

Ok so plotting out the rest of the book it looks like this arc/book will end on chapter 340 (the Manny epilogue) which comes out the 24th. That means the end of arc/book two chapter break will be on the 28th and 1st. Just FYI for anyone cycling patrons.

7k Chapter.

Chapter 338

Matt wasn't looking forward to the celebration, but between Allie's excitement and Aiden's waxing on about the event, he was at least interested in going, if for no other reason than to see the strongest people in the realm. Part of that was the Tier 48s and Tier 47s, they would undoubtedly be powerful, and uniquely so at that, but most of his interest was targeted at the realm's other Ascenders.

They were his peers. The people that could fight him on an even level.

While he was fought out after the last war, Matt was already feeling the itch to pick up his sword, after even their short eight month break.

Getting there was as simple as waiting around as a group until a presence surrounded them and they appeared in the Palace.

Mara and Leon were restrained in bands of hardened air as they squealed and tried to break free, to the obvious embarrassment of the other royals, who avoided looking at the duo.

That brought a chuckle out of Matt, who walked over and gave both of them a hug before letting Liz and Aster make their rounds.

"It's good to see you guys again."

Their reactions were unintelligible blurs of words as they failed to lower their perception to an understandable level, but they didn't seem to notice and kept speaking.

Liz's chuckles turned into outright laughs until the bands of air started to fade, where she blanched and tried to run to Allie, who just looked panicked at the happenings.

Liz didn't make it more than a few steps as Mara and Leon split into three and nearly tackled them.

Matt just let it happen and smiled as he was inundated with kisses and hugs. He might be hundreds of years old, and he was sure if it happened too often he would get tired of it, but

after everything they had gone through in the war it was nice to be treated like a kid for a few moments.

He could feel Aster's agreement through their bond, but it was far more entertaining to watch Liz struggle against her parents preening over her new bloodline form.

Leon kept zapping her bird clone with tiny bolts of lightning while repeatedly saying 'that's my girl' while a phoenix Mara kept grooming phoenix Liz despite the bird's desperate squawks.

At the same time, Liz was also being peppered with hugs and kisses like Matt and Aster.

It lasted for almost a full minute until Rusty tackled Aiden and started giving him a nuggie, ruining his perfectly floating hair. "I can't believe you held out on me. How could you?"

Aiden never got a word out edge wise as all the royals ganged up on him, including additional copies of Mara and Leon.

It took Manny clearing his throat a few times for everyone to separate, but it did eventually work and they were able to regain some level of dignity. Or, everyone but phoenix Liz, who wasn't able to escape the claws of phoenix Mara.

"We have five minutes before we need to leave. Then I expect some minimum level of decorum from my royals."

Matt was almost offended by the clear belief that the Ascenders and elites couldn't handle themselves with decorum, but on reflection, it was better to not ask for the impossible.

The royals bullied Aiden until he apparently shared some information about Authorities, after which they turned to the rest of them.

Harper greeted Matt, Liz, and Aster with a short nod. "It is good to see you three again. I hope the rigors of war haven't been too onerous."

Matt was about to say something polite about how they just did their jobs when a second Harper spoke with far more exuberance. "And hello from meeee!"

Matt nodded to the intelligent mask, Lyre. "And good to see you too, Lyre."

"It is good! I—"

Their talk turned to the general state of the Empire in a polite small talk fashion, but it became clear that wasn't entirely true when all of the other royals made their way to Matt's orbit.

It didn't take a genius to guess they wanted something from him. Matt didn't expect it to be his mana; he already had deals with Manny for that. And while he would be happy to give the royals more, he wasn't quite making so much mana that they should be interested yet. No, it had to be something else.

It was Tur'stal who broke the awkwardness. "We are all interested in the Aura rifts. You have said you intend to release them via your guild, but we are all eager to get access to them. Bottled Concepts aren't cheap, and are subsidized by the government with various incentives. Even a few aura rifts could relieve some pressure and be a great post war boom for our local economies at the same time."

Matt smiled at that and nodded. "I can't really speak to it until I have my guild set up, but after we do some more testing I'll release them and you can make as many as you'd like. I'm sure you all have a copy of my mana."

That seemed to take Tur'stal and the others aback, and Matt raised an eyebrow in return. "What?"

Frederic cocked his head slightly in what might have been a nod or a light bow. "We are willing to pay. W—"

Matt held up a hand, causing the royal to stop. It was rude, but Matt wanted to make his stance clear. "Unless something is considered an imperial secret," he nodded to the Emperor where he stood off to the side. "I don't intend to hide or restrict what my guild is doing. At least not in terms of making a profit. I'm not trying to make money here. I'd open the aura rifts up to creation now, but from my talks with Erwin, I think there is still some ground to excavate with them. That is the only reason I'm waiting. I may have said it when I was young and naive, but I truly don't want to profit from my guild. I want to make the realm a better place."

That improved the mood substantially, at least until Aiden draped an arm over Matt's shoulder. "I, on the other hand, want money and riches. Pay my— hey, don't walk away! I was monologuing!"

Matt smiled at the interruption but didn't complain. It felt weird to be dictating terms to the royals. Sure, they could take what they wanted, but he didn't think they were the type to do so, even if they could. When he was younger, he didn't *really* get it, but he now had a much better understanding of the Empire and how things like aura rifts would fit into the larger picture.

That, and he genuinely didn't want to hoard knowledge. He wanted the realm to be a better place than he left it when he inevitably ascended. Aura rifts and things like it were the first steps towards that goal.

Manny stepped forward at that and nodded to Matt before saying, "It's time to leave."

And then they were somewhere else.

Matt looked around and immediately found the massive copper planet surrounded by seven planets and one massive space station.

They were in the Minkalla system.

Not the same one where he had ventured into the planet, but even from here, he could feel the essence and mana being siphoned to the planet.

That wasn't their destination, though. They couldn't enter Minkalla again, and as much as Matt wanted to see just how much mana the planet could absorb, he wasn't about to do something so stupid.

No, they flew towards the corporation space station and entered the top level, where they were greeted by their hosts. The Royals and Aiden quickly blurred through their own formalities and vanished deeper into the station, leaving Matt alone with his fellow Team Zero Ascenders.

If Matt was going purely based on physical appearance, he would have assumed that Ortizimanin was the Corporation's Tier 50, and the golden-skinned woman standing next to him with a raven perched on her shoulder as the draconic man's assistant. He may have only been about Matt's height, and thus didn't *loom* in quite the same way as was common among Empire dragons, but the way his white scales seemed to blend almost seamlessly with his advanced armor left quite an impression. It drew Matt's gaze to him almost magnetically as he wondered just how far off his own armor was from the Minkalla bound version.

Matt tore his attention away from the dragon before it could be construed as rude, and respectfully inclined his head towards the trio. "Chief Executive Official JR, Violet Paladin Ortizimanin, Chief Logistics Official Kal'dire. It is an honor to meet you all." To his sides, his fellows echoed their own formalities.

"Likewise, Ascenders Shadow, Light, Titan, Legion, Wraith. You have been most impressive," Kal'dire replied. "It is our honor to welcome you."

Before any of them could respond, JR fluttered over to Matt's shoulder. He froze, the weight of one of the eight strongest people in the entire Realm literally resting on him. What was he supposed to do in a situation like this? JR's beady eye studied Matt intently, and he had to fight his heart rate from spiking. Had he seen something about his mana regeneration, even though he was at full mana, was wearing a mask hyper-focused around that area, and generally had done everything he could to protect his secret?

The raven's beak gleamed, a deadly Tier 50 weapon sitting mere inches from Matt's exposed neck. But as Matt opened his mouth to speak, JR finally broke the silence.

"Have you enjoyed your Pair-Linker? It was quite the clever gizmo, if I say so myself."

Relief flooded Matt's body, but he still kept himself very still outside of nodding in gratitude. Fortunately, it wasn't hard to show that he was thankful, the gift had been *immensely* appreciated. "I have immensely appreciated your gift, honored JR. I and my assistants have had many substantial breakthroughs thanks to it, to the point that one of my friends even experienced an Inspiration. It has also been an invaluable tool as I have practiced with my newest Talent, and allowed me to work on creating talismans out of pure mana stone, something I would have otherwise thought impossible."

The Tier 50 bobbed his head in a nod. “Good, good. I am always quite saddened when my gifts go unappreciated. You ought to speak with your Emperor, I’m certain that we could arrange for some nifty little tools for you as you grow stronger.”

With a few flaps, JR returned to Kal’dire’s shoulder, and Matt felt like the weight of the world had been lifted from his shoulders. From his typical perch, he turned his calculating gaze towards Matt’s fellows. “Before the ceremony begins, I also wish to express my sincerest congratulations to the two of you. Presenting a threat large enough to encourage a buy-out with your first war? Absolutely marvelous! A true exemplar of what a Chosen can do. Ascender Legion, congratulations upon developing a blood-fire element. What do you call it?”

Liz kept her cool quite well, far better than Matt managed, and smoothly replied with, “Ichor, honored JR.”

“Ichor?” He seemed slightly taken aback, but then let out a screech that Matt supposed was laughter. “Well, I suppose it’s quite fitting! And Ascender Wraith, lest you fear I’ve forgotten you, allow me to express that should you ever desire assistance developing your ‘space ice’ aspect, I am *quite* willing to collaborate. I even offered my assistance to your Emperor, but he declined.”

JR swept his head from side to side. “What a short-sighted man. You really ought to persuade him to reconsider. My prices aren’t *that* high. Not for him, at least.”

Matt fought back a grin. Manny had warned them that JR was always looking to make a sale, but it was still amusing to see the bird’s tactics on display.

“Well, I suppose I shouldn’t keep you too much longer! I’ve marked your quarters, as well as several other locations of interest such that they should be obvious to you, Ascender Shadow, when teleporting. As for the rest of you, and Ascender Shadow, of course, should you decide to walk, we have an AI module you may download right here. It will automatically help you find your way around, inform you of events of interest that are occurring, and provide additional information about nearly anything you find yourself curious about.”

“It’s also fully private to you and de-obfuscated,” Kal’dire added. “Simply touch any of the maps, such as that one, to initiate a download, and it will guide you to only install the modules that are of personal interest to you. And if you prefer to not install anything onto your personal AIs, the station itself can provide all of the same functions simply by querying the onboard AI.”

She hadn’t even finished when Allie teleported over to the holographic map by the wall, tapped it, giggled, and teleported away once again.

After a moment, it became apparent she wasn’t coming back, and Zack inclined his head towards the trio. “Thank you for your accommodation of my partner’s eccentricities, and your general hosting of this event.”

The three foremost Corporation speakers returned their pleasantries, and guided them along their ways. Aster downloaded a copy of the onboard AI, but the rest of them stuck with

simply messaging the station, and loosely marveling at the way it responded to their requests for direction. The station was capable of providing full-sensory guidance perceptible only to the person asking for it, and Aster had fun making their rooms smell like ice cream, while Matt instead settled for a tether of blue light racing off into the distance of the white hallways. They'd seen similar things before, but the Corporation's version was impressive in a number of ways they'd never thought to imagine before.

With their personal guides, it didn't take them too long to find their quarters. They checked their messages to determine where Allie was now and where they should be going next for their network.

As it turned out, they didn't need to look very hard, as Lila swooped in almost immediately with Aiden and Allie in tow. They were swept up in seats made of sand and relocated in the blink of an eye to a massive sandstone cavern seemingly open to the stars above. Matt had to use his AI and connect to the LocalNet to determine where they'd ended up, only to find that they'd scarcely moved at all. He was in what he'd assumed was a minor amphitheater near their quarters, but was now highlighted as 'Ascender Worldwaker's Quarters.'

Matt started. The huge space was far bigger than what he and Liz had, let alone what Allie or Aster had, and was far more personalized than the sleek and stylish, but generic rooms they *had* been in. He opened his mouth to ask, but Lila preempted his question with a draconic grin. "You can customize your quarters pretty easily. Yours won't be this big, but I've still got a few *lingering perks* with the Corporations after capturing Maxie."

There was a snort from nowhere and Matt found the apparently empty room now filled with a number of other people.

Aiden immediately pointed and laughed at a stunning blonde. "Ha! Fuck you, Maya! How's it feel to get your ass kicked? I wasn't able to rub it in before, but now I can! Does the knowledge that I could have kicked your ass at any time burn at you? Does it irritate you? Ha!"

Maya rolled her eyes and made a rude gesture, but Matt's attention was pulled to the massive dragon who had snorted.

Matt had met a fair few dragons in his time, but the enormous red dragon was on another level beyond them. A crown of horns ringed his head, surrounded by a halo of bright blue plasma, and his simple presence tickled the back of Matt's mind with a sense of fear unlike any other he'd experienced. He felt the presence trying to persuade him to kneel and submit, beg for his life, or run for the miniscule chance of survival it might impart.

Even without the dragon being identical to the videos and pictures he'd seen, Matt would have been able to identify him from that alone. The elder dragon, Eclavorn. He and Gideon, the large man sitting in a chair next to him, had been the Federation's last Ascenders before the Monster Collective's war of independence, and their defection to the Monster Collective had been a *very* dramatic turning point in the war, and was sometimes cited as the reason the fighting grew past Tier 35.

Lila transformed into a dragon even larger than Eclavorn and dismissively flicked the younger Ascender with her tail. “*I’m* doing the introductions. Stop spoiling the fun. If you interrupt, I’ll punch you into the local star.”

Eclavorn growled at her, but otherwise didn’t say anything.

“Grumpy-scales here is Eclavorn, of course. That’s Gideon next to him, and despite what the Monster Collective may tell you, they *don’t* mind it if you refer to Gideon as Eclavorn’s rider. Just make sure you don’t mistake that for one of them being stronger than the other. Eclavorn gets all the press these days, but good ol’ Giddy does half the work himself.”

“Next to them, the self-proclaimed ‘deadliest woman in the Realm’, we’ve got Maxine. Don’t worry, no matter what you may have heard about her, she won’t blackmail you about stuff she reads off you.”

“Unless it would be funny!” Olivier butt in.

“Unless it would be funny,” Lila confirmed. “She’s also the only one of us who really *likes* politics, is our de facto therapist, killed her boyfriend, and got captured like a punk by yours truly and will *never* be allowed to live it down. Also if you value your wallets, *don’t* make bets with her or play any kind of bluffing game, poker included.”

Maxine stuck her tongue out at Lila, and Matt fought back a wave of fear. Cosmind’s abilities were the stuff of literal legends, and her *confirmed* feats included making an army kill itself to the last man, killing the Master of All in single combat, and wiping out another army with a hail of projectiles that she had launched *six months* before the army even arrived in that particular system. Her rumored feats were even wilder, including mind-reading and mind-controlling people ten Tiers above her, allegedly blackmailing entire Great Powers into buying her out of war Tiers, and more. If there was anyone in the entire Realm more likely to figure out his secret, he didn’t know who it might be.

He’d heard legends of the cold and calculating woman, and was completely taken aback by the truth of the matter; that was a friendly woman who looked a bit younger than him, reclining in a plush beanbag chair and giving a friendly wave. Her colorful hair was draped all across the beanbag, winding in on itself and glowing slightly, but it didn’t seem to be under her direct control. It paired well with her dusky skin, bright clothes, and cheery smile.

“Sup, guys? Good to meet you, you can call me Max. No, I’m not reading your minds, just your faces. Yes, y’all are like open books, but don’t let that bother you. No, I *won’t* actually blackmail you about anything I read off you, no matter how funny it would be. They’re just being mean. And yeah, I make a pretty awesome therapist, you can tell me *anything*. I promise, I’ve heard worse from some *very* loud thinkers. And if you want something to stay a secret, it’s between you and me.” She winked, then made a finger gun at Aster and winked again while clicking her tongue.

Lila snorted at that. “Nobody’s ever *fessed* to taking her up on the offer of therapy, but supposedly she’s done it a few times. Next to her is Sien, who you’d know as the Lady of Ill

Dreams.” Lila leveled a glare at the Sect woman, who just waved. “You’ve met her kids, and I’ve had money riding on her kids being Gideon’s since they were born, but neither of them are fessing up and Max refuses to say anything either.”

Matt was shocked at the thought the twins had been the children of two Ascenders, but simply nodded. If that was true, he couldn’t imagine growing up with two Ascenders as parents. Unless Sien raised them alone. It didn’t seem like anyone had proof of who the father was, which implied Sien raised them alone or in secret.

Maya snorted at the comment though, and interrupted Matt’s thoughts. “Count yourself lucky, I’m still certain they’re Balster’s. The timing works way better.”

“We can get back into it after I finish introductions, Maya. Wait your turn. Sien, want to say anything?”

“It is a pleasure to meet you all formally. I am certain that our forthcoming interactions will be most delightful and productive.”

The sect woman smiled at them, and Matt tried to match the twins to the woman in front of him.

He could at least see where the twins got it from. Blue and green skin were far less common in the Sects than they were in the Empire, where they already weren’t the most popular skin colors. But while her kids were fairly vibrant with their blue and green skin, each a deeply saturated hue contrasted by the reverse color of their hair, Jai Sien’s skin was a dark midnight blue, framed by flawless, long, and straight black hair which faded into smoke at the tips. All three shared the same glowing red eyes, an already-striking effect made all the more striking on their mother.

“You’ve met Olivier, who’s currently taking great delight in sitting in Wun’s normal seat. Wun’s been delving for nearly five centuries now, and there’s currently a betting pool as to whether he’s napping or just ended up stuck in a rift challenge.”

“Wun is Goldenrod, right?” Allie asked.

Lila nodded.

“Isn’t his entire thing that he’s crazy lucky? Why would you bet against him getting a rift challenge?”

“That’s what I said!” Olivier pitched in.

“It is not a constant,” Eclavorn rumbled. “And he certainly enjoys lazing about at times when he feels safe. Were he to *not* get a rift challenge, it is likely he would have taken the opportunity for respite where no one can bother him.”

“We’ll see. But next to him, we have *On The Last Line* - the ‘On’ is important- with Krodag, who you know as Lifegiver, but prefers Bottle. He’s way too loud, but is the best healer

here. Greathammer, or Moe, or Lug... Don't challenge him to an arm-wrestling match, even Gideon can't match him. Ellen, or Jack, is next, and she's probably the third smartest person in the room, nevermind what the Clans might tell you about her being a Mastermind."

"Oi!"

"You're right. Fourth at best. Moe clearly beats you. If she and Max ever get going at it, just enjoy the show. And then we have Brian. No, The Deadlord is not a skeleton, that's just when he's acting as Boney. He's easily bribed by interesting dead bodies. *Don't* let him talk you into giving him any of your corpses, Liz, it's not worth it."

"Spoilsport!"

"I don't... leave corpses anyway. They just melt into blood," Liz replied, clearly a bit unnerved.

"Spoilsport anyway! Also, Aiden, I don't suppose you actually stuffed the body of that one Freddie merged guy somewhere, did you?"

"Nope, sorry."

"Ah, I figured, but it was worth a try."

Matt cast an eye over the four Legends.

"And last and *certainly* least is Maya, who just got whooped by someone three tiers weaker than her even with massive support." The blond woman made a rude gesture, reinforced by an illusionary hand.

Lila turned as if to introduce the still-standing group, but was preempted by Aiden as he stepped up and waved, as though volunteering to go first. He was swatted with an errant tail, sending him flying into the back wall. "New to the group we have Allie and Zack, the most impressive Ascenders to be bought out this generation, and officially making them the youngest retirees in any of our records."

At the mention of the buyout, Max glared at Allie and signaled that she had her eyes on the younger Ascender. Shortly thereafter, there was a whoop and faint cheer emanating from multiple points of the room, and Matt caught a glimpse of Allie teleporting between said points, cheering wildly for herself.

"Then finally, Matt, Liz, and Aster, officially becoming the *fastest* group to ever follow up another Ascension."

Krodag whooped, cheering on Aster. "Finally, another support! We get [No Respect]!" A burst of aura flared around him at the shouted skill name just for the sand to engulf him.

"I swear, he's an idiot." Lila shook her dragon head back and forth before settling down. "Of course, it's a common affliction here. I'm just happy that I got to do *two* introductions. That never happens. Anyways," she swung her head back at Matt and those around him, "This group

formed a few generations back, as a way for us to actually appreciate time with peers. Each generation's own abilities change the texture a bit, but right now we've got occasional meet-ups and an AI group chat mainly courtesy of Max and Brian.

"Anyway, your first war was a bit skewed, in that you *actually* had a bit of a challenge, but you'll figure out soon enough that it can be tricky being at the top. So, this is a place to unwind, swap tips, and appreciate the fact that we're not all quaking in our boots about the dreadful and fearsome Ascender in our midst. You can be as formal or as informal as you like, but the only real rule is that there's no shop talk if you're currently in a war. That said, if there's someone you'd *rather* not die in a war, we can try and accommodate it, within reasonable limits of course. And if they do die, well, try to not take it too harshly. We're Ascenders, people die. The main goal is to keep the group going, getting us the best fights possible, so don't screw it up too badly."

Matt approved of the idea and just wished it could have saved Eric or Morgan's life.

The other dragon snorted and looked at Matt. "Can you handle that boy? Losing your temper over just one dead mentor."

Matt didn't even hesitate and punched the dragon right in the nose. Manny had told him there was no reason to hold back with his mana usage and he would block any signs, so he had no issues throwing a full forty million [Breach] into the blow as well.

The explosion didn't even move Eclavorn, but the scorch marks on his scales did give him pause.

The rest of the energy was absorbed by the collective power of the other Ascenders.

A tail came down out of seemingly nowhere and cut a deep furrow into the dragon's flank and sent him sliding back in the sand hard enough to cause the entire space station to tremble.

Lila stepped over Matt and loomed above Eclavorn. "I told you not to taunt him, Eclavorn. Apologize."

Matt was running hot, but the anger was quickly cooled by Lila's back up and Eclavorn's nod. "At least you've got spine." He stood up and shook himself, the wound quickly filling and closing. "And I won't apologize. None of *you* were willing to test the boy, and if he was going to be all hissy about it any time someone stepped on his feelings, it would be a problem. I *refuse* to have a new Charl, and I said that I'd test him, so I did. He passes, at least provisionally."

Matt considered that. He supposed it *did* seem like they were broadly alright with basic physical violence as a commonplace conflict resolution, and if that were the case... yeah, he could see how this would be relaxing for them. Being able to just *punch* someone had to be good to keep conflict at a basic level.

Mindful of his cover Talent, Matt withdrew a good-sized mana crystal from his ring and absorbed it, refilling his mana pool before he absentmindedly used any more mana and started having his regeneration really pick up.

Maya regarded him with a bit of a hungry expression, “Oh, who I wouldn’t kill for that kind of Talent. Do you know how strong of a Law I could make if I could throw around that much power whenever? I’m jealous.”

Aiden finally crawled out of the sand, just to be flung back by Moe this time.

Sien walked over and explained the confusion. “A number of us are pissed at Aiden for hiding such a big secret for so long. Quite a few of us lost a ton on the bets on who would win their little fight.”

She chuckled and fanned herself. “I, on the other hand, am smart and bet that Aiden would shock us all. That made up for my losses in the other categories.” Glaring at the place Aiden was crawling out of the sand, she sneered. “Fucker nearly cost me half my fortune by not Tiering up via inspiration in the fight though.”

Aiden spat sand out, “It’s not my fault that I already had my Authority inspiration.”

This time, Gideon kicked him to the other side of the room. Liz raised an eyebrow at the action, and he shrugged. “He pulled one over on all of us and this is pretty much our only chance to pick on him until one of us figures out our own Authorities.”

That made a lot of sense, and Matt nodded along even as Olivier ran Aiden all the way to the other side of the room before appearing right back next to them.

“So you guys are going to try for it before Ascending?”

Maya snorted at Allie’s question. “Obviously. We wouldn’t be very good Gladiators if we gave up on such an impressive source of power before Ascension. After all, *everything* gets strengthened when you Ascend, from Talents to Domains, Skills, Natural Treasures, all of it. Plus, there’s a theory that the stronger you are overall the better *all* the upgrades are. None of us are ever going to Ascend at Tier 50, so an Authority’s our best bet at actually boosting it all. Aren’t you planning on getting one?”

Allie shrugged. “Can’t say I really thought about it. Need my Aspect first, ya know.”

Olivier nodded. “Touche. But yeah, pretty sure all of us want to make a go of it. Sure, it’s dangerous but what isn’t? We are Heroes after all. With Ellen to translate, maybe we can actually wring a few drops of knowledge out of Aiden’s spirit after all.”

Matt smiled at that. While he didn’t plan on sitting around forever until he got an Authority, he fully agreed with the thought process. If there was power on the table, why wouldn’t he reach for it? It was the same for Liz and Aster. It was surprisingly nice to be around people who shared that mindset and didn’t need such things explained.

He suspected that was the reason for the Ascender chat, if nothing else. If he and his team were the only Ascenders in their Great Powers, things would probably get very lonely very quickly.

Moe sauntered over to him just as Aiden begged off getting tossed around again. “So, I ‘ear you are ‘trong.”

Matt looked down at the dwarf and raised an eyebrow. “Pretty strong, yeah.”

Moe smiled. “Fantastic. When you reach Tier 35, we need to have a spar. It's so hard to find others who can match me in melee. It's usually just magic users dodging around and never getting in melee range. I'm begging for a good brawl. I punch you, you punch me, I punch you, you punch me. Eventually we'll find a winner and it will be a jolly good time.”

Matt grinned. He couldn't help it. He had seen the reports and knew he would be weaker than Moe in a pure melee, but he had so much more than pure melee, even if it was his preferred range.

Maya rolled her eyes. “Have fun sticking around then. I'm out in three hundred years. Janet *begged* me to stay longer, but fuck that. If Aiden is leaving and has his Authority, there is no reason to sit. Better to advance up to where it's marginally safer to try for an Authority. Plus, better senses and the whole shebang.”

Aiden, finally having crawled out of the sand, spat, “I take offense that you guys want to try for Authorities. It's my unique thing and you can't have it.”

Lila rolled her eyes even as she settled down next to Eclavorn, slightly off to the side. “Then why did you make us pay through the nose for the information? I bet you are already working on the next step.”

No one took her up on the bet, and Aiden didn't bother to hide it. “Of course I am. What do you expect me to do? Sit and watch as other people use me breaking the mental barrier to catch up? I still bet that none of you manage it. It's fucking hard. I can't wait to hear about one of you blowing yourselves up mid-attempt. I just hope you survive so I can laugh in your face and not just at your body.”

Ellen leaned forward as if whispering a secret. “I hear all the Tier 50s are salivating at getting their hands on the info. I bet a personally customized AI that one of them kills themselves in the attempt.”

Allie leaned forward. “Ohh. I'll take that bet. Not sure what I have to offer, though.”

Maya slipped into the group. “*Teleportation*, obviously. You don't need to tell us your actual range, but like... we basically *never* get to meet up in person. Anything you've got or could build out would be great.”

Brian pitched in, “I wouldn't mind a bit of collaboration to try and reinforce the chat infrastructure, either. Don't know how your portal-making is, but some better synchronicity would be great.”

As Allie was chewing her lip, Max caught Matt's attention, and she beckoned him over to where she was leaning against the wall.

“Can I talk to you for a second in private?” she asked once he got closer.

“Sure? What about?”

“One moment while I throw up a privacy shield.” She reached out her hand, clenched her fist and suddenly all sounds of chatter were silenced. The outside area was even muted to his spiritual sense though not entirely cut off, like it was on the other side of a wall.

“There. Nobody can hear what we say, and trying to read our lips won’t work either. I figured you wouldn’t want anyone overhearing this but it’s clear we need to have a chat.”

“What did you want to talk about?” Matt asked more than a little wary. He had heard a lot of things about Cosmind and without Manny being within spiritual range he would have never allowed this.

“That, that right there. Like seriously dude, *chill*. I haven’t seen anyone so tense since... doesn’t matter.” She made direct eye contact and shot him a wink. “You’re worried about your secret getting out, I can tell. But, hey, hey, *relax*, okay? Your boss already paid me to not go digging and to keep it to myself if I do figure anything out. I usually figure them out because surprisingly people are really bad at keeping secrets. ‘Cept Aiden anyway. Can’t *believe* he managed to blindside me, I’m so mad. Not actually, it was a great show, but *still*. Point is, I don’t go digging for them. Everyone has secrets and I respect that. Besides, they’re usually wayyy less important than people think. At least to me. After the dozenth super special Growth Item, private super-special rift, or unheard of Natural Treasures you stop caring, and I’ve seen *thousands*. I’m sure your secret is great and all but I *genuinely* couldn’t care less about it.”

“Thanks for the concern?” Matt was a little uncertain on how best to respond. It wasn’t often that someone out of the blue said that he shouldn’t worry about keeping his secret. He *did* remember Manny saying that he had paid some counter-intelligence people to help keep his Talent hidden, but that was fairly basic precautions that all Ascenders had, so far as he knew. And she seemed genuine in wanting to set him at ease but even if she had seen rare secrets she hadn’t seen one on the magnitude of his, so her reassurances fell flat.

Ultimately he wasn’t sure why she was bothering? Was it an act to get him to lower his guard? Was it genuine?

Matt had no way to figure it out besides outright asking so that was exactly what he did. “I’m not sure why you’re singling me out?”

“Well, mostly because of how stressed out you are. Most people’s body language isn’t practically *screaming* about how worried they are about their secrets getting out. And sure, out there, maybe it’s worth worrying about. But here? You could be Damien Dusksblade himself reincarnated, and they’d just toast you. Whatever it is, it’s *not* a big deal. Not here, not with them. So don’t stress, and enjoy the party.” She bumped his shoulder playfully and added, “Sound good?”

Matt didn't think he was on edge, and even a check of his physical body said he was perfectly at ease. He was incredibly nervous, but he wasn't showing any signs. He was sure of that because Manny had said he'd cover for any slip ups short of outright stating his Talent if Matt made any.

"But I'm not stressed."

At Max's disbelieving look, he gestured at himself. "This is me relaxed."

Max bit her lip and shook her head. "Ask your healer about chronic stress and hypertension then. I haven't seen a bigger bundle of nerves in *centuries*. And now you're worried about me reading your mind, stop that. I *don't* mind-read friends, full-stop. Besides, not even I can read your mind without you feeling it. I'm just *that good* at reading your face, I promise you. I'll sometimes *phrase* it like I can hear your thoughts, but that's because it's easier to talk like that."

Stepping back Max held up her hands. "My goal here is to have friends. Nothing more nothing less. Yeah, I know I'm the big scary mind mage, but the point of this group is that all us big scary Ascenders can *be* friends, and that's the only reason I'm mentioning all of this."

Matt nodded, still a bit hesitant, but he tried to laugh it off. "Thanks for the heads up. I'll keep what you said in mind, but of course I've got secrets, who doesn't?"

Max winked. "That's the spirit. And if it continues to bother you I'm happy to give anti-mind mage lessons."

Around them, the privacy screen dropped. Max gave Matt a fist-bump, and wandered off to start chatting with Zack, leaving Matt a chance to rest with his thoughts. Shortly thereafter, Sien elegantly swept in to sit next to Matt.

Sien took a sip of tea and let out a satisfied sigh. "So, you were one of the ones most commonly engaged with my children, and I must know how they did. What was the experience akin to? Did they conceal themselves adequately, or were they brilliant embers clearly outshining their dull fellows? And do you have any advice or ideas in regards to how they may better master their capabilities for future fights? I could certainly see about arranging for a fight with them, if you want."

Matt ran over his interactions with Sien's kids and nodded. "Sure. I have a couple comments. Once I figured it out, it made sense, but we really struggled to understand where the boost was coming from at first."

Sien nodded even as Liz, Aster, and Zack joined him and added their own observations.

"Oh yeah it's a super cool power set but I'm more interested in why they don't just buff each other?" Aster's comment spurred on a few more as Sien happily bragged about her kids.

This... was kinda fun.

