

Chapter 339

Contrary to his expectations, the older Ascenders were content to spend the entire two weeks leading up to the ceremony lounging around in Lila's room. He had half expected them to have their own things to do, but all of them seemed more interested in hanging out in person.

Matt, Liz, Aster, Allie, and Zack, on the other hand, had never been inside the Corporation Minkalla space station and wanted to explore. Which matched up with the rest of Team Zero who had already been exploring.

Zack left with Susanne fairly quickly off to go do their own thing; it was the first proper date they had been able to have in at least twenty years, subjective-time. Seeing that, Matt and Liz decided to copy them and split off from the others who decided to keep together.

He hadn't expected to see anything interesting, after all he had already been in Minkalla, but that thought was killed almost immediately.

The very first floor they entered was centered around selling skill shards. There were hundreds of people showcasing the skills they had inventory of as well as others rushing from person to person buying things up.

Matt wasn't too interested in any of the actual skills, but he enjoyed walking around absorbing the ambiance.

Phoenix Liz cocked her head and sniffed a few times before squawking quietly. Human Liz translated the thought. "Oh, I smell something interesting in this direction."

Together they weaved their way through the crowds until they found a room filled with dozens of games of chance. Following Liz's nose they made their way through a dozen more rooms until they found a beauty care section. Phoenix Liz had to flap her wings to stop from falling forward as the two humans were too slow.

Matt just looked on in amusement as Liz grabbed a small jar of orange lotion. Matt had to nudge human Liz to the side as she and Phoenix Liz were seemingly trying to inhale the substance.

It smelled slightly citrusy but that was the only smell he could identify. Leaning back he shrugged. "What's so interesting about it?"

Both Liz's looked at him like he was crazy. "Can't you smell it?"

Matt shrugged again. "Not really. It's light citrus."

Both Lizzes looked at him with pity. "Rub a dab on your neck."

As he did so Liz turned back to the smiling shopkeeper who Matt finally noticed was only a Tier 15.

“What is this stuff?”

The young man beamed. “It’s Familia’s newest product and designed with bird bloodlines in mind, especially those with an exceptional sense of smell. It’s made with a proprietary blend of a few herbs as well as everything listed on the back.”

As Matt rubbed a small dab of the lotion on his neck Phoenix Liz fluttered over to him and started nuzzling his neck with little coo’s.

Human Liz seemed to have a better handle of herself. “What’s the price?”

“Five hundred ninety nine kilocredits a bottle. What size order are you thinking about purchasing?”

“What are your sizes?”

“A box comes with fifteen bottles and a pallet comes with twenty seven boxes. We can even do large scale orders and arrange shipping with an Empire merchant, though that comes with additional cost. Alternatively, we can simply deliver here and you can arrange your own transportation.”

Liz nodded and asked a few follow-up questions while Matt tried to reframe what they had purchased. He knew that the Corporations used credits instead of mana stones, even for higher Tier transactions, but that wasn’t how he thought normally so he did some mental conversions to put the price into Empire standard.

Current exchange rates, which did fluctuate, put six hundred kilocredits around... a Tier 18 mana stone. Or it could be a few Tier 8 skills because they also usually sold for around a megacredit.

The core of the issue was that the Corporations didn’t value things based on Tier. Unlike the Empire, where a mana stone of that Tier served as the fundamental unit for a given Tier’s economy, in the Corporations, mana stones were valued primarily on how much mana they held. There was still some markup for the higher-Tier stones due to their mana to size ratios, but it still meant that a Tier 18 mana stone might only be worth a few dozen times more than a Tier 8 stone in the Corporations.

Amusingly enough, it meant that he actually created more value for unit of time with his Talent in the Corporation’s economy than the Empire’s.

While he was busy trying to figure out how much they were spending, Liz finished her transaction for three pallets, which came to about two hundred and forty megacredits. Translating that to Empire standards it was one Tier 32 mana stone, if directly converted, which they weren’t doing.

They had *thousands* of Tier 8 skills lying around in their portable house and that was how Liz paid the salesman, which made the price feel downright cheap.

But that didn't explain what she needed over a thousand bottles of lotion for. That much would last well over a century, and it seemed excessive to buy that much at once.

When he asked she simply replied. "Do you think I'll get my chance to buy any of these once mom smells this? Not a chance. She's going to buy millions, if not the recipe itself."

Shoving her face into his neck she took a deep breath. "Oh that smells soooo good."

She tried to go in for a second sniff but got smacked by Phoenix Liz for her efforts.

Seeing that, Matt just considered it money well spent.

Grinning, he pulled her along to check out some of the other stalls. They didn't find anything else quite so interesting but it was fun just browsing through the random stalls together, seeing all the odd bits and bobs that had either been pulled out of Minkalla or brought into the system by the Corporations.

It was a great way to spend an afternoon and better still when they met up with the rest of the group and did some exploring together.

Liz was also proven right and the moment they arrived at the Empire quarters a blur of fiery chicken raced at them trying to smell Matt's new lotion.

Liz tried to hide the source but cracked almost immediately as Mara started grooming her phoenix body.

Answers pulled from her daughter Mara vanished for a whole ten seconds before she came running back, wings trying to hold a dozen bottles of the lotion as she speed waddled back to her and Leon's room.

Aster leaned forward and took a sniff but shrugged. "I don't get it. Is it an aphrodisiac?"

Liz rolled her eyes. "Not technically. It just smells *really* good."

A chortling chuffing sound came from the other side of their quarters hallway and two non-human figures came walking their way with Manny escorting them.

The first was a turtle-like man, complete with scaly skin and a massive rocky shell on his back. The shell itself looked almost like a miniature world, mountain peaks and lakes and forests spread out, wisps of clouds drifting through the landscape. If there were any people or cities, they were too small to see, but he didn't dare look too closely at a Tier 50. Tobias, the First Shepherd of the Monster Collective wasn't an *enemy* of the Empire, but politeness was always the best policy for people twice your Tier.

Next to him was a very large lion-like person he *didn't* recognize, and needed to query his [Library] to recall notable individuals before he had any luck. He was fairly clearly a chimera, with very pale yellow fur contrasting strongly with metallic bronze wings folded along his back, but Matt didn't know all of the Collective's super soldiers. After a moment, he got his answer: Kar'tan, the first chimera and the only one the Federation had managed to make. He was a

fairly reclusive figure, and while he'd had a fair few impressive stories from their war of independence and some tragic ones from before, he hadn't been seen much in public since then.

That he was *here* was surprising.

Manny made the introductions before he and Tobias turned and left, leaving just the chimera.

Kar'tan dipped his head to them. "Good to meet you all. If I could talk to you two privately, that would be ideal. Matthew is welcome to join us of course."

Matt and Aster followed Liz into their room where they all took a seat, watching as one of the chairs adjusted to match Kar'tan's size.

His smile, while ostensibly friendly, set Matt on edge as the hand sized teeth came into view. "You are a spitting image of your mother, Elizabeth. While I don't have the honor of calling them close friends, both of your parents fought in the war when we were freed and I owe them a personal debt of gratitude for that. This is why it pains me to come asking for more instead of bringing gifts."

They had been warned that the Monster Collective would be interested in their new bloodlines by Mara when Liz and Aster had decided to advance down that path. As far as he knew neither of them were too interested in sharing, but that may have changed.

Liz nodded politely. "My parents always expressed regret that your people weren't helped until it became a good political excuse, despite their advocacy."

Kar'tan shrugged a wing as if he wasn't bothered, but even Matt could read his anger at the fact. "It is simply a truth in the way the realm works, but I still appreciate their efforts. Without them and people like them, the cause would have been crushed long before any help would arise."

With a full body shake, the large lion man changed the subject. "Onto happier topics! I was overjoyed when news came forward about you two having evolved your bloodlines. Aster, your creation of a Rank 1 Aurora bloodline astounded even my greatest researchers. We had thought the possibility of making a Rank 1 bloodline with a Level 4 mana type a distant possibility at best, but you managed it. I know the pressures of modifying one's bloodline, but to do so while resisting the pull of advancing up a rank? That is something I don't believe that even I could have managed. Let me express our heartfelt congratulations on your success."

Matt thought that was just a figure of speech but Kar'tan let out a long low roar.

Once he finished he looked over to Liz and repeated his roar. "And another for you, Elizabeth, for your feat of creating both a blood fire mana type and bloodline. A wondrous Level 4 mana type that combines the best aspects of both of your parents, as well as your own uniqueness. It is truly a marvelous accomplishment."

Liz seemed uncomfortable at the praise, but Aster preened under it. “And I intend to make the jump to space ice as well, though I don’t know if I want to stay Rank 1 for that or advance to Rank 2 with the breakthrough.”

Kar’tan nodded. “Both have their advantages and disadvantages. Be aware that Level 5 mana types, like your space ice would be, are oftentimes even more challenging to integrate with a bloodline than is normal. I wouldn’t call it *impossible*, certainly not in the presence of Alphas, but such a thing would be very difficult indeed. On the other hand, advancing to Rank 2 with the creation would greatly lessen the strain on you, while remaining Rank 1 would increase the difficulty many fold. All that being said, if I may be so bold, I’d recommend staying Rank 1. The advantages of creating the bloodline at Rank 1 are less so for yourself but more so for any descendents. The lower the rank of a bloodline innately is, the longer it can last without supplements to bolster it before being bred out. It will also give you more control over the actual power that manifests at Rank 2. When the time comes I would even be willing to add my own insights for free and more help can always be traded for.”

Aster considered that before agreeing. “It’s a ways off, but I’ll keep your offer in mind.”

Kar’tan chuffed in what Matt interpreted as happiness. “Wonderful. Now, Elizabeth, while you have set up your own research guild I’d like to offer a partnership of sorts. The advancement of bloodlines is something the Monster Collective is very interested in. We will not allow our people to be ostracized again and part of that is learning all we can about such a fundamental part of ourselves.”

“While it’s a generous offer, I can’t accept something so binding.” Kar’tan seemed a little upset but Liz held up a hand, forestalling any comment. “I intend to take a feather out of my husband’s cap and publicize my research initiative’s findings for the wider public.”

That turned Kar’tan’s full attention to him for the first time, and Matt explained. “I created a rune while I was younger for the [Bandage] skill after seeing how a local guild was monopolizing something so helpful. Now that the war is over I intend to pursue those ideals on a larger scale with a guild of my own, with the express purpose of creating things without the expectation of making a profit. My intentions aren’t limited to runes but anything and everything that can help people.”

Kar’tan’s wings started to flap lightly in unison with his nods and it seemed like he was working himself into a bit of flight before he finally said. “An admirable goal and one I will keep an eye out for. One does wonder if those inventions will make their way out of the Empire, though.”

“For most things, I don’t intend to just sell the product at cost, but make the creation of it public. That should ensure that prices remain low. If there is enough interest, people will flock to creating such items. I’m sure there will be exceptions, but my core ideal is to better the realm itself. Not just a single Great Power, even if that is where I’m sure most of the inventions will be clustered.” Matt corrected Kar’tan’s misunderstanding with a smile.

Or at least his pretend misunderstanding. Kar'tan, for all that he was affable, was a warrior forged to be a super weapon by the Federation and now led a research group of his own. The man was anything but dumb, which made Matt question the legitimacy of his 'misunderstanding'.

"A wonderful intent. I look forward to both of your findings then." Settling back in, Kar'tan looked between Liz and Aster once more. "The last thing I would ask is that you two allow me to take a sample of your bloodlines back to the Collective. We will provide resources to make up for the removal of course but it is important that we don't allow such unique bloodlines to fade because of an early death no matter how unlikely. We would handsomely compensate you for such personal information as well."

Liz and Aster shook their heads in unison, but Liz spoke for both of them. "We are going to have to decline. We have thought about it, but we just don't feel comfortable giving so much information about our bloodlines to anyone else."

When Kar'tan looked like he was going to try and persuade them to change minds, Aster spoke up. "We are willing to revisit the topic before we Ascend, but not until then. As for death, it's always possible, but we aren't so easy to kill."

Kar'tan nodded and stood from his chair saying. "That will suffice."

He quickly took his leave and Matt followed his Monster Collective etiquette training and did the polite thing, escorting him out of the Empire's quarters. There he found one of the Monster Collective Tier 48s waiting for them.

Martin may have been physically the exact opposite of Kar'tan, a roughly humanoid mouse all of eight inches tall, but the Giant Slayer hadn't earned that title for nothing. Around him, a lingering aura of righteous bloodshed filled the corridor, making his presence impossible to miss.

Kar'tan greeted the mouse with a friendly bow, then extended his furred paw out. In a blur of motion, Martin jumped first to the outstretched appendage, then scampered up until he was sitting on the lion's head.

However, before the man could say anything, another figure appeared in a way that high-Tiers often did when they stumbled across an interesting scene and wanted to readjust their cultivation speed to take part, but Matt highly doubted that this particular encounter had been by chance.

The First Leader of the Federation, Faith. Like many other high-Tier Federation citizens, her physical body was sculpted past perfection with a metallic sheen, giving the illusion of them being a sculpted statue. Not a single hair was out of place, and she had an all-too-elitist smirk carved into her face, a disproving glint in her eye.

"Hello, Martin, Kar'tan. Good to see you two after so long." The words were casual enough, but Matt didn't even need his Tier 25 senses to *feel* the mood in the area plummet. A

few other people nearby vacated the area as well before anything dramatic could happen, and Matt couldn't blame them. Faith's prior title was The Beast Master, and was a potent mind controller with all the associated implications those two facts carried.

Kar'tan didn't even acknowledge the woman, but simply turned aside and walked down the hall without a word. As he did so, Martin simply sat atop his fellow's head and faced backwards, his eyes fixed on Faith until the duo vanished, returning to their Tier 40 speeds.

Faith tsked slightly, shaking her head. "Such rudeness is unbecoming of civilized creatures. But if they don't wish to speak, allow me to simply wish you firm congratulations upon your showing in the war."

With that, she walked away, as though the entire encounter hadn't been set up purely for his viewing. She had come in already slowing down to Tier 25 speeds, but the question was why Kar'tan and Martin had played along. At their Tiers they could have been gone long before she finished uttering her first word, that they all chose to remain at speeds perceivable to a Tier 25 meant they wanted Matt to hear her snide comment.

He doubted they were working together, but they were both playing their own angles. He suspected Kar'tan wanted to look sympathetic and hoped Matt used that to convince his wife and bond to share their bloodlines. That explained Kar'tan's motivation, but he didn't get what Faith got from being so clearly antagonistic in front of him.

He very much doubted she was so truly evil that she would do something which would only make her look bad without a dozen reasons which all played into whatever game the Federation was playing as a whole.

That was why Matt simply turned around as if he hadn't even noticed her.

He probably wasn't doing anything she hadn't accounted for, but he also didn't care. He just wanted to stay out of their games as much as possible. He *did* make a mental note to take Max up on her offer to give him some extra lessons on resisting mind control. It was *unlikely* that it would do much against a Tier 48, but if anyone had knowledge on how Tier-jumping and mind magic interacted, it would be Cosmind.

As he turned around the corner he was startled to see Harper and Frederic waiting for him. Neither said anything and vanished before Matt could ask what game was being played but it was nice to know he wasn't alone in it.

Thankfully, that was the last thing of note to happen while they waited for the ceremony to commence.

Matt was ready for a lot of things, but he hadn't expected the way the collective Great Powers liked to show off. The ceremony only had immortals so it could have been held even in the depths of space, but that wasn't good enough. No, the Clans invited the attendees into a massive teardrop of glass which was lowered into the local star once everyone was inside.

The plasma of the star was caught and funneled into channels and runes which both powered and illuminated the station like the entire thing was a light rune.

Being made out of high Tier materials, it wasn't so impressive that it was possible, but that they bothered to do it at all. The star was only Tier 2, but the work that went into the structure had to be immense. Doubly so when it couldn't be stored in any system Minkalla resided in for long or the planet would drain the essence out of the materials, and moving around something so large and high Tier would be difficult at best.

And they did it all to make a grand stage for a ceremony.

It seemed... extravagant.

Thankfully, Matt didn't have too much to do. As an elite and Ascender his participation in the ceremony was minimal, and after that little bit it was made clear he could leave on his own or remain as he so chose.

As the 'losers' it was their turn to go first and one by one all the notable Tier 15s made their way down the roaring stage to where the Tier 50s awarded the participants a special gift for their outstanding efforts.

A few even caught Matt's attention.

Benny Silverstan, a fresh recruit in the early stages of the war, had joined as a Tier 15 and played an incredibly key role in helping his squad hold their position on a fortress world against three assaults by Federation soldiers, which bought enough time for the rest of his battalion to focus on repelling the other attacks.

For his heroism he was awarded a Tier 26 upgrade orb as well as ten thousand army contribution points.

Next was Tianyna Forglow, who snuck behind enemy lines and killed the higher ups of an assault before leading the pursuit off on a wild goose chase buying enough time. She then managed to slip from her pursuers and return to her command.

For her efforts she was awarded a Tier 26 upgrade orb, two thousand army contribution points, as well as time with a smith who could affect growth items.

The Empire's army was massive and it took hours to get through each person one at a time but Matt didn't really mind. After the first few he enjoyed the insights to the army and its typical heroics. Each and every one of them earned their moment of fame as did everyone who they represented.

Who knew how many people had done similar heroics, but hadn't succeeded, or hadn't lived to tell the tale.

Before he knew it, it was their turn and he detachedly listened to Manny as he spoke of their accomplishments. It all felt so distant, as if someone else had done all off that.

The only thing *really* worth paying attention to was the names of the planets they were going to be provided with for their duchies. He'd been a bit surprised when he'd first learned they were effectively getting paid to *not* be paid to not advance past Tier 35, but he didn't care that much. Tier 35 seemed so far away as to not matter even if he was sure time would fly.

Also, what he hadn't expected was that they were getting residual benefits from the massive pile of goodies that Zack and Allie were getting, mainly from the Sects in the form of access to hidden realms and the like. The way it was presented made him wonder if that had been a last-minute addition.

What did wake him up a little was the other Ascenders cheering for them.

They had all been quiet up until that point but they broke decorum and cheered with the Empire's people even as their Great Powers politely clapped.

The reception for Allie and Zack was slightly more elaborate considering they were being bought out of the war Tiers altogether but it was ultimately the same song and dance.

Aiden, on the other hand, interrupted his ceremony to monologue for fifteen straight minutes about how great his accomplishment of making an Authority was. He probably would have gone on for longer but magically his throat got dry and he needed to take a break.

Even as he was given his accolades he complained relentlessly in the Ascender chat about being stifled less than a tenth of the way into his prepared speech and how his wife and Cammie wanted to hear more from him while he was onstage. None of the other Ascenders believed a word of it and simply drowned out his complaints with messages of their own.

Then the ceremony concluded, they returned to the station, and everyone filtered out, allowing for the *next* ceremony to start up.

Before he could go to the Ascenders box he dedicated some time to make a pass through some of the award recipients. He might be exhausted by the politics and Great Power grandstanding, but he knew it would mean a lot to those present to get some face time with an Ascender.

He was even pleasantly surprised when he got a handshake from a Tier 15 elite who had been in Minkalla at the same time as him and had acted as their rearguard when they had made their final dash to the exit.

It took Matt aback that the man was still Tier 15 for a moment, but it had only been a few hundred years and elites advanced much more slowly than Ascenders on the Path.

The conversation did serve as a good reminder of why he was fighting so hard for the Empire and it was a lesson he took to heart, acting as a balm for his exhausted spirit.

For the rest of the time he was able to hide in the Ascender's box, watching as the other Great Powers had their own concluding ceremonies in turn while chatting with the others.

The Guilds had technically won, as their separate peace was decided just off their own war score which had been overwhelmingly positive. The rewards given out to their people weren't any more interesting than the stuff given to the Empire soldiers but there was a bit more pomp and ceremony in it all.

Then there was another changing of the guard, as the Republic cycled in for *their* ceremony, and Matt just let himself tune everything else out and he only started paying attention once again when the elites he had fought were brought out to be shown off.

He glared at Valentina, but she never looked at him or where the rest of Team Zero stood, which was a smart decision all things told. He wasn't about to rush out and kill her, but if she'd tried stirring the pot any, a fight would have broken out.

It was at least more interesting when Gan Le, as part of his prize, was being brought under Yun Me's tutelage. A number of other sect members showed outward expressions of jealousy but Gan Le's expression never wavered from his flat stoicism.

Aster chuckled even as she sent a message through the ascender group chat. "I bet he's fuming inside. I get the feeling he *really* wants nothing to do with wars. It was half of what he complained about when I had him trapped in my spirit place."

Max sent back a quickly sketched Gan Le, tearing his hair out. "It's all he can do to not run away. Poor guy. He's got a creative breadth of profanity, I'll give him that though."

Sien didn't even try to defend him. "He'll get over it sooner or later. I had a talk with him and while he'll never make for anything but a defensive specialist he's going to become a force to be reckoned with after ten or twenty thousand years of training with Yun Me. I'll bet he can take a full force punch from Moe at that point."

"I'd sha'er em with a 'ingle blow."

Everyone weighed in on whether or not he would survive such a blow and even Matt couldn't help but add his own bet to the pot.

That last thing of note was the complete absence of the rune soldiers from the ceremony and when Matt raised that question in the group chat, Gideon replied. "If they are alive this time next month I'll be very surprised. Virgil is like her grandfather in all his worst traits. I'm sure they officially sacrificed themselves for some project, but we'll never know the truth about it."

Allie replied almost immediately. "Really now? That seems super interesting. Maybe I need to go snooping in the Federation's backyard. They sent me into a wild goose chase in a shit bucket and I still haven't forgiven them about it. Maybe I'll go see if I can find the rune squad after this stuff settles down."

Ellen immediately replied. "Oh you need to take me. Or at least take a skeleton that Boney can shove me inside. Their systems are cleaned super regularly so I need to physically bust in to get a more permanent back door into their systems."

As their conversation devolved into how to best hack into secure systems Matt let his attention wander back to the rest of the ceremony which was more of the same.

There was some more chatter, but none of it particularly pivotal. Matt couldn't help but feel like he was being pulled into a den of inveterate gamblers with how fast and loose everyone played with what were objectively immensely valuable items... but hey, what did he know?

Eventually, the final reward was given to the final Federation elite, and with that the ceremonies came to a close. Nominally, they could have stayed for a while longer, visiting and shopping in the Corporations station, but Allie announced that she was heading back to the Capital that very day, and that if anyone wanted teleportation back home, they'd need to let her know right then.

With none of the other Ascenders indicating that they were going to stick around terribly long, Matt decided to take her up on the offer.

Of course, right before they left, Matt got an interesting message.

He had already agreed once but the second check in warmed him.

While this would be one more person who knew his talent this one at least was one who truly needed to know.