

Chapter 514

Matt sat next to Liz, who lounged against Aster, while the three of them picked at an array of food he'd thought they'd find enjoyable before the war, as they watched the Tier 15 battlefield below them. The food wasn't exactly working, but it wasn't *not* working either.

He took another bite as he watched another million man army of Collective Tier 15's charging the Empire held fortified planet. Most of his attention was on a pair of Knights who fended off two high elite bloodline combatants. The Empire's newest elite program had spat out more than a few successes since their refounding, but the Tier 15s on the field still managed to impress him.

One used their Talaria Seed to move like a speedster, but paired each dash, dodge, or duck with a slash of his wind coated scimitars. The ranged contingents had tried to lock him down, but he moved so quickly they struggled to deliberately land a shot on him.

Next to him was another with blades, however her Living Edge Natural Treasure let her merge with the weapons as if she and they were made from clay. She wasn't as fast, but kept in close to the Collective elites, shifting the blades in her to block and attack in a fluid pattern. He didn't miss the inspiration they'd taken from the Federation's First Warrior when founding their 'Order', but there was a reason they'd been elevated to Tier 47 in the first place and it wasn't because of how well they did paper work.

Together, they disrupted the enemy advance, taking Collective elites out of the fight with every exchange. Those same battles left wounds they couldn't heal from before they were beset by someone else looking for a challenge. There were just so many Tier 15s. It wasn't an ocean of bodies, only because the Tier 15s were both water and ecosystem in one. Spells, Domains, and cultivators merged into a grand but horrifying tapestry of carnage.

And the Knights created a ring of calm in those seas. However, that came with a cost. Calm always gathered the larger fish's attention, and the duo weren't the top of the battlefield food chain, just near it.

That was when he'd want to stop watching, but he knew he wouldn't be able to truly look away. He'd need to watch. It wasn't much, but it was what he could do.

If nothing else, it was different. In their last war, they hadn't really had time to sit around and smell the roses, given Allie's Talent. Not that they necessarily had such spare time to faff around without her, but reality didn't care about their wants or desires.

In their current situation, it was a simple matter of priorities. Once they'd pacified a corner of the battlefield, they *could* race to another and repeat the process. But that would have been a greater waste of their time than sitting here doing nothing.

The war hadn't stopped, or even settled down, after their victory over the pinnacle elite trap. From that battle they'd gone directly into the next, clearing out the Tier 35 battlefields and

repelling the invasion by removing their top Tier anchor and returning the fighting to the border worlds.

The real reason they got any sort of reprieve afterwards was due to the main Empire push that broke through in a more core sector, which forced the Collective to redirect their troops.

It wouldn't last for long, as another invasion fleet was being prepared by both sides, and there was a chance the Collective would choose to send it at them. Something would eventually change, whether from the Collective or the Empire, but high command seemed content with them doing the job at the moment. As such, their orders were to hold their positions until reinforcements arrived or the situation changed enough that the current priority was moot.

They'd spent their first free day or two calmly sitting in their ship, working on their various projects, but all three of them had grown antsy almost immediately, given their constant brushes with danger.

Matt didn't like the idea of sitting around when he could be useful and it tore at him. At first, that driving force was enough to let him make some progress on his Image, but after looking at his changes he realized how little progress he'd actually made.

Through their recent fights he'd come to understand himself better, but therein lay the problem.

His Image felt not exactly wrong, but it wasn't right either.

In and of itself, that wasn't surprising. He *knew* his current Image wasn't perfect for him, that was the reason he was tweaking it. But the more he thought about it and how it interacted with him, the more that feeling of wrongness cemented itself into an inescapable reality.

Normally, that would have prompted him to start picking at individual pieces that felt particularly out of place, where he'd start rebuilding those sections. After sitting around and having time to mull over the last battles, he'd come to the realization that such actions weren't enough anymore.

He needed to discard his current Image and make something new. He liked the core of his idea but he needed to play around with different methods of harnessing energy on a celestial scale. His dyson sphere was good but not exactly what he wanted from himself and his Aspect.

He'd found some amount of clarity with the latest fighting, limiting himself to his sword and his muscles, but it was that insight that reminded him he wasn't a single anything.

Matt wasn't *only* a great melee fighter, even if he thoroughly enjoyed living up to the unstoppable legend of physical cultivation. He may not have a single iota of essence in his mana core, but at this point, it was hard to deny he was one of the strongest mages. Maybe more so than he was a melee fighter.

Matt sighed into the vacuum of space. Both for the Tier 15s and himself.

Tur'stal had said there wasn't anything he could do and she was right.

Not that he particularly *wanted* to be able to do something. The knowledge that he couldn't intervene did more to protect him than he'd given it credit at the start of the war, and he was grateful for the rules being both firm and long established.

The Tier 15 battlefields were awful on a level that not even the Tier 25s had been able to match. There were just so many people, he had to wonder if the Pather war he'd experienced with massive troop moments culminating in large, only semi-coordinated formations hadn't been more accurate to the battlefield than he'd given them credit in recent years.

Even the light engagements where only a percent or two left their bodies on the battlefield still meant tens of thousands of cultivators fell. He hated that his Insight had put it together, but more people died in that single push than all of the Tier 35s they'd fought, let alone killed, in the war so far.

And that was only one medium importance Tier 15 battlefield among a sea of them.

Their battles may have been a part of the population war, but *this* was its true purpose. Seeing it, he couldn't help but be happy the Tier 50s had initiated the war now instead of letting the problem reach the Tier 25, let alone Tier 35, battlefields.

While the higher Tier battles may be smaller in scale, the danger they presented was an order of magnitude higher. Not only for the combatants, but the Realm itself.

Matt would need to check the historical records, but he was fairly sure the destructive capabilities of such an overwhelming number of Tier 35's battling it out in a low Tier world might just be able to pierce the barrier between real and chaotic space.

Though even without that threat, he was sure there was another reason they deliberately kept the influx below Tier 25. Tier 15 materials were a lot more common, and therefore less expensive, than Tier 25, let alone Tier 35, ones.

Outfitting hundreds of millions of Tier 15s was possible, if difficult. Doing the same for that many Tier 35s would require a true war in and of itself.

As they watched, the attack failed and the army retreated, collecting their wounded along with their corpses. The defenders didn't get any reprieve as another equally large formation of troops moved to replace the first.

He suspected the fortress' shielding would collapse in this or the next push, where the inevitable would happen and the fortress world would change hands. Again. Though given said world's current dilapidated state, he wasn't all that surprised by the new world the Collective army had brought along.

Fortress worlds were replaceable by design, and after a point the damage got so bad it was easier to swap them out rather than try and rebuild one between attacks. Any full scale

army could and would make repairs, but that wasn't their main focus. Especially not during a population war, where unit compositions trended towards combat heavy allocations.

In other words, the war continued the same way it always had. Both sides tried to gain ground while preventing their enemies from doing the same.

From the reports they got about the other wars, that was far from unique. The Sects and Guilds' war was unsurprisingly the bloodiest one, with the Sects showing the benefits of Winter Hornet's reforms combined with the Hall of Aspirants.

Their collection of self-creatable skills, designed and developed by their best and brightest cultivators, showcased its usefulness right out of the gate, especially in the low Tier brackets. Not in the skills themselves, which weren't inherently any more powerful than traditional skills, but through the familiarity they had with said skills.

The Sects' central authority had allowed nearly any lesser sect to select and use a single skill as their sect's core technique. Many sects fumbled the opportunity by choosing the wrong skill, but those same sects became fodder for their more successful brethren through the normal internal infighting ever present in the Great Power.

Most of the sects that succeeded in adapting to Tier 0 skills did so by choosing ones that already fit the established theme of the sect. A fire sect choosing a fire fist skill instead of modifying something like a [Fireball] into a fist spell fared far better than the ones who overreached by choosing one of the creatable Tier 8 skills.

The results were apparent in the war effort.

The newest generation of Sect cultivators fought with a fluidity and cohesiveness of style that had Sien crowing to anyone who would listen in the Ascender chat. It was a refinement of everything the Sect's had already been doing, and their showing in the first stages of the war had everyone else watching just in case they had something else up their sleeves.

That information was a small additional weight on Matt's shoulders, but one he'd already accepted when he came to terms with the consequences of releasing the Tier 0 skills to the wild.

And it wasn't like the Sects were singlehandedly winning the war.

The Guilds hadn't been sitting on their laurels while everyone else advanced. None of the Great Powers had.

In fact, they were almost too prepared for the Sects.

Where the Sects had leaned further into hyperspecialization within each sect, with variation only coming from the individual, the Guilds went the other way and ensured their cultivators had access to a wide variety of skills, similar to the Empire and Republic.

That still meant each cultivator was weaker on average, but they had a breadth to their skills the Sects fighters lacked. If the Great Powers had been smaller, that might have proven to be an issue, but the Guilds had been able to slant most of their battlefield combatants to counter the single sect armies that had led the initial push.

Being met with a countless sea of similar but different elemental counters had seen most of the Sects early aggression blunted, if not outright halted.

That advantage would be nullified when the individual sects started working together and created mixed units, but their own culture of infighting ensured that wouldn't happen until things started to hurt.

It was very similar to the Republic and Corporations' war, in that the Corporations had kicked the war off by declaring open season and letting the mercenary groups run rampant on the border with seemingly no direction.

The mercenaries caused serious damage to Republic military infrastructure with their raids, but they were rebuffed with significant losses. If Matt didn't know the bird in question, he'd have considered that a blunder, but he and most others had noticed exactly which units had taken the worst of the casualties.

When the dust settled, the Corporations had traded their most bloodthirsty and unruly mercenaries for damage that would take at least fifty years to recover from. In addition, it was the perfect cover for less flashy missions, as seen by the deeper sabotage that only became apparent as new ships fresh out of the shipyard had their engines fail spectacularly on their first engagement. Or supply stashes found suddenly empty.

Not that the Republic had taken the hits lying down. They'd assembled their legions in step with their manufacturing capabilities and made the most territorial advances out of any Great Power. They'd occupied most of their shared border region and pushed the line back five or six systems before being stopped dead in their tracks.

The final remaining war, the Federation and Clans' war, was a whole other beast.

The Federation had led the war with their latest iteration of rune soldiers. In both the general troops and purpose raised elites, the enchantments were more powerful and more synergistic, leading to greater applied power.

They'd made good progress until the Clans brought out a poison that disrupted bones, and, more importantly, bone-based formations. If the poison didn't require direct contact, it would have single handedly turned the war, but the Federation took it in stride. They issued new counter measures brewed up by their best and brightest alchemists as a new arms race was kicked off and tests were shuffled to the frontline.

He and most other Empire soldiers were quite content with the current policy of pretending they weren't a part of that shit show, though they all knew it couldn't last.

There was a tension in the air, but one that was slowly lessening as the wars found their footing. Everyone seemed content to let things take their course.

The worst part was he enjoyed the act of fighting, but hated this war and his place in it. Pitting himself against other combatants who were close to his level without needing a Tier advantage was just plain old enjoyable, and he savored it while it was still possible. That clashed with his general distaste for the war, and that resulted in both surprising insights and frustrating roadblocks when working on his Domain.

While Matt worried, he'd also accepted the realization that his Image would need to be scrapped. He didn't do so immediately, rather he started with his Aspect's Phrase, where he had a solution.

He had two frontrunners. Two options he felt might work, but at the same time, neither felt perfect. At first, he'd thought it was because neither were right, but the more he fought against other Tier 35's with their own Aspects and their own unique understandings of themselves and the Realm, he started to realize his indecision came from the fact both were perfect for him.

Unlike his Concept or Intent, Matt's Aspects Phrase hadn't boiled down to a single choice.

'I am Limitless' followed his previous trends, but 'Overwhelm' also felt like a good fit.

Matt felt like he was at a crossroads.

Neither were wrong because he hadn't decided. Did he want to be limitless? Did he want to overwhelm?

The way he could just smash through so many obstacles with his newly enhanced and empowered body had been refreshing, and 'Overwhelm' would definitely strengthen that ability. It could also make his spells hit that much harder. At the same time, 'I am Limitless' theoretically offered the greatest highs.

If his guesses were correct, both could have similar effects on his combat style, in that they'd let him fight better, but at the same time, he was sure they would manifest themselves in vastly different ways.

Matt forced himself to confront the truth as he watched another wave of Tier 15's rush to their deaths.

He didn't fear death. Not really. His greatest fear was that choosing 'I am Limitless' would shift him even further into the role of a mana font.

Icliz had been limitless, or some variation of it, and his fate was what Matt considered worse than death. He may have come to terms with it being at least partly Icliz's choice, but he refused to take steps that led him to such an end.

If Matt wanted to be limitless, it had to include not just self imposed limits or physical limits, but the limits others tried to put over him. And he wasn't sure his particular blend of 'I am Limitless' encompassed that fact. It might, but he wasn't confident in that fact.

'Overwhelm' might not necessarily cover that weakness, but something about it told Matt it wouldn't have the negative effect on his Aspect should he be captured compared to what 'I am Limitless' would cause. It also had decent odds of being more directly relevant in breaking free of any cages.

While speculating about the effect of a Domain before it was solidified was guesswork at the very best, most people had half decent ideas. Part of recognizing its compatibility allowed one to get a glimmer of what the part might do. 'I am Limitless' felt like it would allow Matt to utilize his mana and body efficiently. If he was correct, he'd be able to throw his entire mana pool at a spell and the spell would be able to handle it while raising the scaling ceiling.

On the other hand, he felt that 'Overwhelm' might allow him to 'punch through things'. His spells might hit harder for the same amount of mana, his sword might buckle armor with even a glancing blow, but all of it would be about applying his force. At the same time, he also got the impression it would have a positive overlap with his Truth's resistance to restraints, due to how they synergized.

Both had so much potential, he couldn't easily make a decision as he had before.

The endless questions that led him in well trodden circles were also why he'd insisted on a break. Admittedly, he could have chosen a better vantage point.

Aster must have felt the same as she stood up with a silent huff as she stomped the void. "I can't do this!"

Matt was about to offer some reassurance when she raised and dropped her hand in a hard chop, preventing him from speaking.

At the same time, she whacked him with her tail and grasped Liz's hand to speak securely through spiritual perception. "I'm not giving up because I don't know what my Aspect is. I'm giving up because I *know* what it is and it revolves around me succeeding in my bloodline swap. That, in turn, requires me to actually figure out my space ice mana aspect. Which I would have done if I could, putting me right where I was before."

Liz used her connection to pull Aster right back down as Matt made proper contact, grabbing the flapping tail firmly enough that he could transmit through the appendage.

Her question was the same as his, saving him the effort. "What? You figured out your full Aspect?"

Aster wanted to have a hissy fit. She wanted to pound the ground, roll over, and cry loud enough her problems were everyone else's. It would have been cathartic.

She settled for throttling the air as she replied in a burst of her own spiritual fluctuations that she transmitted back. They were still on an active battlefield after all, and it was her duty to keep the many prying eyes off them. She couldn't let her own Domain problems get in the way of her actual role.

That would make everything so much worse.

"Yes, but it doesn't do me any good, so also no. This sucks! I was supposed to be excited! If nothing else, I fixed my Truth. Even if I can't actually claim it because it's not true yet. *I was first.*"

Aster felt the near surety of the words only possible thanks to her Inspiration. She may not have succeeded in her Truth, but she knew she would, she had to. It was that confidence which had allowed her to recognize the Truth as being her own despite not embodying it yet.

Because she would be first. The first of a new bloodline, a new mana type, a new species. It was a burden she'd have to bear, even if she didn't necessarily want to.

Once she made it, she'd be responsible for those who came after. Maybe not in actuality, as she had no intention in having children any time soon, but in lineage if nothing else. If she wanted to make a new Rank one bloodline with the power and burden of a Level five mana aspect, she'd have to see things through properly. To carve the path into the Realm for others to walk in her wake.

Because that was her Truth.

She was first.

Or, she would be if she succeeded in making the thrice cursed mana aspect in the first place.

At the moment, her Truth rang hollow with the knowledge that she wasn't first. She hadn't taken that step. At least not yet, not in the way that mattered. Aurora fox wasn't her end goal, it was merely a stepping stone.

Aster only needed to take that next step and everything would fall into place. She was sure of it! It was so close, she could almost taste it.

Matt was giddy for her, their bond wide open and his feelings served as a comforting snowbank of love and excitement.

That was nearly enough to turn her mood around, but she forced it down. This was a time to be upset, not a time to be happy! Besides, when the inevitable movie came out about this war, she wanted to make sure Cynthia had some places to show her range. That, and she was determined to do something so interesting her actress friend *willingly* came out of 'playing Aster retirement' to reprise her role as Aster's premiere actor.

If she complained enough, maybe she'd trick her own mind into giving her the answer via the most dramatic moment imaginable.

Her stupid bond's words threatened that beautiful dream. "That's an awesome Truth. I bet it will be a powerful one. Did you also figure out your Image?"

Liz looked especially eager for Aster's reply, and she tried not to disappoint. "I came to that first realization by figuring out my Image, so yes. That one I'm confident enough now that if I had my bloodline, I'd form my Aspect right here and now. *Maybe*."

Aster would at least try. She was confident in her realizations, but she also wanted to hedge her bets. At least privately.

Liz twisted their clasped hands and used her strength advantage to poke Aster in the ribs. Or where her ribs would be if she wasn't in armor. "So what's your Image then? Stop drawing it out and spill!"

Aster stopped and quickly sketched a mental picture with her [AI]. It didn't do what she saw in the center of her triplicate essence core's justice, but that was true for all attempts to draw Images.

Still, it was enough to give them an idea of what her words described. "My Image is me being born. It's me hatching from my icy egg." She leaned into Matt and headbutted him the same way she'd have done in fox form so many years ago before adding. "Except instead of my egg, I'm hatching from a star. Except that isn't right either. I *am* the star, even as I hatch from it. It's that first light of a star which will give rise to a planet that will eventually house life. *That's* what my Image is. It's a moment like a sunrise. It's not just a fire ball coming over a horizon, it's the specific act of a sunrise. It's its own thing."

Aster still felt like she hadn't described it properly, but the appreciative nods and silent coos from Phoenix Liz made her feel better.

"You know, this feels logical given where you started with your Phrase."

Aster nodded at that. Her phrase had seemed out of place at first, but now that she'd completed the set, she saw the shape of the whole.

She hadn't been entirely sure what the phrase 'Regent of the Cosmos' said about her and her mental state, but now that she'd put the rest of the puzzle together, she was far less concerned. She had always known that she wasn't trying to take over the cosmos in a literal sense, her Phrase had always been more about her spirit space and the world inside than it had the real world.

However, the lack of context left her confused for the longest time. So had the word choice for that matter.

Regent wasn't all that different from Duchess, Queen, or Empress, but she'd tried all of those words and they hadn't felt right either. She wasn't exactly the ruler, nor did she want to be.

She was the first, which put her in a position of authority but not necessarily or inherently one of power.

It was an important distinction, even if she couldn't exactly explain why it mattered so much.

It hadn't helped that the revelation had come at a time where she'd realized how little she actually wanted to become a royal. Being a duchess or any noble was hard, unrewarding work with few actual upsides for someone like her.

One childhood fantasy she'd completed like an obsession. One she'd discarded before she'd even stopped holding it close. The irony wasn't lost on her, but she did her best to ignore it.

At least when she combined it with her created anchor scepter, she was done. She was ready to create her Aspect.

Or, she would be when she could embody her Truth.

Which meant she needed to create her level five mana type.

Or find it.

Her mind went back to the Seekers who insisted they could find her elusive level five mana type. None of them had succeeded, but that didn't mean it was a hopeless endeavor. She just needed a better Seeker.

Like access to the Collective Seeker Gideon had mentioned might be able to help. Albert Wittelsbach had quite the reputation for finding the impossible, even if his Talent came with quirks of its own.

Maybe she could leverage the war to her advantage in a bit more round about way?

The idea suddenly had far more merit than it had a few seconds ago.

Milton Barrett didn't know where things had gone wrong. Or rather he did, but he still couldn't understand how the events had led to him joining the Tier 15 battlefields, where he was going to die.

Only a few thousand years ago he'd fully intended to sit the war out, relying on his clan to shield him from the storm. However a few *hundred* years ago they'd been ousted by the very O'Neil clan they'd replaced seven generations ago.

The other clan had bided their time while the Barrett rose and then stagnated without surpassing their predecessors. The O'Neil's gathered their strength, then, right before the war, they'd struck the moment both his clan uncle and aunt were removed from their positions in the army. They'd been caught skimming resources and had been made examples of.

They'd pleaded their innocence right until the end, but the evidence had been damning and indisputable.

Personally, he'd thought they'd have had a better chance by admitting fault, but they'd remained persistent until everything unraveled around them. At that point, no matter what Milton thought about the situation, things had escalated. Or rather crumbled.

He felt that was a much more fitting description.

Milton wasn't jealous that all of the extra resources had gone into propping up his cousin, he really wasn't. Or he hadn't been until he'd found himself staring down the barrel of a Federation armada.

His position in a secondary line of defense was supposed to have been one of the safest in the Clans. It was why he'd used some of the last remaining connections the Barrett clan still had in the army and pushed to get himself a position *off* the frontline.

It had been one of the first times in his life that he considered himself lucky that his Talent had taken after his human father rather than his dwarven mother.

For most of his life, he'd considered the ability to time his shots a decent but ultimately supplementary Talent. His Talent didn't make holding a weapon easier, it didn't inherently make him more accurate, it didn't make his shots more powerful. All he got was a feeling on when to let loose for maximum effect.

Like a crescendo in a majestic musical score, he could sense when the moment was right, but it did nothing for his actual aim. That was a skill he'd needed to work on all on his own.

Knowing when to shoot wasn't all that useful if trembling fingers bungled the shot anyway. Still, he'd considered himself lucky when his Talent had earned him a secondary placement off the frontlines.

But that was then. And this was now.

Caressing his trigger, he followed the clattering song only he could hear, sending out gouts of mana as fast as the orbital cannon could fire.

As the song's tempo changed, his finger hesitated as he tracked his latest target. The background notes of other possible songs, other possible targets, started to make themselves known and he considered tracking one of them, but he didn't waver.

The note was *almost* there.

Rising. Rising. Rising until his ears wanted to bleed.

Milton pressed the trigger, not bothering to linger and watch his shot travel. He knew it would hit exactly where he'd aimed. The cannons were good like that. Also, he could already feel the next note rapidly approaching. While the fifty foot cannon he was controlling could move quickly, that was only true when engaging targets at its expected *orbital* range.

His current targets were much closer, and as such, much harder to hit.

The Clans defense had repelled the first wave of attacks with minimal casualties, as the Federation seemed content to throw soldiers at them as if the losses were irrelevant. They'd repelled both the second and the third with slightly more casualties, but had taken significant damage to their shielding infrastructure. Then the fourth assault had come.

The Federation troops had brought their own orbital platforms in and attempted to shatter their orbital shield through overwhelming fire power.

It would have worked too, except General Ickthor had shut down the planetary shields before they were irreparably destroyed. That meant they had to take the cannon shots on their hardened emplacements, but it was that or permanently lose the shields altogether.

Milton didn't know how many had died then, but he'd only been happy to be underground and safe from such attacks.

With the shields down, it became a game of cat and mouse between the planet and their orbiting assaulters. Without the shields they were at a severe disadvantage, but that was why the bunkers were dug deep into the planet's protective surface. That didn't stop the troop transports which brought more and more cultivators down through the anti-air fire. Each successful landing made their situation all the more grim.

It wasn't fair. He never should have been in this war in the first place, and yet here he was. Stuck and about to die.

An explosion rocked the bunker he was in and it was only the pause in his song that prevented him from firing at the worst time.

Someone else wasn't so lucky as emergency doors dropped as their neighboring cannon pulled power and exploded.

Milton waited until his song told him the disturbance in the mana supply had settled and he continued to fire up into the sky.

He took down three dropships, a full squad led by a captain reckless enough to try and brave the descent unprotected, and had even taken out two of the dozen remaining orbital platforms himself.

While he didn't want to be here, he wasn't going to roll over without a fight.

So when he saw the last functional orbital cannon directly above him unleash a payload of white hot mana, he knew his end was nigh and accepted it.

Except all of his bad luck turned into good in that moment, as the orbital shielding reasserted itself as a blue wall of protection, blocking the shot and cutting off the descending Federation troops.

Cheers echoed through the halls, but Milton wasn't one of them. He'd never stopped listening to the song of battle and firing even as the last reserves sallied forth and cut down the Federation troops that had been trapped inside the shields.

Milton hardly knew what was going on, as a few minutes later he was dragged into a leadership meeting, but he knew he didn't like finding out he was the highest ranking dwarf left in his section. If that hadn't been bad enough, he learned that General Ickthor wanted to talk to him personally when he tried to send one of the humans to meet with him so he could inspect his cannon before the next assault.

The general looked haggard as he spoke to the surviving leadership, including humans who'd been forced to take up the position as he had. "We've done our best to hold and we've succeeded as best as anyone can ask or expect. However, the battle isn't over, the enemies are still at our shields! Therefore, we still need to do more, and I think I know how. We need to take a gamble."

The room buzzed at that but no one directly interrupted him. "The Federation hasn't gotten reinforcements either, and they are as low on troops as we are. If we can survive the next assault, I'm pretty sure they'll be forced to pull back, or at least rethink their tactic of throwing bodies at us."

Milton didn't believe that, but he kept a straight face until the general looked directly at him.

"And it relies on you, Lieutenant Barrett." Milton was too shocked to speak, which the general took as acknowledgement. "Those cannons have the same flaw as ours; they are prone to exploding upon being hit. We need you to hit them at just the right moment and cause a cascade that can take out several. That's our best shot with what we have. We will be defending your position, and will make that our last stand. Worst comes to worse, we overload the battery ourselves, taking out every Feddie we can!"

Milton didn't know what overtook him as he stepped forward and proclaimed his willingness to do his part. That same part also had far more grit and determination than the Milton he saw in the mirror every morning, because his voice didn't crack or waver.

He was ready to die.

The next assault came far too quickly for his liking. Only minutes after the remaining defenders consolidated around the orbital cannons, the next assault pushed forward.

Following his song, he took out two of the last three orbital platforms and their respective cannons, even as they took fire in return. Deployable shields were thrown out, used, and left discarded where they fell.

The same was true for people.

Bodies were everywhere, and were growing more and more numerous with every passing minute.

General Ickthor came by at some point, but Milton couldn't stop firing as he tried to take out their final opposition. He didn't know the exact battle situation, but through his song, he knew he was making a difference.

He just needed to aim carefully and fire at the proper moment.

When another fireball lit up the sky, he was confident they'd won. That was until the main Federation troop transport nosed itself into the battlefield as it brought its even larger cannons to bear.

That was when he knew they were all going to die.

It seemed they were done playing around and were willing to risk a very much non-disposable asset to take their world. He didn't understand why the Federation leaders were in such a rush, but he didn't stop.

Milton tracked a covered cannon port, waiting for it to open. The second it did so, he'd fire. It would be his best hope. To hit one of their cannons the instant it fired so that he could bypass both the physical and magical shielding.

He just needed his moment.

The hidden cannons were revealed for only an instant, like a reverse blink.

Except in that all important moment, his song stopped. It didn't mellow, it didn't quiet, it halted, taking his brain with it.

The massive gouts of mana slammed into the ground around him, missing their bunker by the miracle of sacrifice. Two entire units fell, intercepting the shots with deployable shields, but through it all, his song remained silent.

It wasn't time yet.

Milton didn't know what to do. He'd always listened to his song, and right now, he knew without a shadow of doubt it wasn't time to fire. To fire meant an early death.

General Ickthor screamed at him. He even tried to force his hands to press the trigger, but Milton couldn't move.

It *wasn't* time.

Another volley came down, landing closer. General Ickthor left, but there was still no sound to tell him to fire.

It wasn't until the third volley, where the gigantic Federation ship felt comfortable with the lack of return fire to nose in close, that he heard the song restart.

It started low and deep like a planet's breath, and Milton followed its rhythm, waiting.

On instinct, he swapped firing mode and pressed the trigger down.

The cannon only a dozen feet away that had been still despite the shouts and screams blossomed to life, and mana started to gather in its long tube. Thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, maybe even nearing or approaching a million mana, Milton didn't know, nor did he care. General Ickthor had already input the overrides, and Milton had never been one for numbers.

No one else mattered in a moment like this. It all revolved around his ever building song.

He released his finger and it felt like the planet bucked as his cannon spat out its maximum accurate payload. A second later, the Federation opened its cannon hatches as it tried to finish him off.

The overlap was less than an instant, too close for anyone, let alone a Tier 15, to correct the mistake.

His cannon shot hit one of the Federation ships' cannon mid-fire. By chance or happenstance, it was the leading shot, the one meant to draw covering fire and allow the following shots to make it through.

The Federation ship bucked as ever-building explosions rocked the ship. A moment later, the rest of the ship started to twist as the remaining working cannons tried to cause as much damage as they could before they crash landed.

Milton felt the song surge once more, and held down his trigger again, gathering mana. However, this time he waited as he watched the still falling ship point one of its final remaining cannons at them.

It wasn't one of the broadside cannons, but rather its forward main gun, meant to be used against other capital ships. And it was glowing.

Milton knew he was going to die; he just wanted to go out with someone remembering his name. That he wasn't a coward. He'd done his duty, even if it hadn't changed anything.

He released the trigger right before the last return projectile from space came directly down their firing line, aimed directly at their fully charged cannon.

Milton wanted to loose the shot, but he waited. He waited as death crossed the minuscule distance that was orbit to the ground for a ship to ship projectile. He waited until the mana bolt was so close that he could feel the scorching heat. He waited until he was already dead.

He waited for his song to reach one final peak.

Only then did he release the trigger.

As the two projectiles collided right above the bunker, they rocked the fortress world in an explosion larger than any the system had seen before or would ever see again.

He almost thought he saw a hand reach through from the very heart of the explosion, but he died before he could process the thought.

Milton Barrett didn't know where things had gone wrong. Or rather he did, but he still couldn't understand how the events had led to him joining the Tier 15 battlefields, where he was going to die.

Authors note: there were no formatting issues in this chapter.