



# C. MANTIS



# THE PATH OF ASCENSION

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## **THE PATH OF ASCENSION**

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Thank you for reading The Path of Ascension!

A Dream of Wings & Flame

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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 one hundred and eighty-seven children of Warrington's Upper East Side Orphanage #3 had trained hard for their Awakening. Every profession was covered, and every combat role was touched upon. Even the more obscure variations were at least mentioned, if not directly trained for.

Matt could answer any question about any role or their sub-variations. He had studied every extra book his instructor's thought might be the slightest bit useful. Unwilling to be unprepared for a Talent that could change his weapon of choice, he practiced with every weapon the training armory had.

He preferred a longsword but was familiar with one-handed and shield combinations, dual-wielding daggers, weighted gloves, staffs, and even had practice time with the fake wands that simulated casting spells.

Matt was ready no matter what uses his Tier 1 Talent had.

However, Matt had not prepared for his Tier 1 Talent to be useless. Or worse than useless. He had not prepared for his Talent to be so bad the Empire's AI would officially rate it as 'detrimental.' That was a death blow to any potential career with an established guild.

Matt sat in the testing chair, wires still connected to his arm. Staring at the display that doomed him.

***Tier 1 Talent determined.***

*Mana Regeneration inversely proportional to current mana, directly proportional to Maximum Mana.*

***Secondary Effect:*** *Essence cannot be applied to mana cultivation. Mana Regeneration is decoupled from mana cultivation.*

***Tertiary Effect:*** *Anomaly detected...*

...

...

...

*Anomaly processed.*

*Maximum Mana is substantially below average levels.*

*Additional review required. Please, wait until a higher authority can be contacted.*

Matt felt the blood drain from him. He was lightheaded, couldn't breathe. The screen blurred, words merging, sealing his fate with their little white proclamations.

*Everything was falling apart and there was nothing he could d—*

He focused on his primary effect! If that was good enough, then nothing else would matter. Heart pounding, Matt pulled up the complete description of the first aspect of his Talent.

He blinked when, in addition to the paragraphs he was expecting, a complicated mathematical formula and graph popped up. Apparently, the amount of mana he naturally regenerated varied dramatically depending on how full his pool was.

Matt froze when he noticed the percent signs on the graph. His Mana Regeneration was being measured as a percentage of his Maximum Mana. *He could generate mana at a rate equal to his Maximum Mana per second while below 1% of his total mana.*

What this meant was he could channel mana endlessly at an extremely high rate but any single use mana spells were effectively useless.

That was... insane. At low tiers, Mana Regeneration was usually so slow it was better measured in *mana per hour*. That was why mages dedicated massive amounts of their cultivation to improving their Mana Regeneration. Improving only the size of your pool and not how fast it filled led to mages constantly running out of mana.

Mages were forced to spend most of their cultivation on three separate, non-physical attributes from all the research he had done prior to his Awakening. This made them physically weaker and more vulnerable to melee attacks, though many considered this a fair trade-off for the ability to summon fire out of nowhere. Matt certainly did.

Regenerating a percentage of his Maximum Mana meant Matt could completely sidestep this issue. By the time he dumped enough cultivation into his Maximum Mana to double the size of his mana pool, he would automatically have doubled the amount of mana he regenerated each second without spending anything on his Mana Regeneration.

*Secondary Effect: Essence cannot be applied to mana cultivation.*

Just like that, Matt's fantasy crumbled to pieces.

Before they raised tiers and began cultivating, people could typically hold only 100 mana in their pool, unless their Talent applied some boost to it. Conventional logic said the initial size of someone's mana pool barely mattered in the grand scheme of things. Even if Matt only started with 10 mana, by focusing a slightly heavier ratio into Maximum Mana, he could just stay at relatively low mana permanently while still casting endless spells. However, conventional logic assumed people could add essence into mana cultivation.

Matt looked back at his projected Mana Regeneration graph hopelessly. According to the AI, he would regenerate at a flat rate equivalent to his entire Maximum Mana per second for as long as his current mana was less than 1% of his maximum capacity.

Starting at zero mana, Matt needed only a fraction of a second to regenerate his pool to 1%. The instant he exceeded 1% of his Maximum Mana, though, his regeneration rate started plummeting below 1% of his capacity.

The AI even provided a little table showing how long it would take to reach certain benchmarks. It would take exactly ten minutes for Matt to reach 10% capacity but reaching 25% or 50% would take him months or years respectively.

While these rates were ludicrous, they were also irrelevant. With normal mages, getting to full capacity was important because it meant more spells to cast during a delve. In Matt's case, if he could raise his maximum up to 1,000 mana, then he'd regenerate 10 mana near instantaneously whenever he dropped under 10 mana. That was enough to endlessly cast a basic [Fireball] spell with a cost of exactly 10 mana.

No mage could cast any spell endlessly. Even if they had 100,000 mana, it would eventually be exhausted since normal Mana Regeneration was still calculated in mana per minute.

*Secondary Effect: Essence cannot be applied to mana cultivation.*

Those damning words shredded any hope Matt had still carried. Even melee fighters dedicated at least 30% of their essence to mana cultivation, just so they could use skills in battle. The most aggressive cultivation ratio he had heard of, from an actually successful rift delver at least, was 80% to physical and 20% to mana. And that was only possible because that particular delver's Tier 3 Talent let him negate the mana cost of skills based on his physical abilities.

Tier 3 Talent. That was his ticket out of this debacle. Matt never heard of a Talent set being purely detrimental. The ones that seemed useless at Tier 1 usually had synergy with that person's Tier 3 or Tier 25 Talents.

Matt could do thi—

*Higher authority reached.*

...

*Anomaly resolved.*

...

*Tertiary Effect: Lowered starting Maximum Mana.*

*Maximum Mana determined to be 1.*

Matt felt as if he'd been punched in the gut yet again. A starting Maximum Mana less than what was needed to cast a [Fireball]. And he could never increase it. His stomach roiled with renewed vigor once the reality of his Tier 1 Talent's secondary effect set in again.

He stood out of the chair once the wires disconnected from his arm and the screen flashed and said, "Please, have a nice day," as if it was mocking him.

Looking around at the seemingly unfamiliar world, Matt tried to find anything or anyone that could fix him.

Everyone in here was an acquaintance he grew up with in the orphanage, no one who could turn back time. He had been with them since the mass rift breakout five years ago that destroyed half the city and orphaned so many kids like himself. As his gaze wandered, all the people he knew so well appeared alien to him.

They all looked so...happy.

A dozen feet away, Roxanne stood at a recruiter's desk for Victor's Elementals, a mage-focused guild that was the husband guild to Estor's Escalators, a physically oriented guild that acted to round out delve compositions so the parties were balanced.

Every word that came out of the recruiter's mouth made Roxanne smile more. The paperwork placed in front of her was quickly signed. She'd dreamed of being a mage since their Introduction to Magic class all those years ago.

Matt wanted to feel happy for her, but nausea clawed at his stomach. He looked over to Gavle's Good Guilders, a respectable Tier 10 guild based on Ilstor, a neighboring Tier 12 planet. As he approached their booth, the head recruiter, Miles, stared at Matt 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's 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 debated what to tell Miles. He was a good guy who tried to get as many of the orphans into the fairly prestigious guild as he could. With Matt's knowledge and skill with a blade, Miles easily arranged a conditional contract for Matt with extremely good terms that only lasted ten years instead of the standard fifteen.

His percent-based mana regeneration could have been useful, if not for his pitiful Maximum Mana. So, he revealed the worst of it and ignored the solely useless parts.

"Completely unable to cultivate mana," Matt whispered. Venturing a glance over at Miles, the man had abruptly stopped pacing on the other side of the table.

"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 waited and silently hoped Miles could think of a way for this not to be the end of his career as a delver.

Was he finished before he even started?

The nausea resurfaced even stronger than before, gnawing at him as the contents of his stomach fought to escape by any route necessary. With a deep breath and an effort of will, he forced his stomach to settle.

“I know that sounds like an excuse, but it’s happened before. It would end in you getting blacklisted from any guild on this planet, and probably the neighboring ones, too. Even some of the city governments wouldn't allow you anywhere near them.”

The next pause idled for what seemed like an eternity. “All right. The way I see it, you have two options. Well, only one viable option really. The other is a long shot at best.

“Best-case scenario, you somehow find a sponsor for The Path of Ascension. That would come with admission to the PlayPen Island. It's an Empire-run training facility only the best of the best get into.”

Of course, Matt knew of The Path. It was literally legendary; the place where legends were forged, racing through the Tiers to become the heroes of the Empire.

As Matt opened his mouth to state he no longer fit that category, if he ever had, Miles held up a finger. “But there is a second way into the PlayPen. Most city adjuncts get a couple of slots per year to send promising youths. Getting one of those slots is even harder than usual in this city. The adjunct has been using them as political favors for the last ten years or so.

“That’s the ideal case, but 99% of people never even sniff a PlayPen’s air. More realistically, you need to buy a slot in a public Tier 1 rift. It’s what freelance delvers do if there’s too much competition for local rifts of their Tier.”

He pulled his pad out and started tapping on it. “Ah. Here, in Glesie, two cities up the coast. They have a kobold Tier 1 rift, the going price is...”

Miles's eyes flicked around, scanning as he sucked in a breath. "Ten thousand credits. That's more than usual, but the price seems to have jumped in the last few years. That's the problem with a Tier 4 planet. At Tier 5, the planet would have far more Tier 1 rifts."

Miles spun the pad to show the listing that further confirmed his doom.

*I'm fucked. It will take years to get that many credits. I'd be so far behind everyone else it would be terrible.*

Matt forced himself to drop the self-pity and think about the situation more.

*No, I don't care if I'm older than everyone at my Tier. I'll still become a delver and stop the rifts from overflowing again.*

Earning ten thousand credits wouldn't be easy. That would take at least three years of work at any job willing to hire a thirteen-year-old. Let alone someone without a useful Tier 1 Talent and no job skills besides beginner delver training.

"Is there any chance I could join a lesser guild? Not that I don't want to join Gavle's, but it has to be easier to join a guild and get access to their rift than to get ten thousand credits, right?" Matt hoped for it to be true.

Miles's face hardened at Matt's question. He stared Matt right in the eyes and forcefully said, "Matt, with a Talent rating as bad as yours, it doesn't matter if your Tier 3 might fix the problem. No one here is going to willingly risk the resources to train you without a near illegal..." he grimaced, "or an actually illegal lifelong contract you'd never get out of. They'd take all your earnings or use some other nefarious deal to suck you dry."

Matt sputtered for a response, but Miles held up his hand and continued, "This planet is just too new and too poor. Just the teleportation to neighboring planets is too expensive for wasteful transits. Every inch of space is worth its weight in mana stones. A good 80% of the recruits we pick up today are never even going to leave this planet in the next five years. If they don't have clear potential, the Guild isn't going to shoulder that cost.

"Go ahead and try, but don't sign anything without reading the contract. Every single word. All recruitment contracts have to be in plain text that is

easy to understand.”

Miles reached into a cabinet along the wall and grabbed some cards. He held his hand out for Matt to shake and handed the cards over in his off-hand. “These are PlanetNet vouchers. Each card is good for an hour of uptime, and these five should get you through the next few years. The CityNet mostly just has general info, but the PlanetNet will let you check Glesie’s rift status from time to time.”

Miles looked drained all of the sudden. “Good luck, kid. And when you solo delve, play it safe and don’t get injured. Healing will put you into crippling debt faster than anything else. Slow and methodical. Careful. Just be careful.”

With that, Miles turned and trudged out of the room, and Matt took it as the dismissal it was.

*He tried to help me, and his advice about the contracts is good to know. Without that warning, I might have jumped on the first offer without looking into it.*

For the next hour, Matt traveled from stall to stall seeing if any guilds, corporations, or crafter associations would take a chance on him. But Miles had been right. Few were willing to even talk to him after seeing the detrimental rating for his Tier 1 Talent. Those who were still willing presented him with predatory lifelong contracts, all containing inescapable clauses where at least 50% of all his earnings were owed to the guild, even if he left the guild at some later point.

One particularly heinous contract had a line stating he forfeited ownership of his own body. Matt shuddered to think what people who accepted that contract ended up doing. Illegal prostitution would be the most preferable outcome, if the look the recruiter had given him was any indication.

Matt picked up the bag with his few belongings inside and headed for the door, eager to escape before he lost his breakfast all over the polished floor. The moment he got outside, he fertilized the shrubs next to the front entrance with the contents of his stomach.

After rinsing his mouth out, Matt stood up and headed away from the Awakening Center. He didn't know where he was going, but there was no point in standing around.

This being only a Tier 4 planet meant the resources needed to advance past Tier 3 weren't readily available for the population at large. The only reliable way to accumulate essence was to delve into the rifts and slay whatever monsters you found.

Some of the books Matt read referenced the air on the Empire's Tier 47 capital planet. The atmosphere alone held so much ambient essence people could cultivate without delving into rifts. On this backwater, the ambient essence was near zero.

*Transportation off the planet is too expensive. No guild will accept me unless my Tier 3 Talent is synergistic enough with my Tier 1 and lets me accumulate more mana so I'm not crippled.*

*Or unless I sign my life away.*

Matt pondered his next steps.

*I need a job.*

Thirteen wasn't *technically* considered an adult, at least not by the Empire's normal standards. Starting today, though, they were all on their own. The orphanage just didn't have the room or resources to spare on older children when most could find employment or an apprenticeship after receiving their Tier 1 Talents.

To relieve some of the crushing stress on the orphanages, both emancipation and Awakening were performed early on Lilly. Orphans were made legal adults at the age of thirteen instead of the usual late fourteen or fifteen when Awakening normally happened.

Matt wandered south. The further he walked, the more lingering damage he came across from the rift break five years ago.

While the debris was mostly cleaned up and repaired on the northern side of the city, the southern section still carried battle scars in the form of the occasional burned-out building still waiting to be demolished and rebuilt.

As Matt passed a crater where some great spell had ripped into the horde of monsters, rainwater filling in the bottom had turned it into a stagnant pool thick with algae growing on top.

Just another sign of what happened when rifts weren't delved regularly enough. Another bleak reminder of the loss of his parents and the destruction of his city.

---

When searching the CityNet as he wandered aimlessly, Matt found a business called Benny's Inn advertising an open position for 'general staff. No skills needed. Room and board included. Pays four hundred credits a month.'

The description was lacking in detail, worryingly so. But with that kind of pay, Matt at least had to try. It offered more than any of the other unskilled labor jobs being advertised.

Matt looked up directions and followed the road for several more miles until he came upon Benny's Inn. It was right near the edge of the five-mile coastline that served as the safe zone, the water preventing rifts from spawning.

Benny's Inn was situated on the trail leading to the closest Tier 4 rift in the region, the highest Tier available on the planet. It also had the benefit of being near the trailheads leading to the three Tier 3 rifts closest to the city. That made Benny's the best place for local parties and groups to relax and recuperate between delves.

*They say delvers spend way more credits than normal cultivators, so I need to work near delving to reach Tier 3 anytime soon. To reach a city with a public Tier 1 rift, I need money. The ten thousand credits on their own won't be enough. At the very least, I'll also need to buy gear and cover travel money.*

What Matt found at the end of the road was a six-story building with a large, garish sign proclaiming the owner's name.

When he opened the front door, Matt found a large common area with a bar at the center surrounded by tightly packed tables and seating. Behind the counter, a big man in a greasy apron gave only a quick glance to Matt in the open door before immediately returning to whatever he was doing behind the bar.

As Matt approached, the man gruffly barked out, “Kid, unless you’re a paying customer, fuck right on off. No charity. No donations.” He never even bothered to look back up.

Matt braced himself and gathered all the cheer he could muster despite the man’s tone. “No, sir. I’m here to talk to Benny about the position that was posted. Can I assume that’s you, sir?”

That got the fat man to look back up. He scanned Matt with squinted eyes before asking “Lemme guess. Shitty Tier 1, kid?”

Matt swallowed hard before answering with what dignity he could, “Yes, sir.”

“Got any inkling what the job entails?”

“No, sir, but I’m willing to work hard. I’m—”

Benny cut him off. “Yeah, yeah. I already expect that, and I won’t put up with nothin’ less. What I need is a floater. Somebody who can do any job. Jump between ‘em as needed.”

Benny’s eyes flicked around, and then back at Matt. “Might mean you scrub toilets. Might mean you help the girls carry out food when it’s busy. Hours are from five in the morning to midnight, with a two-hour break ‘round noon. You get four hundred credits a month, no tips. I see you take a tip, I kick your ass out.”

Matt ground his teeth as much as he could without letting it show. The old bastard had him good. That kind of pay was excellent, even if it sounded like he’d be earning every credit.

The delve slot in Glesie was ten thousand credits, and that was his last lifeline. Simply too many people needed the low-tier rifts, and there were not enough of them to go around. Slots were bought, then later resold when the

delvers team outgrew the rift's Tier, so credits wouldn't be wasted. Nonetheless, the barrier to entry was high.

*A little more than two years. That's all. Call it two and a half for extra expenses. I can do this.*

Matt's decision was already made.

"Where do you want me to start, sir?"

“Matt, I need you to check the staff bathroom. The water is really slow,” Beatrice called out as she passed by.

“Is it the hot, the cold, or both, Bee?” Matt shot back from the maintenance room, where he was assembling a table. He got no response. Apparently, Beatrice had already returned to the slow lunch crowd.

Matt decided to finish the table first. They needed it more. Last week, a bar fight had destroyed nearly half of the tables in the common room before it was brought under control.

The problem was, they had a limited number of spare tables in reserve. It'd been just enough to keep the common room from having *too many* gaps, but just barely. To make the room feel less empty, they had spread the remaining ones out, which only worked because they hadn't been slammed yet. But with the weekend approaching, they needed the seating. So, Matt had been making tables in all his spare time to refill the common room, and then get their surplus back.

*If Benny wasn't such a tight ass with money and just bought better tables instead of treating them as disposable, I wouldn't be playing amateur carpenter every other week. Or if he just hired a bouncer.*

Matt finished the table and grabbed his plumbing bag. As he walked through the common room, he looked for Beatrice, but she was nowhere to be seen. He sighed. Of course, two customers were already at the bar, clearly

waiting to be helped. Matt didn't recognize them, which meant they were probably new customers.

*Where is Beatrice? Must be nice to be able to slip out for a dozen smoke breaks just because you sleep with the boss.*

That made him pause. Maybe she did earn the extra breaks. After all, no one else wanted to be near the man longer than absolutely necessary.

If Matt didn't help the new customers, Benny would have his ass despite it being Beatrice's job to man the common area.

Matt hurried over to the front desk part of the bar and greeted the guests. "Hello! How can I help you this afternoon, sir and ma'am?" Benny expected unfailing politeness to his guests and would side with any paying customer over his staff on any issue.

The man answered, "We'd like a room, please. But we don't know how long we'll be in the area. So, what can you do for around, umm...say a two-week stay, with the option of it going longer?" As he leaned forward, Matt got a better look at him under the bar's brighter lighting.

He was tall. Based on Matt's 5'10", he was at least 6'2", possibly up to 6'4". Dark hair and gray eyes with a face that, while hard, looked used to laughing. The woman next to him was probably 5'9". The ponytail of copper-colored hair made her green eyes pop even more in the dim lights in an almost disturbing contradiction to her classically attractive face.

What took Matt by surprise wasn't their good looks, it was that these two felt far stronger to his spiritual sense than the normal Tier 2s and Tier 3s that usually frequented Benny's Inn. Even stronger than the Tier 4s that came around, though that was beyond his ability to get a good sense of. He pegged them at the peak of Tier 4 or possibly even Tier 5.

It made Matt nervous. If these two wanted to start trouble, no one here could stop them. No one would even want to try.

Who knew what an enraged pair of Tier 5s could do?

Matt didn't want to find out.

*If they felt slighted, no one was there to greet them... I don't want to think about what Benny would do to me to keep in their good graces.*

Being fired would be the least of his problems in that situation. Rumors still circulated about former employees who were never seen again. Supposedly just rumors, but Matt wasn't interested in testing their veracity.

“Yes, sir. We have several packages that might suit your needs. If you'd like, we can offer a room for a week and, after that, you can just pay by the day at about the same rate. It comes with unlimited access to the training room and three meals a day. It would all be for just four hundred credits the first week and then sixty credits a day going forward. Is that something you'd be interested in?”

The woman answered, “We'll take it. Can you show us to our room, please? Then to the training room.” She swiped her hand at the payment reader, and Matt saw ‘accepted’ immediately appear.

That was a pleasant surprise. Despite Tier 1 mana stones being worth one hundred credits, the price was still enough that most people complained and tried to haggle.

“Yes, ma'am.” Matt did as requested.

The duo only stayed in their room long enough to drop off their bags. Then Matt led them to the training room, where the woman looked around at the training dummies in obvious disappointment.

*Why is she disappointed? The training aids are only years old and updated with the newest software for attack and defense patterns of Tier 4 speed. It's one of the few actually nice things this place has.*

“Is there something wrong, ma'am? The training aids go up to Tier 4, and the software was just up—”

Before Matt could finish, she waved him off and sighed. “No, it's fine. I just forgot where we were for a moment.” Her flashed smile took the sting out of the comment.

Matt decided to leave before she could take her obvious disappointment out on him. He had a sink to fix anyway.

*Just one more year. Keep your chin up. You got this.*

---

The alarm started blaring at 3:55 a.m., and Matt was down at the training room by 4:00 a.m. He could squeeze in two hours of practice time before Benny was up and assigned him tasks.

Matt started with a few warmup stretches, then used the variable weight bar to do strength training. Today was legs, which meant he would be walking like a newborn until tomorrow, but Matt had to admit he liked the tingle.

Using part of the PlanetNet vouchers Miles had given him, he had long ago found a training routine good for a young man looking to be a melee delver. It wasn't amazing, but it was free and didn't require proprietary supplements or a subscription to a sketchy netsite like so many others did.

As he completed each set, he recorded his weights and sets while trying to keep the fatigue at bay. For the last year, he'd put in as much physical training as he could manage while still needing to work twelve-hour days. While he had clear results to show for it, he was perpetually bone tired. Even when he slept, he felt tired.

Each rep was paired with the mantra, '*One more year.*' When the time came, he had to be ready to delve a rift with only his physical abilities.

After weight training, Matt took his usual practice-longsword down and started a Tier 2 combat sequence on the training dummy. It was faster and stronger than him at this setting and, with his wobbly legs, his ever-rotating collection of bruises would grow again.

Matt practiced in rounds of five minutes, trying to inflict damage while avoiding being hit as much as possible. Everything he read on the CityNet said injuries were what retired most low Tiered delvers.

With few Healers on the planet and fewer still who had their skill as public knowledge, most injuries could only be healed with mundane methods. That meant months of recovery if it was serious. Which meant months of not delving and not progressing. It meant months of wasted income and increased debt.

*I can't afford to get injured. Literally.*

*This sucks. Living on a low Tiered planet means anyone with a healing Talent or an innate healing skill immediately gets snatched up by the guilds and shipped off planet. It leaves only the lucky few who get a healing skill as a rift reward and don't take that opportunity to join a guild and do the same. Or the few idiots insane enough to sell such a valuable skill shard.*

*Can I blame them for bailing, though? I was going to do the same. Am I just bitter I couldn't escape this backwater shithole?*

Matt had to admit that sounded truer than he'd like.

The training aid landed a blow that brought Matt out of contemplation and back into the fight. With a pivot and an upward slash, Matt deflected the next blow and brought his sword down on the training aid's collarbone. The blow was hard and clean enough that the lights flashed red, signifying a 'kill.'

The aid had a programming oversight that didn't handle overhead attacks on its right side well. It was hard not to abuse it. Matt didn't want to develop habits that might get him killed but finding an obvious flaw in an opponent was possible, too.

The *beep* chimed, signifying the start of his three-minute rest interval.

He picked up his water bottle, wiped the sweat off his face, and stretched. When he noticed someone was in the other corner of the room, he came to a halt.

*Shit! Is it that late already? Am I late for work?*

Matt quickly checked his pad and saw it was only 4:23 a.m. Looking closer, there were actually two someone's loitering in the corner, the man and woman who had checked in yesterday.

The strong ones.

He didn't want any trouble, so he turned down the volume on his pad so the beeps wouldn't disturb the training duo. The last thing he wanted to do was piss off a customer, let alone a powerhouse who could probably level the building in seconds. Matt wasn't sure what a Tier 5 was capable of, but he knew they were stronger than most people on the planet. Lilly was only a Tier 4 world and, therefore, only had rifts up to Tier 4. Anyone higher Tier

than that needed to travel off-world to find higher Tier rifts to help them progress.

Matt continued to practice in intervals. As a Tier 1, he didn't have enough essence or physical cultivation to keep up with nonstop, high-intensity combat. Right now, he was only marginally stronger than he'd been before his Awakening.

During a lesson about high Tier cultivators at the orphanage, he had seen a recording of a competition between two Tier 15 participants. The combatants were so evenly matched the fight lasted over an hour of nonstop fighting. Matt's heart would explode if he fought at that intensity for that long.

Cultivation was the journey of power and strength, after all. The normal human limitations quickly fell away as you ascended.

Matt cleaned up his area and stored the training aid along the wall, preparing to go shower. As he crossed the common room toward the staff housing hall, he saw Zephyr. The old man had first stumbled in around two months ago and never quite stumbled back out. The entire time he'd been here, Zephyr followed a strict routine; he drank until he passed out on a table, woke up, and then kept drinking.

Matt had eventually taken it upon himself to make sure the grumpy old bastard got into his bed most nights and ate at least one meal a day. The look of loss and despair in the man's eyes was easy to recognize.

It stared back at him every time he looked in a mirror.

He saw it in everyone who'd lost people in the rift breaks.

He couldn't fix Zephyr, but he could at least stop him from killing himself before he worked past whatever loss had broken him.

"Come on, Zephyr. You need to sleep. Preferably in a bed. And drink this." Matt shoved his water bottle in the man's hand and glared till he finished it off.

"All right, give me your arm." He hooked an arm under Zephyr's and helped the man shuffle to his room. He grumbled nonsense at Matt the whole time.

*A Tier 4 reduced to this is just depressing. Who did he lose to end up like this? Spouse? Kid? Mother? Father? Brother? Sister? Some shitty combination of those?*

Matt fished the key card out of Zephyr's pocket and dumped the old man on his bed. Before he left, he filled a glass with water and left it on the nightstand.

*Is there really no escaping the pain? Will ascending to higher Tiers not even help?*

---

The next morning, Matt once again started in the training room. At 5:00 a.m., the redhead and the dark-haired man strolled in. Unlike yesterday, though, the redhead came over to his side of the gym. Once she confirmed she had his attention, the woman held out a hand to shake.

"The name's Dena. Sorry, I either didn't get your name when we checked in or forgot," she said with a smile that removed any sting from her forgetting his name.

"No, ma'am. That's my bad. I must not have introduced myself. The name is Matt." He took her hand and gave it a firm shake. "Is there something I can help with, ma'am?"

"There actually is. I'm in need of a sparring partner who specializes in longswords. My husband Eric, over there..." She pointed a thumb over her shoulder at the man, who just nodded along at the mention of his name. His concentration was fully aimed at a floating ball circling his hand. "He's too busy working on his mana control. Would you be interested? I'd pay the standard fee."

Matt *was* interested, but there was no way he could take Dena's money. If Benny found out, he'd be out on his ass so quick his head would spin. Then he'd be truly screwed.

"I'd be happy to help, ma'am. Though I can't accept any payment. Part of my duties is to assist guests in any way I can."

Dena gave him a look that said she sensed something was wrong but wasn't going to press it.

"How would you like to spar, ma'am? I'm only a Tier 1, so I won't be able to challenge you. But if you need to practice a certain move or technique, I'm happy to fill whatever role you need me to."

"I'm more looking to practice my staff technique against the longer weapon, so I'll reduce my speed and strength to match yours."

Matt shrugged. "Whenever you're ready, ma'am."

He pulled his longsword up into a neutral stance. When Dena moved, Matt sidestepped the thrusting butt of her staff and retaliated with a cut toward her leg, but she stepped out of range of the slash.

As the fight progressed, it became clear Dena wasn't very used to the staff. Which was probably the only thing that stopped her from easily annihilating him. Even with her speed and strength reduced to near his levels, Matt struggled to take the lead.

Whatever her normal weapons were, she was well accustomed to melee fighting, and it showed. The Tier 5 was always ready for every move he could think of, and it let her control the flow of the fight effortlessly.

She called the end of the spars at 6:00 a.m. after several rounds of combat. The breaks in between were purely for Matt's benefit. Even after an hour of training, she'd yet to sweat a single drop.

Reaching a higher Tier truly was stepping above the common man.

"Do you train here every day? Or do you have a set schedule? This was a far better practice than I thought it would be. You have good instincts with that longsword of yours."

Matt futilely tried to get his breathing under control before answering, "I'm here every morning, ma'am. Also, I'd be happy to spar with you as much as you'd like. It was far better than the training dummies even turned up to Tier 2."

"Good. I'll see you tomorrow, then."

---

Every morning for the next month and a half, Matt sparred with Dena. Occasionally, Eric would get fed up with his mana control exercises and also treat him to a thrilling longsword vs. longsword sparring match.

Apparently, the taller man was the dedicated melee fighter of the duo, but he'd found his mana control to be lacking recently and worked to shore that up.

The few suggestions Eric gave Matt about longsword combat had greatly increased his confidence with the blade. The advice was nothing revolutionary, but he shared tips about attacking from unexpected angles and a few feints that Matt found enlightening. Matt believed he was good, but the older man seemed to be one with the sword.

Surprisingly, Eric preferred an ax but said no melee fighter could rely on just one weapon. You had to be at least proficient with most of them. Monsters came in infinite variations. Some would eventually be resistant to or problematic to fight with your preferred weapon type.

Those were probably the best weeks of Matt's life. Dena and Eric were nice to him, didn't treat him like spare luggage they were trying to get rid of or as a charity case because his parents were dead.

The couple gave him respect, even though they were so much stronger than him. They could have treated him like something you'd scrape off a shoe and no one would have looked askance at them for it. He'd received invitations to eat with them a few times, and even Benny hadn't said anything during the occasional meal.

Matt swore to himself that when he was that strong, he would remember their kindness and strive to show the same to others. So many of the delvers coming through Benny's treated anyone weaker than them as sub-human and fawned over anyone stronger. It was all so fake. So meaningless. He wanted nothing to do with it.

"Hey, Matt. You don't have to answer if you don't want to, but I've got to ask. Why are you here?" Dena looked awkward as she asked. Even Eric looked up from his mana control trainer, which he put away to stand and join the conversation.

“You’re strong, good with a blade, and very hard-working. I’m just confused as to why you haven’t been snatched up by a guild or party already?”

Matt sighed. “No real secret to it. My Tier 1 Talent doesn’t allow for any mana cultivation. That invalidated my contract with the guild I was going to join. Any other guilds willing to take me had terms so absurd I might as well have sold myself into slavery.”

Dena winced, and Eric mirrored her expression. She opened her mouth to speak, clearly going to apologize for something that wasn’t her fault. So, Matt cut her off. He didn’t want their pity.

“That’s why I’m working here. Miles, the head guild representative, did what he could to help me. He wasn’t able to do much, but he pointed me in the direction I needed to go. That’s why I’m here, saving up money to purchase a slot in a Tier 1 dungeon. Everyone says there are no purely detrimental Talents, just paired talents you need to advance to fix. So, I’ll be a solo delver and advance on my own. It’s not even a purely bad thing, delving solo. I won’t have to share the essence, so I’ll advance faster, which will let me catch up with my age group.

“Hopefully, the problem is solved at Tier 3 and not Tier 25.” Matt tried to lighten the atmosphere with a joke, but the pair just stared at him for a long moment.

“Well, that’s a shit hand to get dealt. But you didn’t give up, which is the most important part. If this planet were a higher Tier, you’d be picked up by a guild for that alone. So many delvers lose the will to continue, the drive to advance. And that’s not something a Talent can compensate for.” Eric shook his head.

On that sour note, Matt went about his day, resolved to avoid thinking about his Talent more than he had to.

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That night, another big fight broke out; one worse than the usual two-to-six-person brawl.

The party of delvers responsible for starting it came in later than most, so the common area was already crowded with parties eating and drinking. They sauntered in as if they'd just found the crown jewels of the Emperor himself.

Their attitude attracted everyone as they walked to the item identifier. Without hesitation, their leader walked up to the man about to use it and shoved him out of the way violently.

The air of anticipation built as they placed a skill shard in the reader. Skill shards were a rare drop at this planet's Tier, but they could vary in usefulness. This group was so cocky and sure they got a good skill, they didn't even bother to set the readout to be sent privately to their pads. Instead, the process was displayed on the large screen for the whole crowd to see.

The reason for their arrogance was readily apparent when the first lines of text appeared.

*Analyzing skill shard...*

*Cracked skill shard detected. Requesting a higher authority to complete analysis.*

A cracked skill shard was a rare variation of shard modified off the baseline. The change could be anything and finding two that were identical was said to be impossible.

The most famous cracked skill Matt knew of was a cracked version of [Shadow Sword]. The original skill projected a copy of the weapon to the side during a strike. Nothing crazy. The 'shadow' was only a quarter the strength of the original strike, making it useful but not amazing.

The infamous cracked version allowed the user to summon fully autonomous shadow swords. This was superior to even comparable skills like [Sword Minion] and [Sword Doppelganger]. The former needed real

blades and the user's concentration to control them. The latter was just a single sword that, while autonomous and equal in strength to the original, lacked durability and could be shattered with a powerful enough hit.

That [Cracked Shadow Sword] let the user summon *endless* autonomous copies at only a quarter strength. Having hundreds of blades that worked together in perfect harmony made it a skill everyone feared.

Matt blanked on the name of the individual who had gotten the skill but could remember they'd carved themselves out an earldom spanning several new planets with that skill alone.

*Are we going to see the birth of a legend here?*

Matt hoped not. Desperately.

If the cracked skill turned out to be a useful variation and not neutral or detrimental, this night would turn into a bloodbath. These idiots should have never revealed it publicly. They could get themselves and, more importantly, Matt, killed in the rush to steal the skill.

Just as Matt moved to escape the crowd on the cusp of exploding, the man who'd been holding the skill, and who was probably the party leader, got everyone's attention. Still with his back to the crowd, in a voice dripping with arrogance, he called out, "I'd love to meet the people stupid enough to attack the son of Brackus of Brackus Holdings."

*That's what he's relying on to keep him safe?*

Matt was flabbergasted. Brackus Holdings was a local courier service. While they had some influence and power, they weren't nearly enough of a deterrent to stop people from killing his arrogant ass. The only difference was now they'd make sure to kill all the witnesses, too.

He spun, intent on slipping out, but saw Zephyr passed out on a table not too far from the item identifier. For a moment, Matt debated leaving the old man to his fate. It was his own fault he'd chosen a spot right where the action would be fiercest.

*Just leave him. Getting yourself killed to save a drunk isn't worth it. Just go.*

Matt cursed at himself even as he started toward the old man. In the end, he couldn't just stand by. Inaction was a choice; one he refused to make.

The trick would be getting close without attracting attention or triggering a stampede toward the party at the item identifier.

The item identifier beeped right as Matt slid up to Zephyr's table.

The noise grabbed everyone's attention, including his.

*Analysis complete...*

*Skill shard identified as [Cracked Phantom Armor].*

*Original Skill Description: Tier 14 skill. Pre-charge 200 or more mana into the skill. When a lethal blow is detected, skill will automatically activate and block the attack. Alternatively, skill can be activated at the user's discretion.*

*Cracked Skill Description: Channel mana into the skill to activate [Phantom Armor], which will then block physical and elemental damage with efficiency depending on the rate at which mana is channeled into the skill.*

*Rating: **Detrimental** - Extremely niche or limited use due to mana cost being continuous. Crack turns a highly sought-after, life-saving skill into a costly and inefficient general defense skill. Possibly recommended for mages with a strong emphasis on Mana Regeneration cultivation.*

Matt swallowed. No one would be getting murdered for *that* skill shard. However, judging by the look on the party leader's face and the crowd's growing laughter, a brawl was about to break out anyway.

Matt hoisted Zephyr up and whispered, "Start moving. We need to move. Now."

Before he could get Zephyr balanced on his wobbly legs, the man who had been pushed aside earlier spat at the party. "Hah! That's what you arrogant pricks get for cutting—"

Before he could finish, the son of Brackus of Brackus Holdings snatched the skill shard out of the reader and hurled it at the man. While he ducked to the side of the projectile, his attacker took that opportunity to bash him in the face. With the first punch thrown, both parties went at it, and it immediately spread to the rest of the room.

People took the opportunity to get aggression out or settle grudges.

Matt pulled Zephyr along, no longer trying to be subtle and just trying to find the edge of the fighting. He didn't want to get crippled by an errant blow from someone multiple Tiers above him. Benny wouldn't cover the cost of healing him after all.

They had almost made it when something hit him from behind. As he and Zephyr tumbled to the ground, Matt picked out a gleam under a broken chair leg.

It was the skill shard.

Matt's world slowed.

He glanced at Zephyr and saw the man was completely out of it, eyes closed, mouth slack.

*I have to take the chance. It may be useless for most, but I could use it. I just hope this doesn't get me killed.*

Matt quickly grabbed the chair leg, and the skill shard with it. As he pulled Zephyr back to his feet, he raised the chair leg threateningly while letting the skill shard slip into his sleeve.

Carefully, he swung the chair leg at someone's back and let that knock the wooden weapon out of his hands. Then he switched the arm he held Zephyr with, trapping the skill shard in his elbow.

The feeling of the small crystal shard pressing into his flesh haunted Matt's every step and pumped adrenaline through his veins like never before.

Once he and Zephyr were out of the brawl, he carried the old drunk to his room, quickly dumping him on the bed before heading to the maintenance room. As Matt closed the door and ensured he couldn't possibly be seen by Zephyr, and before he fully stepped into the hallway in view of the cameras,

he shoved his right hand into his pocket and let the skill shard slide down his sleeve and fall in.

His heart was racing, but not from the fight. He had been an unwilling participant in more than one of them. No, it was the danger of the stolen skill causing him to spiral.

When Matt entered the maintenance room, he prepared to make tables and chairs as a cover. Benny popped in not five minutes later, once the noise died down a bit.

“Oh, good, you already started. And I saw you getting the old man out of there. I can’t charge him rent if he’s dead. So, good work.”

Matt resisted the urge to scowl when Benny made callous statements like that. He had practice. The comments were commonplace.

“No problem, Boss. What’s the damage? Do we need more tables or chairs?”

“Tables. People can eat standing up, but no one wants to eat on their lap. If they wanted to sit, they wouldn’t use my chairs as fucking weapons.” With that, Benny stomped out.

Matt let out the breath he’d been holding.

He’d almost shit himself when Benny said, ‘I saw you.’ Matt expected Benny to check on him, but if he had seen him steal the skill shard, Benny would have just killed him. Useful or not and lazy as he was, Benny still treated his customers like they were his only source of income. Which they were.

Matt knew he shouldn’t be checked on for the rest of the night, and there were no cameras in the maintenance room. The spare tables and chairs were kept in a separate storage room, so there should be no interruptions while he hid the skill shard.

If the arrogant party complained the skill shard was missing, which Matt bet they would, Benny would try and appease them by searching the staff. It was Benny’s standard practice, so he could say he did his best, then do nothing else.

Matt grabbed a finished table and wedged it under the door handle. Then he went to the desk and pulled out his pad.

It was an older model that had seen numerous repairs by Matt and the previous owners. He pulled out a shim, carefully pried off the back, and immediately ripped out the speaker. The pad's sound system was subpar and intermittently went out, so it was no real loss.

In the newly opened space, Matt carefully placed the skill gem. It was a close fit. Thankfully, the shard was oblong, a little less than an inch long and a quarter inch wide in the middle.

He quickly inspected his work and guesstimated it would work. Most of the cramped internals were taken up by the screen. The processor was small, and the mana battery was even smaller. He had the skill shard nestled in next to the battery right where the speaker had been.

Matt grabbed a hot glue gun. After an eternity waiting for it to heat up, he applied a drop under the skill shard, stopping it from rattling and giving its hiding place away.

As fast as his shaking hands could move, he closed the pad back up and checked to make sure it still worked. Nothing seemed amiss. Matt shook it to see if he could hear anything move.

Not a sound. It was perfect.

After cleaning up and putting everything away, Matt smiled and was about to get back to making tables when he saw the small speaker. He couldn't leave it out. It wasn't like anyone else came in here, but leaving any clue to his theft was stupid, suicidally so.

He proceeded to smash the small speaker until only an indiscernible powder remained, which was tossed to intermingle with the dust and debris already in the shop.

With the evidence of his theft taken care of, Matt removed the table he used to bar the door against interruptions and began making new tables. After about an hour, the shouting started. Matt repressed a smile. Shortly after that, Benny came in with the irate party leader.

As soon as Brackus's idiot son saw Matt, he started screaming, "Did you steal it, boy?! I'll fucking kill you if you took it!"

Inside, Matt smiled. That was all he needed to hear. It was a question, not a statement.

Outwardly, Matt put on a surprised face and stood up. "Steal what, sir? I didn't steal anything. Benny would kill me if I did, and I've been working here for over a year. Never stole a thing."

The man didn't seem to care, but the show was for Benny not him. He had a wand in his hand he pointed at Matt.

Matt knew what it was, a mana detector. These things only worked at close ranges but would find Mana Concentrations. A skill shard would be detected if said skill shard wasn't right next to a mana battery, which would overpower any reading with unstructured mana. Even if he replaced the battery with the skill shard, so long as no one tried to mess with the pad, they wouldn't think anything was amiss but a broken pad.

Even if the wand picked something up. Mana was supposed to be there after all.

Matt hadn't expected the man to have a detector like this on hand, but it was a standard tool used at the orphanage to check for any kind of mana contraband. There was nothing to be concerned about. While he personally hadn't smuggled anything in, kids liked to brag about their successes, and the best smuggling methods were well-known by all the orphans.

This was a very reliable way to beat the scanners.

"C'mere, Matty. Let Mr. Brackus scan you. Doubt you took it but, if you did, say so now. Even if you swallowed the thing, the wand will find it. Don't do nothin' stupid," Benny recited through a bored expression, clearly only humoring the man.

With nothing to fear, Matt walked over and let the pompous ass run the wand over him, focusing on his stomach, shoes, and pockets. After a murmured curse, he waved the wand over all the drawers. When he repeatedly found nothing out of the ordinary, he stormed out.

Wanting to reinforce his alibi, he stopped Benny before he left. “Wouldn’t it be more likely that someone else took it and absorbed it already?”

Benny yawned out, “Nah. Not that anyone would want to take that shit skill, but it takes days to absorb one.” As he was leaving, he examined the tables Matt had stacked in a corner. “That’s enough for tonight, just get some sleep and finish tomorrow. All this ruckus over a great life-saving skill turned into a shitty defensive one. Whoever heard of a channeled defensive skill? No one can afford that kind of mana cost.”

As Benny turned the corner, Matt heard the murmuring turn to ‘arrogant whelps who throw skill shards then want them back.’

Matt was surprised Benny didn’t try and get him to stay up all night to finish. He had before. “Thanks, Boss. I’ll be sure to finish it first thing tomorrow.”

Not caring if Benny heard him, Matt took the excuse offered and fled to his room.

### 3

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Lying in the dark, Matt cradled the pad in his hands. He had tried to get some rest, but the anticipation and thrill of getting away with the theft kept sleep away.

He looked at his pad again. This was his lifeline. Some part of him kept expecting Benny or the party leader to burst into the room and snatch the pad and skill shard out of his hands. But all was gloriously quiet.

Delving without a skill was common at lower levels, but the casualty rate was much higher for those unlucky delvers.

Matt already decided he wouldn't let this pad out of his sight for the remainder of the year. This skill was near perfect for him. A channeled skill would allow him to use his full 1 mana per second of mana generation while he was under 0.1 mana.

Matt used his PlanetNet voucher time to check on the status of the Glesie public rift. The purchase price for a spot was still ten thousand credits and holding steady. A while back, it had spiked to eleven thousand for a few weeks before dropping to nine thousand for a bit. Now, it was back at its usual price. He then quickly searched for average mana stats for lower Tier mages and found a guide put out by the Juniper family that had the barony over the planet.

The guide was only recommended up to Tier 3, then more advanced versions had to be purchased. It focused on directed mana cultivation and its

three aspects: Maximum Mana, Mana Regeneration, and Mana Concentration.

Fascinated, Matt read on. The orphanage hadn't covered the nuances of directed cultivation. They taught that as you gathered essence from killing monsters in rifts, the person dealing the final hit absorbed the lion's share of the essence.

Most teams wore devices that automatically divided the essence amongst the rest of the party. Ratios could even be changed so one person could get nearly all the essence, which was how crafters got the necessary essence to advance without having the skills to fight monsters themselves.

Once out of the rift, you would process the essence, allocating it to either your body or mana.

Cultivators could direct how they allocated the essence. Physical and mana were the two sides of cultivation. After that choice, you could target sub aspects of each, which was called 'directed cultivation,'

The other option was to let the essence go where it was needed, called undirected cultivation. It was an easy way to shore up weak areas.

The guide described directed cultivation as making mountains to have specialization and letting the valleys get filled in, raising the baseline to build your peaks even higher, is called undirected cultivation.

All power needed a strong foundation, after all.

None of these details were discussed at the orphanage. They were just told that the group they joined would have their own guidelines and recommendations specific to their position.

The guide said the goal at Tier 3 was to have 1,000 mana and Mana Regeneration of about one mana every two and a half minutes. The guide explained this was the ideal ratio for directed mana cultivation at lower levels, with 70% directed mana cultivation and 30% undirected physical.

The guide strongly warned against attempting directed physical cultivation until Tier 3, and only when the appropriate classes were taken. The guides specifically for it were not available until after the classes were taken.

*What's the difference? Why are you allowed directed mana cultivation but not physical at Tier 1?* Matt wondered but got back to reading. The information was interesting but not particularly useful until he could collect essence in a rift. It was still something to do, so he kept reading while he couldn't sleep.

The general idea was that a mage would regenerate 576 mana a day. It also wasn't recommended to delve more than once every three days, and delve slots reflected that. That would let mages fully regenerate their mana pool in under two days. That extra mana could then be used for practicing their skills or stored in rechargeable mana stones for quick mana recharges in a rift.

The rechargeable mana stones were particularly recommended. Because it was mana from your own mana pool, there wouldn't be any time needed to aspect the mana to match your natural mana pool. The guide also recommended emptying and refilling any low Tier rechargeable mana stones after a week because the mana would un-aspect, turning into ambient mana.

Un-aspected mana was great for powering devices but was hell on a cultivator's mana channels. Directly using it could cause near permanent damage.

The last and most interesting part of the guide covered Mana Concentration. Allocating any essence into Mana Concentration before Tier 5 was flatly not recommended.

Mana Concentration shrunk your other mana cultivation aspects to make your mana denser and more concentrated. Denser mana gave your spells more power for the same cost, but the returns were terrible.

To double the power of a spell with Mana Concentration, a Tier 5 mage would need to diminish their base Maximum Mana and Mana Regeneration values back to what they had at Tier 1. That was at a 70% essence allocation to mana through all the preceding Tiers.

That brought Matt up short.

*What an insanely bad return.*

The amount of essence a Tier 5 had would be massive. In the early Tiers, advancing to the next Tier required ten times the essence of the previous one. If it took ten essence to reach the peak of Tier 1, then it took a hundred to reach the peak of Tier 2.

It was why people didn't farm low Tier rifts despite them being safer. The monsters didn't have enough essence to make it worthwhile. Killing a single monster in a Tier 2 rift was worth the equivalent of killing a dozen in a Tier 1 rift.

The amount of mana and Mana Regeneration a Tier 5 mage would have would be insane, completely incomparable to a Tier 3. Doubling the power of each skill would force them to give all of that up to reset back to the base of around 100 mana and one mana every twenty minutes.

Mana Concentration, for all its downsides, was an important part of mana cultivation. Maximum Mana and Mana Regeneration had diminishing returns when applied to the allocated essence after a certain point. The spirit could only grow so much without strain, and Mana Concentration increased that cap farther than the cultivators lost from Maximum Mana and Mana Regeneration when allocating to it, eventually allowing a mage to have millions of mana.

Which just proved going from Tier 5 mana levels to Tier 1 wasn't worth it. But, then again, this guide was tailored for lower Tier mages. Matt doubted this was the whole truth.

It was a good warning, though. Matt was sure many a young mage would have crippled their mana cultivation early on without that warning. They would be in the same boat as Matt, unable to cast a single spell but without his advantages.

Matt stroked his pad. His Tier 1 Talent wasn't perfect, but this skill shard synergized with it amazingly.

Before falling asleep, he plugged the pad in so the mana battery would charge overnight and tried to drift off.

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The vibration of his pad woke Matt up. It was 3:55 a.m.

Panicked, Matt clumsily tapped around the pad, finally opening a video to hear nothing. Sighing, he flopped back to his bed.

All was well. The skill shard hadn't managed to run off in the night somehow. It hadn't all been a dream. Still exhausted, he forced himself to get moving. Midnight had been rolling around when he'd finally fallen asleep.

*I can nap during the day in the maintenance room.*

Despite his weariness, he arrived at the training room only a smidgeon late. According to his schedule, today was only flexibility training. If it had been a strength training day, Matt didn't know how he would have done anything. Stretching was a perfect way to wake himself up before Dena and Eric came down to spar.

When they arrived, both headed straight to his corner. Matt was surprised. Eric had recently said his control training was almost done, so he was doubling down on the practice to get it over with quicker.

As soon as they got close, Eric announced, "Matt, Dena and I talked it over last night. You have talent, and it's wasted here. We want to help."

Matt started to say it wasn't necessary. He didn't want to take charity from them. They were too kind. It would make him feel dirty.

He thought back to last night, the skill shard he'd swiped. Did he still even deserve help after that? If it had been theirs, he knew he wouldn't have stolen it. The arrogant stranger was another matter.

Before he could get anything out, Eric continued, "It's not charity. You're going to earn it in a spar. Unless they have a Talent that boosts physical cultivation, a Tier 1 fighter just landing a hit on a Tier 3 is more than enough to earn them a guild invitation. Anywhere but here, at least. It's actually a pretty standard test in the Empire proper. Though they usually make the fight against a peak Tier 2 with a 70% split."

Dena returned from the weapons rack with a pair of blunted daggers.

Instinctively, Matt wanted to reject her offer. On the other hand, though, this might be his best shot at escape from this shit hole city. He wouldn't

need to spend another nine months slaving away. He could escape with his stolen skill shard all the sooner.

Dena clearly saw his internal struggle because she preempted, “Remember, this isn't charity. You're either going to earn the hit or not. And I'll be fighting at Tier 3 strength and speed.”

The hesitation didn't completely disappear from Matt's face, so Eric followed up, “We won't force you, but sponsoring a young talent isn't unheard of. It's really not that uncommon in the Empire proper. You're hardly the first person to ever come out of the Awakening with a...*less than ideal* Tier 1 Talent. The Emperor doesn't want potentially strong people to languish in the gutters because they were born on low Tier planets or with weak Talents.”

“That's where the Path of Ascension comes in. A sponsor even gets rewarded if their sponsee does well. Make it to Tier 5, we get some small rewards. Make it to Tier 10, we keep getting more and more, all the way up to Tier 25.”

Eric looked wistful as he continued, “The Empire *wants* powerhouses, *needs* them. But it also won't waste resources on those who won't put them to good use. This system helps all involved, but we won't recommend anyone if they don't have the drive to advance.”

Matt swallowed. It didn't sound like he'd be taking advantage of them. But what would happen if he didn't do well?

Dena anticipated his question. “If you stop advancing or die before Tier 5, you simply get marked as a failure. If a sponsor has too many failed recommendations on their record, they lose the ability to sponsor more people. That's really just in place to stop people from recommending everyone they see to play the odds.”

A final bit of reticence held Matt back, so Eric added, “This moment right here, this is exactly how we got started, two street rats from a Tier 5 planet. Someone saw potential and gave us a chance to prove ourselves. There are thousands of low Tier planets in the Empire, Matt. More great people than you probably think come from places like this.”

He and Dena shared a smile, reminiscing on their own beginnings.

That decided it for Matt. “All right. I'll do it. I'll rise all the way to Tier 25 eventually and get you those rewards.” Matt tightened his grip on the training longsword. Who didn't want to complete The Path? Who didn't want to be a legend?

Dena laughed. “That's the spirit!”

With that, she lunged at him and started the most intense fight of Matt's life. She moved faster than in any previous spar. Matt strained his eyes just trying to make out some of her movements. They were mere flickers that left lines of pain in their wake.

As the five-minute mark passed, Matt realized there wouldn't be rounds between engagements to catch his breath in or rethink his strategy. This would only end when he gave up or landed a hit.

Matt's resolve hardened. He hadn't chanced stealing the skill shard because he was afraid of a risk or a challenge. He could take some risks in a spar. So, he concentrated on keeping his movement defensive, disregarding Dena's strength and speed advantage. Her Tier 5 endurance meant she could just attack at full speed until he collapsed. Even if she kept her speed to a Tier 3.

Matt sent out more attacks, probing his opponent. His was the longer blade, so offense was his best defense. When she closed in, her more maneuverable daggers had the advantage. One could tie down his blade while she got in vicious stabs with the other.

Switching his attacking pattern bought Matt some breathing room. With a moment to think, he concluded Dena's lack of skill with her staff did not extend to her daggers. The woman had mentioned she preferred them as her main weapon, and it showed. She was intimately familiar with her range and light on her feet, which let her evade every blow as if she saw the future.

Matt stayed patient. He wasn't trying to kill her just land a single blow. Not an easy feat on someone with much higher physical abilities than a Tier 1 like him. While each Tier didn't quite double the power, if two people had the same allocation ratios, the difference was significant.

Higher Tier meant more essence. More essence meant more power.

The golden rule stated total essence distributed equaled increased power. It was the reason the higher Tiers required more than ten times the essence to rank up and was also why the higher Tiers had such massive jumps in power between them.

After another few exchanges, the fight stalled. Dena was content with sending probing attacks or blocking with her daggers or forearm guards.

The more the fight dragged on, the more the fatigue and desperation set in. His energy was flagging. Running himself dry would spell the end of this chance. There was only one choice left; he had to go for broke, attacking with everything he had left at once.

Disregarding defense and leaning to a fully offensive strategy, he no longer conserved his energy and, instead, bet everything on the exchange. He tried to push her into a particular trap without being too obvious. The flurry of blows kept Dena on the defensive until Matt used the rebound of her blocking a side slash to step left and forward, closing in on her. He brought the longsword around with every last drop of power and speed he could muster.

Matt was 5'10, and Dena was only 5'8, maybe 5'9. It meant Matt held the slightest reach advantage even before their weapon choice came into play. Dena was more experienced and faster than him, though. As the blade swept in, she danced back from the blow.

His desperate plan failed. Matt wanted to curse but couldn't waste the breath. As he surged forward to follow up, Dena just kept retreating, holding her hands up.

Matt halted, fear gripping him.

*I didn't hit her. Is she just calling it now because I wasn't good enough?*

The next words he heard shocked him, "Well done, Matt! I knew you had it in you."

Off to the side, Eric even clapped a few times.

Matt was flabbergasted. He missed. They claimed it wasn't charity, but what was this obvious faking of a hit? At least they could have made it more

convincing.

“I didn't hit you, though?” Matt protested. Somehow, charity from these two felt worse than failure.

Dena grinned broadly and raised her right arm to reveal her side. “Think again! You grazed me right here.”

Matt saw nothing, but Eric nodded right along.

“You don't have to sponsor me. I couldn't make my part of the deal, so you don't have to feel—”

“Matt! You *did* hit me. Look!”

Dena reached down and pulled the workout shirt over her head. Matt couldn't help but stare, she was only wearing a sports bra now, and she had a light sheen of perspiration on her athletic body that reflected the light. She had freckles that ran down her upper chest down to her—

Matt jerked his eyes up to meet their combined smirks and felt his face flush hot.

Pale skin and a trail of freckles tempted him to look down again but, with an effort of willpower he didn't know he had, Matt kept his eyes on hers.

Dena had righted the shirt and showed him a small mark under the right armpit. Matt had to squint, but he could see it, if barely. A small diagonal line was only distinguishable from the fabric's weave because it didn't run parallel.

He *had* done it!

That was truly the smallest of strikes, but it was all he needed. Relief washed through him. As the stress of failing left him, his body wanted to collapse, being hopped up on adrenaline no longer enough to keep him standing.

Matt turned to Eric and Dena's smiling faces. Eric tossed Matt a small bag he definitely hadn't been holding before. “Well, congratulations, Matt. You did what most can't even dream of. Striking a person two Tiers up is one hell of an accomplishment.”

“I don't know how I can repay you both.”

Dena waved him off before he could continue. “Advancing will be more than enough thanks. Let alone the rewards we’ll get the more you progress. But if you really want to pay us back, pay it forward once you get the chance. When you get to Tier 5, you can recommend someone for the same program. Don't waste it, but don't forget about it either.”

“In the bag, I left you more instructions and a train ticket.”

As Eric spoke, Matt managed to turn to him. Keeping his eyes off the woman standing not two feet away was a challenge.

Eric didn’t seem to mind. “Though, you might want to get moving. The train leaves at eight, and the station isn't exactly next door. Unless you’d like to spend more time here, maybe?”

That statement cut through the cacophony of thoughts in Matt's head.

*Not next door... That's an understatement. If I leave now, I'll still have to run at least part way to make it.*

Matt gaped at them, unable to express his gratitude.

Dena took pity on him. “Best get a move on. I know I look *good*, but I don’t think I look so good you’d pass up an opportunity to bail on this dump.”

Matt flushed hot again, but her teasing also spurred him into action. Calling his thanks over his shoulder, Matt snatched up the pad from next to the wall and ran to his room. Then he had to find Benny to tell him he was done.

Freedom awaited.

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Matt dashed down the road. A train couldn’t be seen in the station, and he was terrified it had arrived and left early. Checking the pad clenched in his hands, the time only said 7:32 a.m., but he couldn’t shake the fear he’d be stranded here.

He pulled up to the station with a torrent of sweat rolling down his back. Bouncing on his back was the pack holding his clothes and the few other