. "Yeahhhh, I don't think I've ever seen a group that strong at Tier 12. I'm assuming their armor must be enchanted to the brim."

Matt shook his head. "No, that's not it. It was their bodies that were strong not their gear. I only checked it out a little before putting it away. I got a good enough look to prove that it's not that. While it's top of the line, it's not enough to explain their durability."

Aster whined, and Liz translated, "Aster asked if maybe they were someone's rich kids or the like?"

Matt mulled that over but disagreed. "That doesn't make sense. Why would some group geared to the teeth ambush us outright, and then not even try to flee when the tide of the fight turned away from them. Even if they were super confident in their gear, they should have tried to run once their healer dropped."

Liz threw out her own idea despite Matt pulling needles from her neck. "Maybe they were a low Tier hit squad."

Susanne made a noise of disagreement, which Aster seemed to back up, but Liz defended her idea. "Think about it. Most death squads are strong Tier 14 teams who are then kitted out after being trained to counter a few Pather equivalents. But what if the team was extra strong and you wanted them to kill people and also get good rewards? Why not send them in as Tier 12s? It would even get them underestimated by the majority of people who would be incredibly suspicious of any higher Tier team."

Matt didn't think she was right, but he also didn't have a better explanation, so he left it at that.

Anything more they could learn would be from the group's belongings, and they needed to finish healing before they started going through loot.

After Liz's needles were pulled out, and the holes in her arm patched up, they pulled the arrows out of Aster and Matt.

His broken rib was left to its own devices after he drank a healing potion.

They could have used spells or even talismans, but they all suspected that their talismans would be nerfed in some way soon, and their spells were meant for emergencies until they left this floor.

This was only the second level of this floor, and they had already encountered four teams, three of which attacked them on sight.

It wasn't a comforting trend, as it only promised to get worse as they slowed down and ventured deeper, where everyone was pushed closer together.

As Matt laid down on the floor, he concentrated on keeping the mana in their reserves topped up while working his still sore jaw.

Liz started going through the first group's gear, but it was indistinct and didn't have any telltale signs from any of the Great Powers. But like Matt had said earlier, it was well-crafted gear, about as good as Minkalla would allow.

Thankfully, Tier 14 materials and enchantments could only be so strong within the restrictions of the planet, which prevented teams like this from coming in with Tier 20 disposable weapons and just killing everyone they encountered with wealth.

The second team that attacked them and had been killed by Matt's [Cracked Mana Spear] were a different story altogether.

They, unlike the first group, were very obviously Republican delvers, judging by their gear and items. As far as Matt could tell from the quality of their gear, the team had been on the Republican equivalent of the Path, though they weren't notable enough to have been included in any of the briefings that Matt had received. Unfortunately for them, they were a case study in the dangers of delving too deep and too greedily; all their years of hard work were wasted because of a single bad decision.

Matt was just about to take a nap when he felt a ripple of Genesis Energy flow through his spirit, and it traveled with the mana he was sending into the house.

He jerked up, despite the pain, and started concentrating as much as he could on the sensation of the house becoming a growth item.

As his Genesis Energy flowed out of his spirit, he was able to follow it as it spread like an infection through the house. It wasn't a perfect description, but it was the best way he could describe the change.

The Genesis Energy from his spirit spread through the house's physical material and the accompanying spirit, but where it passed through, the material was changed. The spirit and materials of the items were strengthened and reinforced, while also binding to him like his other growth items. From their relatively ordinary house, things shifted and twisted as the Genesis Energy worked its magic.

Matt felt the unique energy as it completed its first pass and encompassed the physical house before it started making leaps.

First, it jumped to his kitchen and started flowing through his range, and then to his fridge, and then to his spatially expanded cabinets. Even as he

watched, the enchantments he had personally laid out morphed and changed. The changes weren't large, and as far as he could tell, the function of the runes didn't change. Just like he observed with Susanne's armor binding, it was like print letters being changed to cursive.

After his kitchen was absorbed into the collective whole that was the house, both his and Liz's workstations started to be absorbed at the same time.

He tried to concentrate on both but focused most of his attention on his own room. What he found interesting was that he could feel his workstation itself bind to the room, and then to the house as a whole. It was like a nested binding that made absolutely no sense when he considered what he knew about linking enchantments, but the Genesis Energy seemed to easily accomplish the task anyway.

At the same time, as they were bound, he noticed that his workstation did what he could only call 'settling in'. It was like they became unified and singular, despite remaining distinct items. With a thought, Matt knew that he could merge the two tables that made up an 'L' shaped desk into a seamless whole, and then break them apart once again, but he wasn't so limited as to just return them into the original shapes. No, he was able to break off just a foot of the greater whole to create a smaller table that he could move around.

His tools also seemed to melt away into the workshop, and he knew that he could summon a carving pen at a whim, as long as he was inside the room.

As far as he could tell, Liz's workshop had the same things happen to it, but he wasn't nearly as familiar with it as he was his own, and he wasn't able to really investigate the changes there before both of the bedrooms started transforming.

The changes were smaller, but like the workshops, the furniture merged into one with the room as the Genesis Energy passed through.

As it hit the bathroom, he paused to inspect the changes a little more thoroughly but found nothing new there either.

Watching the living room, and finally, the mana storage room change, Matt tried to commit the changes and how they happened to his memory, so he could try and replicate them eventually.

He paid extra attention to the house as a whole as he felt the Genesis Energy finishing its job.

Like with every item Minkalla converted to a growth item, they all got something extra added, and he wanted to see how that happened.

From the runes and enchantments he knew so well, he felt something extra taking form, like a whale rising from the depths and pushing the water

above it away. That was the best way he could describe the way runes seemed to appear out of the Genesis Energy that had infiltrated the house's spirit.

Then as the new runes appeared, the Genesis Energy retreated into his spirit, signaling that the conversion was over, and weighed down on his spirit like a lead blanket.

As it ended, Matt started making notes on a pad of paper he pulled out of his spatial ring and jotted down everything he could while it was still fresh in his memory.

The instant his pen stopped, Aster yipped, and Liz asked, "What did the house get?"

Matt blinked at them before shrugging. "Don't know. Haven't checked yet. I was trying to note down what I felt first."

Liz rolled her eyes so hard she fell back into the couch while Aster flopped into her.

Susanne tried to suppress her laughter at seeing their exasperation, as her barely healed abdomen would have made laughing quite painful, and he took the opportunity to inspect the house and the feeling it gave him.

He twitched slightly as he realized what the house actually did.

As he tried to speak, he ended up stammering, "What kind of growth item needs stuff like this? That's stupid. How does that even count?"

Seeing the two other humans' amused expressions and feeling his bond, Matt scooped up and blew a raspberry on her head. "The house eats other houses to upgrade itself and expand. I also sense that we can upgrade individual parts, like our workshops, by buying a new one and letting the house absorb it. Frankly, I'm disappointed to the extreme. We'll need to buy new houses anyway, so why bind as a growth item? We could have just used the new house. It feels pointless."

Liz rubbed his shoulder and stopped laughing long enough to ask, "Would you really want a new house anyway? You love this one so much."

Matt tsked at her point as he couldn't deny it. "I like it because it's *mine*. Future houses would also be mine...but you aren't wrong, I *do* like this one. I just wish it had a better ability."

Aster, on the other hand, squirmed free of his grasp and into their storage area before returning with a ring in her mouth.

As Matt grabbed it, he realized she had brought the house they had found in the third-floor safe rooms area.

It was worth a test, and they all piled out of the house to drop the other house next to their original one.

The other house was smaller than their own, but even more opulent and well crafted.

Matt turned to Susanne, as she also had a stake in this house, so he couldn't just let his own house absorb it without her approval.

He didn't even need to say anything before she gestured for him to continue.

With her go-ahead, he thought of their house absorbing the new house, and it did exactly that.

Their houses seemed to stretch slightly before its edge merged with the smaller house, and then it started to absorb the smaller house like slime eating its prey.

It was slightly horrifying to watch, but Matt was more occupied with the feedback that the house was giving him.

He found it interesting that he could expand the individual rooms of the house or add entirely new rooms with the additional material from the house being consumed, but he immediately rejected that option.

Their house was already as large as it could be with their current spatial ring, and if it got any larger, they wouldn't be able to take it with them but thankfully, he was able to guide the upgrade.

Instead of enlarging the house itself, he was able to send the materials into their own house and improve various functions.

Their old shower and bathroom was replaced with the smaller house's full tub and better enchantment suite, even though he was forced to expand the room slightly into their bedroom closet. They really didn't need the closet space anymore because they had more spatial rings than they knew what to do with. He likely would have moved the walls around anyway, after getting out of Minkalla, so doing it now with no effort was a minor but welcome boon.

After inspecting the kitchen, he kept his own appliances. The other house had much better appliances, but they weren't built to the same standard sizing as he was used to. He would have had to spend a lot of effort to directly incorporate them to his original house, while also giving up some countertop space.

Instead, he was able to direct his house to improve the existing kitchen with the cannibalized materials of the other house, adding in better self-cleaning functions and spots on the countertop that would keep plates placed on them warm. All the appliances were improved to varying degrees and effects. Though, he always thought it was a bit of a waste every time he saw that something became more mana efficient.

Matt then felt prompted to make a decision about the emptied armory in the smaller house, but as he couldn't just add the room to their house, he was forced to sacrifice it as well.

That turned out to be the right decision, as he felt his house's shield generators become more efficient and adaptive to outside attacks. There was some slight feeling from consuming the armory that the house would be able to attack back, if fed a few more similar houses.

Even better, he felt their mana storage crystal absorb the other house's, letting it store even more mana in the same volume.

That, more than anything else, was a boon sent by Minkalla itself. It nearly ensured that he would never have an issue with finding ways to increase his own mana pool as he Tiered up, if his read on how much additional capacity it had gained was right.

It wouldn't have been his first option to convert into a growth item, but Matt was content with how things turned out. He did love his house and knew himself well enough that he would have pushed them to continue living in it long after they could have afforded something better.

But this was a good solution, even if he would have preferred to bond with...well, pretty much any of his other commonly used items over it.

He just wished they weren't constrained by spatial ring size, and that he could add more rooms. Some of the other teams they had killed and looted had also had houses that they could absorb, if only their rings had the space to hold the upgrades.

As they entered back into the house, Matt started showing off the new abilities, and even learned that he could grant people permission to change things like he could.

He seemed to have greater rights and could lock things down so others couldn't change it, but it made it convenient for Liz so she could change her workshop and allowed Susanne to rearrange her room with a thought.

They spent half a day recovering before they finally put the house away and continued their slaughter of the horse lizards.

Even injured and limited on spells, the Tier 14 monsters were no direct threat to them so long as they were careful and didn't pull too many teams at once.

As fun as the new items were, they needed to try and pull as far ahead as they could to avoid having to fight over Genesis Energy with other teams.

Slipping to the side, Matt avoided the rake of a lizard monster's claw and punched the air, casting [Fist Blast] with his short jab.

While too weak to do serious damage, it was enough to knock the lizardman off balance, causing its follow-up tail swipe to narrowly miss him. With the opening, Matt chopped down with his longsword and cut a deep furrow into the lizard's shoulder.

The creature tried to scuttle away, but he pinned it to the ground with his Tier 14 sword's weight and hacked its head off with a few brutal strikes.

This floor had turned into a slog, and even fighting the normal monsters was becoming a struggle, as they were slowly forced to use their skills more and more. Minkalla had finally decided that they had used his talismans enough to discount the challenge and weakened their effects to the point of near-uselessness. That, in turn, forced them to rely on their own skills more than they would have preferred, which only increased their mana costs after repeated usage.

Many of his skills were too expensive to cast outright, and after the latest fight, [Fist Blast] joined their ranks. He was storing and retrieving mana from his mana stones dozens of times per engagement, but even that didn't help once the skills started costing more than 2,500 mana.

[Fist Blast] had carried him through the last three ruins, but using it had been a deliberate choice, as it was one of his newest skills. Therefore, that made it one of the most expendable he had. Being in his outer spirit, it was already expensive and fairly weak, but he'd faced worse odds before. He'd taken to pulsing his physical buffs instead of running them at full blast at all times, but even that was starting to add up.

Rushing to assist Liz, they finished off her lizard before helping Susanne and Aster.

They were cleaning up the battlefield when Susanne said, “Team ahead!”

Scanning forward with his spiritual sense, Matt found the team in question and was going to dismiss the encounter, as the other team didn’t seem inclined to bother them, until she continued with her observations.

“That’s one of the Clan teams who attacked me during the fight with the death squad.”

Matt took a deep breath before letting it out slowly.

He would really prefer to avoid a fight with other delvers right now, but he also understood Susanne’s anger and desire for revenge. If he had been attacked like she had, he would also be chomping at the bit to get some payback, and he wasn’t going to let her go alone.

He just really wished that they could do it on another floor.

Aster yipped and tapped the floor twice, letting Liz translate. “Aster said that we should make it quick. And frankly, I agree.”

Susanne shrugged, seeming unconcerned. “They didn’t have any special skills when they were accidentally attacking me, but I wasn’t intending to go up and challenge them openly.” Gesturing with her greatsword, she poked the air as if it was a dagger. “I was thinking more of a...stabby stabby from behind approach.”

With everyone’s agreement, they made their way through the tunnels of their current ruin while also keeping as low of a profile as possible.

Chances were, the other team had already seen them in their spiritual perception, but rushing forward recklessly would have been just as dumb.

They were a few hundred feet from the other team when they turned and started casting spells and loosing arrows at them.

Matt sidestepped a glowing arrow and was going to charge forward, when he caught a flicker of movement from behind himself. Instead of charging with the others, he twisted and slashed out with his sword.

A man in subdued Sect robes ducked his slash and racked out with his hand in a claw-like motion while flames gathered around his nails and burnt the air with their passing.

Stepping back, Matt called out, “Attack from the rear! I got it.”

Matt tried to keep his opponent at a decent range, where he could use his weapons length to his advantage, but the surprise attack meant that he was already too close.

How the man had so perfectly hidden his presence from spiritual perception was a mystery that Matt didn’t have time to ponder.

In the second exchange, he took a slashing attack on his quadriceps. His physical armor was cut clean through as if it didn't exist, and he felt the fire as it burnt into him.

Growling, Matt pulled his longsword into his spatial ring and punched his attacker in the face.

A magical armor appeared for a brief second and formed a helmet that blocked the blow, while his attacker raked their claws at his wrist, trying to disable him.

Matt flexed his Concept's repulsion effect and used its power to push the attack away slightly, then used the space it gave him to slam his fist onto the man's chest.

This blow landed, and even with the magical armor flaring up, he was sent stumbling back.

Using that to his advantage, Matt withdrew his sword and cut down at the man. He avoided the attack with an unnaturally fast side-step, then summoned a sword and shield pair that radiated power.

The Sect fighter thrust out with his shield, and a mana copy of the weapon appeared and slammed onto Matt's blade, sending it off course, while he cut out with his physical blade at Matt's already wounded leg.

Matt pulsed [Cracked Phantom Armor] to block it, letting the attack bounce off the concentrated second layer.

Unlike normal spells, channel spells got more expensive for every second used, which for Matt's toolkit, mostly meant they functionally just got weaker over time.

[Cracked Phantom Armor] had avoided most of that fate thanks to Matt not using it. But even having only used it twice on this floor for short bursts, Matt could already feel the difference in its defensive power.

But it was still more than strong enough to block the blow, and Matt used that to his advantage.

Stepping forward, he chopped down at the man's body, forcing him to block with the shield. As the blow landed, he sent mana into the [Mana Slash] that he'd ultimately imbued into his sword, letting the resulting explosion obscure the man's vision for a brief instant.

Taking a step back, Matt chopped down at the man again, sending another [Mana Slash] out, but the man intercepted the crescent of mana with a [Mana Slash] of his own.

With a little distance between them, Matt shifted his focus onto the other three and their fight with the Clan team.

Things were going far better for them, it seemed, as there was already a foreign body on the ground, and the other three Clan delvers were trying to retreat.

Happy to let the other fight finish, so they could then turn this fight into a one versus four, Matt changed his style into a defensive one. To his surprise, his attacker didn't retreat, and kept on with his attack, pressing Matt hard and casting spell after spell, as if he didn't feel the increased cost of this floor.

Taking each attack in, Matt guessed that most of the skills being used were enchanted into the weapon, and his armor had a physical boosting enchantment, allowing the man to fight at a breakneck pace for so long without worry.

Just as his team was finishing off the group from the Clans and rushing to join him, *another* team came out of an adjoining tunnel and immediately peppered them with attacks.

Spells and arrows rained down on Susanne, Aster, and Liz, while Matt and the Sect man were relatively unbothered, being slightly outside the range of the other fight.

The man Matt was fighting stopped his advance and said something in the Sects' language that Matt couldn't fully understand without his AI, but it generally translated as mocking or gloating.

Matt cut low as the man charged with his shield held high, but the man jumped up and dodged the strike, then jumped again with a ripple appearing under his feet. [Puddle Jumper] was a rare skill to be seen in actual combat, and Matt was completely caught off guard, taking a cutting blow on his back that thankfully didn't bypass a burst of [Cracked Phantom Armor].

Wanting to end this fight as quickly as possible, he flared [Mage's Retreat] at max power for an instant, then rushed forward and swung his blade at where the man would jump next if he decided to cast [Puddle Jumper] again.

His guess was correct, and Matt caught him on his leg, drawing blood from the Sects delver for the first time.

As the Sect fighter tumbled to the ground, Matt lunged forward and chopped down, but his blow was caught by the glowing shield, and he took a counter strike to the knee where the man kicked out.

Matt wasn't sure if his opponent had expected his leg to break from the blow, but [Cracked Phantom Armor] didn't react as if it was anything but a normal blow, and the failed attack allowed him to cut down twice more at his assailant.

Neither blow landed on anything but the man's shield, but he was able to cut large gouges into it until, finally, the third blow disrupted a rune in the

item. In response, the shield glowed brighter and brighter.

Knowing what was about to happen, Matt backed up rapidly and had to roll to dodge the shield as the Sect fighter threw it at him.

As he came out of the roll, he nearly impaled the man, but apparently, his claws weren't just for the offensive, as he was able to grab Matt's blade and twist it out of his grasp.

Seeing that it was a futile cause, he let the blade go and grappled with his opponent.

They twisted and vied for the top position for a few moments, but Matt was able to gain the advantage.

The other man was a good ground fighter, but Matt was stronger, and after getting the mount, he started launching punch after punch on the man's face and upper chest.

His opponent seemed happy to trade blows while he relied on his magical armor, trying to cut through Matt's [Cracked Phantom Armor] with his claws that were glowing with flame once again.

Matt was growling in anger, as he had to direct all the spell's second layer into his abdomen to prevent himself from being disemboweled.

He could feel [Cracked Phantom Armor]'s mana cost slowly increasing with each blow and used the anger to fuel his attacks. The man's claw swipes did more damage than they should have, and it was forcing him to spend more and more mana on the spell.

Finally, something broke, and the stalemate ended.

Matt's punch broke the Sect man's armor enchantment, and his face exploded in a wash of blood as Matt drove a second, then a third blow down on the man.

He was going to finish him off when the man's claw finally broke through [Cracked Phantom Armor], sending a wash of agony through his chest.

Rolling free, Matt grabbed his nearby sword and cut out at the man, but before they could properly reengage, another team came out of a nearby ruin and attacked both of them.

Matt took a crossbow bolt in his already wounded leg, even through both his magical and physical armor, and felt it hit but not break the bone.

Seeing that now a second team had been attracted by the fighting, and hoping to get an easy cleanup, he cursed.

Striking out twice with [Mana Slash], he used the proper skill in his spirit this time, causing the skill to be larger and faster. Matt cut a massive [Fireball] in half and sent the team scurrying in two directions to dodge his strike.

Rushing the others just as the Sect man mirrored his action, Matt cast [Bulwark] to block a massive, glowing crossbow bolt that exploded on impact and destroyed his skill. Matt thrust his longsword forward, and right before the blow was about to be blocked by an upraised shield, he cast [Acrobat's Finesse] and [Willow in the Wind], using the increased proprioception and flexibility to twist his blade and change its point of impact.

Instead of being blocked by the woman's shield, his blade slithered past her shield and punched straight through her shoulder armor.

The crossbowman took the charge and launched a second bolt at Matt, and this time, it punched right through [Cracked Phantom Armor] and his physical armor. It was only stopped because he flared [Barbarian's Hide] at the last second.

The bolt was lodged in his chest when it exploded, sending Matt stumbling back.

With his three layers of defenses, the bolt was only half an inch inside him, and most of the explosion was outside of his body, thus washing over his armor harmlessly.

It still enraged Matt, and as he pulled his blade back into his hand with his Concept, he cast [Sword Twin] and allowed the two magical blades to dance out and harass his attackers. He had been saving a number of his strongest skills for these tougher fights against fellow delvers, as he assumed most people did.

While the shield woman blocked one of the blades, the crossbowman took the opportunity to shoot another bolt at Matt, but he was already moving.

For a brief second, he flared all his channeled self-buffs, giving him physical cultivation comparable to a Tier 14.

He was much faster than the man expected, placing the man's teammate between Matt and the crossbow, and denying him a clear shot.

As Matt drove his blade through the woman's less armored armpit, he raised his other hand and cast [Fireball] right past her head at the crossbowman.

Even as his teammate was impaled, the crossbow man dodged Matt's magical projectile and sent his own in return.

Matt knew that the man wanted to quickly finish him off so his teammate could be helped and possibly saved, but he didn't hesitate in casting [Mana Charge] while his blade was inside the woman.

The explosion of blood and gore didn't even cause the crossbowman to pause for a second, and he shot at Matt once more while rolling away from his return [Jolt].

While he was absorbing the Genesis Energy from the kill, Matt cast [Mana Slash] once more and slashed out, causing the man to roll again, but he predicted it and cast [Earth Spear] at where he would land.

His second attack pinned the man through the leg, but before he could finish him off, the Sect man from before jumped at him with extended claws glowing.

Side-stepping, Matt was about to cut out at the Sect man, but he saw that the real target was the pinned crossbowman.

The crossbowman cried out a name Matt recognized, though he was speaking the Republican language. “Blood Hand.” Dying apparently didn’t stop the man’s commitment to shooting Matt, as he fired a final bolt even as Blood Hand was tearing into his abdomen.

He said something else even as he died, but Matt didn’t know the language *that* well. He did recognize the name as one of the Sects’ up and coming Young Masters.

Long Zhiyuan was known for his brutal, bare handed fighting style, giving him the name “Blood Hand.” It explained the man’s penchant for claw attacks and their efficiency.

Matt should have put that together before, but the man was strong enough that he had little room to think, let alone go through the hundreds of Sect fighters that he had memorized before entering Minkalla. His pulling out a sword and shield was a surprise that hadn’t been noted in the dossier on Long Zhiyuan’s commonly used weapons. Most people were bringing out backup weapons and skills though, since it wouldn’t take all that long on this floor before Inner Spirit skills matched the cost of Outer Spirit ones.

Now that he had a name, Matt activated his AI for a second while flaring his Concept to nullify Minkalla’s suppression and get whatever information he had about Young Master Blood Hand.

The information was short and sweet, but it told him what he needed to know.

The man was incredibly powerful, despite coming from a low Tier Sect, and the Empire speculation said that he was going to make a splash in the future if he wasn’t killed.

Knowing the man was going to be an issue if left alone, Matt grit his teeth and cast a single [Cracked Mana Spear] at him, wanting to finish him off quickly. However, a portion of his robes stitching lifted, manifesting a spherical shield that blocked the spear pulse.

Long Zhiyuan gave him a surprised look at the fact that he made the defensive barrier appear.

Matt assumed that it was a life saving measure given to the man by the Sects to help counter a solo melee fighter's greatest weakness.

Seeing that ranged attacks would be futile, he cast [Cracked Mana Trap] at Long Zhiyuan's feet, hoping to bypass the shield, and armed it with fire mana. The resulting explosion engulfed both of them in billowing flames.

Matt rushed forward and nearly caught a spear in his chest but managed to deflect it with the flat of his blade, only allowing the spear point to skitter along his physical armor.

Long Zhiyuan sidestepped Matt's cast of [Jolt] while trying to stab him but ran into the wall that was Matt's longsword.

Other than his longsword, Matt knew spear techniques better than anything else. Beyond Luna and Kurt's training, he spent decades training with Liz, who used the weapon as her primary.

Long Zhiyuan was good with the weapon, but not anywhere close to Liz, allowing Matt to easily dance around the thrusting point of metal.

Seeing that it was ineffective, Long Zhiyuan retreated slightly, which allowed Matt to cast [Fireball] three times in rapid succession. He also noted the man's robe didn't protect him from the projectiles which he filed away.

With the small break, he inspected their battlefield and saw that they had attracted half a dozen teams over with their battle, and that theirs was just a small portion of what had become a complete free for all.

Liz, Susanne, and Aster were carving their way through the multiway battle with the help of a team from the Empire and one from the Guild; the three teams had joined together to defend themselves against the others.

Seeing that they were fine, and even starting to win their battles, Matt focused on his own.

A [Mana Spear] caught him in the chest and cracked his physical armor, but the only real damage was a flesh wound from the metal puncturing his under armor, so he ignored it.

Matt and Long Zhiyuan were beset by a third team, and even as they turned on the newcomers, they didn't stop attacking each other.

A mage tried to cast a debuff spell on Matt, but he dodged the projectile, and after spending most of his remaining mana cost of [Earth Manipulation], he grabbed the mage's ankle and pulled his leg under the ground.

He wasn't able to kill him, as the mage immediately fought the spell with his own version, but it gave Matt enough time to cut their melee fighter's leg off.

On the other side, Long Zhiyuan drove his clawed hand through one woman's throat, and after ripping her windpipe out, jumped over a blade

swipe with [Puddle Jumper].

Matt didn't pass up the opportunity and cast [Mana Bolt] at the man, but the sphere under his robe rose and blocked the attack once more confirming the robe was purpose built to counter neutral mana spells.

With a [Mana Slash], Matt cut down the third-party mage and finished off their melee fighter that he had just de-legged but took a cut to his forearm in return for the final blow.

He hurt all over, but he knew that he wouldn't have time to drink a healing potion before being forced back into the fray. Just as predicted, Long Zhiyuan finished ripping out the final melee fighter's heart, then turned and picked up one of the fallen delvers to use as a human shield. It was an unconventional tactic, and it allowed Blood Hand to get within grappling range of Matt, with only a few shallow cuts to show for it.

As they fell to the ground, Long Zhiyuan took the advantageous top position, and despite Matt's best efforts to block, he took a raking blow empowered with an air spell across the face. As soon as the strike connected, his face was set afire with pain and blood. Matt could tell that the man had been taught well, as he was locking space down with extreme force, preventing Matt from teleporting away. Though that must have been a particular focus for someone who excelled in short range combat.

In an effort to get Blood Hand to back away, Matt brought out a handful of sand from one of his spatial bags, then pulsed [Sand Manipulation] with as much mana as he could afford. Unfortunately, Blood Hand didn't attempt to contest the skill with the less efficient [Earth Manipulation], and instead recalled another shield to block the force of the blow. He let himself be pushed away, putting the backup shield away a second later.

Wishing he could still cast [Hail] and [Ice Manipulation] was a futile hope, but Matt knew there wasn't much else he could do to slow the Sect man down.

Swapping his blade over to his other enchantment configuration for a second, Matt blocked a [Mana Bolt] with [Mana Barrier] and returned the attack with a [Fireball] cast from the tip of his weapon.

The change in casting position caused Long Zhiyuan to react too slowly, and he caught the spell in the face.

Even Long Zhiyuan's robes couldn't block all of the spell, and half of his hair was set ablaze before he cast [Create Water].

For the first time in the fight, the two of them paused and just stared at each other.

Long Zhiyuan said something that Matt could only piece together as an acknowledgement of some kind, with his limited understanding of the language, and then he lunged at Matt once more.

Their fight was interrupted by an explosion that came from the main battle, and they both paused as they saw what looked like a sun being born in the center of the fight.

A ball of fire appeared and exploded before sucking all the expelled energy back into its center of gravity and reforming into an even larger mass.

The second explosion was larger than the first, and it caused anyone still able to retreat to do just that.

Matt and Long Zhiyuan separated as they scrambled to get away.

Even as he did so, Matt inspected the area for Liz and Aster, and found them running in the opposite direction along with Susanne, mostly unharmed.

The fifth explosion of the sun was seemingly the last, but while Matt stuck around, Long Zhiyuan and most others seemed to fully retreat.

Calling out to the retreating figure with what little of the Sect language he remembered he said, "Run you chicken noodle soup."

Or at least that was what he hoped he had said. He also made a mental note to *never* mention how much his Sect had slipped in front of Luna or he would never hear the end of it. He could do some self-study on his own time, and she would never know.

Once more entering the now blackened cave, Matt saw his team doing the same with a few others.

Everyone who stayed was Empire, Guild, or Corporations, and they immediately started looting the battlefield.

After collecting the spatial items and undamaged weapons and armor from the bodies that he and Long Zhiyuan had killed, Matt hobbled over to his team.

Pulling a healing potion out of his spatial ring, Matt downed it but could feel that it wasn't as effective as it could be. He was at the healing cooldown once more, and he needed time for his body to recover. Time to rest and recover was something he didn't have though, nor did he expect to get much any time soon. He would need to hang back and avoid as many fights with other cultivators as he could.

Pulling off his helm, he poured another healing potion over his still-bleeding face and held the flaps of skin in place even as Liz came over to him.

"What was that?" he asked, as she started wrapping his forehead with a compress.

Aster yipped something, but Susanne answered, “Some item. A Monsters Collective guy cracked it with his last breath. I don’t know where he got it, but it created that weird-ass sun thing.”

Before they were able to say anything else, a man walked over to them before dropping off a pile of loot.

“Here are items not devoured from the people you killed.”

Liz thanked him and introduced him to Matt, dipping in and out of the Guild’s main language. “Thanks Claude. White, Claude. Guild Hero, and good guy who helped us out in the melee there. Had our back when another team tried to ambush us.”

Matt, who now had his head wrapped, proffered a hand, which the man took.

To his surprise, Claude spoke the Empire language, even if it was a little hard to understand everything with his accent and poor grammar. “Nice to meet you. I not stand and watch ambush on allies. You interesting fight guy side.”

Matt scoffed. “You could call it that. Long Zhiyuan, better known as Young Master Blood Hand. He ambushed us as we were attacking the first Clan team. I didn’t realize who he was until another team called his name out as he killed them.”

Liz sat down and pulled up her shirt so Matt could start applying a disinfectant to the hole that had been punched through her abdomen.

It looked like an arrow had gone through cleanly, but it was always better to be careful, so he took his time to ensure that her internal organs weren’t punctured.

Liz said as he worked, “Is that what happened? We were wondering when you got attacked.”

“I’m not sure if he was ambushing the Clan team or us, but he has a way to hide from spiritual sense scans and has most of his Genesis Energy in a ring. Or I assume so, as when he killed people, he got their Genesis Energy like normal. Either way, he’s a strong fighter and excels in close range combat, just like the information said.”

Claude paused for a second before asking, “You start this?”

Susanne took that one. “Yeah, that was on me. That Clan team were on Winter’s side with us on the last floor, and they didn’t put much effort in aiming their attacks while I was getting attacked by a Death Squad.”

Her tone was challenging, and Claude clearly caught it as he nodded to her. “Fair. Just surprise. Most us avoiding attacking other teams—” The

Guilder paused for a minute while clearly searching for the word he wanted. Seeming to give up, he finished with, “Fear of this happening.”

Matt nodded as he pet Aster before starting to pull out the two crossbow bolts still inside his chest and leg. Liz was busy helping Susanne pull an arrow from her back, so he dealt with the easier injuries himself.

Claude lingered with them until the other teams left and then said, “Al. Please.”

Matt looked to the others, who nodded, and Matt activated his AI and translated for Claude as he said in the Guilds’ speech, “Watch out for the Federation. They have a few death squad teams of ten, and they are incredibly strong. I fought one on the third floor, where they were only Tier 9 while I was Tier 12 on Back to Basics, and I still struggled to kill them. They kill without hesitation or negotiation. I know of at least two teams running around, one of which is even more fearsome than the group I took care of personally or so the report of the lone survivor indicates.”

Matt met his team’s eyes and they saw the same surprise in their eyes.

Susanne said, “We encountered the same thing. Ten assholes who were more than happy to attack us on sight. They were strong, but we were able to kill them off easily enough.”

Claude shrugged. “Maybe it was the same group, but with all respect, I don’t think you would be walking right now if you had encountered the stronger group. Seeing two groups like that implies more, and they can’t all be so proficient. I handled a group on my own, but I had a three Tier advantage, and they were weakened and distracted. Just a warning.”

With that said, he nodded and walked out through the nearest cave entrance.

Matt took a little longer to get back on his feet, with the wounds he took during the fight taking more potions than normal to heal.

Now that they were alone, Liz took the opportunity to inspect Matt’s mask.

Thankfully, despite the cuts to his face, the enchantment was still intact, and with the helm, no one would have been able to see more than blood.

They still swapped out the mask for one of the backups they brought. The last thing they needed was someone to discover that they were Tier 11, let alone this deep in Minkalla, with everyone so packed in together.

When they were walking through the tunnels, Susanne said, “Thanks, guys. I know we didn’t expect it to snowball like that, but thank you for not pulling out or anything. I couldn’t have blamed you guys for not wanting to go for the initial fight, or not sticking around once it turned bad.” She paused before shaking her head. “Just thanks. Means a lot.”

Matt, limping alongside her, could see her discomfort in opening up, and took the opportunity to change the subject. “What did you guys get for loot?”

He hadn’t seen what Claude brought over, but they were a lot closer to the explosion, and he didn’t expect much to have survived.

Susanne, who had gone through it, shrugged. “Nothing stood out to me but a few houses. A lot of items, weapons, and other stuff. A few things might be natural treasures, but I can’t be sure with the quick look I gave it.”

Matt quickly parsed through what he was able to while on the move and agreed that there was nothing too noteworthy, though a full assessment would have to wait.

Going through his own loot, he found something *quite* interesting.

A single bottle of green liquid. Green liquid he had seen before.

It was a bottle of decay mana from the Fall General.

Pulling it out, he shook it. “Well, what do you know? It may take a while, but our rightful earnings always find their way back to us.”

Liz grabbed it and inspected it. “Nice. And they didn’t even open it. I might be able to make a poison potion out of this. I wasn’t going to pay the cost for this thing, but now that it fell into my lap, I won’t say no.”

They chatted until they found a way out of the area in a jungle ruin that still had monsters, and then dropped their house and took a break to recover from their wounds before pressing deeper.

As they sat around, Matt once more contemplated the idea that they might need to Tier up before they exited this floor.

It would make all these fights easier, and it would also slow them down as they would need more Genesis Energy to take the rewards.

But they would be safer.

Much safer.

Looking at all of them, Matt couldn’t help but notice their growing collection of injuries. Injuries that might force their hands.

Tiering up wouldn’t remove or even reduce their healing cooldown, but it would help them take less wounds.

He remembered Luna talking about Minkalla and his own attitude.

Matt didn’t think he was arrogant, but he had been confident before this, despite everything.

He now knew how much of a delusion that was.

Minkalla was dangerous, and a Tier disadvantage made that all the more apparent.

The monsters were one thing, and if it was just them, they would be fine, but the other delvers proved to be the real threat.

They, more than the planet itself, might prove what forced his group to Tier up.

He would rather Tier up than have his friends in danger.

That could be avoided if they could regain their lead on the pack, which is what they were trying to do and being Tier 11 they gathered Genesis Energy far faster than their competitors. That was an advantage he was loath to lose.

That was his last thought as the painkillers finally kicked in, and he fell asleep.

Matt rushed forward and punched the moose creature in the face, even as it tried to bite him in retaliation.

Dodging the monster's maw, he stabbed down at its eye with a dagger he summoned, and after finishing it off, he turned to see how his team was handling the rest of the smaller creatures that the boss had summoned.

Seeing they had everything under control, Matt was about to turn and dispel the reward distortion when he noticed a team standing in the tunnel they had come down to find this boss.

This new team wanting to leave through an already open exit wasn't in and of itself surprising, but their stances, lack of Genesis Energy fluctuations, and general demeanor told Matt that they had less than honorable intentions.

As he watched them watch him, he saw the moment that they decided Matt's team were easy targets and made their move.

All six people rushed out of the tunnel as Matt yelled, "Another one!"

That was all the others needed to hear, and they started slinging spells.

The fight was short, not because the team was weak, but because as soon as they put up a resistance with strong spells, the other team decided to pull back.

On any other floor, Matt might have chased them down or used [Cracked Mana Spear] to finish them off, but the increasing cost of his spells meant that his strongest channeled spells were now only as strong as a stiff breeze after being on the floor for so long.

The other team backed off, not wanting to get into a life-and-death battle right before they could leave the floor.

If they had been spent from their boss fight, the other team wouldn't have hesitated to push the attack, Matt was sure. But without easy kills, they

decided to move on. It wouldn't be the first, or even tenth team that had tried to ambush them, hoping they were weak from prolonged skill usage on this floor.

How the team got this far with so little Genesis Energy was a mystery, and Matt didn't get the feeling that they were hiding most of their Genesis Energy in rings, as his team was.

Getting stuck on the third level with no Genesis Energy was a hard place to find oneself in, being faced with the choice of facing down the incoming waves of slower delvers or skipping out on a valuable reward. Though, the thought occurred to him that maybe they actually *had* been lucky, and someone let them surrender at the cost of all of their Genesis Energy, which was why they were now so desperate.

Matt's team had left other Empire delvers alone, but maybe some people took a middle ground between killing their fellow citizens and mutual ceasefire.

They, on the other hand, were flush with Genesis Energy after their battle on the second level of this floor and had been able to get ahead of most of the pack with that boost.

As Aster looted the dissolving boss, Matt and Liz guarded their rear as the four of them walked into the distortion and were finally able to leave the floor.

When Minkalla saw that he had more than enough Genesis Energy to take the floor theme challenge and offered it to him, Matt agreed with a lethargic sigh.

The floor itself was a slog, and its challenge was no different.

For this test, they needed to fight their way through waves of monsters. That, in and of itself, wasn't a difficult challenge, and wouldn't have been up to Minkalla's standards. But, like always, there was a catch.

During the test, they were put into false bodies, and they would need to kill monsters for extremely breakable gear and talisman-like spells, color-coded for quality. As this was the fifth floor, he would need to clear the twenty-fifth wave to maximize his reward for this challenge and get the full reward of three skill slots in his Core spirit, fifteen Inner slots, and forty Outer skill slots.

Gaining control of his body, Matt moved his arms and legs to test the new body and found that this one was generally the same as his own, at least physically. He was a bit slower and weaker than normal, and his Talent and mana pool seemed to be wholly gone, but he knew that it was all just part of the challenge.

Inspecting his surroundings, Matt found himself inside a valley with steep walls that he knew would be impassable, but what caught his attention were the five towers lit with what looked like small fires at their peaks. One piece of gold-quality loot per boss wave, as expected.

Even as a mental countdown appeared in his mind, telling him he had five minutes until the first wave of enemies, he ran forward and looked for monsters to kill.

The waves would start small but grow over time, and he knew there would be random, lone monsters he could kill for equipment that would be wandering around the area. If he could find and kill any of them, he would be in a much better position for the first wave.

Thankfully, his luck was good, and a lone kobold stood around a smoldering fireplace, as if in a daze.

Scooping up a rock, Matt bashed the small monster on the head once, then twice, but as his weapon impacted the monster for the second time, it shattered in an explosion of motes of light. The item's destruction wasn't dangerous or a surprise, but it was inconvenient as the monster wasn't quite dead yet.

Even as the kobold swiped at him, Matt stepped backward, keeping out of its range, before stomping down at the monster's overextended leg. Bone snapped and the monster was sent stumbling backward, which allowed Matt to grab a larger, head-sized rock and awkwardly drop it on the monster's head.

As it died, its body faded away and was replaced with a pair of gloves that had spikes on the knuckles.

The instant Matt touched them, they appeared on his hand, and he took off running toward the nearest tower. He frantically searched for more monsters to kill before the waves of monsters started spawning.

He was able to find and stomp another kobold to death quickly, and this one dropped an iron-plated, leather chest piece. Fortunately, putting armor on quickly wasn't a part of the challenge, and the chest piece appeared on his body with not a second to spare before the countdown hit zero.

Not bothering to run anymore, Matt stayed in the clearing and listened to the sounds around him.

All he heard was normal birds chirping and the rustling of the forest as branches moved from the wind.

Nothing out of the ordinary.

At least, not until he heard the sounds of crashing from his left.

Turning that way, he found half a dozen goblins appearing out of nowhere from inside the nearby trees.

They seemed to phase into reality as if walking through water or a heat haze.

That wasn't an ideal way for the first wave to start, but it was random, and his luck couldn't always be good. But still, he would much rather have had the monsters appear out of noisy portals, or from burrowing out of the ground.

Not having time to complain any further, Matt ran to the left, stretching the line of monsters out to give him time to analyze their equipment.

Three out of the six were armed with only small daggers, while the remaining three had a bow and two short spears, possibly for throwing.

Thankfully, the archer was less than skilled, and Matt could read where they were going to fire well ahead of time. He ducked the first shot while punching the first waist-high goblin in the face with his spiked gauntlets.

The monster's face exploded in a shower of gore, and even before the monster hit the floor, it was already dissolving into a mass of light.

Seeing how strong the weapons actually were, Matt held his ground and killed the next two goblins with two more fast, straight jabs.

Before he was able to pick up their loot, he was forced to sidestep yet another arrow as it almost hit him.

The two spear wielders tried to use their range advantage, but Matt was twice their height and was easily able to grab their spears behind the sharpened blades and disarm them.

To his disappointment, the spears vanished as soon as he tried to use them, but with no weapons of their own, he was easily able to punch one of the goblins to death, and then use the second one as a shield as he ran down the archer.

Despite the archer's best efforts, he still managed to pulverize its head in a single blow, which then retrIGGERED the mental countdown of five minutes.

Matt also had the idea that he was now able to leave the challenge at any point, so long as he wasn't in a fight.

He firmly rejected that idea, and instead grabbed the items that dropped from the goblins.

Not every monster had a drop, but half of them did, and he was grateful that the archer was one of the goblins that dropped something.

He was less excited when it appeared to be a bow with a dozen arrows, as he was barely a decent archer at the best of times, but he still accepted the bow with a mental command.

The other two drops were more useful, at least to him. The first was a dagger that seemed to be made of decent steel, and the second was a pair of chainmail trousers that felt more durable than the chest plate he had recovered earlier.

As he took off toward the tower once more, he inspected his spiked gloves.

They had obvious cracks on their surface that made them seem ready to break in a few more blows. He suspected three to five, but he couldn't be sure without actually punching something, which he wasn't willing to test on anything but a monster.

The second wave came out before he was able to reach the tower, but he was able to repeat his earlier tactic of leading the goblins away from their spawn area to kill them one by one.

There were twice as many goblins this time, and the two archers made things difficult, but he was able to dodge most of their shots while killing the melee monsters.

As it turned out, the gloves had four more uses in them before they shattered into motes of light, which forced him to use the dagger to finish off the final two goblins armed with similar weapons.

The spear wielders were a more difficult problem now that there were four of them, as they tried to surround him anytime they got close. A good strategy on their part, as it forced Matt to stand and take three blows to his back while dealing with the main group of goblins.

Thankfully, his armor held up nicely and blocked the weapons from injuring him.

Quickly dispatching the two remaining goblins, he ran down the archers and finished them off, despite taking an arrow to the chest that made the cracks on his armor visible and concerning.

With the final monster dead and with five minutes left to recover, he ran back to where he killed the first goblins and collected the items they dropped.

Another chest armor similar to the one he was wearing appeared in his mind, but vanished into whatever holding mechanic the test had, and another dagger easily went away as well. What gave him pause was the item, or rather the skill, that one of the spear wielding goblins dropped.

Mentally inspecting it gave him a description, and it seemed to be a simple lightning spell. It wasn't quite [Jolt], [Bolt], or even [Arc], but something in between. He also knew that he'd get exactly three uses out of the spell before it too fell apart.

Continuing to run toward the tower, Matt quickly climbed the winding stairs to reach the top, where he gratefully picked up a shining, golden ball of

light.

As the item inside appeared in his mind, Matt nodded. A shield wasn't his ideal choice, but he wasn't going to complain.

Gold-quality loot, though even more random than most of the drops the monsters gave, were substantially more durable than anything else and was enchanted as well, making them invaluable for doing well on the test.

A quick inspection told Matt that this shield had the ability to reflect projectiles back at the attacker, which would come in handy with the growing number of archers that this set of waves was sending his way.

Equipping the shield, he exited the slowly fading tower and waited for the next wave as the final few seconds ticked by. He didn't bother to set off toward the monsters, since he was in a nice open field with dense trees nearby, offering good cover if he needed it.

The third wave consisted of the same number of goblins as the last wave, thankfully, but they were instead better equipped than their previous counterparts.

However, with his own upgrades, Matt had no problems in killing them, though both his current armor and dagger fragmented into motes of light in the process. His armor had been replaced instantly by the other set he'd picked up, and fortunately the dagger didn't break until he was finishing off the final archer.

As he picked over the loot, Matt found and instantly equipped a spear to match with his shield and was pleasantly surprised to find an archery skill in the drops. It would increase the penetrative power of six shots, which was useful with the monsters now appearing with armor.

He was almost to the second tower when the fifth wave came out of the water like barrier.

Every five waves was a much harder wave, and Matt expected to spend most of his spells and gear taking this one down.

At first, two dozen goblins came out of the water like apparitions, and instead of trying to fight them one by one, Matt activated the lightning spell he had received. A bolt of lightning as thick as his arm lanced from his arm, bouncing between the armored goblins like they were lightning rods.

The spell started out strong enough to instantly kill the first six goblins, but it only wounded the final six. Even then, Matt was quite happy with the result. He didn't recast the spell but instead rushed forward with his shield raised high, killing the goblins still standing with his spear.

He was nearly done with the goblins when the boss appeared. A ten-foot ogre emerged from thin air and instantly sprinted at him. Disengaging from

the goblins he was fighting, Matt turned and ran as fast as he could, wanting to get as much distance as possible.

Seeing the monster crossing the distance a little too fast for his liking, Matt cast his lightning spell once more at the unarmored monster.

The spell still bounced from the ogre to the goblins, but it didn't kill the ogre, only angering it instead.

Once Matt got far enough away, he summoned his bow and cast his empowering shot spell while pulling back his arrow.

If he were a better archer, he would have gone for a headshot, but with his mediocre skills, he only aimed for center mass. And the ogre helped by being a massive target.

His first arrow blasted a hole the size of his fist right through its lower abdomen, while the second hit something vital in its upper chest, ending its life.

A silver drop appeared in the place of its body, but Matt wasn't able to pick it up, as the small horde of goblins weren't too far behind them.

Swapping back to his spear and shield, he was able to kill the remaining monsters, but destroyed his spear on the second to last goblin, which forced him to end the final archer's life with a dagger.

With ten minutes between this wave and the next, Matt collected the gear and sorted it.

He got two new spears made out of better materials, a full set of armor made from plaited leather, a helmet, and a pair of boots that the ogre dropped, which increased his running speed by half at the cost of constant degradation.

As for spells, two of the goblins dropped a mana weapon spell, which would cover his weapons in mana, increasing the damage they dealt for ten blows while strengthening them against harm. Sadly, these spells were single cast, but he had received two of them, which made up for it.

Finally, he got a fairly standard [Fireball]-like spell that could be cast five times before crumbling.

Needing to test the boots, he equipped them and found that his entire lower body seemed faster than before, without throwing off his sense of timing or balance.

Putting the boots away, he ran toward the tower and claimed his reward.

Laughing, he equipped the helmet that would create a burst of flames anytime he killed an opponent.

Not the longsword he hoped for but quite a strong item.

The sixth wave came out of the air like before, but instead of goblins, a half-dozen flying imps appeared and started dropping small, bomb-like vials of liquid that exploded in noxious green gas wherever they landed.

Matt, with his less than stellar skill with archery, would have had a hard time with the flying enemies. They seemed to only have a single bomb each, however, and could only engage him in melee afterwards. Though the bombs were a threat, each imp was a pitiful challenge when he could directly strike it. A lucky shot finished the first wave of imps early by hitting one in the air, causing its bomb to kill its nearby friend.

As Matt looted them, he found that they dropped interesting items.

One dropped a cloak that would allow him to hover in the air for a few seconds, and a second dropped a spell similar to their bombs, that would create an explosion and small area of dangerous gas. With only two uses, Matt put it away in his metaphorical pocket and kept moving to the next tower.

He was able to get the next golden drop before the ninth wave.

Finally, a gold-quality spell.

The spell was similar to [Cracked Mana Trap] in that it created a mine-like area that would explode when an enemy stepped on it. But unlike the other spells, it didn't have a set number of uses. Rather, it could only be used once per wave.

Still, it was incredibly useful for Matt, who had taken to kiting the monsters around.

As the tenth wave came out with a mix of flying imps and goblins, Matt saved his new spell and relied on the imp spell to kill the first few goblins, and created an area of gas that caused the survivors to choke and sputter.

The ogre that came out shortly after was better equipped with a club and hide armor, but that wasn't what caught his attention.

No, that was the werewolf-like creature that rushed out of the area like an arrow directly at him.

Casting the trap spell, Matt retreated and allowed the monster to run over it. The werewolf was sent flying, but as it got to its feet, with fur singed and one arm missing, Matt raised his shield and cast the weapon enchantment on his spear while he rushed the monster.

Even his golden shield started to show signs of cracking as it blocked the werewolf's blows, but Matt was able to finish it off before the remaining monsters recovered from the gas, which he killed with the last of his bow shots.

The next wave consisted of goblins, imps, and a new monster that resembled something like a floating banana that shot various spells at him. As

Matt avoided a stream of attacks, he realized that he now possessed a disgusting combination of items.

The trap spell didn't always kill the enemies it hit, except for smaller and weaker ones, like the goblins. Those kills then activated the helmet enchantment, whose detonation took out more of the monsters and, more often than not, set off a chain explosion that killed most of the weaker monsters for him.

And without the cannon fodder, he was easily able to kill the stragglers and the occasional ogre or werewolf that survived both attacks.

His fourth golden loot was a throwing axe which he could recall, while his fifth was a blanket that made him hard to detect.

That final one never got used, as Matt was more than happy to kill his way through the waves as fast as possible.

With his method perfected, he used his extra spells to finish off any of the survivors.

As the twenty fifth wave ended with his standing victorious over a giant's body, he was booted out of the challenge and into the safe room between floors.

There, he found hundreds of teams scattered around the area, which massively increased the space of the safe room. Though, it still didn't hold a candle to the size of the floor safe room.

Thankfully, it seemed like he was the first one to exit, which he considered a good sign. With his trap spell, he had expected nothing less.

He had beaten the challenge perfectly and relatively quickly, with his abuse of his golden drops, which meant that the others should be able to earn the top reward as well.

Matt worried about Aster a little, but knew that she would be fine, as they had practiced for this floor. Even with her body being small and not ideal for combat, she would succeed as long as she got a spell or two early and took her time.

After he scanned the area for anyone he knew to check in with, but finding no one, he set his house down in an out-of-the-way location and inspected his own spirit.

He had been warned about what was coming, and knew it wasn't going to be pleasant.

Once he started inspecting the portion of his spirit where his skills sat, he found a small bubble of Genesis Energy nestled next to his Core skills, waiting for him to activate it.

Sticking a mouth guard between his teeth, he touched it and felt his spirit stretch and grow like a balloon, rapidly filling with air.

As he bit down and screamed, he involuntarily flexed his muscles so hard, he felt his bones creak and fingers pop.

It wasn't like any kind of pain he had experienced before. His spirit was expanding, but it felt like his very person was being ripped apart and torn to shreds before being reassembled and stretched back out in a vicious cycle of pain.

When it finally ended, he found only two minutes had gone by. It felt like an eternity, but the reward had done its job.

His spirit was larger than before, and he could see where he had space for three new Core skill slots, along with fifteen Inner slots and forty Outer.

With the harvest of skills they had earned in Minkalla so far, Matt was excited to start absorbing new skills. Waiting could also be good practice for if the next floor was New Growth, but it could just as easily backfire if it was World of Cardboard. The needle overall tipped *slightly* toward it being better to absorb skills ahead of time, but he'd need to wait until his spirit settled down in any case. The strain was so bad he felt physically cold and couldn't stop his limbs from shaking.

This strain felt worse than it had when he pushed [Cracked Mana Spear] too hard multiple times in a row.

Susanne came out fifteen minutes after Matt did and found him nursing a cup of tea as he ran his freshly usable healing spells.

Seeing him curled around the cup in his hands, she asked, "It's that bad?"

"Worse than Luna said it would be."

She plopped down next to him without a word, and he could feel her spirit expand and contract repeatedly for a few minutes.

Feeling slightly better, he boiled water and made her a cup of coffee, which she gratefully curled around in a mirror of what he did not moments ago.

Through chattering teeth, she said, "Fuck that. I'd rather go another ten rounds with the troll."

Together, they suffered in silence until Liz came in and joined them in their misery.

Aster was the last to come out, a full two hours after Matt had, but she was in high spirits until she saw the three of them still recovering.

Her tail drooped as she said, "You know what? Maybe I'll wait to take this reward for a couple years. I have plenty of skill slots anyway."

Matt scooped her up, and after wrapping her in a blanket to comfort her when she experienced the spirit strain, said, “It makes you feel super cold. Like spiritually cold. I’d bet you won’t even feel it.”

Burrito Aster tried to wag her tail as she readily agreed. “Oh, that sounds great! I had so much fun in that challenge. I was in a city, and between rounds, I was able to raid a bunch of ice cream stands, it was *so good*. I—” Aster twitched a few times until it turned into a vibration. “This feels awful. I should have waited.”

Matt felt for his bond, but just kept her in the blanket, even as he felt the fibers start to freeze over. Though, he put her down when he started to get chills as well.

Aster, at least, wasn’t bothered by the coldness the spiritual strain gave her. Apparently, she actually liked the feeling despite it being uncomfortable. She thought she might be able to replicate it when her control over ice was stronger.

The four of them spent the rest of the day recovering from their spiritual strain by abusing Matt and his unlimited mana to recover from their physical injuries as much as possible. Not being able to run [Endurance] at a high rate almost constantly made fights truly exhausting, especially when they were coming on as quickly and often as they had on the previous floor. It may not have done too much, but using his self-healing spells did work to lower his healing cooldown a degree, and every bit counted.

While they had some downtime in a relatively secure area, they took the time to look through the growing pile of loot they had accrued. It was an unfortunate fact that many of the best skills and natural treasures got used shortly after being found, so the items taken from other delvers were typically worse than what could be found from Minkalla directly. But quantity had a quality all its own.

Not everyone had a *need* for any given valuable item at the moment they picked it up. A fire mage wouldn’t absorb even the best water skill or natural treasure if they could trade it for something that better fit their existing abilities once they left Minkalla.

After the fifth floor, upgrade orbs were one of the most valuable things that one could find with some regularity in Minkalla, but they were also useful for pretty much anyone. Luna had even told them that if they did find an upgrade orb, they were to use it as soon as possible. The improved combat ability from even a single upgraded skill would outweigh any opportunity cost of using it later, if they could leverage it to get deeper into Minkalla before Tiering up. At this point, it was quite possible that a few of the people that

Matt's team had killed found an upgrade orb earlier in their delve and used it on themselves.

In terms of more direct monetary rewards, Matt was getting somewhat numb to it all. The three shards of [Directed Heal] would be worth a substantial amount when sold, alongside the twenty or so shards of undirected healing spells, and suite of Tier 14 Manipulation skills. As a joke, Matt started making tiny buckets for each *type* of skill that they had, with a full fifty-five [Fireball] shards in the fullest bucket, followed closely by [Create Water]. The normal buckets for classes of Tier 14 skills they had no plan on using were less full, but more than respectable.

That was all in addition to the items, materials, natural treasures, houses, and innumerable other odds and ends that their liaison April would be identifying and selling for them after leaving Minkalla. While Matt and his friends were fighting their own battles, April prepared for war at one of the inter-Power auctions that occurred periodically through each of Minkalla's cycles. That phrasing was apparently not entirely figurative; people did die on occasion.

Susanne elected to fill out her manipulation skills somewhat, though not nearly to the same degree as Matt because she previously only had [Air Manipulation]. The manipulation skills for fire, water, earth, and metal would give her a greater degree of flexibility once she had some practice with them, and they had endless mundane uses that really couldn't be overstated. She also finally relented on taking [Ice Manipulation] and [Create Ice] for herself, after Aster's many comments on the subject.

Matt, on the other hand, chose [Fire Weapon] as another skill that he would be adding to his spirit in short order. Liz had used the skill in her Torch persona but had a hard time justifying the mana cost when fighting up four Tiers. Channeling mana to encase his weapon in fire was a simple and effective way of improving his damage potential, though he was hoping for one of the more potent variants in the same family of skills, one that would work with his Courtly Warfare boon more.

[Air Weapon] was somewhat redundant with [Sword Twin]'s enhanced sharpness abilities, though he'd have to give it careful consideration before absorbing it, nonetheless. Even with a newly expanded spirit, Matt could *benefit* from thousands more skills than he could ever fit in his spirit.

He also picked out a [Mage Hand] shard, recalling Harper's advice about learning telekinesis, but he likely wouldn't absorb it until after they left Minkalla. It was intensely useful, but required a fair bit of practice before it could be used effectively in combat, and Matt needed to prioritize 'not dying'

at the moment. Or, more realistically, he needed to prioritize ‘not being forced to Tier up,’ but the steps lined up well enough.

Liz ended up with a pair of very fetching boots enchanted with [Air Slide], letting her slide around flat terrain like she was on ice. It gave her a level of unpredictability in a fight, similar to Concept flight, with much less ability to be disrupted.

From the moose boss itself, Liz got the Tier 20 skill [Skewer], which paired extremely nicely with a [Return Weapon] she had been holding onto. [Skewer] was a straightforward spear or javelin skill which let the user launch their weapon at a positively enormous speed, with a degree of added homing and durability for the weapon to survive the impact.

Matt hadn’t been too impressed until he watched a video of a Tier 20 blow a hole as wide as Matt’s torso through a same Tier dragon from thirty miles away. *After* breaking through two layers of shielding. It was a railgun of a skill, if a bit too slow and predictable at close range, and the hope was it would make it through Liz’s skill conversion without changing too much.

[Return Weapon] was a mainstay of archers everywhere. Reserving some mana would tag a weapon, and teleport it back to the caster when the mana was unreserved, with the cost scaling with estimated distance to teleport. Archers needed to modify the skill to better apply to multiple smaller weapons, but Liz could use it straight away, and was combat-usable even in her outer spirit.

She would likely be using some of their many looted spears for ranged battle until it had settled in her spirit. Matt wanted the skill as backup for his sword, but [Crescent Sweep] was better suited for killing monsters than people anyway, and they didn’t typically try to steal weapons.

Aster found [Brittle Cold], a debuff skill that sapped durability from a person’s skills, making their skills easier to break, along with making Concept powers slightly more vulnerable. The second portion wasn’t quite as strong as the skill portion, but in a close fight, it could quite easily make the difference. She’d also ended up with the singular [Side Slide] skill shard they’d found, which Matt had initially tried to claim for himself. However, she’d eventually won that argument on the basis that he already *had* a way to teleport himself, whereas she had nothing.

Entering the next floor, they found themselves in a fog-covered field with limited visibility and spiritual range, but almost immediately recognized the people they were standing across from.

Themselves.

Wispy versions of the four of them stood in the mist and almost immediately attacked them.

A sixth floor Folded Reflections.

Matt couldn't be happier.

Alvin looked at the cluster of buffalo with various elemental horns and contemplated how he could kill them.

Things had *changed*.

His team had earned enough Genesis Energy on the fourth floor, but with his repeated injuries and captures, he had been stuck in a rut. If not for those blasted extortionists taking all his Genesis Energy for a single potion, he could have left with them, but no.

They had left him.

If that had been the only problem, it wouldn't have been an impossible rut to get himself out of, but when his team up and vanished one day, that rut became more of a canyon.

So, he decided to risk it and head deeper into Minkalla.

It was always a risk to head further in, where the planet got smaller and the people were closer together, but the monsters gave more Genesis Energy per kill as well. That combined with the exit reward not scaling meant he could, in theory, get away with a few dozen kills. Then, he'd just have to find cleared areas to push through the three levels of the next floor and exit without too much fighting.

Except he once again had awful luck.

Taxing Skills was never a good floor but, considering he had been robbed of most of his belongings besides his weapons and armor, he was faced with an issue.

How was he supposed to kill monsters this tough and durable?

If this was a rift, he would simply attack one of them at the edge and kite around them until he could whittle it down. But this was Minkalla, and things were never that easy. The monsters here weren't necessarily different, but

these were herd creatures, and the first time he had tried to split the group, the entire pack had chased him down.

He had been forced to exit into the adjoining ruin to get them to break off the chase.

That tendency to group up and attack also explained why those monsters, in particular, weren't killed like everything else on this floor.

Despite this floor being the antithesis to large scale magic, Alvin couldn't walk ten feet without seeing the signs of battle.

Large swaths of forests were burned or uprooted, deep pits littered the landscape, slowly filling with water, and in one particularly noteworthy area, a large portion of a desert was glassed.

Whatever fire mage thought it was worthwhile to spend that much mana on a floor that made skills more expensive with each cast was either desperate, or dumb.

Either way, Alvin avoided that ruin in case the monsters that would eventually respawn were stronger than the average.

So, he pushed on and eventually found the ruin with the buffalo.

As far as he could tell, it was the only ruin without most of its monsters killed off.

And he didn't know if he would be able to find enough monsters to satisfy his Genesis Energy needs without killing at least some of the buffalo.

He estimated that he was about eighty percent of the way to his goal, after a long, *long* time spent killing Fae, but the creatures here were so few and far between, he'd be hard-pressed to close the gap.

Sighing, he decided against trying to fight the buffalo, and instead decided to look around for the few monsters that would have respawned in the meantime.

While Minkalla would boot him out at the end of the cycle, he had, at a minimum, four more years before the earliest time the cycle could end, so he had time.

As someone over a thousand years old, he could be patient.

Even when he didn't want to be.

It took him almost six weeks, but he found an out-of-the-way ruin only accessible by a single entrance, next to a lava-filled ruin which few people were likely to stumble upon by accident.

Better yet, the monsters in the ruin were a physically strong, but magically weak type of zombie, which meant he could fight them without resorting to skills. After more than a year of slow farming as the monsters respawned, he

slowly gathered up Genesis Energy to the point where he was halfway to his goal.

If he ventured out of the undead ruin, he could have gathered more Genesis Energy faster, but he knew he still needed to leave the floor and might need to cast spells during that time to beat some of the bosses on each level, so chose the slower-but-safer method.

Even with nobody around to hear him, he complained to the thin air about the slow respawn rate, averaging just under a single monster per day.

Still, it was safer than remaining on the fourth floor and risking getting captured once again.

Three years after he entered the fifth floor, he finally felt the Genesis Energy in his spirit reach the point he could take the fourth floor exit reward. It actually surprised him as the information jolted him from the stupor he had fallen into in the last few years.

Packing up his things, he pulled out his flying sword and immediately flew out of the ruin and through the nearest two, to find a boss rift he had found cleared when he was exploring.

Thankfully, the distortion was still there, and he entered it without hesitating.

He didn't care about rewards or skills. He just wanted his Concept to break through to Tier 15.

When he reached the third level of the floor, he found a team battling a ghost like boss and waited a respectful distance as they finished the boss off. When he was sure they had gone through the distortion, he followed up and walked into the distortion as well.

He wasn't even given the opportunity to take the floor challenge as he didn't have enough Genesis Energy, but he didn't care.

The instant he appeared in the safe room, he readied his shield for an attack that never came.

Spreading out his spiritual sense and looking with eyes, he saw that most everyone was keeping to themselves, and was either wounded and recovering, or bartering with the trader who had set up shop.

Ignoring it all, he ran at the crystal pillar in the center of the room.

Alvin almost didn't believe it when his finger touched the pillar, and he was given the option to exit or head deeper.

He had expected someone to attack him or try and rob him, despite no one being near enough to do so.

As he disappeared, he felt a list of his passed floor rewards being offered and let out a breath, seeing he both had access to and could afford the floor

four reward.

Mentally selecting it, he felt the Genesis Energy he had painstakingly gathered rush and swirl into his cultivation cores, filling and then shattering the bottled Concept he had used to break through to Tier 10 so many years ago.

Even as the Genesis Energy settled into place, he was given the option to choose his exit destination, and with a feeling of relief he never knew he could feel, selected the Empire's moon.

Appearing on a random street, he knelt and let out a sound that was somewhere between a cry and scream, venting the last thousand years of frustration.

With a thought, he pulled out an essence stone and absorbed the energy to his spirit and immediately crunched with it, breaking through to Tier 15.

Even as his AI was inundated with offers from celebration halls, he just took a moment to take everything in.

He was immortal.

He had all the time in the world.

Looking at his hand that had started to show the signs of wrinkles and age he was keenly aware of despite his gauntlets, he threw his head back and started to laugh.

Valerie clenched her armor-covered fist and punched the orc in the face.

Metal met flesh, and the flesh of the creature exploded.

Taxing Skills was one of the five most annoying floors for a Paladin candidate, thanks to the block on [AI] usage, but she knew what was important, and it wasn't rushing ahead and killing everything for Genesis Energy.

Oh, the Genesis Energy was important, vital, even. But she wasn't gathering it for the rewards, even though she took each one from the floors she passed.

As a Tier 12, they weren't so expensive and were quite useful.

But her entire purpose of entering Minkalla was to have the set of armor protecting her bind to her as a growth item, which had thankfully been forced by the fourth floor reward.

The Paladins were one of the most elite forces the Corporations had to offer. While the Chosen were their answer to the Sect's Young Masters and the

Monster Collective's Alphas, the Paladins were an entirely separate military unit based on two extremely valuable resources.

The first and most obvious of the two was the hyper-advanced magitech power armor she wore almost like a second skin. It was a wonder of modern engineering, handcrafted by entire teams of the greatest crafters the Corporations had, up to and sometimes including CEO JR himself, and formed entirely from the very best natural treasures, Talent-made materials and fused into a single, beautiful and cohesive whole.

The second resource were the remnants of a Talented crafter who Ascended ages ago that could create rechargeable custom mana stones, with each able to hold an insane amount of mana for their size. They were integral to the function of the armors at higher Tiers, when they could burn upward of *millions* of mana every second.

She didn't have any of those crystals with her, of course. Not only were they worth far more than everything else in the suit *combined*, which already cost exa-credits to produce, but they failed the single most important requirement for the entire suit.

Everything had to be below Tier 15.

The goal of the armor, after all, was to bind to someone and turn into a growth item.

And as it was a single item by design, if it did bind, it would bind as a whole.

Valerie had trained for nearly five hundred years before getting this chance, and she wasn't going to squander it.

She wasn't the first pilot of this particular suit. Her power armor had been into Minkalla twice before her entrance and had been said to be outright cursed from a *double* failure to bond. But Valerie had been the one to bind with it. Even if she hadn't gotten a floor that automatically bound it to her, she was sure it would have happened anyway.

From the moment she was encased in the seven-foot-tall armor system, she knew they were destined to work together.

Using her shield, she blocked the next blow and drove her vibro knife through the orc's armor.

Stepping out and down, she shattered another's leg before firing her mana cannons at the remaining two creatures.

She could have killed all the orcs from a distance, but melee combat had shown a small but historically noticeable tendency to increase the chance of binding to the power armor.

When the final orc fell and started to dissolve, she checked her readout and saw that she only had seven percent mana left and signaled the team behind her to retreat.

Her handlers.

Her *power armor's* protectors.

They would watch her kill herself in combat, but the second she died, they would immediately move in and claim the power armor.

It was far too valuable to allow Minkalla to absorb it, after all.

She was disposable.

Or at least, she was until she had bound with the armor.

Now that that had happened, she had become one of the elite Paladins, and that was a status few could match.

Even knowing that and experiencing it for the first three floors, she wouldn't have wanted them to step in and save her.

More than one of the Paladins had their armor bind right at their moment of crisis, and she had been willing to take that risk as well.

If she'd been the *third* Paladin Cadet to fail to bond to this armor, she wasn't entirely sure what would happen to the suit. But she personally would have been kicked out of the program, and with how much of her life she'd poured into the organization, she would likely never recover from that.

As she retreated to her handlers, she opened her chest and took the straw in her mouth, then started taking large gulps of the protein smoothie. The suit was built for an immortal, so it didn't carry anything so mundane as food for the pilot, and frankly Kepler made pretty good blends of the stuff.

At the same time, the mechanics in the group started inspecting the suit, to make sure its self-repair functions were still working and integrated well after its bonding.

Valerie herself had nothing on her; she couldn't if they wanted to increase the odds of the armor binding. And despite the armor already becoming a growth item, they didn't change their plans mid delve.

Looking at Darren, the Tier 14 leader of the team, she asked, "How are things looking?"

Not glancing up from his pad, the man nodded slightly. "Good. Things seem to be stabilizing. Your integration with the armor has risen to seventy three percent."

Hearing that, Valerie clenched her fist. "Fucking finally."

Darren looked up and shot her an evil smirk. "Don't get too excited. That's dead average for someone who is bound with an item because of a floor

reward. Good, but you'll need to work harder to fully integrate. You still have potential to grow, don't squander your time."

"I know the stats, but it feels so much higher than the seventy percent mark."

Pausing, she watched the other mechanics start to channel the tens of thousands of mana to refill her armor's reserves and asked, "What's up ahead?"

"Giant birds. Lightning and fire mostly."

Despite that being a less than ideal combination, Valerie nodded. "I'm going to fight them."

Darren looked up, and she could see the sigh he restrained. "That is not recommended. It's a non-optimal match up with the floor theme."

Valerie disagreed. "We can do it."

Darren didn't argue further.

Valerie was already a full member of the Paladins, which meant she was officially in command.

While he was technically a higher rank than her, his responsibility and authority started and ended with her power armor. So long as she wasn't deliberately risking her power armor's recoverability, she had the authority to pick and choose her engagements. And even that small technicality of control over her vanished now that she was no longer a cadet and was bound to the armor system.

Despite the readings only indicating a small increase in synchronization, she felt it in her bones.

The two of them were merging.

Becoming one entity.

Binding in more than just in spirit.

"I'm taking the fight."

And that was the end of that discussion.

"Our reports indicate the monsters are faster than average but have slightly weaker bodies in compensation. Also, their elemental attacks are mostly based around their wings and claws. You are being officially warned to retreat at thirty percent mana remaining, at a minimum, to ensure damage stays within repairable parameters."

That last bit was said in his official capacity, and she responded in an equally official manner. "Understood. Thirty percent."

As the mechanics finished their work, she shut her opening and readied herself to engage with her new enemies.

Darren then said the same thing he had hundreds of times before. “Bind or die, cadet.”

Not bothering to send the response back through her AI, she said to herself. “I chose to bind.”

The call and response were as old as the Paladins themselves and was another part of the superstitions regarding the process. Just because she had already bound to the armor didn’t mean she was finished. She needed additional growth item floors if she wanted to reach the heights she was aiming for.

Better to not jinx it.

With a full charge of mana, she activated her thrusters and flying enchantments, taking off with a burst of speed.

She could fly with just her Concept, but she felt that it wasn’t the right course of action when she was trying to deepen her tie with the armor.

Valerie did use her Concept to part the air before her as her speed quickly passed the sound barrier while she flew into the next ruin.

It was a plain with waving grass and a ceiling she couldn’t see or sense with her sensor suite or spiritual sense.

More of Minkalla’s spatial shenanigans, she was sure.

She did see the two dozen person-sized eagles banking to attack her and noted them as they appeared on her screens.

The normal Heads Up Display from the power armor was integrated with her AI, but it did have redundant backup screens just in case her AI was suppressed, in Minkalla or elsewhere.

For a less experienced pilot, she might not be used to fighting blind, but Valerie and every other cadet had practiced for this a million times.

Their training was long and brutal.

But she had come out of it victorious.

Now, it was just time to synchronize with the armor and hope that she got another floor with a growth item reward.

She was in a better position than the gray Paladins, who bound to the armor by themselves, but got no floors related to growth items. A fourth floor Courtly Warfare meant she was already on track to be a Green Paladin, but reaching the ranks of Blue or Indigo would only make her victory all the sweeter.

Unless they were *both* relevant, she wouldn’t be a Rainbow Paladin, and becoming the next high-mythical Pearlescent Paladin was already dashed when her entire run wasn’t made up of growth item floors.

Still, it was only a starting point. Size-changing was a classic Paladin power, but she'd also gotten the ability to manipulate her suit's force fields, and that opened a whole new set of options for her.

Her synchronization and combat skills were more important for her long-term growth, which was why she threw herself into battle time after time.

As the first eagle approached her, she relied on her shield to block the wings set ablaze while she slashed out at the eagle with her integrated blade, wrapped in a cutting-edge force field just for good measure.

It was decidedly overkill—the blade was already some of the finest enchanting work around—but the force field took it to the next level, allowing her to slice through the monster like it wasn't even there.

Spinning and falling, she dodged the talon trying to grab at her and fired her mana cannons at the second eagle's underbelly, smiling as the two streams of Genesis Energy rushed into her.

Valerie was ready to take on the world.

Chuck dropped his invisibility at the same time he activated his glaive's lightning, scything through the Sect healer in a single blow.

Always kill the healer first, his father would say, which was the first of many lessons Chuck had taken to heart over the years. He had tried doing it the other way a few floors ago, just to see what would happen, and it took so much longer to actually finish the fight. Also, there was nothing more demoralizing than taking down a party's nursemaid, which was an edge that he wasn't eager to ignore a second time.

He sent a follow-up beam of lightning through the healer's head with a snap of his fingers as her body fell to the ground in pieces. Chuck locked eyes with the party's presumed leader as he did it, just to really drive home the message of who was in charge here.

The Realm is vast and contains many tricks. Do not simply assume that someone is dead. Ensure it.

That was lesson number two. Another good one. Or two, technically. The first part was worth being a lesson on its own.

There was no burst of Genesis Energy when she died, which would normally have been suspicious, very few people collected exactly enough to buy the floor rewards with nothing left over, but he thought he knew the cause in this case. There was that Corporations trader from the last floor who had been buying and trading Genesis Energy, and they must have sold off

exactly enough to ensure they still got the floor reward. It was frankly pathetic that they had been on this floor for four days and still not managed to kill anything, but he could believe it.

He pulled the girl's bags to himself with a crackle of his Concept and latched them to his belt. Probably nothing spectacular, but you never knew.

"I'll give you a fair shot, since I've been itching for a real fight for ages. For every hit you land on me, I'll let one of you live. I think that's fair, but if you barbarians want something else, I'm sure we can come to terms." Chuck challenged them while casually holding his glaive out to the side.

Honestly, he was pissed, though he thought he was handling it well. Summer should have been a sure thing; it should have been the easy win and boon for the first cycle of Courtly Warfare.

He *deserved* that win. But now it was gone, and he was stuck on a mediocre fifth floor with these ingrates.

Maybe their corpses would have something to make it worth his time.

The party charged at him without even acknowledging what he had said. There was one guy with a spear that looked decent enough, the leader with the tower shield and short sword, and a mage of unknown ability, though she struck him as a mud mage. She had that slimy, grovelly feel to her those types often had.

Like necromancers but less interesting.

From the Sects he expected better of Tier 12s, this group was hardly enough to give him a warmup. Fighting at Tier opponents was easy for someone like him.

The leader came first, at least doing the bare minimum as a tank after failing to protect his backline. He tried to go slow, let his team get into position, but slow and steady had never been Chuck's *thing*. A short feint at the head made the oaf duck behind his shield, then Chuck latched onto the top of the shield with the hook on his glaive, pulled the shield down, and made a quick stab to the throat.

He'd be down for at least a bit before Chuck could make the rounds and finish him off. Besides, the tank living meant that his gear wouldn't decay. A tad risky, maybe, but so was this whole thing.

The others fell in short order. A good spear fight was always a nice way to greet the day, but the spearman was sadly not up to snuff. Three exchanges were enough to prove that and leave the other man dying on the ground, even with some support magic from the girl. He actually got a little excited when the girl showed that she *was* a mud mage. She shot a blast of mud at him,

which he simply teleported around. He actually waited a second just to see what she did next; he so rarely got to see what his opposite element could do.

Sadly, she just made a boring wall of mud between the two of them. Chuck did need to care about efficiency on this floor, at least a little, so he elected to smash the wall with his glaive rather than overpower it with lightning. The new growth effect on it was *nice*, and he wanted to utilize the armor breaking as much as possible. He cut the girl's hands off to neuter her as a threat; it might be amusing to keep her around for a few more minutes, just so she could grovel at his feet before he needed to move on.

He missed all the groveling from his father's servants. It had seemed like hundreds of years since he had some good groveling.

After that, he went around to kill the men and relieve them of their presumably hard-earned items, but when he got back to the mud girl, she was weeping over the body of her healer friend, which was really killing his buzz.

"What's the matter, girlie, can't you try to hit me with [Cresting Dragon Waves of the Overwrought Metaphor]? No [Lashing Vines Hidden Beneath Summer Night's Harvest]? Some other overly pompous description of your impotent magic?" She was still crying, sobbing into her missing hands. "Your magic is weak. Your *people* are weak, and they will not survive the coming war. I hope that you've learned a valuable lesson on attempting to exist in the hunting grounds of your betters, and the most valuable thing you can do with your life is take this message back to your sniveling Sects. For their sake, I hope you make it."

With his mood appropriately brightened, he stood up to see if there was anything else of interest nearby and started walking in the direction of the closest uncleared ruin. The girl could figure out what to do on her own, or she could die. Either way, it wasn't really his concern.

Force the Realm to remember your passing.

Lesson forty-seven. A classic.

Long Zhiyuan watched the team from the Clans and was about to move when he felt four sources of Genesis Energy start approaching with a hostile speed.

Backing up into the shadows, he sent more mana into his obscuring cloak and let it hide his presence from spiritual perception.

That, combined with having most of his Genesis Energy in a ring, meant he was nearly undetectable.

Once the attacking team passed his hiding spot, he rushed forward with his claws ready to rip out the last man's throat.

His hand was just inches away from flesh when the man turned and cut out at him.

Dodging, Long Zhiyuan barely avoided catching the blade in the face, and seeing he wouldn't get his clean kill, activated [Heavenly All Seeing Eye].

The technique started parsing the information, and he immediately set two of his clones to fighting the man's copies.

It wouldn't be a perfect copy of the man, but his technique was now upgraded and had a better measure of people it encompassed.

Withdrawing a sword and shield, he stored his cloak so as to not damage it and engaged the man with more traditional weapons.

He nearly caught the man, but he was good with his blade, and almost caught Long Zhiyuan a number of times as well.

A rare occurrence, as people who could match his training efforts were hard to find.

And Talented.

That was always a possibility he couldn't discount.

Still, [Heavenly All Seeing Eye] would eventually gather all the information he needed, and then he would learn how to beat anyone.

He was just settling into the brutal rhythm of a life and death battle with an equal when they were attacked by another party.

That wouldn't do.

After taking care of the trash, Long Zhiyuan jumped back at the man, but to his surprise, he shot out a weapon that activated his last measure defensive artifact.

Despite the Sect leader not liking him, Soaring Clouds Sect knew how to take care of its most valuable resource, and commissioned him a set of embroidery for his robes that would protect him from neutral mana spells.

It cost a Tier 14 mana stone every second of activation, but its defensive power had the strength to match.

And he came in with a spatial ring full of the power sources for the embroidery.

In the second he had to attack, he used his off hand to replenish the pocket where the mana stones were kept, in case the man could cast that same spell again.

At the same time, he cast [Heavenly All Seeing Eye] once more, wanting to get more information about his opponent.

He cataloged the information to his [Spiritual Self]. Stronger than the average Tier 12. Faster than average. A higher defense than average. A higher attack than average. Average regeneration. The armor that flicked in and out of existence was rated as exceptional, with a potential weakness to either the floor theme or innate duration. The skill suspected the man in front of him had done exceptionally well on Genesis Cultivation and Back to Basics, which would explain most of his physical abilities.

As he updated his copies of the man to fight, he started planning his retreat.

He could see that the tide was turning in the larger battle that was happening next to them.

When an explosion went off and knocked everyone around, he was already ready to run for it.

He'd come back once he had a better understanding of the man's abilities and how to counter them.

As far as he had seen in a purely one versus one, he had a good chance of beating the man, but with the rest of his team, that was a long shot at best.

And this wasn't the time to take a fight for pride.

He could always kill the man deeper into Minkalla, when he had a more perfect model.

Even as he picked up the equipment from two of the bodies that were blown this way, he wondered just what techniques the man used to be that strong at Tier 12. That raw physical strength was hard to match for a long time and could make any prolonged battle a challenge.

With that information, Long Zhiyuan let the two clones fight each other.

He needed to hurry up and get ahead of the pack.

This whole getting third parties thing was growing old quickly.

He was supposed to be the one interrupting fights to take advantage of both sides.

Finding an untouched ruin, he found a lone sheep monster and carefully fought it while gathering its information with [Heavenly All Seeing Eye].

Once he had enough information, he set two sets of clones to fight it. When he knew everything about the monster, he started a one sided slaughter.

Deeper into Minkalla. That was where he needed to go.

But first, he needed Genesis Energy, and if he couldn't properly ambush people without dozens more teams coming in to scavenge, he needed to focus on monsters.

Jasper jumped to the side as a bolt of mana swiped past his flank, while his bond darted from under his bulk and sent out a lightning bolt of her own.

As an Earth Armadillo, his outer shell was harder than most and was reinforced by his mana, even without an active spell. Which was very good for this floor, as the cost of his defense never increased.

Thankfully, Amsond was a Ground Gopher with a penchant for lightning spells, despite what her Talent would like to force her into.

As good as the bound pair was, they had been forced to fight their way through a number of ruins that were less than ideal for an earth mage, and she could pick up the slack.

As his bond chittered at him, Jasper sent a pulse of mana through his feet and felt for any more monsters nearby. Thankfully, nothing came back to his senses, and he was able to let out a sigh of relief.

Amsond climbed onto his outer shell and pointed off into the distance. "Oh! I see a lightning-struck tree. Head that way, and we can see if there is anything good."

Not particularly caring about where they went as long as he could minimize spell usage, Jaster sauntered over toward the charcoal tree and started digging through it.

Instead of a natural treasure, they found a pillar of crystal.

A challenge room.

"Want to do it?"

His bond rubbed her paws together as she thought before shaking her head. "No reason to risk it. We have enough Genesis Energy to take the floor reward as soon as we find an exit."

Agreeing with her, he started to walk forward once again. "Can you scratch that scab where the crab thing pinched me? My armor is rubbing there."

He could feel as Amsond rolled her eyes but helped him out.

Letting out a sigh of relief, he moved the two of them forward.

Han De jumped to the next tree and grabbed the squirrel like monster and drove a dagger he had found on a defeated foe into its brain.

To say this floor was not good for him would be the understatement of his life, but it was forcing him to learn.

This planet was one giant training ground where one needed to get rid of the crutches they once relied on, and it seemed he relied too much on his techniques, as they had been growing ever weaker while he fought.

He noticed the difference quickly and had been fighting with just his body for a while now, but his real issue was the lack of monsters.

It seemed that being behind the others was finally making things hard for him. On the other floors, he had been able to find untouched ruins with a little effort, but now he couldn't find a ruin with even a dozen monsters in it.

That, combined with his techniques being limited, had led to him gathering a few new wounds but, thankfully, nothing debilitating.

Gathering his resolve, he looked off to the distance, where he could feel the newly respawned boss of this ruin.

With pumping legs, he charged at the purple and silver man-sized squirrel and slid along the ground, cutting at its front leg.

Before his blade could land, it jumped into the air and tried to drive its claws into his body, but Han De was just as fast as it was.

Rolling to the side, he brought his blade around and slashed out at the claw.

Sparks flew as Yi Zhelan's sword impacted with the claws.

The purple squirrel seemed to have a mana type that actively ate away at Yi Zhelan's sword, and seeing that, he changed his tactics to avoid using the sword so much. He didn't want to risk it in a fight. It wouldn't be the first or even the tenth item he had gone through in Minkalla, but that one was special to him, *bonded* to him even.

But as they fought, Han De was forced to use skill after skill to defend himself and felt the skills he had previously hoarded start to get more expensive, until finally, he couldn't cast them anymore.

Close to ten minutes later, a bloodied Han De looked at the squirrel and shifted his grip on Yi Zhelan's sword. Lightning coursed across his body, turning what remained of his clothing into smoldering ash and beginning to char even his flesh in its wake.

He felt this would be the final exchange.

One of them would die here.

With a heart like iron, he knew it wouldn't be him.

Rushing forward, he met the monster's attack with Yi Zhelan's sword, and steel met claw. His breath heaved, unsteady and ragged as his chest burned with exhaustion and violet flames alike, but he pushed against the claw with all his might. It met his muscle with its own might, and lightning swallowed his body.

The tip of his blade cut through the claw and plunged into the beast's chest. The squirrel's lifeblood pooled on the ground, mixing with his own. He sputtered with the aftershocks of the squirrel, and his vision grew dark as he collapsed onto the body of the squirrel, his final thought solely on not losing his precious blade.

Yi Zhelan was with him always, even to the bitter end.

Matt's copy shot out a [Mana Slash] immediately upon seeing them, while Aster's cast [Ice Spear] at the same time.

It might have been threatening, but the two spells were half-formed at best; they were so weak, they only fizzled out in their flight.

The copies Minkalla started with were bad; Matt knew that from all the reports they had seen. But this was beyond his expectations.

As the first two spells crossed the halfway mark, the copies of Susanne and Liz made their moves, with Susanne's casting a sloppy [Wind Cutter] while Liz's attempted control over a stream of blood was so bad that the glob of fluid wobbled.

Despite that, they all took the fights seriously, and split off to deal with their copies.

The deeper they were on this floor, the better the copies would be, which meant they needed to learn to fight themselves while there was a smaller risk of death, rather than rushing headlong into danger.

Fighting an exact copy of yourself would, in theory, result in a fifty-fifty chance of victory or death, but Minkalla wasn't so evil. Instead, the copies it created were based on the version of you that had entered the floor, giving you time to get used to fighting yourself, along with many chances to grow stronger.

After a whole floor without being able to *truly* use his skills, Matt brought his blade down with all the force he could muster. His copy was weaker, and it almost immediately gave way, just barely surviving by blocking his attack with [Cracked Phantom Armor]. Just for fun, he flexed his boon as he called up his own suit of armor, manifesting it as an icy blue and giving it a few winter-

themed features. It didn't affect the skill beyond making it look cool, but it was a new toy for him to play with, and quite a fun one at that.

The copy's skill flickered, but he didn't press his advantage, pulling back instead and allowing his copy to recover. The experience he'd get fighting himself would be invaluable for the end of the floor, after all.

His copy tapped into his own boosts, and Matt echoed in kind. Each of their reflections, until the final boss on the floor, were *lesser* in some way. Some only had a fragment of their total skills, some lacked Concepts, and very few had a full grasp of strategy and were capable of improvisation. This one, however, seemed like it was slightly weaker overall in every way, but it was an excellent introduction to the floor.

As Matt blocked a thrust and a point blank [Mana Slash], he learned about his own combat style, and tried to dissect it like an opponent would.

He was fast, nimble, and defensive, never overcommitting while also trying to bait opponents into overextending themselves. If that failed, he would just wear them down into dust. Compared to the opponents that Matt was used to fighting, his initial copy was laughably slow and weak, more like a turtle than a predator.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, Matt was substantially more than just a defense-specialized melee fighter, and that apparently carried over to his reflection as well, since it unleashed a barrage of [Fireball]s at him. Matt dodged most of them but cut one in half as he closed the distance between them once again.

It was really fortunate that the copies would be lesser versions of him until the end of the floor, and that Minkalla didn't raise them to Tier 14. The additional speed and strength alone would be a pain, but mostly, the idea of fighting himself after he got a couple more tier-ups and doubled his mana a few more times filled him with a bit of dread.

Matt had no confidence in fighting a version of himself that had 20,480 mana, versus his current 2,560 mana. It might not technically be suicide, but it would only be one step removed from it.

Even with no more than his current spell arsenal, being able to spend eight times more mana on every spell would mean his [Cracked Phantom Armor] was impossible to break through, while his physical buffing spells would be substantially more potent.

Still, it *did* give him a relatively easy way to be assured of a win against his reflections for the entire floor. If he broke through to Tier 12, his mana generation would double, and his copies just wouldn't be able to keep up.

He and this current copy traded a few more blows, with Matt steadily gaining an advantage before it tried to turn the tables with a blast of [Hail], shooting it at him sideways rather than raining down from above. That proved to be a mistake, as Matt reached out with [Ice Manipulation], seizing control of the icy deluge around him. His copy fruitlessly tried to reclaim command of the spell, but Matt's grip was absolute in comparison to this first reflection.

Matt could feel his Winter boon blossom into full effect. Thanks to the limits on skill usage on floor five, it had taken a while to fully piece together, but he'd eventually nailed down two main effects. The first was a substantial boost to his precision and control when using winter-related elements. It was most obvious with the corresponding Manipulation skills, but was present even in [Hail], as evidenced by his reflection turning it into a headlong ranged attack instead of mere hailstones falling from the sky. Secondly, any ice skills he used grew in power the longer he controlled them, and the more mana he put into them.

All around him, the ice crystals produced by [Hail] grew larger and sharper with each passing second, swirling around the pair of them like they were in the eye of a hurricane. His copy never stopped trying to break his control, until, with a passing thought, Matt directed the entire storm at his reflection. A stream of razor-sharp ice and wind punched through a subpar [Bulwark] and [Cracked Phantom Armor], bursting out the far side of his reflection's chest and shattering it into a thousand rapidly dissolving pieces.

Minkalla might recreate their items for their copies to use, but all their equipment, items, and even consumables were fundamentally tied to the copy, and couldn't be extracted through any means.

Though, he paused to see if his copy would drop any of his skills.

While it was only a remote possibility, getting a second [Cracked Phantom Armor] would be fantastic, so he could modify the second skill for different threats.

He was disappointed when his copy simply dropped an essence stone, but he still picked it up and put it away.

He joined Susanne off to the side, who had already finished her own fight, while he watched Liz and Aster testing their copies. Like him, neither seemed terribly concerned about killing their opponents quickly, instead getting used to the idea of fighting *themselves*. Liz was testing out the limits of overpowering someone's control of their own blood, mirroring his own bouts of clashing against her with [Blood Manipulation], but given she was using her blackened arm to control her magic, it was clear that she was in an utterly dominant position.

As Aster killed her copy with a quick [Chomp] to rip out its throat, Liz turned the tendrils of blood swirling around her into spears, skewering her copy a dozen times over. The body and a substantial amount of the surrounding blood soon dissolved into nothing.

There weren't any terribly notable landmarks around them, with the ruin being a simple forest-type. After a quick survey of their surroundings, Liz stashed a small amount of her blood in a spatially expanded canteen, brushed off her hands, and consulted her compass to get a heading.

It continued to point to the right as they followed it to a small scattering of other delvers' copies.

They took their time to fight them, as it was important intel on their possible opponents, but it had its complications.

Or at least, it was in theory. Minkalla didn't always use reflections of delvers on the current floor as templates. Anyone who had ever entered its depths could appear, so far as anyone knew, but it preferred those who had entered the planet this cycle. Particularly those who had reached the floor. Frankly, the sheer breadth of possible people who could appear was good for Matt, since it would help obscure his own identity and trump cards. So long as whoever fought one of his reflections didn't see an attack that was uniquely and identifiably *his*, no matter how much mana it used, it wouldn't be a concern.

He had carefully hidden [Cracked Mana Spear], and from his single encounter with his copy, he assumed that the spell would be hidden until the last moment as well. It was an assumption, yes, but he felt that it was a good one. If the copy had used it immediately, it would have fared much better in their battle.

And while the spell might be incredibly strong, if anyone got attacked with it and survived, they would know one of his most important hidden trump cards, which was less than ideal.

It also meant that anyone who fought his copy would get a good look at his sword, which was one of the things he tried to avoid, as it was the single piece of equipment that could link Quill with his real identity of Matt. He had already failed on that front when fighting Young Master Blood Hand on the previous floor, and it was one reason of many that he so desperately wanted to tie up that loose end.

Knowing there was nothing he could do about that, he just hoped that anyone who fought a copy of himself got blasted to bits by a beam of pure mana.

When they reached the edge of the ruin, they all paused.

The forest ended like it normally did, in a sharp line, but the ruin next to them was out of Matt's expectation.

It was space.

Or at least, what looked like empty space was sitting next to their standard forest. Vast and devoid of any and everything, it looked like it went on forever, but their compass pointed in that direction without fail.

Liz broke into a coughing fit as she tried to speak, causing Matt to wince at the ear-grating sound. He gave his girlfriend a reassuring pat on the back, and she recovered enough to finish what she'd been saying. "So, do we follow the compass and enter...space? Seems kinda risky."

Matt extended [Air Manipulation] into the next rift and confirmed. "Yeah, no actual air in there. I can bring in a lot of air, but I don't have [Create Air], so it will eventually run out." They did have the skill somewhere in their numerous bags, but they had barely even spared it a thought, given how niche of a skill it was.

Aster yipped a question. "Can we use a spatial ring to bring in more air? It's compressible, so it should be possible, no?"

While they talked and discussed possibilities, Susanne squinted and watched something in the distance before speaking up. "Is that an asteroid?"

Everyone peered into the distance until Liz brought out a pair of binoculars. "Yup, that's an asteroid, and it definitely has air."

After she handed off the binoculars to Matt, he saw what she meant.

The asteroid had plants and water on its surface, despite not being much larger than their house.

After helping Aster see the asteroid, Matt started doing the math on how much air he could control, and whether or not it would be enough to get them to their next destination.

The answer came out as a confident yes, even without accounting for his Boon.

With half of his mana generation, he would be able to grab and hold enough air for them to breathe confidently.

With that settled, they tied themselves together with a bit of rope and jumped into the void.

Entering the empty space was...odd.

Matt could feel the strain of having to simulate the natural air pressure around his bubble of air, ensuring that it didn't escape into the surrounding vacuum. Without gravity warping their trajectory, all they did was wait as they floated toward the asteroid.

All of them seemed to have the same thought at the same time, and they twisted to get a look at the ruin behind them.

Like a strip of light in the darkness, there was a band of reality that seemed starkly out of place as light leaked out of the adjoining ruin into the empty space. Oddly enough, it seemed like the ruin they were currently in stretched out beyond their previous ruin as well.

As they drifted out into the distance, Matt started to ponder.

He had a space related Concept, but he had never actually been to space, as odd as that seemed.

Oh, he had traveled *through* space, but he had never experienced it directly.

That seemed weird to him.

He hadn't thought about it at all, and even Luna hadn't suggested anything of the sort. She might have been waiting until he was Tier 15, and didn't have pesky needs like breathing, but Matt felt connected to the new ruin around him in a way.

Through their bond, he knew Aster felt the same way.

She had aspirations of making space ice, and he could feel her fascination with the surroundings as they drifted through the emptiness.

After a few seconds of drifting, Liz started pushing herself along with [Blood Manipulation], dragging the rest of them to the asteroid that was floating along ahead of them.

As they neared the asteroid, they were attracted to the small oval of rock to a degree that was unnatural, but they didn't complain, as it gave them fresh air and a place to stand.

Once they landed, Matt looked to his bond, who felt what he wanted to do, and she immediately jumped into his arms. Together, they leapt back off the asteroid and into the vacuum.

Holding their breath, they relied on their high Tier bodies to prevent their lungs from exploding in the vacuum.

They both wanted to experience the true vacuum of space.

Instantaneously, Matt's eyes went dry, so he shut them and experienced the emptiness with his spiritual sense and body.

There was nothing...and *everything* around him.

Space was the home of everything in reality.

Empty, but not.

He could feel the small random bits of rock and debris drifting along, but he treated them as the inconsequential bits they were.

Matt followed his instincts and flexed his Concept, discovering that his repulsion powers were a touch more responsive.

A white hole might not be real, but it was a celestial body. Space was its home, and he had been remiss in not experiencing this before now.

Next to him, Aster's manifestation of the dead star appeared and flickered as it started to grow colder. Even though she wasn't targeting him, Matt felt a chill enter his body and spirit, as her connection to the cold became stronger and stronger with each passing moment.

Eventually, she also stopped and looked up at him, and he flew with his Concept back to the ground, where they took grateful breaths of air together.

Liz was glaring at them when they landed. "What if your eyes had exploded? Then what would you two do?"

Aster rolled said eyes. "We aren't mortals. We're stronger than that. And I got a lot out of our experiment."

Matt nodded along. "I feel a...well, a sort of connection to my Concept I'm not quite used to. It didn't do much, but it feels like...a door was just cracked open, ever so slightly. It's hard to describe, but... Hmm. No, I don't think I can explain it, but that little test was definitely worth it. Once I'm Tier 15, I'll see about doing it more, I think."

Liz didn't complain anymore, and the four of them explored their little island in space.

It was small, but the gravity was a planetary normal, giving them a good foothold despite the asteroid being smaller than a large house.

Liz checked the compass, and it pointed slightly to their left and up, which forced them to use their combined Concepts to change the direction of their asteroid base.

It was hard, but they had just succeeded in steering the rock in the proper direction when they saw another asteroid traveling on a near collision course with their own.

Seeing that it was so similar to the one they were standing on, Liz said, "Anyone want to test why these asteroids have air and such?"

Susanne shook her head. "Not on my asteroid. I'm quite good, thank you."

Matt smirked but prepared with Aster to catch their next passerby and crack it open.

It took nearly an hour but, eventually, another asteroid drifted past, and the two of them sprang into action.

Behind Aster, a dead star appeared, and the asteroid slowed noticeably while Matt grabbed it with [Earth Manipulation], pulling it into an orbit with their own.

When it was close, they flexed their powers and shattered the rock, and even Liz whistled as the center of the asteroid was revealed.

Heavy Iron wasn't named for its properties upon Tiering up. No, while metals almost always got heavier as they tiered up, Heavy Iron was a natural treasure that could increase the weight and durability of any item it was merged with. And the chunk they just got was big enough to be split into at least two portions.

Susanne whistled as they brought the fist-sized rock down to their own asteroid. "Okay, I take back what I said. Let's crack open every asteroid we see like pinatas. My armor could use the extra durability."

Liz shamelessly added, "I'm so glad I told you two to break that asteroid."

That started their great collecting expedition, and over the next six hours, they harvested a dozen fist-sized chunks of the natural treasure. Some of the asteroids had copies of delvers on them, but they were easily dealt with, as Matt shattered the ground under their feet and left them floating in the emptiness of space, where they were easy pickings for the rest of his team.

Matt used the largest one on his sword, at the insistence of the others, as he had no issue with its weight, even with one of its growth aspects being higher than normal weight and the item being Tier 14.

After his weapon absorbed the Heavy Iron, he nodded at the greater heft and took a while to practice with the weapon, so he could get used to its increased weight. It ended up being heavy enough that Matt needed to run [Mage's Retreat] at a low level to comfortably use it, but he *could* still swing the blade without the skill, it just took a lot out of him.

Susanne used it for her armor, and Liz absorbed the Heavy Iron with her Blood Iron, giving her body and blood some additional weight and durability. The added momentum would help with breaking through armor, and additional body weight helped with melee weapon fighting to a degree, as everyone past Tier 6 or so had the strength to spare.

After seeing that Liz had no major side effects from the absorption, and she wasn't slowed down too much, Susanne did the same, and the two women started practicing and sharing tips on how they were each dealing with the additional weight. Liz mostly utilized her internal hemokinesis while Susanne relied on her Concept more for the time being. While they did, Matt stashed the eight remaining chunks of Heavy Iron in their storage, idly wondering if he could get his house to absorb any of them.

While scouting for more loot, Matt saw five strangely symmetrical asteroids, roughly arranged in a 'K'-shape around a barely noticeable, distorted ring of light. He might not have even noticed them if his Concept

didn't increasingly signal that the world was *wrong* in that direction. What started as an equivalent to slight white noise became a rather insistent spiritual tinnitus, before finally turning into someone raking their nails on a chalkboard as they got closer.

He was forced to look away and think about it for a few seconds, but then it clicked. The lensing effect was familiar to Matt, and he would have recognized it earlier, but the bright accretion disk usually associated with this object was missing.

"Is that a black hole?"

Aster jumped onto his shoulder, and after some inspecting, nodded. "Sure is."

"And we're drifting directly at it?"

"Yup!"

Matt and everyone else panicked. It also explained why they had to push their asteroid so hard to go to the most valuable thing in the ruin. They had been effectively stalling their rotational momentum, which sent them plummeting right toward the black hole.

Liz immediately suggested, "We need to change our direction and slingshot around this thing."

Matt and Aster both shook their heads, and he responded, "Nope, can't do that. That's the prize, I'm sure of it. Haven't you heard of the Heart of a Black Hole?"

Liz and Susanne shook their heads while Matt explained. "It's the cultivation core of the black hole, and it's incredibly valuable, mostly for its use as a crafting material. Even a low Tier core of a normal planet can make Tier 20 items stronger." Seeing both Liz and Susanne look unimpressed, he added, "We could even absorb its cultivation to speed up our own progress, but that would be a waste. It's better to make an amazing item out of it."

Liz shook her head. "I also know that only higher Tier people can get the cores of planets and such. On top of that, it happens to be illegal." She paused for a second before adding, "Well, illegal in the Empire, which we aren't in, but my point still stands. How can we get it out? As far as I know, it takes a Tier 40 to take the core out of a Tier 25 sun because of how hard it is to even reach."

Matt shrugged. "I have no idea, but it's got to be possible."

Susanne shook her head. "Not necessarily. The compass points to something valuable, not something valuable that we can *get*."

Matt nodded at the distinction, as it was a valid one he had overlooked in his excitement, and the four of them pushed their asteroid into as close an orbit as they deemed safe.

After that, they inspected and thought of a way to destroy the black hole without destroying its cultivation core.

He and Aster chatted about everything they knew about black holes and their cores, but neither of them had an answer beyond throwing the weight of their Concepts against it until it broke.

In real space, that would have been impossible, as even the smallest black hole was far stronger than any Tier 11, but they were in Minkalla, where everything was a challenge to overcome for a Tier 14, and they both had Concepts that were counters to a black hole.

Matt was the inverse of a black hole, while Aster's Concept embodied the *true* death of the universe, when even black holes had died.

From their little asteroid, they threw their Concepts against the Tier 14 black hole and were immediately rebuffed.

Rubbing his head, Matt said, "Okay, let's try and slowly grind it away. Going up against it directly wasn't the best decision."

With that lesson learned, they summoned their Concepts and slowly edged them into the black hole's space.

Aster was manifesting her Concept behind her as she focused on breaking down the black hole. With his spiritual sense, Matt could see his eyes glowing more brightly over time as he focused too, which was decidedly less dramatic.

Almost instantly, Matt understood that they weren't completing whatever challenge Minkalla had designed for this ruin. It was the same feeling as when he stole the gloves from the first floor, but as they were challenging *themselves*, Minkalla didn't deem it necessary to intervene.

It didn't mean that what they were doing was particularly easy. Not by any means.

If Matt had connected with his Concept during his little excursion into space with Aster, he was now honing and refining his Concept as he held it against the grinding wheel that was the black hole in front of him.

In a battle of pure strength, his Concept was far, far weaker, but his Concept was also alive and growing in a way that the black hole's wasn't. When his white hole took damage, he was there to repair it and make it grow stronger, while the black hole was slowly whittled away and began dissipating under their combined pressure.

Little by little, Aster and Matt slowly ground the seemingly implacable black hole down, until it was little more than a pinprick of a deeper blackness in the emptiness of space.

During the battle of wills, Matt noticed that when his Concept reformed, it grew stronger with each encounter, as did Aster's. It wasn't just them

attacking a greater entity than themselves, but rather them engaging with and overcoming something that their Concepts didn't align with.

The back and forth felt as long as weeks and as short as seconds at the same time but, eventually, the black hole collapsed in on itself, and a single, grape-sized orb of darkness floated in the void. All the asteroids started flying off in straight lines once the gravity well holding them in orbit vanished.

Matt fell to his knees, and Aster passed out entirely.

Susanne thankfully reacted in time and used her Concept to cut space in order to appear next to the orb, grab it, and quickly return to their asteroid.

Aster woke up quickly, and other than a splitting headache, she was fine.

With the core in hand, the four of them inspected it while they drifted toward a small strip of light that more than likely signified an adjoining ruin.

The core was tiny, radiated power like an insanely powerful natural treasure, and was clearly more valuable than that would imply. Matt could tell that it was *stuffed* with essence from how it felt to his spiritual sense. Considering that the item was literally the essence core of the black hole, it wasn't all that surprising.

It was weird to see it physically there, as living entities didn't create physical cores, but had them exist entirely in their spirits. It weighed almost nothing, despite being spiritually heavy, as if it was still the black hole it had once inhabited, which explained why it was so useful in crafting. With just that effect, Matt could think of a dozen enchantments he could layer upon the core without actively integrating it, as well as expending it to enhance an existing item to give even stronger effects

That gave him an idea, and he looked down at his gloves.

If they didn't bind to him as a growth item—which he doubted they would, now that the house had left his spirit feeling somewhat bloated—he thought of a few ways he could increase the gloves' gravity prowess with the Heart of the Black Hole. Or he could at least take the Heart and the gloves and use them as the core and blueprint to create something stronger.

A Tier 14 core of a black hole would be useful for a dozen Tiers above its own, at a minimum.

Liz hadn't been wrong about it being illegal to harvest a core of a planet, or some other celestial body, in the Empire and the rest of the Great Powers, but it did happen on occasion. It was legal if the system was being abandoned for some reason, which was beyond rare. The other exception was if someone personally 'raised' the celestial body themselves, from Tier 0 to the desired Tier.

That was such an expensive and time-consuming process, it was only done by a single guild, and they only brought the bodies to Tier 10, or possibly Tier 15, upon request. Even then, they only created a single sun to harvest every ten thousand years or so.

Matt hadn't done much research beyond that, but he had asked Erwin why they didn't use higher Tier rifts to accelerate the process. The older scientist explained that in rifts, no matter how large the planetary body inside it was, the body would never form a core. Instead, their essence was spread through their material evenly. If brought outside of the rift, that essence could condense and form a core, but it was so inefficient, a moon from a Tier 47 rift would only create a Tier 1 moon when brought out.

As for why that happened, no one was sure. But it was one of the main reasons why any space-themed, galaxy-sized, higher Tier rifts weren't able to be harvested for thousands of higher Tier planets.

While the others had started doing their own thing, Matt made a small wand and created a containing rune that encased the Heart in the wand. Then, with a release function, he was able to make it increase gravity in a small area where he pointed the tip of the wand.

It wasn't an elegant use of the core, but it was quick, useful, and wasn't permanent. Considering it only took a trickle of mana to activate the enchantment, it only served to redirect the power of the core, rather than consume it.

They were nearly at the next ruin, which they could see was a desert of some kind, when Liz noticed that the compass was pointing above the ruin, so they shifted their trajectory to avoid it. After a little flying, they found a pitch black asteroid that had been completely hidden from their spiritual perception and housed a small cave in its side. Inside the cave, they found a large, concealed pillar of crystal.

A challenge room.

Everyone got off, and in a bubble of air, inspected the pillar.

Matt frowned as he tried to get a feeling of the challenge inside. It didn't feel like combat, but it also wasn't a puzzle either.

It felt more...testy.

Liz identified it before he did.

"I bet it's Careful What You Wish For."

Matt wasn't entirely sure she was right, but it was better than any of his guesses.

The test was simple, if difficult to pass. It usually could be found *somewhere* in Folded Reflections, Mind over Matter, and Spiritual Journey, if

any of them appeared in a cycle.

Minkalla found your deepest desires and then put you in a situation where you got to enjoy them. Whether it be carnal pleasure, food, lavish living, or the power to crush your foes, it gave it all to you, and would keep you there forever if you allowed it.

Beating the test required one to reject the contents of the illusion. In some cases, that came from love slowly turning to hate or apathy, as too much of a good thing became unbearable. In others, that was more straightforwardly resisting your desires and pushing yourself out.

Ultimately, the quality of the reward came down to how quickly they could extract themselves, though some considered the reward to be more so the experience itself.

Of course, if the testee wasn't able or willing to wake themselves up, they'd stay in the room forever.

Aster immediately perked up and jumped for joy. "Me, me, me. Let me do the challenge. I want ice cream bunnies! I want it soooooo bad. Pleassssse!? I'll only say for six hours real time, I promise!"

In the end, they all decided to participate in the test, and were brought into a holding room where Aster immediately vanished.

Unusually, the room allowed them to watch. Matt guessed that part of her desire was explicitly that they could all see as Aster was placed in a psychedelic land of candy, with bunnies made from ice cream that covered the landscape.

Instead of resisting, she dug in and tore the rabbit apart in a spray of ice cream and raspberry syrup while chowing down.

None of them expected anything else, and Matt chuckled at his bond's enthusiasm.

What he didn't expect was that once she was done eating the first rabbit, she immediately pounced on the second, then third. None of them resisted, and they all seemed unfazed, even as their neighbors were eviscerated in sprays of fudge, caramel, and various fruity syrups.

He had thought she would control herself, but she seemingly had no intention to do so and started going wild, tearing into and devouring each and every rabbit she encountered.

Matt facepalmed as he realized she was going to eat her heart out.

And she did exactly that.

Well, perhaps she had the right idea. It *had* been a stressful few months—or even years if the third floor challenge room counted. Perhaps a vacation of sorts was just what he needed as well.

Knowing and trusting his bond to pull herself out of the dream, Matt willed himself into his own test.

Matt wasn't the emperor. He was beyond him, and every other Tier 50 in the realm. He had somehow ascended to Tier 51 but was still present in their plane of existence. Stronger than everyone else.

Finally free.

He wasn't just at the peak of power.

He was beyond it, and beyond risk.

No one could challenge him.

No one could shove him in a box.

Matt was finally *free*.

As the strongest existence in the realm, no one could *dream* of challenging him, and he had people to turn his simplest desire into a command that could shake the realm. He wasn't alone, of course. That would be dull, monotonous.

But nor did he have peers, for that implied equality.

He was above all.

He was the lifeblood of the entire realm, giving life with his every whim as his supplicants extolled the virtues of their causes, pleading with him to aid them. They knew *he* was the Superior One, and others threw grand treasures at him in the hopes he would hear their cause and act to solve it.

Occasionally, he would even listen. He ended wars, terraformed entire planets, funded great libraries, and ushered in a new wave of truly unbound, truly free research for all. It was a paradise, a utopia for those who pleased him. Those who disrespected him or his values, those who sought to prey upon those weaker than themselves, or those who sought to exploit, even in the abundance of all, were harshly dealt with. Erased from existence and history.

None were his equal. Every man, woman, and child, every beast and human, and every mortal and immortal all looked to him for guidance and protection.

He was above all.

He had conquered every foe.

Righted every wrong.

Everything was perfect.

There was nothing for him to do.

No challenge to overcome.

No one stronger than him who posed a threat to either his freedom or his life.

He couldn't even enchant anything over Tier 50 because the instant he made the object, it ascended, unlike him. None dared question him, no one opposed him.

There was nothing *new* for him to do.

Absolute safety was boring.

It made life...dull.

And the illusion broke around him.

Liz walked down the street in perfect anonymity. With the power to change her face and her spirit as she pleased, it was impossible for anyone to recognize her. She had complete and total freedom. No fans staring in shock at Torch, the future Ascender. No sycophants crowding around Elizabeth, the Princess of Fire. No whispers about a quenched phoenix...*nothing*. Not even stares due to her red hair and sculpted figure, for even those were gone.

Someone crashed into her, a random drunk who wasn't watching his path, and she shoved him off her. That would show him, all right. No perfect princess here, and no more thousands of reporters waiting to pounce on the slightest misstep.

He crashed to the ground, and Liz smirked in satisfaction as she stepped over him and carried on her way. She reached home not long after, and Matt greeted her from the kitchen as he whipped up another wonderful meal. He alone *knew* her, and she loved him all the more for it. He'd even received the same blessing as her, allowing them both to vanish into the distance without a single care, without a single worry of anyone tracking them here, so far from her home. Nobody would know his secret; she was all his and *he* was all *hers*.

With a shiver of delight, she cast aside her last face and returned to a much more familiar one, specifically, Matt's favorite. His little gasp of appreciation always brought a smile to her, and she winked at him, beckoning him to her.

A whispered question and an eager response were all it took for Liz to wake up the next morning arm-in-arm with Matt, surrounded by the evidence of their escapades of the previous night. It would be the scandal of the year—to say nothing of how her mother would preen and make such a tremendous fuss about it all—if Princess Elizabeth were found in such a compromising position, yet she hadn't been and *wouldn't* be.

She got drunk in bars, walked arm-in-arm with Matt down the street totally naked, joined an underground fighting ring as a pyromancer known for blood-red flames, and did everything else that came to her fancy. And best of all, Matt was side by side with her for it all, his participation and unconditional approval of her every last whim making it all *meaningful*, in this world of fleeting faces and no consequences.

Anonymity came with its downsides, of course. If she wanted to receive preferential treatment in restaurants, she needed to spend time establishing a persona deserving of the treatment beforehand. People didn't defer to her in the street, and if she wanted that annoying guy in the bar to *stop pawing her*, she needed to *burn him alive*.

Wait, what?

Liz came back to herself and looked in horror at the spectacle in front of her. The man, previously a bastion of bravado and charm, was a charred mess. His hair was gone and his skin was black, burning coals where his eyes once had been. Flames licked across what was left of his skin, though it was more charcoal than living flesh. He would be whimpering in pain if his throat would work, but he was kept alive by the nurturing fires running through his veins.

This isn't who I am, Liz thought, her mind wavering. *This isn't me*.

She let her victim drop as the illusion broke around her.

She appeared back in the waiting area and started to shiver.

Liz hadn't expected the test to be nice, but she hadn't expected it to show her as some unbridled sociopath either.

She got angry at people, yes. But she didn't think it was any more than the next person.

She was a nice person. She helped people. She was kind. She was polite, even to the rudest strangers. She never got *mad* at them, she never would *hurt* them...unless they outright attacked her.

But do I want to?

That thought frightened her.

Was she only this way because she wanted the approval of others? Was she a monster, deep down, hidden beneath the oceans of blood she had shed, held in check only by the expectations of people around her?

It was a terrifying thought.

To distract herself, she turned to Aster's test, where she was still eating ice cream bunnies one after another. Matt and Susanne were still gone, but their fantasies, like hers, weren't visible from the outside, which she was very grateful for.

That isn't who I am, she told herself. But there was a small corner of her mind that refused to be quiet.

Or is it?

Susanne stood in front of the indistinct figure for what felt like both hours and seconds. His offer was genuine, she knew, though she'd only learn of his identity after accepting.

And what an offer it was.

Money? As much as she could ever want. Power? He had more than enough of that. Revenge? Well, all she would need to do was say the word, and her deadbeat father would be left humiliated and broken for the entirety of his smugly immortal life.

There was just one thing causing her to hesitate.

"But...what do you want? What do *you* get out of it?" she couldn't help but ask her would-be benefactor.

"Nothing more than to make you happy. I just want what's best for you. You thriving is reward enough for me."

He meant it, too. She could tell. Everything she had ever wanted, handed to her on a silver platter. All it would take was accepting, and the world was hers.

The illusion shattered around her.

No. She would never, *never* be forced to rely on someone so *utterly*.

She was Susanne Velar.

She was *Queen*.

And she would never be so reliant on another ever again.

Matt appeared and saw Liz and Susanne sitting alone on their own corners of the waiting area, with Aster still in her fantasy.

Liz looked *deeply* unsettled, but when he approached her, she just shook her head and gently pushed him away, saying, "I'm fine. The challenge just caught me off-guard is all. I'll be okay soon. I just... need to process it a bit."

Matt knew her well enough to know that she decidedly *wasn't* fine, but he still wanted to respect her wishes. He tried asking a couple more times but was gently rebuffed each time. Well, he wasn't about to let his girlfriend work

through whatever she'd had to give up, or was repulsed by, completely alone, but neither did he want to push too hard about something she clearly didn't want to discuss.

So, he settled for sitting down next to her, pulling her into his lap, and holding her. She tensed for a while but eventually relaxed, melting into his arms and occasionally burying her face in his shoulder.

They sat in silence for hours as an accelerated Aster ate ice cream rabbit after ice cream rabbit.

After just under six hours of real time, or something like a year and a half inside the challenge, she finally stopped and broke the illusion with a swish of her tail, exiting the challenge with a plop.

Aster didn't care at all as she lay there with an extended belly.

One burp later, she promptly fell asleep.

Reactions were mixed as they left the challenge room. All of them except Aster had gotten far more Genesis Energy than they'd put in, who only got close to fifty percent extra, and a tea set that allowed everyone drinking from the five cups to share their perceptions of taste. The teapot itself could store different pots full of tea by twisting the top, which was a fun effect to play around with.

A handful of skill shards also appeared after a few seconds of the crystal pulsing out Genesis Energy, almost like it was reluctant to give them anything more. Susanne identified one as [Broken Ground, Broken Core], a Sect skill which destabilized the earth below a target's feet.

Liz picked up [Pike Block], a spear skill that made multiple floating mana copies of the user's weapon that could act in concert for a potent defensive ability. It apparently had some history to it that Liz said she would explain later.

Finally, there was a Tier 20 light aspected skill that no one recognized. It was their second Tier 20 skill drop from Minkalla, about as expected from getting to the sixth floor. Any skill of that Tier would sell well, and if it wasn't in any of their databases, it had a good chance of being *quite* valuable.

Matt was slightly unnerved, though more rested than he had felt in weeks. Unending boredom wasn't *pleasant*, but it certainly wasn't that bad. Nowhere close to the vacation he had somewhat hoped for, but it was at least a welcome relief from the tension and soreness he had been feeling.

Susanne was mad about *something* that she wasn't talking about, and while Liz definitely looked better, Matt could tell she was still a little shaken about whatever her trial had been. Though, if he hadn't seen her earlier, he might not be able to tell.

Aster, of course, was ecstatic, having lived out her grandest dream for over a year, but she was at least courteous enough to keep her excitement to herself...mostly. When they exited the now disordered space ruin, they found themselves in the desert, and were immediately attacked by scorpions that burrowed out of the sand.

Matt brought his sword down on the carapace of the first one, and with its newly increased weight, it shattered the hard chitin and cut cleanly through the monster before its large stinger could descend on him.

Susanne appeared next to one of the others and removed its stinger off before slicing through its body in seconds.

Liz, who had finished off two more of the monsters, said, "First actual monsters of the floor. Should mean this ruin is mostly normal, but still, watch out for copies of others."

She ended up being correct, as the ruin was a standard "kill monsters collect loot" affair.

Though, the boss was a little new.

It was some hybrid of a scorpion and man, with the upper humanoid half seemingly welded onto a scorpion's body.

Armed with a long spear, the boss used its weapon along with pincers to try and pin them down. It also had the ability to control time around it, allowing it to dodge most ranged attacks through a combination of slowing the projectiles down and speeding itself up.

If any of the four of them were alone, they might have struggled, but with their varied skill sets, they were able to take the boss out without much fanfare. And its loot turned out to be quite interesting.

It was a small hourglass that created an area of accelerated time at the cost of spiritual strain for everyone inside it, along with a boatload of mana. Considering Matt, the latter cost might as well not exist, but the former was a fairly harsh condition.

The hourglass only sped up time by a factor of two, so they couldn't abuse it and completely remove their healing cooldowns, but it did let them rest completely in just an hour of real time, allowing the rest of them to recover mentally, albeit not spiritually, from the challenge they just cleared.

As it turned out, that was a good thing because just minutes after entering the second level of the sixth floor, they felt a familiar someone else flaring with Genesis Energy not far away.

Despite the signal almost instantly vanishing from their Genesis Energy perception, they were close enough to easily catch up to the lone fighter.

Long Zhiyuan looked almost as surprised to see them as Matt was to see him.

Given their previous enmity, Matt didn't hesitate to send a burst of [Cracked Mana Spear] at his fleeing back. But just like before, his robes rose and blocked the neutral mana attack.

Not willing to let such a strong enemy Young Master live if they could help it, the four of them chased him down.

It immediately became obvious that he had already fought his way through this portion of the ruin, as there were no monsters present. He was seemingly intimately familiar with the layout of the ruin and was able to run, fly, and dodge his way through the rocky cavern leading them on a chase to a portion of the ruin he hadn't cleared trying to lose them on the copies of other delvers still lurking in the forest.

They chased him to the neighboring ruin which turned out to be a winter one, which Long Zhiyuan smartly refused to enter, and forced him to take a [Wind Cutter] to the leg from Susanne after she cut her way closer, reappearing in a different spot while already invisible to land the blow. Blood flew, and the Young Master pulled back for a moment, interposing a physical shield between himself and Susanne. She instantly broke the shield with her next attack, and the man lost what looked like half of his left hand.

He tried to use his Concept to fly away, but Matt threw his own Concept against Long Zhiyuan's, shattering the working and sending him tumbling to the ground. Aster hit him with [Kar'tan Greets His Foes], which only resisted his movement for a moment before he smartly spent a large chunk of mana on a [Cleanse Corruption] to remove the effect. Before too long, his mana would be exhausted, and he would be easily crushed.

Liz was the closest, and lashed out with [Blood Whip], but Long Zhiyuan sprang back at her with a skill enhanced lunge and slashed out with his trademark flaming claws, catching Liz in the face despite her attempted dodge.

Her helmet crumpled in, and Matt winced as he saw the double break on her jawbone. It was healable, but Liz would be in pain whenever she ate for at least the next week.

Long Zhiyuan took advantage of Liz staggering back to continue his retreat, but Matt cut him off with a [Crescent Sweep] combined with a quick [Mana Charge], throwing the sword with everything he had.

It spun through an arc to blow through the latest shield that Long Zhiyuan had thrown up before biting deeply into his back.

As Matt's blade completed its arc and returned to him, he caught it and raced forward.

In theory, he could use the skill while moving, but it was his first time casting the skill in true combat, and he didn't have that level of control yet, forcing him to pause.

Still, Aster was right there and picked up the slack, catching Long Zhiyuan in his good leg with a burst of [Snowbank] to cover him in clinging frost.

Susanne reappeared from *somewhere*, with her sword inches away from bisecting the Young Master when lightning flashed around the man. He teleported just out of range, and he narrowly avoided falling on his face as he redoubled his speed.

Liz was already back on her feet, and threw her spear at his fleeing form, guiding it with [Blood Manipulation].

Long Zhiyuan proved he was a top-tier Young Master as he dodged the attack at his back, and in his roll, sent out an enlarged claw strike empowered with earth mana at Aster. Matt retrieved and triggered a talisman to block the strike without breaking stride, allowing Aster to land an [Ice Spear] on the Young Master's chest.

Aster jumped on Susanne's shoulder and started pulling ice and snow from the adjoining ruin, throwing it at the fleeing man and encasing him utterly, literally freezing him in place. It didn't hold for very long, as Long Zhiyuan erupted from captivity in a burst of flames, using the explosion to boost his speed and further the distance between them. He looked fairly singed and still had some ice clinging to him, but wind and fire whipped around him, lengthening his stride tenfold.

Matt redirected most of his mana to the combination of buffs that boosted his physical speed, sent the rest to [Air Manipulation], and took off after the Young Master. Just as he got close enough for an attack, ten new points of Genesis Energy appeared in the distance.

With the newfound urgency of needing to kill Long Zhiyuan before they entered into a larger melee, Matt swung a glowing sword at the Young Master's neck, only to have it blocked as he raised his left arm between the blade and his head.

Whatever skills and equipment the man had was enough to stop the strike cold, but given the way his arm fell afterwards, it was at least broken. A good wound, and the man shouted in pain and annoyance as his defensive robe was torn. Then the new team of ten reached them, and Matt lost the opportunity to finish off his opponent.

Between their gear and the way they composed themselves, Matt recognized them as akin to the team of ten they'd encountered on the previous floor. Perhaps they were part of the same training regiment, or some Guild was trying to optimize their participation. In either case, Matt wasn't too concerned about the risk they posed as they struck.

He was wrong.

Very wrong.

They focused on him, since he was somewhat isolated from his team, but didn't seem worried about hitting Long Zhiyuan in the crossfire. The Young Master used the opportunity to retreat to the portion of the ruin he had already cleared, scrambling on three limbs—and cradling his mangled arm—to escape.

Matt brought up a [Bulwark] to block the first pair of attacks—a white spear and a tiny fireball that his spiritual sense veritably screamed was dangerous.

The white spear partially penetrated [Bulwark] without breaking the spell but got stuck before it could pass all the way through. The fireball wasn't even slowed down by the shield, passing through it as though it were a mirage. It didn't strike—Matt had already shifted to dodge it—but as it detonated against part of the scenery behind him, it felt less like a [Fireball] and more like a miniature sun flickering into existence.

He responded with a flurry of [Fireball]s himself, like so many glittering stars, but one of the team's mages deflected them upward with a dismissive wave of their hand. Given just *how* quickly they'd been wrenched from his grasp, Matt assessed that mage as a dedicated pyromancer, and a good one at that. They may not have had quite the same finesse that Liz did—Torch could steal a fireball from him without him even noticing—but they had the power to more than make up for it.

He sent his assessment to the rest of his team and started pouring willpower into his AI. Minkalla lifted its restrictions on it, and it sped up accordingly, swiftly creating, discarding, and improving battle plans about as quickly as he could think.

Both attacks showed substantial armor penetration capabilities and were about as strong as he'd seen at his Tier. All their gear was high quality, but not *mastercrafted*, and definitely seemed to prioritize some level of visual conformity, favoring a particular shade of royal blue that Matt didn't recognize as associated with any major factions. However, there were definite concessions made to individual functionality. Four had enchantments that were more mage-like in nature, five were more geared toward physical

defense, with heavy armor plates that more than likely indicated warrior combat styles, and the tenth Matt couldn't quite pin down.

His outfit was decorated with more silver buttons than his peers, while the fabric itself shone and shimmered in a way he couldn't quite follow. Their gear was similarly mismatched—two carried swords, one was unarmed, one had only a shield, one wore spiked gauntlets, and the final attacker carried a glaive with a handle that doubled as a potent staff. The mages also had their own gear—two staves, one wand, and one crystal orb that floated at head height.

Their gear was exceptionally well-maintained in a way that spoke to the degree of reverence they held for their tools, but Matt could pick out the faint traces of blood left on some of their weapons that spun tales of a *lot* of bloodshed, not that he expected anything else.

He dropped [Bulwark] as he started to fall back to the rest of his team, and the white spear embedded in it vanished in a flurry of sparks, reappearing as a bolt of lightning in the hands of the unarmed warrior, who promptly threw it once more.

Lightning crackled along its length and shot out from the sides, connecting the projectile with its surroundings and its thrower, with each tiny bolt accelerating it more and more. His AI warned him that it was starting to bend mid-flight, but pointed out several safe zones he could escape to, and Matt quickly positioned himself into one of them. True to his AI's prediction, the spear bent toward him, but it couldn't redirect itself as much as it needed to strike him, and it obliterated a tree nearby instead.

He had enough of a head start to make it back to the rest of his group before the squad of ten first caught up with him, but as he took the final step to rejoin the circle, Matt found himself going in the wrong direction. He suddenly became very, *very* disoriented and crashed to the ground.

He broke out of the dizzy spell in less than a second, but the first thing he could process was a foot mere inches from his face. It smashed into his mouth, and while [Cracked Phantom Armor] stayed firm, the kick's energy passed straight through it and his mask alike, shattering and caving in several of his teeth.

Matt spat blood and teeth onto the ground, then rolled over to block a punch aimed at his head with [Bulwark]. The spell held firm, but the impact sent reverberations vibrating through his *magic*, disrupting the spell and giving Matt an odd sort of headache.

Not wanting to take the second hit from the next man thrusting out with his sword, Matt cast [Icicle] at his crotch, causing the man to flinch back.

With that opening, Matt was able to stand and cast [Sword Twin] twice by draining most of his mana stone reserves, and with two copies of his blade floating out and giving him some cover, he cast [Wind Cutter] at the man with the armor bypassing ability.

The man dodged the slash of wind, but before Matt could follow up, one of the swordswomen rushed forward, intercepted one of his blade copies with her shield, and cut out at Matt with her own blade while the other man slashed out with a fire spell.

Matt twisted, dodging and blocking the two attacks, but opened himself up to a rib punch from the gauntleted man, sending painful vibrations through his entire body and disorienting him enough that his counterattack was easily dodged. A high-powered pulse of [Endurance] cleared his head, just in time to take a [Shield Bash] to the face.

It broke [Cracked Phantom Armor] but was stopped by his helm, which still painfully aggravated his unusually empty mouth, knocking his head backward even as his primary armor reformed around him.

With a flare of his gravity gauntlets, he pulled the man into a pommel strike that should have broken bones, but his attack bounced off with a dull ring and earned him a kick to the knee for his trouble. It didn't shatter the bone outright, but fractures spread across it.

He jumped back, favoring his uninjured knee, and threw out a [Mana Slash] to intercept a dangerous [Fireball] he felt shooting toward his back. It detonated in a way *not* common to the skill, with a lingering miasmic cloud of violet flames expanding out, connecting with [Cracked Phantom Armor] and setting the skill on fire.

It dealt hefty damage to the defensive skill, but not enough to burn through Matt's outer layer. [Analyze] revealed that the attack was something optimized for burning out enchantments and skills in part through mana exhaustion, which didn't bother him.

The spell still clung to him like tar, but he was able to functionally ignore the flames while dealing with the swordswoman, who sent a series of tight cuts at him from behind her shield.

With little exposed to his angle, Matt sent one of his [Sword Twin] copies at the woman while he sent the other at the pugilist, countering his lack of weapon.

It worked. Sort of.

The brawler took a small cut to his shoulder, but retaliated with a punch that shattered the spell. They withdrew to the wanded mage, who started healing them, but that still left Matt in a two versus one, and a quick glance

through his AI confirmed that the others weren't doing much better. As the brawler was replaced by the shield-only fighter, Matt made a decision, one voiced almost simultaneously by Liz. "Retreat! We're not winning this fight."

A [Cracked Mana Spear] pierced the swordswoman's chest and heart, but the healer, having just finished mending their brawler, had a spell already working on her wound, and the lack of Genesis Energy confirmed that the attack failed.

He recast the spell, but the shield wielder intercepted it, reflecting the beam back at Matt and nearly hitting him in the face, all the while sticking close and preventing him from casting the spell once more.

Matt cursed and struck out at the shield-wielder. They blocked, naturally, but he took the momentary distraction as an opportunity to flee. A teleport brought him above the group, and he used [Air Manipulation] to grab at the winds around him and blow himself away, just behind the rest of his team.

His spiritual perception warned him to dodge as the white spear screamed through where he had been right before his teleportation, and he responded with a [Wind Cutter] at the line of attackers who were already chasing them down.

The fire mage unleashed a river of flame at them, wider than Matt was tall and burning everything in its path to a cinder. As it approached, the heat coming off it felt like standing in front of a blast furnace, and he started summoning some water to protect himself as he used his own fire skills to contest control of the attack.

With a desperate wave of her good hand, Liz threw half her remaining mana pool to [Fire Manipulation], seizing control over just enough of the onrushing inferno to divert it around them, like water passing around a rock. It had the benefit of concealing their exact position, but the move forced all four of them into tight proximity.

As the flames died down, a small barrage of magical arrows fell from the sky. Aster was able to blow most of the projectiles off-course with [Cross Wind], with Susanne cutting down the few that made it through without so much as breaking stride.

A few thousand feet later, the spear shot through their midst with a crack of thunder but, this time, its wielder teleported to it instead, appearing next to Susanne and Aster while trying to skewer the former. The strike connected, and Susanne stumbled and nearly tripped over her own feet. Aster, riding on her shoulder, went flying, but still retaliated with an [Ice Spear] while Matt scooped up Susanne with his [Air Manipulation] until she could regain her

footing. By his AI's reading, she'd used her [Cracked Second Wind] to recover from the injury, and he let her resume her run.

Liz hadn't been idle and had simply tripped the spear warrior with a [Blood Whip], making them stumble enough to fall behind their retreat. Matt contributed with an overloaded [Cracked Mana Spear], and while the shield-user reflected much of the attack, he did hit two of the group located more toward the edge of their formation.

That was enough to get their pursuers to slow down as they grabbed their wounded and tightened up ranks against further attacks, but Matt still felt an arrow break both [Cracked Phantom Armor] and his physical armor, leaving a graze against his flank, but otherwise left him no worse for wear. He started pulling out talismans and dumping huge quantities of mana into skills to slow the pursuers down.

He produced thousands and thousands of gallons of water appearing in a flood behind him, hail rained down in sheets to block their sight and movement, and the earth heaved itself up to create barricades and pitfalls. Aster sent a [Tornado] into their ranks, which they elected to scatter around rather than directly contest, and a [Wind Lance] knocked one cultivator out of the sky who was trying to fly over Matt's obstructions.

At the same time, Susanne used [Mana Blade] to lengthen her sword, then felled clusters of trees for Matt to throw at the group chasing them.

Their pursuers proved their prowess by dodging, leaping over, or blasting through everything his team could throw in their way. Against anyone else, he would appreciate the skill they displayed, nearly doing an obstacle course at a dead sprint. But, at the moment, all he wanted was for them to find someone easier to chase after.

The next arrow was aimed at Liz, prompting Matt to block the shot with a massive [Bulwark] behind them. His shield virtually exploded as it stopped the blinding arrow from getting any closer to his team, and he heard the splinters of the arrow ping harmlessly off his armor. The skill was thoroughly shattered in his spirit, more than he had felt in years, and it would take a few minutes for it to reform enough to be usable. Minutes he didn't have.

The four of them passed through a narrower portion of the ruin with large stone walls that they had chased Long Zhiyuan through not a dozen minutes before. Matt used [Earth Manipulation] to collapse the walls, but that barely slowed their pursuers, who simply blew through the barriers and sent rubble flying.

Of course, that meant they hadn't seen the minefield of talismans that Matt had dropped when they barreled ahead with the force of a rampaging

dragon.

Elemental explosions triggered all around them—clouds of acid, mountains of stone and ice, hurricane-force winds, raw kinetic force, chains of lightning, and flashbangs that rapidly alternated between casting darkness and light. He'd been forced to use nearly all his remaining proximity-triggered talismans in the maneuver, but it managed to further the gap between them all the more. Most of the group was stopped, and only two of them—the spear warrior and the fire mage—kept pace.

Liz dropped a [Blood Chakram] behind her, paired with a small barrage of [Blood Bullets].

A burst of flame evaporated most of the projectiles, but it critically slowed them down.

Before they were able to capitalize on it, the spear wielder once more threw, and then teleported to his weapon, despite Matt and Aster's spatial lockdown. But, this time, he arrived next to Matt, who met the man's thrust with a flare of his repulsion field and a burst of [Cracked Mana Spear] directed at his face.

The man vanished before the attack could land, but Matt didn't pause in his desperate sprint.

He left a few more [Cracked Mana Trap]s in his wake and was forced to sweep [Cracked Mana Spear] a couple more times to preserve their lead, but they eventually managed to make it to the blizzard ruin. Susanne fell to her knees and Liz moved to check on her, but Matt and Aster couldn't afford the luxury of pausing. The two of them worked to create a massive dome of ice around themselves, compacting it and strengthening it as much as possible.

It took what felt like forever for the team to reappear, with all ten having regrouped and unerringly following his own team. Matt tried to resist as the fire mage *burned* through their icy shelter but lost the battle within seconds.

Still, that wasn't his main aim. He'd directed enough mana into the ever-raging blizzard around them that each snowflake was more like a sharpened needle, and they dug at and picked into the group's skin and eyes.

They staggered back, trying to defend against a hundred thousand insect-sized attackers, and Liz finally managed to drape Susanne's arm over her shoulders, the two of them continuing the flight deeper into the blizzard ruin.

Matt didn't relent, instead redoubling the amount of effort he was putting into attacking the team of ten. They struck out at him, but he was never where they expected. He was the Herald of Winter, and that *meant* something. From needles to mana stones, then mana stones to daggers, the shards of ice kept

growing and getting stronger. Aster threw in her own contributions, directing actual skill attacks and her own Concept to further empower the ruin itself.

Eventually, between the ruin's natural blizzard, Matt and Aster making it so much worse, and a group of reflections that attacked them, the ten broke off their pursuit. After waiting for a few moments to ensure that it wasn't just a trick, Matt and Aster took off to rejoin the others

Thankfully, they were able to quickly find where the ladies had wound up and used [Ice Manipulation] to avoid any reflections that might have attacked them.

It took them a little while, but they eventually found their way out of the wintery area, and after running through another two ruins, they found a safe cave to hide in. As an extra precaution, Matt covered the entrance over with [Earth Manipulation].

Dropping their house, Matt and the others could finally relax, and they all collectively dropped.

Aster looked absolutely awful. Half of her fur had been burned off, and her tail had been fully incinerated, but she was still the first to speak. "What was that team? Were they secretly Tier 14s?"

No one had an answer, but Matt crawled to his knees and over to Susanne, who his AI said was in the worst shape. She wasn't *dying*, but it seemed like she'd spent most of her [Cracked Second Wind] healing trying to get her back into running shape. The skill could return her to prime health...if she had enough mana reserved in it, and the wounds she'd taken had clearly outstripped it by a large margin.

Most critically, her armor had been damaged enough that it was tearing into her body with every movement. Beyond that, half of her face had been burned off. Her eye was in surprisingly good condition—probably restored by [Cracked Second Wind]—but her ear was a charred, shriveled lump of flesh, most of her hair was gone, and her mask was flickering and nearly failing. It looked like she'd taken a [Flamethrower] to her face while Aster had been on her shoulder. Still, while the burn was perhaps the most *visual* injury, the fragments of metal cutting into Susanne's body with every passing second were a higher priority.

Not bothering to get her onto the table, Matt started pulling off her armor and said, "Bwe beed bo—"

Pausing as he ran his tongue over his now shattered teeth, he concentrated and carefully enunciated. "We need. To. Get the metal. Out of her wound. Every. Time. Shaeeah- she moves, it ish mahking it worse."

Despite having a broken jaw and hand, as well as missing massive strips of skin from her forearm, which were temporarily patched up with [Bandage], Liz crawled over and assisted him. In just half an hour of frantic work, they had Susanne closed back up.

He couldn't do much more than dump a healing potion over the charred portions of her head and neck, but it wouldn't be hard to keep them from getting infected. And with that taken care of, the rest of her burns were fairly superficial.

Aster had gotten it *much* worse. The only reason she'd been able to keep fighting was a newer use of her Concept that she had developed, which let her 'freeze' her sense of pain. It didn't provide any healing, but it *did* make cleaning out her newly textured hide less painful for the both of them. Once she was relaxing in a sink full of ice water after the worst of her burns had been cleaned out, they dug through their supplies for salves to heal burns and delicately applied them to the ravaged skin. Only after she had been properly treated and medicated did Aster release her hold on her Concept, and Matt felt a dull wave of pain through their bond.

With the worst of the injuries taken care of, he turned to Liz and helped her remove her helm and then carefully examined her jaw.

Long Zhiyuan had done a number on her and had shattered her jaw in two places.

It wasn't pleasant, but he helped Liz set the bone before casting [Ranged Heal] and [Bandage] on the wound, allowing her to work her own magic with relative ease.

It also looked like her spear had exploded while it was in her grip, as both of her hands and arms were absolutely *filled* with splinters and shrapnel, in addition to several fractures in the bone and the missing skin. Her right arm was at least easy enough to treat, but with her left arm still on such intense healing cooldown *and* still wounded from the general...all they could do was wrap it and splint it to try and prevent it from getting worse, using her armor's vambrace as a makeshift cast.

Matt was no healer, and he felt like he might have aggravated the entire limb with his clumsy efforts with [Ranged Heal] to provide some basic relief. Liz was also burning some of her blood to regrow the skin she'd lost on her right arm, but she simply didn't have enough to spare to do much more than encourage it to scab over. Her left arm was almost useless at this point, but they'd just have to deal with that.

After helping her, Matt returned to Aster, who had curled up underwater, licking the stump where her tail once was.

She looked up to him with watery eyes and asked, “Are you okay?”

That caused Matt to choke up, and he forced out a smile—realizing a moment later that the gesture may not have been reassuring—and said, “Ahm fine. How abo’ you?”

He’d adjust to the missing teeth soon, but talking would feel *weird* until they left the planet, and he got them regrown.

Aster shook her head. “They burnt my fur and killed my tail.”

Through their connection, Matt could feel how devastated she really was, and despite her trying to put up a brave front, he could tell this was getting to her. She had been burnt before, with damage worse than this, but they were always near a healer, where they could fix the damage and then Liz could pour a hair growth potion on her to get her good as new.

But inside Minkalla, using a potion like that was both frivolous and dangerous. A hair growth potion was technically a healing potion and would add some healing cooldown to her already stressed body.

Essentially, Aster was going to have to stay like this.

He reached out to pet her, but she flinched away and said, “I’m not pretty enough to pet.”

Matt ignored her as he scratched the top of her head, careful not to disturb her burns, and pulled her out of the sink to work more healing lotion into her leathery and charred flesh.

While he worked, he murmured words of comfort to her, which eventually put her to sleep.

With her taken care of, he got to his feet and stumbled to the bathroom and proceeded to pull out the remaining lumps of enamel that remained from his front teeth.

It was excruciatingly painful, but he suffered in silence. The others were all passed out and needed their rest.

After downing a healing potion and casting [Bandage] on his ribs, he put his armor back on and stood guard while the others rested.

As he sat there, he meditated on the disastrous fight. Without his AI able to record, he couldn’t review it directly, but Tier 11 memory was essentially flawless for short-term situations.

Long Zhiyuan likely hadn’t meant to lead him into an ambush, but it wasn’t impossible. Meanwhile, the ten were definitely connected to the ones they’d fought earlier, and that Claude had warned them about, but they were still *substantially* superior to the previous group. Any two of them were easily a match for anyone on Matt’s team. In an even fight, Matt felt like his team

probably would have a slight edge, but they were outnumbered more than two to one, so they never really stood a chance.

Their coordination and teamwork had been exceptional as well. Not flawless, but for such a large team to perfectly weave spells and attacks without ever once interfering with plans or blocking lines of attack was *extraordinary*, to say nothing of the gear they'd been using. Their bodies were tougher, their magic was extraordinarily powerful, and they almost seemed to move as a single unit.

He wasn't sure if it was a new type of death squad, but he shuddered to think of what they could have done if they were Tier 14 instead of alleged Tier 12s.

The four of them would have almost certainly died if that had been the case.

Again, he thought about Tiering up, but he shied away from the idea.

Had they come this far just to fail and Tier up at the last possible moment?

Matt rejected that notion.

It had just been one bad fight, after a long string of victories through Minkalla. There had been setbacks of various degrees, less than total wins, but they had conquered everything set before them until now and profited enormously from it.

Except...that was how it almost always was, wasn't it? There was no gradual increase in challenge until someone found their limit, with the option to leave before they got overwhelmed. For fighting other delvers, most people fared just fine, one way or another, until they ran into one of the big fish in this small pond and were promptly eaten. Matt had personally ended the lives of dozens without giving them any chance to retreat when it became obvious he would overpower them, to speak nothing of the people who had died near instantly to his more powerful abilities.

They had lost this fight, convincingly, and they had come close to losing much more than that. He could prepare, make items or plans to help counter the group, but they could do the same against him. The biggest change in relative power that might occur in the near future was for members of the opposing group to fail their Folded Reflections challenge, and have their Concepts replaced with ones that were worse and unfamiliar to them.

It was something of a distant hope, but always possible.

Better skills and items for escape were feasible though, and that was something he could definitely work on before any more encounters.

Even if it meant they would just run away faster next time, instead of standing their ground. Long Zhiyuan had proved the efficacy of *that* strategy,

and it was something they'd outright practiced for. Minkalla was eminently survivable, so long as you were careful to not overextend. It was a hard thing to balance, since he didn't want to *escape* from his fight against his copy at the end of the floor. He needed to win, and without serious injury.

Still, Matt was worried.

They had taken serious injuries during this fight that would take weeks, if not months, to recover from. At least for the injuries they *could* heal.

Aster's tail wouldn't be regrowing until they got her to a proper healer, and while Liz's enhanced healing meant that she'd have basically full functionality in her right arm within a few days, he wouldn't be surprised if it would be sore for months, or effectively the entire rest of the time they were in Minkalla. That her left arm would require higher-tier healing than they could find here was basically a given, but Liz still pushed herself to use it as much as possible. His own teeth were gone as well, but that felt less important for the time they had.

Thinking of time, he pulled out the hourglass from their earlier delve and sent mana into it.

The spiritual strain was instantly noticeable, but he pushed through it and focused on meditating through the growing uncomfortableness. The others would be dealing with the same strain, but he was the only one with a skill that seriously stressed his spirit, which limited how much he could use the item right now.

He wouldn't be able to keep it up for long, but it allowed his team to recover that bit faster, which might mean the difference between life and death in the next encounter.

Pain was nothing new to Matt.

Discomfort was an old friend.

Seeing his friends so badly hurt was unacceptable.

He was durable and hard to kill; he should have been the one to take those blows.

Despite knowing how unrealistic it was, he wanted to be the center of the battlefield. If everyone was focused on him, they wouldn't be attacking Liz and Aster.

He hadn't even *seen* the attack that had so badly burned Susanne and Aster, and that ate at him.

Matt didn't have an easy answer, but he was used to working through problems and started figuring out ways to draw all the attention, and therefore attacks, to himself.

His gravity gauntlets were a good start, and with the cultivation core of the black hole, he had a few ideas sparking. He also *really* needed to improve the second set of enchantments on his sword, and seeing Long Zhiyuan's armor in action today had given him some interesting prospects.

While the others slept, he started tinkering.

Matt roused with a groan as Liz gently shook him awake.

Everything hurt, so he immediately channeled [Endurance] to help alleviate the aches and pains.

But where the skill normally washed away soreness like this, it did little more than mute the injuries thanks to the healing cooldown his body was accruing.

It didn't do anything for the spiritual strain he was feeling either, and after pushing the time accelerator, he was feeling like a worn dish rag.

Getting up, he found Susanne eating a small breakfast of savory oatmeal with a battered-looking Aster. Bowls for himself and Liz were already set out.

Sitting down with Liz, they quietly ate until Aster finished and asked, "What did you do to your gloves?"

Matt didn't need to look down to see what everyone else was looking at. And he couldn't really argue that it was an odd sight to behold.

Embedded into a spare set of armor, he had carved a hole in the center of the chest to place the cultivation core of the black hole.

It was then linked to his gravity gauntlets through a bundle of conduit running down his arms. Considering the work was both rushed and intentionally temporary for both the gauntlets and the core, it looked sloppy.

But it worked, and that was all that really mattered.

"Bah lingering dhegmn... By linking. The Heart. Of the Black Hole. Wish da... With the gravity gauntlets. I wash able to ingereashe... Ingresh...*whuckin* Boosht..." Forcing himself to slow down, he carefully continued, "*Boost* the power of the gauntlets an' selectively change where da...*the* center of the pull is. It's not perfect. But...it works, and it should be pre-pretty strong. Still locks me down when I'm using them. Becaushe when it comes down to it. All I'm

really doing is using a rune. Modeled off [Throw Voice] to shift the origin point. But, hey, it's a thing."

He'd gotten the idea thanks to Liz, actually. [Throw Voice] was predominantly used by entertainers and infiltrators, but it had been one of the skills she'd gotten for her tournament rewards. Apparently, the skill worked via a variant of object teleportation, and Liz's [Throw Bleed] allowed her to teleport small masses of blood short distances. She didn't use it much, but it worked wonders whenever they faced an enemy with a completely sealed bubble shield.

He started to explain as much in more technical details, but Susanne waved him off, saying it was too early in the morning for her to learn enchanting, especially with Matt's speech being the way it was. The other three wholeheartedly agreed. Still, it got everyone talking, and while Aster and Liz eventually split off to focus on how to counter the team from before, Susanne turned to Matt and asked, "I saw that you worked on my armor. Thank you for that, by the way, but what's the prognosis?"

Hearing that, he shook his head. "Not great. You *could* still— still use it, but that hole was just the start of it. It's covered in fractures, past what I can fix, and any hit it might take to save your life is liable to break it past the point of repair. My advise... Advise... My *shuggesh*tion is, pull out a backup set of armor and don't risk the growth item."

Susanne sighed, an action that cracked the charred skin along her neck and chin, leaving it oozing pus. She ignored it totally, giving him a shallow nod. "Not what I wanted to hear, but good to know."

They loitered around the house a little longer, but before long, they left the house and got moving, not wanting to lose any more of their lead than they already had.

It was unusual, not charging headlong into fights and taking everything down with extreme prejudice, but none of them wanted to risk a fight with another delver at the moment. So, they picked their targets carefully, taking out ruins that their skill sets countered and rarely attacking any of the monsters or delver copies directly. Instead, they crept around and engaged only when they were confident in a quick victory.

From Luna's reports of this floor, that wasn't exactly an outlandish strategy; most other teams were doing the same thing. Everyone wanted to be in their best shape for the final fight of the floor.

Fighting their duplicates always complicated that, but at least those were good practice. Never mind that Matt nearly lost half his hand when taking down one of Susanne's reflections, and Aster's burned ear was shot the rest of

the way off by Matt's reflection. They still *won*, and that was what mattered. They even scored an extra [Blood Manipulation] from one of Liz's reflections, not that any of them needed it.

They were getting *tired*, but at least Matt's presence meant that none of them needed to worry about running low on mana stones, and they were able to practice their newest skills *extensively*, further enhancing their chances when fighting themselves from the time they entered the floor.

They also ended up fighting several other delvers, though fortunately, none of them were anywhere close to as strong as the squad of ten that had almost killed them. They were all *exceptionally* grateful that being Tier 11 meant they needed a fraction of the Genesis Energy that even Tier 12s would require, and that they were able to get enough for the theme challenge halfway through the second layer. With no small amount of cheer, they redoubled their efforts and made a speedrun for the end of the floor. Any treasures they might find paled in comparison to getting *out* before they needed to Tier up, after all.

If they could leave quickly, they could, in theory, have an almost free final floor as everyone else rested and recovered their strength from the previous fights. No one was unscathed this deep into Minkalla, and most teams were stuck waiting for healing, healing cooldowns, or absorbing skills to give themselves an advantage over their final fight copy.

After what felt like nowhere close to long enough and far too long at the same time, they made it to the end of the floor, finding an out-of-the-way ruin with stone that Matt could actually shape, so they could dig out a cavern for themselves. Being at the end of the floor meant that once they decided to challenge the final boss, they could do so refreshed and ready. The reflections that attacked them were predominantly their own and were close enough to full strength that they could get good practice.

And so, they prepared.

Matt dropped his house and charged the shields as far as he could manage, and the four of them got to work. Folded Reflections wasn't like a lot of other floors, where the bosses were static and obvious. Rushing through the floor would be a death sentence if they hadn't *improved* adequately, and that required work.

Liz brewed potions, Matt tinkered with his sword and other equipment, Susanne spent time meditating on her sword, and Aster got practice with her Boon and new spells. All of them absorbed at least a few new skills and spent time working on tactics that their clones wouldn't anticipate.

Most importantly, they *rested*.

Taxing Skills had been exhausting for them, and they'd only had a day of rest between it and Folded Reflections. Since then, they'd been run all the more ragged, but a week was about the best balance they could strike between resting and preparing, and not letting the rest of the delvers catch up. Floor 7 was small enough, and the costs intense enough, that if any of them needed to Tier up to beat their copy, they stood a strong chance of struggling to get enough Genesis Energy to afford both the theme challenge and exit reward. Especially if they weren't the first ones to the floor.

None of them managed to *fully* heal over the week. Liz's arm still was waxy, and Susanne's face was still a mess of scabs and half-healed burns. Aster's burns were hardly any better, and Matt still had holes in his chest that threatened to tear back open if he took another hit because of his healing cooldown. However, none of their wounds would slow them down at this point, and that would hopefully be enough along with their final cheat.

Talismans and potions.

Matt divvied up most of his no-skill talismans between his teammates. Much of his arsenal as Quill had been made with *him* in mind, but there were still enough talismans usable by the others that would make a difference. And when paired with Liz's potions, they would be able to buff themselves to the limit of what a Tier 11 could handle.

If worse came to worst, they could Tier up and just hope they still had enough Genesis Energy to take the theme challenge.

After they were freshly rested from a good night's sleep, they set out to the boss room. If you knew what to look for, it was just as obvious as the ones with an enormous troll waiting in the center. The rooms consisted of crystal caverns comprised of gems that reflected everything, blindingly bright lights that turned everything into a white haze, and thick banks of fog blanketing winding mazes of tunnels that would force people to separate.

The one they found was set in a cavern ruin littered with drooping vines and a number of stalagmites and stalactites. Minkalla didn't recognize 'teams' so much, but this room was perfect for them all, thanks to the silver fog enveloping the area. They all knew what would happen once they entered.

Matt downed his potions, activated his talismans, and drew his swords. To his left and right, the others made their own preparations, with him helping Aster. He took a long look at each of his teammates, then nodded farewell as he stepped into the mists. No sooner had he lost sight of the others than a new figure emerged from the fog across from him.

Their surroundings cleared, giving Matt a clear look at...himself.

They were almost identical. The identical part went without saying, but the *almost* was only because Matt felt way more tired than his duplicate looked, in a way that [Endurance] couldn't touch.

Neither of them moved quite yet, preferring to stare in silent contemplation. Matt couldn't help but wonder what the other was thinking.

Was it aware that it was just a copy of himself?

He had thought of the question before, but Luna didn't have an answer.

From what he had seen, the copies so far weren't rage-fueled monsters like the beasts found in ruins and rifts, but neither did they talk or act like real people. They seemed intelligent, or at least enough to present a facsimile, but not truly sapient. But this final copy was different. Nobody knew just *how* different, but Matt felt his double with his spiritual sense. Its spirit felt complete, not like a shallow shell stretched over Matt's body.

It left Matt and everyone else who cared to think about it with a massive question mark of what Minkalla was actually doing on this floor.

If people hadn't been verifiably killed in this fight by never exiting the mists, he'd wonder if they were simply replaced if they happened to lose. Even as seconds turned to minutes, neither of them stopped inspecting each other. Or rather, he inspected the copy while it stood there. He still had no idea what, if anything, was running through its mind.

Its armor had the same scratches and dents as his own had when he first entered the floor, but it was missing the damage that had been done during his encounters thus far. But that also meant it lacked the repairs and modifications he had done to it as well.

Thankfully, Matt wasn't the same Matt he had been two weeks ago.

Each fight had changed him and forced him to grow.

Through victories and losses, he had improved. He was tired, yes, but he was *experienced* against fighting himself now. He'd strategized, prepared, and dug out a very particular set of gear from the bottom of the loot pile. He'd picked out and exploited his own weaknesses relentlessly, blocked [Cracked Mana Spear] with his own sword, and come to grips with his new skills and Boon in a way that the Matt in front of him simply never could.

Never would.

He was ready.

A sound like a thousand books being flipped through echoed throughout the arena, and Matt was surrounded by a veritable storm of talismans. A good quarter of them unleashed their payload simultaneously, and a hail of elemental attacks barreled down on his copy. He felt the copy ripple through

space, bringing up a matching set of defensive talismans that caused an explosion as the spells collided.

When the air cleared, Matt's clone was standing unharmed, ten feet away from where he'd started and with a shimmering [Bulwark] slowly fading as the parchment of its talismans started to burn away.

Honestly, Matt was glad that he couldn't be taken down so easily. To prevent retaliation in kind, he flexed his Concept to lock space down, and felt with some amusement as his reflection did the same. Neither of them wanted to deal with talismans at the moment. Fair enough, he supposed.

They mirrored each other, raising their swords in a faux salute before blurring into motion.

Except, the swords they raised were vastly different.

Matt didn't wield his growth weapon.

While he loved that blade, it was currently in his left hand, ready to be attached to a mount on his back while he wielded the void sword, that the vampire boss had dropped, as his primary weapon in this fight.

Minkalla had seemingly created it specifically to counter [Cracked Phantom Armor], and Matt wasn't going to pass that advantage up when fighting a copy of himself.

Matt knew it was a good thing that they had chucked it inside the house after getting it, which meant his copy wouldn't have access to it. It wasn't like Matt would allow his mirror to drop the house and rummage around inside for one of the only weapons they had that could reliably cut through his armor.

Twin charged twin, with magic flaring around them identically as their body and minds were empowered. Magic flared around their swords, turning two into four, and four into six, but with that, the mirror broke.

Matt's blade first split into two copies of the fighter set of enchantments, then he switched it to his new mage set, while its copy simply made two copies of the fighter set. Then, while his double left both [Twin]s floating as flanking partners, Matt reabsorbed the *fighter* blade into his main sword, superimposing a portion of its associated enchantments with the mage set. He wasn't entirely sure *why* it worked, but it meant that he was able to lightly split the difference between his enchantment suites.

Dual wielding with two similar sized weapons that were larger than a short sword was nearly impossible. Matt wasn't intending on using both at the same time.

He had made a modification to his armor just for this.

With a flick of his wrist, the void sword snapped to his back as he swung his growth blade and sent a pair of [Mana Slash]es arcing out, just as his

double cast three with its extra floating twin. Two sets detonated as they collided in midair, and Matt quickly swapped swords and sliced through the spare crescent of mana with his void sword before quickly returning it to his back.

He brought [Cracked Phantom Armor] up as he crossed blades with his twin, but while his copy gave the skill a wintry appearance, Matt left his in its normal form. The extra sword his copy had was met by a small dagger that he pulled off his waist with his offhand.

The resulting explosion of the dagger overloading had worked as he hoped. It destroyed the extra sword twin, and his reinforced left arm blocked most of the damage from the explosion caused by the dagger lacking a repair rune to support its durability runes.

That gave him a lead, and he pressed it.

In theory, he and his clone should be perfectly matched. After all, they had identical cultivation and buffs, and Matt didn't even have the option of spending more mana than his duplicate to burn hotter and shorter.

And yet, everywhere they met, Matt's clone gave way.

Strength rushed through his veins as potions empowered his body while talismans strengthened his mind and spirit.

His growth sword bore down on that of his clone's, with the extra weight from the Heavy Iron weighing it down. The clone slowly gave way, but his twin taking the fight slowly was a trap, and he knew it.

His potions and talismans would wear off eventually, and with them, so would his main advantage over his duplicate.

The problem was that Matt, and by extension, his mirror copy, was really, *really* good at dragging things into endurance contests.

Matt easily had mana to spare as he pushed his clone back, and he dedicated it to his gloves. The black hole pulsed in his chest and his enchantments flared. His copy wasn't prepared, and it stumbled backward as Matt struck forth with a full-power blow, flaring [Mage's Retreat] to the peak of its strength.

His sword crashed into a [Bulwark], but that just locked up the skill's use, so Matt quickly put his growth blade away on his back while pulling and stabbing out with his void blade in his off-hand.

Its black and purple point sought blood as it pierced through [Bulwark] and [Cracked Phantom Armor]. At the same time, he separated the growth sword on his back into its constituent [Sword Twin]s, sending all three blades to close in on his copy.

Reacting with admirable speed, it dropped [Bulwark] and spun to the side, dodging most of the void blade. Despite that, Matt pressed his advantage with the confidence of knowing exactly how his copy would react...probably.

He'd practiced against the lesser copies earlier in the floor, but there was no guarantee that this reflection would act the *exact* same way.

Still, it was a gamble that he knew he needed to take.

Just as Matt had hoped, his copy cast [Flamethrower] and directed the torrent of fire at Matt's head.

Matt could have diverted the oncoming rush of flame with [Fire Manipulation], overpowering his copy's own use of the spell, but his instincts said there would be a trick there that he couldn't recognize from his previous fights with his clones. Thankfully, he didn't intend to engage in a battle of [Fire Manipulation] with his twin. Instead of doing the predictable thing, he cast [Hail] while using his boon to direct it into something like an icy mirror of the fire spell.

It didn't put out the flames, but it did allow him to use [Ice Manipulation] and the empowerment from his boon to cut at his copy with a rain of icy arrows.

That forced his copy to drop the fire, but Matt instantly found himself in a struggle to maintain control over his own [Hail], a reversed situation that saw him at a disadvantage when the ice got nearer to the clone than himself.

If he hadn't anticipated exactly that, he might have been in trouble. Instead, he pulsed his Concept and [Ice Manipulation] to spread what snow had accumulated over the entire foggy battlefield.

His clone wasn't prepared for Matt's instant abandonment over the skill, and that gave him enough of an opportunity to throw an off-hand [Crescent Sweep] arcing toward his copy. The copy performed admirably, with a brief halo illuminating its head before it took a quarter-step to the left, taking it just barely out of reach of the void blade that would have cut it in half.

However, the maneuver took the clone directly into the barrage of [Fireball]s that was hiding in the wake of [Crescent Sweep]. Most of them were stopped by pinpoint second-layer defenses of [Cracked Phantom Armor], but one managed to detonate on a comparatively undefended portion of the armor.

Only to do absolutely nothing against the implacable defense, of course. It still distracted his copy enough for the void sword to come back and cut right through [Cracked Phantom Armor] in its entirety, leaving a large, jagged cut along his copy's upper arm.

On anyone else, it would have cut their arm clean off at *least*, but Matt was a *touch* more durable than the average Tier 11.

Fighting yourself was a *pain*.

It wasn't like he *enjoyed* utilizing such complex chains of skills just to land a solid hit on a single target, but at the same time, it was about the only strategy he wouldn't expect himself to use because he'd only come up with it while fighting himself recently.

Thinking about fighting yourself was *also* a pain.

Taking advantage of his copy finally being wounded, Matt channeled a [Wind Cutter] through his growth sword after catching and returning the void sword to his back, allowing his new enchantments to shine. The past weeks had been spent fruitfully, and with a full set of skills to work with, Matt had added three new features to his sword.

The first was a boost in cast speed to wind spells. It was sloppy, and far, *far* from his best work, but the four percent extra speed, and three percent extra power it gave was that much more of a boost that his copy wouldn't have and wouldn't expect. It would also give Matt an edge any time they clashed with [Air Manipulation], which he suspected he would seriously need.

Though three percent extra power wasn't enough to break through his copy's [Bulwark]. Before he could enact his next plan, Matt's eyes went wide as mana flared around his copy's arm in a very familiar pattern.

He didn't *usually* cast [Cracked Mana Spear] this early in a fight, but perhaps his copy didn't want to wait until Matt ground him down, incremental improvement by incremental improvement.

Of course, his copy couldn't know that Matt had prepared for that exact eventuality. *He* certainly wouldn't have any idea how to reliably stop his strongest trump card, if not for that fateful second encounter with Long Zhiyuan.

He and his AI had spent a couple of sleepless nights dissecting Matt's haphazard battlefield [Analyze] of the Young Master's lifesaving robe, and his hard work had paid off. The robe had an unusual form of elemental resistance, if 'neutral mana' could be called an element.

It blocked skills like [Mana Slash], [Mana Bolt], and [Mana Spear], making it uniquely good against Matt. It was also *insanely* mana-intensive to run, but while that meant Matt now knew how to overwhelm Long Zhiyuan the next time they fought, it was good news for him, as massive amounts of mana were Matt's forte.

His version was imperfect. Not quite so shoddy as his wind enchantments, but shoddy, nonetheless. Still, he was confident in his ability to block enough

of [Cracked Mana Spear] to take any remaining on his armor directly. Now that he thought about it, the enchantment might also be a good way to break through his clone's [Cracked Phantom Armor], similar to the vampire's former sword. The tradeoff for it was that he inherently couldn't *use* any neutral-mana attacks channeled through his sword while the enchantment was active, but that was workable.

[Cracked Mana Spear] screamed through the air, the raw power of it making the hairs on the back of Matt's neck rise and was met by Matt's sword. The beam parted around his blade, fragmenting into a diffused beam of energy that splashed harmlessly against his armor.

He wasn't about to just stand and take the attack like an idiot. He ducked and weaved as he drew closer, keeping his sword interposed with the beam as he tried to dodge it. Matt was far slower than most of the enemies he fought, and his copy had no issues keeping the attack trained on him, even as it danced out of Matt's reach, keeping the armor-piercing sword far away from his armor.

Before his copy hit its spiritual strain limit, it cut the spell off and cast its own flurry of [Fireball]s at him.

Recasting [Bulwark] and rushing forward while swapping weapons, Matt tanked the spells and got in close.

Once there, he cast [Fire Weapon] on the void sword and activated his gravity gauntlets.

He quickly diverted as much power as possible to the item, pushing past their previous limits with his added enchantment, and focused it all through his Heart of the Black Hole.

From the center of his chest, a wave of gravitational force started attracting everything except himself with far more power than the gauntlets themselves could normally put out. He even enhanced the effect with several force-based talismans that he'd integrated with his glove-enhancement creation for this very purpose.

Sloppy work, but it would increase the pulling force of his gauntlets for a short while.

His copy tried to block the power with its Concept repulsion, but Matt threw his own Concept at the mirror's.

While the boost he'd gotten to his Concept's strength from being in space and facing down a black hole was minor, his copy needed to fight not only Matt's Concept, but the enhanced gravity gauntlets as well. When coupled with the strain from using [Cracked Mana Spear] so early, enough minor differences made a major one.

His copy's Concept working shattered, and Matt took advantage of the suddenly-unlocked space to pull a set of talismans from his storage. He stopped his repulsion and channeled more power through his gauntlets, meeting his copy with the tips of his blade and void blade, along with a half-dozen talismans aimed at the center of its chest.

His sword met [Cracked Phantom Armor], and the void mana from the vampire longsword and talismans came together into a devastatingly strong attack. Combined, his mirror's armor never stood a chance, and it shattered. The successful strike left the copy with one seriously bleeding gash along its thigh, and a dozen smaller wounds from the spells that landed.

His copy was blown backward with the force of the talismans, and Matt nearly lost his grip on his sword as it reverberated with the explosion. His reflection, meanwhile, broke through Matt's spatial lock even as he flew backward, activating a talisman array of his own and several self-buffing talismans to match Matt's own preparations.

A familiar pattern of swords rained from the sky as space was locked once more.

The twin jumped forward, and Matt was forced to redirect his mana to his self-buffs to escape. He danced to the side, slipping through a small gap in the swords around him to avoid a [Mana Charge] from his copy, and followed up with a [Fire Bolt]. The copy grabbed one of the falling swords and jerked it into the path of the skill, weakening the projectile enough that it splashed harmlessly off of its target's armor.

By the way the reflection was acting, Matt could tell that it was directing a fair bit of mana to regeneration, trying to recover from the wounds he'd inflicted.

He *wanted* to pull out his Aurora Lance and blast his clone to bits, and he was certain that his reflection had the same thought. However, *that* particular attack was firmly not an option for this battle. There were too many ways its activation could go *catastrophically* wrong for the caster, and while unlikely to happen over the course of a normal battle, both Matt and his copy intimately knew *all* the ways it could fail, and how exactly to trigger them.

He was fortunate, really, that his copy wasn't willing to sacrifice itself just to kill him.

Matt shot a carefully timed [Cracked Mana Spear] at his reflection, forcing it to dodge directly into the path of a sword as it fell from the sky. It clanged off the copy's armor but still threw the reflection off of its rhythm, which Matt eagerly capitalized on with his void sword. He concentrated his gravity gauntlets and Concept entirely in the blade to make it truly inescapable.

Mana flared as his copy brought up a [Bulwark] *lengthwise*, deflecting the blade to the side. Matt dropped the sword, then shifted his gravity to his glove, and what started as a sword slice ended as a punch. The reflection's head cracked back, and Matt imbalanced his Concept and gravity to apply a powerful rotation to his copy. It practically backflipped, recovering with a bit of wobbly [Air Manipulation] to lift itself into the air, and [Cracked Phantom Armor] grew even more ornate as mirror Matt put a solid two-thirds of his regeneration into the skill. The [Sword Rain] wasn't quite done yet, but his copy was able to reinforce its armor wherever the last few blades were striking, just as Matt was able to.

Matt wrenched control over the air his copy was using to fly, throwing most of his regeneration into the skill, and *pulled*. He watched as his copy was forced to redirect nearly all its mana to not being tossed around like a ragdoll, while [Cracked Phantom Armor] instantly lost its decoration and dimmed in a way only Matt could spot, which told him the copy had dropped the second layer of the spell.

His copy had two things working against it as they struggled for the winds. The first was that Matt had more practice with his boon-enhanced [Air Manipulation], and knew if not *all*, then at least *more* ways he could leverage its added finesse to great effect. The second was the three percent extra power provided from his enchantments.

Three percent, in all honesty, wasn't much. But even when dealing with thousands of mana per second, sixty mana a second *was* a lot. Enough to tip the scales for anyone.

Even as Matt's copy grounded itself and diverted more mana to controlling the air around him, Matt responded with his own [Cracked Mana Spear].

The copy tried to move and tried to block but taking mana from [Air Manipulation] meant that Matt would buffet him around, and the reflection wasn't able to block with Matt's Concept bearing down on him. In the end, he abandoned defense in favor of offense, and responded with a [Cracked Mana Spear] of his own.

Matt's own beam struck his copy in its wounded shoulder, and the return attack lanced through Matt's calf with a bolt of pain. His AI helpfully informed him that his leg was now missing most of its muscle tissue and was practically useless.

There were no *good* injuries, but fighting yourself was basically about damage control, and he would take the exchange of his copy's right arm for a little mobility.

The copy silently withdrew, shifted its longsword to his left hand, and started slinging spells.

A smart move.

While Matt had trained to be able to use his sword in his off hand, he wasn't ambidextrous by any means, and the copy clearly knew that.

Still, Matt wasn't afraid of a fight with spells.

While [Cracked Mana Spear] was strong, it had its limitations. Namely its spiritual strain. And with the condition his spirit had been in when they first entered the floor, Matt suspected that his copy had about fifteen to twenty more seconds of spell usage left.

Matt smiled as he cast [Ice Manipulation] to grab the nearby ice and send it back at his copy.

Minkalla might be a forge, but he was good tempered steel thanks to Luna's decades of training.

Despite the danger, he was having fun.

Susanne looked at the copy of herself and knew this would be a brutal fight. Not that fighting against a reflection of yourself was ever easy.

As she sized herself up, she pulled off her mask and her reflection did the same. They looked into each other's eyes, a burned and scarred gaze meeting unblemished skin, and both of them knew that they could win. She wasn't fighting *Queen* here, she was fighting *Susanne*, and there would be no tricks to hide that truth. If she couldn't face this reality, if she couldn't best her past, she didn't deserve to be here.

Liz and Matt had doubts when Susanne refused any extra potions beyond the initial dose and all the talismans, but Aster seemed to understand, at least a bit. This place was less personal to them. It was a place to find treasure, gather new skills, and grow stronger. Nothing more.

Susanne briefly glanced down at their respective armors. Her reflection still had the functioning growth armor, while she was stuck with some looted armor from a few floors ago that *mostly* fit her thanks to Matt's efforts. The growth armor was potent, and her own was somewhat more geared toward defending against ranged attacks, but that ultimately didn't matter.

The strength of her convictions and mastery of her blade would decide this fight, not some fancy suit of armor.

She had been hoping for Folded Reflections since she had heard about it. The reward was incredible, obviously, but that was the least important part. Susanne needed to prove to everyone, most importantly herself, that she would forge herself anew with each challenge conquered, each skill mastered, and each enemy slain. That she could wade through a planet filled with death and walk out the other end unbroken at a Tier few others had. There was

nothing more direct to prove that than fighting your own past, literally for the challenge, and overcoming it for the reward.

She was here to test her mettle and her metal, to prove that she would always come back stronger and batter down any threat or challenge. To prove that she wouldn't let her past define her, that she would never back down, and that *she would never falter*.

Her manifestation was escalating in power as she focused, and as it reached new heights, both she and her clone activated [Iron Skin] at the same time, with the metal racing out from her steel gray eyes to cover her body.

The final fight of its life had begun.

Her clone opened with the same move it almost always did—slash its blade to turn invisible and cut through space. It was odd learning that she was *predictable*, but she'd been able to adjust from the last half-dozen times that she had fought her reflections, whereas this copy hadn't.

She swung out with her own sword, aiming at the spot she predicted her copy would make an appearance.

Her blade impacted with something, and she knew she had been correct.

The copy reappeared as [Cracked Second Wind] knit its flesh back together and lunged at her, this time fully visible.

She backed up and blocked the blow to savor the feeling of her Concept manifestation clashing with another.

It wasn't like the feeling of a blade hitting another blade. Instead, it was similar to when she battered down someone else's Concept, though not quite identical. A manifestation was more solid than that.

A tiny bit more real.

She had fought others with weapon manifestations a couple of times at Carol's behest, but they were all at a much greater Tier than her, and she hadn't been able to feel this unique sensation then. Her previous reflections had given her a similar experience, but none of them had *quite* so solid a Manifestation.

Each time she experienced the clash, she was able to refine her blade, feeling its weaknesses like never before through her reflection.

Two inches from the top of her blade on the left side, there was a spot that had stung like a sore tooth during the impact.

Taking that knowledge, she polished her manifestation to remove that weakness, even as she threw herself at her Minkalla copy.

At first, they fought with purely their mundane blade skills, but that only lasted until she forced her copy back through her potion enhanced strength, and it decided to cast [Wind Cutter] at her.

Susanne cut the attack in half with a single swing of her blade, then followed up with [Dash] and used the boost in speed to close the gap between herself and her copy.

As she brought her blade around in a heavy swing, she smiled as her copy back-stepped just enough to dodge the blade while preparing to rush back in. But instead, Susanne cast [Mana Blade] to extend her weapon.

Her reflection seemed surprised by the move, but it summoned a second copy of her Concept manifestation and blocked the now larger descending blade. Meanwhile, the fake Susanne's main blade lunged forward, trying to impale her original.

Using her own Concept to create a second version of her blade as well, Susanne blocked the lunge and cast [Counter]. The spell repelled the blade with explosive force, and Susanne used her main blade to cut out in retaliation, but her reflection used its own [Counter] to block the blow.

Not wanting the skirmish to fall into a stalemate of [Counters] until one of them ran out of mana, Susanne cast [Fire Burst] and allowed the explosion of flames to wash over her copy.

While it worked, the reflection had its own defenses, even if it didn't have [Fire Manipulation], so it was only singed by the blast.

Her reflection cast [Dash] and [Hypersonic Edge] as the flames washed away.

[Fleet Feet] enhanced her footwork, and she sidestepped and then ducked under the swipe of her copy's weapon while lunging forward and casting [Mana Thrust].

She nearly cut the reflection in half with the attack, but it managed to block her blow, so they fell back into a stalemate.

Susanne retreated a few steps and cast [Momentum Overcharge], allowing the spell to steal some of her speed, and when it had a good bit of energy stored up, she cast [Dash] to close the gap once again.

As her blade came around, she unleashed [Momentum Overcharge], and when her blade impacted her copy's, she overpowered the upraised sword and smashed both of their blades into the copy's chest.

She was sure that it was going to kill the copy, but [Phantom Armor] sprung up and took the brunt of the blow, to her irritation. Susanne definitely hadn't had the skill active when they entered the floor, which meant it must have cast it sometime during this very fight. But that told her that the mirror was lower on mana than she was.

That was useful information.

Rushing forward, she brought her sword down in a massive, overhand swing, but her mirror was able to roll out of the way and cut space to dodge the blow, despite Susanne trying to lock the battleground down with her Concept.

Still, she had compounded her few advantages into a distinct lead as she took off after her copy and started chasing it down.

She just needed one more blow to land in order to finish it off and could see its end drawing near.

It felt right.

Blade fights were brutal and short.

Decided in a single blow.

Just how she liked it.

Aster growled at her copy.

She was not a happy fox.

She had fought. She had been hurt. She had been injured.

But never like this before.

And it made her angry.

Matt had been hurt.

Liz had been hurt.

Susanne had been hurt.

And she hadn't been able to turn the tide.

Normally, she was more than happy to play the spoiled princess when she could, even if it was mostly in jest.

After their brutal loss, she intended to change that.

No more miss nice fox.

They started off with an [Ice Spear] each, which collided in midair to create a thin cloud of snow between them. A dual [Wind Lance] collision blew that away, leaving them in the same position as before. Elemental mages of the same type often stalemated each other, as the increase in control and power of said element got better the closer it was to the other mage, making defense much easier than offense. That basic dynamic was doubly true for support mages like Aster, who had far more ways to deflect, avoid, or block damage than deal it out.

Fighting against a *copy* of yourself made that problem so much worse, as there were hardly any tricks or spells that one side could exploit for an advantage. Aster had improved over her time on this floor; they all had, but it

was quite difficult to overcome the inherent disadvantages she needed to contend with in order to wound her copy.

Her frozen earth elemental, courtesy of her Boon, allowed her to make unusual types of ice. With her tiara turning [Create Ice] into a minion, the creation lumbered forward as she summoned it into being. Matt had helped her cast the spell a dozen times to strengthen it to the maximum before they took on the boss fight, and she hoped it would help turn the tide.

Her copy threw a barrage of [Ice Spear]s at it, but her minion just absorbed them all without so much as a crack appearing on its surface.

She growled and threw out a flurry of [Wind Slash]es, which her copy was able to dodge and dispel even as it was predominantly occupied with the elemental. She battered at her copy's Concept with her own, though even with her improved strength in that area, she was still so much better at keeping things from changing than she was at directly hurting someone. Her copy eventually summoned a [Wind Lance] elemental to challenge her elemental, and the two beings began their clash.

Hers was far stronger than her copy's, as it had been reinforced as much as the tiara would support before she entered, but it was kept busy with blocking its spindly and agile counterpart from reaching her. How long their fight would take, Aster wasn't sure, but her summon would definitely win in the end.

Still, she intended to help it.

With a thought, she sent a touch of mana into the carpet of talismans that Matt had made for her and attached to her armor before this fight.

Spells shot out in all directions before curving around and targeting her mirror self.

As the spells landed, Aster took painful smattering of [Hail] on her wounded skin, but she scored a single good hit with [Ice Bullet] on her copy's front leg as it tried to frantically dodge the rain of spells.

If she hadn't been angry before, a reminder that her copy still had intact fur and an actual tail drove her over the edge.

She rushed her copy with wind lengthening her stride, and they both traded spells ever more quickly as the distance closed. Ice and air collided alarmingly close to her face, but she was focused on her target and her plan. A single [Ice Spear] scored a line down her flank, and that was all she needed to end this fight for good.

Aster froze up quickly and started focusing on dodging as best as she was able while fighting against her copy's Concept. Standing barely five feet from

her clone meant that she had to be absolutely perfect to avoid each strike, but dodging was a skill she had honed for decades.

Sadly, so had her copy, meaning neither of them was actually able to hit the other.

An [Ice Bullet] flew through where she had been a heartbeat before as she dodged *left*. At nearly the same instant as her paws left the ground, she teleported to the *right*, just beyond where her copy would see or expect, and lunged at her copy's neck with [Chomp].

The [Ice Spear] from her copy flew harmlessly through the space Aster would have been occupying if she hadn't teleported through all the ice and snow they had created around them.

Anger infused her and powered her jaws.

Rage at her helplessness.

No more.

Shaking her head back and forth as hard as she could, she felt bones snap in her copy, but she didn't let up for even a moment. Aster, strengthened by Matt's talismans and Liz's potions, was substantially stronger than her duplicate.

Her old self.

She, and therefore it, was tougher than that, and refused to die so easily. Aster responded by throwing its wounded body to the side, and directed her elemental, as it rejoined their battle, to crush it to a pulp.

Repeatedly.

Until she felt Genesis Energy rush into her as the reward for her victory.

Proof it was dead.

Aster was already a step away when she noticed a skill shard forming on the ground where her copy had been.

She snapped it up and stored it away as she slinked over to the edge of the cavern while she waited for the others to finish their own fights. Once she settled into a comfortable spot, she pulled out a few healing potions and [Bandage] talismans.

While she had complete confidence in the others and their abilities, she wanted to be able to pounce in and help out if they emerged from their battles wounded or vulnerable.

No one would hurt her friends anymore. Not if she could help it.

Liz thrust her spear out and took her copy in the side but was unable to draw blood from the single hit.

She pulled her spear back as the copy thrust forward with its own spear and used the haft of her weapon to block the blow.

She had already learned the futility of using blood spells against herself.

Before either of them were able to get the spell to land, the target would be close enough to easily wrest control of the opposing spell with their own [Blood Manipulation], rendering it useless. Liz *did* have an advantage over her reflection in that she knew a few more tricks about controlling an opposing blood mage's spells. It wasn't *that* different from stealing control over fire skills, which she'd had plenty of practice with as Torch.

It was a good thing they all came into the boss fight prepared with a handful of Matt's offensive talismans. With them, she was able to gain an advantage by cutting deep into her mirror self's side.

But Liz was hardly one to go down from a single wound, and neither was her reflection.

She was almost impressed with herself, if she was being honest.

Elizabeth Moore was a hard woman to kill.

Without spells, that left the mirror images deadlocked in a melee fight.

Liz had the advantage there, having drank several of her strongest safe potions before the fight, as well as benefiting from Matt's boosting talismans. But she, and therefore her copy, was far too used to fighting stronger opponents for those boosts to be a decisive factor. To make matters worse, the longer they went on, the stronger her copy got as it mixed and consumed blood potions. And it was able to utilize even *stronger* potions than she could.

A sizable amount of her internal arsenal was actively harmful to Liz, where the energy of the potion was too intense for the body to handle or could result in long-term health problems if left untreated. Normally, she was able to use them in moderation, but with her body constantly at the edge of the healing cooldown at the moment, she couldn't treat herself properly afterwards.

Meanwhile, her copy had less of an active healing cooldown than she did, and was apparently less concerned about its long-term health, allowing it to push itself further than she was willing. It wasn't suicidal, but the reflection fought as if Luna was there with a medical team ready to undo anything it did to itself in the name of victory.

Knowing she needed to change the paradigm of their fight, Liz thrust forward once more with a [Fire Weapon] and [Water Bullet] pair.

The water spell hit her copy in the shoulder, but its armor blocked most of the attack while she used her now flaming weapon to push back the copy.

It worked for a moment, but her mirror countered with [Fire Manipulation] and tried to push the weapon away from itself using the fire on the blade as leverage.

Instead of fighting that force, Liz let the copy push the tip of the spear away and used that momentum to spin her weapon around and bring the butt into the copy's left arm.

She felt the crack where her weapon hit the armor but didn't think it was enough to break the arm. If the positions were reversed, it probably *would* have broken her arm, but her healing cooldown had been mostly *over* when she entered the floor, and it was only the fights here that had aggravated the regrown limb to its current state.

The copy formed its spear into a halberd with blood iron, then started building [Blood Charge] on it. Liz responded with a quick [Blood Spear], but the copy sidestepped it and dashed toward Liz with power that burned through its mana and potions.

She tried to retreat and let her copy expend resources while she defended, but it started pouring even more power into catching up to her, leading into a horizontal sweep with the halberd. It was an enormous expenditure for one blow, and Liz knew she couldn't take it head on.

Quickly summoning [Blood Polearm Block], six floating blood copies of her spear appeared next to her. She formed her own spearhead into a partisan, with all the blood copies getting in formation to block the approaching blade.

The halberd's head virtually exploded with blood as [Blood Charge] went off, destroying three of the six copies of her weapon and damaging the head of her material spear.

Hitting her with the halberd wasn't the goal, however, as her copy dropped the weapon almost immediately. It took advantage of Liz's spear being out of position by drawing a dagger and charging her directly, seeking to stab her in the neck.

Liz blocked with both of her hands they tumbled to the ground, where she and her copy struggled in a power enhanced stalemate for a moment, until she wrapped her leg around her mirror's and twisted with all her might.

That sent them rolling just far enough for Liz to get on top and send the dagger flying.

As she was about to extricate herself, her copy interlocked their arms and tried to twist Liz back to the ground.

Pain laced up her left arm in an arc of fire as her far-over-cooldown arm protested the treatment, giving her copy the opening it needed to put her in a

headlock and pin her to the ground.

Liz flailed with her good right hand, trying to punch the copy even as it was behind her. She summoned blood but was countered because of how close they were. She cast [Blood Ragdoll] to no avail, and in the time where her blood was out of control, her copy took advantage of the weakness to transition from the headlock to pinning her to the ground. The copy had apparently noticed the weakness in her left arm, and had grabbed it with both hands, shoving her to the ground underfoot as it attempted to tear her arm off at the shoulder.

Her arm screamed in pain, but Liz resisted the urge to make any more than a pained grunt as she struggled to escape. Her every action only worsened the pain, and slowly and steadily, her copy began ripping her arm off. She needed to think, come up with something, but the pain was *debilitating*. She mentally reached toward her core to Tier up, damn the power loss.

Then, her mind settled on another option, and she went for it.

Her arm gave way halfway up the forearm, tearing a ragged stump up to the point where it had been regrown not a month earlier, and Liz's resolve to not scream in pain was broken. Though, she retained enough presence of mind to carry out her plan.

In the instant before her arm tore, she wrenched herself away, tearing it early, and in her right hand, she summoned a dagger of her own.

Lunging forward at her mirror as it was still reeling backward, she drove the blade through a gap in her armor, and into her copy's neck.

It wasn't an instant kill, of course, but it did free Liz to roll out of the way, ignoring the knives of pain that accompanied her arm-stump brushing against *anything*, and recall her spear to hand.

Her copy was busy knitting itself back together, actively holding blood in. The lone evidence of it having been nearly decapitated was a small blood splatter. Liz brought her spear forward, leveraging her single arm in conjunction with [Blood Manipulation] on the blood in its haft to press her mirror self while it struggled not to bleed out.

Its skin turned red with the telltale signs of [Blood Rage], but Liz ignored it. That single spell wouldn't save it from [Hungering Weapon] draining its strength and blood at a rapid rate. She could feel the stolen strength course through her and leveraged that to drive her weapon deeper into the clone's body, tearing apart its internal organs in the process.

Liz felt the dying embers of her Concept flare up, but she crushed them *utterly* as she burned through her mana, wrenching control of all her reflection's blood in a single instant. If not for her *very recent* experience with

her personal brand of resurrection, coupled with a day of meditation preparing for this very fight, she wouldn't have been able to stop it. But her brushes with death had pointed out all the ways in which she was still oh so very mortal.

The flames guttered out, and Genesis Energy rushed into her, signifying the end of the fight.

She took to her feet and used the newly unfettered [Blood Manipulation] to staunch the bleeding of her ragged stump, casting [Bandage] to try and reattach the limb.

The spell didn't take, instead simply capping off her left arm. She wasn't surprised, her arm had been so far over cooldown that it barely even counted as *hers*, so far as her buff spells went. That it had been ripped off only would have exacerbated the issue.

With a flick of her powers, she stored the limb inside her spatial ring.

She would hopefully be able to get it reattached when they left. If not, she'd just get it regrown.

But it would present a serious problem for the rest of her time in Minkalla.

Aster was waiting for her as the mists faded and ran up to her while asking if she was all right. Liz wasn't, but she had already triaged herself, so she just nodded.

She was down an arm, but she'd live. It hurt, but she'd *probably* had worse? At the very least, her missing hand wasn't hurting, as [Bandage] kept her stump from aching *too* much.

For now, all they could do was wait for Matt and Susanne to finish. Liz suspected that Susanne would be done first, as Matt had too much of his style predicated around long, drawn-out contests of endurance for anything else.

Susanne [Dash]ed forward and cut through the [Earth Wall] that appeared in front of her and cast [Sword Gale] the instant she was through. This fight had lasted far longer than she intended, but she had learned something about herself.

She was pretty good at running away when she needed to and didn't have enough direct chasing or binding methods to prevent it. At least, not against herself.

Flurries of sharp ribbons of air whipped around her, only to be blocked by the copy's [Shadow Armor], but Susanne hadn't cast [Sword Gale] for the direct damage.

Instead, she reached out with her new [Earth Manipulation] and sent the particles of dirt that her attack on the wall had created at her mirror self in a stream.

For an instant, her copy flinched back as the surprise attack hit her in the eyes, and that was when Susanne moved.

Cutting the distance between her and her copy, she appeared next to it, but instead of directly attacking, she cut the air once more and used her boon to vanish for a moment.

Stepping more directly in front of her copy, she avoided the two slashes it cut out with, and then miniaturized her greatsword to something closer to a longsword. With the extra bit of speed it afforded her, she thrust forward and through her copy's chest, twisting and *pushing* at her Concept to make the attack even more lethal. Every last drop of mana she had went toward empowering the strike, and it cut through her reflection with a ragged, messy tear.

It wasn't without its cost, though.

While her Concept clone blocked one attack from the reflection's clone, that left her open to a second blow from the mirror's main blade.

Even with [Phantom Armor] to block most of the blow's power, it was still fueled with [Hypersonic Edge], and cut into her current armor and deep into her left side.

Despite that final blow, her copy died, and out of its body dropped a material version of her greatsword.

That almost seemed insulting in some weird way. Minkalla must be taunting her with a weapon she'd never use.

Picking it up, she placed it into her storage ring and hobbled over to where Liz and Aster waited. She dropped to the ground next to them, and stared at the bank of mist that was undoubtedly where Matt remained locked in his fight.

"Any idea how long this is going to take?" she asked.

Liz and Aster shared a glance. "Two defense-focused tanks with no mana constraints?"

Susanne sighed and started wrapping her wound.

They should have had Matt leave the house out before they fought. She might have been able to get a nap in.

The explosion sent Matt's copy flying, but it caught itself in midair by utilizing a wobbly Concept and dove back toward Matt while unleashing a barrage of fireballs. Matt raised a [Bulwark] inches in front of his copy, tanking the [Fireball]s against his armor as the reflection narrowly avoided slamming into the immovable barrier by teleporting to the other side of it.

Matt greeted it with a column of lightning almost as thick as his arm, but the copy raised its own [Bulwark] and blocked the talisman's effect.

The buffs Matt had applied to himself at the start had worn off a long, *long* time ago, and he was even almost out of talismans entirely. Amusingly, he now had more talismans in his two Aurora Lance arrays than he did across all his other talismans and arrays combined.

He judged his copy wasn't much better off, and was perhaps even down part of an Aurora Lance, using some of the feeder talismans as makeshift, lesser attacks. Matt's left arm hung limply, suffering from both a sprain *and* a dislocation he hadn't had the chance to fix, and missing half the fingers on its hand besides. His own copy seemed hellbent on finishing what Susanne's reflection earlier in the floor had started. It had also disarmed him of his two growth rings, but he could retrieve them later.

If not for [Endurance], he and his mirror copy would have collapsed from simple exhaustion minutes...hours...days ago? He had no idea how long this had been going on, but he'd long since exhausted every trick he had prepared for his clone, and it had simply turned into a slugging match.

Nearly all of them had *worked*, but it just *wouldn't stay down*. They'd both ended up getting a *lot* of practice with usurping elemental manipulations, and there wasn't even a square inch of flat ground to stand on, thanks to all their attacks tearing it up.

If Matt was being poetic, it was a reflection of the two of them. Once pristine ground now broken. Hills and valleys carved out of it where they had used the floor itself as a weapon, but still there. Still functional.

Or at least Matt was.

His Folded Reflection mirror was finally checkmated.

With a last ditch burst of strength, Matt swept past the reflection with [Air Manipulation] wrapped around him, then threw his Concept at his clone beneath him, shoving it to the ground and pinning him.

Matt followed closely behind, slamming feet-first into his prone reflection, then activating his gloves to lock himself in space. His clone struggled underfoot while throwing spells at him, but Matt was unyielding. It teleported out from the trap, pushing through Matt's spatial lock, but Matt called his void sword to hand and swung where he knew the copy would appear.

The clone materialized in the path of his attack, blade at his neck and enhanced with everything Matt had left in him.

The reflection finally broke as his copy was decapitated, and the fog around him faded.

Matt groaned in relief, staggered over to the lump of flesh that had formerly served him as three of the fingers on his left hand, and dug out his rings from the bloody mess.

Matt cursed as he saw the result of his copy's attack. The plain silver band that served as a teleportation focus was cut nearly in half, and he could only find one half of it. Meanwhile, his mana aspecting ring had several of its crystals broken, and the metal itself was bent out of shape.

It was *fixable*, as the connection his spirit shared with them attested to, and because he still had the physical objects, or at least parts of them. If they ran into a growth item-based reward on floor 7, he could still empower them if he so chose. However, it effectively removed both teleportation and the ability to make new talismans from his suite of options for the rest of Minkalla.

Aster broke him out of his musings as she sauntered over to him with a questioning thought, and he gave her a few head pats in return for her concern with his good arm.

Seeing that his copy didn't drop anything, he staggered over to his friends and made sure that most of them were okay. He was relieved by his findings until he noticed that Liz was missing her left arm...once again.

"Ahh you okay?"

Almost before he finished asking, she nodded. "Fine. Well not *fine* fine, but I needed to sacrifice it to give my copy a big enough wound that it couldn't just [Blood Ragdoll] any attacks I made. Besides, the arm was only half functioning anyway, so it's not *that* bad. We've got a spare prosthetic, anyway. I should be able to manage until we leave."

With that said, they dispelled the reward distortion. Everyone wanted to leave the floor as quickly as possible.

Out tumbled half a dozen skills, along with a longsword similar to his own, a horse plume helmet, and six upgrade orbs.

Catching the items, everyone agreed it would be best to sort it after their test.

If worse came to worst, one of them might need the increased power if they were unable to wake up from the dreams that the floor challenge would give them.

They stepped through the distortion, and with a mental nod, Matt's mind was whisked away.

Matt opened his eyes to a living room. It wasn't any particular living room, but rather a mishmash of his own, Luna's guest living room, and even Travis and Keith's. The coffee table was undeniably his, though. Six cups rested on it, each in their own unique vessel and their own unique teas.

A fairly plain earthenware mug had a honey sweetened black tea in it, a common breakfast tea in most parts of the Empire which Matt was pretty sure he had a few ounces of left in his house.

The porcelain teacup with gold filigree had a strongly spiced black tea in it, though there didn't seem to be any milk available for it to be served traditionally. A similarly decorative bowl sat next to that one, with blue accents the same shade as his mana rather than gold, and it held a strongly caffeinated dark green tea that Matt had never particularly enjoyed, though Liz liked it enough that they usually kept some around.

Next was a white tea served in a ceramic mug that seemed to have a sharpened lip. He was fairly confident that the particular variety had gone extinct a few hundred years ago when the rift that produced it had been destroyed, though he didn't recall what had caused that.

The final two cups were a normal glass cup with a cold brewed pale green tea that normally had some additional flavorings added, and a strange iridescent bubbling jasmine tea served in an ornate cup and saucer.

As he scanned each cup and tried to unsuccessfully puzzle out what each of their lives might be he gave up.

With a shrug, he brought the first earthenware mug to his lips, and sipped.

Matt was sick.

He didn't know exactly what was wrong, but when his alarm went off for school, he barely heard it.

Sometime after that, his mother came into his room to see why he wasn't awake yet, but he couldn't make out her words.

He felt her shake him gently, but that just made him hurt even more, and he groaned.

As if trying to torture him, she turned on the lights, sending agonizing pain into his eyes.

He tried to burrow into the blankets to get away from the light, but his mother started screaming for his father, who was getting ready for work.

Matt could feel each of the booted footfalls in his bones and knew that his father would be in trouble for walking in the house with his boots on.

Thankfully, his mother seemed to catch on that the light was hurting him, and the main light went off, so he was finally able to rest.

He was just about to fall back asleep when his father pulled him out of bed and pulled him into his arms, before they went running down the stairs while his father told him he needed to stay awake.

Before he knew it, they were outside, and he was enjoying the cool morning air when the flashing lights hit his eyes and seemed to set off every other pain in his body.

Trying to wiggle deeper into his father's embrace to get away from the lights, he groaned as he was pulled away and laid out on something.

Above him, people were talking, but he was too tired and hurt too much to really understand it. Before he knew it, someone was shining a light in his eyes despite him trying to pull away.

"I know it's uncomfortable, buddy, but I need you to hold still for me." The voice was an authoritative man's voice that seemed to cut right through the pain Matt was feeling, and he forced himself to stay still, even as another light was shined into his eyes.

Once more, it felt like someone was driving nails into his eyes, and his vision seemed to split into a thousand facets, like the view from a fractured mirror.

Thankfully, it only lasted a few seconds, and then the light went out, and they were quickly in what Matt suspected was an ambulance.

Almost immediately, the overhead light was turned off, which helped alleviate most of his headache, but the light coming in from the open doors didn't help.

As he heard his parents' worried voices, a sharp pain in his arm was quickly followed up by a cool sensation that almost instantly knocked him out.

When he woke up, it was to the quiet whispering of rapid fire comments that he recognized as his parents arguing.

While they didn't argue often, Matt knew better than to interrupt them. It would only mean that the argument was postponed until later, and then he would have to deal with the two of them pretending everything was normal.

It was better to just let them argue it out most of the time, but if they knew he was nearby, they would instantly stop.

"Clare, I didn't pick up anything or go anywhere strange. I told you a dozen times. Don't try and blame this on me."

His mother's voice was tight and sounded hoarse, like she had been crying, which almost made Matt open his eyes. "Well, I haven't been anywhere except for home and the bank, so I couldn't have picked anything up. I work in a cubicle not a graveyard."

"Clare, I haven't been anywhere but the construction site and home. I didn't even go to the bar last Friday cause your parents were in town. Don't blame me. I would never hurt our son."

Before their argument could circle back around, a quiet knock on the door stopped them, and a second later, the door opened. Matt heard a new voice say, "Matt's vital signs are indicating that he'll wake up in a few minutes. Do you mind if I sit here with you two while we wait?"

Matt almost smiled as he heard the tone of the doctor's voice. It was masculine but held a tinge of humor when he said that Matt would be waking up soon.

It seemed his secret was out of the bag, at least for the doctor.

If his parents knew he had been listening to them argue, he'd get scolded for listening to adult things, but he was curious.

His mom was the first to speak. "Wonderful. Has there been any other news?"

The still unnamed doctor said, "Not yet. But I'd rather only go over this once when Matthew wakes up, if that's all right with you."

His father immediately responded, "That's fine. Thank you."

After counting to one hundred, Matt groaned and started to 'wake up'.

Almost instantly, his parents were on him, and he felt exploring hands grasp his own. His mother kissed his forehead twice before the doctor coughed quietly and they backed up, giving the mystery man room to inspect Matt.

As his parents retreated, Matt got a good look at the doctor, who was a middle-aged man who winked at him from the side his parents couldn't see.

Matt was barely able to repress his own smirk at their shared secret but managed it with a herculean effort.

"My name is Healer Cox. C, O, X. Not quite as funny when it's spelled that way, is it?"

Matt didn't understand, but his dad snorted, which seemed to be the reaction the Healer wanted.

"Okay, basic questions first. Just to see if you're all there. What is your name?"

"Matt"

"How old are you?"

"Seven and a half"

"What year is it?"

"1747"

"Who is your elementary school teacher?"

"Miss Aberdeen."

"Count back from 100 by 7's."

"100, 93, 86, 79, 73..."

"72, but that's close enough. What is 7 times 9?"

"63."

"Smart for your age, aren't you? I'm going to show you a list of letters. I want you to point out each letter A."

This went on for a good while, until finally...

"List all the animals that start with the letter B."

"Bee, Bear, Buffalo, Bison, Blue Whale, Beaver, Ba."

“Okay, that’s enough. Not sure if I should count ‘Blue Whale’. I’m going to show a picture of an animal and you tell me what it is.”

“That’s a fox. A white one!”

“Yep, cute little bugger. Well Mr. Matt, congratulations, you’re neurologically intact.”

After that, the healer inspected his throat by pressing down on Matt’s tongue, but he didn’t seem to see anything noteworthy.

Once he was free, Matt asked, “What’s the difference between a doctor and healer?”

Healer Cox smiled. “Now *that* is a good question. The main difference is that a doctor generally works with mundane medicine. Healers can do all of that, but we also have a little magic to help us as well.”

As the Healer said that, he raised a finger, and it glowed slightly with light blue luminescence.

Matt couldn’t help but gasp. “Wow! A real spell!”

Healer Cox smiled and winked at him. “Work hard, and you could do the same thing one day.” Then he pressed his glowing finger to Matt’s abdomen and stared off into space for a while.

When the man blinked back to the real world, he smiled at Matt. “Well, you look nice and healthy now. The treatment was a complete success. I’ll cast [Healing Touch] so you can recover more easily from being bed bound these last few days.”

Matt shivered as what felt like goosebumps traveled from the healer’s touch all the way to his head and toes. It wasn’t pleasant, but Matt felt the need to rub the raised hairs back down on his forearms.

Before they could say anything else, there was another knock on the door.

Unlike Healer Cox, who had knocked softly, this knock was assertive and crisp.

Healer Cox rolled his eyes at the knock and said, “Well, you might as well come in. If you knock that hard, people might think you’re compensating for something.”

The woman who walked through the door looked like she was cut out from every military movie Matt had ever seen. She had a ramrod straight back with square shoulders, and the woman had a no nonsense air about her that immediately shifted the atmosphere in the room.

She nodded to the Healer and his parents before looking at Matt with piercing silver eyes.

Matt swallowed like he had done something wrong but knew he hadn’t.

“Mr. Alexander, I need to interview you about your recent history. I am Imperial Investigator Rebecca Ignite, Tier 16, and under the jurisdiction of Count Allaway. Do you have any questions?”

Matt blinked. “A lot. What’s going on?”

Healer Cox didn’t seem amused, and in a much harsher tone than he used with Matt, said, “Some of us understand bedside manner, and try to give our patients time to acclimate and adjust before badgering them.”

Investigator Ignite didn’t look amused; she just stared at Healer Cox while they seemed to have a silent conversation.

Eventually, Healer Cox turned to Matt and said, “What happened, Matt, is that you were infected with a disease we only see from undead rifts. Which is concerning on its own, but that same disease has infected six other people. As far as we can tell, you were one of the first to be infected, so we need to get as much information as possible about who you talked to before you got sick. The others are still asleep so you are our only source of information.”

Investigator Ignite stepped in as Healer Cox took a breath. “Could you walk me through *everything* that happened the day before you fell ill?”

Matt nodded slowly but couldn’t think of anything odd. He had never been near a rift, though. Everyone knew they couldn’t spawn in the five mile strip between the coast and land, and their city was built entirely inside that safe area.

Seeing the Investigator not taking her eyes off him, he shook his head. “Nothing really strange happened that day.”

Investigator Ignite seemed unhappy with that and said, “Matt, this is important. While we already found and destroyed the rift that had undead in it, we don’t know how the disease got inside the city limits. What do you remember about that day? Start from the beginning. Every detail you can remember, I need you to tell me. We know you should have been infected the day before, so I just need you to think really hard about that day. But don’t make anything up. If you don’t know, just say so.”

Matt looked to his parents, who nodded, and he started reviewing his day.

“I woke up and got ready for the morning like usual—”

Investigator Ignite shook her head, interrupting him. “Matt, I need every little detail. Please, it’s important.”

Trying to add every little detail he could remember, he restarted. When he mentioned his clothes, Investigator Ignite, who had been nodding along, asked. “Were the clothes clean?”

At his mother’s outraged huff of air, the Investigator just shrugged a shoulder. “If they were old, it might change our timetable.”

His mother nearly growled. “They were clean, thank you very much. I had just done laundry the day before, and I know his clothes very well.”

Investigator Ignite nodded for him to continue, so Matt did so.

After she once more reminded him to give more detail he added, he repeated and spelled out the entire list of words he had his mother had gone over this morning trying to annoy her, but it didn’t seem to work.

“Rough, grudge, stunt, thumb, once, another, does, trouble, cousin, began.”

After describing how he went to school and the path they took, Matt shrugged. “There were a lot of people going in. I only knew Christie Miller and Rodric Sales, though. After I went to my classroom, Miss Aberdeen taught us math before giving us our spelling test.”

Matt went on to list everything else they went through that day, along with who he sat by during each period.

It was when he said he went to the bathroom that Investigator Ignite asked for more information.

“Did you see anyone in the hall when you walked there? Smell anything worse than usual? Did the water taste funny?”

Matt was going to shake his head, but paused as he remembered seeing a teacher talking to someone at one of the doors.

“Miss Harrowfall was talking to someone at the end of the hallway. They kissed before she shut the door, but the wind was blowing, and it didn’t smell good. Like old trash.”

Investigator Ignite’s eyes narrowed, and she asked, “Which door, and can you describe the man in question?”

Matt nodded. “The green door at the end of the ‘E’ hallway. The one that goes out to the back entrance next to the playground, but where we aren’t supposed to go, since it’s where they bring in the food.”

“And what did he look like?”

Matt thought about it and tried to replay the moment, but nothing really came to him besides the smell...until he remembered the jacket that the man was wearing.

“The man was wearing a thick jacket with sleeves that were torn up. I remember thinking Mom would never let Dad leave the house with such a torn jacket. It was orange and brown, I think. He also had a bushy beard and had an earring in his left ear.” Matt smiled as more information came to him.

He was about to continue when Investigator Ignite’s eyes narrowed to slits as she nodded once slowly.

“Do you think you can identify the man if you see him again?”

Matt chewed his lip but nodded after a few seconds.

The image seemed pretty clear in his memory, now that he had thought about it.

Once he said that, Investigator Ignite turned to his parents and got their permission, seemed to pull a pad out of nowhere, and asked. “Can you read this out loud to me, please?”

“I hereby swear what I will say is the truth, to the best of my knowledge. If I” Matt looked up at his parents seeing the next word, as he didn’t recognize it.

His mother read it out loud for him. “Deliberately, honey. It means on purpose.”

“If I deliberately lie, I can be charged with—”

He looked up once more, but this time Investigator Ignite answered. “Perjury. It means lying after swearing to tell the truth.”

“If I deliberately lie, I can be charged with perjury.”

Investigator Ignite nodded once he finished. “If you don’t know, just say so, and you won’t be in any trouble, so don’t worry. But if you recognize the man you saw, please just say so.”

Handing him the pad, Matt saw a man with brown hair and a beard, but the man’s skin was ruddier than the man he saw before, and the earring was the wrong shape.

Matt swiped through half a dozen people, not seeing anyone who matched the man in his memory, but Investigator Ignite didn’t seem worried, and just gave him another twelve people to look at.

This time, Matt stopped at person number four.

They weren’t a perfect match, with the beard shorter and better groomed, but the earring was the same, and the look in the man’s eyes was enough to make Matt certain he had the right man.

“It’s this guy. I’m sure.”

Investigator Ignite caught his eyes and asked, “How sure are you, Matt? This is important. Don’t lie to make any of us happy.”

That made Matt question himself for a moment, but looking again, he was even more sure. “It’s him.”

Investigator Ignite looked to Healer Cox, who nodded, but Matt wasn’t sure why he was important. She wasn’t asking him questions, after all.

After that, Investigator Ignite and he went through the rest of his day, but she was less picky about the small details that she had agonized over earlier.

Once he ended his recount of the day with his going to bed, she thanked him before leaving so quickly, he was pretty sure she had teleported, like from the movies.

Healer Cox patted Matt's shoulder and said, "Well done, Matt. You did good work today. I'm sure you helped out a lot."

Matt looked up between his parents and Healer Cox's and asked, "Does the Investigator think it was that man who got me sick?"

Healer Cox looked to his parents but eventually answered, "That would be my guess. Orange and brown are the Junipers colors, and the jacket sounds like their Deep County workers uniform, so he would have been outside the safe zone. As for anything beyond that, we'll have to wait for her investigation to be finished. If he did come in contact with an undead rift, and both didn't report it and infected half a dozen people, he'll be in trouble, though."

After Healer Cox checked a few more things, a nurse brought in food, which Matt hungrily scarfed down. Or tried to.

As the pasta hit his tongue and his brain registered the taste, he spit it back up immediately.

His parents were worried that something was wrong, but Healer Cox sighed and said, "This is unfortunate, but not unexpected. It's a side effect from one of the medicines we use to prevent the spreading of the disease. About ten percent of the recipients have an incredibly heightened sense of taste and smell for a while after. Nothing to worry about, though. It will fade in another three days or so. We'll get some more bland food sent in."

The Healer sent the nurse off with a flick of his finger and winked at Matt, who was trying to wipe the lingering taste off his tongue. "Sorry, kid, but if we warn you, you're almost guaranteed to get the bad reaction."

Matt shot him a glare but didn't say anything.

That hadn't been nice at all.

After Healer Cox left, Matt could hear his tone change, and he started yelling for others to start doing things, but the door shut before he could listen in. He was yelling at a door, or somebody named door, which Matt just found odd.

Now that they were alone, Matt's parents rushed in close, each taking a side of the bed, and they started fussing over him.

No matter how many times Matt insisted he was fine, they kept adjusting his blankets or, in his mother's case, combing his hair.

"Oh, honey, we were so worried about you." His mother said as she pulled him into a hug.

His father looked at him with a shaky grin as he added, "I knew you would pull through, champ."

That caused his mother to snort, but she didn't say anything out loud despite having a smirk flirting around her lips.

Seeing that moment, things seemed to crystallize for Matt. In that moment, while things seemed so perfect, everything felt so wrong, and it was almost like he was a stranger inhabiting his body. Thankfully, the feeling passed as soon as the nurse came with the promised porridge.

With an effort of will bolstered by his parents' urging, he managed to choke down the bland food, but even that was a struggle, as the oats seemed overwhelming to his amplified senses.

Still, he managed it and quickly fell asleep with a full belly.

When he woke up, his parents were asleep on the couch and cuddling together, his father's arms wrapped around his mother.

Once more, that odd feeling of wrongness overwhelmed Matt, but it passed quickly as he shook it off.

He was stuck in the hospital for another two days as they observed him, but they finally let him go home on the third day of his being awake.

Things returned to normal for the three of them for the next two weeks, once his parents finally stopped worrying about him so much, and he was able to return to his normal routine of after school activities.

The sense of normalcy lasted until two weeks after the incident of the undead rift.

A massive news broadcast went out as Investigator Ignite made an announcement.

She had found in her investigation of the undead rift that the local Baron family, the Junipers, had their personnel creating rifts recklessly close to the inhabited cities. This had led to two cities being outright attacked before the undead sickness had alerted Imperial authorities.

The Junipers had both covered up the earlier incidents and done nothing to rectify the problem, which led to their house head being arrested publicly while their family was stripped of their noble title.

It shocked the entire city, but Matt's family in particular, as they had met the woman personally.

Not long after that, they were brought in with a collective lawsuit against the noble house and the Empire itself.

Matt found it weird that the Empire had represented them and everyone else with a Tier 25 lawyer to sue themselves, but when his parents tried to explain it to him, it just went over his head.

It took nearly five months but, eventually, the verdict was ruled that they and everyone else affected was eligible for both financial compensation and a public apology. The latter of which was given to them personally by Duke Fulton, who had been the Junipers' many times removed liege.

Matt hated the entire thing, as his parents had forced him into a suit, and he had been forced to stand around all day during the ceremony, but they insisted he needed to be there with them.

After that, things seemed to return to normal. Matt went back to school and was about to enter the fourth grade when his parents sat him down, and his father asked. "Matt, how would you feel about a little brother or sister?"

Matt shrugged and looked at the door. He had hoped to join the other kids from his old class in a game of tag, but his parents were asking him weird questions instead.

There was that odd feeling of something not being right, but since this was the third time he had experienced it, it was easy to push away. He quickly said, "It's fine, I guess. Can I go play with everyone else now?"

His mother put her hand over his fathers and said, "Sure, buddy. Just be careful and remember to be back before four. That means you need to leave at three forty five. Set your watch to it. You might not realize this now, but things will change."

Doing so, and showing his parents he had done so, he ran out and went about his day.

Seven months later, just as his parents warned him, things did indeed change.

He was sitting in the waiting room with his grandparents, who had come in from the neighboring planet in the waiting room, while trying to get rid of the feeling that he didn't know them.

It was odd because he *did* know them. He had only met them three times, but that was more than enough for him to remember them. He couldn't shake the feeling they weren't supposed to be there though and should have died years before this.

That feeling was dispelled when his father came out and said, "All done and no issues. We have a baby girl!"

He seemed tired but excited, and Matt thought about what he said.

He now had a baby sister.

It seemed so odd, and that distorted feeling came back stronger than ever. It seemed like the world would collapse if he pushed that feeling.

That feeling remained until his father led the three of them to the room where his mother had been moved to, and in his mother's arms, he saw her.

All he could see on the large head was the wispy white hair and piercing blue eyes that seemed to shock his soul as his mother presented the baby to

everyone.

“Everyone, we’d like to introduce you to Aster Alexander. The newest member of our family.”

Once more, Matt felt the world seem to go out of sync, and this all seemed wrong, but he shoved that feeling away.

This was *perfect*.

And how could something so perfect be wrong? It couldn’t, *obviously*.

From his earlier indifference, Matt was suddenly infatuated with his little sister, and they were inseparable.

Deep inside himself, he knew he was her protector and shield. Nothing could hurt her because he would be there for her.

At the same time, he also started to help out around the house more.

With a newborn, things became hectic as they both finished their move to a larger apartment and settled in with Aster as their new addition.

Matt was pretty sure his parents didn’t sleep for more than a few hours a night, given how much Aster howled. It was like she was a fox rather than a human with how her wails could pierce everyone’s eardrums. Being both high-pitched and loud wasn’t a fair combination for anyone around her.

That phase only lasted a few weeks, thankfully, but as Matt’s father went back to work the following month, things got a little harder.

Matt asked why they didn’t just use the money they had gotten from the lawsuit to live off as the stipend seemed like a lot, but his mother instantly shut that down, saying it was his money.

He tried to say they should use it as he didn’t need money, but his mother snapped at him that it wasn’t for him to decide.

He slunk away after being yelled at, to which she apologized for saying she was tired and didn’t mean to yell at him.

Wanting to help, he asked. “Why don’t you take a nap. I can watch Aster while you do. And she’s napping, so it’s not like it’s hard.”

“Are you sure, sweetie?”

“Yeah mom. I have my homework to do, and she can sit on the table. If anything happens, I’ll wake you up, I promise.”

It seemed like a weight was lifted off her as she thanked him and then promptly fell asleep. Shutting the door, Matt went back out to the kitchen and did his homework until his father came home a few hours later.

His father looked surprised when Matt shushed him as he entered, but as his father looked around, Matt whispered, “Mom needed a nap, so I’m watching Aster. I even did my homework. See!”

Kissing Matt on the top of his head, he said, "Thanks, buddy. Your mom is working hard taking care of Aster."

He leaned in and kissed Aster on the head as well as he picked her out of the carrier and sniffed her diaper.

"At least you didn't make a stinky. What a good girl."

Aster giggled at their father, and then as if right on cue, she laughed and let out a loud fart.

Matt laughed at their father's surprised face, then ran away as the smell hit him.

"I swear there is an undead rift inside you sweetie. That is rank."

When she was cleaned up and the smell gone, he returned to the living room, where his father was on the floor playing with Aster and a kids show played quietly on the screen behind them.

His father patted the ground next to Matt and asked, "What do you want to do for dinner, buddy? I figured we can do something fun to surprise your mother."

Matt perked up. After he had recovered from the awful medicine he'd been given for his illness, he'd found himself appreciating cooking and the food he ate far more than before.

Something he had never given a second thought to had become a hobby of his.

"We should make stuffed peppers. That's one of mom's favorites. She always says it takes too much work to make, and there are tomatoes we can make for me and you. We can do it for her!"

Matt's father laughed and said, "That's a good idea. Can you get started, or do you need help?"

Matt jumped up and raced to the kitchen, not wanting to let his father do everything.

It took him a little bit, but he had the rice cooking and all the ingredients out when his father walked in with Aster in her standing toy thing.

"You ready for my help now, buddy?"

Matt nodded, and his father helped him cut the onion and other ingredients while browning the ground beef, while Aster watched from the table where she had been placed in the stand up bouncer.

They were finishing up putting the stuffed peppers in the oven when his mother came out and asked, "What happened here? Surely I'm dreaming if we're eating stuffed peppers, and I didn't make them."

Matt stuck out his tongue at his mother and said, "Dad and I made stuffed tomatoes for ourselves."

His mother ruffled his hair as she kissed his father and wrinkled her nose. “Someone didn’t shower when they got home. And while I appreciate you not waking me up, everyone now needs to get out of the kitchen, and *some* of you need to shower.”

With a pointed look at his father, his mother started to clean up the few dishes they hadn’t yet gotten to.

When Matt tried to help, he was shooed away. “You cooked, so I’ll clean up. Don’t look at me like that, Matthew.”

Matt pouted his way to the living room with his mother and Aster’s laughter following him out.

From that day forward, he started to help with the cooking more and more as he grew older, and his parents slowly let him use more of the kitchen appliances and utensils without supervision.

It all came to a head, though, when he was thirteen, and his mother asked. “What’s our ETA on dinner, Matt?”

Matt shook his head. “I need to re-cut the onions. They were too uneven for the—”

He was interrupted as his mother cut in after looking at his cutting board. “Matt, I know all the chefs on the show stress that, but we are simple people who need simple food. The onions are good enough. We just want to eat some time before dark.”

Matt froze as her words seemed to strike a chord with him.

Seeing his expression, his mother apologized, “I’m sorry, Matt, that was harsh, but if you want to take over cooking, we need to eat at a normal time. If you need some help, I’m—”

Matt shook his head. “No, that’s not it. You are right. Home cooking is home cooking.”

What he didn’t say was he now had the beginnings of a plan stewing in his mind.

As they were finishing his dinner, he said, “I’d like to get a part time job as a cook. There is a part time gig being offered at this place called Benny’s that I could work at a little bit. It would look really good for when I try to get into a culinary school.”

What he didn’t say was that the place was on the outskirts of the city near the forest, where rifts might start appearing. That would end the argument right then and there because of the danger.

His mother shook her head vehemently. “Absolutely not. You’re only thirteen, Matt. And you don’t need money.”

Aster also interjected. “No bwig browther. We play on the weekends!”

Matt rubbed the still white hair of his little sister and said, “Even if I get a job, that won’t change. And if I get a job as a chef, I can bring you all kinds of good food.”

Hearing that, Aster immediately changed her tune. “Bwig browther should get a job!”

His mother mock glared at him and his sister, which sent them into a giggling fit before turning to his father, looking for backup that she didn’t get.

“Tell him he’s too young, Blake.”

His father shook his head. “I think it’s a good idea, actually. Not the job part, but the experience part. He clearly has the passion and drive to be a great chef. Why don’t we let him try it out?”

That seemed to surprise his mother, and her face turned from a mock glare to a real one as she said, “Kids, go play in the living room.”

Aster giggled as she slipped out of her chair. “Daddy’s in trouble!”

As she pattered out of the room, Matt tried to stay. “I thin—”

“Matthew! Out. Now.”

Hearing the tone of warning in his mother’s voice, he went out and threw himself into the couch, where Aster then jumped on his legs, trying to get him to play.

Instead, he tried to listen in to his parents’ conversation, but one of them had turned on the water as they cleaned the dishes. That, combined with the clanking of the plates and utensils, made it impossible to hear what they were saying, but it turned out he didn’t need to.

After everything was clean, his parents called him into the kitchen, and he could see the defeated look on his mother’s face.

“Your Father and I have decided to allow you to take an apprenticeship with a reputable restaurant that isn’t a shit hole at the edge of town.”

Those words seemed to be dragged out of his mother, and the glare she shot him told him she had looked up Benny’s.

His father seemed much more at ease as he said, “You will awaken in a year, so it’s not too early for a part time job, and we know someone. Do you remember your Mother’s coworker, Janet? Her father lives here and has a small restaurant. I think he once owned a restaurant on a higher Tier planet. We talked to them, and he’s willing to give you a shot as a part time helper on the weekends.”

Hearing that, Matt jumped up and hugged his parents before racing around the kitchen.

That weekend couldn’t come fast enough, and he eagerly awaited the next Saturday, when his parents woke him up and took the bus with him to the far

side of town.

The restaurant was clearly new and called 'Antonio's'. Matt felt excitement as a short man opened the door and shook his parents' hands before looking Matt up and down.

"They said you are thirteen? What kind of thirteen year old is that damn tall?"

Matt froze as he had no idea how to respond, but the man laughed and stuck out his hand. "Antonio, like the giant sign outside says. And you must be Matthew."

Returning the handshake, Matt was surprised at how firm the man's hand was. It was like his hand was made out of steel rather than flesh and blood. Matt also understood that if the man squeezed, his hand wouldn't have survived, so he was glad he hadn't tried to out squeeze the other man like some of his classmates liked to do.

Antonio led them back to the kitchen, where he threw Matt an apron and gave his parents and Aster a tour before politely yet firmly kicking them out.

Once they were alone, the man pulled a sack of potatoes out of a storage room and dropped them next to Matt.

"First, we start with cutting. Tonight, I'm serving roasted potatoes as a side to a tenderloin. That means we have more than a few potatoes to cook, and we need to prep them. Prep happens every morning before we cook. Do you understand?"

Matt nodded, to which Antonio sighed. "Kid, do you want to be a home cook who whips things together for themselves and a few guests, or do you want to be a proper cook?"

Matt shook his head. "I want to be a chef. A real one. Own my own restaurant someday."

Antonio nodded. "Then you need to understand. Most of this you would learn in culinary school or, like here, working for a professional. I'm old and laid back nowadays, but in a proper kitchen in a big city on a high Tier planet, you'd get tossed out on your ear for not responding 'Yes, Chef'. It might sound weird and military, but a good kitchen *is* like a military unit. I've seen and worked in restaurants where the hands were forced to stand at parade rest when not actively working. I'm not that strict, but I do expect a level of discipline in anyone working for me, and especially from someone who wants to 'make it'. Do you understand?"

Matt wasn't sure he actually understood everything, but nodded and said, "Yes, chef."

That earned him a wink, and Antonio started showing him how to cut the potatoes into cubes the right size, and what to do with the leftovers that would be turned into mashed potatoes for tomorrow's dinner.

When Matt had a basic understanding of how to properly cube a potato, Antonio left Matt to practice while he started doing his own prep work. Matt had to stop and stare when he saw the man work. His hands were like something out of a movie as they blurred with his speed.

Even as his hands worked without pause, Antonio looked up and grinned. "With that expression, I assume you've never seen a Tier 10 work? If you think this is impressive, let me tell you. It ain't nothing. I worked for a Tier 30 chef on Old Rubarthan, and they would have all the prep done in about fifteen seconds. My paltry strength is nothing in comparison. And don't worry. A lot of this speed is from repetition. You do this long enough, and one day you'll look back and wonder how you could ever be so slow."

He paused his blurring blade and said, "Here's some advice I once got that meant a lot to me. Going fast isn't about speed. It's about consistency. 'Slow is smooth and smooth is fast.' So, if you want to be fast, you need to slow down."

Matt mulled that over for a moment and nodded. It made sense, and he concentrated on his pile of potatoes, making each cut as perfect as possible, not worrying about trying to keep up.

As he deliberately slowed down, Matt found each cut a little easier, and before long, he fell into a rhythm.

For the rest of the morning and afternoon, he was shown how to prepare each ingredient for that night's dinner with Antonio. Around two, the rest of the small staff filtered in, and Matt met them all and was paired with the potager chef Martinez, who made the soups for Antonio's.

Thankfully, the man was only Tier 3, and Matt could follow and actually help him with his job that evening.

It was nearly ten when they finished up the last order; Matt was wiped out like never before, but he felt good.

Even as he almost fell asleep on the bus home, he couldn't wait to do it again.

Matt waited outside the school and looked for a dot of white hair in the crowd of children.

The kids had been steaming out for a few minutes now, and his sister was still not out causing him to get annoyed.

He wasn't worried, as he knew Aster's classroom was on the far side of the school, and it would take her a while to walk through the twisting halls of the building. No, he was *annoyed*, as he knew his sister all too well, and she was probably chatting with some of her friends instead of walking.

Minutes later, he was proven right as a bob of white hair walked out of the school surrounded by five other kids.

Aster's little pack of friends finally separated to their respective bus or guardian, and he saw the moment Aster noticed he was there picking her up instead of one of their parents.

Normally, it was their mother, as her job at the bank gave her a bit more flexibility, but his father always picked her up once a week. Though, his day was always random depending on what they were doing that week in the construction of the new skyscraper.

She rushed over and slammed into his leg before grabbing onto his hand that was reaching to ruffle her hair.

Holding his hand, she jumped up and down. "Oh! Why are you picking me up today? Can we go get ice cream?"

He saw the moment the thought came to her as she blurted out. "Aren't you supposed to be at work? Did you get fired for flirting with Leah again?"

Seeing the little monster was more concerned with getting ice cream rather than seeing him, he pushed past her futile defense and ruffled her hair.

"No, short stack. Mom and dad had to leave the city quickly, as Aunt Katya went into labor early. And unless you want to get on a six hour train and then spend the next two or more days helping them get settled in, I figured you might want to stay back."

Aunt Katya was one of their mother's friends from the bank, and she had moved to the neighboring city for a promotion a few years ago. Despite that, she remained close with their mother.

She had gotten married and pregnant in short order, but her labor wasn't supposed to happen for another week at the earliest, and her husband was on the neighboring planet, bringing his parents over.

Bad timing on the teleportation platforms meant there was no way he was getting back to be there for Katya, so his parents had called out of work earlier that afternoon and headed over to assist her as much as anyone that wasn't a medical professional could.

Aster looked up at him as she started swinging their hands before observing. "I think *you* didn't want to go and used me as an excuse."

Matt shamelessly nodded. "Yup! But at the same time, I know *you* didn't want to go either. So really, we're helping each other out here."

Aster nodded back at that before saying with an evil grin, “Sure, but you owe me ice cream.”

Matt rolled his eyes. “We’re going to Mark’s Market, but we are *not* buying ice cream.”

Aster immediately went limp and started dragging her feet in protest.

Matt, now Tier 2, rolled his eyes and picked her off the ground where she dangled.

Aster giggled before pulling herself up and biting his hand.

It hurt.

Despite that, he pretended it didn’t and teased, “I don’t feel a thing with my higher Tier.”

That caused her to bite down harder, and he had to hide a wince.

It worked.

In fact, it worked too well, as Aster changed from biting his hand to licking it and he jerked to get her off him.

Landing on the ground with a giggle, the little terror laughed as Matt looked at the small half circle of teeth marks on his hand.

Wiping the saliva and indentations off, he groused, “I swear you got replaced at the hospital with a dog.”

Aster giggled even harder even as she dodged a patch of water on the sidewalk.

“I’m not a dog, I’d be a wolf!”

She growled for effect while Matt ignored her.

“As I was *trying* to say before you so rudely bit me, we aren’t *buying* ice cream. We’re going to *make* it.”

Aster, who had started to pout once more, perked up and grabbed his hand, trying to race ahead.

Sadly for her, she was a little girl, and Matt was a six foot tall Tier 2.

“Come on! Hurry up, you slime! I don’t want to wait any longer.”

Matt pulled the little monster back to his side so they didn’t run over an older man and said, “First, we’re going to make dinner, which you need to eat all of if you want dessert.”

Aster wilted a little but peered up at him with puppy eyes. “What are we having?”

Matt grinned. “I thought it be fun to make stuffed shells together.”

Aster seemed to mull that offer over before nodding. “Okay, but I want to pick out the ice cream flavors.”

Seeing Aster being all cute and trying to get her way, he jabbed her. “Hey, maybe seeing Aunt Katya having a kid will inspire mom and dad to get

pregnant again.”

Aster shouted as if the idea was personally offensive. “No way! They can’t do that. If they do, I’ll be the middle child! And I’ve seen enough movies to know how that goes. I’ll become neglected and forgotten about!”

Seeing he had gotten back at her a little, Matt eased off the teasing and reassured her that they would always love her, even if they did eventually get a younger sibling.

What followed was a disaster of epic proportions, as the two of them trashed their tiny kitchen, making dinner and ice cream with two dozen different flavors ranging from various fruits to candy bars crushed in.

His little sister had somehow managed to get some of the fruit ice cream in her hair, which had dyed the usually white hair a motley assortment of the rainbow.

Burping, she rubbed her extended tummy and said, “Okay, maybe I can have enough ice cream in one night. I can’t tell if I need to fart or vomit.”

Knowing that meant it was time for them to finish up, he extended a hand to his sister who was laying on the tile floor.

“Okay, time to get up and in the shower.”

Aster pouted. “I can’t move.”

“You’ll feel better with a nice warm shower.”

“The cold tiles feel better than a warm shower.”

Matt rolled his eyes. “Ok short stack, you can lay on the floor all you want, but I’m going to mop the floor whether you’re on it or not.”

That got her up and he escorted her to the bathroom in case of any accidents, and once he heard her turn on the shower, he started to put dishes into the dishwasher.

Normally, he would have cleaned as he went, but he had been more concerned with letting Aster have a fun time, which meant he had at least three loads of dishes to do.

He wasn’t even done getting the first sinkful ready for the next cycle when he heard the shower turn off.

As a now clean Aster came out, he washed his hands and joined her on the couch for a little time to watch something together.

It was well past her bedtime, but the two of them rarely got to spend time together alone like this, so he was willing to push it a bit.

And it was a Friday, so she didn’t even have school tomorrow and could sleep in.

Even then she was nodding off before the first commercial break, so Matt prodded her into brushing her teeth and getting ready for bed.

After brushing their teeth together, Matt sent the tuckered out Aster to bed as he cleaned the apartment from top to bottom as best he could without running the vacuum.

His parents weren't exactly on a vacation, and the last thing he would want to come home to was a messy house.

Just as he was dozing off on the couch with a cooking show rerun playing quietly, his pad pinged, and he rubbed his eyes to clear them to find his mother's profile calling him.

Yawning, he answered but sent the volume to next to nothing.

"Hey, Mom, how is it going with Aunt Katya?"

His mother looked tired but smiled. "She's still in labor, but we wanted to check in on the two of you. How is your sister?"

Despite being tired, Matt didn't fall for the trap. "Aster is already asleep. If you really want I can wake her up—"

"No, no that's fine." His mother said, but he knew she was happy he had her settled in before ten.

Cracking open her door, Matt turned the camera on the pad to show Aster sprawled across her bed, clutching one of the stuffed animals that was nearly her size.

Quietly closing the door, Matt saw his father was now on the screen and said hello.

"Hey kiddo, thanks for looking after your sister. We really do appreciate it. We know you had that date planned for tonight."

Matt dropped back into the couch and waved his father off. "I enjoy spending time with Aster. We made stuffed shells and then made some ice cream. It was fun."

Matt could hear both his parents sigh and knew their pain. The kid would live off ice cream if no one made her eat normal food.

"Don't worry, I made her eat two stuffed shells and three scoops of mixed veggies before we even touched the ice cream. Really, we spent more time making a mess of the kitchen than eating."

Without being asked, he raised the pad so they could see the now clean kitchen and finished up. "We're fine here. What about you two and Aunt Katya? I assume everything is okay? Isn't ten hours of labor, like, long?"

Matt's mother snorted and shook her head. "It's not that long for a first time mother, but she's mostly fine, just tired and wanting it to be over. We just wanted to check in and say thank you."

Rolling his eyes, Matt said, "It's not like she's in diapers. We'll be fine. Antonio gave me the weekend off, and if you guys aren't back by Monday, he

said he'll make sure I'm out of there in time to pick up Aster from school. I'm thinking we'll go to the new water park tomorrow or something fun. You guys worry about everything up there and we'll send pictures of our plans."

Matt's father yawned over his mother's shoulder, and that set Matt off, which then set his mother off. Once all three of them finished yawning, Matt waved them off.

"You two have fun and update me when everything is over. Take your time on our account."

Saying their goodbyes, Matt flopped into his bed after showering himself and heard something crack underneath him.

Rolling away, he heard a crinkle and sighed.

Aster must have been drawing on his bed, again, and once he pulled back the covers, he saw the snapped colored pencils and crumpled sheets of paper.

Too tired to get mad, he scooped it all up and dropped it to the floor to deal with in the morning.

Really, Aster needed to learn to leave his bedroom alone. He didn't care that it had better light for drawing after school, and that he had been spending more nights at Leah's apartment, that didn't mean it wasn't his room still.

He also knew that breaking her colored pencils, intentional or not, would go over like a punch to the nose tomorrow.

Rolling over, he decided that was a problem for tomorrow Matt.

And screw that guy.



Matt ducked as Chef Abdul threw a pot across the kitchen.

"Carlos, if you ruin the scallions one more time tonight I swear by the emperor's balls I will cut your fingers off. Test me!"

Matt looked to Eleanor Eskar, his good friend and sort of rival, and they both shared the same expression.

Chef Abdul wasn't a bad man or boss. In fact, he was normally easy going and relaxed, but word had come in that there were Phoenix Hearth inspectors on the planet, and he was killing himself with stress.

And to be fair, it was a massive event for Chef Abdul.

It was the first time he was the owner and head chef of a restaurant that both rated a Red Feather and had the possibility of actually getting one. If he did succeed in getting his first Red Feather, he would be one of the youngest chefs to earn the honor, and it would catapult him into instant stardom.

That turned the normally easy going chef into a monster. Some people just didn't handle stress well, and Chef Abdul was one of them.

Matt kept that thought to himself and kept his spoon moving as he stirred the sauce in front of him, pouring in his Talent in a slow but steady stream.

Right as the sauce started to turn golden, he pulled it off the fire and slid it down to Sous Chef Annabelle.

She scooped the pan up and carefully drizzled the sauce over the plate in front of her, before plating the fish in a careful pyramid.

She then slid that down to Chef Abdul, who inspected it and then put it on the tray and said to the waiter standing by, "Third course for table seventeen."

At the same time, another waiter, Alex, came into the kitchen and said, "Order for two ladies at table fifteen. They would like the fish and duck combo, no pepper in the glaze, extra pepper in the fry. Two orders of duck with lard instead of butter, one for each."

The fact that Alex had read the order out said two things. One, the guests were suspicious, and might be Phoenix Hearth inspectors, and two, they had done at least one test the inspector group was known for, such as putting a utensil on the floor or tipping over a mostly empty glass of wine to test the front end service.

Everyone froze for a moment, but not for long, as Chef Abdul read the ticket back out to them, and they all repeated their stations' orders.

Personally, Matt was cursing inside, as one of those modifications was on his glaze.

The glaze wasn't anything crazy, but with his Talent, he could bring the most out of the flavors, and freshly ground black pepper was one of those core ingredients.

Eleanor, his friend, was also panicking. As she was the chef rotisseur, she now needed to cook their duck in lard instead of butter, which would completely change the cooking temperature and time needed for the bird. That on its own would be hard, but when added with the fact that the guests were suspected to be Phoenix Hearth inspectors, it drove everyone's nerves to eleven.

Everyone but Sous Chef Annabelle, who was cool as she had been last month, before the rumors of Phoenix Hearth inspectors drove everyone else mad. She had good reason at least, as she had worked for a two time Red Feather recipient and had worked through the inspection the second time.

Matt breathed out twice as he listened to Chef Abdul's proposed modifications for the glaze to work without the black pepper and got to work.

He was finishing up and had a lull in his orders when Eleanor started to get overwhelmed, and he stepped in to take over her less important dishes.

Not that any order would leave without being perfect, but most of her attention was and needed to be on the two custom orders. And Matt, while not a chef rotisseur, had enough experience in the position to fill in during a pinch.

He was just returning to his own station when his AI pinged half a dozen times from his sister.

Brushing the messages aside for the time being, he buckled down and focused on his work.

Phoenix Hearth inspectors didn't just look at their own dishes. After all, their habits were known and well recorded, which meant they judged a restaurant by all the dishes that came out of the door through some stealthy uses of [Remote Taste]. More than one Phoenix Hearth inspectors had been served a perfect meal, only to deny the Red Feather because the other dishes that night came out subpar.

A Red Feather was a status symbol known across the Empire and wasn't given out lightly. Helen of Helen's Hearth had rescinded more than one Red Feather if the standards of the head chef or restaurant slipped from excellence.

Finally, Chef Abdul said the magic words. "The last ticket is closed. The kitchen is done for the night." He took a breath before slowly letting it out as everyone else slumped or otherwise relaxed. "Thanks for all the hard work everyone. Whether we get the Red Feather or not, I'm proud of each and every one of the dishes that left our hands tonight."

Matt slumped to the floor and was joined by Eleanor. "I'm so fucking beat tonight. Carry me home Matt."

Matt didn't open his eyes and stretched out his legs. "You're two Tiers higher than me. I'm going to have you carry *me* home tonight."

Eleanor chuckled and slapped his arm. "Thanks for the cover earlier. I was going under there for a minute."

"All good. All good."

As he finally relaxed, Matt remembered the messages from his sister that had come through.

Jerking to his feet, he slammed his head onto the table and dropped to the ground, clutching his head.

That also had everyone's attention firmly on him, and Marco, the entremetier, asked, "What's the big commotion? I don't have the energy to be that excited."

Matt tried to wave him off, but he had already gathered everyone's attention, and Sous Chef Annabelle said, "Well now you have to share."

Shrugging, as it was good news, Matt said, "My sister just signed an art deal with a Tier 40 children's channel on King Rusty's capital planet. She's getting to write two seasons of a new show, due to some of the art that she has done. They are even basing it off one of her characters."

That took everyone aback, and even Chef Abdul pulled out an expensive bottle of Tier 15 wine and opened it up for the crew in celebration.

Ecstatic for his sister, Matt sent her a picture of the entire team congratulating her and paid the extra fee to have it sent express.

She had worked so hard, and it finally paid off.

Now, it was just time for his own pay off.

Matt's knife was a blur as he cut nearly a hundred onions into perfect cubes when the door opened. He expected sous chef Amanda or chef Jacques, but instead, a woman in a business suit walked in.

Stopping his blade mid-stroke, Matt said, "Ma'am, I don't think you should be back here. The kitchen isn't open for another three hours. The hotel staff will be more than happy to get you something from the buffet kitchen if you can't wait, but you can't be back here."

The woman smiled slightly and stuck out her hand. "I don't think Jacques will mind if I come in. I own the place, after all."

Matt straightened up and apologized, and he checked her appearance with his AI. "Sorry, ma'am. I didn't realize you were Ms. Telkia."

Whipping his hands off on a nearby rag, he shook the proffered hand and noted that the woman was definitely a Tier 38. Even as a Tier 12, his hand felt like soft puddy when compared to her own.

"No worries. It's good that you can stand up to any nosey guest who thinks *they* own the place. I just got out of my delve and saw that Jacques hired a new employee."

She must have seen something in his face as she waved a hand. "I'm not questioning his hiring of you, but I like to meet all my staff. Normally, we would have met during the interview process, but I was probably elbow deep in a monster at the time."

Ms. Telkia led Matt out to the dining room and to a table that was off to the side, but well-lit by the window, where she pulled out a black leather binder of all things.

“Your resume is impressive, Mr. Alexander, I must say. Top of your class at a respectable Tier 15 culinary school, and you came in second place at a Young Chef contest not long after that.”

She flipped one of the pages and showed a picture of himself and his friend Eleanor, who had taken the first place prize of that same tournament.

“You and Miss Eskar seem to have a rivalry. You both competed in the same tournament and seem to have a nearly equal chance of beating the other.”

As she paused and looked at him, Matt explained, “Eleanor and I are good friends and push each other. We like to keep each other on our toes, but it’s all in good fun. We’re even roommates whenever we’re on the same planet.”

Ms. Telkia nodded. “Yes, so my reports say. Having a friendly rival is a good thing, and it explains some of your achievements. Only one hundred and seventy years old with an impressive record behind you, and glowing recommendations from all your previous employers. Working for Chef Abdul when he earned his Feather says a lot about you as well. Can I ask why you chose to work for Jacque? We are a high Tier restaurant with a prodigious reputation, but after your last win, I see Burnets was courting you for a poisoner with a fast track to sous chef.”

Matt smiled his most charming smile to cover his awkwardness. “My Concept. I felt Chef Jacque resonated best with my Concept. My phrase, ‘Good Food Takes Time,’ allows me to enhance the effects of ingredients. An example would be anything that increases Strength will be more effective at doing so. Chef Jacque’s entire reputation is built around ‘making—” He made air quotes “—simple recipes and elevating them to something exquisite’. And I felt that my Concept and Talent are well suited to that mindset. He’s also been a massive help with my professional progress and has me floating around positions to get a feel for his style and all the positions of the kitchen, so I can step into sous chef sooner rather than later.”

Ms. Telkia nodded and changed the subject to something he expected earlier. “I hear you have a Talent for making things taste better. Can you demonstrate that for me please?”

Matt nodded and asked, “I can go get something whipped up in just a few minutes, if you like.”

Ms. Telkia shook her head. “I hear you can do it with anything. Can you demonstrate with this?”

With a wave of her hand, a store bought bar of chocolate appeared on the table.

Scooping the bar up, Matt snapped off two squares of chocolate and handed one to Ms. Telkia without doing anything. “If you could try this? At risk of overexplaining, my Talent allows me to imbue mana into food to enhance its properties, most notably taste.”

Sending 20 mana into the square of chocolate, he handed it to Ms. Telkia, who sniffed it with her eyes closed before gently biting off the corner.

As she worked her jaw, he continued, “It has *seriously* diminishing returns past a certain point— ten thousand mana is only about twice as effective as one thousand mana. Also, the mana I put in fades over time and faster if put into a more processed product. So, that means the more involved I am in the process, or earlier in the process, the better the overall result for less mana. That’s why I do all the prep for the kitchen. I can do lots of more interesting things, like making essence from monster meat easier to digest.”

Ms. Telkia ran her tongue over her teeth as he finished, before taking another bite of the square he hadn’t used his Talent on.

She didn’t frown, but she did pull out a bottle of water and took a large swig before nibbling on the other square once more.

Seeing she enjoyed the effect of his Talent, he enhanced the rest of the bar and slid it to her with a grin.

“Everything is properly licensed, and I have the certifications verifying my Talent is an *alchemy* talent, not a mental one. It’s an actual, physical change that works similarly to an innate [Enhance Reagent] or [Enhance Reaction] skill, but more efficient at a lower mana cost, though more specialized. It only works on *food*, for example. I’m not an alchemist, just a cook, ma’am.”

Ms. Telkia opened her eyes after finishing off the single square, waving away the rest of the bar.

“That is a useful Talent, Mr. Alexander.” She turned to the side, and Matt followed her gaze to see Chef Jacque walking out of the kitchen.

“Ahh it is good to see you, Ms. Telkia. It has been too long since I have seen you with the length of your last delve. How have you been?”

For the first time, Ms. Telkia dropped some of her business persona and seemed genuinely happy to see Chef Jacque.

“I’m good. Better than good, now that I’ve met our newest employee. I saw business was up seven percent, but even his little demonstration with a bar of chocolate has me sold.”

Chef Jacque laughed and patted Matt on the shoulder before sliding into the chair next to him, forming a triangle with Matt and Ms. Telkia.

Ms. Telkia looked to Chef Jacque and said, “I hadn’t intended to eat in tonight, but after that demonstration, I simply must. Can you fit me in?”

Chef Jacques laughed. "I already told Alison to prepare for your party when I heard you were out. We have the private room set aside for you, and we can easily work a dozen extra tickets in."

"Wonderful news Jacques, wonderful news." As Ms. Telkia said that, she looked to Matt. "When is the next Young Chef tournament being held?"

Chef Jacques waved his hand. "Matt has outgrown them. I'm instead thinking we send him to represent us in the Tier 15 competition that the duke holds every decade."

Matt was startled, as that was the first he had heard of it, but Ms. Telkia nodded as if it made perfect sense.

"That's a good idea. It gives us more prep time, and we can abuse his Talent more."

She looked to Matt as she explained, "The Tier 15 competition is different. While you cook there, you can bring your own ingredients. If I'm right, Jacques plans to use your Talent on growing every ingredient you would use to maximize its use." She paused. "It will be expensive, but worth it if you can do well."

As if out of nowhere, she changed the topic and asked, "Are your parents still alive?"

It took Matt a moment to register the sudden shift in conversation, but he nodded. "Yes, they are Tier 14. Mom has her Concept, but hasn't advanced, as she's waiting for Dad. I have a little sister, Aster, who is a successful artist-mage and got them carried to Tier 14." Wanting to show off his sister a little he added. "She writes for a Tier 40 children's channel on King Rusty's capital."

Ms. Telkia nodded as if what he said was within her expectations.

"If you win the competition or even do well, there is a Shard of Reality in the duke's personal vault. You said your father doesn't have a Concept yet, and this can solve that problem. Are you interested?"

Matt's mouth went dry, but he swallowed and nodded. "Very. But it seems expensive. I can't afford the cost to do what you said about growing the crops and such."

Ms. Telkia waved her hand. "You wear my logo on your uniform when you compete, and that's all the compensation I need. At my level of business, that kind of publicity is worth its weight in Tier 50 mana stones."

After hashing out a few more details, they shook on it, and Matt walked back into the kitchen to finish prepping the food the kitchen would use that night.

Right as he was about to enter the swinging door, Ms. Telkia called out, "Also, I heard a rumor that Helen of Helen's Hearth will be there, if you need

another reason to try for first.”

Hearing that, Matt froze as the world tilted on its side.

He had...he had *met* Helen. He should be calling her *Aunt* Helen. But that didn't make sense, she was a legend. He'd never met her before. But...

He hadn't experienced that since he was a child, but this time, he wasn't a child, and knew this was something to explore. His Concept was still nascent, but he'd been taught the exercises. His Willpower flooded out from him, powerful and... Endless.

The world around him didn't seem to notice, but Matt the chef was no more. Or perhaps, Matt the chef was *far* more, far more than he'd ever dreamed of, and had given way to Matt the Ascender.

His body didn't seem to notice, though, and carried on talking and preparing food, unaware of the Folded Reflection-reality it was inhabiting.

Matt pushed himself into the controlling seat of the body, and using the AI, sent a message to his parents about how much he loved them and wished they would be at the competition he would take part in.

Then, before he could dwell on them being alive any more than he was, he let himself drift back into the Folded Reflection life. Now that he had broken free, there was no risk of him losing his Concept, but he wanted to live his life as far as Minkalla would allow him.

Five years later, he went to the competition and won using his Talent and skills, and as Ms. Telkia had theorized, received the attention of the duke. After a long ceremony, he was handed the Shard of Reality, which Matt was able to utilize to give his father a Concept.

Seeing his parents in person while he was in control felt...it felt like everything.

Matt had to go to the bathroom twice and cry his eyes out. Once when he was able to hug the two of them, and another time when his parents just gazed into each other's eyes and said how now that they were both Tier 15, they had eternity together.

It was just too perfect of a moment, and he wasn't able to control himself.

Aster even caused him to cry a few times.

While she was and always would be part of his family in the real world, it felt extra special to have her been born as his literal sister.

He would be able to see her in the real world, so this life ending wasn't such a devastating moment for him as losing his parents was, it just felt all too real to have her in this life as his sister.

It had been perfect. And would continue to be so until he hit Tier 15.

Now that he was in control, he could delay the life a little by prolonging the time until he hit Tier 15, but Matt didn't choose to do so. Nor did he choose to rush to Tier 15 and end the life, either.

Instead, he took a back seat during the remaining two hundred years while Chef Matt lived his life.

The only times he took over and interfered directly was when he talked to his parents.

Those moments were just too precious for him to pass up, and he ensured that Chef Matt met up with them at least once a year, just so he could bask in their presence just a moment longer.

Eventually, it came to an end, as all good things did.

Chef Matt was going to make Tiering up to Tier 15 a small affair of little note, but Matt took control and hosted a party with his friends and family so he could have one last moment with them before Folded Reflection life ended.

After saying goodbye one last time, he Tiered up to Tier 15 and felt the world starting to fade away.

Just as he felt the life ending, he pulled his parents and sister into one last hug as they faded away, wanting to savor the feel of them for even a moment longer.

Matt sat in the living room and looked at the empty teacup in his hands and started to cry uncontrollably.

His parents had been alive, and it had been fantastic.

Aster had even been his actual sister.

He just sat there and processed the life and its repercussions while it started to fade.

He could remember everything just as well as when he had been in the life, but now that he was out, it was like a dream he could remember. Clear, but obviously not real.

But he wished it was.

How he *wished* it was.

It had been a good life. Everything he could have ever asked for.

Idyllic.

Cleaning himself up, Matt sat and processed everything he had been through.

He couldn't say he'd trade lives, but seeing his parents alive and well had been fantastic. If they were alive now, he knew they would be just as proud of him and his accomplishments as they had been in the Folded Reflection life.

It wasn't perfect, but it was *enough*.

Seeing them happy together, even in a Minkalla alternative life, healed something deep inside him.

With a smile, he contemplated which tea to drink next.

Aster found herself sitting in a room similar to their living room, but there was one subtle difference.

Someone had forgotten to turn off the air conditioner, and everything was covered with a layer of frost.

Frankly, she needed to try that herself, but what really caught her attention were the six perfect scoops of ice cream sitting on the table.

One vanilla, one strawberry, one grape flavored, one mint with chocolate, one that smelled like spring, and finally, a scoop that seemed to change flavor every time she looked at it.

After sniffing each of them once more, she decided to start with the strawberry ice cream. She was pretty sure she knew what this one translated to as her reflection of life, and she wanted to get it out of the way sooner rather than later.

A young fox hatched from her egg and shook herself on wobbly legs. A nice comforting warmth came out of her and seemed to heat up the air around her nicely.

Through her bond, she felt someone panicking a little and looked up to see her human.

Green eyes and blond hair met her own, and she felt an instant connection between herself and the other person.

It was her human!

In her excitement, her tail wagged, and she felt the area around her heat up even more, which felt really good, so she pushed that metaphorical muscle

a little harder, yipping at the flames that came out of her fur.

Her human patted her with something red on his hand, which she curled into before falling over onto the ground, which she only now noticed was soft and springy.

Rolling over, she played a little on the crinkly but soft thing for a while, trying to understand it before her tummy rumbled, and she realized something was wrong.

She was hungry.

On instinct, she crawled over to her shell and quickly ate the red pieces of her former home, but it wasn't enough, and she looked to her human for help.

Somehow, she knew he had an answer, and she whined to him.

Thankfully, she was right, and he had something that smelled *really* good in a bowl just for her.

With her hunger driving her, she dove in and started munching away at the small balls of crunchiness.

As she crunched away, she hummed in contentment.

It tasted so good! And every time the bowl got empty, her human somehow made more of the food appear.

Her human was the best!

Before she knew it, though, her stomach was full, and her flames were sputtering as she got sleepy.

Thankfully, her human picked her up and set her on his chest, where she curled and was able to hear the sound of his heartbeat thumping a lullaby to her as she fell asleep.

The next morning, everything was a whirlwind as her human brought her to explore her new surroundings between her naps.

It was great!

She got to burn down all sorts of stuff. Leaves, grass, a twig, his shirt, part of his pants, part of his bed that didn't have the crunchy no-burn stuff on it, and best of all, a bug that tried to eat her. Its wings furiously trying to cut her up, but she put a stop to that with her flames!

She was a fearsome predator, and everyone knew it. That was why they always came and gave her scratches.

Clearly, because she was the bestest of foxes ever.

Things seemed to blur together for a while, as each day passed without many changes. But then, one day, everything changed as they went into a rift with giant bugs.

That was simply the best thing that had ever happened to her, as Aster was able to burn them to her heart's content, and her human once more

showed his perfectness with his ability to recharge her mana.

With her new special backpack, she got to ride around and burn all of her enemies for her human.

It was the best!

The next few months were more of the same, and Aster enjoyed herself, but soon, everything changed when they were in the food place.

There was something warm and spicy served that day, and after watching her human eat a few mouthfuls, she waited for him to turn to his other food and lunged.

She got her entire muzzle into it and started lapping away, even as Matt tried to pull her from her prey, but she was in her happy place. She savored the soft mushy bits along with the tingling spice. Once he pulled her away, she pushed that feeling of perfection to her bond, trying to convince him to let her have some more.

Instead, he held her back while tapping away at his glowly pad for a while but, eventually, he proved why he was the best human ever, and let her eat the rest of the ‘chilly.’ An odd name for something so hot and spicy, but that didn’t take away from the food’s delight.

That started her lifelong love of the food, and it was a good thing, too, as the next place they went to fight monsters was full of evil ice wolves. They had far too much ice about them for anyone trying to live a healthy life.

So, she burned their entire forest down!

While it might be a little harder to get a fire started, the trees burn like any other once they got going.

Sadly, shortly after that, they left their home. It was a fun home, but they had to move on to another place that was far too cold for her liking, and someone got blood all over her fur, which was just rude.

Thankfully, she then washed Aster off, which made everything better.

That was how she met her new best friend, Liz!

Things got even better, if that was possible, when they met a bird woman who gave her the best chili in the world, along with some blood.

The bird woman’s blood mixed with the dragon’s blood that they had found, and the fire running through it fed into the fire *already* in her blood, which was very nice of the lady.

Better yet, they went to meet Liz’s brother, who happened to be staying where an ascension would be taking place, which was where Aster was able to refine her own Concept.

Fire was hot, and if she got it hot enough, she could burn everything.

As her Concept settled into place, Aster felt something go weird with the world, so she poked at that feeling.

Like a hole was opened in her head, the real Aster took over and grouched, “Come on Minkalla, a life as a fire fox? How unoriginal.”

Still, she wasn’t upset. Despite her reflection life being the antithesis of her real self, she enjoyed getting to watch how life had been when she wasn’t smart yet. That was fun and different enough that she was able to ignore the elephant on fire in the room.

Fire was not her element of choice, but she hoped that when Minkalla translated this life’s Concept to her own, it would be something useful, like being able to directly freeze fire. That could be a really nice surprise to any fire mages she did have to fight.

While she let herself fade into the background and let the life live on, she started noticing more and more deviation with the life, and actually started enjoying her other self’s life a little. She even learned a few subtle weaknesses of fire mages that she hadn’t known before and intended to put them to good use. Eventually, the fire version of herself reached Tier 15, and the life faded away and was like a dream she could enter and relive at any time.

But it wasn’t *her*, and she wouldn’t miss being a fire fox.

Liz looked at the table before her and the six cups of wine it held. She nearly sighed when she saw them.

How original, Minkalla, she thought as she rolled her eyes.

Nobody had *ever* associated wine with blood before—but at least they weren’t all red wine.

The first cup that caught her eye smelled like a holiday blend. There were hints of cinnamon and spice, and the concoction was heated and bubbling. A fire life if she had ever seen one.

Not a bad life, but as she checked the other cups, she frowned. The leftmost was a dark red wine in an elaborate chalice that she could only associate with blood and bad vampire movies. Not a pleasing choice at all, but maybe not the worst possible life either.

The next was a white wine that smelled like liquid sugar. Not a pleasant wine by smell, but hopefully the taste and life would be more palatable.

Next was a rosé wine that smelled like grass in the spring and had a slight green tinge when the light hit it just right, but she wasn’t sure if that was the glass or the wine at first glance.

The purple cup smelled like fresh-picked grapes and was no more enticing to her senses despite being normal for a wine. It was so normal, it stood out amongst the variety of odd wine choices.

The final cup was a white wine with a buttery scent, which was a mystery to her.

Wanting to get the worst over with, she grabbed the goblet of blood red wine and drank it down without trying to taste it.

A mistake, as it turned out, as a pleasant flavor was the last thing she remembered as she started to fall asleep.

The first thing Liz's parents taught her was to hide.

Hiding was how to stay alive with the roving bands of higher Divinities who came through their little planet, ruthlessly killing anyone and sometimes everyone they encountered.

So, they stuck to the places without monster spawners and rarely, if ever, entered a town or village.

Not that those places lasted long.

Liz remembered half a dozen places that had once been thriving cities with thousands of people but were now little more than holes in the ground at best, and poisonous remains that corrupted the land around them at worst.

She was nine when she asked why this was happening, and twelve when her parents actually answered her.

They called it Armageddon. The end of times.

The Immortal Ever Generous and Benevolent God King had been killed by the traitors, while the Ministers had revolted, and the Great Wars had started.

Her father said that the Glorious Everlasting Kingdom of Prosperity was eating itself alive as factions rose and fought for power.

The few other small groups they interacted with had a much simpler name for it.

The Shattering.

The shattering of their way of life. The shattering of everything they knew. The shattering of the stability they once had.

Liz felt the name was apt, even if she was too young to remember the few years of life she had lived before the God King's death.

All she knew was fear, hiding, and the threat of death being ever present.

When she was thirteen, her parents brought her to a monster spawner and took her inside.

There, they subdued the first monster and had her drive a blade into its chest.

It was a bloody event, as she missed the heart and the deer with metal antlers struggled furiously.

Liz thought it was her fear at first, but quickly came to realize that she had a connection with the blood seeping from the monster before her. With a thought, it rushed into her, and she felt bloated like the one time she ate an entire rabbit on her own.

Except, this came with a rush of power, rather than sleepiness.

It took some trial and error with her parents' help, but they learned she had the ability to absorb blood to empower herself, sacrificing the lifeblood of her foes for strength.

With that, she was able to kill beasts that were two full Mortal Realms higher than herself.

When she reached the 3rd Mortal Shedding, they learned what her second Blessing was.

Blood sacrificed to her was stronger and lasted longer.

Life seemed to settle down for a period of time, but then *they* came.

The invaders.

They called themselves the Liberators of the Fallen, but Liz and the other inhabitants of their homeworld knew them for what they really were.

Monsters in human flesh.

They took whatever they wanted, be it people for pleasure, the little food that they managed to gather, or the very clothes off their backs.

They also monopolized the monster spawners, allowing no one who hadn't submitted to them to enter their depths.

Liz's parents and a few others had a plan. They decided enough was enough and intended to enter a monster spawner and never come out. They would set up a new life away from everything else.

It was a decision that they knew would doom them, which is why they hadn't wanted to do so before. They had held out hope that things would get better, but now, they saw the truth. Nothing would get better. Only worse.

So, as the sentiment grew and spread through the scattered remains of the survivors, they decided to gather what supplies they could and then enter the monster spawner.

The decision of which monster spawner to enter was not something easily decided, and everyone had an opinion, but in the end, one was chosen that they felt could sustain them for at least two hundred years.

A long time for those in the lower Mortal Realm, but nothing for those above the 8th Shedding.

Their next challenge was gathering what remaining domesticated livestock they had that wasn't under the control of the invaders.

Things seemed to be going well with their planning, and before long, they had five thousand families ready to move.

Liz and everyone else expected disaster to strike, and they were right.

The Liberators of the Fallen had gotten wind of their plans and ambushed them right as they were going to enter the monster spawner.

Liz and her family were in the rear, as some of the stronger fighters, and they fought with everything they had.

It wouldn't have been enough if the Liberators of the Fallen hadn't been both arrogant and conceited in their abilities.

Instead of attacking them with their 1st Immortals, they sent their Junior Liberators, conscripts from the few villages and cities which had lasted to this point and were firmly under their control.

Even as Liz battled with tendrils of blood and with her obsidian horn blade, she saw the Immortals laughing and jeering at their attempts at resistance.

Still, they fought and retreated into the monster spawner, and it must have been the last blessing of The Immortal Ever Generous and Benevolent God King because, against all odds, they made it.

Most of them did, at least.

There was only so much time before a monster spawner changed its world. Everyone knew that, and they had planned around that very scenario and practiced moving quickly through narrow gaps while avoiding clogging the entrance.

But things changed when they were forced into a fighting retreat.

Liz liked to think that they had done well. When the last three dozen of them entered the monster spawner, they were met with emptiness.

The forest was as they expected, but their friends and family were gone. Separated by the rules of the monster spawner and its separate worlds.

Liz and the other Low Mortals fell into depression for a time, but that didn't last.

It couldn't.

They were still in a monster spawner six Sheddings stronger than themselves, and only seven out of their numbers had their First Understanding.

They wanted to leave the monster spawner but knew that leaving so soon would only mean their death when they encountered the Liberators of the Fallen troops.

So, they fought the monsters because what other choice was there?

It was there that for the first time, Liz learned just how useful blood could be, and the many ways her Blessing could be used.

Blood was life.

It was death.

It was healing and decay.

It was the bonds between comrades in arms.

It was the ties between brothers and sisters.

Blood was her.

Her first Understanding was born of the blood of monsters and her companions.

Nine months.

It took them nine months to clear the monster spawner of anything dangerous, nine months filled with blood and danger, but they learned and grew during that span.

Liz wasn't entirely sure how it happened, but with her First Understanding, she became their group's hub despite not being their strongest fighter. She wanted to reject it, but she knew they needed her.

So, they gave her blood to empower herself, and with her Understanding, she fed that power back to them. She healed them with their blood and used their blood to take out monsters.

But it wasn't perfect.

Nothing was.

They lost people during their campaign against the monsters.

They lost people to the demons inside them.

Each loss was unacceptable but, eventually, those who remained were hard like iron, and they were angry.

Angry at the Liberators of the Fallen who wouldn't just let them leave. Angry at The Immortal Ever Generous and Benevolent God King and the ministers of the Glorious Everlasting Kingdom of Prosperity, who decided their own political ambitions were more important than the welfare of the little people.

So, they hatched a plan.

At first, Liz was against it, but others showed her the truth.

She had the ability, so she needed to use that ability to take back their world.

So, two years after they entered the monster spawner, they left.

They had prepared for a fight with the Liberators of the Fallen, but no one challenged them.

That allowed the seventeen of them then moved like wraiths through the night and enter a city.

From there, it was easy.

One by one, they joined the Liberators of the Fallen.

At first, they didn't do anything out of line, but once they were past the initial training and had earned a measure of trust of their leaders, they enacted their plan.

Liz and her sixteen Apostles of Blood.

They made up the core of their new faction and were the pillars of their tenets.

Liz had refused to test it on her friends, but during their time in the monster spawner, she learned that her empowerment of blood could have more effects, even if they were subtle.

Like the Glyphs of Power, she could use her blood to make her own glyphs, and she used them to control the converts they recruited.

They gave her blood, and she gave them power in return.

What they didn't know was that the social brainwashing that those recruits received was backed by Glyphs of Power.

It took nearly a decade, but they infected the Liberators of the Fallen from the inside out, until they were finally able to decapitate the local leadership and declare themselves a regional power standing on their own.

Liz led the battle, and as a Mortal in the 13th Shedding along with her Apostles, killed an Immortal at the 2nd Shedding through her believers' empowerment. That, more than any other act, had cemented her rule.

While some people found the sharing of blood distasteful, she and her Apostles spread their influence gently. At least for the civilians.

The former members of the Liberators of the Fallen weren't given such liberties. They had two options. Become a member and accept a Glyph of Power carved into their skull or be a sacrifice to empower the Apostles and Blood Queen.

Liz didn't care about their fate. They were monsters, one and all, and she was determined to see them useful in life or death.

Things were never that easy, though.

Liberators of the Fallen were an operation that spanned seven different worlds, and they hadn't taken the loss of one of their worlds quietly.

They sent warships filled with conscripts and tried to rain down on her world and her people.

Liz used those same ships to rain blood down on their headquarters on the other planets.

One by one, they took over each of the Liberators of the Fallen and saved all of them from tyranny.

There was always a cost, though. Seven of the Apostles had fallen during those battles with Immortals, but Liz knew them, and knew they gave their lives willingly.

They had learned the most important lesson early.

Change could only be enacted through bloodshed.

As Liz stood on her new capital at the 14th Mortal Shedding, she overlooked her people and watched as they each cut a small line on their forearms.

Their offering to her was absorbed and empowered her body and soul.

A drop of water might not be able to topple a dam, but a million could destroy even the mightiest of barriers.

Power flooded into her, and she looked out to her people. “We do not seek out to recreate the Glorious Everlasting Kingdom of Prosperity. I do not see myself as The Immortal Ever Generous and Benevolent God King reborn. I am your queen. The Queen of Blood. Of binding! Of life! Of brotherhood! Of shared suffering, and shared loss!”

She took a breath and kept going reiterating her doctrines of Blood while her Apostles stood behind her, with seven notably empty spots.

When the event ended, they moved to the treasury. Not for their own wealth, but they needed to fix the economy that the Liberators of the Fallen had ruined with their ruthless exploitation.

Most everything was normal, but one thing caught Liz’s eye.

It was an old book she almost overlooked, but something caught her attention about it, and she flipped through the pages.

It was a book on old magic.

It spoke about the ways to control magic that didn’t necessarily need Glyphs of Power or Abilities from monsters spawners to function.

She almost dismissed it as irrelevant, as it was no secret that old magic was weaker, slower, and more expensive than Abilities or Glyphs of Power. That was until she saw the note about how blood and souls could be used to empower the old magic effects.

That caused her to stop her progression into Immortality, and she and the Apostles started delving into the old magic, or as they started calling it,

unstructured magic.

It wasn't the same as her using blood to boost the Glyphs of Power but instead, it was about harnessing the powers of the world with the soul.

Blood and sacrifice just made it that much stronger.

After they learned the tentative rules of this unstructured magic, the first thing they did was empty their dungeons of the remaining Liberators of the Fallen loyalists to create the strongest armor ever created for her Apostles.

Ten thousand bodies drained. Ten thousand souls captured. Ten million sacrifices of blood willingly given.

Together, they made twelve of the strongest sets of armor ever created.

They hoped to never need to use it.

That hope only lasted two years.

As Liz donned her blood-red helm, she looked up to see the Everte Republic ships in space above their planet.

Hearing she, the Blood Queen, was still a mortal, the other local powers had been circling like wolves, and the Everte Republic was simply the first to move.

She would show them the folly of their choice with the spear in her hand.

That thought caused Liz to pause. She had never wielded a spear before and wasn't now. She was a support mage who boosted her allies' capabilities, not someone who fought on the front line.

She looked down to check, and for a second, a spear seemed to superimpose over her shield, and then her mind seemed to shatter as information flooded in.

Liz, the *real* Liz, took a deep breath.

This life had been scarily close to reaching Tier 15, and only hovered at the peak of Tier 14 for reasons she could only explain away by Minkalla ensuring she had more than a century to break out of the illusion.

Now that she knew what it felt like, she hoped it would be easier next time, but she was still shaken.

In only her first Reflection, and she almost lost herself.

The Blood Queen carried on with her war in the midst of the Shattering. An interesting time period, Liz felt, and not one she would have expected. Most interesting was her alternate self. Their Talents and Concepts weren't *that* different, but the ways in which they each approached their magic was... interesting.

It bore consideration, if nothing else.

She wasn't sure if using blood to empower runes would work in the *real* world, but it wouldn't hurt her to try. And she knew just the person to help her

experiment with runes.

How convenient.

For now, it was just time to see what Blood Queen Elizabeth could accomplish.

Susanne looked around at the house and paused for a moment.

It looked more like Matt, Liz, and Aster's reward house than her own, which was disconcerting.

Had she set down such ties with them in the last six months? She hadn't thought so, but now that she thought about it, they were her closest friends.

Her initial reaction was to say that they were second to only her brother, but while he would always be family, he had never understood her drive and determination to make it on The Path. The reasons *why* she fought and bled day in and day out just to rush up the Tiers with a self-enforced handicap.

Her brother was her only family, but he didn't understand.

Matt, Liz, and Aster *did*.

She once heard the saying that 'friends were the family you choose' before, but today was the first time she actually realized it was both true and could sneak up on you without really realizing it.

While she still fully intended to once more strike out on her own when they left Minkalla, she was now thinking that she would at least stay in correspondence with them.

The idea of not talking to them at all once they separated didn't sit right with her.

Maybe she'd even visit Aster when she was sent off to the beast boarding school thing at Tier 15. The fox had told her how much she was worried about being separated from Matt and Liz, and maybe a visit could help.

Was that even possible?

She honestly had no idea but intended to ask Carol about that once she left.

Returning to her mission at hand, she looked at the coffees.

They smelled fantastic. Each was a different roast and blend, and she rubbed her hands in anticipation.

The first she immediately recognized, and it made her pause. It was her parents' favorite blend. A simple, local blend from their home planet, but not something widely distributed. She wasn't surprised that Minkalla had pulled it out of her mind but was rather intrigued by its implication.

She knew herself well enough to know she wasn't a puzzle solver and preferred a direct approach, but in her introspective mood, she wondered how that coffee corresponded to the life Minkalla would create for her.

The other coffees were more normal, though not *normal*.

Two were rare blends she thought she recognized but couldn't be sure, but the third coffee was strange. Something closer to an espresso, but not quite. It was smaller than normal, little more than a thimble, but her spiritual perception said it went on endlessly.

Odd, but what in Minkalla hadn't been odd so far?

Deciding to keep things simple, she grabbed the first cup she'd seen and took a drink.

Susanne lived a happy life.

Everything was perfect.

Her mother was the ever-doting housewife and mother to her and her brother, while her father ran a delver training program.

When he came home, dinner was always on the table, and the kids sat down with them to all eat as a family.

It was the best part of her day.

Her father regaled her and her brother with stories of the delvers he trained. As a Tier 15, he was immortal, and always seemed to have something exciting happen while he was at work, so Susanne was endlessly fascinated.

Her brother, not so much. He would rather read one of the millions of books he always seemed to have or paint something, but Susanne was hooked on her father's words and wanted to be the one in the stories.

That brought them closer together, and while her father always tried to bring her brother into their shared time, he nearly always refused.

Susanne put in endless hours of training with her father's encouragement, but what she didn't notice was the rift it was creating with her brother and her parents.

Even her mother, prone to her own desire for solitude, worried for her brother. He would retreat into his own quiet activities despite their every attempt to engage him.

They tried therapy. They tried joining in on the activities he enjoyed. They tried signing him up for any of the after school activities he showed even the slightest interest in.

Nothing worked.

Susanne grew tired of it.

She didn't hate him. Really, she didn't. He was still her brother, but he was *ruining everything*. Her parents argued more and more as the days went by, blaming each other for how withdrawn he became, but that just caused him to retreat into himself even further.

Until one day, he snapped at her when she called him down for dinner and demanded to just be left alone.

Susanne was so tired of it that she instantly agreed and slammed the door as she stomped down and out of the house.

If only she didn't leave.

If only her father didn't chase after her.

If only her mother was higher than Tier 5 and had stronger spiritual perception.

If only.

If any one of those things hadn't happened, they might have been able to notice as her brother hung himself in his room.

If only.

That destroyed their family.

Her mother had to be checked into long term care, as she had tried to kill herself three times in as many days after her brother's suicide and was now catatonic.

Her father held it together for all of a week before he just vanished.

No one knew where he went.

There were no records of him entering a rift, no records of him leaving the planet through a teleporter. Not even a record of anyone exiting the planet through flight during the period he could have left.

He just up and vanished one day.

Gone.

Like everyone else.

That started the end of Susanne's bad days. Not that things became better. No, things went from bad to downright awful.

As she was thirteen, Susanne took the offer of early emancipation, but her Talent turned out to be less than useful.

The ability to write prettily.

Useless.

But she wouldn't be.

Taking the offer of training from one of her father's old friends at his academy, she lived on the training fields for two years, honing her skills living off the family's savings.

Thankfully, as a Tier 15, her father's bank accounts were more than enough for her to live on, as long as she wasn't buying dozens of skills.

At fifteen, she stepped into her first rift and slaughtered her way through it. It was a brutal fight, and she lost herself to the massacre for a while but came out a calmer woman.

She couldn't change the past, but she could change the future.

Marcus, her father's friend, gave her two things when she came out of the rift that day.

A not so subtle eviction from the closet she had been living in at the academy, and a multitool.

The first was justified, and a long time coming, but the second stumped her.

She had always intended to follow in her father's footsteps and use a broadsword as her weapon of choice.

Marcus disagreed. "There's a tool for every occasion, and it's up to you to find it. Your lack of a combat Talent frees you from the constraints of the rest of us. Take that, and never let yourself be limited."

Those words struck her as profound, even if he probably didn't mean it that way, and she left the academy and just started walking.

She walked for hours that night, though the city until her feet carried her to the teleportation platform.

It turned out to be good timing, as the teleporter was cycling a set of passengers in little under an hour.

Fortuitous.

With only a stop to use one of the local recharging stations, she sent Marcus a message that she was leaving the planet and just left, not looking back. What did she have to keep her there? A mother who couldn't recognize her even on the good days, and was so heavily medicated on the bad ones? No, her mother was all but dead in spirit, even if not physically.

She didn't see Marcus standing in the station as she left, or she would have been able to get one last look at the man who had been watching over her the last two years before he teleported across the planet.

If she had seen that, Susanne could have commiserated with him about wanting to get away from a place with so many memories.

If she had been able to see into the hotel room, she would have been able to see the man's face slowly shifting into a familiar one.

Her father. Alive and well.

Just a coward, unable to face reality, but in a different way than her mother.

Susanne never spent more than a month in a single place. Sometimes she moved from planet to planet, and sometimes she simply moved from one hotel to another if she found a particular reason to stay, like a good trainer.

Otherwise, she moved.

She learned.

Every weapon she picked up she attempted to master.

It wasn't a fast process, but by the time she saw the end of her first century, she was competent in nearly every weapon that existed. She was no master, but she was versatile, and good enough to practice on her own.

If she needed to fight a golem, she knew both heavy and light blunt weapon tactics. If she fought a slime, she knew the best way to wield enchanted weapons to maximize her kills per unit of mana spent.

Her proudest accomplishment came when she entered a Tier 10 Conceptless tournament and fought her way to first place.

She wasn't the best fighter there, not by a wide margin. People had been training for centuries for it, but she would not be denied her prize. She knew the weaknesses of each of her opponents because she had fought like them, and she knew what they would struggle with. Her versatility brought victory, and victory brought her to a room holding a Shard of Reality.

As Susanne sat there in front of the forearm-long sliver of reality, she thought back to her life.

There were a million things she would change.

But that was impossible.

However, she could widen her arsenal.

Some days, she didn't even know why she fought so hard, but she just refused to stop.

Some part of her refused to stop putting one foot forward.

She felt like she would die if she stopped, so she moved.

She progressed.

She grew.

She became more.

And it was that simple, wasn't it?

She was trying to outgrow her past.

If her father had been better, smarter, faster, none of the bad things would have happened.

The same went for her mother.

If her brother had just opened up...

If she hadn't thought her irritation was more important than the obvious stress her brother was going through.

She was the real reason things had gone bad.

The linchpin of the entire situation.

The world didn't revolve around her, but if she just had the right tool, she might have been able to solve the problem.

Susanne was versatile because, if she wasn't, she couldn't keep herself together.

I am what the world made me.

As she felt around with that Concept, she disregarded it.

It was close but not *right*.

I am what I made me.

That clicked into place, and she felt something wash over her.

Except, even as that clicked into place, she felt something was wrong, and probed it like a sore tooth.

Susanne, the ascender, woke up and cursed the life Minkalla had just made her live.

It was like the last bitter dregs of her coffee, but without the enjoyment of the rest of the cup.

Her fist closed around...nothing. No sword appeared, and she tensed. She didn't have her sword, and she had to fight against the panic that accompanied it. But no, there was no reason to panic, and she needed to *relax*.

This was just a dream. A figment of Minkalla's imagination of what her life could have been like.

Even repeating it like a mantra unnerved her, and she wanted this life to *end*.

How much worse could the other lives get, when she had caused the death of her entire family?

Once Matt was sufficiently recovered from his emotional first life, he picked up the cup with blue filigree and caffeinated tea and sipped it.

For a tea he knew he wasn't a fan of, it seemed better than he remembered, but he wasn't able to appreciate it for more than a moment as he felt the world fading.

Matt looked at the result blinking on the screen in front of him. It was unbelievable, unacceptable.

Unchangeable.

He had done everything right. Followed every instruction. Pushed himself until the instructors forced him to rest. When his group of orphans turned nine, and the physical conditioning and rift training tests began, he never slacked off or skipped lessons.

The world seemed hollow and empty as he stumbled over to Miles, the head recruiter of Gavle's Good Guilders, who stared at him with alarm.

"Ascender's balls, Matt! What's going on? I just got a notification saying your Talent isn't up to recruitment standards." Miles' head swiveled around, and he whispered, "Get over here." He reached out and snagged Matt's arm and pulled him into a vacant conference room behind the recruiting stands.

"What happened? I can't see the exact details, but your application was just booted back by our AI with..."

Miles held up the pad currently displaying Matt's conditional contract into GGG. He scrolled all the way down to show a flashing red box with the words 'applicant does not meet minimum requirements.'

"Is it *really* that bad?"

Matt looked at the contract while he debated what to tell Miles. Currently everything felt like a bad dream he was living again and again.

Swallowing Matt squeaked out, "Can't cultivate mana at all."

Without looking, he somehow knew Miles had frozen even before he said.

"Fuck."

"Fuck."

"Fuck."

Miles pressed his hands together in front of his face and started pacing again. Clearly deep in thought, he said, "There's not much I can do without getting both of us into trouble. If I show too much favoritism, other guilds might think I'm trying to create a spy to infiltrate another guild for us."

Matt saw his world crumbling and tried one more time. "Is there nothing anyone can do?"

Saying that, he almost stopped listening, as he seemed to know the script of how this would play out. Miles would say no, and he would be out on the street.

Miles paced and seemed in deep thought before he finally threw out a lifeline to Matt. "There isn't much I can do. But there is still a chance!"

Walking over to the still shell-shocked Matt, he shook him. When Matt didn't respond, he shook him harder.

“Get your shit together, Matt.” Seeing he wasn’t paying attention, he said Matt’s name a few more times until Matt focused on him with a burning ember of hope reignited in his chest.

“The vice guild leader came over with us for a business meeting with the Junipers about getting rights to some of the inland rifts. If you can impress him, there is a chance you can still join the guild. He’s a melee fighter himself and has brought in a few kids who had shown nothing more than skill with a blade before. It was a last minute decision for Connor to come over and I almost forgot. This is your shot Matt.”

As Matt brimmed with eagerness, Miles patted his shoulder. “Stay here and get yourself together. He’ll be back in a few hours, and I’ll get you in front of him. That’s your chance, and I think it’s a good one. I’ve seen you fight, and you’re good with a blade.”

Miles then led Matt to a small sparring room in the awakening facility and told Matt to prepare.

It felt like years later when Connor Daniels walked through the door and Matt jumped to his feet.

Miles followed the large man into the room and widened his eyes at Matt, who jumped forward and stuck out his hand.

“I’m Matt, sir. I, um, uh, got a bad Talent, but I think I’d still be useful to the guild. I’m good with my blade, and even without spells, I can be useful.”

Feeling like he fumbled the introduction, Matt swallowed and hoped things wouldn’t go badly because of it.

Connor didn’t seem to mind, as he silently took Matt’s hand and shook it before, in his left hand, a longsword appeared from nowhere.

He gently tossed it to Matt, who quickly disengaged from their handshake to catch the blade and step back.

It was a good thing, as it turned out because it gave him enough time to block the blade coming at him from his offside.

Connor swung the blade slowly, like someone swinging a willow branch, but the impact jarred Matt’s hands.

That broke Matt out of his funk, and he blocked the next two strikes and lashed out after countering the third strike, landing a blow on the man’s left hand.

Matt jerked back in surprise and horror as he stammered, “I’m so sorry. I didn’t—”

Connor didn’t pause in his next attack but showed Matt his palm even as he attacked.

Matt ducked, but nearly stumbled as he saw the uninjured palm and realized his mistake.

Connor was obviously a high Tier, as he was the vice guild leader of GGG. That was a Tier 10 guild, and he knew Glave was Tier 15, so the vice guild leader had to be at least Tier 10. He shouldn't have been surprised that he couldn't hurt the man so casually.

With that dilemma settled, Matt was able to focus entirely on fighting the other man and felt like he gave a good showing of his abilities.

Connor spent five minutes allowing Matt to attack and then pushing him back on the defensive to test both of his abilities. They had fought around the small training room several times before Connor stepped back and his sword vanished.

"You're pretty good with that blade, kid. Consider your contract accepted with the old conditions. No new restrictions or reduction in recruitment bonuses. Don't let your Talent define you."

With that, he gestured to Miles and then vanished out of the nearby door.

Matt was about to ask what he should do with the blade that the other man had handed him, when Connors voice came through the still closing door like it was carried on the breeze. "Consider the blade an appreciation gift for your skill with it."

Miles seemed as relieved as Matt was, and the older man smiled and reached out to shake Matt's hand, but he pulled the recruiter into a hug as all the stress and worry fled from him.

Matt felt an odd sensation and probed it like a sore tooth, and the real Matt woke up.

He was joining a guild.

That was so odd, he couldn't really adjust to the idea, but he was excited to see how this life played out, and let the life continue with him watching as things sped by.

Holding back tears, Matt got out, "Thanks, Miles. You saved my life."

Miles patted his back twice before they pulled back at the same time, and Miles slapped his arm. "I knew you could do it. It was all your skill and a bit of luck that Vice Leader Connor was here. I couldn't make the same decision even if I wanted to."

"Still, you could have just sent me on my way and not asked Vice Leader Connor to test me at all."

Miles waved that off and brought out his pad with the contract on it. "All right, Matt, let's go over your contract now." Miles looked up and around to

the training room before adding. “Actually, let’s go back to the meeting room where we can sit down like civilized people.”

It took them close to two hours to go over all of the documentation and signing everything, and what felt like an eternity later, Matt had signed the next ten years of his life away to the guild.

It wasn’t that he couldn’t leave before that, but if he did, he would need to pay back all the guild’s bonuses and a small penalty, depending on how much they had spent versus how much he took from them over the time he was with him.

As he had no intention to leave them, Matt wasn’t worried.

He knew how lucky he had been in the guild accepting him and wasn’t going to be an ingrate for that.

Breakfast the next morning got a little weird, and vice guild leader Connor gave everyone an offer to join the guild in establishing a new base deeper inside the continent. Anyone who didn’t wish to go with the setup group was given the opportunity to head to the headquarters, but only three people chose to go back to Nardak, where the guilds main base was, while everyone else decided to stay.

Three days later, they were joined by a dozen new faces who all felt strong, who Vice Leader Connor introduced as their new trainers and guards.

With them, they boarded a bus that, to everyone’s shock, took off from the ground and flew.

The flight took them hours, but they eventually arrived in a forest that looked like any other, but higher in elevation.

Matt and all the other newly awakened were shocked by the sight of magic building being their new housing, but it also served to drive them to help furnish their new buildings with excitement instead of drudgery.

As the sun was setting, they gathered around the open area in the middle of the houses and started a fire, where they ate dinner and listened to the higher Tiers talk about the rifts they had delved.

It felt homey and comfortable.

Being a part of a larger group of friends and comrades felt...natural.

It took another two days, but the Tier 10s started splitting them into teams and training them based on the rifts that were around them, and they would be delving.

It was real, tangible progress, and everyone worked hard. When they were finished with their duties, they played hard, too.

A month later, they started delving, and even though the supervision of one of the Tier 10s meant they got little to no essence, that was okay. All of

them made mistakes in the first delve that would have cost them injuries from the kobolds they faced.

Matt leaned into his role as a frontliner, and despite not loving having to use a shield and smaller sword, knew it was his best choice, so he didn't complain.

He was walking away from the food line when he overheard vice guild leader Connor saying they needed the next shipment of mana stones sooner rather than later, when an idea came to Matt.

While he had disregarded his Talent after reading the can't cultivate mana, he had been able to rethink things as he calmed and was surrounded by his new friends.

Even 1 mana a second wasn't nothing. It wasn't much compared to a normal mage in a single instant, but no Tier 1 mage could keep that output going for even two minutes.

And Matt could do it forever.

At least in theory.

He had never tried it beyond charging his pad.

Shuffling his feet, he felt awkward interrupting the vice guild leader, but didn't need to, as Connor looked up almost instantly and asked. "Is there something I can help you with, Matt?"

Matt felt like he really shouldn't be telling anything this for some odd reason, but ignored that feeling to say, "I, um... Can I talk to you privately, please?"

Connor shoved the pad he was typing at and stood up, and led Matt to the guild officer's rooms, where he gestured for Matt to sit down at one of the tables in the common room.

"Is someone bullying you or something, Matt?"

That question took Matt aback, and wondered where that came from, but then understood Connor thought this was Matt trying to complain.

"No, nothing like that, sir. I heard you saying you needed the next set of mana stones sooner than later, and I thought I could help."

Vice guild leader Connor looked at him strangely and asked, "I thought you couldn't cultivate mana at all? 100 mana isn't nothing, but it's useful for you as well."

Matt shook his head. "I only have 1 mana, but my mana regeneration is different from others. When my mana is nearly empty, I regenerate my maximum mana per second. So, I, um...regenerate 1 mana a second now."

Connor went from looking dismissive to leaning forward, and he brought out a rechargeable mana stone and charging device before asking, "Can you

fill this then?”

Matt took them and sent his mana into it over the course of three minutes, the stone filled up, where Matt handed it back to the man who looked like a kobold who had been run through.

He looked from the stone, and then to Matt and back down a few times before asking. “You’ve had this Talent the whole time? And you only said you couldn’t cultivate mana?”

Matt shrugged awkwardly. “That seemed more important, as it was why it was a detrimental rating.”

Connor closed his eyes before he reached out and slapped Matt on the back of his head. It didn’t hurt, but it surprised Matt, and he looked at Connor, who had his eyes still closed.

“Matt, you might be the dumbest smart person I have ever heard of.” Taking a deep breath, he continued, “Would you let me see the actual readout your Talent had? I think that will be easier than us talking around it.”

Matt sent the vice guild leader the information while the real Matt watched and waited to see his reaction as an observer.

Connor sighed. “Kid, if you had said the second portion of your Talent at the recruitment center, you would have been recruited by every guild with an incredible bonus. That, or you would have been kidnapped and stuffed into a box.”

Matt felt a jolt of fear, but seeing Connors relaxed attitude while he was explaining things, Matt felt the fear pass quickly.

“I wish you had said something earlier, as it’s now our top priority to get you to Tier 3 as quickly as possible. You might not know about detrimental Talents, but I do. Most, or at least a good portion, are ‘fixed’ at Tier 3, or possibly Tier 25. If your Tier 3 allows you to expand your mana pool, think about how much mana you could make a day? If you wanted to just sit on your ass, you could be richer than the guild leader in a few months. If you wanted to delve, you could be one of the strongest mages ever.”

Matt was excited at the idea even as Connor continued, “Though, without armor skills, it will be hard to keep you safe. If you want my two cents, I think you would make an incredibly strong support mage. Your melee skills would keep you safe from anything attacking you, but you would be able to cast spells and buff the other fighters around you. It would make you the leader of your team. At least, that’s my idea. How does that sound to you?”

The vice guild leader let that offer sink in, and Matt thought it over.

He liked the idea.

He had never thought he could be both a mage and a leader, but it sounded really nice.

Power to help others and himself.

And if his Talent fixed itself, he might be able to become a mage properly.

“I’ll do it.”

Things seemed to move quickly after that.

Matt was changed to another team who carried him through Tier 3 rifts twice a day until he was Tier 3 just months later.

When his Tier 3 Talent did, in fact, fix his cultivation issue, Matt decided to lean into the fact he was a perfect backline mage.

Instead of returning to his former team, he joined other Tier 3 teams as a floater and temporary leader, both boosting their damage and increasing the speed in which they could delve as he kept everyone full of mana.

Before long, more and more resources were being poured into him as they started using him to refill the rifts they used to delve, allowing even the higher Tiers to advance faster.

When he reached Tier 10 himself, he was promoted to third in command as a vice guild leader, after he stated his intentions to stick with Graves Good Guilders instead of jumping to a higher Tier guild or striking off on his own.

GGG was his family, and he wanted to see them become the strongest guild in the Empire. And with his Talent, it was possible.

First, they Tiered up their own rifts on Nardak and delved to advance their Tier 10s, before striking it out to a newly settled Tier 17 planet to establish a new guild headquarters, after converting the old ones to independent feeder guilds.

There, they advanced as a whole, powered by Matt’s endless mana.

At Tier 12, he completed his Concept, which gave him some ability to pass off both his physical cultivation to others, along with a small portion of his mana regeneration.

That further boosted their delving capabilities, and soon, they were delving up two Tiers once a week, not having to wait for their mana stores to recharge. They could have delved faster, but they still had to manage the guild and see to its smooth growth.

They were currently discussing their ideas on their plans on expanding the guild after Matt reached Tier 15 and were looking at possible planets they could move to while at his Tiering up dinner, where he would reach Tier 15.

While they were excited for the future that another doubling of mana would bring them, Matt—the real Matt—knew it meant the end of this life.

The entire idea seemed almost anathema to his current self, and he was surprised that he hadn't been captured or forced into leaving the guild for a stronger power. They weren't subtle at all about his Talent in this life, and he strongly suspected that Minkalla had been pulling the strings to ensure things came out this way.

That, or the emperor was taking a hands off but protective approach to him.

It was also a nice glimpse into what was possible with his mana once he created his own guild, and some of the pitfalls to avoid that the growing guild had run into.

The Concept was useful, and he could only hope that it transferred over to his real self in a similar way. The transferring of mana wasn't anything new, but the ability to share his strength would be useful to boost Liz, Susanne, and even Aster in basically every fight. Even more so when he had more mana than he could reasonably use in a fight.

Even as the life ended with him Tiering up, he was still surprised things had gone so smoothly.

Aster stretched out across the floor, nose tucked between her front paws as she thought. Being a human was still an unusual situation, but now she was trying to readjust to her fox body and take a few minutes to process.

She'd certainly never seen herself as that much of an artist, but she also couldn't deny the enjoyment she'd felt being an animator, and Matt's little sister besides. It had been... peaceful. In many ways, it had been dreadfully boring, and certainly wouldn't be a life she'd want for herself out in the real world, but as a vacation and a way to de-stress, well... She was beginning to understand the immortals who would spend a thousand years pursuing some odd and mostly useless skill.

Her Concept in that life was a prime example. There was little *real* use to her ability to 'freeze' a moment in her memory, then apply it to her art; not when an AI could do all that and then some. But it was fun and neat to play with.

Eventually, Aster scrambled to a standing position and meandered over to her ice cream bowls. Perhaps the life that smelled like spring? Hopefully, it wouldn't be quite so slow as her last one.

Aster stretched as her pack leader growled and stared at her, ignoring the command to get moving.

Frankly, she didn't care what he thought.

Hard Tooth was an asshole, and only remained in command of the pack because his father was a Tier 25 of the neighboring pack.

Honestly, Aster was getting tired of the pack as a whole and was thinking about entering human society early. It was almost taboo in the winter wolf society, but the nearest city was already mostly populated by the various beasts that lived on this planet, so it wouldn't even be that hard.

She even had a Concept she had practiced manipulating objects with. While she wasn't as good as a human with hands, she had managed to carve out a few letters in the snow that were mostly legible.

As she thought about it, the more she liked the idea.

While she loved the pack, she didn't love this current iteration of it. As an orphan, she had been well taken care of, but once Hard Tooth took over and tried to woo her, things had taken a turn for the worse. Especially when she'd let those advances fall on a cold shoulder.

And the Winter Wolves had a level of distance to human civilization that she never fully agreed with. Yes, they should stay connected to their heritage, but was there really a good reason that they had to forgo the convenience of having an AI? Or for not getting any more than the minimum Empire-mandated education?

The Pack leaders said yes, but she thought differently.

And at Tier 12, she believed that she had the right to choose for herself.

Personally, she thought they were all hypocrites about it anyway. After all, they gladly used the bottled Concept to advance past Tier 5 while banning nearly everything else.

Others now avoided her, just in case Hard Tooth took their attention for interest, and that isolation made her decision easy.

Stretching, she walked away from the group to use the bathroom, but once she finished, she just kept walking. Even as her paws moved, and she plowed her way through the snowbanks, she kept moving. Slowly, enough so that she didn't even really feel the difference, her walk turned into a lope, and then full blown run.

As the wild winds ruffled her fur, she took in deep breaths, enjoying the familiar, but now somehow different smells of her home.

It was the same windswept hills as always, but now that she had decided to break with the pack, it felt new and different.

The mundane had turned exciting.

With a yelp of joy, she pushed out at the falling snowflakes with her Concept, kicking the swirling eddies of snow into a proper snowstorm, then barreled her way through it, enjoying the feeling of the ice trying to bite at her.

It took her most of the day but, eventually, she started to smell it. The city was right up ahead.

Normally, if they were close enough to smell the city, the pack leader would immediately turn them away but, this time, she ran directly toward it.

She was both nervous and excited as she padded into the city's outer limits and looked around.

She was hardly the only wolf, but she immediately noticed the difference between herself and the others.

The city wolves were still Winter Wolves, but she understood why most of the True Wolves called them dogs. Their fur was sleeker, their nails were cut back where hers made soft clicking sounds as she walked, and their eyes less wary of everything around them.

There were also humans.

She had only seen a few of them before, on the rare occasion, some of them got permission to enter one of their Winter rifts. But here, there were so *many*.

Aster was standing off to the side of the road, basking in the new stimulus, when an older looking human with a white tail and ears walked over to her.

Before he reached her, he shifted and morphed into a winter wolf, like herself.

He was well groomed, but there was a scar on his flank and a glint in his eyes that told her he wasn't born in the city.

She growled a greeting at him, and he returned it and allowed her to sniff him.

The first thing she got from him was that he was strong. Tier 30 at a minimum, but possibly higher.

She also got the scent that he was older than his appearance suggested.

After she finished, she looked at him and in her politest-but-not-submissive tone, asked, "Can I help you? I don't think I know you after all."

The older wolf chuffed at that. "No, you don't know me, but I know you. Or I know your type. Got tired of the pack and decided to come into the city." He turned, and she was forced to dodge his tail as he did.

That should have been rude, but it reminded her of the elders and how they never seemed to watch their tails when she was just a cub.

A good if distant memory, and that same thing set her at ease.

"Call me Harold. I'm what you might call a liaison of the Marquese that owns this planet. I also work with the city governor to help acclimate kids like yourself who get tired of the 'old ways' and ease your transition into Empire society."

They walked through the city for a little bit while he asked her about herself, and she answered.

Before too long, though, they arrived at a building where the doors opened automatically. She felt slightly confined in the halls that were only two wolves abreast, but she didn't smell any hostility from Harold, and was relieved when he led her to a large, open area filled with snow and trees.

She was looking up to see how they managed to fit trees inside when she smelled it.

Cooked meat. Bison, if her nose was correct.

Harold snorted and indicated with his snout. "Go ahead and eat up. It's free. Room and board are free for the next year if you need. You shouldn't need it too long as a Tier 12, but it's here for your use, even after the year. Though, you will need to pay a Tier 5 mana stone per week."

Aster might be from the wilds, but she understood money and knew that was cheap. Very cheap.

Seeing her look of hesitation, Harold explained, "We have found that if we offer a safety net, less of you idiot kids will turn to crime the first time you have a bad delve, or whatever the case may be, and lose a lot of money."

Nodding to that, she started eating the slab of bison that had been placed in front of her by a helpful human woman.

After chuffing a sound of thanks, she started digging in while Harold sighed. "Ugh. I forgot they don't even give out AI anymore. In my day, we got them so we could learn to understand Empire common at least. If you only know the beast language, we're going to need to get you one sooner rather than later."

Aster didn't stop eating but flicked her tail to indicate her understanding.

Once she was done with the plate of goodness, she got up and stretched before the two of them padded their way to a building a few doors down, where there was a helpful fox lady in human form who explained what the AI chip was and how it would help her.

Hearing it would allow her to talk to baseline humans who couldn't naturally understand the beast language, she readily agreed to the procedure, even though it meant they had to shave a tiny portion of her fur to make the incision, and it wouldn't really work for three days.

She didn't have enough skills to even fill her Core spirit so there was no need to move them around to make room for the AI.

After that, she was quickly brought up to speed and taught everything she needed to know to live a life in the city.

Harold even helped her get a job watching over children who were learning how to delve. Or, she considered them children. What else would you call someone who needed an escort through a rift, no matter their age?

It only paid a Tier 7 mana stone per run, but she was a good fighter, and was easily able to take three groups through the rift a day.

That allowed her to get her own place and afford her own things, which she found satisfying. It was nice to have a place to call her own.

Better yet, she had made friends, and been recommended to a team who needed a mage and melee fighter.

It was when she met the woman of the team, a red haired front liner specializing in metal magic who introduced herself as “Elizabeth” that she froze.

That wasn’t right, was it?

Liz was a blood mage.

A blood mage?

Aster had never even heard of a mage that controlled blood, but the thought lingered, and as she tried to chase it down, she felt her mind expand.

Aster, the fox, was startled as she woke up.

She hadn’t expected to be a wolf, let alone a Winter Wolf, though she did find life in the beast kingdom fascinating.

Luna had told her things were catered to beasts and their myriad forms, but she found it really cool how different things were.

It also gave her the idea that she really needed to bring Matt and Liz to a place like this, even if just to explore.

If they did it post Tier 15, Liz could even join her in beast form!

Settling back into the reflection, Aster waited for her wolf self to reach Tier 15 and end the life.



The cup shattered in her hand as Liz awoke from her latest reflection, sending what remained of the spiced wine across the ground, still dancing with the remnants of faint flame. A few fragments were trapped in her fist, and she ground them into powder before throwing the dust across the false room. She grabbed the goblet her Blood Queen life had been in and threw that across the room as well before sitting herself down on the ground and screaming into her remaining hand.

It was okay.

Everything was fine.

That life...that life *wasn’t real*. It was little more than a dream. *It wasn’t real*.

She was Elizabeth Moore. A future Ascender. She had a loving boyfriend and practically a little sister in Aster, always by her side. She was *Torch*.

Yes! She was Torch! She still was the best damn pyromancer of her generation *and* a blood mage. She'd burned her way to where she was now, and nothing could ever take *that* away from her.

Slowly, she calmed herself, wiping away a few tears and grateful nobody was around to see her reaction. She thought she'd be better about it, but... seeing what her life might have been if her Talent was fire based hurt. Even if it was just a figment of Minkalla's imagination.

With a shaky hand, Liz snatched a random cup and downed it.

Hmm, grass tasted better than she would have guessed.

Liz was a princess.

That was her life, and she accepted it.

Born from two of the Empire's royals, she had an elevated status few others could match.

It was a little lonely, but that was fine. She didn't need friends. She learned to love the solitude and gravitated to the Empire's science and arts.

Her Awakening as a blood mage managed to focus that gravitation onto a specific target: bloodline powers.

It was only natural, really. She had among the strongest bloodlines in the entire Empire, and her Talent and Concept only made it easier for her to explore the branch of cultivation it unlocked for her. Despite so, so much research, they were shrouded in mystery.

Common sense dictated that research on bloodlines should wait until after Tier 15, but Elizabeth Moore was a *scientist*. She had eternity to live once she was immortal, but she was uniquely qualified to provide a mortal perspective on bloodlines until then.

It was generally accepted that beasts born in human form could only transform after Tier 15 because they lacked the spiritual control required for the transformation before then. But was that a *hard* limit? Was it *really* just a coincidence that it happened at the same time the body became immortal, or were they connected on a deeper level?

Similarly, were bloodline powers harder to control before Tier 15 *because* the beast form was absent, or was it just a lack of essence and practice? Clearly, it wasn't completely cut off, as her bloodline had enabled her to utilize rudimentary fire magic before her Awakening.

There were so many questions. Why did bloodline powers last *exactly* three generations without maintenance? Why were pure humans completely unable to utilize bloodline cultivation? What was really happening when a beast absorbed another bloodline? How did they borrow a *different* set of powers?

So, so many questions, all of which nobody could answer.

It was only right that she, the Beast Princess, should seek to answer them. Few people felt that Talents represented fate or destiny, but what other explanation was there for her to get a Talent that so clearly showed what she should devote her time and energy to? Her parents were more than happy to help her, providing funding for the most sophisticated sub-Tier 15 bloodline research center the Empire had ever seen.

Some people may have found it weird, to be Tier 10 yet bossing around Tier 30s a hundred times her age, but she didn't find it that strange. This was her project. *She* was the most determined to find the answers.

And learn she did.

For phoenixes specifically, their rebirth was tied to their beast form, and the molting/burning they regularly underwent. As a human, she couldn't molt, and thus her resurrection wouldn't work. Some other Rank 2 bloodlines, like dragons, didn't have the same restrictions, even though it was hard to confirm that, as most dragons with two draconic parents were born in dragon form. But there were a few born of alternative unions that she had been able to find and test.

Meanwhile, some Rank 1 bloodlines *did* depend on the beast form for their sole power.

She felt like she was getting close to some new breakthrough, some aspect she was missing. After all, once she reached Tier 15, she wouldn't need to be in bird form to resurrect. There was clearly *something* going on that wasn't fully tied to just what body she had. The math in some areas just wasn't adding up, but she just didn't have the data to figure out *what* was happening.

Her latest volunteer padded through the lab doorway. An oddly familiar ice fox named—Liz consulted her notes—Little Star?

She froze.

No, that wasn't right.

That fox should *not* be named Little Star. Aster. She was supposed to be Aster.

With that, Liz, the blood mage on The Path of Ascension, awoke and almost instantly faded back, allowing the dream to take back over.

It was interesting to see the results of her efforts into studying her bloodline. It had always been something of a passing interest of hers, but never something she *truly* devoted time to.

Liz shook her head as she felt some off putting thoughts come to her, then she almost seemed to forget them as she worked with Little Star, who described her bloodline powers and how she was transforming them into a Winter bloodline.

The real Liz couldn't help but chuckle at Minkalla's clearly prepared script, meant to jar her to wakefulness, if Little Star's mere presence hadn't already. Meanwhile, her alternate life reached out with her Concept.

'Power Through Blood' was focused on bloodlines in particular and could *seriously* boost the bloodline of her and any willing participants close to her. The dependence on the existence of a phoenix body prevented her from fully using her Rank 2 power, but her pyromancy was second to only Talented pyromancers when she used it on her Rank 1 power.

In this case, she would be helping the fake Aster undergo the change from Ice to Winter. An interesting use of her Concept, but one which would provide invaluable data.

And with that data, Liz managed her breakthrough. That phoenixes could only resurrect themselves a certain number of times before they molted was well-known, but *molting* wasn't really what reset their extra lives. It was a complex interaction with their Rank 2 power, which molting triggered.

And she could trigger it with her Concept as well.

She'd already done so, though it had taken her nearly a year of solid meditation. She was Tier 14 now; she'd devoted *far* more essence than any phoenix before her to her bloodline powers. She'd worked and massaged her Concept until it was as strong as it would ever get.

She was old, and on the cusp of immortality, but she needed to prove that it was *possible*.

She was in the middle of an operating room, with her parents and siblings watching nervously. No healing could be used or it wouldn't work; her life was truly on the line. But this *would* work.

She was sure of it.

Her fellow researchers adjusted their measurement devices as Liz raised her dagger. Her hand shook a little, but as she settled her resolve, it steadied out as she plunged the blade into her heart.

The world quickly went dark, and Liz pushed her Concept to its breaking point, straining her willpower as she spun her Bloodline into overdrive.

And Elizabeth Moore *died*.

Then, Elizabeth Moore *lived*.

Golden flames engulfed her body, spilling out of her chest and consuming her body. It crumbled away to ash before that ash revealed her, unblemished and unharmed.

A complete success.

Susanne woke up from her third life and took a slow breath.

The last life hadn't been bad.

Not as bad as the first, at least. Though, that was hardly saying anything.

They had been relatively simple lives. The second life, she lived in the Sects and became a Young Mistress of a low Tier Sect, fighting her way to prominence with a blade that could stretch and shrink in any way she chose.

She hadn't minded that life, as it was so different from her own that once she woke up, she felt detached.

The third life had been one where she had a wind hyena bloodline, and used the speed that came with it to dual wield daggers to deadly effect. She even had a Concept to boost the power of blades around her as well.

Not a bad life, all things considered.

Still, she had three more lives, and her instincts told her that her luck had run out, and Minkalla was going to play with her family once more.

Despite that misgiving, she brought the fourth cup to her lips.

Fear was just an emotion to overcome.

Acknowledgement wasn't a show of weakness, but rather the first step to dealing with it.

Susanne pulled her little brother along with her to the testing station.

He was a year younger than her. Almost. *Technically*. But with their birthdays so close, by delaying her own awakening and urging him to get his a little early, she was able to maneuver things so they could get awakened together.

And what more could they ask for?

Susanne, the real Susanne, had already woken up in this dream, and simply watched as the reflection lived its life.

This life was remarkably similar to her actual life. Her asshole father had left when her mother started to age and had thrown himself a party to celebrate as her health declined.

While Minkalla prevented lives from being too derailed, it was distinctly possible to make fairly small changes. She couldn't say things her simulation didn't know or go somewhere that her other self didn't know existed or had no reason to go to. But she could help make choices that her simulation was already considering. Like what shirt to wear, how much time she spent with her mother, or push harder when trying to convince her mother to take them all to therapy.

That small change had saved her mother's life, and while she was depressed, she was getting better with each day that passed, and that was all that mattered to Susanne.

For everything else, she just watched.

It was interesting to be the observer and the observed at the same time, but it taught her a lot about herself. She took everything with a pound of salt, but she soaked in this version of her younger self, so full of vibrance and joy.

Not needing to shoulder her family's burdens had allowed her to be more carefree and act like an actual child.

Susanne suspected some of that was because her brother was only one year younger than herself, and with that change, they were much closer.

The analytical part of her found it interesting that Minkalla didn't change much of her brother's core personality, despite it being impossible for him to be exactly the same with such a change, but she welcomed it.

It was nice to spend time with her brother.

Not a replacement for the real thing, but they were too old to try and shove mulch down each other's shirts now.

Some things could only be done as children.

But she enjoyed them, nonetheless.

Still, while this version of her brother also loved the arts, he wasn't as driven to *create* as he had been before. He was pulled more toward being a mage.

It made her wonder if Minkalla would give him a new, more combat oriented Talent.

As they were awoken, she learned that the answer was a resounding yes.

Her Talent remained unchanged, but while her brother had gotten one similar to her own before, now he got one that reduced the cost of a skill the more recently he'd used it. It reminded her of Matt's Talent, really.

But unlike Matt, her brother was just as vulnerable as any mage. She wouldn't let him get hurt. She *couldn't*.

The swell of pride her simulation felt made it easy to nudge things just a little, and this was a situation wherein they were in full agreement. Her brother needed to be protected, and she would be his shield.

When the opportunity to join the Path presented itself, Susanne jumped on it eagerly, hand in hand with her brother. In her real life, she'd been pushed to rely on herself and herself alone. It had driven her to succeed, to master the blade and always, *always* rely on herself.

Her reflection was still quite self-reliant, but she carried the weight of both her and her brother everywhere she went. She eschewed the blade in this life; that was the one thing she didn't need. *He* was her blade.

And she was his shield.

With her focus and determination, the real Susanne could only smile as she developed her Concept right as she broke through Tier 5, giving her a shield every bit as reliable as her sword had been. Her brother took a bit longer, but the two of them made for a phenomenal team. She protected him, while he unleashed endless waves of attacks.

Torch and Quill weren't at their Tier 10 Pather tournament, and so the two of them faced almost no resistance as they barreled over their competition. Carol was her manager again, but they didn't enter Minkalla until Tier 12. There was no Folded Reflection floor this time, there never was in these lives, and they were a bit less bold than Susanne had been with Matt, Liz, and Aster. But the delve in this life was still a resounding success.

When she reached Tier 14 and was nearing the peak of Tier 15, she once more took over her reflection.

There was one more thing she had to do before this life ended.

Tracking down her father was easy. The man had a new family with a new mortal wife that he hid his immortality from, along with two kids. Same thing he always seemed to do.

She found him walking down the street, arm-in-arm with a low Tier woman, back to the same old tricks.

"Hi, Dad."

He took an embarrassingly long time to remember her, sputtering denials to his new wife. She didn't listen to his excuses, and just waited until recognition dawned in his eyes.

Once it did, she punched him in the face as hard as she could. He flew backward to the horrified scream of his new wife. Cheating husband or not, she clearly wasn't happy that a Tier 14 had just murdered him. Her scream of

horror sputtered out as he stood back up, little worse for wear, and Susanne could sense her putting the pieces together.

Good. In the real world, she planned to spite her father in the best way she could, exposing his tactics and hiring someone to warn everyone he ever tried to date about his history. Here, though, she'd settle for just punching the man down the street. She wasn't a monster, even in this life she wouldn't mutilate or kill him out of spite.

But the punch had been *everything* she'd wanted it to be.

With that, she spun around and left.

She promised her brother she wouldn't Tier up without him, after all.

Waking up in the living room, Matt thought about the last life, its chill still lingering on his lips where the tea slowly faded.

Things had been fairly standard, with him joining the path and getting Aster as a drop, but when they went to the training planet, they went to a new location and never met Liz.

Without her, they continued on their own, with Matt leaning into more of a tank while Aster went for more of a damage mage build.

Oddly enough, they even entered the Tier 10 tournament, and Matt did well enough to get himself a manager.

Kurt.

That was what had woken him up, and with Kurt's silent help, he created his Concept. An Internal Concept that boosted his body to incredible heights.

Then Kurt left, and Matt only interacted with his liaison, Julio.

Oddly enough, he even entered Minkalla, though it was during the cycle after the one he was currently in.

He was doing well, as he reached Tier 15 still going strong on The Path.

As far as he knew—and once he gained control over the life, he did check—Liz just never existed in that life at all. That, or she never joined the Path. Information on royals was hard to get at times, and doubly so when his alternate self didn't care as much as him about finding the answer making it hard to pry too hard.

Still in thought, Matt's questing fingers retrieved the gold-lined teacup and brought it to his mouth for a sip, letting the world around him vanish.

Matt walked out of the awakening center and started looking up jobs. Sadly, the only thing he found that might work, an inn called Benny's, rejected him when he messaged them about their open position.

That left Matt adrift, and he wandered around the city until he found a cheap hotel and spent some of his credits for a week's lodging.

He tried walking about to various shops, but no one was hiring anyone as inexperienced as him for a wage that would do more than get him a few credits saved up each week, which was wholly unacceptable if he wanted to earn enough to buy himself a delve slot before he was forty.

He was contemplating heading off into the wilderness, trekking deeper inland to find a rift on his own that he wouldn't have to pay for, despite knowing it was asking for death, when he overheard the waitress talking to one of her coworkers.

"Beth, are you joining me to stop off at The Vault after our shift? I'm almost full on mana and could use some credits to spend this weekend."

Hearing she was going to spend mana for credits and the name of the company, he immediately pulled out his pad and looked up 'The Vault' on the CityNet.

It was a place he had never heard of before, but they bought people's excess mana for credits.

Seeing the rate, he understood why he had never heard of the place before during any of his training.

The exchange rate was awful. For every ten mana given, they would pay 1 credit. For a typical Tier 1 who just awakened, their entire mana pool was only 100 mana, which would earn them ten credits. That would pay for two meals, but not much else.

Even his crappy motel cost him 100 credits a week, which meant that for a normal person, selling their mana wouldn't even earn them enough credits for rent.

But for Matt, it was perfect.

He could sit there for two hours and give 7,200 mana, which would get him 720 credits. He could sit there for a day and earn enough for rent for that week.

Even better was the rift slot in Glesie, the next city over. It only cost 10,000 credits, and he could earn that in...

Doing some quick math, Matt checked then double checked his answer. In thirty hours, he could make 108,000 mana, which would convert into 10,000 credits.

He could knock that out in a *week*.

Screw getting a job, he would be able to earn enough for him to buy himself a slot in a rift next week.

If he took two weeks, he could even ensure he was able to get a decent set of armor before delving.

Feeling as if he had the cheat code to life, he got on a bus and went to The Vault.

Once he arrived, he found a regurgitation desk and signed up before being directed into a room with just a seat and large mana crystal connected to the wall with a cable.

It took him a few moments to get the hang of sending his mana into the crystal, but once he felt the mana leaving his mana pool, he settled in, watching his pad to see how much mana was being sent to The Vault.

As the mana ticked to 10 in the leftmost column, the second column changed to 1 credit.

Money in his True Vault account and ready to be withdrawn at any time.

Matt watched the number tick up for another minute, but then grew bored.

Seeing money appear in his account was nice, yes, but it was also as boring as watching water boil.

Wanting to stay for at least two hours, which was when the place would close, Matt sprawled out on the bench and found a movie on sale for a single credit and bought it.

Staying for ten extra seconds would be more than worth the distraction it would offer.

Two hours later, when his pad beeped warning that they were closing, Matt left and went back to his hotel. Sprawling across his bed, letting the happiness wash over him Matt thought about how lucky he had just become.

He had earned more money today than he would have in months of a normal job.

And that was only for two hours.

Tomorrow, he intended to stay from the time they opened till they closed. A full eight hours. That would earn him 2,880 credits.

Almost 3,000 credits in a single day.

An unbelievable amount of money.

Excited for tomorrow, Matt had trouble falling asleep, but after ordering a large but cheap meal, he fell asleep.

The next day, he brought a pillow from the hotel and spent the entire day watching movies, along with his bank account ticking up for every ten mana he sent into it.

Ten collective hours done, and only twenty left.

Next week this time, he would be in Glesie.

Away from this awful city and with a blade in his hand.

He was coming back from his third full day of selling his mana, and was sitting on the bus for his commute, when the world went black just as there was a loud explosion.

Matt tried to struggle, but all he felt was a suffocating blackness that weighed down on him like a blanket, and he couldn't feel his limbs responding to his commands. He wondered if there was another rift break, and he was attacked and knocked unconscious on the bus.

He hoped someone would find him sooner rather than later but couldn't do anything to speed it up.

It seemed like hours or days later when the blackness was lifted, and an attractive but stern woman was standing over him.

Matt thought he was saved, but when he tried to get up, he felt the restraints that shackled him down to the bed.

The woman watched the horror trace itself over his face with a blank look.

"Let me go!" He tried to keep his voice stern, but the crack in his voice ruined that. Not that he thought the woman cared.

She seemed indifferent.

"You have a useful Talent. A lot of mana. One could even say an endless amount. How interesting."

She pointed off to the side at a screen that resembled the display on his pad when he sold mana at The Vault.

"36,000 mana a day. If you don't meet that quota, you will lose privileges. If you cooperate, you will even be given access to local stations and movies. If you decide you would like to not give us the mana we want—"

Matt felt a jolt of pain like he was struck by lightning hitting him from inside his skull.

"We implanted a pain device into your skull. It won't kill you. It literally can't. It only stimulates your nervous system. It's also well calibrated to not wear out your nerves. If you decide not to give us 36,000 a day, you will get pulses of that until the mana quota is reached."

The woman paused and let Matt take all that in. "If you cooperate, things will be quite comfortable for you. If not, pain will be your only company."

With that, she vanished, and Matt felt the restraints disengage from his limbs and sink into the bed.

He immediately jumped up and started pounding the walls as he didn't see any windows screaming for help.

No help came. As far as he could tell, the walls were solid, and he only hurt his hands.

Giving up a hopeless effort, he looked around the room.

It was simple, with a nice, small bed he knew hid restraints, along with a toilet and shower in the corner, not even behind a wall.

Beyond that, there was only the pad that was connected to a bendable arm he could move around to see it from any view.

And the cable connected to a mana stone that could reach anywhere in the room.

Sudden anger raged through him, and he tried to destroy the cable, but he couldn't even scratch the surface of the mana stone, despite smashing it against the wall. He even tried jabbing it into the screen, but it did absolutely nothing to either object.

Without anything else to do, he started trying to disassemble the bed, but he found it was seemingly one singular unit.

Seeing nothing else he could do, he sat down and planned.

Not that he had any good ideas, but before he knew it, the pad started to beep quietly.

Idly checking it, he saw a message and countdown indicating he needed to start charging the mana stone to meet his quota in time for the next reset.

Ignoring it, the beeping stopped after five minutes, but the red blinking didn't.

Matt refused to cooperate with these kidnappers and held firm for the entire ten hours.

In every movie he had seen, the hero refused to cooperate and then broke out of captivity before getting his revenge.

He would be just like them.

Strong and defiant.

He thought he was ready when the pulses of pain started, but after only a minute, when the pain stopped, he was on the ground sweating and panting, having urinated on himself during the shocks.

Matt had understated the shocks, thinking the earlier ones were as strong as they could become.

He had been wrong. Oh, so wrong.

These shocks were thousands of times stronger and seemed to be trying to break something inside of him.

After another minute, the shocks started again, and Matt once more resisted, just telling himself he needed to resist, and the kidnappers would eventually stop once he called their bluff.

An hour later, his will broke. Sobbing, he crawled to the mana stone and sent his mana into it, just begging the shocking to stop.

He had even tried knocking himself out, but found the shocks woke him up even after he choked himself.

After that, he had just tried to power through, but he quickly found even his will power had limits, and once it became clear he wouldn't be given even a small respite, he gave in.

He just wanted the pain to stop.

Anything to make the pain stop.

Except it didn't.

Like the woman said, the shocks would continue until he had caught back up on his charging.

The only saving grace was that they went from lasting a minute to being a short jolt once every ten.

Like stubbing a toe, it hurt, but wasn't enough to do more than jolt him.

Clutching the mana stone like it was his safety net, he sent all the mana into it as if his life depended on it.

Ten painful hours later, he saw the pad blink blue before resetting and showing another countdown with 14 hours and zero mana given.

Seeing that, he cried some more, but at least the shocks had stopped.

It was also confirmation that his captors weren't joking about the ten hours of mana per day.

If he skipped like that, he wouldn't be pushing back the total, but rather sending himself into debt.

He tried to stay awake and keep the mana flowing, but after a few minutes of not feeling the pain, he passed out.

He woke up to a beep and looked up in horror, seeing he was once more being warned that if he didn't start sending his mana, the shocks would start again.

Matt thought about resisting again, but even the memory of the hours of shocks almost sent him into tears.

Even as he sent his mana into the stone he called out, begging them to stop this until he was hoarse, but no one seemed to be able to hear him. Or, if they were able to, they couldn't care less.

Once he finished his ten hours of mana, a tray of food appeared right before his eyes.

He almost didn't believe it was real, but after poking it, he found that it was the genuine article

The food wasn't appealing, being a gray porridge, but it was something to fill his empty stomach, and he slurped it down, just wanting to feel full.

Seeing there wasn't anything else and noticing that his thirst was now awakened, he went to the shower where he washed himself and drank his fill.

The water at least seemed clean and filled him.

After that, with nothing else to do, he fell asleep.

When he woke up, his soiled clothes were gone and replaced with a chest of simple clothes in a pile, along with a plastic cup and towels.

Matt checked the pad that loomed over him and saw he had seventeen hours till his deadline and started filling the mana stone.

He still wanted to fight back but knew the obvious method wouldn't work.

So, he complied.

Days went by, and slowly he was given slightly nicer things, along with better food as well as shows and movies to watch on the screen.

That all came to a head one day when he fell asleep through the beeps and missed his deadline by twenty minutes.

As the shocks started, all his luxuries vanished, and he was left in the once more sparsely furnished room.

The message was clear.

They could give him nice things, but they could just as quickly take them away.

They were training him like a dog, but there was nothing Matt could do.

No escape.

It seemed like months or possibly years later when something changed.

An older man appeared in the room.

Matt thought help had come to rescue him, but the man's first words broke that hope. "I do hope you will be as obedient for me as you were for The Vault."

Seeing the shock on Matt's face, the man cruelly laughed. "Oh, yes. They are the ones who captured you. Blowing up the bus and putting a similar body in your seat was a good distraction, but they couldn't hide it from my noble family's eyes. Took us a while to find you, though."

With that, they vanished, and Matt found himself in a similar room but noticeably different. This one at least had a door that was open and had a bathroom inside it.

The man smiled at Matt as he looked around. "Same rules apply here as they did there, but there is one more."

A white, pearlescent stone appeared in the man's hand. "You will absorb and cultivate the essence in the essence stone as well, or the shocks will

come. The Junipers aren't content with only 36,000 mana a day. No, we suspect you can do much more than that after you reach Tier 3."

Hearing this was the Junipers and the local noble family, something in Matt broke.

He might have been able to escape from a company, but a noble family had far more resources.

When Matt reached Tier 3 and his second Talent was awakened, things got worse and better.

They still expected him to give ten hours of mana generation a day, but the amount increased. They also started giving him slightly better things if he gave them more than ten hours of mana a day.

And why not.

He might as well make his prison as comfortable as possible.

That continued until he was Tier 5, and someone else came and took over from the Junipers.

That same pattern repeated for three more capturers but, eventually, someone much stronger than the rest of them appeared.

The man seemed older and was built like a fighter.

It took a moment for his mind to wake up.

It was Emperor Georgios.

The man just looked at Matt for a while before shaking his head and speaking to the two people Matt now saw were behind him.

"I don't agree with what's been done to him, but he's only full of hatred now. Or at least, he is when he feels anything at all. In every timeline, he turned against us the instant he got any degree of freedom. Nothing for it but to keep him locked up and working for the good of the Empire."

The other man shook his head. "This isn't right, Father. No one should be locked up and sucked of their mana for 'the good of the Empire.' If the Empire needs its people in chains to function, we don't deserve to be a Great Power."

The woman shook her head. "The sacrifice of one can improve the lives of quadrillions, eventually. That is a choice that is hard to make, but one that must be done. If it's not done, we only have an angry enemy. If he hadn't been captured, it would be better to create bonds of trust, but now that he has, we might as well continue with the draining of his mana."

The other man shook his head, and Matt felt like he had met him before, despite not knowing the royal children.

Once, he had known them, but like most everything else, it had faded away in the endless boredom and monotony.

Before the two could argue more, Emperor Georgios raised his hand, which commanded silence. “While not as ideal as other methods, it’s what we have, so we must reinforce our control even further. But first, we need him to create his Concept. If he can’t create that, he’s of limited use to us.”

A hand length crystal that seemed to have a picture inside of it appeared, and then shattered, releasing energy into the air.

With a voice that bricked no rejection, the man said, “Absorb this energy and create a Concept.”

The emperor and the woman vanished, but the man stayed behind. “I am sorry for everything you’ve gone through. Truly. I just wanted to introduce myself to you, Matt. My name is Emmanuel, and while I can’t help you right now...I will. If I become emperor, I will free you. If you hate me, I will not blame you. If you attack me, I will not kill you. If you want to be left alone, you will be left alone. If you desire riches, they shall be given. I will do everything in my power to free you, and to make amends for what my father, and all those who have imprisoned you before, have done to you. I don’t expect you to believe me, but this is my solemn vow. Nobody, *nobody* should have to suffer what you have suffered.”

The promise broke something in him, mind and spirit. As the Matt of the reflection broke down weeping, reality shattered around Matt the Ascender.

It was the worst case scenario about revealing his Talent. If the emperor weren’t so accommodating—or in this case, if Matt had been alive in the reign of Emperor Georgios, Emmanuel’s father, this would be his life.

Emperor Georgios was like Luna had told him, a hard man who would happily sacrifice one person for the sake of the whole. At the same time, it was heartwarming that Emmanuel was still steadfast in his belief that no one single person should set themselves on fire to keep the Empire warm.

Matt wasn’t sure if that was just because he himself didn’t believe that Emmanuel would do any different, or that Minkalla couldn’t create a believable world where Emmanuel would choose differently.

That didn’t change the fact that this life was horrific.

Not wanting to interfere with his reflection’s creation of its Concept, Matt watched as it absorbed the energy of Ascension from the Shard of Reality.

He was interested in what this copy of himself would create with its lack of stimulus and such a negative experience.

Seeing where the reflection’s mind went, he raised a mental eyebrow. It wanted its mana back.

The reflection latched onto that desire and grew a seed within it. That seed grew and flourished, until it finally awoke.

It's my Mana.

Like a sink with its plug pulled, all the mana in the room siphoned into his reflection, leaving behind a complete void.

Matt had uses for that.

Still, he felt sick at what even a fake him had gone through to get such a Concept.

This life couldn't end soon enough.

Aster came out of her reflection and spat. The ice cream had been fine, but the fourth and fifth lives they'd brought her to were less than stellar.

In one, Matt had died, leaving her all alone, which had been frankly awful. And while the Concept had changed and been about making her as strong as possible, turning her fur to literal ice and using it as a way for her Talent to leverage its might against her own flesh, she hadn't liked living in a world with Matt dead in it.

No, that had not been fun.

In her next life, she had never gotten the fruit of perfection, and had, for some reason, gone almost feral, which was frankly insulting of Minkalla to suggest. Even without the fruit, she had been a perfect lady, even if she had chewed on a shoe or three.

With one ice cream left, she hoped it would be a good one.

Aster flicked her tails and sent a stream of fox fire at the target that tried to run away and snickered at Frank, who dodged all the illusionary fires and ran directly into the real one.

She didn't let the fire burn too long, but did allow him to get singed before she flicked her tail and dispelled the illusion that they were training in.

Frank whined, "Miss Aster, why can't we practice longer?"

Flicking him with one of her tails, she berated him. "You started out well, but by the end of the training, you spent more time trying to look at my butt rather than watching my tails. Distractions like that will kill you in a real fight if you aren't careful."

The boy blushed down to his neck, but she ignored it.

He was young, and hormones were raging through him like a tempest.

She could forgive that.

She couldn't so easily forgive the sloppiness of his technique.

Stopping him at the door, she caught his eyes and said with her best teacher voice, "Work on your sword forms. Especially seventeen, eleven, and forty three. Do each of them two hundred and fifty times, instead of the normal two hundred each. I can tell from your *lack* of progress that you were slacking on those."

He tried to interrupt, "But Miss Aster, I—"

She cut him off with a stern voice and a dismissive flick of her tails. "No buts, mister. If you want to graduate, you need to work harder. As a third year, it's frankly embarrassing how little you've progressed this last semester. Even the second years are starting to catch up to you."

Softening her tone, she poked him between the eyes with her long finger. "I know you have a lot going on at home, but if you don't focus up and buckle down, you won't be able to change anything."

Seeing his eyes shift down to the ground rather than her butt, she asked. "How are things at home? Last I heard, your father was stable and just waiting on a higher Tier healer."

Frank sighed. "Yeah, but mom is getting worse by the day. She barely eats, and she hasn't gone to work in the last week. And..." He paused and looked around nervously. "And people are coming around looking for money. I've had to get a part time job to cover the expenses."

Aster narrowed her eyes at that.

She knew Frank's father had gotten hit by a curse and was in a coma, and that his mother was taking things badly, but she also knew that she and the headmaster had ensured that all their bills were being deferred until his father was able to get back to delving.

There shouldn't be anyone sniffing around Frank and his mother for money. No one legitimate, at least.

Smacking Frank with one of her tails, she asked, "Why didn't you say so earlier? You were there when the headmaster got your mother's bills deferred. I know because I was there as well. So why are you paying anyone anything?"

"They said that it was different, and my father owed them. And if we didn't make at least some payment, they would have to take our things in repayment, and you couldn't do anything about it as it was a personal debt."

Aster looked up and counted to fifteen, going through all ten fingers, and then her five tails.

She begged anyone to give her patience.

Frank was a good kid, but clearly too naive.

“You should have come to me sooner, rather than taking things into your own hands. I could have brought this to the headmaster, and he would have squashed this before it started.”

Dragging him to the headmaster’s, she had him explain everything, and the older man picked up his cane and asked Frank to lead the way to where he was told to deliver the money he earned.

As she and the headmaster suspected, it was just a local gang of wannabe street toughs who thought they could take advantage of their strength and rob a down-on-their-luck family.

Almost instantly, a fight broke out, but with a flick of her tails, she was able to send most of the lower Tier gang members into a stupor, which allowed the headmaster to more easily subdue the ring leaders.

She, as a Tier 14, could have done the same, but with the Tier 20 as back up, they ensured there were no senseless casualties.

Looking to Frank, she gestured with one of her tails as her arms were crossed. “See. We could have handled this if you had said something earlier. The Corporations don’t tolerate such gangs doing as they please, and our Academy even less so.”

Frank looked both happy and crestfallen, so she tapped him on the head. “Now, I expect you to practice harder without such distractions. Three hundred of each form, as we have ground to make up.”

He tried to complain, but she threatened to increase it to three hundred and fifty, which finally shut him up.

She was leading him out of the building when she caught one of the guards flying in from the sky and jerked as she recognized the armor.

She knew that armor. A passive version of [Precast Armor NM14-PA]. A cracked version.

Something about that seemed wrong, and she poked at that idea and felt a spike go through her brain.

After that moment of pain, Aster felt like her mind expanded as memories rushed in.

Aster, the fox, immediately took over Aster, the kitsune’s body.

She had tails!

And fox ears.

That was fun, and she immediately knew she would be adding them both to her body from her life as Matt’s sister.

Though, maybe only one tail. It was better to have one perfect tail rather than a bunch of subpar ones. Really, this Aster needed to take better care of

her tails, having illusions didn't mean one could forget about proper fur maintenance.

She also found it interesting that she was living in the Corporations for this life, of all places.

Her Concept of this life was also interesting, as it was related to illusions.

She was impressed with herself in this life. Tier 14 by one hundred years old without huge amounts of assistance was quite impressive, but her kitsune life had managed it easily. By the same token, that had been incredibly dangerous, and she shuddered slightly with the realization of how close she had been to losing herself to the life, but the important thing was that she hadn't.

Not wanting to have this life end just yet, she dove back into the reflection with the thought of not Tiering up to Tier 15 quite yet.

She wanted to incorporate illusions into her own ice eventually, and this was a perfect chance to learn about them.

Liz crushed *yet another cup* in her hand, letting it fall to the ground to accompany its broken brethren. The glass cut into her hand, but she dismissed the wound, and the dreamscape healed her. That made two lives in a row she never wanted to think about ever again.

That white wine had betrayed her.

It was supposed to be easy going and pair well with everything, not...*that*.

That wasn't her. It never *would* be her. It never had *been* her. That was someone else altogether.

It. Wasn't. Her.

It was just a nightmare, of sorts.

A traitorous voice in the back of her head spoke up, asking if this was how she reacted to seeing herself in the mirror. It was a reflection, that meant it was her, right?

But no. Minkalla was a liar. The lives it showed were lies. Luna had even said they weren't indicative of how she actually was. Probably warning her of exactly the things she had seen in the last two lives.

An image of a man half-burned but kept alive by healing flames flashed through her mind, but Liz shook her head to clear it.

She just wanted to hug Matt and cry. To talk to her therapist, to just... *anything*, to get two *vile* lives out of her head.

But she couldn't. Not yet.

With shaking hands, she raised the final cup to her lips, and drank the last glass of wine, bracing herself for something awful.

Liz was a noble. Nothing so noble as a princess, but a viscountess through her parents' hard work.

Not that she was a viscountess *yet*. She would need to reach Tier 20 to take over their title, and she was only Tier 11.

But she would be one day, and as everyone knew, foundations were set early.

Though her Talent may have been decidedly average, and her *blood* at that, Liz was never one to squander an opportunity presented to her.

Uselessness was merely a symptom of insufficient creativity.

Blood had its uses. Notably in contracts.

Contracts bound in Blood, Talent, and Concept were nigh impossible to break, and for those that managed it, they suffered.

Contracts weren't one-sided, of course. There was a give and take to such things, after all. A contract was an exchange, and a willing exchange always left each party better off than before.

Of course, what she had in abundance were often the very same things which others were desperate for.

Commoners in particular desired equally common things; wealth, skills, connections... They could be so pathetically short-sighted, too, signing away decades, centuries, some few even an eternity for one of the countless skills within her vault.

A pittance.

They worked for *her*. If they were better at their jobs, that meant they were more valuable to her. That they were ever-so-willing to work for her *more* in exchange for the ability to do their jobs *better* proved the value of her philosophy.

Soft power was far superior to hard power.

Combat power.

So what if she was embarrassingly bad at fighting? She hadn't needed to raise so much as a finger in self-defense in decades. She had a few trainers helping her improve, but what did it matter if she could punch hard? What did it matter if her Talent made nearly all skills useless for her? She was layered in defensive spells and armor and surrounded by the greatest defense of all: her *minions*, bound to loyalty and all the more empowered by her might.

No one could hurt her, even if they wanted to.

When Liz heard about a strong woman who had a Talent for the blade and an armor Talent, she quickly moved in to snatch them up.

As she was sitting in the hovel that the woman's family called a home, she smiled as the woman signed away ten years of her life for the sum of ten mana stones, two Tiers above her own, per year.

Practically nothing for her.

And the woman was *happy* about it.

It was wonderful.

She was watching a news report on her AI when an alert flashed to her about a new and upcoming chef.

Young and Talented, being rated as a once-in-a-decade prodigy.

Someone she absolutely needed to have for herself.

She was looking at a picture of them when she noticed the person next to them.

A bodyguard.

She studied him, trying to figure out why she was drawn to him, but couldn't figure it out.

Attractive, yes, but no more so than her endless flock of paramours.

He seemed almost familiar, but a quick search revealed he had never been in a movie or tv show, though the one video she did find of him fighting hit her like a jolt of lightning.

The man was the son of the Beast King Alargon.

But wasn't the beast kingdom ruler Queen Mara?

Wasn't Mara her mother?

Liz awoke and studied her life.

It wasn't ideal, but compared to her last two lives, this Elizabeth may as well have been a saint.

Still, she wasn't sad to wake up from it, and she pulled herself back out of the life so it could pass as quickly as possible. A little trick she had learned two lives ago. It helped distance herself from the dream, like memories of the reflection lives, and kept her from having to directly experience anything her other selves did.

Six new Concept powers. She should be happy, but she wasn't.

The lives weren't her. She knew what Luna and Kurt had said, but these were still reflections of *her*.

The lives *shouldn't* be her.

But what if they *were*?

Susanne took a deep breath, calming herself as some of her reflection's irritation carried over.

Being the sword she wielded was interesting, yes, but she had to deal with so many bad pick up lines about being a 'sword sheath', even the real her almost snapped at the young men who learned about her Concept.

Castrating one of them hadn't been her real self's idea, but she hadn't stopped the reflection either.

The week in jail and the fine had been worth it as it got the word out she wouldn't tolerate such 'jokes' anymore. She'd considered breaking her Concept just to escape the teasing but eventually settled on a 'never tell' policy.

Susanne took a few minutes to process the last life, but after reviewing and packing it up for later exploration, she picked up her last coffee and drank it down.

It tasted like a library smelled.

A good smell, but not a good taste, if she was honest.

It would have made a better tea.

Susanne was a scribe.

That was her life.

While her brother struggled to become an artist in an oversaturated field, she wrote. It didn't pay much, but it paid the bills and kept the both of them fed and clothed on a Duchess Tier 31 world, where they could cultivate the ambient essence and advance without delving into rifts.

That was far, far too dangerous for two academics like them.

Entering into the little room in the library, she set out her supplies and cursed as she realized the book she had stashed under the booth yesterday was gone.

Meredith.

The woman was *infuriating*.

Attractive.

Attentive.

Astute.

Brave.

Shrewd.

But most of all, a stickler for the rules.

Susanne could deal with all of the other characteristics, but an unbending desire to follow every rule was a step too far.

Did Susanne take over the little private room to work in every day? Yes.

Was that against the rules? No.

Was she supposed to leave things in the room overnight even though she had the room reserved? Also no.

But still. No one used the out of the way room, yet Meredith insisted she clean it out *properly* every night before she went home. And she did. Susanne never left even a scrap of pencil or ink stain in the room, but she saw no reason to put away the assuredly heavy book every day. She was just going to get it back out the next day.

And even that wouldn't be so bad, except its index placed it in the farthest section of the seventeen story library. Even as a Tier 7, it would take her twenty minutes to cross the distance with her best speed, but she couldn't even move that fast, as it would be both rude and dangerous to the books around her.

Trying not to stomp, she arrived at the place her book should have been close to an hour later because of a school trip taking up most of the stairwell.

Except, when she arrived at the place where her book of flourishes and calligraphy strokes should have been, there was only a single wooden marker that stated the book in question was no longer in circulation.

That took Susanne aback.

Had someone other than Meredith taken her book?

That sent a bolt of horror through her, and she ran to the front desk a little faster than was strictly necessary. She had developed a fine sheen of perspiration that she tried to wipe off before she waited in line.

There were seven people in front of her and two people working at the front desk. Susanne didn't see Meredith and wondered if she had been right about someone else taking the book.

Meredith normally put it away in its proper place and would simply chide Susanne a little when she came to drag her away for lunch.

Just as she was going to get helped by Spencer, Meredith sauntered out of the back room with a familiar shaped bundle wrapped in brown paper.

Susanne didn't wait until properly called to the front desk and stepped in front of Meredith, reaching for the book, but the woman's mock cleared her throat and pulled the book back slightly.

"Patrons are supposed to wait until called to approach the desk, Miss Velar."

Susanne rolled her eyes and smoothed her shirt before asking the most important question. “Why did you take my book?”

Meredith just looked at her with those piercing eyes, letting the question speak for itself.

They both knew the answer, but Susanne wasn’t asking what she had spoken aloud. She was asking why the change in routine.

Just as she thought Meredith was going to make her ask properly, the librarian spoke. “I believe we have gone through this song and dance long enough, so I decided to end it.”

Terror shot through Susanne at the thought she was being banned from the library, and she swallowed through her suddenly very dry throat. If she couldn’t work in the library, she would need to rent a place out, and that would be beyond expensive in the city.

She was already struggling to make ends meet while supporting her brother.

She was opening her mouth to speak when Meredith pushed the wrapped book forward. “Despite my lack of understanding as to why you still need this book, as you are beyond proficient, I have given up. If you feel the book helps in some way, you might as well make it your property properly. That way, you can take it with you when you go home and won’t need to leave it behind anymore. Consider it a gift.”

Susanne froze as the unexpected news caught her off guard.

The book wasn’t just a book. It was the book that had taught her how to use her Talent for more than fancy lettering. It had been her lifeline as a poor young adult trying to figure out how to support herself and her brother on an expensive, high Tier planet.

It had been her only friend when she went hungry.

It had been there when she made her first commission, and finally was able to start repaying their debt.

It had been there when she first met Meredith, and the woman forced herself into her life.

It had been there when she formed her Concept, and her quill had risen on its own for the first time.

She had always wanted to buy it, but it was also an incredibly old book that went for two dozen Tier 32 mana stones. A price she could never afford. She could have bought a cheaper reprint, but that wouldn’t have been the same.

You couldn’t replace a friend with a copy just because they were expensive. It was the experiences they shared that made them friends. Not

the contents of the book.

And the generosity. That just...*wasn't done*. Some part of Susanne's spirit rebelled at the gift, shouting at her that no, this wasn't right, this wasn't normal, she couldn't rely on anyone else ever for something like this...

A sword is reliable.

But she had never held a sword.

The Concept broke through the illusion Susanne found herself in, and she relaxed.

She could deal with generosity in a dream. She didn't quite understand the woman's gift, but it seemed like Minkalla was trying to do *something* with it.

As she watched and waited for skills and personal developments of value, Susanne contemplated the value of her life as a calligrapher.

An animated pen definitely seemed like it would translate to an animated sword back in reality. It was either that or gaining the ability to manifest a quill with her Talent, but that seemed less likely.

She settled in for the ride and watched as her other self bumbled through awkward thanks. It didn't seem like it would be all that interesting of a life, but who knew? Maybe she'd get some insight into her Talent to help her with the slow process of expansion. A professional calligrapher *sounded* boring, and she remembered it being fairly dull, but she would stay optimistic.

These lives were worth more than just their Concepts after all. Each could teach her something and could act as a reference for skills she might not have gathered during her real life, even after they faded to little more than memories.

These lives were the pieces of experience that could help her create her Intent.

Minkalla was a forge after all.

And she was her best hammer.

Five lives down, one to go.

Matt tapped his recently drained teacup against the saucer it had rested on, contemplating life. Specifically, a life that seemed smarter than his own. His alternate self had never gotten [Cracked Phantom Armor], the bar fight which had ended up with him snatching the skill for himself simply never happened. He'd still been able to join the path of Ascension, but without a skill, he'd just relied on his physical prowess for delving.

That meant a slower rate of progress overall, as injuries were more common, but it also meant he'd turned around and left the rift when it presented him with a rift challenge. Without Aster, he stayed a solo climber, never teaming up with Liz and becoming more and more self-reliant.

What had *really* interested Matt was how his other life had eventually expanded his capabilities. Notably, he used Talismans far, *far* earlier than Matt ever had, starting at Tier 5. It was like watching *Quill*, not Matt, clear rifts.

Where Matt's strengths had always lay in outlasting and overcoming tough opponents through attrition, that life had focused on incredible amounts of preparation followed by a few brief moments of overwhelming power, perfectly tuned to fell targets.

It was inspiring, really. He'd managed to develop a true Concept at Tier six, all on his own and without the help of an ascension like the real Matt had gotten. 'Always Preparing,' played a dual purpose of allowing Matt to change the aspect of his enchantments and even *move* mana between talismans he'd made.

He'd won his tournament by the skin of his teeth, fighting Queen for the top spot, and had gotten *Erwin* as a manager, though filling a role as a classical enchanter rather than a researcher. He wasn't even aware the man was a manager, though he likely wasn't in reality.

Overall, it was...interesting. And gave him a few ideas for new talismans for once he was out of Minkalla.

Well, nothing else to it.

Matt grabbed his last cup, the ceramic mug with a sharpened lip, and poured the contents into his mouth.

Matt slammed his sledgehammer into the rock twice more, and once it shattered, wiped his face.

Construction was hard work.

He knew that. His father had worked in it as a supervisor, but this wasn't even that kind of construction.

This was using cheap human labor to work where the bots couldn't get as easily.

Still, it was a job, but it was the best paying one Matt could find that might someday get him to his goal of being a delver.

500 credits a month wasn't much after he paid for housing, but it was enough to let him save a little. It would just take three years of hard work.

He had already been doing this for six months, but now that he had fallen into a rhythm, things were at least passing by monotonously, if slowly.

As he checked the time on his watch, he and most others started walking to the end of the construction site.

Calvin shouted, "Hey, Matt! Why don't you join us at the bar tonight?"

Matt shook his head. "I can't afford it, Calvin. You *know* that."

Calvin grabbed Matt's arm. "Come on, the first one's on me, and no need to drink another. It is nice to have you with us."

Matt debated declining but ended up agreeing when the others on the team pestered him.

The bar was as run down as they were, but it at least had cool beer, and Matt sipped at it slowly as he listened to the others talking.

As was usual, the conversation turned to the rift break, and Matt spat, "Fucking Junipers. Useless bastards."

A man at the nearby table raised his glass to that. "Fucking truer words have never been spoken."

As their table raised their glasses in toast, they went back to their drinks just a little more somber.

Going to the bar became a regular thing for Matt. Or rather, the others dragged him along once a week and paid for him to have one beer.

Matt even became familiar with the man who had toasted to the Junipers' shittiness the first time.

Tom was a simple man like the rest of them, but after getting to know that Matt wanted to be a delver, he became closer to him.

He had apparently been a delver before the incident but gave it up when his family died.

That was a feeling Matt understood, even if he didn't agree with giving up.

Things came to a head after another year.

The Junipers were fined for allowing rift breaks, but they weren't given any more punishment as they managed to foist the blame off on their low Tier workers.

As Matt and everyone in the bar were fuming about the weak punishment, Tom came over to Matt.

"Do you want to take revenge too?"

Matt nodded, and Tom didn't say anything else, just nodding and drinking next to him.

Matt thought that was the end of it when, a week later, a new man joined Tom at his table and shook Matt's hand.

“My name is John. I’m a lot like you. Lost my mother and sister to something just like what happened here.” There was a pause before he added, “I want to do something about it. Wanna help?”

Matt knew he should say no, but he nodded. He *was* angry. The Junipers were just a symptom of the evil that were the nobles. Above the rules and lawless.

“We intend to graffiti the town hall tonight and could use another hand.”

Matt hesitated, but it wasn’t too dangerous. Even if they were caught... Meh. What was a few more months of work in exchange for spiting the people who’d ruined everything?

That night, the three of them and six others painted ‘Cowards’ and ‘Our Lives Lost Don’t Warrant Punishment’ on the stone face of the building before running away, even as the police came to investigate.

Thankfully, John had a contact in the police department, and they warned them in time so they could get away.

That started Matt’s time with the Resistance.

They started small, but as the weeks passed, they escalated.

They did bad things, but they were the good guys.

Burning down the town hall was met with satisfaction of the masses, even while the local papers tried to vilify them. They knew the truth. They talked to their fellow citizens, who were just as angry as them.

A year later, they were in contact with a dozen more groups like theirs, and they had a plan for an even bigger score.

They wanted to burn down one of the Junipers’ supply depots.

It took some planning, but they managed it without any of them getting caught.

That was only possible because of John.

Far from the simple man he pretended to be, he was actually a Tier 15 who had come back to Lilly when his family was killed.

With his help, they grew stronger as he took them deep into the continent and taught them how to fight.

When Matt reached Tier 3, they grabbed onto his Talent and the possibilities it provided.

Mana was both money and power.

With it, they got better gear and hit harder targets.

First was an outpost of the Junipers that housed their guards, who had been responsible for putting their mana stones too close to the cities.

They executed each and every one of the lazy, corrupt bastards and sent the video to the news stations.

They called them terrorists, but Matt and everyone else knew the truth.

They were liberators.

Saviors of their fellow commoners.

Once they got a taste for blood, they hit more outposts and hit them harder.

With John, no matter how strong the defenders that the Junipers tried to hide in the common guards were, they were always dealt with easily, and they punished all the traitors the only way they could.

Things continued like that for another two years before they had an opportunity.

A prestigious 'playpen' for the rich and elite had a vulnerability in their primary ward.

They took advantage of it.

The nobles and ilk had taken away their parents, so the Resistance would take away their children.

A few explosives filled with tens of thousands of mana detonated while they were at lunch and killed eighty percent of the little monsters.

As John said, 'If the problem wasn't taken care of at the root, it would just regrow.'

That was their first big victory.

It was also when the stove got too hot, and they needed to move.

With that last mission done, they left Lilly and moved to a nearby planet with its own corrupt noble.

There, they gathered more support before striking out once more.

They even started claiming their attacks as, 'The Wrath of the Commoners.'

They used Matt's mana and got themselves support from the locals while striking out at the nobility and upper class as much as possible.

They spilled the common man's blood without thought, and The Wrath of the Commoners spilled theirs back.

One time, they even ambushed and killed a Tier 15.

That was their greatest victory.

A victory so great, they needed to lay low for a while.

That was when Matt created his Concept.

Detonation.

He could constrain his mana in the area around him, building it up and compressing it with his will. Then, once he was ready, he could unleash it in a massive detonation that not only could destroy just about anything of his Tier but melted even higher-tier runes and enchantments in a wide area.

That enabled them to attack even larger targets.

It culminated in an attack on a prep school for noble children.

It took a year of infiltrating the staff but, eventually, they got their bombs in place, and during an assembly for some stuck-up award, they intended to detonate them.

Better yet, the fish they hooked was the biggest one yet.

Some Elizabeth Moore was present to give the award for some little noble brat being more noble than the others.

As the bombs went off, sending broken bodies flying every which way, Matt felt triumph, but that feeling quickly yielded to confusion.

That shouldn't have worked. How had that worked? There was *no way* that should have worked.

Liz was a royal's daughter. She had Tier 35 guards.

They should have stopped the bombs.

But they hadn't.

A body landed near him, and Matt smirked as he saw their target lying broken on the stones before him.

Wait.

Liz was dead?

Liz was dead?

Matt felt an overwhelming sense of nausea, but he shook it aside. As he looked at the body of the girl in front of him, it returned in force, and Matt broke.

He had killed Liz.

The love of his life.

For some reason, that more than any of the other heinous crimes this reflection had committed hurt him.

Liz should have been safe.

And the thought that Liz mattered more than the others hurt even more.

Liz was only one person, but to him, she mattered more than all the others.

In horror, Matt watched as his reflection recovered and celebrated the death of the nobles.

They ran, as cowards always did, but Matt knew what was coming, even as his reflection thought he'd escaped.

Mara and Leon descended on the planet like angry gods.

Matt's only warning was a tremor sweeping through the atmosphere like a sonic boom, then he was *elsewhere*, alongside every other member of The Wrath of Commoners.

Matt expected them to kill them instantly, but they didn't. They didn't even torture them, even though Matt wouldn't have blamed them. Honestly, their little band of terrorist shouldn't have even gotten that far after hitting the targets they did without a Tier 45 coming down on them but he was sure Minkalla had kept them away until Matt and his team killed Liz.

Instead, they simply handed them over to Imperial authorities, who tried them for their terrorist actions.

All of them were guilty and pronounced so, despite their pitiful excuses.

Matt felt sick watching his other self casually dismiss the lives of everyone they killed because of who their parents were.

It was a side of himself he never thought he could become.

He was glad they were being killed. His entire group deserved far worse than the quick executions they were going to be given.

A part of him wanted to tell Mara and Leon this was just a Minkalla reflection, and he loved Liz more than his life, but couldn't bring himself to do so.

He was a coward to think about what they would say.

In front of a gathering of their victims' loved ones, his reflection fell over, dead alongside his entire band of terrorists.

Matt fell to the ground, on his hands and knees.

It was done.

His spirit felt tumultuous, though whether that was his Concept assimilating its new abilities or something more akin to nausea from his experiences, Matt didn't know.

There were a few other houses scattered across the safe zone, and a few individuals in varying states of recovery. Fortunately, Liz, Aster, and Susanne all appeared alongside him with spirits seemingly intact.

They didn't need to say anything, Matt simply pulled out his house and the four of them filed inside. In silence, he made tea and passed out the mugs for everyone, hiding a small tremor in his hand as he handed Liz hers.

Matt was just starting his second mug when Aster finally spoke up. "Did everyone succeed?"

Nods all around gave the answer.

Aster then continued, "Great! What did everyone get? I had ice cream lives, which was cool. There was one where I was a human artist and Matt's little sister, which was the best! One where I was a winter wolf, one where I was a

fire fox... That one was okay at best, but I like my cold much better. That dumb fox liked chili. There was another where I was a kitsune, one where I wasn't nearly as pretty or smart, and... one where Matt died early, and I had to live on my own."

Aster's low whine as she sent the last life was a heart-wrenching thing, and Matt reached over to where the little fox was sitting to pull her onto his lap in comfort. She snuggled up close to him, stealing all his warmth with a deliberate burst of cold.

The cheeky little fox.

Susanne chuckled at Matt's involuntary shiver before speaking up herself. "I had coffee, not that it really matters. Um, anyway. I had one life where I served as a dedicated defender for my brother, focusing on shields especially. One where I mastered lots of weapons rather than just my sword, one where I was a scribe..." She frowned at that before continuing, "There was one where I was an agility warrior, specializing in daggers and using a Concept to empower others' blades, interestingly enough. I had one life in the Sects with the power to resize weapons I wielded, and one life where I could hide swords inside my body to benefit from their enchantments. I swear if I hear *one more* joke about being a sword sheath, I *will* hurt someone."

Matt smirked but kept his mouth shut. He had learned his lesson about bad jokes decades ago.

Their other lives were sort of abstract memories at this point, he didn't need to worry about getting confused in regard to what was real or not, but habits and preferences *were* known to bleed through. They'd be sorting out whether or not a bit of irritation was genuine or a 'phantom impression' for months, maybe even years to come.

They'd have a dedicated debrief with Luna and their psychiatrists once this was all over, unpacking the six other lives they'd all lived, but for now, they needed to focus on what was immediately relevant. Namely, the general forms that their new abilities might have come in.

Liz still seemed interested in staring at her still-full mug of tea. He reached over and gave her a small squeeze on her shoulder, which broke her out of her contemplation and earned Matt a smile. "Oh, am I going next?"

Matt shook his head. "I was going to, unless you really want to? You just looked deep in thought."

"Yeah...yeah. But I'm fine." She shrugged. "Just thinking."

"If you're sure."

"I am." She smiled, but he could see it was forced. "Matt, are you delaying?"

Matt just rolled his eyes and counted off on his fingers. “My lives involved me being a professional cook, then there was one where I was imprisoned for my mana generation. There was a life where I never teamed up with you, and mainly worked as a mage-warrior duo with Aster, one where I never even *got* Aster, and moved into using talismans way earlier, and a quiet life where I joined a guild and acted as a support mage. The last was a life where I was a... well, a terrorist, with a Concept meant to...meant *to* make things explode.”

Susanne shrugged. “Yeah, I can’t say I’m happy with my behavior in the Sects, but they—”

“They aren’t real. I know.” He took a breath and nodded to Susanne before looking to the last one. “Liz?”

“A life where I was a researcher. A life where I had a fire Talent instead of a blood Talent, a life where I used blood sacrifice to become a queen during the Shattering, a life where I pushed people to sign unbreakable blood oaths with me. That one isn’t great to look back on. Same with the next it was a life where you and Aster both died and I went hard on being a blood warrior rather than a mage, and finally a life where I killed a few planets via bloodborne illness, rot, and decay.”

That last life caught him speechless. That was...a step beyond even his terrorist life. “Are...are you sure you’re okay?”

Liz nodded, “Absolutely. They weren’t *me*.”

The private AI message Matt got as she said so told a different story, however. “I need to talk to you. Alone.”

He acknowledged the message, not letting his face show any reaction, and spoke up. “Well. I don’t know about the rest of you, but I *really* need a good night’s sleep as *me*. Bedtime for now, get a good night’s sleep. We’ll divvy up loot in the morning and cross our fingers the last psychotic floor isn’t Wasteland.”

There was a bit of murmuring in agreement as Aster and Susanne got up to go to bed, and Liz just nodded silently as they went to their respective beds.

No sooner had the door clicked behind Matt and Liz as they entered their bedroom, with the privacy enchantments graven into the walls clicking and humming into action, did Liz launch herself at Matt, wrapping him in a one and a half-armed hug, sobbing.

Matt scooped up his girlfriend into his arms and sat the two of them on their bed, where she sat crying into his shoulder for a substantial length of time. He just held her and gave the best hug he could while she vented her emotions into him.

Eventually, her sobbing relaxed into a mere snuffle, and after she blew her nose on the handkerchief Matt provided her, she looked him straight in the eyes. “It’s well past time I told you about my Awakening.”

Liz looked at Matt, red-eyed and with sadness dripping from her voice. “I loved fire growing up. Still do, really...the flicker of the flame, like a tiny life of its own. Mom would always play with me using her fires, they’d be there when I scraped my knee, or if I was tired or bored. Flames of all colors, warm to the touch but never burning. My siblings, when they visited, always showed off, too. Whenever they both were around at the same time, Alice and Erin would compete to see who could burn the best picture directly into a block of wood.”

A smile flitted across her lips. “Erin would sometimes do somewhat more *risqué* pictures of her lovers. Those were always fun, and Dad’s reaction to her burning them when I was around was always hilarious. I think I still have some of those actually, in some old forgotten closet back home. Some of my classmates were afraid of fire. Meanwhile, I had blankets that were *literally* solid flame. Mmm...I loved those blankets. I wonder where Mom put them. I know she didn’t throw them out.”

Shaking her head, she continued, “But fire was in my *blood*, literally. How could I be afraid of it? Working magic when you’re not awakened is hard, but hey, that didn’t stop me,” Liz chuckled. “You know, looking back, I was *really* good at fire magic. One of those things you don’t really appreciate when you’re a kid, I guess. But I could fire-dance on my own, spin ribbons of flame, and even create little puppets made out of fire. I’d always send them dancing around the room to put on a show for anyone there. Even just myself some days.”

To illustrate her point, Liz sparked a small fire between her fingers, shaped it into a hummingbird, and sent it buzzing through the air. She fell silent, and Matt just hugged her tightly.

When she next spoke, her voice was nearly breaking. “I *loved* fire. I knew exactly who I was, and exactly what I would be. I would be a pyromancer unlike anyone had ever seen before. Flames had birthed me, flames would be my companion, and I’d live forever basking in fire. I had my *Concept* all but made. I knew *exactly* what my image was, *exactly* what my phrase was, and the only reason I wasn’t on the first step of my Domain was because it’s physically impossible before the peak of Tier 4.”

“I had my *Concept*, Matt.” Her voice broke, and she started crying quietly into his shoulder. She kept talking, only slightly muffled by Matt’s shirt after a few moments. “At age *nine*. That was younger than *Uncle Aiden* was. Ascenders, some people spend a thousand years trying to figure out what their Concept was, and there I was, a precocious little girl not even a decade old, and I had it all but done!”

Matt rested his lips against her forehead, and Liz relaxed into the kiss, releasing her death grip on his arm. “And then...and *then*? The day of my fifteenth birthday came around. All my siblings, Uncle Aiden, Aunt Helen, even Uncle Manny were there, all ready to celebrate with me as I Awoke my first Talent and took my first steps as a pyromancer.”

Between her wavering voice and just knowing how the story went, Matt could guess what was coming, and hugged Liz tightly, pulling her as close as he could manage without hurting her. She took a deep, shuddering breath and continued, “I absorbed essence no problem, it settled into my spirit, and *everything went wrong*.”

“Have you ever had your mana forcibly aspected? Rhetorical question, I know. Mana carries a sort of *sense* to it, and my bloodline meant I naturally had fire-aspected mana. I never realized the warmth it carried for me until it was *gone*. Everything went cold, my spirit shook, I started bleeding from the eyes, and *everything went wrong*. All but completely unable to use fire skills! I *lost* my ability to connect to fire. To *feel* fire. Not the heat, but the *fire*.”

“My life...it didn’t go well for me, those first few weeks. My Concept shattered and I hid in my room, looking up every blood mage on the EmpireNet. Niall Erlan, the blood researcher, he killed four million people through his experiments. There was Kell the Impaler, they had a habit of drowning people in their own blood after, go figure, impaling them. The Red Plagues, were a series of pandemics that wiped out three low Tier worlds, perpetrated by a cabal of blood mages. Another was Duke Sanguine, infamous for his blood-haze spells that could drive armies into self-destructive frenzies. Countless cases of blood sacrifices, disease, unethical experimentation, I saw

it *all*. Was that going to be my legacy? Was I just going to be a young spark snuffed out by the real world, not even able to take any steps to *real* power?”

“And oh, there were rumors. My Awakening was private of course, but people talked. Ohh, did people ever *talk*. They didn’t know what happened, but they saw that I wasn’t around dazzling everyone with an even better mastery of fire magic, and they came to conclusions. The Extinguished Phoenix, they said, the Cinder Sparrow. Oh, did they ever talk, did they ever *revel* in their rumors. They thought I might be unable to use magic altogether, that I got some Talent so detrimental even my parents were hiding me away, never mind that they’d *never* do that.”

A small smile crossed her face as Liz continued, “But what they did do, was spend every single one of my waking moments trying to help me feel better. They brought in a blood mage from a local hospital to talk about all the good that blood magic could do in healing. It just wasn’t as flashy, so it didn’t make the EmpireNet headlines. They told me they didn’t care what my magic was like, and they reassured me in every way they possibly could that they still loved me and always would. What finally got me, in the end, was them saying that I could be just like Uncle Aiden and my dad. After all, what was blood but just red water? I could use blood like it was water, and that wasn’t so bad, was it?”

Liz wormed her way out of Matt’s hug, sprawling across the bed and putting her hand under her head as she stared at the ceiling. “And you know what? It wasn’t. I had already been planning to join the Path before my awakening, and there wasn’t much need to change that plan just because my Bloodline was largely cut off from me until—until I got stronger. My mana aspect was all wrong, my Concept was shattered, and I had to learn an entirely new form of elemental magic from scratch. No, no reason at all. Dad gave me a [Water Manipulation], and after a few days of practice with it at home, he officially sponsored me to join the Path and I was on my way to the PlayPen. I said my goodbyes, and well...that was that. The only time I saw them before Tier 10 was after I graduated the PlayPen and headed off-world, though, while I was local, we still communicated via AI. But I’m sure they watched me the whole time.”

They stayed quiet for a long moment before she spoke again.

“I moved on, or at least, you know, I thought I did. Stupid Minkalla,” she grumbled.

“I’ve talked to my therapist about it, talked with Mom and Dad about it during the tournament, and even talked with Uncle Manny about it. Even by the time we met, I was mostly over it. Still prickled a little, but I was fine. Torch

really was the crowning achievement that finally put everything to rest. I managed to fight my own Talent and *win*. First place as a pyromancer with a Talent actively working against my own magic. I was beginning to really embrace blood magic, and I always consoled myself knowing that even if I hit a major roadblock in my path, it was my own grit and willpower that got me here. If I'd gotten the fire Talent I always dreamed about, I wouldn't have been forced to push myself so hard, so fast, and I wouldn't be where I am today."

Liz scowled, and her face contorted with the clear desire to kill *something* before fading back to normal. "Then, *Minkalla* happened."

She looked off to the side before pulling one of their pillows to her and grabbing it in a one-handed hug. "My first life, like I said, I was a Blood Queen. I used the blood of my enemies and my allies for my own strength. It was weirdly *honest* for a sacrifice-based skillset, but I guess that's just all the more proof that evil is in the mage not the magic. Still, though, it was disturbing, and it *did* give me a few ideas as to how I could use blood in some novel ways. It doesn't particularly matter at the moment, but I'll probably want your help implementing them at some point."

"Of course, *Your Majesty*," Matt gently needled his girlfriend, earning himself a good-natured swat.

"Brat. But yeah, a nice clean life. Then, I decided to go for some spiced wine, very clearly a fire mage life. I thought to myself, may as well get it out of the way, could be fun, might be nice to reminisce and feel good about myself and what I've accomplished," Liz looked up to him and caught his eyes, taking a deep breath. "Remember what I said about how I always consoled myself that I pushed myself harder and faster as a blood mage than I would have as a fire mage? Well, at least as far as Minkalla thinks, nah. Just, nah. All that meant was my drive to excel on my own merits, to push myself out of the shadow of my parents and siblings was all the stronger. I pushed myself just as hard as I ever did in real life, and boy did it pay off. It took me *years* to become half-decent at blood magic, but after a few years as a fire mage, I was the best, no question! We met up and teamed up, but I matched you as easily as breathing. You pushed yourself harder to keep up with me, with both of us excelling and feeding off each other. Once we met Luna, my drive didn't even matter!"

A tear slipped out of her eye and slid down her face as she continued, "Best pyromancer she'd ever seen, according to her. From fucking *Luna*. We *blasted* through the Pather tournament, barely breaking a sweat. We completed Minkalla at Tier 11 with barely a scratch! *She* never lost her arm fighting the general. *She* hardly even got hurt! That tree Concept backed by

most of an Intent? She burned the tree to the *fucking ground* and the general right behind it because *that's just how strong she was*. Oh, but her flames weren't just destruction, they were healing and light, beauty and life, and...it was *perfect*, Matt. *I was perfect!*"

Matt stroked her head as Liz lay silently, staring up at the ceiling for almost ten minutes. "I got a bit of a break then. Life as a researcher, using my Talent to explore my bloodline. I wasn't evil, but I certainly wouldn't call myself *good*. I was too obsessed for that, if nothing else. Then, Minkalla decides to kick me while I'm down. Straight from my dream life to one of my *literal nightmares* in the days and weeks following my awakening. Filth and disease, my blood spreading across the world and infecting everything. I don't get many comments these days, pretty much every one of our Tier has gotten the concept of good or bad mana aspects soundly beaten out of them, and I've gotten better at controlling my blood when it matters to make it less intimidating."

Liz shook her head as if clearing it. "But early on... Ascenders, early on? I got a few bad comments about being a 'filthy blood mage' at the PlayPen, but I was already so deep in self-loathing, I'd come out the other side, and my parent's support kept me stable. In my fourth life, the comments were so much worse, and on top of that, my parents had managed to die in a rift. I think they weren't full royals, or something nonsensical so Minkalla could kill them off, but all that loathing just kept bottling up while they hated me for something I couldn't control. And so, I killed them. Slowly, painfully, and somehow without a trace. I turned their own blood against them, infected them with incurable diseases, and fed on their dying gasps, relishing in their suffering and the baffled attempts of the healers called in to fix them. Then, I ran away and kept preying on the weak, impoverished, the poorly protected, and went even heavier into sacrifices than even my Blood Queen life did. No greater cause, no morals, no guiding... I think I killed five planets before being forced into hiding."

Liz looked up to Matt, but he didn't revile her. It hadn't been her, and he wasn't a hypocrite. "And I don't mean I killed all the people, but I sacrificed the planets themselves. Eating the essence out of their cores to power my rituals. I turned my blood into a self-replicating infection that spread from planet to planet, consuming everything it passed to grow stronger. It wasn't pretty. Oh, but I loved it. *She* loved it. Whatever. Ascenders, is there even really a difference? At some point, does it matter whether I was the one in control or not? Because the *memories* are still there, and those definitely aren't going away.

“The dying heartbeats of my victims, bodies sometimes forcibly fed life so that they’d keep on living while I drained them for everything they could give, feeding on their pain and misery just as much as their blood, mana, and essence. There were *billions* of people on each of the planets I killed, and I want to say I remember each one, except I just *can’t*. Too many men, women, children, beasts. Young and old. Sometimes I’d slowly kill children in front of their parents just for the delight of it but, usually, I wouldn’t bother and would just move on. The screams and the sobs of the dying; mothers begging to save their children, husbands begging to save their wives, or the other way around, parents trying to give me their children to save them, or to take their spouse and leave *them* alive, I saw it all. I saw the absolute worst that humanity has to offer, and I *caused it all*.”

Matt pulled her into a hug, and she sobbed into his shoulder before clearing her voice to a calm, if unsteady tone. “My next life went basically the same as my real life. At least, until you died in one of our early rifts, bitten in half by that giant feathered serpent. And Aster died shortly thereafter, crushed by a stone golem. I teamed up with Conor, Annie, and Emily, and they all died, too. I’m not really sure what I truly snapped at, or if there even was a single instance where I went from sane to unhinged. That Liz kept some level of morals; she didn’t go around eating planets or killing babies, but I definitely wasn’t right in the head. She’d kill people for the slightest provocation, cause bloodshed wherever possible, and *literally* bathe in the blood of her enemies to strengthen her blood. Then, of course, just to top it all off, there was a life where I was a control freak, binding people to me with contracts signed in blood. I barely even *tried* to excel personally there, she just wrote off skills as a lost cause and got other people to do the work for her.”

Her voice fell to barely above a whisper as she continued. “I just... What if Minkalla is trying to tell me something? All my other selves, they all truly used blood magic in ways I never have, nor ever wanted to. But...is it saying that I’m a monster, and would do those things? Is it saying that I need to *become* a monster to truly realize my full potential? Or that using my Talent to its full potential would corrupt me, and *make* me a monster?”

Matt just pulled her closer, giving her a peck on her cheek. “Hey. I love you.”

Liz smiled and muttered something that sounded like agreement as she melted into his arms. Liz didn’t need his reassurance. She already knew he had her back and would stop her from going too far. She just needed him to hold her as she processed things.

After they had sat there for over an hour, he spoke up, stroking her head as it lay on his lap. “My first life was one where my parents never died. I was a chef and had Aster as a little sister. It was perfect. Everything I could have wanted. I think they would have liked you.”

Liz’s single arm gripped him tightly for a moment, and he patted her back to show he was with her and not lost in his mind.

“Things only went downhill from there. The next few lives weren’t that bad, but the last two were awful. The second to last one, I got locked in a box, treated like nothing more than a mana stone.”

Trying to inject some levity, he added, “At least our emperor was his same old self. That life happened back before he was even heir-apparent, and old Emperor Gregorios had no problems keeping me locked away once I had been ‘rescued’ from the last group trying to control me. That life was bad, but in the next one, I became a terrorist.”

Matt swallowed hard twice before he could speak again. “I killed a lot of people, and I know I should feel bad about them, and I do, but what really eatsh at me was how easy it was for me to slip into that life. Each decision seemed like one that I could see myself making at the moment.” Taking a breath, he let it out slowly. “I didn’t wake up until I killed *you*, and even then, it was only because my alternate self thought it was too easy. It was a relief when that life ended, I couldn’t stand seeing your parents hating me as my trial went on, wanting me dead but refusing to do it themselves.”

Liz didn’t try to justify his actions or comfort him, just as he hadn’t for her, she just pulled him close and kissed him before cuddling into him.

Matt wasn’t entirely sure how long it was before they fell asleep, but when they finally did it was while holding one another.

When he woke up, the first thing he saw was Liz grinning at him, inches from his face. “You have my only arm pinned, I really have to pee, and I can’t teleport.”

Getting up, he exited out of their room to see Susanne and Aster sitting in the living room.

After Liz came back, he used the bathroom himself and started making everyone breakfast.

He paused as he looked at his knife block and then swapped two knives. Chef Matt had his block arranged that way, and Matt felt his hand reach for that configuration instinctively.

It wasn’t quite muscle memory, but it was a firm habit.

Reviewing that life, he decided on a breakfast he had cooked at one of the restaurants he worked at. It was more fancy than he was used to making out

in the real world, but he wanted to try.

“So Matt,” Aster joined him by jumping up onto a bar stool on the far side of the counter, settling into a position where her tail would have been wrapped around her legs, if it wasn’t a charred stump. “I had a life where you were my big brother.”

Matt’s eyebrows raised as he chopped an onion. “It wouldn’t happen to have been *tha* life where you were an artist, was it? Because when I was a chef, *you* were *my* little sister.”

“Yes, it was! And yeah! You were a super awesome cook!”

“Now, now. Wash I a *cook*, or a *chef*? I’m a cook right now, but a chef works in a restaurant.”

Aster rolled her eyes and shook her body. “Fine, you were a *chef*. So, do you think we had the same life?”

“Luna said that linked lives were impossible,” he reminded the overeager fox as he moved to cutting up peppers. “But I don’t see why we couldn’t have separately had the same kind of life, even if they weren’t *literally* shared.”

Aster preened, “I choose to believe they were shared, no matter what anyone says!”

Then she wilted, with her body slumping onto her stool as she met his gaze. “I miss them too.”

That made Matt instantly lose it, and he pulled his bond into a hug as the two of them cried on the kitchen floor.

Kissing the top of her head, he said, “You are always a part of my family, and mom and dad would agree. I’m glad you got to meet them and have them as your parents officially.”

Aster let out a long, slow whine as they grieved for what was lost.

When they got up, they deliberately lightened the conversation by talking about the funny moments in the life they seemingly shared.

Matt didn’t care about the little details that seemed different, like when a family friend had a different nickname in the other’s life. Those could simply be a byproduct of imperfect memory, and the main points were nearly identical besides. Really, Matt was just glad he could share something that special with Aster.

As they were winding down from talking about their shared experience, Aster pulled out a skill shard from her collar and said, “I wanted to give you this. I got it from my final clone, and it’s really only right to share this with my bond, even aside from how I don’t need it.”

Matt plucked the skill from the air as Aster released her hold on it, and cast [Analyze] on the skill shard, before his eyes went wide.

It was [Ice Manipulation].

Aster's [Ice Manipulation], with her upgrade, and years' worth of Aster's own modifications to it. Combined with his boon from Courtly Warfare, it would near instantly become one of his strongest skills. He really couldn't ask for anything more fitting, and wrapped the little fox in a hug all over again before scratching the spot she liked right next to her ear.

When they served breakfast, Matt saw the wet spots on Susanne's face, but didn't ask. Emotions were running high this morning, and if Liz was able to help her while he and Aster had their little moment, that was good.

Breakfast was a quiet affair. When they finished, they fitted Liz's prosthetic arm over her stump. It wasn't much, as it had essentially no tactile feedback, and its fingers could only really be used to hold onto or release a single object.

To make up for the weakness, Liz went searching through their loot vault and eventually came out with a round shield enchanted to be basically immovable for anyone but the wielder, for whom it was all but weightless. It had a maker's mark that Matt identified as being from the Guilds, but the design on the front—a stylized leaf surrounded by ripples of water—wasn't something that any of them recognized.

While she was doing that, Matt and the others were busy experimenting with their new abilities. Fortunately, for the most part, it wasn't terribly hard to figure out how to *activate* them, but figuring out what they did wasn't always quite so simple.

By pushing Willpower into his Concept's repulsion ability, Matt felt two new 'slots' branching out in his spirit, one going 'inside' and the other going 'outside.' With a bit of experimentation, he determined that the new development was associated with his life with just him and Aster, and his life as a terrorist.

When he activated the 'inside' ability, he felt the weak repulsion field around him drawing in, far closer to him and his body, and made a sort of second skin around his body and armor, even with [Cracked Phantom Armor] when he activated that. Overall, it acted as a potent defensive ability, and though Susanne was able to overcome it without too much difficulty, that wasn't necessarily a fair assessment.

The repulsion-armor also seemed to help with Matt's lifting strength, but that would be more trouble than it was worth to try and measure at the moment. He could also feel that if he worked with it, he could send it into his sword for an explosive addition to his blade, but he had a hard time getting the power to get further than the pommel.

Overall, it promised to be a decent addition to his defensive arsenal once he got some more practice with it. Since it wasn't a traditional form of 'armor', it wasn't quite as vulnerable to standard armor-piercing attacks. It had its limits, sure, but Susanne was hardly a good benchmark for its defense.

The next power was *different*.

Normally, his repulsion worked by pushing solid objects and spells away from him with a solid, gentle force, up to a certain range. After which, the object could keep moving if it had enough momentum.

Motion in its purest form.

The ability he'd gotten from his life as a terrorist, meanwhile, wasn't nearly so gentle.

He could 'bottle up' his repulsion in a particular way, building up force at a rate only matched by his Willpower expenditure, then release it as a massive shockwave that traveled... well, a good ways. He'd tested that ability outside the house's shield, and so far as he could tell, it hit the edges of the safe room before being absorbed away by Minkalla.

Even with his warning to the others in the safe area, that stunt earned him some very unwelcome attention—fair enough, though. He *did* basically attack the other two teams unprovoked. That he'd given them a warning that 'something' would happen didn't seem to mollify them, but in the end, it didn't matter, as nobody tried to follow him through the house's shields, contenting themselves with just yelling at him.

If he didn't want to 'bottle up' the explosion, Matt could also push his Willpower at it in a constant stream, creating a rapid-fire, continuous explosion as his Concept created dozens of weaker shockwaves a second, rippling out from him in a low roar.

Both uses were quite destructive and *incredibly* satisfying, but taxing enough on his Willpower that he'd gotten a nosebleed from Concept overusage for the first time in a very, *very* long while. He meditated to recover while passively helping Susanne explore her new abilities.

Most of hers were fairly quick to master, being abilities she'd already been using for a while, in some form or another. She could manifest a shield as well as a sword now and make either of them animate itself and dance around her.

She could also freely manipulate the size of any of her Manifestations, even while they were active, and absorb them inside of her body in a way that was somewhat nauseating to watch. Her arm peeling open to accept a miniaturized sword nested between her radius and ulna was...unsettling. Doing *that* made her arm Concept-reinforced, and about as unbreakable as her sword normally was.

During their final test, she even managed to *halt* a low-powered [Cracked Mana Spear] with her palm, then dispel it by cutting the energy in half with the tip of her sword poking out of her hand.

That almost wiped out her willpower, but it was still impressive.

Her last two abilities were frustrating her, though. She described it as trying to reach for a power that just wasn't in reach, despite knowing very clearly where it *should* be.

While she ruminated on her own investigation, Matt returned to his own experimentation, this time with Aster.

His mana-granting ability wasn't quite so easy to figure out, despite only one obvious new 'mode' to it. When he used that mode, he could feel the mana around him drain away and into him in a way that he instantly recognized as associated with his life stuck as a mana stone. He wasn't able to test if it worked on ambient mana, as there just *wasn't* any for him to experiment with, but he wasn't able to target individual spells, like he suspected his alternate life would have been able to if presented the opportunity.

He *was* able to determine that it worked on people, but that meant he needed to overcome their spiritual defenses. Even when Aster intentionally tried to let it affect her, she couldn't *truly*, as she described it as a deeply unpleasant feeling she couldn't help but flinch away from. The most Matt was able to drain from her was about twenty mana a second, which wasn't much over the scale of a fight, but considering it was a complete *reversal* of his Concept's normal effect, he was still content with its power. He was pretty sure he'd be able to absorb ambient mana with some training, but Minkalla, with no ambient mana, wasn't the place for practice.

The only way they found to really use it was when he got in melee range, where if he was able to get through someone's spirit, it took considerable effort for them to break the connection.

Two of Aster's new abilities just focused on making her ice even better—specifically, harder and more defense-piercing. Her ice-based debuff spells were the most obviously affected by the latter, as Matt's passive spiritual defense was barely able to keep her out. He needed to actively focus on not allowing the creeping cold at the edge of his perception inside him to block it, and her [Ice Spear]s definitely put more strain on [Bulwark] when it was active, though not enough to actually break through the defense in a single cast.

She'd also gotten the ability to create an illusory duplicate of herself, an ability she promptly swore off using until her fur was healed, and an

expansion to her normal Concept to enable better interaction with wind and winter abilities. Her Concept-empowered gusts of wind cut nigh to the bone with their chill, actively stealing heat from whatever they touched.

Her experimentation with that ability, in fact, led her to discover the ability she'd gotten for being a fire fox, namely the ability to invert fire and make it burn icy blue and cold, sucking in heat from their surroundings to sustain themselves. Even skills weren't immune to the effect, though they were harder for her to affect than the candles she predominantly practiced on. She was naturally thrilled and enthusiastically thanked Minkalla, apologizing for ever doubting its wisdom of making her live with *fire* for an entire lifetime.

Matt's main takeaway from her celebrations, though, was that he should make her heart chili at some point, just to mess with her. See whether her hatred of the spicy food or love of hearts would come out on top.

Liz joined him, pulling him into a hug as they watched Aster dance around the room. Her new arm was cold metal, barebones, and certainly not mistakable for flesh and blood. Those prosthetics were far too expensive to warrant keeping in their first-aid kit, but while Matt's heart ached to see her so injured, he didn't bring it up, instead focusing on her own Concept discoveries.

Liz had found that her blood had gained a similar effect to Aster's defense-piercing, but even more focused on subtle usurpation of spiritual defenses. When paired with her permanent Lady of Red Snow ability, it allowed her to make bloody wounds unnoticeable to the wounded. With some practice, they theorized Liz very well might be able to tear someone apart from the inside with [Bloodthorn Vines] without them even *realizing* they were under attack.

A terrifying proposition.

She'd also gotten the ability to infuse her weapons with her own blood and make them 'drink' blood from wounds they inflicted. They'd only tested with relatively small amounts of blood, but if the trends held true, the more blood they drank, the more she was able to directly empower her attacks with her Concept. It was practically assured that there was more to it than that, but their healing cooldowns limited the amount of self-flagellation they could do in the name of information.

What *was* easier to test was her ability to empower her own bloodline, and correspondingly her already impressive fire affinity. Furthermore, she could make blood she controlled burst into flames at will and could direct the flames she controlled to burn things to *blood* instead of ash. It made for a fairly nasty loop if the ability worked the way they hoped.

She also had two abilities she hadn't been able to test but was fairly certain she understood in broad strokes. One allowed her to use the blood of the recently deceased for... something. Some form of personal empowerment, specifically. The other was an ability to establish a *permanent* 'blood oath' between herself and another person, giving both of them benefits in exchange. That sounded fairly worrying to Matt and Liz alike, and they agreed that they needed to talk to Luna before even *thinking* about potential uses, though they had a few.

Even with roughly half her new abilities mostly untested, Liz was quite pleased that she at least had an *avenue* for direct weapon empowerment with her Concept. Only time would tell how effective it would be *exactly*, but they were all fairly optimistic. Liz would be *terrifying* if it even worked out minorly.

Aster, meanwhile, had finished her own experimentation, and found that her last ability enabled her to freeze things, or even spells, in space and seemingly time.

When caught by her Concept, they hung in place, perfectly still until disturbed. It took most of Aster's focus on a single object, but as a starting point, it was quite promising. It also covered one of the typical weaknesses of defensive air magic spells, namely large singular attacks, which was quite the upgrade to a previous weak spot.

Aster's description of her discovery sparked Matt's own mind, and he quickly discovered another one of his Concept uses when he took his mana regeneration enhancement and 'focused' it onto a single person. When he did so, not only was the mana regeneration he could provide nearly doubled, but so too did his 'champion' experience a substantial boost to their physical cultivation in a way that perfectly matched up with Matt's own cultivation. The boost was, split—a focus on Mind and Senses, then a bit more Strength than the rest.

When paired with [Mage's Retreat], it became a powerful addition to his arsenal.

It also gave them the idea that they might be able to make a feedback loop of Matt's ability to transfer physical strength and Liz's contract power, to empower both of them more than they could do on their own.

If he focused on a single *item*, Matt found he could imbue it with mana to enhance it. With food, that meant stronger reactions, including taste, in a very familiar way, but he could also saturate his crafting materials with mana for a similar effect. Most true enchanting-work didn't *require* mana-heavy materials, but it definitely made things easier. He could also focus onto a

mana crystal to fill it with mana at range, or if he switched to mana draining mode, *withdraw* from it at range as well.

If he focused on an enchantment, however, he could fill it up directly with mana, an ability which extended to *talismans*. Having just lived a life with a similar Concept power, Matt already knew a ton of ways to take advantage of being able to charge his armory after creating it.

Normally, creating a talisman was like painting a steady line. You had to have the right amount of paint on your brush the entire time and know exactly how much paint you were going to use in total from the very start. Any deviations could ruin everything. Of course, with a talisman, it was mana instead of paint, and failures could be literally quite explosive.

If he could charge talismans *after* they were made, however, he could do the equivalent of scratch a quick thin line on paper, and only *later* decide how much mana he wanted in it. It would also drastically speed up his talisman production, both because he wouldn't need to be so worried about things blowing up in his face, but also because he could spend less time at the workbench limited by his mana regeneration.

Actually, it would also help him make *stronger* talismans, too, because he could spend several days powering up a single talisman until it held millions of mana. Before, he'd have to use an array of talismans to hold that much mana, simply because he was unable to spend literal days only making a single object with no interruptions even if he had higher Tier materials that could naturally hold that much mana.

He still had to be a bit careful to prevent burning out the runes, but on further reflection, he realized that just meant he could probably cause some *weapons* to burn out, if they weren't properly designed to handle excess mana.

With a bit of practice, he could probably ruin any enchantments that his enemies had on their weapons before they knew what happened.

While he was busy celebrating his newfound ease of enchantment, Susanne finally figured out her last two abilities. The first required her to hand her sword off to someone else, where it would dissolve in their hands. Then, for an ongoing Willpower cost, she could use her Concept to empower *their* sword. It only worked with swords and was limited to a single person at a time, but like all Folded Reflection abilities, it was only a starting point.

With a little practice, she was even able to boost herself by making a Concept copy of herself, then empowering each other for a short burst of strength.

She eventually figured out that for her last ability, her Concept wanted her to ‘absorb’ other swords into itself, and when she did so, she could choose to Manifest a copy of the absorbed sword instead of her normal blade. She could even keep the absorbed sword’s enchantments, albeit at only about half strength.

Considering one of the main weaknesses of Concept-manifested swords was their inability to be enchanted, Susanne was appropriately thrilled. She couldn’t tell how many swords she could absorb into her Concept, or if there even *was* a limit, but even the three she already had to switch between—one with armor-piercing enchantments, one with a flame enchant, and one with an imbued [Mana Slash]—were already a great boon.

Watching her absorb a new sword was really neat as well—she held a sword in her hand, then manifested her normal sword ‘over’ it, then dismissed the Manifestation, which took the formerly real sword with it into her Concept.

They were in something of a rush to get going, but they had one thing left to decide upon before moving to the final floor. Six upgrade orbs between four people weren’t terribly easy to split up equitably, but after a few minutes of discussion, they came to a deal. They would each get one upgrade orb to use immediately, and keep the two spares for later, either for the final loot split after Minkalla, or to use when they got another two orbs so that everyone could have a second.

After that was hashed out, the upgrading went quickly, since everyone had picked out the first skill they would want upgraded ages ago. Matt upgraded [Sharp Mind], which typically enhanced his mental cultivation, but now also greatly improved his resistance to outside mental effects of all kinds. The disorientation skill he’d been hit by in the fight against the team of ten from the last floor had left an impression, but if they ran into that group again, he should be able to resist it.

There were a few smaller improvements as well, such as better mental focus and a slight efficiency boost, but without pumping his entire mana regeneration into the skill, he would have been hard pressed to notice the practical differences.

Aster upgraded [Winter’s Harvest], which she was excited about. The base skill drained strength from designated enemies and used that to boost allies, but the conversion efficiency was typically somewhat weak. In addition to improving that aspect of the skill, the skill started to affect the mental and regeneration aspects of cultivation, inducing a mental torpor onto foes while hampering most healing they might attempt to do, and improving those same attributes on allies in turn. When combined with Matt’s new ‘championing’

concept ability, he and Aster would be able to turn Liz into a positive wrecking ball in a fight, though most people would already consider her one.

Liz herself upgraded [Hungering Weapon], which Matt was a little unclear on until she explained. Most of Liz's skills were heavily changed by her talent, and because of that, she didn't actually know what most of them would *do* once upgraded, which happened to be especially true for her better skills. She hadn't had [Hungering Weapon] for long, but it was largely unchanged from the normal skill, and going from draining strength and blood to also preventing all but the strongest healing skills was quite potent. There were other skills that might have given better returns, but this one was less of a gamble.

Finally, Susanne upgraded her [Mana Strength], which allowed her to focus the increased strength to different areas of their body, shifting where they were strongest nearly at will. It couldn't mimic the sheer numbers of the upgrade for [Mage's Retreat], but it could improve the strength of a weapon strike at one moment, and then let the user leap much farther in the next.

With that taken care of, the four of them stood in front of the pillar and touched it.

One last floor.

Then, they could rest.

Matt looked down and paused as his mind tried to process what he was seeing.

His body was gone.

Kinda.

His body looked like [Cracked Phantom Armor], glowing, blue, and ornate full-body armor that was leaking wisps of white light from where the joints would be on a normal suit of armor.

He looked up and saw the others.

Susanne had the most extreme change as a *literal* shadow of herself, mostly just a silhouette of a human woman who was missing half her head and holding a *very real* greatsword. So real, in fact, it made everything around it look unreal by comparison, such as the fox standing next to her.

Aster looked like a fox-sized hole in the universe, with distant stars peeking out from the cutaway, each slowly dying. She had a tail again—a fact which she seemed *immensely* happy about—but it was wispy and insubstantial, like a memory of a tail rather than the tail itself.

Liz looked like a perfect copy of herself but made of glistening blood. Even her individual strands of hair looked like tiny veins of blood, but her left arm was still mostly missing, a network of blood vessels tracing out where it *should* have been. The prosthetic was a shimmering cover that seemed to exist in the same place but not interfere with her arm.

Only two floors included such a drastic change to reality, Spirit Journey and Mind Over Matter. But given their surroundings bore more of a resemblance to a watercolor leaking pigment into the air instead of a psychedelic nightmare, and the fact they were all together from the start...

Aster's message came through at the same time Matt came to the conclusion on his own.

"Mind Over Matter confirmed."

Eraxs ran.

He ran for his life.

Draxs, Craxs, Braxs, and Araxs were all already dead, and he didn't want to end up like them.

Folded Reflections was a floor of mystery, and in Minkalla, mystery translated into danger.

Anyone who had ever gotten the floor could appear as a reflection. That was a well-known fact and was taken as just another one of the many dangers that Minkalla possessed. And normally, that was fine. Over the many, many cycles the floor had appeared in, trillions of people had entered its depths. And most of those people were, by definition, average.

But there were always the exceptions.

The Hastors, Duke Waters, Unyielding Anvils, Eclavorn and Gideons, and Cosminds of the realm.

Dangerous people that no one had a chance of beating.

The odds of them being chosen by Minkalla to operate in the floor were just as high as anyone else's—which meant one in trillions—and the odds of running into the particular reflection was even lower.

But they had run into just such a person.

At first, it seemed like the man in plain armor was a simple Tier 12 delver, like anyone else wielding a longsword.

It had started as a standard fight, with Draxs and Braxs going forward to entangle him in a melee while Craxs and Araxs shot spells and arrows at him to whittle him down.

For the first few moments, things seemed to be going well, but then, the reflection exploded with power and strength.

Draxs' chest had been caved in with a single punch, and Braxs had his shield shattered as the reflection's blade descended with the weight of a mountain.

Seeing his brothers fall, Eraxs had immediately cast [Area Heal], trying to keep them alive as Craxs cast his [Bolt] at the reflection's head.

That spell had killed Tier 14 bosses, but the reflection simply poured more power into their armor, turning it more ornate, and it blocked the spell even as he raised his hand to send a flurry of [Fireball]s at Craxs.

Even as Craxs dodged the spells flying at him, Braxs tried to tackle the man to the ground, but it was like he hit an invisible wall as he was unable to get in contact with the reflection.

Araxs took that chance to shoot a metal mana arrow at the reflection, but it was blocked by a [Bulwark].

Draxs, who had managed to partially heal, had gotten to his feet and drove his short sword at the reflection's face, but its gauntlets started to glow with a black light, and everything was pulled toward the reflection's armored hand, where the enchanted blade was caught by the spell armor encased hand.

Araxs made some space and unleashed his [Charged Shot] to destroy the [Bulwark], but instead of shattering the spell, it simply cracked the mana construct, and before their very eyes, it started to repair itself.

But that cost mana, and that meant they could wear him down. They just needed to survive until then.

Eraxs cast a buffing spell on Draxs and Braxs as they swung their blades both high and low at the reflection, intending to attack two places at the same time so he couldn't reinforce both strike points. Araxs even had an enhanced arrow arcing over the [Bulwark] to land on the reflection's head. From the flank, Craxs cast [Mana Spear].

Four perfectly timed attacks.

A combo that nothing should have been able to survive.

Except, the reflection created ornate patches where each attack would land, dropping its other spells, but blocking each attack perfectly.

Then, its retaliation started.

Eraxs, who thought the earlier flurry of [Fireball]s was impressive, had a rude awakening as the reflection summoned a copy of its sword and lashed out with [Mana Slash] half a dozen times, cutting Draxs into pieces.

Braxs tried to retreat, but the suction power appeared once more and pulled him directly into the reflection's hand. Eraxs' brother lasted three seconds in the reflection's grasp before he fell to the ground, a burnt husk of a corpse.

Craxs went down next as a circle of talismans appeared and launched an oversized bolt of lightning at their mage.

At first, it looked like Craxs had dodged, but the attack curved mid-air and landed anyway.

Eraxs and Araxs ran in different directions, but through his spiritual perception, he was forced to watch as his brother was chased down and cut into pieces in mere seconds.

Eraxs continued to run, cursing their luck. They had been careful. They had done everything right. It wasn't fair.

As he was contemplating how he would tell his parents how his brothers died, he saw the reflection raise a single finger and point at him with his spiritual perception.

He was ready for any number of spells, but he wasn't ready for a beam spell that instantly punched through his chest, seeming to ignore his armor.

As he tried to regrow his destroyed heart, Eraxs had to watch the reflection close the distance and then loom over him.

He was paralyzed on the ground as its foot went up.

Eraxs cursed their luck. How could they have been so unlucky and stumbled upon a monster like this?

The foot came down.

And Eraxs died.

Three more men died by William's hand, and the day was just getting started.

It took some *creative* spell work to fend off both the monsters and the copies of the enemy delvers, but he didn't get to where he was today by being a slouch in a fight. On top of the normal difficulty of the sixth floor, William was additionally attempting to rapidly become proficient as an air mage, rather than relying on his more familiar earth magic.

He'd had some courses, naturally, and he was a deft hand with manipulating the air manually, but that was a far cry from relying on the more specialized skills in real combat.

Courtly Warfare had been less than an ideal floor four, but he'd made out with a fabulous reward, even if it had cost him an arm and both legs to get it.

Almost literally.

The general's scythe was a Chosen class weapon if he'd ever seen one, and it had been a hard but ultimately clear decision to sell everything he could in order to claim it. On top of its ability to radically improve the potency of air

and decay magic, drain mana from fallen foes for his own use, and having its own imbued skills, the floor reward had granted the scythe the ability to sap the mana from nearby spells to fuel his own.

Thus, while he was a relatively novice air mage, at least by his own standards, Minkalla was providing him an excellent degree of practice by throwing so many bodies at him.

Better yet, his streak of good luck had continued unabated.

Under typical circumstances, shifting around the skills in his spirit would have taken months of work to incorporate air skills, but the reward for Taxing Skills had allowed him a much easier transition while in Minkalla itself. While many would consider it a substandard floor at this depth, William knew he could capitalize on its effects well enough to keep up with the frontrunners, despite his rapid shift in fighting style. Not to mention how it would allow for a substantially easier final fight at the end of Folded Reflections.

He spun his scythe while utilizing its installed [Area Dispel AI14-EM] to dissipate the slurry of ice that was being slung at him, with the skill protecting him from harm as he hammered at his opponents with blasts of hardened air. The bursts of Genesis Energy and mana in his core told him that he had passed the tipping point, and this fight was all but over. A single delver copy and the remaining members of the bone pangolins were all that were left of this ruin before he could move on to the boss.

As he collected the skills and other valuables dropped by the fallen enemies, he considered his scythe for what felt like the hundredth time since he bought it.

Its form factor was *ridiculous*. And not in a good way.

It wasn't even a proper war scythe, it was a *farming tool* that happened to have the most potent magic he had ever felt stuffed into it.

The fact that the general had used it as a melee weapon showed the potency of his strength and magic more than how well a farming implement could be used in a true fight. At least, there was no compelling reason for him to use its blade as anything more than ornamentation. With a bit of luck, the final floor would be All Paupers, and he could utilize it to morph the item's shape into something more palatable.

Twenty minutes and seven valuable skills later, he walked out of the ruin into the adjacent one, where one of his biggest regrets was sitting there waiting for him.

Quill.

William had completely fumbled his interaction with Quill on the fourth floor and lost out on the opportunity to form a connection with one of the

rising stars of the Empire. Instead, he had largely spent his time getting in the good graces of Dexter and Tiffany. The latter had gone and *died*, wasting all the time he had spent cultivating her favor, and Dexter was essentially out of the running for getting deep in Minkalla due to the delay caused by his extensive injuries.

Then, Quill had shut himself in his house for the remainder of the floor, cutting off any chance for William to try for a business relationship. Number one reason why people shouldn't use a second layer of false identities. How could people butter them up if no one knew who they were?

Though, the revelation that White was Quill should have been obvious; that was hindsight speaking.

He had tried to talk with Queen, but she was...less than conversational.

The reflection of Quill rushed toward him, and William lashed out with boon-sharpened blades of air. Quill had the footwork and speed of a fighter, he had to give him that, but William had little reason to hold back on mana for this fight, and there was no dodging every blade. Two cut deeply into the man's armor, and where William had thought that might end the fight, as it had so many others, Quill seemed surprised that his armor hadn't been breached at all.

Apparently deciding to reconsider fighting in melee, the battle soon transitioned into trading spells at a rapid pace. William was sure to lock down space with his Concept, to prevent any talisman use, but that apparently didn't hinder Quill from throwing out powerful spells as fast as William could counter them.

The reflection even forced William to conjure some crystalline barriers when his current air magic wasn't suited for the task.

From the feedback William was getting from the scythe, specifically in its spell draining effect, Quill was burning mana at an utterly unsustainable rate, especially his armor. And yet, he didn't seem to be slowing down, even as his injuries accrued and William became more and more assured of a hard-won victory.

Curious.

How very curious.

Long Zhiyuan was killing his way through a ruin when four blips in his spiritual perception appeared nearly on top of him.

He immediately sent all his collected Genesis Energy into his ring and activated his cloak that would hide him from spiritual perception as he decided to disappear into the forest before attacking. He would reveal himself only if he believed there was a good chance at killing the team.

But counter to his expectations, the other team started to run him down, and he saw why moments later.

It was the team he had fought on the fifth floor.

So, he started running for real, instead of just trying to disengage.

A four versus one was never ideal, especially not when one of the members was strong enough to fight him to a standstill.

Activating [Heavenly All Seeing Eye], he picked up where he'd left off, gathering all the information he could about the four of them.

Without Minkalla restricting the amount of mana he could use, he was able to gather a lot more information, and immediately changed all of his Talent copies to fighting versions of the four of them.

As spells started flying, he felt things starting to get frantic as the woman seemed to teleport next to him invisibly and cut off two of his fingers from his left hand.

Getting desperate, he tried to use his Concept to fly away, but it was instantly shattered just as his feet were off the ground, sending him stumbling.

As the second woman got close, her use of blood magic shook his predictions. He'd thought she was a fire mage, but her fighting style was similar enough to that of a water mage's he wondered if that was *truly* her specialty, and the blood was another layer of misdirection. What didn't change was her physical abilities, and with the practice he had from fighting her copy, he wove a claw through her guard and cut through her helmet and mask.

He thought that opened up enough of a gap in their wall, but before he was more than a dozen feet away, he was forced to block the large man's sword as it swept out with a technique empowered blow that he recognized as a crude, barbaric [Grass Sways but Returns to Its Roots].

Despite putting a shield between himself and the blade, Long Zhiyuan felt the blade bite deep into his back.

As a wave of snow froze his leg, Long Zhiyuan's instincts, long-honed from many fights within his spirit, told him to move, and he trusted them.

Crushing a Bottled Lightning, he vanished to reappear a dozen feet ahead and started to run.

Still, the team chasing him didn't give up, and as he was forced to dodge a spear, he sent out a [Claw From the Beyond] at the small wolf, but his attack was blocked by a talisman, and he took a shard of ice to the chest in retaliation.

Feeling the ice growing and trying to slow him down, he shattered a gem on his belt, sending a wave of fire washing out and over him.

At the same time, he activated [Flames and Wind of The Dancing Stars] to enhance his speed a dozen fold and used his lengthened strides to put more of a distance between himself and his pursuers.

Feeling ten spots in his spiritual perception, Long Zhiyuan raced ahead, wanting to get the two teams entangled, and just as he got himself free, he was forced to use one of the natural treasures he found on someone he killed to block the sword that tried to lop off his head.

The Spine of the Earth was spent to reinforce his arm for a brief moment, instead of permanently strengthening his bones, but it was a small price to pay for his life, even if his arm still broke under the blow.

Shouting in anger, he used the new team's arrival to slip away, and didn't stop running until his mana started to run low.

Once he found a tree with large roots, he absorbed a few mana stones worth of mana with his fast converting stone to cast [One With The Earth] and create a hole under the tree.

There, he started to inspect himself.

His left hand was missing the smallest two fingers, and his glove was nearly ruined. His right arm was broken in four different places, and he had a cut that traveled from his left shoulder down toward his right hip.

After taking stock of his wounds, Long Zhiyuan didn't start healing himself immediately, and instead breathed in and out until his heart was slow and steady.

This wasn't his first time being wounded so badly, but it was one of the worst beatings he had taken. That, he couldn't deny. He had experienced almost dying, but he believed he had grown from the experience.

[Heavenly All Seeing Eye] had seen everything, and his Talent now had much better copies of the four of them.

While he didn't think he would be able to fight some of his peers in a four versus one, he knew that if he had to fight any of them alone, he would have a much better chance at beating them.

And in a week, he would know each of their weaknesses and strengths, how to capitalize on any openings and avoid every dangerous attack they could throw at him.

But first, he needed to heal.

After refilling his mana, Long Zhiyuan cast [The Healing Stream Which Washes Wounds Away].

He was no official healer, but for someone who could practice on themselves limitlessly, the spell was better than [Radiant Touch of the Benevolent], or its ranged counterpart, [The Spring Breeze of New Life].

Stitching his skin and muscles on his back together, Long Zhiyuan then straightened his broken arm, one shattered fragment of bone at a time.

It took a while, and when he got to his mangled hand, he was running on fumes.

While he could regrow the digits, he didn't bother, deciding to just grow skin over the stumps and call it a day.

Falling asleep, he changed his clones to start fighting himself.

He knew little of Minkalla, for to know of a test was to lessen its purity, but he had learned much from his time here, and he was capable of seeing the shape of things to come. The end of this floor would be another battle against himself, he was certain, but not the imperfect clones that he'd been facing so far. He'd be fighting against *himself*, and that meant he needed some perfect counter against his own strategy, which was no menial feat to undertake.

After all, he knew himself better than anyone else.

Once he woke up, he reviewed his clones and knew what he had to do.

It wouldn't be an easy fight, but he had a strategy. He would need to absorb a few new techniques, which was less than ideal, as he preferred to create a cohesive fighting style with merged techniques, but he couldn't stall for long.

Going through all the techniques and spatial items he had gathered so far, he found exactly what he believed would be able to counter himself.

[The Rippling Reflection Beneath the Still Pond] could create a copy of himself, and while it was only made of mana, it could look real and fight for a few brief moments, though it required his utmost concentration to utilize.

With its help, he believed that he had an answer to fighting himself.

His lesser copy would be disposable, and while lacking much in the way of his personal strength, it would serve for a single blow.

He continued to fight himself within his spirit, finding an appropriate plan.

If he cast the technique right as he began his fight, he could then give the technique copy a bomb and wound his reflection with its life.

He'd learned a few things from facing off against the inferior copies Minkalla had sent after him. None of them incorporated any of the new tricks

he had learned since entering the floor. They were all static in skill and technique, and he could only hope that the final fight would be the same.

For then, he could utilize his greatest weapon of all.

Preparation and planning.

When he finally crawled out from under the tree's roots, Long Zhiyuan started hunting anyone he saw that he believed he could kill.

What good was a cloak that hid your spiritual presence if you didn't use it?

And he might just get a new item that could help him kill himself.

Gabby woke up in an opulent living room, very confused.

Hadn't she just drunk one of the energy drinks? Why would she be back here already?

As the realization dawned on her she instantly started to panic.

Reaching inside her mind, she hurriedly checked where the other lives sat like neat little packages, ready to be opened and inspected at her leisure. But where she remembered four, she found an extra one. When she delved into it, she realized what had happened.

She had failed that life.

Her Flowing Winds Concept was gone.

In a panic, she exited the challenge and then sprinted to the pillar.

Someone had to fix this.

Mason saw a lone figure appear in front of him and readied his blade.

Magical armor with a sword.

A blade mage was one of his favorite archetypes to fight.

Using his bloodline, he wrapped the earth around himself and charged with momentum, even if his speed wasn't impressive itself.

Deep Stone Elephants weren't known for their sprints, but rather their unstoppable momentum.

The arrogant reflection simply raised its hand as if it wanted to stop him with its puny strength, and seeing that, Mason smiled.

As he raised his fist and cast [Shattering Blow of Atrun], he expected a shield to appear.

And one did.

[Alkuis Stops Their Assault]. He had broken many of them in his days, and one more would be added to his belt today.

The spell shattered, but it wasn't so easy; the shield actually robbed him of most of his momentum.

Raising an earth covered arm, he blocked the first slash of his opponent's blade, but staggered back as he felt his earthen armor sundered in two.

If his bones weren't harder than normal, he would have lost his arm there.

He channeled [Hide of the Ancestors] as he activated the secondary bloodline he had absorbed before entering this floor.

As he burned, the bloodline flames washed out from his body like a floodgate being opened.

Flame Worms weren't a powerful bloodline, but the ability to excrete fire was a useful secondary power.

If it weren't for his family's deep pockets, he never would have been able to afford a dozen vials of Flame Worm blood for his delve, but it was moments like these where he was glad to have their wealth at his disposal.

Casting [Horn of Piercing Charges], a combination skill of [The Mystic Dash] and [Auru's Phantom Tusk], Mason rocketed forward and let his glowing horn land on the reflection.

He expected with his flames weakening the armor, his skill would pierce right through it, but the armor held firm, and a suction power from the reflection's hands caused his next punch to go awry.

The punch he took in return rocked him back, and he was pretty sure that even with his armor, one of his teeth was knocked loose after that blow. Mason pulled back to lash out once more with his earthen fist.

His fist met the blade, and while his defenses held, he wasn't ready for the explosion of mana that washed out from the blade, blasting apart most of his earthen armor and extinguishing the flames around them.

Mason was gathering more earth while he was laying on the ground, but it didn't do any good, as the reflection seemed unharmed by the explosion and raced forward with its sword leading the charge.

He tried to raise an earthen barrier in time, but the earth responded sluggishly to his orders as the reflection grabbed large portions of it and commanded it to remain still.

As the blade entered his chest, Mason couldn't believe it.

He had worked so hard.

Practiced all his skills.

Minkalla was supposed to be his place to shine.

How could he die here?

With one last burst of energy, he tried to pry the blade free, but found it an immovable object that started to glow.

How could it cast another explosion like that?

He hadn't seen it recharge its mana at all.

Blade mages *were not* supposed to be able to do that.

As the mana detonated, he still wasn't sure where he went wrong.

Marvin felt what seemed to be a massive battle raging through a nearby ruin, and seeing its intensity, decided to poke his head inside.

If one side just barely lost, he might be able to make out with all the spoils.

Better yet, it felt like a water mage fighting, which he had a million counters for.

Instead, he found something out of a bad horror movie.

Blood flowed like rivers as two teams tried to fight against a thirty foot tall, crystalized blood golem.

Quickly retreating, Marvin felt it was better not to get involved.

Alexi and her team waited in the safe area of floor five with Bravo team, Charlie team, and Delta team, though the last two had each lost one of their members.

After waiting a full hour beyond the specified time, she shook her head.

Anyone else was dead or entangled with something and wasn't keeping pace.

"Okay, what does everyone have to report?" she asked.

Brett spoke up first. "We have killed seven Empire teams, five Monster teams, and two Guild teams on the fifth floor."

Charlie and Dixie had similar numbers to report, which is when Alexi started going through the collective information.

"That puts us at a good number, but only if Ethan and his crew are still alive and killing. But I suspect they are preoccupied or dead, and we will proceed assuming the latter. I'm giving the order. Take only fights you know you can handle, disengage immediately if things look even or worse. Mother will not be pleased if any more of us fall inside this dump."

They were strong, but this place had taught her that even the runes so cruelly engraved onto their bones weren't an all powerful tool. At least, not yet. Minkalla restricted their power just as it did everything else.

Getting nods of approval from the other teams, she turned to the most important factor. "What is the status of everyone's runes?"

That got her a round of grimaces, and she understood. The third floor and its reset of their power was rough on all of them. When they and the runes were Tier 1, the runes burned so much worse than with their full power pushing back on them, creating a feedback loop of pain.

Damn Empire and their wicked test.

But with that in mind, she needed to check up on everyone and see if their runes were unstable.

Frankly, the instability of the runes was what she believed had delayed or taken out Ethan and his team.

After their brief and a joint check over by the healers among them, each of them gathered and left toward the pillar in the center of the room.

Alexi smiled internally as she saw the way people shied away from them.

Power.

They were afraid of their power, and that made her feel good. Really good.

The first level of Folded Reflections was nothing interesting, with them being able to kill three teams, but they had barely gotten their footing on the second level when they found a team chasing someone.

From the spells they felt, April believed the group was an Empire team that they had put on their internal blacklist for being the ones who had helped win the war on the fourth floor.

Ashton, Arnold, and Aaron closed in with the man suspected to be Quill, even as she split off to attack the woman with the sword: Queen.

Alexi was slightly shocked as her first blow did not instantly blow through the woman's defenses. So far, most of the Empire delvers had been little more than bugs to be stepped on, but she understood that this might very well be the real Queen if she was that strong.

As they exchanged blows, it galled her to admit it, but Alexi wasn't Queen's match in a one on one. If Alana wasn't there, she would have been disarmed and killed after the first five blows.

But that was why they were teams of ten.

Backing off slightly, she started charging fire in her left hand, wanting to take out Queen with a surprise spell.

A small wolf jumped up and started defending Queen with bursts of ice and bitter cold wind, but Alexi didn't let that change her idea. Queen and the

winter wolf could burn. Burn like everyone in the Empire should.

When Queen lunged in, Alexi let loose her flames and smiled at the result.

Just after she had burned half the woman and wolf's faces off, Alexi was shocked when the man surrounded by Ashton, Arnold, and Aaron had not only broken free, but hurt Ashton and Arnold so badly that Adam was forced to concentrate all his healing on them.

That set off an internal battle as the other team disengaged and tried to run away.

This other team was probably stronger, one for one, than anyone on her team. That fact ate at her, but she wouldn't lie to herself. Mother demanded better of her.

In truth, they were outnumbered and wounded.

Knowing it was a risky play, she commanded, "Forward! Chase down these dogs and kill them if you can!"

Except, it was all for naught.

The Empire team reached a snowy ruin, and it would be the height of folly to chase them into it with a winter wolf at their side.

"Stop the chase and see to the wounded." Her order was curt as she tried to repress her anger.

They had been so close, but now, they were wounded for nothing.

When they met up with Adam, she asked how Ashton and Arnold were as Ajay, Aurora, and Alana got healing for the wounds they suffered during their chase.

"Ashton and Arnold will live, but those attacks pushed them close to their healing limits. With our fights against ourselves coming up, I do not think they can risk another engagement. That armored asshole hurt them pretty badly. If I had not been able to heal them, they might have died there and then. And Aaron is not any better. Our limbs may be harder to cut, but once they're severed, they're harder to reattach. I need at least two days to ensure the healing takes."

Alexi heard the anger in his report, and it matched the anger in her heart.

"We pull back then. Heal up on the second level and punch toward the third level in one shot. The non-wounded of us will go out and farm Genesis Energy."

With that decided, they moved to lick their wounds.

Unacceptable.

Alexi let the anger wash over her and remembered it.

They were failing Mother's expectations.

The woman who saved them from eternal torment and protected them from the runes on their bones.

They owed her everything and were failing to pay her back in even the smallest way.

That fact was undeniable, and it tormented her.

One day, she would make the entire Empire feel this level of despair.

Chuck stared into the eyes of one of the greatest dangers that had ever stepped foot in Minkalla. A man who had cut through Minkalla's denizens like they were wheat to the scythe, who would have legends sung about him for eons to come. A man who struck fear and envy into the hearts of all who saw him and had carved his way through Sect lowlifes as if they were newborn babes.

Himself.

He had been prepared for this, naturally. There were few problems in this realm that money couldn't solve, and this wasn't one of them. While the poors generally had to make do with finding or utilizing something new in Minkalla's depths, leading to horrifically high mortality rates when the first wave of people found Folded Reflections early, Chuck had been given a potion and an unknown skill shard as part of the preparation for his delve.

Once he had entered Folded Reflections, chugging the potion and absorbing the skill had allowed him to settle it into his newly expanded spirit within hours, and from there, he just needed to practice with it well enough to gain some proficiency.

He didn't even know anything about the skill beforehand, except that it would be useful. His father had prepared it for him for the possibility of having to fight himself, so not knowing made it all the better; his clone wouldn't have any possibility of being prepared for it. From his testing against his lesser reflections, it seemed to be highly specialized in letting his glaive pierce lightning based defenses, which would let him break through his own magic and kill his copy's version of Richard.

His own lightning tiger stood by his side, ready to get through this floor and reap the reward. Without any real need to slow down and prepare for the final fight of this floor, Chuck could be one of the first people on the final floor, passing all but the absolute fastest people, and he would have nearly free reign to gather the resources that were just *waiting* for him deeper in. Self Identity would be his ideal choice, but there were very few floors that

wouldn't offer *something* worthwhile. All that was left was to finish off this poor, inferior clone.

Chuck raised his blade and charged.

Beating himself was the easy part, living six new lives would be the real challenge.

Half an hour of real time later, and after centuries of subjective experience, Chuck was teleported into the safe room and promptly fell on his butt, his wounds reopening and spilling blood onto the floor. He had blown through nearly every healing item he had in the fight against himself and used nearly every talisman, and he had still only barely made it.

As it turned out, he was just as excellent as he thought, which made the final fight a brutal one.

Folded Reflections had given him time to think on his mistake. It was a common one that nearly everyone made when they saw him, and one he had witnessed countless times in the six lives he had conquered.

He had underestimated himself.

A single skill couldn't best him, and no measly trick would put him down. That core competency had been carried over to his final clone and made it a wildly dangerous opponent. Chuck was just *too good* at everything, and it had nearly cost him his life when he forgot that.

His wounds made further progress all but impossible, and Wasteland would surely kill him in his current state. Not worth the risk. Sadly, he would have to abandon his Minkalla run here.

The only question remaining in his mind was whether anyone else on the floor would be able to handle the lesser versions of himself that were surely running around right now. He supposed he would never hear about it, since there were unlikely to be any survivors.

Still, he was walking away with a sizable reward from this floor. Most important of all, the Forge had tempered him, brought impurities to the surface, and scoured them away.

He would walk out a new man, with his last imperfections left behind.

Percilla panted as she ran.

The reflection behind her was a monster, more so than the monsters she usually dealt with.

Despite showing a cultivation of Tier 12, it was faster than most Tier 13s, and never seemed to run out of mana, which was frankly unfair.

Percilla was no slouch as a solo mage, but she also knew when to pick her fights and when to run away.

Finding a lone wandering reflection, she understood instantly and ran.

That initial decision had saved her life, but it hadn't stopped the reflection from chasing her down.

Reflections were only created when someone neared them, and they would normally be killed like any other monsters, but if the reflection killed the team that spawned it, it would start to wander.

And Percilla knew herself well enough to know she wasn't a match for a reflection that had killed another team.

As a storm of ice fell from the sky, she activated [Close Teleport SP14-TA] to escape from the area, but that didn't stop a flurry of [Ranged Explosion FI8-AL] from chasing her.

Each time she grabbed another mana stone from her pouch and drained it through her Mana Conversion Stone (Type Rapid), she cursed.

She had refilled her mana pool three times, and no one wielding a blade that large in one hand should be able to utilize so many skills, that many times in a row. Minkalla had clearly broken this reflection.

Seeing another team ahead of her, she debated using them to lose the reflection but decided not to be an asshole when she had a chance to get away.

Changing directions slightly, she used her [Assistive Intelligence], ME26-MI-FLX5, of course, to warn the team in front of her and once more activated [Close Teleport SP14-TA] in quick succession, dodging the earth that tried to swallow her.

To her surprise, the team behind her responded that they knew another nearby team and would attack from the rear with their help.

Percilla doubted it would work, but agreed to try and lead the reflection around the ruin she was in.

It took three groups and two hours but, eventually, the reflection died under their constant bombardment, dropping a [Ranged Explosion FI8-AL] module as a result, but Percilla didn't feel accomplished by their victory.

Instead, she rethought her life choices.

How were some people *that* strong?

She had a good sponsor and nearly five hundred years of experience, but she couldn't do a fraction of what that reflection had done.

Even as she defeated her own reflection, she had to wonder at the difference between people.

Who was that man? What was his name?

Had he been the king of his era when he was alive, and ruled over everyone?

If he hadn't died early, she could believe it.

But history was long, and even immortals died, making memory short.

Percilla made sure to write down everything she could about the reflection and intended to start looking through the history books for such a person.

She was sure their story would be amazing.

As George trudged through the snow of the ruin, he looked around and absorbed the traces of the miniature war that seemed to have taken place here. He was cold and alone, but the furthest thing from miserable.

He hadn't come out the gate with a good starting hand, growing up. His parents were poor, and his own Talents were paltry. "Perfect memory" sounded like a decent ability, until you realized that everyone decent essentially got that anyway at about Tier 15. Not quite as absolute, but that almost never mattered. His Tier 3 Talent to boost his mind cultivation was just enough to let him scrape over the finish line and get to the Tier 10 Path tournament, but he had fallen off immediately after. Constant delving just wasn't his forte.

His first Talent even caused him some minor issues at the tournament, when Ciceron had said it was a national security risk for him to get a list of the Legacies. The normal methods of ensuring secrecy would be unable to remove the information from his mind, and he had to have a wood magic Legacy chosen for him instead of picking one out himself.

That was centuries ago, and he was a new man now. He had refined himself, shored up his abilities, and eventually managed to gather a party to delve into Minkalla.

This cycle was exactly what he wanted. Normally, a person couldn't remember anything but the bare basics of what they had done in the Genesis Cultivation challenge. With some planning, it was a valuable theme reward, but not anything particularly special in the context of Minkalla's wonders.

For *him*, it was a miracle floor. His memories couldn't be removed, not even by Minkalla. The dreamlike state that prevented insanity had still applied to him, but he could remember *all* of it. He had spent millennia training with unlimited resources, perfecting his prowess with all his skills, with every variety of weapon he had ever thought to master, and in every field of crafting

he had taken an interest in. In most respects, he was now better than a Tier 20 in their chosen field.

His party was gone now, back to safety. He had contracted them to get him through the second floor, and they had even stuck with him through the fourth floor, but now he was alone. He had trudged on deeper, in hopes of exactly where he was now.

His talent wouldn't radically change the reward from Folded Reflections, but what it *would* do is assure his success in overcoming the lives. Challenges got harder on deeper floors, and Folded Reflections didn't offer partial rewards. Either you overcame all the lives, or you had your Concept replaced, nothing in between. The downside of getting this floor deep was the increased odds of outright failure, which had extinguished many a rising star.

But not for him. It would certainly be novel for a child to have all the memories of an adult man, and it ensured his total success in noticing the wrongness of the lives. Six new Concept abilities, and then he would leave the planet, to a glorious immortality.

The only real challenges remaining were getting to the bottom of the floor and beating his reflection. Nothing insurmountable, really, not with his crafting expertise.

He smiled under his helmet as the snow continued to blow.
It couldn't stop him.
Nothing could.

Charlie looked at Cecil in the safe area with dawning horror that this wasn't a bad joke.

"I'm just saying that we might not have the entire truth. In every alternative life I had, Virgil also had rune soldiers, even then. And she publicly stated that they were her creation along with Jecker. He has a Talent for lowering the Tier of runes. That's how they did this to us. Everything about the Empire doing it was a lie."

Charlie swallowed, seeing Cecil's manic face. He understood, even if he didn't like it.

Cecil had been corrupted by this planet.

Looking around to the rest of his team, Charlie saw expressions of horror to match his own.

It was not an easy thought, but he knew what he had to do.

“Cecil, I think you need to calm down and think about what you are saying. If Mother finds out about this, she will be very disappointed. I even had a false life like that as well, but that is the nature of this place. It tries to confuse you...make you believe what is not real.”

Carlos chimed in, “Yeah, Cec, why would you believe those lies? Mother is the one who takes care of us. I had a similar life, but I know it for the lies that it is.”

As the others chimed in, Charlie saw Cecil growing more and more flustered.

“Can you not see? Minkalla was not lying to us but showing us the truth! How else can you explain all of us having the same thing happen in those lives.”

Charlie glanced at Chase and Conan, and they stood up and moved to block Cecil from leaving.

He had gone rogue, and there was only one ending for that.

Cecil tried to run, but they knew him all too well. After all, they lived and trained together for decades. How could they not know every move he would make.

Charlie smiled through bitter tears that threatened to fall. “Cecil, I hope we can be brothers in the next life. I wish you had not gone crazy.”

And with one quick thrust of his knife, he freed Cecil.

“Gather his things and leave the body for Minkalla. Let us remember him as he was before he lost his mind.”

They had a moment of silence before walking away so Minkalla could absorb their old friend.

Charlie hated this planet almost as much as he hated the Empire.

But they had a mission to fulfill, and they needed to be strong.

When Alpha and Bravo teams came into the safe room and asked what happened to Cecil, they just said he died to his reflection.

And it was true.

He lost his mind to the planet and became someone other than himself.

No one else needed to know his shame and ramblings after that.

It wasn't the real Cecil, after all.

Their brother had died when he took the challenge.

Luna watched the planet of copper and gears floating in front of her and waited.

It took a deliberate effort to not allow her perception of time to slip into a timeframe relative to her Tier. That would just make it take subjectively longer for the children to get out. Great for when she needed to sneak in a cat nap, but less than ideal now.

It was a symptom of the increasing stress that was affecting everyone.

As the final floors of Minkalla were revealed, everyone stuck outside started to fray at the edges.

Even now, two idiots, one from the Monster Collective and the other a Feddy, were fighting it out. While she hadn't paid attention to the situation, observing the high Tier chats with her AI told her everything she needed to know.

The two had personal stakes in some of the children who had gone in this cycle, and the kids from the Federation had killed the Monster Collective kids. If that was all, it wouldn't have been that large of a matter, but the Feddy had then gloated to the Badger woman.

That set the woman off, and she and the Feddy had been fighting for the last few hours.

Turning her head, Luna looked out at where the two were throwing spells at each other and narrowed her eyes as their battle moved in her general direction.

With a thought, she sent them both a message: "Fight somewhere else."

They ignored her, and their battle nearly washed over her house.

Nearly, because two paws appeared and batted the two idiots in the direction of the sun.

Two extra-large solar flares showed where they skipped off the surface of the celestial body. She had controlled her strength to ensure the hit or impact wasn't lethal. She didn't need to set off an inter-Great Power incident by killing anyone, but a little slap into the sun never hurt anyone.

Luna caught the smirk Carol gave her that signaled that she had pulled herself out of her AI long enough to watch the show. The other manager wasn't able to stay as idle as Luna, no matter how much she wanted to. Not with half a dozen other teams she needed to direct.

She also knew that the woman would be preparing to break away from directly teaching Susanne for a decade or two, after they spent a few years digesting the girl's gains from Minkalla.

She was once more wondering what the sixth floor would be when two figures appeared out of the Federation's and Monster Collective's moons and teleported over to above her house.

"You attacked down at our juniors. Care to explain yourself?" The Federation woman was Tier 40s and strong, judging by the fluctuations of her spirit, but Luna wasn't afraid.

More surprised.

The woman didn't recognize her. And from the glare from the Monster Collective man with wolf ears was giving her, he didn't recognize her either.

Clearly, she had been out of the game for too long if they hadn't scurried away with their tails tucked upon seeing her.

Giving them a chance to leave, she turned back to the planet above her. "I warned them to take their fight elsewhere. They declined to listen. I'll give you the same warning. Leave now, or I'll attack outright. I'm busy."

The wolfman opened his mouth even as his limbs started to transform, signifying a partial shift into his beast form.

Luna smiled even as the two spells came down at her.

A heavily modified [Lightning Blast] and a [Poisonous Spore] hidden inside a [Mana Bomb].

Adorable.

Void mana washed out in the shape of her paws and targeted the weak parts of each spell, dismantling them before slamming into the two idiots' chests.

Holes appeared where their hearts once were and started to grow as her mana started to eat at their very beings.

She started ignoring them the moment she saw the realization hit them of who they provoked.

Or, more likely, their AI told them.

Same thing, really.

Luna wasn't that good a combatant, all told. She never considered herself a fighter, but training untold generations of top-tier fighters and listening in on *all* their lessons still meant she had a trick or two of her own. Besides, most spells were sloppy enough it was trivial to dismantle them in midair, and void mana was meant for destruction.

Granted, if they had been prepared for a void user, they wouldn't have suffered so much, but that was their own fault.

Like their juniors before, she batted the two of them into the sun, but to account for their higher Tiers, she aimed for the center of the stellar body instead of the edge.

A great wave of solar fire blossomed out, but with a thought, she prevented it from washing out more than a few dozen miles from the surface.

She certainly didn't want a solar storm interfering with her vigil, and there was no need to take even a slight risk of a supernova when she could so easily prevent it.

Days turned into weeks, with all the higher Tiers checking each new person who exited for someone who had left during the sixth floor.

A first floor Eternal Darkness, a second floor Genesis Cultivation, a third floor Back to Basics, a fourth floor Courtly Warfare, a fifth floor Taxing Skills.

What would the sixth floor be?

So far, this cycle of Minkalla had been better than average, but Taxing Skills wasn't a deep floor that she would have chosen for her group.

They could use it, but it wasn't ideal. The fact that they would have an odd number of Inner skill slots would itch at her, even if it wasn't a problem objectively.

When half of a woman appeared on the Sect moon, Luna only paid enough attention to see if she would say something useful.

That fraction of her attention turned to all of it, along with everyone else, when she started crying about how it was gone.

Even as the healers picked her up and started closing her wounds, she kept flexing her Concept. Or rather, her willpower was being spent, but there wasn't an effect, like she didn't know how to use her own Concept.

She would be fine, in time.

If she truly didn't like her new Concept, breaking it after Tier 15 and remaking her previous one was a quick, century-long endeavor; far easier than making a brand new one or reforging a legitimately shattered Concept.

Luna caught Carol's eyes and smiled.

A sixth floor Folded Reflections.

Perhaps it was slightly deeper than was optimal, but the extra life experience it would provide was already invaluable. She held particular hope for Liz, that perhaps her other lives would be more used to utilizing more esoteric forms of blood magic. Using blood like an entry-level water mage was a waste of her potential, but Luna simply didn't *know* the other ways in which blood magic could work.

Ideas, yes, but she would not accept presenting mere *speculation* as genuine training methods, and the few blood mages that April had reached out to had all rebuffed her, were executed for their misdeeds, or some version of a healer. Minkalla told many lies, but it often carried a seed of truth. It was simply her job to find those seeds and place them in fertile soil.

She silently allocated a bit of their recovery time to have their therapists help them deal with the inevitable trauma Folded Reflections inflicted. Nobody escaped from living full lives unscathed, be they their wildest fantasies or a living nightmare. Both carried psychological damage.

Now it was just a question of what the final floor was, but she suspected that she wouldn't get that answer until she was talking to her charges.

Their gear had mostly faded. The actual items were useless at the moment, as were any enchantments focused on empowering the material it was made of, such as hardness and sharpness runes, leaving only their more directly magical abilities.

"Heck yeah!" Matt pumped his fist in celebration, a smile spreading across his face. He couldn't *really* say what final floor he *most* wanted, unlike the rest of his team, but Mind Over Matter had been on his list of candidates from the very start. Being able to use his repulsion endlessly was already a solid reward, but a sixth floor Folded Reflections—or *any* Concept-related reward—made it even better.

"I think top...five to ten, at this point," Aster decided. "Double Concept final floors is *great!*"

Susanne was even more pleased. "Top four for me. The discount it gives applies to Folded Reflections, right?"

Liz nodded, studying her arm as she responded. "Yeah, well...depending on how similar it is to your base abilities, your Concept could be almost unaffected, or made almost as free as your base abilities. I'll probably end up...maybe with a one quarter to one third reduction on most of my new abilities? Matt will be better off there. Anyway, top five here, I think."

Queen nodded, but before she could say anything else—if she planned to say anything at all —Aster spoke up, and Matt’s head instantly whipped around. He actually *heard* her speak instead of just reading an AI message. “Liz, can you move your arm? I got my tail back, but I can’t move it.”

Liz shook her head, still inspecting the veins that made up her left hand. “Nope. Not really, at least. I can open or close my fist, but the spiritual concept of my hand is missing at the moment. Pretty normal for Mind Over Matter, but it makes my prosthetic mostly useless. I’ll have to figure out another way to use my shield.”

Matt looked at his own left hand. The fingers he’d lost in his reflection fight looked more like the wisps of white light leaking from his joints than the armor they should have been. And while they opened and closed with the rest of his hand, he couldn’t move them on their own, and his right hand could pass through them as if they weren’t even there.

Unsettling.

Liz called his attention back to what mattered. “So, floor seven Mind Over Matter. Great result for all of us. The only problem is, this is an expensive floor reward. We might have a bit of an advantage from being Tier 11, but we need to press our lead.” Pointing off to the side with her good arm, she added, “Let’s get moving.”

With that said, they immediately started scouting their surroundings, trying to find both monsters and an exit.

Mind over Matter changed the floor and themselves to a spirit form, including landscapes and monsters, and that was readily apparent.

Everything looked like a painting dipped in water, with the edges bleeding out into the air before fading away.

That also brought up the second issue.

They didn’t have physical bodies, and moving wasn’t quite so easy.

Instead of just walking forward, they had to think about moving forward. It was almost like flying with a Concept or flying device, but slightly different, making it a frustrating skill to master.

Thankfully, there didn’t seem to be any monsters around the area where Minkalla had dumped them, so they had some time to adjust to the new mode of locomotion.

Just as they reached the wall of the ruin they were in, they encountered their first monster.

Matt had never seen anything like it before.

It was eight feet tall, and it looked like someone had stuck a half-dozen different creatures into a single body. It had three arms on the right and six on

the left, and each limb seemed to be from a different monster. It screamed the instant it saw them and launched a beam of white flames at them.

Matt cast [Bulwark] but called on his Concept to reinforce the skill. Normally, that wouldn't be possible, but the entire floor was *literally* about enforcing your will on reality in ways it wouldn't normally work.

He'd had practice, of a sort, protecting Aster with a very similar Concept in the life where it had just been the two of them. His Will infused [Bulwark] and turned an attack likely to seriously damage or outright break the skill into a harmless splash.

Aster yowled, and the blazing flames burned away the heat, leaving only a dead chill.

Almost at the same time, Liz and Susanne attacked.

Fighting was a bit odd without their bodies, but their spirits knew what to do.

Susanne lifted off the ground, her sword dancing like [Phantom Sword] or [Sword Doppelganger], save for the fact that her indistinct form came along for the ride. It flew toward the monster, with Susanne's outline trailing behind as it severed one of the abomination's arms.

Liz had her shield, held by a [Blood Whip] tentacle extending from her left arm, raised to block an attack that never came as she struck the monster with a blood spear. Wherever she hit, spots of dark, rotting necrosis followed. It slowly spread across the monster's flesh, thanks to Liz's insistence that the monster was unable to do anything *but* die, contested by the monster's peak Tier 14 spirit.

Matt joined the assault with a flurry of [Mana Slash]es. His sword's steel may have been worthless on this floor, but it was still a useful spell focus.

The first of several attacks slammed into the abomination's spirit, carving out lacerations in its body and forcing it to split its attention between him and his teammates. Liz took advantage of the opening to push harder on her rot, and the blackness spread. Matt's final crescent of mana struck the rotting flesh that Liz had created and cut deep. Matt pushed it farther with his Concept, forcing it through the weakened flesh and clean out its back, causing the upper half to fall to the ground.

The lack of Genesis Energy told him it wasn't quite dead, and the arms each pulling away from the body corroborated his theory.

It was more of a chimera instead of just an amalgamation of random monster parts. It was *literally* multiple monsters smooshed into the same body.

As the monsters came out and returned to their normal forms, Matt blasted a wave of flame at one of them while Aster used her Concept to make the fire burn cold and used the resulting ice to entomb the nearest lion.

Two of the beasts tried to attack Susanne in a melee, but even without a real body, she was no easy target, and she was barely restricted by the floor's rules.

Her blade had never been anything more than her Concept and willpower given form. On a floor where the mind ruled, it was even *stronger* than normal.

And she used it well, a single slice caused the two animals that attacked her to fall apart into tiny cubes.

Liz blocked one leaping at her with her shield then slammed it against the ground, crushing it entirely, and Aster turned one into a *literal* ice sculpture. Matt finished off the final bear that tried to run him down with a [Fire Bolt].

When the last monster finally fell, a rush of Genesis Energy hit them like a truck.

A single kill here was worth at least a dozen kills on the sixth floor.

Aster walked over to the deer closest to her, and he felt her activate a skill, even though nothing happened.

"Aww, I can't eat their hearts. Now that's just unfair."

Even saying that, Aster floated back toward the rest of them, and they started moving onward once more.

After they had killed their third monster, Matt had to speak up. "So, I have an idea."

Everyone looked at him, and he continued. "I think this is how Minkalla makes the monsters. It needs to make a peak Tier 14 monster for the final floor, right?" At the nods, he gestured to the dissolving corpse. "So, maybe it just sticks half a dozen low Tier 14 monsters together to get the power it needs. But on normal floors, it's only got one body. Here, there's no actual body. Just their minds."

Gesturing once more, he let the visual speak for itself.

Aster shrugged, which looked weird as her blob of dying stars crunched up. "Does it matter?"

Matt frowned. "Not while we're inside, but it could be a really cool academic subject of study. Though, I'm sure Erwin already knows the answer. I can't be the first person to theorize this."

Susanne started floating forward. "That's a nope from me, then. They're monsters, who cares how they get as strong as they do?"

Liz blew him a kiss as she passed by, but Matt really wished Erwin was with him so they could dissect this mystery. The act of researching was half the fun, and this could prove to be an interesting case study of monsters.

The next monster finally dropped a skill that he was going to toss into the bucket, when Susanne reminded him, “We’re on the seventh floor, so the skill might be a Tier 20 skill. Check it.”

Matt hit it with [Analyze] to see what it was after his AI didn’t recognize it as one of the Tier 20 skills from his admittedly sparse database.

“Seems like a bow skill. I don’t know what it is beyond that.”

Tossing it into the pile of other skills they didn’t immediately need, they moved on.

The ruin didn’t seem to have a boss, so after they killed the monsters, they moved on to the next ruin, where there were slimes with various other monsters dissolving inside.

Killing them also spawned more monsters, which seemed to confirm Matt’s idea, but when they encountered a ruin with normal-looking orangutans, the others thought he was wrong. To Matt, though, it only reinforced his theory.

The place was made out of tens of thousands of ruins, so it made sense that some of them would be peak Tier 14 ruins and have correspondingly strong monsters inside.

They had just burned down most of a wispy forest to kill a ruin of mosquitoes when Matt felt the first people they encountered approaching them at a run.

He had hoped they had been far enough ahead to avoid other people on this floor, considering how quickly they attacked and killed their final boss mirror selves on the sixth floor.

A pair of indistinct figures rushed around the corner, one being carried by the other, with their spirits obscured behind powerful enchantments. It gave them the appearance of dull, gray humanoids, and their bodies blurred as though out of focus.

Matt raised his sword to meet their attackers, intercepting...a wave of molten metal from the one being carried. He quickly swapped to blocking with a [Bulwark] and sent out an AI pulse toward both his team and the newcomers.

“Start running,” Bradley responded as he swept his prepared attack back behind them. “Nine assholes ambushed us coming out of a challenge room.”

Looking at his team, Matt knew exactly who that was. Or at least, suspected he did.

They were one of the teams of ten who were running around killing anyone they encountered from the Empire and Guilds, and Matt started reaching for an Aurora Lance array.

Putting words to action while he set up the array, he said, “Pretend to run and get ready to duck. I’ve got another one of the arrays I used on the general, and I’ve been itching to use it.”

“You know what, Quill, I think I missed you,” Jill added, redoubling her speed as Bradley shifted to be more firmly in her arms. Matt and his team followed at about the same speed, though ready to turn and fire at a moment’s notice.

Thankfully, it worked, and a squad of nine people burst from the adjoining ruin in tight formation. They appeared translucent bodies over glowing skeletons, with a shield bearer leading their charge with a shield manifestation not unlike Susanne’s.

It didn’t do them any good.

The spell that forced the general with most of an Intent to dodge wasn’t so easy to block, and as it fired, Aster threw her own mana and Concept at the array, strengthening it even further.

What happened proved too fast to even see, but the entire passage between ruins was suddenly replaced with blue ice as the world went still. The sheer *presence* of the millions of mana blown in a single instant even proved almost contagious to the only mostly real Mind Over Matter, and some of the passage’s walls even transmuted from metal into massive sheets of ice.

Even before the spell exploded, Matt felt nine streams of Genesis Energy rushing into his body, signifying the death of the entire squad.

Matt stood there and cast [Bulwark] to protect himself and his team as the mountain of ice exploded and tore holes through everything that wasn’t the impenetrable walls of Minkalla.

When the debris stopped falling, Bradley poked his molten head out of the hole he and Jill had created.

“Fuck me with a polearm, that was awesome!”

Jill looked less than pleased as she said, “You couldn’t tone it down a little? No way any of their gear is intact after that. And those fuckers owe me a bowstring.”

Matt gestured off to the side, seeing the couple’s injuries. “Need some healing?”

Jill shook her head. “We’re already pushing the healing cooldown, so it wouldn’t do much for us.”

Hearing that, Matt tossed them half their remaining [Bandage] talismans before casting the spell on them a few times.

Now that they knew the final floor, they had no worries about needing the talismans later. They had already gone through Taxing Skills, after all.

Bradley gave him an indistinct thumbs up before rubbing his side.

“Fancy seeing you guys here.”

Liz snorted as she pointed at the icy hole in the ground with her spear. “How did you guys get on their bad side?”

Bradley shrugged. “I wouldn’t say we got on their bad side, so much as we got unlucky about timing. They caught us coming out of a challenge room, and they decided to attack. We ran. You killed them all. That about sums it up.”

Jill was busy trying to restring a bow that very clearly still had a string, albeit one that was more theoretical than actual. The sight sparked something in Matt’s memory, and he started mentally rummaging through his spatial ring for a bow they’d found earlier.

Not finding it, he dropped their house and managed to track it down in the loot pile therein after mere moments of searching, it being in *literally* the first place he looked.

Mind Over Matter. Convenient.

Tossing it over to Jill as he put the house away, he said, “Bow of reflections. It will split any arrows shot with it into six copies, including enchantments and spells, but the range won’t go out past three hundred feet.”

Jill took the bow and started fiddling with it before thanking him. “This would have come in handy five minutes ago, but better late than never. We have a few Tier 20 skills if you want, in exchange.”

With that, she sent over a list, and almost immediately, Liz jumped on a skill. “Oh, [Lesser Mana Clone]? I’ve had my eye on that one for a little while. I know it’s on the pricier side, anything else we can toss in for the trade? .”

Bradley ‘threw’—the action was all wrong, but there was no better way to describe it—a skill shard at Liz. “Call it even with the save and talismans.”

Aster floated over and said hello. “What challenge room did you guys find? Also, how did you even find one this deep? It’s way harder to find them here.”

Jill answered even as she fired a few arrows at a nearby fallen tree with her new bow. “There was a circular patch of mushrooms that looked super suspicious. Took me about an hour, but I figured out if you ‘hop’ on your left foot through the mushrooms, you find a challenge room pillar. And the challenge was ‘What Doesn’t Kill You.’ Which was less than fun, but profitable.”

Matt winced along with everyone but Susanne, so he explained, “That’s the one where you need to sit there and let monsters eat you. The longer you can refrain from attacking, the more reward, but the pain you feel amplifies as time goes on. No lingering damage, fortunately.”

“Oh, we should do that one.”

Despite it sounding like an awful time, Matt agreed.

They were doing well with Genesis Energy, and getting a challenge room where they knew the challenge, and knew they could beat it, would only amplify that advantage.

After ensuring the duo were safely settled into a hidden alcove to recover some, the four of them headed to where the ring of mushrooms lay.

It was a good thing Jill figured the secret out, as Matt was sure he never would have thought of it, and it wasn’t one of the puzzles he’d memorized. Though it was funny to see Aster trying to use her mental body to hop on her left paws.

Without having done that before, she stumbled a few times, landing on her face.

When they finally all made it into the hidden space, they found the pillar of crystal, just as Bradley and Jill said there would be.

Touching the pillar and sending all of his Genesis Energy into it, Matt found himself standing alone, surrounded by a field of monsters who looked at him hungrily.

Taking a deep breath, Matt calmed himself as the monsters started tearing into his body with claws and fangs.

The pain was indescribable, as the challenge magnified it a thousandfold, but Matt blocked it out as best he could.

It wasn’t real, and he had trained to withstand pain like this with Luna a number of times before. He was Endless. This was temporary. He was Endless. He was eternal. He could withstand pain. The image of a white hole flooded his mind, and he tried to detach from his body, even as it screamed at him to *defend himself*. He would not yield. He would not give way. Pain...was an illusion.

Breathe in, breathe out. Even if his body didn’t properly exist, the action was meaningful. If he could last for a breath, he could last for a lifetime. A moment was eternity, and eternity was a moment.

The skin on his skull was being peeled back, and what felt like boiling salt was being poured on the open wound, nearly causing him to break. But he kept his reaction to just a flinch and forced himself to unclench his fingers.

He wasn't sure how long he lasted, but it felt like decades when he finally broke. As a monster tore into his wrist, dragging its claw along the length of his arm, fileting him alive, Matt couldn't clamp down on his arm. It only took a single smack from his palm, but it counted as an attack, and the trial ended..

When he appeared, the rest of his team were waiting for him. Aster yipped an approval, "Three minutes more than Liz and me, about a minute more than Susanne."

As Matt rubbed his nonexistent arms to settle the goosebumps from the all-too-recent pain of them being ripped open, the pillar started to spit out their rewards.

At this stage, the main thing they wanted was Genesis Energy, but any skills or items they could get would still be useful.

While they hadn't had anyone stay outside to get a full accounting of the time they spent inside from the rush of Genesis Energy, they could speculate that they lasted at least fifteen minutes, as they all got more than triple the energy they put in.

Even then, the pillar also spat out a number of items.

Minkalla was a planet of miracles, and the final floor was a source of incredible wealth, if you could survive long enough to claim it. While they were in a relatively secure place, and in order to take his mind off the trauma he had just inflicted on himself, he picked through some of his unidentified skills he had picked up on this floor.

Many of them were only useful for selling on the outside, like [Consistency Check], a favorite of writers across the realm. [Telescope] sold well to archers, artillery mages, and scouts for its ability to pick out details at incredible range, though sadly there wasn't a copy of [Light Sensor] that could turn the skill into a real analytical workhorse.

Generally, it was better in rifts with long sight lines, like space rifts, rather than the more typical planets with curvature. [Electroplate], [Locate Ore], [Desalinate], and [Mend Bone] were the next skills he found. The last one alone would net them a tidy sum, considering how in demand healing skills perennially were for healers across the Empire.

[Antenna] was an interesting skill, formerly used in long-range communication, but the advent of the modern [AI] pseudoskill made it almost entirely redundant.

Most of the rest of the skills he didn't even recognize, which was to be expected at this point in a Minkalla run, but he did manage to get a few that could be of use to his team.

[Snowpack] went to Aster, who could benefit from a strong frontal defense spell to benefit from her new ice strengthening Concept effect. In many ways it was similar to [Bulwark], defining an area with the initial mana then channeling more in to strengthen it, though it did so by summoning real snow that then became compacted by the spell.

Fantastic for creating strong barriers, though slower and only a fraction as maneuverable as Matt's own spell. The bread and butter support skill, [Lifeline], would allow her to yank an ally to her with a glowing force tether, which Aster solemnly swore not to abuse in training.

Liz was more than content with [Octopus Assault], which would hopefully be an upgrade to [Blood Whip] in almost every way. At least, if the skill didn't break. It was an incredibly versatile mid-range spell, and eight lashing tendrils of blood could strike fear into the heart of anyone. It was technically a mid-power Tier 20 skill, but it sold better than most.

Not because of its incredible damage, but because of the ability to mimic Duke Waters' assault on the Sons of the Seven Skies. The movie that had been made around that fight still sold out copies to this day because of the iconic scene. She also claimed an [Analyze Water], which she expected would help her with her blood alchemy.

[Mass Deflect] was claimed by Susanne, a fairly utilitarian sword skill that summoned short lived copies of the user's blade to deflect large numbers of weak projectiles. The bottle of Mercury's Might would let her aspect her mana to metal, though without instruction on how to properly split her pool, she would need to wait until they were out of the planet in order to use it.

[Double Tap] was the most obvious skill for him, a general purpose yet expensive spell that boosted any non-channeled skill that was cast twice in a row, though it would be a few Tiers before he could cast it with no setup. The primary drawback was how it could make him predictable, but it would help his non-channeled skills keep up in power with his channels as he got more and more mana.

Additionally, [Extend Arms] was a *classic* spell that he couldn't pass up, and he was eager to experience the lowest Tier of body morphing skills. He'd seen both Luna and Aunt Helen use it on occasion, and if it was good enough for both of them, it was good enough for him. It was a notoriously tricky spell to integrate into real fighting, but it offered a lot of fun and utility off the battlefield, and Aunt Helen swore by its ability to give better hugs.

With their Genesis Energy reserves ahead of the game, they just needed to push ahead and get to the second level of this floor before anyone else.

Speed was their greatest defense at this time, and they intended to push their lead ahead as much as possible before everyone else landed on this floor.

With that in mind, they moved back to where they left Bradley and Jill to send them a message that they were moving ahead, and then started killing their way through the nearest ruins at their fastest speed. The monsters were...tough. He was used to killing stronger things than Tier 14s, of course, but that was with his body. Without his cultivation and channeled buffs, he was left as just a mage. A *very good* mage, who could still [Cracked Mana Spear] just about anything they encountered to oblivion, but it still felt wrong in some undefinable way. Everything was just slightly *off*, without his body.

They didn't have the time to get accustomed to their new reality, either, and they could scarcely delve two ruins without being interrupted by *someone*, so the endless battles were slowly starting to take their toll. Matt lost half his foot to a delver with an oversized axe, which somehow slightly interfered with his ability to *fly*.

It was manageable, but still mildly annoying. Liz had a chunk blown out of her shoulder courtesy of a [Fire Bolt] and a misaligned shield. Aster took a cut lengthwise across her flank from a [Mana Slash] and broke two ribs when a giant troll clubbed her halfway across the battlefield. Susanne had taken an Aster to the face, further aggravating her already injured head and interfering with her spiritual perceptions as a result.

They thought they had found a boss ruin from the energy fluctuations, but when they approached, they found a stick-like person wielding a familiar scythe fighting off four other people.

William, who had taken the scythe from the Fall General.

There was no compelling reason for them to engage with the man, so they hid as best as they were able to and watched him for a short time. Susanne eventually recognized the opposing team as the Dauntless, a strong group of masked Gladiators from the Republic who had placed highly in their version of the Pather tournament.

It was obvious that William was dominating them, entirely alone, and would win the fight in short order. The most surprising thing was that William hadn't *been* an air or decay mage when he had taken the scythe, or at least, hadn't used the spells much. He'd focused more on earth magic from what Matt had seen, but now he barely used it in favor of the scythe's specialties.

Aster criticized his air magic a number of times, as the man was clearly still adapting to the new fighting style, but the results were undeniable. An enormously overcharged [Guillotine] from the front liner's axe was stopped

dead in its tracks against the haft of the scythe, without so much as a scratch. The responding [Wind Lance] from William tore through the man's [Bulwark] and body like they were made of paper.

As William finished off the remains of the Dauntless, Matt and his team made a stealthy retreat. There was no assurance that they'd be able to win against him, between his Tier advantage and the new scythe. Matt was also opposed to initiating fights against people who had yet to directly antagonize him, and an opening [Skewer], [Cracked Mana Spear] or Aurora Lance against an unsuspecting William would be the only moderately safe methods of fighting him.

The only thing they wanted to do was gather enough Genesis Energy before everyone else.

And they were close.

As Tier 11s, their advantage in price reduction and more Genesis Energy per kill was showing itself. After they evened out their Genesis Energy, all of them had enough to take the exit reward, but not enough to take the floor challenge, and this was the first time they needed to be able to afford both.

While Mind Over Matter wasn't as expensive as Spirit Journey, it was still quite costly.

With a little more searching, they found what they were looking for.

A ruin with a boss.

Second level. They were ready.

Matt panted despite not having a physical body.

The last fight wasn't hard, in and of itself; fighting even peak Tier 14 monsters wasn't anything new for the four of them. The difficulty came from the fact that they were rushing headlong into every pack of monsters they could find.

On the second level of the seventh floor, they were practically bumping elbows with what seemed to be the entire planet's population, and each of them was trying to push deeper faster than their competitors.

Even with their spiritual perception restricted, they could cover about the three nearest ruins, and the floor was small enough that just within that range, they could feel two other teams fighting to get ahead of them. Or rather, a team of three and then a solo delver who felt like a summoner of some type.

And they had already been attacked by other teams on three separate occasions, with each of them retreating once they saw that the four of them weren't easy prey.

They were starting to fatigue while pushing as hard as they could to stay ahead of their competitors, so their lead was nowhere near as secure as they'd like. Though they had finally gotten used to moving without a physical form.

A walking pace was sustainable with their mental bodies, but trying to run or *fight* with them grew exponentially harder. And being at the head of the pack, for better and worse, meant they were constantly facing monsters. Half the time, the monsters needed to be killed *twice* to get their Genesis Energy, leaving the team on constant alert.

Matt led the charge with Aster on his shoulder. His bond kept up a low-grade [Kar'tan Greets His Foes] to slow the monsters ahead of them, with Matt

taking advantage of the sluggish targets by empowering a constant stream of [Flamethrower] and [Fire Manipulation]. Ribbons of fire danced through the nearly frozen creatures, charring and burning the strong, jellyfish-like monsters they were scorching their way through.

Once they popped into groups of multiple lesser monsters, Liz took over his flames, burning the remnants to blood. Susanne took care of any stragglers, giving them a steady stream of Genesis Energy.

Their cooperation wasn't perfect, but it was still the fastest method they could come up with to kill most of the monsters, albeit at *serious* willpower cost.

Still, they formed a four-man squad of death and cut their way through the floor, searching for any ruin with a boss.

The floor was the size of a terra-city, and there just wasn't enough Genesis Energy to go around. Even hunting their fellow delvers was unlikely to get them enough energy before the next wave of cultivators killed their own reflections and made everything on this floor that much worse. They just needed to find the next level, maybe ambush their pursuers, and get to the final level of the floor.

They were close.

So close to getting out of this nightmare planet.

They had grown stronger, but they had also been worn down to their limits and beyond, in ways that mere training couldn't replicate.

As they reached a passage to another ruin, the four of them paused to send their spiritual perception into it, hoping for a boss.

The ruin was odd, to say the least.

Three feet tall humanoid mice ran around in packs of dozens, centered around a stone replica of a garden with oversized trees and rocks that led far into the spatially expanded ruin.

As they paused to inspect the ruin, Liz said, "I'm pretty sure I can feel a boss in there. At the least, there's something big and dangerous."

Susanne shrugged before gesturing at the mice. "That's great and all, but what about the monsters? Humanoid mice? That's a new one."

"I'll check it out."

As he said that, Matt put words to action and moved forward while casting [Bulwark], readying himself to activate his defensive Concept.

[Hail] and his new upgraded [Ice Manipulation] made a brutal combination of torso-sized hailstones, forming themselves in the blink of an eye before crushing the nearest and smallest group of the mice monsters.

Surprisingly, they were utterly crushed. If not for the stream of Genesis Energy they provided, Matt would have suspected an illusion, but their weakness was partially explained by the pitiful reward they each gave. Around him, the hailstorm continued to whip itself into a frenzy, pulled into a cyclone with the four of them at the center.

He could feel his Boon feeding into the working, hardening and sharpening the ice into incredibly durable flying razors.

With Liz and Susanne keeping close, Aster floated onto his shoulder and started assisting him in empowering the ice closest to them, which prompted Matt to cycle the ice outwards from the center, before bringing it back in.

Once Matt fell into a rhythm he felt he could handle, he stopped channeling [Hail] and started floating forward.

As they passed into the rift, the monsters started charging at them in swarms.

The outer wall of ice was immediately dyed red as the monsters were torn to shreds, which was when Liz started controlling and gathering up the blood along the edges of the ice, empowering the already sharpened blades of ice.

Matt could feel the strain of the complex control that spinning the ice required, but grinned as he kept pushing.

The more he used it, the more the Boon started mimicking what he was doing and taking over the heavy lifting.

Despite each individual monster not giving a lot of Genesis Energy, there were thousands rushing at them every moment, which sent a steady stream into Matt's spirit.

The others got a portion of it, but as he was the original caster of both damaging spells, he was allocated the majority of the reward.

Susanne, feeling left out, created a second copy of her sword and threw it into the ice, and held it steady and locked in place in the swirling winds. For the monsters that didn't immediately die, and instead got sucked into the winds and were crushed by the colliding ice, it acted as a quicker end.

With the four of them working together, Matt started to speed up, and the monsters reciprocated in kind as they neared a building.

It was some odd mix of a temple and commercial building that gave off uncanny valley vibes, but they didn't hesitate as they entered one of the oversized entrances.

Inside, there were massive structures on large but relatively thin metal legs.

With his spiritual perception stretched to its limit, Matt noticed that they were oversized and distorted games with odd imagery.

Thankfully, the space was large enough that Matt was still able to move his whirlwind of ice around the few obstacles.

Even then, they were starting to slow down. The mice had gradually gotten larger during their journey into the building; they were now close to human-sized and were correspondingly tougher.

That didn't stop the mice from throwing themselves into the ice blender they had created, but the four of them needed to slow their forward progress so the monsters didn't overwhelm them.

Concentrating on his Boon more to reinforce the ice and sharpen it, Matt activated his AI and [Sharp Mind]. The newly upgraded skill allowed him to concentrate on the vortex, and he mentally created finger width bands of frost in the storm, then started changing their speeds.

That increased the load on his mind, but with the upgraded skill and his AI helping to quickly notice and identify spots that needed his attention, he was able to increase the lethality of his attack a dozen fold. Even the larger mice were unable to push past the frozen cyclone as it now stood.

Liz and Susanne helped by sending waves of blood and swords out of the ice dome, which started killing some of the mice before they got close, relieving even more of the pressure on Matt.

When they were close to halfway through the first room, Matt felt a jolt in his spirit as the Genesis Energy he gathered told him that he now had enough for the exit reward.

“Exit reward achieved. Nothing about the challenge reward yet.”

Aster yipped a happy noise as she redoubled her efforts to earn more Genesis Energy, and Matt noticed Liz and Susanne do the same with their efforts on killing the monsters before they reached Matt.

Seeing they were challenging him and Aster, Matt cast [Hail] in their path and started assimilating all the ice that fell, with Aster's help.

As they took back the lead on killing, Matt activated his Concept to refill both Susanne and Liz, but added his Championing effect to Susanne, who was lower on mana.

Using both effects wasn't quite a doubling of the normal mana refilling, but rather an additive effect. Still, Susanne had a smaller mana pool than Liz, so the boost was more significant for her.

Matt knew he couldn't keep that level of drain up for long, but he wasn't using his will power to shape the cyclone thanks to Aster's assistance, so he had some to spare.

They paused in the center of the room, as thousands of eight foot tall mice men rushed them and died.

As more fell, Liz started casting [Blood Tidal Wave] and then [Blood Sprites] on the remnants.

That signified the end of their troubles, as the self-replicating birds had oceans of blood to feed on and did so before swarming out to devour all the nearby mice.

Even though it took dozens of blood sparrows to kill even a single monster, they feasted off the body before splitting and moving on in a red wave of sparrows.

Dropping the now unneeded ice combination, Matt walked forward even as Aster complained to Liz, “You stole all my kills! [Blood Sprites] are cheating.”

Liz snorted. “It’s definitely not. You could argue it was before, when I could just summon out all the blood I needed from my glove, but now I need to *earn* every kill so I have enough blood to cast it and [Blood Tidal Wave].”

As the two of them carried on with their good-natured bickering, Matt and Susanne took out the few stragglers with [Mana Slash]es, but Liz hadn’t left many for them. They were just about to relax when a presence appeared behind Liz.

A nearly invisible mantis-like monster emerged from thin air, slicing its arms like a scissor around Liz’s neck, biting deep into her armor.

Blood flew, and Matt’s heart leapt into his throat before her AI confirmed she was still alive, but one of the blades had made it through her armor and cut into her neck. Mana pulsed in her neck and Liz wrapped herself in a cocoon of blood, clutching her head and lashing out blindly with an array of blood tendrils.

Even as the monster faded out of sight and from his spiritual perception, Matt threw some [Fire Bolt]s through the area where the monster had been.

Not feeling any feedback from his attack, Matt reinforced [Cracked Phantom Armor], locked down space, and started feeling his surroundings with [Air Manipulation] as he prepared to block another sneak attack. Susanne stood at his back, sword and shield ready to block the next assault.

A spike of danger alerted both of them to the next attack, and as Susanne swung at where the warning originated from, the mantis reappeared as it twisted in midair, turning a deadly execution into a merely devastating attack at her lower half.

Susanne moved her shield a hair too late, and with no physical armor to stop it, one blade surrounded with thick tangles of mana cut through her [Shadow Armor] and halfway through her knee. The monster yanked on its blade, and it went the rest of the way through before withdrawing.

Despite losing half a leg, with the severed limb falling and vanishing in a thin cloud of smoke and leaving an even wispiest copy of itself attached to Susanne, she managed to cut one of the monster's blade limbs off. But before her sword could kill the monster, it pulled back and started to vanish like mist in the sun.

Before Matt could really get a good look at it, it was gone, and they were left in an awkward stalemate as Matt dropped on top of Susanne and cast [Bulwark] flat over her, creating a small dome for her to start healing in.

During that time, Aster and Liz had covered the area in blood and ice, but even the wide area attacks seemed to do nothing, implying the mantis had a level of intangibility, which was a scary thought.

Thankfully, Aster was thinking one step ahead and retrieved their illusion-piercing mirror from her spatial collar, and immediately swept its view across the room.

The second it hit the mantis' hiding spot, Matt lanced out with [Cracked Mana Spear], and Susanne's sword followed in its wake a second later. Space blurred around the monster as it tried to twist around Matt's attack, but Susanne and Matt *both* shut it down hard with focused spatial blocking, a move even more effective on this floor than normal.

The moment the mana beam struck the suddenly stationary monster, it vanished in a puff of mana, and tellingly, no Genesis Energy.

"I think it was a fucking summoned monster," Matt swore.

Susanne straightened up, absently rubbing her leg. "Oh, that fucker wants to play games. Let's see who gets to the safe room first. I'm more than happy to fucking cut their head off."

Liz emerged from her cocoon and studied the faint outline of Susanne's lower leg and foot. "Ugh, you okay?"

Liz's voice was mildly garbled, but a look of concentration crossed her face. "Better? Better."

Susanne shrugged, but replied with her AI, "Could still be listeners. I don't really need the leg here, so it's not that big of a deal. Aster used a [Bandage] on it, but I don't even think it bleeds."

"Liz? Are you..."

She ran a finger over her throat. "It's kind of weird thinking about nearly being *decapitated* as not too bad a wound, but I was able to keep the blood flowing just fine and my spirit counts as close enough to blood that I was able to manually reattach the severed arteries. And now the cut seems to be... *gone*? Still not entirely sure about that, but I'm definitely pumping my own

blood for a little while just to be safe. Thankfully, [Blood Crystal Armor] took most of the hit.”

Mind Over Matter made things weird, but Matt was just happy they were okay, and made it his personal mission to kill the summoner, if they found... whoever they were.

He had no idea how long the monster had been following them and didn't like that it seemed impossible to sense with both mundane and magical senses.

Aster shivered slightly before freezing the mirror to her collar. “I think I'm going to keep this on me for the rest of the floor. I don't think I'd survive the sneak attack.”

That put them all on high alert, even as they pushed through the rest of the ruin.

Thankfully, their entrance and then Liz's follow up seemed to have killed most of the mice, and they were able to press into the next room quickly.

There they found small groups of ten foot tall mice men that were noticeably more muscular and actually started casting spells.

Each of these monsters were substantially tougher than their lesser brethren, making conventional tactics a faster approach than the winter storm that Matt had been using before.

Matt opened with a flurry of [Mana Slash]es at one of the monsters, while Liz drove a spear of blood into its shoulder and drained the mouse dry. It didn't have *blood* exactly, but whatever it did have was close enough for her new blood-drinking Concept power, and it greedily consumed the monster over the course of a few seconds.

Susanne was substantially slower than she had been before she lost her leg, but she was still able to direct her second sword with full agility, keeping her future targets at bay as she allowed one at a time to approach her and die on her main blade.

Aster served a largely support role, slowing down the monsters enough that the rest of them weren't overwhelmed. She kept Liz's targets particularly restrained, and buffeted Susanne's future victims, leaving them disoriented and ready for execution, all while keeping an eye on her mirror, ready to preempt the next assassination attempt.

A defensive measure that turned out well, as while Matt was embroiled with two fifteen foot tall mice men, Aster lashed out with a short but violent storm of ice as she reported, “Five of them!”

Matt growled and used a short burst of [Cracked Mana Spear] to finish off all the remaining monsters of this room. A couple of them tried to jerk out of

the way, but Matt finished them off before they could escape.

Driving his sword into the wispy ground, he growled, “So, the asshole isn’t content to just try once.”

Liz interjected, “Do we need to go finish him off?”

Matt paused as he thought about it, even as Susanne growled, “I’m all for it.”

Matt shook his head as he analyzed the situation. “That wouldn’t be a smart use of our time. It’s better to just keep our attention on our rear but push forward. He can’t do shit if we get to the next level before him.”

Despite arguing otherwise, Matt waited for anyone else to have a good reason to go kill the man, but none of them did, so they carried on deeper into the ruin.

As they turned, Liz adjusted her grip on the spear and growled, “Fucking summoner. Maybe we should wait around for a few hours to see if he appears in the safe room? I’d love to give him a little surprise.”

Susanne nodded. “I only need a second. It’s one thing to attack people, but invisible, impossible-to-sense monsters just feel unfair.”

Matt offered up an explanation of his own, “I think it’s the floor theme that’s making them so dangerous. My guess is that outside of Minkalla, they’re probably normal assassin mantises with the ability to vanish from spiritual perception. Here, though, they don’t have a physical body hindering them—they’re more like a mental projection by the summoner. Because of that, they’re already not fully ‘here’ to begin with, and some kind of ability their master has to force them to ‘vanish from everything,’ they’re able to avoid attacks not specifically directed at them. Maybe it’s some sort of Concept ability”

“What makes you say that?”

Matt pointed to where the assassins had been lurking. “Of those five, only one felt as slippery as the first one we fought. I think the summoner may have picked up a new ability from Folded Reflections and can only focus it on one creature at a time. By what I’m sure wasn’t coincidence, it was also the only one trying to use a skill.”

Aster shook like she was wet, which was a disorienting sight with her star body. “Even so, it’s a bad match up. Imagine if we didn’t have the mirror?”

“But, thankfully, we do. Let’s just kill the boss and get out of here.” As a thought came to him, Matt added, “Actually, let’s even out our Genesis Energy after testing how much we need to get the floor reward.”

As he and Liz consolidated their Genesis Energy through the gauge rings they had gotten on the first floor, they cringed.

Both of them individually had enough Genesis Energy to take the exit reward, which was the flexible innate skill slot, but it was only together that they had enough for the floor challenge. There was a bit to spare, and once Aster and Susanne added theirs to the mix, they found they had *just* shy of enough Genesis Energy for two of them to afford both the challenge and exit reward, though all of them could afford the exit reward, even then.

It wasn't great, but it wasn't awful. They were about two-thirds of the way there and depending on how much Genesis Energy they got from the level boss, it might end up being enough. If not, well...that was just a few more ruins that they'd need to clear on the next level.

Or they could kill a few delvers.

Even at half-rate, they'd get a *lot* of Genesis Energy at this stage, and if they all got half of their current amount again, it *would* be enough for them all to get out with full rewards.

Matt could only shudder at the cost of a final floor Spirit Journey if Mind Over Matter was this expensive for *Tier 11s*. Luna saying only one or two people ever got that reward when it was the final floor made a lot more sense. Everyone would be waiting on the final level, trying to kill each other to gather an entire Minkalla run's worth of Genesis Energy.

And with how Genesis Energy became more obvious to everyone the more one gathered, anyone ahead of the average would turn into public enemy number one.

Thinking about the possibility, Matt was grateful they had gotten Mind Over Matter instead.

After redistributing the Genesis Energy back out to everyone, they pushed forward, killing the mice monsters as they grew larger and larger. By the time they entered what seemed to be a nightmare version of an industrial kitchen, the monsters were close to thirty feet tall, and were growing difficult to take down. The good thing was, they also grew rarer, allowing them to focus their entire combat prowess on killing one.

With Aster watching their back, they cut through the final monsters until they found the management room, where they found the exit distortion and the ruin's boss.

Which was a literal...boss.

Or the mouse version of an office manager.

With a set of armor that looked more like business clothes, the boss wielded a clipboard as a shield and threw pens like massive darts.

Matt raced forward and cast [Hail] at the sixty-foot-tall monster, and directed the ice at its face while it was busy blocking a [Mana Slash] from

Susanne.

The monster threw a retaliatory pen back at him.

That would have been fine, but either through an insidious mind or bad aim, the monster's attack was headed straight for Aster, who was keeping watch for more assassins.

Cursing, Matt flew into the way of the projectile and cast [Bulwark] and activated his defensive Concept to empower the skill.

He was sent flying in the resulting explosion, but he had stopped the pen dart in its tracks, which surprised him.

That was an attack from a boss monster that was three Tiers stronger than himself, and he didn't even need to use [Cracked Phantom Armor] to block any of it.

With more confidence, Matt cast [Cracked Mana Spear] at the boss, which was trying to swat the annoying fly that was Liz, who flew faster than normal with her boots of wind.

As the beam of mana landed on its faceplate, the monster immediately turned to smack at Matt with its clipboard.

The larger monster's clipboard froze in the air for a moment before it overpowered Aster's Concept, but Matt had already floated out of range and kept the beam on the monster, cutting deep lines into and through its armor.

He couldn't strain his spirit too much just yet, so the moment his beam opened a legitimate hole in the creature's armor, he switched to unleashing a torrent of [Fireball]s. The boss managed to block several of them with its clipboard, but more struck its face, keeping its attention firmly on *him*.

Thus freed from the boss's attacks, Liz and Susanne closed in on the monster itself. Liz drove her spear into the beast's ankle and launched herself up with the assistance of her wind boots.

Susanne flitted forward like a shadow being chased by the light, pulled along by her sword as she raced up the left side of the monster, aiming for the gaping hole in its business suit armor.

Liz reached the pinnacle of her leap and pulled herself above the boss with a blood tendril. She summoned the blood around her into a giant spear and dropped down into a stabbing attack. Her shield and spear glimmered in the not-light, and her Spirit flared as her Concept poured into her attack,

Even as it tried to slap Susanne, the monster took the blow from Liz on the face, and the helmet cracked like an egg and shattered.

As the boss screamed and went to smack Susanne, Matt let himself fall to the ground as he channeled [Wood Manipulation] and [Metal Manipulation].

With the two spells, he grabbed the oversized clipboard and pulled.

The weapon was protected by the monster's spirit, which made the manipulation hard, but Matt had the mana to spare as he sent nearly all his mana into the spells.

Even as the massive boss tried to pull against the force, Matt held firm and grinned as the shield was sent flying under the combined and opposite forces.

That moment of hesitation was more than enough for Susanne to reach the monster's face and drive her blade deep into its eye.

The monster slapped itself in the face, trying to kill what was hurting it, but that only helped drive the blade deeper into its body, and it went stiff right before Liz's blood spear drove into the other eye and started spinning.

As the boss slumped over, Matt felt the rush of Genesis Energy that signified it was truly dead and sighed in relief before catching himself and looking to Aster, who was still watching their rear with the mirror.

It would be the perfect time for the summoner to try and ambush them, after all.

As the boss vanished, it dropped a number of items and natural treasures, which Matt added to the other pile that fell out of the reward distortion, somewhat forlorn that they weren't in a good position to look into whatever Tier 20 skills and other valuables they happened to get. They simply didn't have the time for an unnecessary pause.

He'd nearly signaled for them to move on when the former clipboard caught his eye. Matt took a closer look at some of the runes along its edge and was somewhat surprised by what he saw. On top of a frankly ludicrously strong durability enchantment, it had an *impressive* shape changing rune array built into it, enabling it to shrink or grow over the course of about a minute from the dimensions of a thick piece of paper all the way up to a square forty feet on a side and four feet thick.

That included the ability to grow divots or edges, self-repair, and self-clean with a bit of mana. He could even change the finish, color and grain of the wood to any 'natural' pattern that he desired. For anyone who wanted a ridiculously over-engineered base for a flat shield, it would be a great find.

He'd use it as a cutting board.

Aster didn't see anything trying to sneak up on them, leading Matt to assume that the summoner had decided it wasn't worth the mana to create more monsters to send at them. That, or he understood they had a counter to the monster type.

When they appeared on the third level of the final floor, Matt immediately cast [Bulwark], sensing an attack from their rear.

A Tier 13 and two Tier 12s were within a hundred feet of them and had seemingly been in the middle of clearing the ruin when they appeared right behind them.

As the Tier 13 finished off the alligator monster, one of the other two turned and started casting [Fireball]s at them while the final member shot magical arrows out of a bow.

[Bulwark] blocked each and every attack, and Matt called out, “We don’t mean any harm!” and sent the same message through his AI.

The other team didn’t respond to either message, and Matt returned his own [Fireball] as they started to batter down his [Bulwark].

Seeing they weren’t going to stop attacking, Matt settled on killing them.

He hadn’t chosen to appear right next to another team, but he also wasn’t going to walk away after the misunderstanding was perpetuated.

A single attack out of surprise was one thing, but a continued assault was another.

As a burst of flame came from Liz, not having any blood to wield, he cast [Earth Manipulation] and brought two slabs of ground slamming toward the team.

The mage of the team created a bubble of hardened air with a spell, but Matt broke that working with a flex of [Air Manipulation].

The other mage reacted quickly, even with only a moment before the slab of earth landed on them and used [Earth Swim] to enter and pull the archer into and through the ground.

For cultivators of their Tier, one hundred feet was nothing, and that made all the difference. If they weren’t deposited right on top of the other team, they might have had some chance at running or even getting off an attack, but they hadn’t been.

Susanne had already started moving toward the Tier 13, who clearly didn’t expect a melee engagement with the floor theme and tried to block with a magical shield. Susanne’s blade didn’t even slow as it cut the man in half.

Seeing one of their teammates die, both the remaining people immediately Tiered up to Tier 13, but Matt didn’t give them time to do anything more.

With a stream of fire from [Flamethrower], he wrapped them up and punched through their [Water Shield] that attempted to keep the flames away with [Fire Manipulation]. As two more bursts of Genesis Energy rushed out of them, Matt relaxed slightly.

“Fucking idiots.” He nearly spat the words out.

Aster flicked her ears. “Their loss is our gain, though. That was a good bit of Genesis Energy. We’re close, very close, to having enough to leave.”

Sadly, things were never that easy, as they felt another team rushing at them from a distance. A full team of Tier 14s.

Their fight wasn’t even the only fight in this ruin, let alone this floor.

Everywhere his spiritual perception stretched over was filled with fighting, as teams tried to reach boss ruins and Tier 14 kill squads used this level as a final bottleneck to finish their missions.

The end was in sight.

Now, they just needed to get there.

Matt's AI spun up as he poured both mana and willpower into its activation, hoping to process everything going on in the chaotic melee around them.

There were several factors that made this task substantially simpler than trying it elsewhere.

First of all, his AI didn't need to account for each person's own AI and then try to predict what combat solutions it would put out, thus creating counters ad nauseam. Though, that was a Minkalla benefit and restriction as a whole, rather than being floor specific. With it blocking most of the others' AI, Matt's only needed to predict what each person would do on their own, which helped simplify things a great deal.

Mind Over Matter also changed things in its own way, making things at least slightly easier. Mages dominated on the floor, as the lack of physical bodies or weapons meant that fighters had a hard time accomplishing much without prohibitive mana or willpower expenditure. Anyone with a weapon Concept would be able to strengthen their incorporeal weapons into something usable, and making a weapon manifestation was even achievable for a normal person on the floor. But Susanne would likely be one of the most capable fighters on the whole floor, given her Concept specialization.

Three seconds after his AI started processing with nearly his full mana generation, Matt sent out the results.

Their best option? Punch through all the opposition and kill the boss as soon as possible.

Not exactly something they needed an AI to tell them, but it did come with some helpful information and the framework of an actual combat plan.

Acting on the information, the four of them floated to the right, where there were two Empire kill squads trying to take down an equal number of

Federation fighters.

Ideally, they could assist the kill squads and then exit through the boss ruin nearby, relying on the kill squad to hold off anyone and everyone who would want to prevent someone from leaving the floor.

Easy.

Except they needed to not give away their Matt, Liz, and Aster identities any more than they already had.

Harder.

And they needed to do all of that while not being forced to Tier up.

Difficult.

As they got close to the ruin in question, they were surprised by a team teleporting right next to them.

Spinning, Susanne cut one of the team in half before they even fully materialized, and a burst of flame scorched another who created an earthen shield a second too late, trapping the heat inside with him rather than blocking it.

Matt slashed out with a [Wind Cutter] that sank deep into the hasty shield of emerald flames that a melee-looking woman had raised. The next moment saw her try to rush him with a newly manifested sword made *from* emerald flames, but he forced her to parry his barrage of [Fireball]s long enough for Susanne to cut her down in two swings.

With a pulse of will, Matt sucked their looted gear into his ring, then noted the amount of Genesis Energy they had gathered and calculated that into their projections.

They were about three teams away from having enough for the exit reward, by his estimation, and they'd likely get that while en route.

Casting [Bulwark], he led the charge and blocked a stream of exploding arrows that slammed into his shield the moment they came around the corner and into the line of sight for the next ruin.

Before the shield fully fell, Matt reinforced it with his defensive Concept and kept moving forward, even as his vision was obstructed by the series of explosions from the dozens of arrows that were lodged in his [Bulwark]. With his spiritual perception spread out, he didn't even need his sight and was hardly hindered by the attacks, but he pinged Aster to keep a watch out with the mirror, just in case the arrows were a diversion.

A good measure, as the attacks were only meant to block their vision while a melee fighter moved in close with a mace manifestation. They were invisible to the group's spiritual perception but were perfectly visible to the mirror's illusion piercing abilities.

Susanne moved forward and took a position right by the right flank of the [Bulwark]. The moment the man came around with a [Dash] infused lunge, she was ready to meet him blade to mace.

If he was just fighting a single Susanne, he might have been fine. But when the second copy of Susanne peeled away from the main body, he was unprepared, and lost his off-hand trying to block the unexpected strike.

Seeing the man's shock, horror, and surprise at seeing Susanne create a duplicate with her manifestation, Matt was reminded that most non-immortals couldn't do what Susanne did with her Concept. Though, Mind Over Matter certainly helped out those who were close.

Still, he wasn't weak, and managed to preserve his life long enough to disengage and try to retreat.

Try...and fail.

A flower of flame blossomed behind him, rippling with cold as the air around him froze.

A spatial fluctuation started to ripple out from his armor, but Matt threw his Concept at the space around the man and commanded the world to hold itself together, which prevented the fluctuations from breaking space and teleporting the man out.

That was all the time Susanne needed for herself and her copy to flit out from the cover of the [Bulwark] shield and cut the man down.

Grabbing the body, she pulled it behind the wall that was Matt's shield and started stripping the man, looking for the spatial item. As it turned out, it was a necklace with a small gemstone that pulsed rhythmically to an unseen beat.

They were able to close a quarter of the distance before Matt stopped moving forward and started injecting more mana into his [Bulwark] to reinforce it, on top of activating the [Mana Shield] spell he enchanted on his blade. As he strengthened his defenses a mage pointed a glowing white staff at them that screamed danger to his senses.

A lightning bolt the width of a tree cracked out with a sound, as if the world itself was splitting in half.

Even with his reinforcements, [Bulwark] exploded on impact, and Matt had to empower [Cracked Phantom Armor] as much as he could to block the spell, as well as activating his newly developed Concept armor. Despite taking the brunt of the blow, Matt's armor still shattered, and it left the front of his 'body' scorched and broken to match.

How exactly that would translate to his physical body, he had no idea, but it wasn't registering as fatal to his AI, so he ignored the pain as he cast [Fireball] as fast as the spell could reform in his spirit.

As the stream of seemingly weak spells flew across the distance, Matt started using [Fire Manipulation] to change their trajectory mid-flight, according to the path his AI predicted would be the least expected.

Liz wasn't sitting still, and Matt felt her Concept flex in an unfamiliar way. He suspected that it was her bloodline empowerment Concept ability. He was proven correct as a pair of [Fire Bolt] talismans flared with more power than usual, then immediately raced forward and targeted the melee fighter that was closing in on the Empire Tier 14 squad.

The other team wasn't sitting idle while he was piecing together [Bulwark]'s skill structure in his spirit, thanks to it being forcefully destroyed by the lightning spell,, and another rain of arrows started streaking at the four of them.

Matt and Aster deflected those projectiles with [Air Manipulation] and Aster's [Cross Wind], and he noted how they also exploded off in the distance, which told Matt that was probably the only enchantment on the opposing weapon, and the only way it could be used on this floor.

With that bit of information, his mid-fight analysis changed, and he sent the new information out to his team. In response, Susanne flicked out to the side before speeding forward like a fish after just entering water.

Knowing she could handle herself, Matt started casting [Flamethrower] and allowed Liz to take a portion of the flames for her own use, while also casting his own [Fire Bolt]s through the obscuring flames.

Using his model to predict everyone's movements, Matt kept most of his spiritual perception focused behind them in case of another ambush.

Thankfully, nothing happened, and they quickly got into melee range despite only a few of them being able to use melee attacks, thanks to their weapon Concepts.

That would have been foolhardy, if not for the fact that Liz could use her blood to subtly reinforce her spear and use the deception to her advantage.

Susanne was a whirlwind of steel as her blade changed shape and form through her Concept weapon swaps. She displayed the various weapons she had absorbed and used their respective enchantments to great effect as she quickly battered down the archer's defenses. That was in spite of the opposing archer's team rushing in to try and free their teammate, but the Empire death squads were already en route to intercept.

Once Aster was close enough, she cast [Winter's Harvest], and an aura of frost appeared as the enemies' strength, mind, and regeneration cultivation were restricted and used to boost everyone she considered allies.

If that wasn't enough, she doubled up with [Kar'tan Greets His Foes] to restrict their movement, along with her natural treasure, Winter's Embrace, which drained power from everyone to empower herself.

The instant boost to her allies and weakening of their enemies changed the pace of the battle, and the ten of them quickly cut down the enemy death squads.

Even as Genesis Energy rushed into his spirit, and they had a clear shot into the next ruin, Matt knew things wouldn't be so simple.

Because everyone else on the floor had seen that they were now unencumbered with a boss ruin behind them, and like crabs in a bucket, no one would allow anyone else to leave if they weren't on their side.

Just like that, they had become public enemy number one.

Good thing they still needed a little more Genesis Energy because they were going to gather it in spades.

The first wave consisted of three teams. Two obviously from the Sects and one from either the Republic or the Federation; their spirits didn't give anything away and they were in deliberately bland armor which made it impossible to use to identify them.

Knowing he had to go all out, Matt cast [Hail] in front of them with its maximum range and then sent the max mana the spell could handle, creating a near wall of ice which he and Aster immediately grabbed and started throwing at the enemies.

Sadly, what had been an amazing tactic against monsters was less effective against humans. Burst of flames melted the ice in front of one of the Sect teams, while a wall of earth grew out of the ground and into a tunnel to protect the opposing team. Meanwhile, the final Sect team seemed to just ignore the ice as it passed around them, despite his and Aster's best efforts.

Dropping a portion of his power over [Ice Manipulation], Matt used [Earth Manipulation] to squeeze down on the team who was trying to tunnel under their ice storm.

He only felt one burst of Genesis Energy from the team as the other earth mage pulsed his power and pushed Matt's own manipulation skill back, but Matt didn't contest the man in a struggle.

Instead, he redirected a stream of ice into the mound of earth and let it build up, hoping to slow the group down as much as possible.

At the same time, Aster was throwing more and more ice at the fire mage team, which was effective at slowing them down, but didn't stop their advance.

That didn't prevent the third team from running through the ice storm like it wasn't there.

Honing in on them, Matt didn't have an answer to exactly how they were preventing the ice from hitting them. They weren't intangible, they weren't redirecting the ice, and they weren't illusions.

It was as if all the ice was just by them, despite Matt and Aster's efforts to redirect it, which screamed some kind of luck or probability Talent or Concept.

And the easiest counter to those abilities was removing any chance for escape for the Talent to effect.

With only a quick message to Aster, he gathered a large amount of hail and brought it toward the team in a tight mass, while holding everything on a steady trajectory, only letting go the instant that Aster cast [Shatter] on the mass of ice.

Instead of a single chunk of ice or a large amount of medium sized ice chunks, the team now had to deal with millions of razor sharp fragments of empowered ice rocketing at them like an icy cone of death.

A [Water Bubble] appeared to wrap the team up, but it was a poor choice.

Aster took advantage of her control over ice and winter to flash freeze the ball of ice, and then expanded the ice until they were encased in a pseudo mountain. None of them died, despite Matt trying to squeeze the ball of ice down to nothing, as the water mage inside seemed to have a degree of control over ice as well, and with their range advantage, they were able to defend properly.

But that left them with one team to defend against. The fire mage Sect team.

Except, instead of it being a three versus three, it was a one versus three, as two other Empire teams assisted them.

Spells raced back and forth, but seeing that they were winning, Matt turned his attention back to the earth mage team, which was trying to burrow deeper underground.

A mix of [Earth Manipulation] and [Create Water] overrode the ground beneath him, turning it first into a slurry of conceptual water and earth, then into outright mud. With his own [Mud Manipulation], Matt was able to gain an advantage against the earth mage's efforts, locking them beneath the floor and forcing them to struggle to use *any* earth spells.

Then, using the gap he created to reach them with the mud, he cast [Flamethrower] at the ground and started melting the earth into lava, which he sent at the team who was just dealing with the mud. Normally, dirt or mud

couldn't melt into lava, but the floor's semi-physical nature helped him out and made the interaction work.

Once he had them surrounded, it took him nearly a minute of squeezing to overcome the earth mages' defensive advantage and wipe out the entire team.

He was turning to attack the water mage team when, seemingly out of nowhere, a forest started to grow out of the ground and tried to entangle everyone from the Empire side.

Using [Wood Manipulation], he tried to halt the spell. That bought enough time for him to cast [Flamethrower] and spread the flames around with Liz's assistance.

Except, while the wood charred, it didn't burn like it should have, and kept growing new shoots instead.

Checking his AI and seeing it had the same analysis of the situation as he did, he cast [Cracked Mana Trap]s unable to fill them with anything but neutral mana. When they exploded, the traps stunted the wood spell's growth long enough for the Empire fighters to pull back into the boss ruin.

"Yellow, Silver, and team two, start killing through the ruin while we protect the rear. We should earn enough Genesis Energy by fighting through. We just need to get out of here."

With half of their manpower leaving the front line, even as more teams came at them, Matt still didn't hesitate to send Liz and Susanne to the monster front and start killing.

His reasoning was twofold.

First, Liz's fire was more useful against monsters who tended to have weaknesses that Torch's precision-based pyromancy could exploit. Second, Susanne, while useful for the ability to attack in melee range, needed to get close, and things were devolving into a spell slinging match.

While *that* was a situation Matt excelled at, he still needed space.

This was a mage's floor, and a mage's battle.

His approach was much the opposite of Torch's, if he was being honest. Not much finesse, but when it came to sheer mana *spent*, none could match him.

Pausing for a moment as he filled then drained his mana stone reserves to recast [Bulwark] at its maximum size, Matt backed up into the cleared portion of the ruins while Aster summoned a [Snowpack] golem to add a new body to their efforts.

Like its original spell, the golem was an impressive defensive wall, an immobile semi-humanoid save for its ability to gather itself into a ball and roll

forward. Still, it was absolutely massive, and was more than capable as an animated defender, giving them momentary breathing room.

Not one to let such an opportunity slide, Aster cast [Frost] to empower ice skills and then [Snowbank] at her golem, giving it more and more material to build its body with, while infusing it with her Concept to further empower the living spell.

The twenty feet tall ice golem intercepted a team containing a man with an appearance halfway between an earth golem and a dryad, and Matt suspected that he was responsible for the trees around them. Seeing that their own ice golem would keep the man occupied for a while, Matt turned his attention to the fire mage team that Liz had been previously engaging.

He didn't directly attack their barriers, but he did send a [Wind Cutter] their way as a feint, following it up with an [Earth Spear].

The spell combo wasn't nearly as effective as he had hoped, and while one of the Sect mages went down, they got right back up with only a hole in their chest that seemed to slowly close as a healing spell hit them.

Trying an alternative tactic, he cast [Jolt] twice in rapid succession, which pierced through the wall of flames but didn't do more than injure the fire mage, who was also quickly healed.

But that distraction stopped them long enough for Matt to cast a series of [Cracked Mana Trap]s that he hid behind a wave of earth created by [Earth Manipulation].

Casting another useless series of [Wind Cutter]s at the approaching team, he smiled as the lead melee fighter stepped on the first mana trap.

As it went off, the mana he had fueled the spell ripped out in ribbons of cutting fury, like a high tension cable that snapped under too much pressure and ripped through both the fire mage and healer.

It didn't kill either of them outright, but it did stop the roaring flames for a brief moment, and that was all Aster needed to send a wave of hail at them, which shredded and pulverized the team before they could recover.

Genesis Energy flowed to them like the confirmation of a job well done, but they didn't have time for congratulations.

Even as they killed one team, another four appeared at the edge of the ruin, trying to prevent them from exiting.

Seeing that, Matt simply retreated slowly while settling into a holding pattern.

Between himself, Aster, and the Tier 14 team, they managed to throw enough spells at the enemies to make rushing them down nearly impossible.

To facilitate their retreat, he focused on Susanne and used his championing Concept to send her a portion of his abilities.

While most of the boost was ineffective on this floor, it did help empower her mind and senses enough to take riskier openings in her fight.

Thus empowered, she was the tip of the spear that punched through the winged rhino monsters in the ruin.

Liz was keeping busy, and was using a short, controlled burst of flames to protect Susanne's flank to cover her blood spells, secretly killing any monster Susanne left alive in her wake. Ideally, they wouldn't expose her as a blood mage after having worked so hard to kill almost everyone who saw her use blood spells in the earlier floors, but Matt knew she was ready to burst out with all her power if needed.

Most shouldn't notice it as too out of place, but a small portion of the monster's blood was clinging to her, and Susanne was giving Liz a small but ready supply of material to work with.

Turning back to the front line, Matt threw up a wall of earth with [Earth Manipulation] before recasting [Hail] once more to give Aster and himself more material of their own to work with.

As they were dealing with five teams at once, he didn't concentrate on killing, but rather slowing them down as much as possible while taking any opportunities to wound them that he could.

With [Bulwark] as their frontal shield and seeing how reliable it was, the Tier 14 team stopped focusing on defense and started moving onto the offense, unleashing their own spells and trusting Matt to keep them protected.

Despite all of that, the distance between them and their attackers slowly started to shrink, until the point spells were hardly formed before crashing into defense layers. But Matt kept their retreat as slow and as steady as possible while also preventing any team from flanking them.

Just as they were crossing into a relatively untouched portion of the ruin, Matt launched his own counterattack.

A dozen [Cracked Mana Traps] detonated and collapsed nearby stone pillars into an impromptu wall within a chokepoint inside the ruin.

It worked, and for a few brief moments, the seven of them were able to rest and catch their breath.

Before the Tier 14s had even finished refilling their mana, Matt felt the battering of his wall of earth and knew that it wouldn't last.

Checking in on his AI, Matt noted what it thought he should do and paused. It said that he should once more cast [Hail] and have him and Aster

use the ice to slow down and weaken the enemies, but he had another plan.

Running it through a few test scenarios, he felt there was a decent chance of his latest plan working as he wanted, and he decided to roll the dice.

Without most items bolstering their defenses, the teams were wholly reliant on spells or Concepts for protection, and that had a fatal weakness.

Mana.

A set of armor would also have some degree of protection by the nature of its physical durability, even if it was just an enchanted robe.

But spells were different.

The moment his wall came crashing down, Matt activated his mana draining Concept and threw his willpower against the leading two melee fighters who had shield spells protecting them.

He initially wanted to dig into their spirits, but found, even with his relatively large reserves of willpower, that it would be an uphill battle.

So, he switched tactics and tried to drain their spells instead. He'd slightly hoped that Mind Over Matter may have empowered his drain enough for it to work, but the only thing it accomplished was to distract the melee fighters attacking him as they noticed his attempt.

Seizing the opportunity provided, he used [Earth Manipulation] to entomb them in the rubble of the former wall.

Their side's mages tried to fight his power, but both sides were so close, there was practically no range advantage, and he was able to use his raw mana output to crush the two melee fighters.

That seemed to give the attack some pause, as they hesitated in rushing through the debris.

One team of dwarves from the Clans didn't seem bothered, though, and rushed forward, gathering the rubble together and throwing it at Matt.

Instead of fighting them directly, Matt deflected the rocks to the side and retaliated with a Concept-based explosion of force, following it up with a blast of repulsion.

The team was sent flying backward, slamming them against broken rubble and impaling two of them on particularly jagged protrusions. As the Genesis Energy flooded in, Matt smiled.

They had finally reached the amount of Genesis Energy they needed to exit Minkalla with both the floor reward and the innate skill slot. The distribution wasn't *perfectly* even, but they all had enough for the floor reward, and they could even out the rest once they were in the safe room. That shifted their goal firmly to 'get out as fast as possible,' and they summoned their final reserves of strength for the final sprint.

Matt and Aster both held their ground for a few moments as he once more cast [Hail] and used the massive amount of ice created to batter down their enemies, who struggled to push through the onslaught of enhanced ice.

All of Aster's new Concept powers empowered the ice, and Matt's boon from the fourth floor combined to turn a generally harmless [Hail] spell into a powerhouse of destruction.

And time was all they needed.

Led by Susanne and Liz, the team of Tier 14s were nearing the boss of the ruin.

The exit.

Their goal.

Using his AI, he asked the team they were with, "Are you leaving with us or staying?"

His answer was immediate. "Staying if possible, but if there's no way out, we aren't going to stand around and die."

It wasn't a surprise, and he fed the confirmation into his calculations. His headache from running his AI on willpower for so long was rapidly growing beyond what he could stand, but he was *so close*. He could hold on a bit longer.

Currently, there were only two exits to the ruin before the boss chamber, and after calculating the odds he offered them their out.

"Both of you should leave at this next exit. We can take the rest of this ourselves."

As Tier 14 death squads, they would need a lot of Genesis Energy to leave with the floor theme, even if they had no intention to take the floor seven exit reward, and choose something like the floor six one, and he didn't want to punish them for helping their group.

And besides, he still had two final trump cards.

[Cracked Mana Spear] wasn't linked to his real identity, after all, and his spirit, while not absent of spiritual strain, was in good *enough* shape he could sustain about thirteen seconds or so of a full-power attack before he outright collapsed.

Thirteen seconds of a beam spell powered by 2,560 mana every second.

More than enough to take out one final boss.

After explaining his idea to the rest of their team, Matt swapped places with Susanne and Liz and called for cover.

They were still a distance away from the boss and that area was full of monsters, but he thankfully had the perfect spell to clear out huge waves of monsters.

His final [Aurora Lance] array was going to clear the path for them.

Spells and the occasional arrow flew around and at him, but not a single one landed thanks to the combined efforts of the Tier 14 teams and his friends.

Thirty agonizing seconds later, he had the array ready and activated it.

The spell went off and seemed to freeze the world itself for a moment before, almost as an afterthought, the passage of the projectile flash froze everything in front of Matt toward the direction of the exit.

Statues of ice were all that remained of the monsters that had formerly barred their way, and the two Tier 14 teams that had assisted them split off, vanishing into the adjoining ruins as they crashed through the brittle bodies of what had once been a horde of enemies.

None of their pursuers followed them, as they were the lowest priority targets, but that left all the burden of a now desperate coalition of teams to the three of his teammates.

Susanne almost seemed like a woodchipper as her new spell [Mass Deflect] shredded hundreds of arrows and other wooden projectiles, Aster moved walls of ice around to block, and Liz pushed and pulled all of them with bits of blood while spending fire spells at their attacker, buying room for Matt to close in on the boss.

Their final obstacle was *massive*.

Fifty feet tall, thirty feet wide, and a hundred feet long, the scariest rhino Matt had ever seen loomed over him, making him seem like a mere speck of dust in comparison. Its hide gleamed like dull metal, with some portions being outright metal plates, and its horns shone black and gold, wickedly sharp and covered in runes so far away that they blended into a single pattern. Aurora Lance had just barely grazed it, from what Matt could tell, given its frostbitten front leg.

As he approached, crimson light flickered along the base of its larger horn, and energy began pouring toward the top as the boss turned to look at the tiny ant that had disturbed its sanctuary.

But Matt had been an ant before. And even an ant could bite. Some bites were just bigger than others.

The world flexed to his will, and he launched himself into the air with an explosion of willpower, riding his own shockwave and flying straight at a crack in the rhino's armor, where frostbitten flesh met a titanic plate of armor, just barely exposing the beast's more vulnerable insides.

His mana flared and split into four streams.

The first went to his AI, keeping him informed as to the status of his teammates. Liz had taken a sword blow to her arm, but she was mostly fine and using her flames to great effect. Aster was low on mana but was using what she had left to assist Liz and Susanne. Susanne was living up to her namesake of Queen, dancing like a monarch as she cut down every spell that flew at them.

The second went to [Cracked Phantom Armor], protecting him from the debris he was about to generate.

The third went to his gravity gauntlets, still empowered by the Heart of a Black Hole installed in his armor and would keep him locked to the rhino even as it tried to shake him off.

The fourth, and by *far* the largest, was 2,400 MPS directed straight into [Cracked Mana Spear].

Matt landed on-target, and his world became blue light.

One second.

The air thrummed with power, and his mana spear burrowed into the rhino's shoulder, tunneling upward toward the beast's brain. A ragged and burned hole opened in the beast's flesh, and Matt followed it, restricting his repulsion until it barely covered his armor, and he absolutely *devastated* the odd mental flesh and innards of the boss as he passed, tearing it apart from the inside.

His AI informed him that his teammates were starting to run low on mana, with only Liz, fueled by [Lesser Blood Sacrifice] and what was presumably a mountain of corpses, still in good shape.

Three seconds.

Gravity pulled in on the rhino around him and his repulsion kept it at bay pulling and pushing at its weakest parts. It bellowed, and its call rumbled through the fleshy prison that Matt found himself in seeming to shake the world.

Five seconds.

He could barely sense the world outside of the rhino while its spirit was still intact. Even his AI was getting some spotty results as it tried to connect to the rest of his team's.

Seven seconds.

Matt found the creature's spine and he slipped along it, finding an entry into the creature's impossibly massive and tough skull. Its brain wasn't quite physical but instead an energy field of pinks, blues, and reds that absolutely recoiled at the arm-thick lance of mana that was disintegrating it.

Nine seconds.

Matt felt a *massive* wash of Genesis Energy flood through him as the rhino shuddered and died. With its spirit weakening, Matt burst out of the creature's head, allowing the titanic boss to crumble to the ground seemingly in slow motion.

He didn't wait for it, and flew to the ground at high speed, firing [Cracked Mana Spear] up once again, this time aimed at the flood of death squads that his team was still holding back.

Ten seconds.

If he wasn't trying desperately to hold the spell structure together in his spirit, he might have been able to enjoy the sight of their panicked faces as they tried to raise defenses against his attack.

Eleven seconds.

Unprepared for his sudden appearance, several teams fell to his implacable beam.

Twelve seconds.

A desperate attack swept out from a team as the spear swept toward them in a massive combination of six skills, forming into an axe that flew like lightning and was as tall as Matt. He tried to dodge, but the attack unerringly curved and took out his right leg, carving out a section of his hip as it did so. He stayed standing, but his AI warned him that the damage would be extensive once he had his body back.

Thirteen seconds.

Matt saw and felt two more people die under his mana beam's sweeping attack and felt his spirit starting to buckle as the spiritual strain built itself to an unsustainable level, but he pushed further.

Fourteen seconds.

The world started to blur as the strain built up.

Liz swept in and grabbed the still-forming loot from the rhino boss, and with one hand, grabbed him and pulled him to the reward distortion that Susanne and Aster were already dispelling.

Fifteen seconds.

As [Cracked Mana Spear] faltered, Matt watched as the other teams started launching last minute attacks on them as they neared the exit.

The ground around them tried to rise and create walls, but they were a step ahead.

Blast of winds tried to knock them back, but Aster commanded the world to stand still, and it did.

Arrows lanced out at them, but Susanne created a copy of herself that flitted around and cut the arrows down.

A ball of flame tried to descend on them, but Liz threw it back at their attackers with a hawk-like cry.

And then, they were in the distortion, and Minkalla was asking Matt if he wished to take the challenge for Mind Over Matter.

Matt didn't hesitate as he agreed and felt himself being taken into the challenge.

It didn't do anything for his aching spirit, but he knew time was the only real remedy for that, and he had the challenge to complete.

He had heard that the challenge had been given a few nicknames over the millennia. Face Your Fear, Whetstone, and The Twisted Mirror were just a few, but they all meant the same thing.

Minkalla would attempt to break your Concept by showing its failings, its opposite, its anathema. To win, you needed to withstand the pressure as it sought to crush you.

Matt found himself in a starscape, a planet of blue and green under his feet, and he saw *himself*. He lived his life, and then he died. The world went on without him, and his goals in life fell short, the people he helped fell backward without him supporting them.

You are finite, Minkalla told him.

You are not endless.

You are limited, your days are numbered, even you will fall short.

When you die, you will cease to give.

You are not endless, you cannot help forever, your contributions will be a fleeting moment in time, then passed over and forgotten

In the blink of an eye, what you claim to be endless will be swept away like a mote of dust.

And the life began anew, this time showing Matt trying desperately to leave some kind of lasting legacy, only for it to be rendered pointless in the end.

What you can do, who you are, is not endless.

Even he would run out of mana someday. Not during his lifetime, but eventually.

So long as he drew breath, he would have mana, but when he drew his last breath, he would cease to be.

He was not eternal.

But he made no grand claims to true immortality.

He was *not* Eternal.

He was Endless.

Even if he ceased to be one day, that did not deny that simple fact. If he died, he would no longer exist. But so long as he lived, he would never falter, never break, never run dry.

And he would prove it, here and now.

I am Endless.

He refused to yield. No matter how long this took.

After all, he was endless.

Susanne was in a world with her sword in her hand.

She needed her sword.

It was as much a part of her as breath was.

And while she had it in hand, it was useless. It bent and flopped around like it was made from foam.

Her sword was distinctly *not* reliable.

As she was forced time after time to kill monsters with her hands, she came to understand that more and more, but her spirit rebelled against the idea. Her sword was always at hand, especially now as she faced down a horde of enemies.

But no. Her sword was *reliable*. It would always be there for her, would always be at hand when she needed it.

Except now, it wasn't.

Closing her eyes, Susanne struck out with her sword.

It didn't matter that Minkalla had made it useless. She trusted in her sword.

It was always there for her, and she was ready to wield it.

Two halves of the same whole.

She never questioned the fact that the monster in front of her died as she danced with her eyes closed.

After all, her sword was *reliable*.

She could trust in it to be there for her when she needed it, just as she would always be there to wield it.

Blood flew as she danced, writing a song of trust and death.

Of blood and bone.

Shattered and spilled.

No matter what Minkalla tried to convince her of, she knew the truth.

Her sword was *reliable*.

Liz looked at the challenge before her with a scoff.

Rebirth Through Blood, her Concept claimed.

And Minkalla presented her with what it judged to be its opposite—diseased, rotting blood. The lifeblood of countless victims seeping across the ground, causing her every step to squelch in sanguine viscera.

It was carnage of nearly unmatched proportions, on a scale that any sane person would recoil from—that *Liz* would have recoiled from not even a month ago.

But Minkalla had already forced her through this trial of fire. The fields of disease and death stretched as far as she could see, but she'd now experienced worse.

She'd *done* worse.

Now, all she could feel was numbness as she saw a complete rejection of her very being, perhaps what her future was doomed to be.

Mindless, purposeless bloodshed, untold loss of life, and a landscape which reeked with the miasma of death.

Was that really her lot in life?

Liz fought back tears.

No.

No.

The story was incomplete.

Her Concept didn't forbid the existence of death. She didn't claim that blood was eternal life.

No.

She claimed that blood enabled *rebirth*.

People reborn in the forge of battle, through the blood of their enemies.

Life would return in the wake of unimaginable death, just as she'd seen Melinda accept with her own Concept.

And she was a phoenix. Returning to life from naught but ashes was *in her blood*.

Death was the first step.

Now it would be *reborn*.

Golden flames engulfed the landscape, and life was born anew.

Aster was forced to watch as gravity pulled the universe back together just before the end, heating up in fire as everything became denser and denser.

Then, it expanded outward in a massive explosion. Once more creating life.

But that was all wrong.

At the end, everything was meant to be cold. Still. Not condense back in on itself before expanding once more.

Everything had its end, and that end shouldn't be the beginning of itself once more.

The end was cold and still.

Peaceful.

Where not even the atoms had energy to move.

That was where the next stage of life could finally exist.

The cold at the end of a universe.

Stillness.

Not a ball of fire once more exploding out to begin life anew.

That was *wrong*.

Aster opened her eyes and watched as the ever growing universes slowed in their expansion, before slowly starting to dim as she imposed her will on the play in front of her

She wasn't strong enough to stop this cycle, but she found power in extending the contraction of the dying stars. Prolonging the cold.

Her only little niche in a world built to oppose her.

That was so much better.

Even as the challenge faded away with the stars themselves, she relished in the feeling.



Matt dropped to his knee and felt the pain return, as his chest was letting him know the damage he'd taken to his spirit body wasn't just magically gone. It had been transferred over, even if not all the way.

Where he shouldn't have lungs anymore, he just felt like his flesh was on fire.

Most of his wounds were ultimately superficial, though he was *well* past the healing cooldown, even at his best. He couldn't see out of one of his eyes, but that was just because blood had dried over the eyelid, sealing it closed. He had at least two bones broken in his arm, given the angle it was at, but it wasn't *that* bad.

His leg and hip were a different story. He was missing a sizable chunk of his pelvis and his entire right leg. A quick [Bandage] stopped the bleeding, and he lay on the floor in utter agony. His spirit was rebelling at the use of magic, but he forced it to cooperate for just a few moments.

His teammates were already around him, either already on the ground or about ready to collapse onto it. Liz got a [Bandage] around her neck, to make up for any potential consequences for her cut throat, but she seemed to be fine. She looked *remarkably* clean compared to the rest of them, but that was simply because she wasn't so wasteful with blood as to leave it *on* her. She stowed her spear and shield, and just dropped to the floor in utter exhaustion, almost hyperventilating as her body calmed down.

What was left of Aster's fur was an ugly shade of clotted red-brown instead of white, and her chest was still bleeding slightly. He could even see a bit of bone sticking out on the side. She was hobbling around on three legs, the last clearly in too much pain to use. She got three different [Bandage]s to keep her going, but none of her wounds seemed to be critical.

Susanne was missing half her leg and half her face, the burns inflicted by the ten-man squad on floor six almost being hidden by the raw flesh currently exposed, where the char fell away. Her nose was gone, and her eye was completely ruined, to the point Matt could see bone around her eye socket. Her sword was outright *missing*, at least for a moment.

After a minute to catch their breath and get used to their bodies once again, Liz staggered to her feet and offered her hand to help Susanne up. The warrior closed her eye in concentration and made herself a peg leg, her sword materializing half-inside of her stump and helping her stay upright.

"Hey, handsome," Liz chuckled as she reached him, bending down to lift Matt upright with her sole arm.

He groaned as he met her hand to pull himself upright, wincing as he was forced to stand. "Thanks."

"Anytime," she pecked him on the cheek, somehow finding a bit of skin not covered in dried blood as she maneuvered herself to take most of his weight, and the two of them staggered toward the exit, when Aster's message interrupted them.

"What is that?"

She still had her anti-illusion mirror frozen to her collar, and she was looking at it in confusion. In the reflection, Matt saw the room they were in, and the pillar at its heart.

Except, instead of a smooth, multifaceted crystal, it now had a keyhole in each facet. Each different, but somehow the same, cheating a mind bending

illusion that made the pillar seem to swim through his eyes, brain, and reality itself.

To say they ‘rushed’ forward would be substantially overstating the speed of their approach. Susanne lurched forward, he and Liz were literally limping over, and Aster was practically crawling.

Still, as they studied the crystal, Liz fumbled around in her storage ring for a key. When she pulled out the key they had found alongside Aster’s mirror, all the way back on the second floor, a key that could unlock anything.

It fit in with a snick.

Matt almost didn’t expect it to unlock when Liz turned the key, a small tendril of blood wrapped around her hand, steadying it, but with a soft click, a small panel opened, and he saw the impossible.

The core of Minkalla.

A torrent of Genesis Energy rushed out of the crystal as it swung open, revealing the impossible at its center.

The item that powered an entire planet to do the impossible.

A white hole.

A *real* white hole.

A part of Matt’s Concept *sang* in vindication, seeing the white hole powering all of Minkalla. He wanted to stay there and just bask in the feeling but as the planet asked them if they’d like to leave, the rest of his body could only give a resigned but wholehearted agreement.

The door snapped shut and with it the torrent of Genesis Energy, and they vanished.

His spirit twisted to open a new innate skill slot within his core, then expanded as Minkalla converted his excess Genesis Energy to Essence and pushed him up to Tier 12. Then there was a moment where he became keenly aware of a massive amount of space surrounding Minkalla. On autopilot he chose his destination and allowed himself to be swept away to the Empire’s moon.

But Matt’s last thought, as the world twisted, was that of the white hole powering the entire planet.

It was real.

Sergio dodged an arc of green blades that tried to slam into him as he fought off a rival team from the Sects before returning their attack with a [Mana Slash] of his own.

His blade was physically useless, which was annoying, but he had spent five hundred years honing his skills for this moment, and Mind Over Matter was a floor they trained and prepared for.

His squad leader Cody called out just as he was forcing the Sect fighter back. “Empire team incoming! Prepare to protect them!”

Sergio resisted the urge to curse.

He had joined the military cadets and proven himself for over a hundred years before getting this opportunity.

Instead of Tiering up to Tier 15 and joining the military, like everyone else in his cohort, he had been offered the opportunity to pause at Tier 14 and instead enter Minkalla. He would be given the best training, skills, and items the Forge would allow, but the corresponding price was to protect the Empire Pathers and other Elites on the final floors, while also trying to kill any of the enemy Pathers he could. Or whatever they were called; they were all Pathers to him.

He had almost declined but eventually decided to do it when he realized that participating in a Minkalla run was the fastest way to enter the special forces of the army.

The Tier 15 Ghost Sturgeons were the premiere special forces unit at Tier 15, and specialized in the lowest rungs of the wars, accomplishing the high risk objectives that couldn’t be left to any other unit. Their prestigious reputation meant they were equally as hard to get into, it was generally by offer only, and you needed to serve in the regular army for at least a thousand

years before you were even a blip on their radar. And all the while, you couldn't advance past Tier 15, or you would be stronger than they allowed.

Minkalla runs were the sole exception.

Anyone who went in and performed well was almost guaranteed an invitation to join their ranks, and that was Sergio's greatest dream.

His grandfather had been a squad leader in the Ghost Sturgeons, and those stories were some of his greatest memories growing up. At the same time, he didn't want his grandfather's legacy overshadowing his application. Even if it would help, which it wouldn't, that would mean he wasn't good enough on his own.

And Sergio was anything but average.

He had fought a dozen other Tier 14s for this opportunity. He was even offered a captain position if he wanted to wait another dozen cycles, but he was too impatient for an otherwise empty title.

Protecting the Tier 12 Elites was half of their job description for a Minkalla run. The other half was killing enemy Elites, but the defensive was to be prioritized over the offensive. That didn't change the fact that they were already in a disadvantageous fight, and needed to kill their opponents before they could easily help the newcomers.

Except, as it turned out, the approaching team wasn't a group of run of the mill fighters. From the way they obliterated the Tier 14 who tried to attack them, he knew they were some of the best in their generation.

Even with all his military-provided training and equipment, he wasn't sure he could kill a fellow Tier 14 as quickly. No one here was pedestrian; safe to assume that no one would have an overwhelming advantage.

No one except the *Tier 12* Elites.

Two Tiers weaker than him, but with higher combat prowess.

This delve into Minkalla was the first time he had really interacted with Pathers, and it was only now that he understood his instructors' warnings and stories. He thought a degree of the mystique was propaganda and exaggeration, but those thoughts were washed away after seeing the Pathers in person.

Most were just slightly better than he was at Tier 12, but a few were monsters in the truest sense.

As the buffing spells washed over his team, they were able to easily finish off their Sect counterparts, and Sergio was thanking his lucky stars that they had made it through unscathed.

The fourth floor Courtly Warfare had created a worst-case scenario, bunching everyone up, and this final floor was more populated than their

instructors had prepared them for.

In this scenario, the manual suggested holding up and gathering more reinforcements before approaching a floor boss, and he was already searching for a defensible position when he got an order from one of the women. “We’re pushing to the exit.”

Sergio felt his stomach drop to his boots, even as Cody responded in the positive along with Janet, who readied up for her team.

Kay, their healer, asked in their joint teams’ channel, “Is this a good idea? Should we persuade them to hold back?”

Johnathan, the strategist from Janet’s team, chimed in with his agreement. “This is going to make us public enemy number one. I recom—”

He stopped his warning as it was already apparent what would happen. Every non-Empire team within the three nearest ruins stopped their fights and turned toward them and the team of four.

Sergio cursed and accepted that he was going to die.

He just wished they hadn’t gotten this floor. Mind Over Matter was not ideal for a melee fighter like himself.

Not that it was bad, as it helped him create a manifestation of his short sword, but he was missing his recently bonded shield and needed to rely on spells, which wasn’t his preferred style.

As they retreated, he came to realize that this team of fighters fit into the description of... well, *monsters*.

The shadow woman with a greatsword cut through enemies like they were training dummies rather than ravening demons seeking bloodshed, and the woman who wielded a spear controlled flames with more finesse than even the best mages he’d seen in training.

But all of that paled in comparison to the armored figure that unleashed spell after spell. Through his spiritual perception, he was able to watch Janet’s team, who held the rear with the only man of the group, and what he guessed was a small wolf.

From the sword the man wielded and the magical armor he wore like a second skin, Sergio learned what it was to be a true blade mage. Spells came to the man as naturally as breathing, and while he had no proof, he suspected the man was just as good with his blade.

As he and his team fought through the waves of rhinos, he started to believe that he would live through this, and when the armored man suggested they split off, he was glad to hear it.

Their mission was to help Elites like this, but ideally, they would be able to help more than one team. Their final merits would depend on how many

people they helped, and the points he earned for this mission would see him set for at least a decade.

As Sergio held up the rear, blocking a few spells that were thrown their way, he nearly dropped his sword when more mana than he had ever felt in one place before gathered up at once. It was like a storm that set the metaphorical hairs on the back of his spiritual neck on end, and it unleashed what could only be described as a cataclysm.

It was pitch-black and glimmered with the colors of an aurora, yet the storm cast an icy blue light over its surroundings for a full *two miles* as it seemingly materialized in a single instant, fading away to an icy wonderland in the moments thereafter. The horde of monsters that had previously been an obstacle were completely gone, replaced by an extensive garden of ice sculptures. Even the boss, at the far end of the attack, seemed wounded.

There was so much Genesis Energy flowing into the man, it was visible as a golden hue, like the sunset on an ice planet between the glimmering bodies of the monsters and the frozen over ruin. The talisman array seemed so strong Sergio saw the very ground start converting into ice like a creeping poison seeping into the planet itself.

Even without a body, he felt his mouth go dry at the sight.

“What the fuck?!?” Janet’s exclamation through the open chat woke them up, and they retreated further from the fight while keeping the exit within their spiritual perceptions.

Once they were far enough away, Kay asked, “How are they going to kill the boss? Another array?”

Travis shook his head. “No way. They’re too close for another one of those.”

As Cynthia countered that they had an ice mage and could be fine, they got their answer.

The armored man raced ahead of the rest of the team and used a channel beam spell to punch a hole into the rhino, before following the hole to tear the monster apart from the inside out.

Cody rubbed his hand across his face at that and gestured with his staff. “I wish he could have done that earlier. Would’ve saved us a lot of effort.”

That piqued everyone’s interest, and the two team leaders looked to each other at the realization.

If they moved in now, they could clean up the attacking teams when the living armor man came out of the monster.

“Move forward to engage.” Cody spoke first, but Janet’s team was already keeping pace with the rest of them.

Cody turned out to be right. At least, partially. When the man came out of the monster's body, he swept his beam across the teams who had chased them, injuring all of them and outright killing a few of the ones with worse defensive spells, though not without taking a few final blows.

As the Empire team vanished, Sergio and his squad engaged with the survivors. Two of the teams were in good enough shape to retreat, but the eight of them were able to kill twelve others and gather their loot.

They didn't linger, though. Tier 12 teams who had seen a boss defeated and one team leave started rushing forward to take down some of the remaining bosses before they were all killed.

The final floor was small, and there was only so much Genesis Energy available to those who didn't want to kill the other teams.

Cody and Janet quickly found a group of their cohorts assisting a Guild team who were trying to stop a Clans cultivator from exiting, and they moved to assist them. Their job wasn't done yet, and they needed to stick around for as long as possible, but Sergio was now far more confident in their chances. With each team that they took out, they tilted the odds into their favor.

It also earned him more contribution points and looked better for his applications to the Ghost Sturgeons.

Long Zhiyuan breathed out as he stepped into the distortion that would take him to the final level of this floor.

Armed with his six new abilities stemming from his First Revelation, he felt like a new man.

Fighting his copy, while proving that he was finally learning how this trial world worked, hadn't been an easy task. But he persevered with only a few injuries that were no longer a concern now that he had reached this floor.

Flexing his hands, or rather his *claws*, he smiled.

One last hunt.

He appeared in a ruin that seemed to be a winter forest, but he didn't worry, as he felt the teams around him.

Once he identified the nearest teams, he moved.

This would have been easier with his cloak, but he could do without its concealment.

Gliding over the snow, he came up to a team of Tier 14s from the Monster Collective that were fighting a team of Tier 12s from the Federation, and he didn't hesitate to rip out the Monster Collective healer's throat.

Instead of fighting with his claws, he started casting techniques. [Grasp of the Storm-Tiger] paired exceptionally well with [Claw From the Beyond], which sent fingers of lightning out to strike at both opposing teams.

His follow up attack surprised the Federation team and burnt a hole through a ghostly looking man.

He cast [Tribulation of the First Heaven] and danced inside the falling flames while his lightning took out the others with flashes of his claws.

After picking up their loot and looking for the rings that stored Genesis Energy, Long Zhiyuan moved to find another few teams to kill for the final bits necessary for the exit challenge, when he saw a message go out through the Sects' [Spiritual Self].

A call for assistance by Young Mistress Meteor Fall to any and all Sect cultivators on this floor.

Long Zhiyuan had no intentions to help the arrogant Young Mistress, but he knew an opportunity when he saw one. Holding back and not responding to the summons, he waited and watched as she made a dash for a ruin's boss.

Instead of fighting for a position with her, he joined her protectors, wielding a staff and pretending to be an average mage from a low Tier Sect. While they fought their way through a blockade of the other Great Powers, he focused on blending into the background as much as possible.

With most of his Genesis Energy in his ring, he was just a faceless lackey among the dozens she had gathered.

As he pretended to help, he put all of his clones into a last minute fight against the Young Mistress, while his [Heavenly All Seeing Eye] watched and picked up as much information as he could from her battle.

Being so close, he was able to gather a lot of information about her that he had otherwise missed, and even deduced a few possible finishing moves she might have used based on what he knew of her Sects techniques and her current fighting styles.

The closer they got, the more resistance they encountered until Young Mistress Meteor Fall cast her Sect's signature technique, summoning a rain of fire and earth onto her enemies.

That broke them, and most that survived the initial bombardment retreated, but Young Mistress Meteor Fall simply ordered her lackeys forward to finish killing the monsters and boss of the ruin.

She pretended to be out of mana, but [Heavenly All Seeing Eye] noticed the potion she was drinking was nothing more than colored water. It had no essence.

A sneaky trap, but someone still fell for it and tried to ambush her from the rear.

A summoner seemed to appear in the distance for a moment, inside one of his monsters. He materialized just long enough for a hidden monster to slash out at the Young Mistress. It might have worked, but she had a white-hot ball of fire ready for such an occurrence, and obliterated the ambushers' summons before quickly sending a flurry of thumb-sized fireballs at the man's last known position.

Keeping up his act, Long Zhiyuan joined with everyone else who attacked the same area, but there was no rush of Genesis Energy, signifying the ambusher wasn't dead yet.

[Heavenly All Seeing Eye] hadn't gotten much time to analyze the man, but Long Zhiyuan believed that the summoner wouldn't stick around. He understood ambush predators better than anyone, and they rarely tried twice when there was easier prey around.

At least, he wouldn't stick around.

Young Mistress Meteor Fall must not have believed he would try again either, as she ordered the lackeys to push forward, and Long Zhiyuan kept up his [Heavenly All Seeing Eye] and his ruse.

Right when the giant darkness crow boss was about to die, Young Mistress Meteor Fall stepped in and finished it off, taking the Genesis Energy for herself.

While that was her right as a Young Mistress, it angered the others, who murmured in distress. Meteor Fall had more than enough Genesis Energy, and it would have been the political play to share the final boss's reward.

At least, it would have been if she intended to let any of them live, which she did not.

As she once more cast her Sect's inheritance technique, Long Zhiyuan fell and pretended to die along with everyone else.

He knew Young Masters and Mistresses enough to know few would share glory during such a moment so he was prepared for the possibility. As some subtle shifts in her mana indicated her betrayal slightly ahead of time he positioned himself next to a larger woman who he had been able to use as cover from the bombardment.

Using [The Healing Stream Which Washes Wounds Away] with just a trickle of mana to stop his heart from pumping any blood in his false mind-body, he camouflaged himself among the other bodies, waiting for his opportunity .

Using a skill was a risk, but he suspected Young Mistress Meteor Fall had her own copy of [Heavenly All Seeing Eye], and it might notice any irregularities in his mental body.

When she came over to start gathering their items, Long Zhiyuan struck one devastating blow.

As his claw reached out, he was already casting [Flames And Wind of The Dancing Stars] to speed himself up, and he sacrificed his left hand to grab her fist as it glowed white with flames.

She tried to summon something out of her spiritual ring, but with a flex of his First Revelation, he demanded the world stay as it was, preventing her from opening the connection to the pocket space.

Young Mistress Meteor Fall didn't seem surprised, and from her mouth, another ball of flames appeared and grew, but Long Zhiyuan was already moving.

His right hand, which he had feinted toward her more vulnerable neck, slammed into her jaw. As the technique went off, her head vanished in an explosion of heat and colors.

Genesis Energy rushed into Long Zhiyuan, and he only paused to claim treasures from Young Mistress Meteor Fall and all the cultivators she had killed, but not yet looted.

Stepping into the final distortion, Long Zhiyuan smiled.

A successful Minkalla run.

He had been forged anew.

The Long Zhiyuan who had entered would be nothing but a bug to be stepped on to his current self.

And he had even managed to kill Young Mistress Meteor Fall, taking all the riches of a Heaven's chosen. Even just a brief glimpse showed her spatial ring was packed with natural treasures, potions, talismans, technique shards, technique manuals from dozens of Sects, and finally, beautifully crafted weapons and armor.

He just needed to leverage these new gains into power, but he had no question in his ability to do so.

His First Revelation abounded with new power, and whatever reward this final floor may be, he would master it just as surely as all else he had claimed within this place. It would take time to consolidate his might, but his clones would aid him immensely in that matter.

As he started the final test, his mind was on his future.

There were so many things he needed to do.

Claude slunk through the shadows of this floor to the best of his abilities.

Mind Over Matter was weird at the best of times, but the body he manifested was especially odd.

He had six arms, and his entire body was covered with eyes.

Not that they did anything, but it looked eerie when he opened them. They certainly were an odd representation of his Talent, for that was the only thing it could be. It sure wasn't from his life of seeing with his eyes.

But this floor wasn't one he was looking for a fight on.

He had found a challenge room hidden at the top of a waterfall on the second level of this floor, and subsequently had all the Genesis Energy he needed to exit Minkalla with the innate skill slot and to accept the floor challenge.

'Know Yourself' wasn't a fun challenge, but self-reflection had never been a difficulty for Claude.

While he could fight his way through this floor, he would rather avoid the fights and sneak his way through an empty ruin. From everything he saw, there were two ruins that had already been cleared, but in front of each one, there was a collection of teams from each Great Power that insisted on defending them.

He didn't need to take those paths, so he instead floated at his best speed to a ruin with an Empire and Guild team.

A quick message to them got them to hold off the others long enough for him to slip through. Those two teams quickly were chased off, and a Sect team along with a Federation team tried to chase him down, but he was already ahead of them. A few quick uses of his Talent ensured that they got in each other's way more than his own.

It was almost anticlimactic as he passed into the ruin's distortion and began his final challenge.

He had expected something to go wrong, or someone to ambush him at the last minute.

Claude just took it as proof that good deeds were repaid in kind by the realm.

Carlos followed his team as they inspected the icy ground where they found what remained of Delta team. Or, what they believed was Delta team. The nine bodies were gone, eaten by the planet, but they had found some telltale signs of Diana's Talent in the twisted foliage that littered the ground in the prodding ruins.

Breaking the ice was not easy. It seemed like it had turned into a part of the planet itself, and they only did so to see if anything was left of their companions, but they found nothing.

No one said anything while they worked by mutual unspoken agreement.

Charlie was in an awful mood and had almost come to blows with Brett in the last safe room, only being held back by Alexi.

They were all angry at having to kill Cecil, and Carlos wondered if the others felt the same way he did.

Mother had warned them of the dangers of the False Truths challenge, where Minkalla would seek to sway them from their course with lies and slander. But some portion of what he had experienced within the lives rang true, though distorted. In the wake of Cecil's death, Carlos had reflected upon a faint nagging feeling he had become aware of sometime during this trial. Thoughts which had never occurred to him before came just a bit too freely, though it certainly had not *felt* akin to an external force attempting to poison his mind.

It was more like a stiff breeze was stirring up dust and debris, returning long-forgotten and neglected thoughts to swirl around his mind. Little actions which their Loving Mother had taken, that at the time had seemed so loving, now were less clear. He had a life within the Conglomerate of Guilds and had possessed loving parents who acted in *no* way akin to Mother. They were softer, more present, and his mind had felt clear and free in a way he wasn't used to, but he did recognize it as similar to what he felt within the depths of this metal monstrosity.

Lies.

The word echoed through his mind. There was a lie *somewhere*, he knew. There was some falsehood existing within him, but he couldn't simply ask Mother what the truth was. Life was simple, it was enjoyable when he could simply ask and receive Truth. But Mother had told them that Minkalla hated them, that it would try to rip them from her, that it was a tool of the Evil Empire meant to ruin them and their own citizens, simply because they hated everyone. But Minkalla seemed so indifferent. Why would it grant them such gifts if it hated them?

It seemed more *indifferent* than malicious, and why would it lie?

And if Minkalla was not lying, there was only one other option.

But why would Mother lie?

He did not know the answer to that. Mother had told them that they couldn't trust what Minkalla said because it would lie, and she would know. She knew everything. He would need to ask her, once they had left. She

certainly had not lied, and if she *had* lied, then there was a good reason for it. Some truth that they weren't ready to hear yet.

Mother was safe. Mother could be trusted.

The entire Realm sought to rip them from her grasp, just like she had warned, but she would always be there for them. So then, why did *Charlie* act to rip one of Mother's children from her?

Was it truly so awful to doubt?

Seeing what happened to Cecil, he had his answer.

Yes, yes it was.

Doubt was how lies seeped in. Lies could poison them all, if they had infiltrated their hearts. And that was deadly.

But his heart was *full* of doubt, especially doubt in *Mother*. That wasn't natural; it had to be some kind of poison...but he didn't want to die. Or perhaps, it would be for the best?

To die in faith was better than to live in doubt, but what if he died in doubt? Why had Charlie consigned Cecil to death, to die *in doubt*? They should have brought him out to be treated by Mother, instead of silencing him before anyone else could hear about his questions. But given the effects his few words were having on Carlos, perhaps that *was* for the best?

Carlos could not voice his doubt because to do so would be suicide, and death while in doubt was the worst way to die. Worse, it might cause some of *his* brothers and sisters to doubt, and consign them to the same, terrible fate he would suffer. Could he truly stand before Mother with such doubt in his heart, and watch her face fall as she saw him shrouded in such darkness?

But! If he settled his doubt *before* he saw Mother again, then she would welcome him once more.

That was what allowed his traitorous mind to wander into dangerous territory. All he needed to do was to investigate his doubt, learn of its falsehood, then his faith would be strong once more. Mother may be disappointed to learn that he needed to see the truth with his own eyes, but she would understand.

She was *Mother*.

She was *reliable*.

She was *safe*.

When he returned to her, she would welcome him once again. Minkalla had shown him a paradise in the Guilds, and once he saw the lies that the planet carried for himself, he could be firm in his heart once again.

He had not wanted to doubt, but the life he had seen had forced him to.

From the false life, Carlos now knew there were no Castes that one would be sorted into upon Awakening within the Guilds, but Mother's teaching always described it as awful and purposelessly chaotic.

He believed that before the alternate life, but now... He was not so sure. From what he had seen, it was a place for True Heroes to rise, to literally soar above the streets as an example for all, paragons of virtue and hope that defended the common man from those Villains who would prey upon them.

To be a Hero or a Villain was the prerogative of the individual, which made no sense, and a small part of him wished to see it for himself. Even after living through it, he was not sure if he understood how it worked. With no assortment upon Awakening, surely the individual's Talent would go to waste?

None of it made any sense.

A Talent was the truest expression of the self, surely life would be chaotic beyond all belief without a place in which to utilize it, certainly beyond the form of the beautiful, self-woven tapestry Minkalla had soothingly whispered to him. He would see it for himself, then find some way to return to the Federation's loving order, or he would die.

His siblings would never understand, though. If they heard that he wished to see the Guilds, they would see it as a firmer betrayal than anything Cecil had done, and he had no wish to die in doubt.

If he died upon seeing the truth, and knowing with certainty that Mother was right, he would rest easy. If he was killed within seconds of appearing within the Guilds, he would die in peace, he would die in *faith*, and that was better than dying in doubt.

So, he said nothing, as they tore their way through the final floor.

Carlos fought as hard as he could as they beat their way through one of the final ruins that still had a boss with the other teams.

As the three teams entered the safe room, Carlos felt his heart racing. He would likely die here, but at least it would be in faith upon confirming Mother's wisdom, and to serve Mother, he would happily die. She would be sad that she lost another child, and that she would never know the true depths of his devotion.

Would she weep, that doubt in him had led to his demise? Or would she hold it within her heart and be strong for his siblings? His mental finger shook, not because of the pain of his runes or his chosen skill settling deep within his spirit, but because he still wished that he did not have to die.

His decision settled itself as his mental finger fell seemingly on its own accord.

Better death than doubt, to look Mother in the eye with so much as a shred of disbelief in his heart.

As he appeared on a street of the Guild moon, he awaited death.

It felt like an eternity but was less than a heartbeat before he vanished from the street and into an office.

A woman in blue and white armor and matching cape that contrasted with her dark skin sat across from him and gazed at him with piercing golden eyes that sat behind a small mask shaped like two diamonds stuck together.

He...he *knew* her.

That shouldn't be possible with Minkalla's lies of other lives.

But maybe Minkalla had not lied?

He knew her.

Madam Skyfist. Her Guild, the Pillars, were a Tier 35 guild with the motto, "We will hold up the sky" because of their dedication to the Guilds and their protection of the citizens under them... if Minkalla had been telling the truth.

"Why are you here, little Feddy? Did your finger slip?" She spoke in the Guild's language, but he understood most of it, despite the life only being a reflection.

"I-I wish to see the truth. Mother told me of the evils of the Realm, but in a moment of weakness, I doubted her. I do not wish to die with doubt in my heart, so all that I ask of you is that before you kill me, I may see the truth. Let me see your lies."

He expected to be denied, and that he would fail, having his doubt remain even as he was snuffed out, but instead Madam Skyfist's face softened.

"What is your name, child?"

"Carlos. I-I—" Before he could finish what he was about to say, Madam Skyfist interrupted him.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Carlos. I am Skyfist, and I will show you the truth you so crave. You are not the first to have come from the Federation, nor do I expect you to be the last. I will warn you, you will be kept under surveillance, but you will see whatever you wish to see. We have some of your former compatriots here on this moon who defected in previous cycles, they will be happy to answer every question you have so that you may indeed learn the truth. We'll even return you to the Federation if you so desire, within reason. We don't permit spies, but we *do* believe in choice."

Carlos felt confused. This was...this was *exactly* how he would have expected her to act from Minkalla's lies. Were...were they *not* lies?

A spasm of pain shot through him, and he collapsed to the ground. Madam Skyfist seemed to teleport to his side and laid her hand on his shoulder. She

frowned, but for the first time Carlos could remember, his bones *stopped hurting*.

“Well now,” she mused. “This is interesting.”

Carlos’ breath caught in his throat. Was she about to kill him? Was she going to—

“Child. We need to get you to a hospital.”

Jullian entered the final level of the final floor and strolled through the destroyed landscapes, taking it all in.

While others had fought desperately, he had a clean path ready to walk.

As he floated through the passages, he contemplated that idea.

Merchants weren’t meant to fight directly, but they could benefit from war. At least, if they were still alive to take advantage of the situation and hadn’t been robbed of all their possessions by someone with a stronger fist.

He had traded goods for Genesis Energy on each floor’s safe area on his journey to the seventh floor, and he had a new appreciation of what the fighters went through to make it this far.

Jullian knew he couldn’t have fought his way through these monster infested halls. His battlefields were clean, well-lit rooms, large offices, and meetings full of fake smiles.

When he entered the final distortion, he once more denied the planet in its prompt to take its challenge and walked straight to the central pillar.

Touching its smooth surface, he felt the planet ask him which exit reward he wanted, and without hesitating, he chose the seventh floor reward and had his AI moved into his newly opened skill slot. It hurt beyond words, but he only screamed for a little while, and had composed himself when he chose to exit onto the Corporations’ moon. The auctions were another place he could make a killing, and he still needed to check in on all the Tier 14s he had helped on the proceeding floors.

Each would need a personal message congratulating them for their successful reaching of Tier 15, which would serve as a reminder they needed to start paying him.

So much work to do, and so little time.

Emmanuel sighed in relief as he arrived back to the capital and saw everything was still in one piece.

After getting away with Hastor's upgraded Talents, he'd had a looming sense that something bad had happened to the Empire while he was gone, and that feeling of dread only intensified as he got closer to his capital planet.

He had half expected to see the burning rubble of his Tier 47 world, but everything was fine.

As his spiritual perception invaded the planet's real space, he swept it across the entire star system and felt around for everything and anything.

There were a few bands of criminals noteworthy enough for him to notify local law enforcement, a few cases of domestic abuse, and a single instance of someone attacking down Tiers. Everything was normal.

Letting out the breath he had been holding, he swapped his Talents and performed a series of quick teleports to reach the bright light that was the Tier 47 system in chaotic space.

He chose to enter real space in his private palace and spent a few moments with his wife before they headed off to the meeting that he had arranged on his way back.

He needed reports from his royals and to share his own findings; both his new Talent set and the possibilities it presented for gaining Talents mid-ascension, as well as what he'd learned from just visiting the Republic's capital. That Hastor had reached Tier 51 and formed his Authority was interesting from a theoretical point of view—Aiden would likely take the mere suggestion of someone developing their Domain so far as a personal challenge—but, *thankfully*, it was irrelevant to the upcoming wars.

Emmanuel had some reports, but relying on foreign relay systems was just *begging* for messages to be intercepted, so he refrained from transmitting anything that wasn't public knowledge.

Entering the meeting room, he found his royals chatting amongst themselves.

Leon was trying to reignite a poker game, if his mirrored sunglasses were any indication, while Frederic looked disgruntled and was refusing outright. A strong indication that Leon had swindled him out of something by creating fake reflections on the glasses.

Everyone fell for that at least once. Usually more than once.

Even once the trick was known, Leon sometimes let the real reflections through and other times changed them, meaning no one could tell when he was showing his true cards, or when he was baiting someone into a trap.

Mara was chatting with Harper and Rusty while Tur'stal was off to the side, silently waiting with a bottle of wine still mostly full.

As Emmanuel and Carissa entered the room, everyone stopped their conversations and turned to him with varying levels of inquiring looks.

Taking the head seat, he gestured to everyone else to sit down and said, "I'm back. How much of the Empire burned down while I was away?"

It was half a joke, but his question was still serious.

Carissa rolled her eyes and interjected, "Let's at least order our food now, so we can get an intermission in the debrief."

Emmanuel wasn't particularly hungry, but agreed nonetheless, as these meetings did tend to drag on, and a break in the middle would be good for general morale.

After everyone had placed their orders with the head chef, Emmanuel turned to Mara and Leon. "What is the general state of the Empire since I left?"

Mara shook her head slightly. "Nothing major has changed. The same general political squabbles, but nothing that breached a duke-level alert."

Hearing that, Emmanuel took a deep breath and let out most of the stress he had been holding in.

If nothing else, that single bit of news meant the rest of the meeting would be acceptable.

Looking to Leon, the storm mage nodded as he added. "On the outward focus of the Empire, there have been new expansion requests submitted by an Earl Kale Liko and Viscountess Nicolosia de Fiorino, respectively, to sectors seventy nine and three hundred sixteen, to start their own vassal kingdoms. I gave them tentative approval for the moves, as neither has any major skeletons in their closets."

Getting Emmanuel's nod that he understood, Leon continued. "On the topic of expansion, the integration of The Alliance of Allied Queens has begun, and they are cooperating with all of the new changes in the integration process without a fuss. The head of state, Queen Diana, has indicated she wishes to step down along with most of her cohort, and allow another generation to take over the integrated high dukedom. As that isn't an unusual request, it was approved with the understanding the integration doesn't run into any major roadblocks. The Wisemar Kingdom has also officially finished its integration, and the rewards were sent out to Vespian in accordance with his Kingdom's progress and size. No complaints or hidden dangers were found in the Kingdom from internal or external sources."

Emmanuel nodded and mentally noted that he needed to find some time to go tour the newest duchy in the Empire, as a welcoming gesture, in the next dozen or so years. It would help solidify the people's image as being truly part of the Empire proper and help smooth any ruffles that might crop up in the coming generations.

Nothing Leon said surprised him, though, and he turned to Rusty, who started telling him about the situation with the Empire's military.

"As you ordered before you left, we have increased recruitment of Tier 15 through Tier 25s by one percent, bringing in another fifty million recruits. We have also increased the militia forces in case of hostile takeovers of inhabited planets by five percent along the borders. Speaking of the outer planets, the battlefield planets out in the deeper parts of those systems have all been reinforced or otherwise built up in preparations for the upcoming war."

Rusty looked up, catching Emmanuel's eye as he continued. "That has put a strain on the military budget, and we will need an influx of funds if you wish to carry out the rest of the plans we talked about. While our predictions were generally accurate, there has been an uptick in the price of military goods with the threat of war looming, pushing out the budget higher than anticipated sooner than we allocated for."

Emmanuel narrowed his eyes for a moment and swapped to his father's Tier 50 Talent, quickly rifling through time, checking for any outside interference.

It was easy to spot.

Entire swaths of the history in regard to civilian arms and armor providers had included purchase orders from higher Tier groups and individuals who were nothing more than frontmen for the other Great Powers.

He generally was able to predict such moves on the side of the enemy, but being so far away for so long, they were able to plan and enact such tactics

before he could prevent them as usual.

Before he burned through a third of his mana pool checking the past, he had his AI list out the actors who had been pawns and the companies that had been taken advantage of before sending all of that to Harper and Rusty.

The former would look into the covert sides of the purchase order and see what information they could ferret out, along with looking into the companies not approached. They could be loyalists, and thus not to be approached, or they might be deep cover agents. To figure out where they lay, everyone needed to be looked into.

His father's Talent was good, but it wasn't perfect, and it burned through more mana the more it tried to predict, or the higher the Tier of the target.

It was also good training for Harper's agents, which was a plus.

Rusty, on the other hand, could use this information and intercept some of the goods that would be sent out and eventually leave the Empire's borders. There was no reason to arm their enemies, after all.

Getting the packet of information, Rusty continued. "Otherwise, our combat capabilities are excellent in the Tier 26 through Tier 35 range. With Duke Waters acting as the tip of the spear, he has managed to decimate a number of Sect and Republic military installations along the border during his current—" Rusty paused as he searched for a word. "Meander."

Hearing that Duke Waters was still out and about, Emmanuel frowned. He had told Rusty to rein him in before he left, but apparently, the battle junkie was ignoring orders to extend his little vacation to the battlefield.

Ascenders were a special breed, and he now understood his father's complaints about Lila. They were your greatest asset, but by their very nature had minds and wills of their own, even if they didn't outright do as they pleased.

They were less soldiers to be ordered about and more cats to be herded.

Sending a personal message to the duke, he ordered him back, and to sweeten the pot, he hinted at the fact he'd learned some things about the stage of Domains beyond the Aspect.

That, if nothing else, would get the man running back.

If it *didn't* work, he would go get the man himself before sticking Waters on terraforming duty, specifically in making worlds with shallow seas. Emmanuel personally liked terraforming, it was good, honest work, but Waters hated it, and preventing him from making oceans deeper than a mile would irritate him like nothing else.

"I've handled the duke. He should be heading back once he gets my message. What else do you have to report?"

“Beyond the normal? Only one thing of note. Lieutenant Colonel Darrow has indicated his desire to move beyond the Tier 15 battlefields. He has stated he is willing to stay at that Tier for the upcoming war but wants to progress both in Tier and rank once the war is over.”

That caused Emmanuel to pause as he considered the implications.

Lieutenant Colonel Darrow was a prodigy by any measure and, better yet, unquestionably loyal to the Empire.

The man had started as a Tier 10 cadet and had proven himself a better than average combatant, a genius tactician, and formidable leader, culminating in a battle wherein his battalion was cut off from reinforcements during a pincer maneuver in the last war.

After a second, devastating battle where most of the senior leadership was lost or seriously wounded, the then-sergeant Darrow led the men deeper into Federation land before escaping detection and vanishing. That was until the battalion attacked the rear of the Tier 15 siege of a Tier 9 transit world that would have opened avenues deeper into the Empire.

When the war ended, Sergeant Darrow had requested and been granted a transition to the special forces, where he only honed his skills and leadership abilities as he decided to become an officer instead of staying enlisted.

Once he had reached the rank of Captain and the limit of growth he could reasonably see in the special forces, he requested a transfer back to the regular troops along with a promotion to Major.

Now, as a Lieutenant Colonel, he was the single best battlefield commander in the low Tier bracket of the wars, with a particular gift for leveraging even mundane talent to its utmost. He preferred small-unit command but could certainly lead larger groups. He just would reassign troops in his squads until each one had a given specialty when possible, giving him a wide array of specialized tools to call upon.

He hadn't progressed in Tier, but his experience meant he was an easy solution to any battlefield in the Tier 15 through Tier 20 range.

Darrow had been content with his Tier for longer than average and had more than earned his Tier up to 35 if he so wished, but Emmanuel had another idea.

In the end, he wouldn't force the man if he wished to walk another path.

“Has the good Lieutenant Colonel indicated which rank he wishes to advance to?”

Rusty immediately answered, “He requested to Tier up to at least Tier 20, but from the reports of Brigadier General Greene sent up, she believes he had his eye on the leadership of Tier 25 Corpse Harvesters.”

Digesting that, Emmanuel ran the simulations with a set of Talents and his AI. Nothing came out that seemed wrong, so he tapped the table.

“Colonel Jackson will be transferring out of the Corpse Harvesters in a decade, in preparation for the war. Let Lieutenant Colonel Darrow know the position is his, along with the accompanying promotion if he so wishes. But—”

Emmanuel thought over his idea once more before mentally shrugging.

“Team Zero could use a commander, and I think he’ll be capable of filling the role. Read him in as needed and offer him the position.”

Rusty nodded, “Project Breach it is, then. I...”

The attention of the room shifted to Carissa.

Emmanuel did not like that look and glared at his wife. She wasn’t a royal, but he had wanted to take the Path out of the hands of the military and bring it under his more direct control, so he had given her a position where the Tribunal reported directly to her.

Everyone looking at her meant that there was something wrong with his Path.

“There *may* have been a few surprises that have come up since you left. Would you like to hear about them, honey dearest who I love so much?”

“*Clearly*, there is something I need to know, *so yes*.”

Carissa just smiled, as though surprises were ever a good thing.

“Light and Shadow reached Tier 24 ahead of our estimations, and both have accepted orders to not progress before we give the go ahead. With Intent, they are ready to complete the Path in as little as a decade.”

Emmanuel took in the report and tried not to brace for the bad news. The two of them were progressing better than expected, but that wouldn’t be why Rusty looked at Carissa.

“Good. Hold them there and rotate them back on counter-espionage duty for the next five years or so. I want to postpone their finishing the Path a little. That will be the *casus belli* the other Great Powers will use. We can’t push it back too far, or they’ll declare anyway, but I’d like to squeeze an extra decade or two out of them if we can.”

Carissa continued, “Stick and Stone stepped off The Path as predicted and are still adapting to full support. I hear they’re taking to their preparatory training like a leviathan to water, but that’s more Rusty’s thing. Supports that strong are rare, after all.”

At Rusty’s confirming nod, Carissa moved on. “Other Pathers are acting within our predictions, there were a couple of promising Tier 5s who crossed my desk, but nothing too out of the ordinary. Bloom stepped off before reaching Tier 22 but declined all offered positions.”

She then paused and tapped her fingers on her leg in a way that caused Emmanuel's blood pressure to skyrocket. It meant she was contemplating, and there should be nothing to think about in this situation.

"Oh, yes. I almost forgot. The only other thing of note to report is that Quill, Torch, their bond, and Queen have emerged from Minkalla as Tier 11s after a full run."

Emmanuel slowly closed his fist as he resisted the urge to slap the table in front of him to display his anger.

It would be an unbecoming display for an emperor, even if he was only in the presence of people he considered friends, and it would also destroy the table, which would be annoying. Their dinner was coming soon.

Looking across all his royals, he asked with a flat voice, "Explain."

Mara was the first to speak up. "Luna said they had a good chance of making it through at Tier 11, and at worst, they would have to Tier up to Tier 12. With Queen assisting them, their odds went up to eighty two percent."

Leon added with a tap on the table, "And they succeeded in proving her correct and showing that they are the best of the upcoming generation. You know you would have approved the decision with that information."

They were right, of course. He would *certainly* be having words with the meddling cat, but he knew that he would have agreed. And even if he hadn't, he wouldn't *truly* have ever stopped them from entering The Forge. They would absolutely crave the rewards it could provide, and he wouldn't deny them their request.

He was *not* a tyrant and would never become one.

Minkalla was simply an aggravating entity beyond even *his* reach, no matter what Talents he tried to use. But even if knowing of their entry would bring nothing but anxiety, he would at least be forewarned, which was better than learning about it after the fact.

Emmanuel cooled his simmering anger. He trusted his wife and his friends to make the right decision, but *sometimes* letting go of control like that could be hard. To help take his mind off it, he checked what cycle they'd gotten for their effort.

A starting Eternal Darkness, then Genesis Cultivation, Back to Basics, Courtly Warfare, Taxing Skills, then finishing out with Folded Reflections and Mind Over Matter.

It was certainly a good set, Genesis Cultivation and Back to Basics in particular caught his eye, and two Concept-related floors at the end provided a solid basis for their future development.

Besides, he couldn't truly be too hard on them for attempting Minkalla at Tier 11, not without being a hypocrite. But that was how he *knew exactly* how dangerous it was to do so...

Releasing his breath, Emmanuel listened as Carissa broke down the highlights of the two teams' merged delve.

Honestly, he was impressed with what they accomplished, and filed away the information about a secret way to gather Genesis Energy in the final floor.

That had several uses, most notably giving a team a massive boost into their next Tier, but his wife and The Seven knew their job well enough that he didn't need to tell them how to leverage that information in the future.

"Very well. That is fantastic news. I wish I could have been informed, but it would have presented a security risk and would have been impractical besides." If nothing else, Emmanuel could admit when others had made the right call.

As Carissa continued talking about the rest of the Pathers they were watching, Emmanuel swapped to his split mind Talent to best keep track of their longer reaching plans.

She eventually finished her report, and Emmanuel turned back to Rusty. "Back to Lieutenant Colonel Darrow. Do you believe he'll accept command of Team Zero?"

Rusty snorted. "The man's a brilliant tactician, loves leveraging unique resources to their fullest potential, and is hoping to expand the scope of his work. We so much as *mention* Project Breach to him, and even you couldn't pry the offer from his cold, dead hands."

Emmanuel mentally jotted that worry off his checklist. Lieutenant Colonel Darrow would do fine, and they just needed to ensure he had the people to complete their missions.

He was moving on to Harper when Rusty kept speaking, "To continue with the good news, Project Ironvine has had a major breakthrough recently."

Emmanuel felt his mood sour slightly once more.

Project Ironvine was a disaster he had inherited from his father.

He would have never allowed such a project to be greenlit in the first place, but it was close to showing success every time he was going to order funding halted toward it.

The idea was simple. Recreate a growth item that they could give to anyone.

In practice, their creations were more akin to a parasite. Modeled loosely off plant-virus hybrids that populated a few rifts, they would infect and bind to a host's body and spirit, growing with and *theoretically* strengthening their

sybiote. In practice, most of the early iterations inflicted madness not dissimilar to that which rift monsters experienced, and those few which didn't left their hosts more crippled than strengthened.

"We had a breakthrough using Razorback Ankylosaurus as the base. There's some interaction with the host that we don't fully understand, which limits the normal side effects to something manageable without a decrease in power. To make a long story short, the team is requesting to move to full human testing within the next twenty years, and I believe it's the right call."

Emmanuel didn't like it, but a new breakthrough was what they needed to deal with the upcoming wars.

At his nod, Rusty continued, "We even have a volunteer. Corporal Evelyn Nore. Corporal Nore's Talents inflict physical harm in place of using mana but compensates with an increased effectiveness of healing cast upon her, including a lessened cooldown. We believe she would be the best test subject. She is used to dealing with immense amounts of pain and heals better than most. In the worst case, we believe she can survive the forceful removal of the parasite."

"Ensure Corporal Nore knows *all* risks involved before testing, but otherwise, you have approval to move ahead. Keep me informed with all news about the project going forward."

At Rusty's confirmation, Emmanuel turned to Harper. "How are our spies doing, and what are the other Great Powers doing?"

"We have caught a swell in anti-monarchy sentiments along with a number of terrorist cells being funded by the other Great Powers. So far, we have managed to catch a number of them, but I'm sure some have slipped through. For now, though, everything is stable internally. Externally, I have been able to plant a few teams of spies in the Sects and turn a few others. Our real victory was your talk with First Shepherd Toby. We've had a few inquiries about the Dragon blood, and talks about an official defensive pact are looking promising for after the war. If we are more generous, I believe we might be able to sway the Monster Collective to join the war, but the price they are asking is exorbitant at best. I think it would be better to ensure their neutrality in the upcoming war, and then tie us together with more benefits once we have shown we are able to weather the storm. But before the war we suspect will happen after this one."

Emmanuel thought over what Harper said and finally asked, "What about the Corporations? Managing Director JR seemed open to a trade when I mentioned it."

Harper shrugged one shoulder. “So far, all of my inquiries have been like throwing a stone into a well. I suspect the other side has upped the benefits to a degree he simply can’t say no to. I suggest that we save the blood to either get them out of the war early if we are losing or use it to tie them to us going forward once we win.”

After Harper went over a few reports about various other spies and information that their people gathered, Emmanuel moved on to Frederic.

“Anything interesting in the academies?”

Frederic shook his head. “Not since you left.”

Hearing that he nodded and moved on. “And how is the economy?”

His newest royal was more formal as he reported this time. “Your majesty, we have had an upsurge in economic spending, but our budget is tight with the war looming over us. Once we start diverting more resources to the front lines, the economy will take a downward turn, and I don’t see how we can afford to keep up a number of the social services we provide, such as Tiering up planets to Tier 5. That is the largest expense that we can cut without too much pushback, as long as it is couched as a temporary war measure. There are a number of other things we could cut, but their cost benefit ratio isn’t nearly as high as that particular case.”

After they discussed a few other matters, Frederic looked to Harper, who asked, “There is also another topic that I would like to bring up, your Majesty. What of the [Bandage] rifts? We have been approached by all of the other Great Powers with the desire to buy sets of five hundred [Bandage] skill shards for their own attempts at making a rift that produces it on their own. The concessions they are offering are generous to say the least. Frederic and I believe there are some good political and economical maneuvers possible through brokering some agreements.”

Emmanuel thought that over before answering, “I had a few ideas in mind, but nothing quite serious yet. I was going to give the green light to create a few more spread throughout the Empire. I’d like to keep those to ourselves for the meantime, though.”

As he paused to think, Frederic had a response ready. “It seems like a wise decision, your Majesty. We could always open up trades *after* the war.”

Emmanuel simply nodded. He knew the situation of the economy better than anyone, and what Frederic said fell in line with what he knew and had planned before.

While he suspected the man had ideas to remove more of what he would call ‘frivolous spending’, his mind went in another direction.

“I have other ideas about trade, but first, I’d like to hear from Tur’sstal. How is the home front?”

Tur’sstal tapped her wine glass. “Well, all things considered. We have added another eight point two trillion people to the Empire in the last decade, along with forty two Tier 5 and below planets. Most of that population boom has been in low Tier planets, but we’ve also caught and settled two Tier 20 or higher planets in various kingdoms. People are flocking toward the frontiers with the benefits and tax breaks we have been offering, but we need to be careful that we don’t have any splinter cultures popping up. I suggest we slow the benefits to a degree, using the war as our reasoning, and focus on digesting what we have gained for the next thousand years or so. That will ensure our expansion doesn’t become a hidden danger, with so many mortals being born away from firmer central governance.”

Emmanuel was about to agree when their dinner came in, and they put a pause on the work talk for the duration.

Conversations that avoided work topics were easy with Mara and Leon there, even more so thanks to their being prouder than peacocks about their children’s achievements in Minkalla. If someone was only listening to this conversation, they would have believed Mara and Leon had been the ones delving into Minkalla with how they retold the stories. Or rather, restating their stories as they started to create illusions to play out the more dramatic moments.

Eventually, once the conversation reached the end of their delve and the plates were cleared, they returned to business.

“Tur’sstal, get me a plan with your suggestions for consolidating our recent gains and ensuring no splinter cultures appear in the meantime, while also dealing with the war. We can’t allow it to distract us from our internals.”

Taking a deep breath, he mentioned his biggest gamble.

“How is the Farm?”

Tur’sstal jerked slightly at the unexpected question, along with everyone else in the room, including his wife.

Carissa, like usual, understood him best, and had immediately seen where his mind went with just the one question if her widening eyes were any indication.

The rest were only moments slower in realizing what he wanted to do. As he watched the horror dawn over their faces, he took a perverse pleasure in the moment. It was so rare that he managed to surprise any of them.

Tur’sstal answered like each word would be the trigger that brought a trap down on her. “The next batch of Tier 40 planets will be ready for harvesting

within a decade, and we already have the next set of planets ready to be seeded as they become the newest generation of the Farm.”

Tur’s tal looked at him like he was crazy, as she carefully didn’t mention what he wanted to do.

Emmanuel understood and felt the same way. Even the idea was taboo, but he believed it was both the best and the smartest move.

The Farm was where almost a third of the Empire’s revenue went. With the scaling of the Tiers, a Tier 47 rift alone just wasn’t enough to reach Tier 50 in any reasonable time frame. Definitely not in a short thirty thousand years.

But they still did it.

And the Farm was the answer.

They took a few planets and started Tiering them up as fast as possible. Once they started growing, they repeated the process with a new batch of planets every millennia or so.

It still took ages for a planet to go up a single Tier, even with the frankly absurd amount of resources dumped on them, but as long as the farm was well tended every century, they would have a few Tier 40 planets ready for harvesting by the end of the cycle.

Harvesting the essence core of a planet was highly illegal for anyone but the emperor themselves, or their direct representative, for whom it was a necessity. Without a stockpile and steady stream of cores, they could never raise up a new Tier 50 in short order. Combined with delves from the rifts, they would always be able to get a Tier 50, but the price paid would be heavy.

He had eaten quite a few cores while delving to reach Tier 50, and it was his duty to ensure his many-time descendants had planets to harvest for their own race to Tier 50.

Or that was what his father had impressed into him.

But that was only an issue because they didn’t have any Tier 50 rifts. A single Tier 50 rift would mean they had no need of the hundreds of planets sucking down resources.

His idea—the idea the others understood—was simple.

“Cut off the resources to the Farm and redirect them to the rest of the Empire. The war effort gets first priority but spread the rest out.”

Leon was the first to speak. “Is this a good idea, your majesty? It’s a massive gamble.”

Emmanuel wanted to scoff. He knew that better than anyone, but they needed mana to spend, and that was a massive drain on their resources that was slated to be useless with Matthew and his unlimited mana.

He had considered the idea before he left for the ascensions, but not seriously.

With the information that Matt had already entered Minkalla and exited safely, he had no more reservations.

It was time to roll the dice.

“I’m sure. We need to plan for the True War. If we win, we don’t need the Farm, and if we lose, it won’t be as simple as being defeated. We will either be victorious or a footnote in history. Those resources can bolster our highest Tier fighters along with the retirees. Better to start spending that budget now, rather than later.”

Rusty was the first to break the solemn atmosphere. “I like it. All or nothing. No one will expect us to have that much excess funding.” He looked to Frederic. “Can we hide that much mana?”

Frederic pursed his lips. “Give me a year to work on a plan, but I believe we can obfuscate most of it. Be aware, we can’t hide it. It’s just too much mana and other resources to be hidden. The other Great Powers will definitely wonder what is happening, but I don’t think any of them would even suspect we pulled the funding of the Farm. It’s madness. We could even make it semi-public, and watch the spies run around madly trying to figure out what *that’s* a cover for.”

Mara laughed. “It’s madness unless you know someone who makes way too much mana. With Quill safely out of Minkalla, he’s guaranteed to reach Tier 24 within a century.”

That set everyone else off into a discussion where Emmanuel mostly listened to what his experts had to say and suggest.

Once the initial shock of the idea wore off, he could see the excitement of the decision get to them. The sheer excess of funds could be utilized in a million or so ways, and it was of utmost necessity that it remained a secret that was used efficiently.

Two days later, they had the framework of an idea hammered out, and he finally moved to more traditionally interesting topics, namely Hastor’s Ascension and accompanying Authority.

That caused quite the stir, with plenty of speculation as to what was required to form it, but Emmanuel had no new insights into the process.

When they settled down, he smirked. “I also learned a few interesting things about Hastor’s Talent. The first was what they *are*, but the latter is how they improved with *Ascension*.”

It took a moment for the import of his statement to dawn on those present, but while most of the room had their eyes go wide, Carissa’s

narrowed.

“Wait a moment. You said Hastor had an inspiration when he created his Authority. He ascended as a Tier 51. Not a Tier 50. Can you even use the Tier 3?”

Emmanuel and everyone else froze for a moment before he realized what she meant.

And she was right. He always had the ability to take people’s Talents if they were stronger than him, even if it was limited to five Tiers up which is when the difference between his spirit and the one he was trying to copy became too large. It had just been *millennia* since he had needed to concern himself with the spiritual weight of something stronger than himself. Hastor’s Talent as a whole wouldn’t have that issue being within his acceptable range, but the Tier 3 carried its own complication.

With a thought, he found a low Tier weapon shop and grabbed half a dozen swords out of their inventory and dropped them on the table.

Picking one up, he swapped to Hastor’s Tier 3 Talent, and the sword rippled as it Tiered up, growing from Tier 7 to Tier 50, then Tier 51 in mere fractions of a second. Already, Emmanuel could feel the realm trying to rip the blade from his hand as it rejected its existence. He could probably resist it for a moment, but with a sigh he allowed the blade to vanish in a flash of light, leaving an awkward silence in its wake.

Talents he stole were copies of the original, and therefore it would make a Tier 51 weapon, as that was Hastor’s Tier.

The silence was promptly broken by his wife’s laughter. “Goodness, dear! A mere thousand years of playing emperor and you forget you aren’t all-powerful. Stabbed yourself in the hip there, losing out on a Tier 50 weapon of your own.”

“On the contrary, my dear,” he countered. “I now have unlimited Tier 51 weapons, each of which I can use for a single *devastating* strike.”

His wife smirked at him and called his bluff. “You just thought of that. Don’t lie.”

Emmanuel shrugged his most indifferent shrug. “I planned it all. I know everything, always. You know that.”

Her snort told him exactly how much she believed it.

Leon, thankfully, saved him. “How long can you resist the ascension?”

That sent them into a round of testing, but as they discovered, it seemed impossible for a Tier 51 material to last in the realm for more than a moment.

Still, a moment was all he needed if he changed his Talent at the last second. A disposable Tier 51 weapon that could be made from lower Tier

weapons? He'd take that trade any day of the week, even if he hadn't intended or expected it.

After some more testing, everyone split off to their respective kingdoms while he ignored some paperwork to spend some time with Carissa.

It was good to be home.