

And we are back. And back with an 11k chapter!

Chapter 518

Aoife watched Legend Maya race off with Tick and Tock clutched in her arms with a flat expression carefully welded onto her face.

It wouldn't do to let her anger show. Not right now. Not in front of the other Tier 50s.

At most other times, giving away so much would have made her stand out amongst the taciturn Great Power leaders, but today was an exception. Most of them were wearing similar expressions, though for undoubtedly different reasons.

She wasn't particularly angry at the Legends' sudden revival like the others, but she wasn't about to advertise that fact. In fact, the only one outwardly happy was Janet.

The President of the Everlasting Republic smiled harder than when she'd ascended to Tier 50, which made her stand out in stark contrast to everyone else. None of the others were happy to see a possible enemy get a Legend team out of nowhere.

Winter Hornet, while clearly happy for the duo in question, didn't extend that pleasure to their leader and gave her a snort before vanishing in a puff of snow and ice.

Aoife didn't bother trying to find him, instead she turned her attention to the true recipient of her ire before he could slip out. *Emmanuel*.

The Emperor's expression was carefully flat, if slightly befuddled. She didn't trust it. What she did trust were the ever glowing eyes that never stopped darting around.

They needed to have a talk, and soon.

JR broke everyone out of their reverie by speaking. "I *still* feel like I could make an argument that they aren't a part of this war. They most certainly don't fall under the new Chosen clause. Tier 35 assets must be registered and all that."

"The time for such arguments has long since passed. Besides that's a foolish argument anyway—"

Janet then launched into a well reasoned defense so fast, Aoife would have thought she'd been prepared for this exact situation, but she didn't care about the squabbling. JR wanted to claw additional war support to his side and took the opportunity to do so when he saw it. The decision had already been made and none of his complaints would change the fact that the rest of the Tier 50s wanted them in this war.

In fact, Aoife suspected his words were more a ploy for the other Tier 50s, hoping to get their hidden support in taking out the newest pair of Legends before they found their footing.

She wanted no part of that. Instead, she bided her time until the others bickered themselves out.

Allister was the next to leave, doing so with an angry expression as they all felt Winter Hornet cross the Guild and Sect border before he bothered to cloak himself. The challenge was sent and taken.

Aoife made a note to keep an eye out for any hidden intrusions but that wasn't her highest priority. Instead, she waited until only she and Emmanuel were left.

"You wanted to talk?"

Aoife nearly punched the golden eyed man in the face, but she restrained herself with immense effort.

"I'd like to talk with you in my office, where it's secure." Aoife let some of her anger creep into her words, making her stance very clear.

Yes it was more secure in her office, but it was also a place of power. *Her* place of power. It was a barely hidden secret that their daily offices were some of the most secure and defensible places in the Realm. While they wouldn't be able to trap another Tier 50, going into another's strong spot was risky.

She wanted to put Emmanuel in a place where he had to submit himself to her power and she wanted him to do it willingly. At least, if he wanted to keep this farce of a defensive pact past the day.

To her irritation, he didn't hesitate as he made a gesture for her to go ahead of him. "After you."

Aoife had to wonder if he'd been able to see and prepare for her question, but she let the matter drop. She wasn't intending to betray Emmanuel and attack him, but she did want to put the screws to him.

The moment they settled into her office, she spoke without preamble. "What game are you playing here, Emmanuel? Do you think it's funny or cute? Because I'm not laughing. I'm not even smiling. I'm pretty fucking angry in fact. You don't even have the excuse of inheriting this alliance! *You* are the one who brokered it!"

Then, to throw him off guard, she tossed out her longshot when she saw him about to speak. "Neither am I happy with you getting me into this war in the first place. I know Legend Wraith had Tessa Bluesand locked away when everyone else thought she was recovering. If you don't have a fantastic reason for all of this, I'll go to the others. I think everyone was quite tired of your father's antics, and no one is eager to be subjected to his whelp's imitations. It wouldn't be the first time your lineage has put their fingers in the Federation pie, and Virgil only

needs an excuse to pay you back for your father's part in toppling them from their palace at the top."

However, instead of growing flustered as she'd hoped, but not expected, she saw Emmanuel grow confused the more she spoke. "Wait *what?* Did you and Janet *not* set this up? I hadn't realized the connection before I started looking at the scene, but was this not Wun's doing?"

Aoife froze at the suggestion.

She'd been so busy, she'd forgotten about the monkey's latest shenanigans and its implications.

Close to three thousand years ago, Wun had come to her wanting to give the Clans' latest bloom that extra little oomph. To that end, she'd sent him on a Clan-wide tour as he shifted luck in large and small ways, spending unique resources like they were worthless.

They'd stopped their efforts over a thousand years ago when there were no discernible impacts, but suddenly all of that absent luck seemed to have found a resting point.

She just wasn't sure she believed it.

"Wun's good, but his large-scale workings are nebulous at the best of times. However, no matter how you slice that sandwich, he didn't aim for this. I refuse to believe that he brought Legends back from a hundred thousand year old grave by *accident*."

Emmanuel shook his head. "A few minutes actually. I peeked as Maya ran past, and for the two of them, they experienced less than an hour between then and now. It's time magic and they were going forward, which makes such things possible. And as for the odds... Well, I'm the one who can see the past *and* future. Let me say with no subterfuge or obfuscation, the odds of this happening were so astronomically small, they should have died ten thousand out of ten thousand times. So many little things I can't even begin to unravel needed to line up *just* right. I can't do that. I'm not that lucky. Tick and Tock *seem* to be, but that's why I suspected Wun's involvement."

He looked off into the distance where they felt Janet lingering at the border world upon which Tick and Tock were no doubt being healed.

"Tock found one single possible timeline and made it reality. That duo is going to make quite the splash, and let me remind you, unlike you, I don't have a good relationship with Janet and the Republic. This is a net detriment to me more than most of the others."

Left unspoken was that he wasn't dumb enough to help an enemy at his own expense.

Aoife wasn't sure she fully believed him, given his Talent, but she'd never actually thought he'd been the mastermind in the first place. She only wanted him on the back foot. To be defensive and reactive.

Not wanting the momentum to shift, she slapped the table and thundered, "Then if you aren't playing games, why are you shirking your duties in this war? Are you secretly working with Virgil? Hardly a skirmish along your entire border, and oh look at that, you sent the bare minimum amount of troops who usually arrive too late. Have you ever considered that Janet and the others dislike you because of moves like this?"

Aoife almost smiled as Emmanuel leaned forward in response to her words engaging with her.

"And calling a third party into a population war is acting honorably? There is an argument somewhere in that mess that I'm the one acting properly, but I won't make it unless you force me too. My reasoning is simple. I don't want to fight the Federation. Yes, I set up the little play with Tessa Bluesand, but you found out about it, and then through that learned about Virgil's little pet project worlds. I managed to inform you without letting Virgil know that I knew about them, nor exposing my own embedded resources. Which, let me remind you, neither of us want pinned on me. Besides, we both know she was already targeting you as a scapegoat for this population war. She's been painting you guys as the evil usurpers because you aren't human and took the top spot by most Great Power rankings. I simply made sure you wouldn't be caught off guard and did so at minimal cost. Sadly, that's where my involvement ended. Everyone remembers that I have my father's Talent set, but they also seem to selectively forget that I have many others that are more useful most of the time. If I'm being honest, I spend most of my time with support Talents active. Few things can beat a Talent for doing paper work in our position."

Aoife tapped the table with a little more force than she might have needed after hearing his last words as she brought them around to her reason for bringing this fight up in the first place. "So then you'll be launching a full scale assault on the Federation as well as paying the penalties of your earlier breaches? Without complaint?"

Emmanuel sighed into the room at large. "I can do the attacking half, but the payment part is going to be far harder. I don't particularly feel guilty or inclined to pay you for nothing. Even if I was, I'm not exactly flush with resources to give away either. How are your thoughts about a deferment plan?"

Aoife nearly laughed at the suggestion. Not because it was funny, but rather because she'd had to fob off several of her underlings with similar methods in recent years.

While the Clans had grown well in the last few thousand years under her watchful gaze, those improvements had come at tremendous resource cost. Emmanuel didn't want to part with valuables any more than she wanted to. They all needed some time to recover after such rapid social expansion in recent years. It would take thousands to even partially digest what they'd already had, and the progression of new innovations was only slowing, not halting.

Too bad for Emmanuel, she had him over a barrel and didn't intend to go easy as she sought to use *his* resources to cover *her* gaps.

"I think *not*. Let's discuss exactly what resources you *do* have. How much of that Dragon blood do you have in stock? And don't say none, we've all long since figured out you really do

only have the one copy of the rift, so don't try to inflate or deflate the numbers. I know you keep half of the production for internal use and stockpiling. How much do you have on hand? I want it all."

Emmanuel barked a laugh so abrasive it caused her blood pressure to involuntary spike. "I can sell *some* of my stockpile to you at market price, but I'd rather break all illusions of cordiality than give you even a drop for free. As for how much? Let's say... two vials."

Aoife finally let herself smile as she heard the words she'd been aiming for. She'd salvage something out of this fiasco one way or another, and she never minded getting one over on the Empire.

Besides, she knew something the others didn't. The Empire and the Guilds were no longer the only Great Powers who were allied. She almost felt the need to thank Emmanuel for handing her the perfect framing for the meeting she'd have with Janet in a few months when things calmed down.

Who knew, maybe Wun really had been pivotal in Tick and Tock's revival. She'd be claiming that even as she pilfered through the monkey's stockpile of goodies next. The Clans vaults really did need a refresh, and despite following the golden age of Hastor, she was determined to prevent their decline.

However all of that would come after she got at least *three* vials of dragon blood for her trouble. They would be the leverage she used over her highest Clans to get them in line. It would also free up the bottle they'd traded for not too long ago, and she was eager to reexperience how deliciously well that particular blood was at polishing her bloodline for the advancement to Rank 3. Even with a phoenix's blood bolstering its effectiveness, the blood didn't last forever at her level. There was too much power needed to approach that oh so rare threshold.

Aoife only let herself truly smile as things came together and the Emperor stormed out of her office, his stockpile three vials of blood lighter.

Emmanuel stepped back into Empire territory and let out the deep breath he'd been holding since he felt Janet start moving before he started laughing. He couldn't quite believe he'd pulled that off with no one the wiser. It had been expensive in more ways than one, but he was... *content* with the results.

If he'd known he was gifting Janet long presumed dead Ascenders, he never would have gone through with the plan, but now that it was done, he accepted that consequence. He reframed it as an expensive way to secure two nearly unique Talents from before his time. It also made it far easier to pretend he wasn't involved. But more important than those small advantages, was the future that he cared about. And in that category he'd succeeded better than he ever could have dreamt of.

The return of two Ascenders hadn't been the medium sized wave he expected, but a tsunami that outclassed anything he could have hoped to conjure on his own. It dwarfed his other moves a thousand times over in both cause and effect.

Even only hours later, the lines of fate were becoming obscured and muddled as everyone was forced to shift their plans and more importantly their resources. They didn't know it, but he could already see as the Empire's inevitable demise was once more tossed into question.

However, by that same token, he couldn't be absent from the reactions and actions. He still needed to investigate exactly how he wanted to move, which meant returning to his rift instance.

That meant it would soon be time to unleash some of the other now seemingly minor disruptions he had previously lined up. He was sure his Ascenders would be happy to see Susanne again if nothing else.

Not that his previous efforts were wasted due to the Ascender pair, but it did change things. After a focused few minutes of searching, he shook his head. It wasn't quite time yet, but soon she'd be able to help cover an important gap. Where she could make the most targeted splash on fate.

In comparison to the two new Ascenders, it would be a much smaller one in totality, but that only meant he could be more focused with its application.

Emmanuel felt his mirth fade, though he savored the small afterglow that remained in his chest like the remnant coal of his earlier bonfire of emotions. He'd done amazingly well, but he wasn't through to the other side quite yet.

There was always *something* to do, something to prepare, something to plot.

He couldn't *wait* to Ascend. Maybe he'd run a tea shop or something low stakes on a mortal world for a few thousand years. That could be nice and relaxing.

If he lived long enough to ascend, it was a thought worth pursuing.

Esther sat next to Lawrence in a hastily cleaned out office, resisting the urge to look around. Not with her eyes or spiritual senses, which wouldn't tell her anything new, but with her Talent. Or rather, Lawrence's Talent, to see the history of an object. She was confident that if she wound back time, she'd see this was some low level official's office.

She'd only been conscious for a few hours and desperately wanted answers. Answers to questions she hadn't fully formed. Ones that not a single healer who'd worked on her would speak of, even if they already seemed to know the answers to questions she hadn't formulated yet.

That was what scared her.

When the door opened, she was almost disappointed to feel the visitor was Tier 35 instead of Tier 50, but as she identified the person in question, any such feelings vanished.

She put on her best, most polite smile as she proffered a hand, "Hello. You must be the Gladiator Reality Warper Extraordinaire that Lawrence spoke of. I wasn't exactly in the best state the last time you saw me, and I wanted to thank you for your assistance in our retrieval. You saved Lawrence a lot of unnecessary pain and I acknowledge that."

The blonde woman flashed her a wide smile that Esther felt was both genuine and full of secondary meanings. She didn't like the smile. She didn't like it one bit, but she tried to keep that from showing.

"Call me *Maya*. And I was happy to do so. Honestly, I'm just impressed you two are up and standing. Your spirit was in tatters only a few hours ago. I know Daimian does good work, but..."

She finished with a whistle that lingered a hair too long for Esther's comfort.

Instead of commenting, she shared a look with Lawrence but didn't refute their fellow Gladiator's words. Neither of them wanted to be up and about, but there were too many oddities and they needed answers. And according to every cultivator here, there was only one person who would provide them.

Their Tier 50.

Except, as the door silently opened once again, she corrected herself.

That was *not* the Tier 50 Esther expected. She'd already suspected that from what Lawrence had pieced together, but having undeniable proof slapped in front of her threatened to collapse the carefully constructed walls of hope and self delusion she'd been maintaining since she woke up.

Maya's presence earned a glare but no words from the Tier 50, which actually managed to ease Esther a fraction. Their Tier 50, Keith, had looked at them like that more times than she wanted to admit.

With a pleasant smile, the woman stepped around their seats and proffered a hand just as they got to their feet.

"I'm sorry about the delay that left you two waiting. I wanted to be here when you awoke but I was held up and that resulted in a hectic return, and for that I deeply apologize. My name is Janet Olga, President of the Republic. I'm aware you two have questions and I have answers. However, I have one question to ask first that I must insist on. Are you ready for the answers you might find? It may be more ideal to focus on healing without distractions. It's what many of our healers recommended, and as such, I wanted to make sure."

The handshake was firm, commanding, but without being overbearing. It was everything Esther expected from a Republic President. Which was a thought that would have been comforting if she'd even had an inkling of who this woman was. She'd never heard of this 'Janet Olga' in any politics and she'd kept notes on any and all up and comers.

Lawrence spoke the question she didn't want to. "How long has it been? It's obvious it's been longer than the few hours we experienced. How long?"

Esther braced for the words that fell from the sky like fists. She needed to know.

"102,523 years."

Esther felt herself shaking, but couldn't quite find the mental wherewithal to stop doing so. Her mind had ceased all other functions when she'd heard how long they'd been gone.

It had to be wrong. There was no way she'd sent them forward over a hundred thousand years. Because if that were true, *she'd* have done this to them.

That was... impossible.

It was hard enough to move forward a few hours in time under normal circumstances. A hundred thousand years? That was... hard to believe.

As if understanding that would be the case, Janet withdrew two small portable screens and handed them over.

"I took the liberty of preparing and collecting the records about your presumed deaths. I'll be upfront that we've taken steps to keep you off the general information channels, but this should be everything you need while you initially recover. It's extensive, but far from complete, so if you want something specific, please let someone know. I'm also sure that you two will need time to properly comprehend this. Is there anything I can do to help your transition? Anything at all?"

Esther's voice was hardly louder than a whisper as she asked, "What about the people we knew? Our friends?" She looked at Lawrence and winced at the realization, "Linda?"

Maya spoke up for the first time. "Ascended thirty thousand years ago or so. Most of your former friends and peers are in that boat. They thought you died and moved up to escape the reminders. Not all, but a number of them."

Esther almost asked about her favorite series, but realized that if nothing else, she had a massive backlog of content to burn through. She'd trade it all for going back to their time, but the irrelevant thought somehow managed to steady her.

Janet took back over the conversation with a small glare at the intruder. "Rafi Townsman is now Senator Townsman and on his way over, along with the few others from your time that were close to you and friendly. They won't arrive for a few more months, but we are doing what

we can. In fact, Senator Townsman and the Steadfast Alliance were a core part of the coalition that got me elected.”

Esther heard more words as Janet obliquely started tying them to her, but she couldn't stop her mind from spinning. Her barely patched together spirit felt as if someone was driving red hot nails through it. She—

She felt an overwhelming presence enveloped her and everything came back into focus. There was no clarity, she was still as confused and scared, but the damage itself seemed less prevalent.

It wasn't healing, rather like someone had picked her up and removed the pressure from a broken leg.

Esther wished it was only a broken leg.

Tapping at the pad, she started digging through the information as quickly as she could manage without her [AI] to help. The pad was locked down to a degree she almost found impressive until she realized it simply didn't have any wireless connections.

That wasn't even a new trick, just one she hadn't been expecting. Her mind felt slow and it was only getting worse with each revelation.

It took Esther and Lawrence almost an hour to go through the most important pieces of personal information as they asked a thousand and one questions, but by the end of it, they were exhausted in both body and spirit.

Janet seemed to recognize that as she steered the conversation to an ending without hesitation. “I think this has been more than enough for a while. It would be best for the two of you to take a few years rest in a rift instance and use the time dilation to heal up. Maya can read you in as she goes to do the same. She can also serve as a guide and touch stone while you are all there. She will, however, need to return to the battlefield once she's replenished her willpower.”

That finally focused Esther, and from the way Lawrence perked up, he must have felt the same.

“What war is ongoing? Is it with the Clans?”

Esther may have been a little too eager, but she felt it was warranted.

It may have been a hundred thousand years for everyone, but the Clans had shot a *star* at them and she'd get her revenge. Not today, but someday she would.

Sadly, that day seemed not to be any time soon.

Janet shook her head, but it was a firm gesture, not the reluctant one Esther expected. “Negative. In fact, our relations with the Clans are quite positive at the moment. That brings me around to our next topic of discussion. The current plight of the Realm. We find ourselves in the

early decades of a population war. And unfortunately, I will need you to make at least a perfunctory appearance in it once you are healed. It was part of the deal that let Gladiator Maya rescue you. But afterwards... while I won't press you for a decision now, as you'd only just reached Tier 35 for a few decades when you were 'killed'... Under normal circumstances, that would lead to you two staying at the Tier 35 bracket for quite a while. I won't mandate you stay, your 'deaths' were more than enough to wipe the slate clean of any obligations you might have and I want to make that very clear from the outset. If you wish to delve to Tier 45 and leave all of this behind, I won't stop you. In fact, I'll clear the rift schedule myself. However returning to something familiar might be a path you wish to take, and one I wish to ensure you understand *is* still an option. One that if you two chose to take, the Republic will fully back you in."

Lawrence frowned but Esther reached out and put a hand on his arm, keeping him from speaking out about the Clan relationship. She was angry too, but a hundred thousand years was a long time. Three immortal generations.

A very long time. It was... long enough that they needed to understand before they started reigniting grudges.

Before either of them formulated a proper response, Maya popped to her feet with a clearly exaggerated cheer.

"Oh, you know Janet, this new event has reignited my love of the Republic and war in general. I don't want to Tier up to Tier 36 anymore. I think I'll stay around in the war Tiers and keep my two new juniors safe."

"They are older than you." The Tier 50 didn't miss a beat as she shot back.

"Not by subjective time. By that clock I've been a Gladiator for waaaayyyyy longer than them. That makes me the oldest one and I need to do right by them. Guide them through this turbulent transition and all that. I'm sure you can fill in the arguments for me."

Esther was going to interject that they didn't need a baby sitter, but she quickly realized Maya was playing Janet.

As such, she wasn't all that surprised when the next words out of the blonde's mouth were, "Unless you want to *pay* me to leave the war Tiers? Then I'd leave with a heavy heart but do so without argument."

The banter itself may have been different, but she recognized it from her own interactions with Keith. Badgering and wheedling their Tier 50 until they got what they wanted was one of the first skills any Gladiator learned. Flipflopping on a previously held position for personal gain was somehow the most normal thing Esther had experienced since the explosion that launched them forward in time.

"Once this war is over all funds allocated to your remaining Tier 35 payments will be paused and redirected... elsewhere." The President shot them a look before continuing without pressing them. "Your assistance and understanding to remain past your previously declared

timeline has been noted for the commemorative exit plaque you negotiated for. Sadly, resource demands have shifted. As a consequence, allocation must do so as well. We appreciate your understanding and help during these turbulent times.”

Maya tried a few more times to squeeze more resources out of the Tier 50, but when they didn't work, she turned to them. “Okay, let's leave this shithole and I can help get you guys caught up to speed on the actually important stuff.”

Lawrence sighed even as he stood up. “Somehow, I expect a lot more than the pads had on them has happened in the last hundred thousand years.”

Maya snorted even as she kicked the wall creating a new door. “You don't know the half of it. Things have changed a *lot* in the last five thousand years, let alone the last hundred thousand.”

Esther moved to follow through the door but paused before crossing the threshold. She didn't think it was a trap, she just wanted to understand what this Maya's powers were first hand.

Her inspection of the doorframe told her she'd never have been able to notice it wasn't mundane in its nature if not for the fact it should have exited them into a storage closet. Being able to see through the wall let her know that it opened into a rift instead.

More than that, she could *feel* the time difference between the zones like a wall separating reality. Or rather, one that had been made into a door. It was fascinating and she was tempted to linger, but resisted the urge. She needed to rest.

She needed time to digest what they learned and make plans about their... futures. This Maya wouldn't be ascending any time soon, which meant such unique perceptions of time could be recreated later.

Sadly, she also understood that she wouldn't be able to do any of that any time soon. Not until they'd been fully caught up on the Realm.

It took a week of additional healing and observation by the Republic's best healers before she and Lawrence were well enough to seek Maya out. The staff were uniformly kind and courteous, but not a single one would speak to them about the realm's current state of affairs, no matter the angle they tried.

Any time they pressed, they got some variation of, “Gladiator Maya has prevented us from sharing anything. Please speak with her when you are ready.”

Which was why Esther was personally taken aback by the bubble bath they found the woman in. It had taken that long for their spirits to be stable enough to leave the healer's hands, and as such, her voice was a little more snappish than she'd intended as she asked, “Was it necessary to limit our information on *everything*? I couldn't learn incidental information about the people we are going to work with thanks to you. That's how you build rapport, and you cut it off!”

Maya shrugged as she brought a flute of champagne out of the bubbles to sip. "Necessary? Maybe not, but Janet threatened me if I let anything bad happen to you, sooooo, yes. Hurry up and get in the tub, these herbs are expensive and multiplying their effectiveness isn't exactly easy on my own willpower reserves. I'm running on fumes myself but they wouldn't have given me access to them if not for you two, so I really do need you to jump in."

Lawrence ignored everything but her first comment, asking, "Have things changed that much?"

The other woman had an expression of helplessness plastered across her face but Esther wasn't sure she trusted it. "Yes. Or at least bad enough I wanted to take the lead. It's been a hundred thousand years after all. The Realm hasn't been stagnant for *three* immortal generations. Though a lot of those changes are both back- and frontloaded, interesting enough. History was kind of calm for a little bit in the middle."

Esther felt a sinking feeling rise in her stomach, but she shoved it down ruthlessly just in time for the first string of words to hit her.

"The Empire had a coup."

She felt a small feeling of pleasure at the news, but the following words dashed any comfort the words brought her.

"Federation got cut in half when they found a Tier 46 world, which is how we now have the Monster Collective and eight Great Powers. Hmmmm? I feel like I'm missing something there but it's whatever. Funny thing is the one thing that hasn't changed, the Republic's ranking, is about to. We are currently the second strongest Great Power behind the Clans, who replaced the Federation at the top, but we are probably going to be overtaken by the Empire in all metrics before the end of the current immortal generation. If we haven't already."

Esther's throat worked, but no words escaped. She didn't like a single thing she'd just heard, except the bit about the Federation's slide into depravity being justly punished by those they'd sought to oppress. And the coup she supposed, but that can't have been a good thing if it let the Empire rise.

Where was the rest of the good news?

Lawrence wasn't so hindered, thankfully. "The Empire had a coup and now they are stronger? That seems... well not backwards, as the Empire was always a shithole, but I'm surprised that it's risen rather than fallen."

Maya once more gestured for them to join her, which they did after stripping down themselves. Esther wanted to complain about the informality of such a meeting place, but instead she let out an involuntary sigh as she felt the medicinal effects of the water soothe her aching spirit. She could feel Maya's power amplifying the effect, but contrary to her expectations, the results were perfectly natural and integrated seamlessly alongside the real healing.

She could feel her willpower recovering, but she'd bottomed out and wouldn't be able to tap into her Domain until she'd fully recovered. She couldn't help but be impressed at this Gladiator she knew nothing about. Even as a support ability, it was an incredible trick for self healing on par with other Gladiators' best moves.

It reinforced that this upbeat Gladiator was a seasoned one who'd justly earned her retirement, not the total stranger Esther still thought of her as.

"Tell me that's all?"

Esther's eyes fluttered open as she realized what she'd said with a start. She didn't retract the question, but she better understood why everyone had been so willing to follow a gag order.

What Maya had said was almost unbelievable, and from anyone else she might not have.

"Not even a little. That's mainly the old news, shit that was old before I was born. There is a fuck load of new stuff far more relevant to us and the current war we are in. All of that is waaaaayyyy more distressing and important. *That's* what I was keeping them from spilling."

Esther shared a look with Lawrence but she was the one to speak for them. "We haven't decided if we are going to fight in this war. We—"

However, Maya cut her off with a snort and piercing gaze. "Look, you can bullshit Janet all you want, but I'm a fellow Gladiator. I *get it*. The others see the intervening years and think you need a break. I know better, you don't need to get back into war mode, you've never left it. You went from one war into the next. Are you seriously telling me you don't *want* to rush out there immediately? That soaking your hands in an ocean's worth of blood to vent your frustration doesn't sound cathartic right about now? That you will be okay just walking away after doing it once? Say the words and I'll believe them. *Say them.*"

As if realizing how she might come across, Maya held up an empty bubble covered hand. "No shame if you do need a break. We all need time off at some point, but I can't see you healing up and then not doing the single thing you are familiar with. Besides, aren't you curious to see how you stack up to the current generation of Gladiators?"

Esther didn't need to see Lawrence's expression to know he felt the same way about being called out as she did. However, it didn't feel too bad coming from what was essentially a peer.

That was a strange thought. So much of one that she felt the need to voice the question it raised. "I'm surprised that President Olga was willing to let you go when she had the possibility of having two Gladiator teams. Keith would have fought tooth and nail for two teams at the same time."

Maya's laugh echoed around the room long enough Esther started to take the sound personally when she finally forced words out. "Oh, this isn't on you, just a timing thing. I'm sure

Janet had a similar thought before she took over. Like I said, though, history has been busy. The other Great Powers are a *little* testy about anyone with more than one Gladiator so soon after the Empire's nonsense of having *three* active teams."

That news horrified Esther to her core, but Maya only seemed eager as she tapped a clear part of the water's surface. The action made more bubbles appear, even as the herbs effects spiked enough she struggled to keep her eyes open. "That's more specific than I wanted to go, but you *do* need to know about the current state of affairs. We have eleven Gladiator teams between the Great Powers."

Eleven?

That pulled Esther out of her lull like a strong stimulant.

Maya continued before Esther or Lawrance could question that number. "The Federation has no one because they suck assholes. We have me, reality warper extraordinaire, for the Republic! We can have a much more detailed chat about what I can do later when we are more comfortable with each other. Then we can have a good spar and discussion about our unique abilities and how they might interact."

"The Monster Collective has Gideon and Eclavorn. They are Tier 41 currently, so out of the war Tiers. Eclavorn, the dragon, is a plasma mage with all of the normal dragon chicanery that comes from greater essence allocation. His Talent is stronger than the dragon baseline, letting him duplicate skills, meaning every attack is a barrage. Worse yet, he stretched it enough to work on all the good meta-skills, letting him quadruple up if he needs to. Additionally, he has advanced his bloodline to Rank 3; one of only four currently in the Realm— though there's rampant speculation about a fifth. All in all, he's a lot of dragon and not afraid to make it known."

"His rider and bond, Gideon, is the quieter partner, but he's also the more dangerous one at our level. His Talent lets him turn channeled spells into reserves and stack effects like the corpses he leaves behind. Through their bond, he can tap into E's bloodline or Power and boost himself even further. It might sound simple, but it's *very* strong in application. Strangely enough, he's also one of the best techies in the group, even though he doesn't advertise it. He's got a knack for it that even Max and Ellen can't quite cover. In addition, they both almost got the perfect warrior trifecta, with a seventh floor Self Identity, along with a floor three Opposite Day and floor 4 Genesis Cultivation, and that all combines to make them very physically strong. Thankfully, neither are too relevant for you. They used to be part of the Federation but defected during the split for obvious reasons."

After a small sip of her drink, she added, "The Sects have Sien. She's *really* scary but an actual good person deep down under all of the Sects' shit. Cute too when you get her riled up. Her actual powers, not so much. She's a Dream mage who gets stronger when anyone falls asleep around her. And she's very good at sending people into night-night time, both in battle and more secretly. If she has any free time, she can even induce nightmares so real while also reconnecting the mind to the body. That means she can 'possess' cultivators and make them temporarily switch sides, forcing you to kill them most of the time. If you think that makes her

weak in single combat, think again. In her second Tier 35 war, she managed to seriously wound a Guilds Gladiator you don't know, Reed Blade, which spelled his retirement at the end of the war. Oh, and she jokes about being able to read dreams, but she's not joking. She can learn a lot from a dreaming mind, though it's got some fuzzy limits no one is quite sure of. But we do know it is range limited and she promises not to use it on any of us without good reason."

Before they could process that, she continued, "On the flip side, we have Olivier, the Guilds' Gladiator. He's *also* a good person if I'm being honest, but he's refusing to return a bet item to me, so he's going to catch some strays here. Speedster with the unironic name 'One Step Behind' because that's *exactly* how he likes to take people down for someone who is the fastest person at Tier by a wide margin. He's *insane* with anything related to secondary Domain powers and has most at a level he can use against peers. Man picks them up like trash off a tourist town's streets. He's mastered all of the Great Power general ones, half a dozen from bygone civilizations, and even seven from the records of ascenders from lower Realms, including our newest entrant to our Realm, Rah. He's also got multiple Anchors, but won't share how. He does it because he can and it gives him an unexpected edge. He's even recreated half a dozen Strange Realm effects through sheer insanity and the willingness to experiment on himself. He has a Stage 4 Power and he's a very good teacher if you want advice on Power or general Domain stuff. He is pushing for Stage 5 after Aiden's showing, but doesn't have a clue of where to even start looking. And note that if you do go get training, he's going to dissect a lot from you. He's quite perceptive, but most of us are, so that's always a lost cause just as I'm sure you'll be able to dig up information on the rest of us."

As she chewed on a slice of dried apple, she fluctuated through spiritual sense. "All of them are Tier 42, and as such are also not really relevant to you, so let's move on."

When her mouth was clear, Maya said. "In the Corporations we have Max. You two are either going to love her or hate her. She's a prediction Gladiator who is *really* good at her job. She also tends to play group therapist, though it comes out of a place of weird misplaced love. It's apparently pretty effective if you are tempted to talk to her, and so far, there has never been even a hint that she's used anything she learns like that against anyone in the chat. So it's as safe a place to vent as people like us can find. As for her combat, well I actually don't want to talk about Cosmind right now or we'll never move on. You can look up her feats when we get out of the tub. Just know she's annoying to fight and be glad she's out of the war Tiers. Her presence turns wars into competitions of how well they can keep their information locked down. Any slip ups and she just directs the Corpo generals to a strategic victory faster than you can blink. She's also the only one of us to kill another Gladiator."

Without giving them time to process that shocking revelation, Maya spoke on. "As for our last two Great Powers, let's get the Clans out of the way, as I'm sure you care about them the most. They have two Gladiators. One active team composed of four idiots with more strength than sense, and one retired luck mage. Don't let Wun talk you into bets without being *very* confident in your victory. Even when he's not putting his grubby hands on the scale, his luck is incredible. Whether that's good or bad luck, it's sadly very much under his control. He's used it to change the outcome of more than one war when he was active, so don't think its purely small

scale. Well it is most of the time, but he can stretch it. He's eaten shit on more than a few big bets that went badly though, so it is possible, but never bet on that happening."

Esther looked to Lawrence as Maya got momentarily lost in her own world.

The information was good, vital even, but the other Gladiator seemed far more aware of their foreign peers' personality traits in a way that didn't make much sense. She'd expected a purely combat report. Not... this half familial half joking tone.

Thankfully, Maya seemed to catch onto their confusion and explained without prompting. "Don't give me those wide eye stares. I did say shit had changed since you were around. Around a generation after your deaths, the Gladiators' chat got some massive tech improvements from Civis. Not to toot others horns, but at this point, I'd say it's at its historical peak. We may have inherited a lot of good tech, but we added our own improvements that made it our own."

Esther found that hard to fathom, given their seniors had talked about Trassa May's Talent that let the Gladiators of the time project themselves across the Realm to each other and chat as if face to face.

How much better could things get than that? They hadn't gotten to experience it, but *it* had been lauded as the peak of communication and she didn't know how to improve upon that.

"We currently have a Great Power-wide instant communication group chat just for us Gladiators. It's complete with basically everything that the normal Nets have, if not more. And I'll note that it's only instant thanks to the last Clans team, but it's very much a group effort you'll be tapped for if you have something that proves useful to the cause. I'm not sure how time might play into things, and given its costs I doubt you will, but I've gotten tapped for shit too, so it can happen. But let's move on to the active combatants. The ones you actually care about."

A data packet arrived with Maya's next words. Though Esther couldn't help but notice that it, like everything in the base, was using security codes from their time and not the newer ones that she'd be able to twist to break through the blocks.

She hoped that hand holding would end after this debriefing, or at least loosen.

"The Clans have 'On The Last Line', composed of two dwarves and two illegally short humans. Honestly, all of them are annoying to fight one on one, but you two really only need to focus on two. Brian is a necromancer of, honestly, impressive power. He's acting as our chat's relay system because part of his Talent lets him fully possess any and all undead he's got control over. It makes killing him in a battle actually impossible. He keeps a 'main body' around with the others, but his real body is hidden somewhere. Possibly in a rift, but also maybe next to his Tier 50. Either way, it makes him a real pain in the ass to fight. Brian will act as both long range magical damage and as a debuff-curse mage with a specialty in exotic magical research. When he brings his skeletons into battle en masse, he does whatever the fuck he wants depending on what minions he decided to unleash. When he needs to, he can fight on multiple battlefields at the same time and overwhelm with numbers. He's *incredibly* strong."

“Moe is the team’s frontliner and has a Talent for strength scaling. Fully buffed, we haven’t found many things he can’t pulverize. He’s got a very valid claim to the strongest person at Tier in the whole Realm, as seen by him swinging around a growth hammer made out of *two* neutronium ingots as if it’s made out of air. We’ve never been able to refute his claim despite a lot of effort, such as making him drag an at-Tier world around in chaotic space. He’s strong, durable, and can punch a cloud or a spell as easily as he does your face.”

“Ellen is a bad match-up for me, but shouldn’t be for you. She’s a mimic. She takes anything you do, learns and understands it, then incorporates it into her own fighting style as she picks yours apart. It’s really frustrating, but you guys are Talent focused, so she won’t be able to steal everything you do beyond your physical fighting styles and some general spells. But to be honest, she’s probably already looked everything up about you two and learned all your fighting preferences, so you won’t get any newcomers advantages. If she gets you in a melee and you can’t cheat, just run. You will lose otherwise. She’s pushed her Talent to incredible levels, and probably has one of the single strongest Innate Understanding Talents in the Realm at this point.”

“Krodag is the team’s healer and drinker. He shouts his spell names as he casts, but that has the side effect of making the spells *waaaaayyy* stronger than normal. It’s nearly impossible to shut him up, but if you *can* silence him, it’s quite effective at reducing his power. He doesn’t use it often, but he can also make combination spells on the fly by making custom names, which lets things get weird. He plays the fool, and honestly he is one, but don’t let the appearance trick you. He’s just as combat capable as everyone else, and very good at keeping his team in the fight well after they should have gone down. As a support he specializes in buffs, he’s who gets Moe ready to punch everything after all, but he can empower them all if he’s not harassed properly.”

Esther and Lawrence could both count and realize what Great Power had been let out.

“So the Empire has a coup and *four* Gladiator teams? Or are there now independent Gladiators?” Lawrence tried to make a joke, but it didn’t land as Maya simply nodded.

“When I say they had a coup, I meant it. One Agatha Sophron took over and turned that particular sinking ship around in a big *big* way. Wide scale reforms that brought them more inline with the Republic. Mandatory awakenings, mortal protections that are *strictly* enforced, free healthcare for non-delvers. Honestly, it’s a pretty good place to live, all things told. Second only to the Republic for low Tiers who just want to live and eventually die by basically any metric. To speak plainly, because I can see you don’t think I’m telling the truth, the current Empire isn’t the place you remember.”

Esther had a hard time believing that, but she didn’t say anything. She didn’t think Maya was *lying*, but she found it hard to view the *Empire* as anything but a repressive shithole.

“I’m going to move quickly because we have *four* teams to go through. Lila, she’s old as dirt and will hopefully climb her scaly ass to the next Realm sooner than later, though she’s not as old as you two. A sand dragon hatched from an egg fully sapient due to the Talent of her

bond— though she's managed to keep the exact details of that Talent secret— she joined the Path *without* said bond. She's a menace, so be glad she's out of the war Tiers. Hmmmm, I feel like I said that a lot today. Eh, whatever! Her main fighting style for fodder and delving revolves around getting in close to scratch and bite with the goal of consuming people in her tides of sand. If successful, she can bring out temporary copies of her defeated foes with most of their power intact. For peers, she does the same but likes to detonate the copies' cores on top of you. It's *very* effective under her claws. While she prefers to be loud and brash, she's a perfectly capable ambush hunter who will wait for the perfect first strike if a fight is close. She's also got a floor seven Spirit Journey, though she refuses to admit claiming it. She likes to use a cracked or otherwise heavily modified [Clone] to keep things in doubt. But don't believe her. She got it the same way everyone successfully gets that floor, by slaughtering everyone else for their Genesis Energy and leaving no survivors to tell on her. And that's on top of a floor six Genesis Cultivation boosting her raw essence further than most dragons inherent ones."

Esther was taken aback by the revelation but only nodded, just to be surprised again as Maya continued. "She also dabbles with time magic, but it's only that; dabbling. Expect her to badger you after she thinks you've settled in. Then we have *Aiden*. Better known as Duke Waters because he's a doofus. He just got bought out of the last war after he revealed he'd created the Domain stage beyond Aspect: an Authority. Oh, and he did so at Tier 30, if that tells you anything. As much as I hate to admit it, he used that revelation to kick my ass along with Yun Me's while being 3 Tiers below us in the last war. She's still around by the way, so feel free to say hello and get ignored like usual. He also killed some stupid amalgamation of fucked up cultivators the Federation cobbled together with enchantments on their bones that they revealed during the last war. I can show you how to pop them later because they've made more in the meantime. It's easy enough when you get the trick down."

After a sigh into her glass, Maya grumbled. "As for Aiden himself, he's stupid, don't engage with him in any way shape or form if you can help it. He's a long, mid, and short range water mage. It's pretty much impossible to track him down and his defenses are top notch. He does basically everything via Domain tricks or outright skill manipulation. The man is, as much as it physically pains me to admit, oh so exceptional at Domains. To the point of dwarfing everyone else in the chat. However, he's so good, he can't explain *any* of it. He just *does* things. Case in point, after he got bought out, he admitted that he managed to incorporate his Minkalla Domain boosts into his Intent, his Aspect, *and* his Authority. Then know he got a near perfect Minkalla run for Domains, because of course he did. 'Once in a hundred generations' run it was called at the time, with people flocking in secondary waves after news spread. After he left the war Tiers, he shared exactly what he got from each floor during the post war celebrations. We knew most from the context of what his powers were and the run his cycle got, but it settled a few bets. He got a first floor Wasteland that added a minor healing effect to his Domain. Second was Back to Basics, which let his Domain feed into his senses, and to a lesser degree, physical strength. Third, he got a Floating Islands, which gave him the normal boost of spatial locks via Concept. Hitting the important ones, he got a fourth floor Folded Reflections. Fifth, World of Cardboard, which boosted his physical based water skills. Mind Over Matter at floor six and finally Conceptual Lock to finish his run out. It being the seventh floor, it boosted his Concept itself into the stars, and he then had the audacity to stretch that reward into empowering

everything else in his run. Like I said, he got the *perfect* Minkalla run and he hasn't let it languish."

Seeing their disbelief, Maya nodded. "The method isn't perfect, and so the boosts aren't quite as effective as you go up, but he's still pulling enhancements out of nowhere compared to everyone else. He's an idiot savant when it comes to Domains, and there is no denying that. Don't fall for any lessons he tries to sell. The man is *famously* bad at explaining Domain things. Even his own Great Power won't pay for lessons as a token gesture, because all he does is manage to confuse people and set them back, even when he's earnestly trying to explain things. Even Ellen, the learning savant herself, has only managed to parse 'the most basic things' from him. He's a menace."

Esther was still reeling from the revelation when Maya shattered even more of her understanding. "Then we have Zack and Allie. Tier 35, but bought out at Tier 25. Zack is a control and anti-mage. He's an exceptional one at that, even by our standards. His main thing is to transform the mana aspect of any spell he's got control over to any other mana aspect he wants; and any spell that gets near him usually ends up under his control. It's infuriating to fight him at range because of that. Don't bother, just save your mana. While never one to jump into the spotlight, he's the go-to guy in the Gladiator chat involving anything to do with skill control. He's picked apart and generalized several of our older techniques and will help for a fee. He'll no doubt want your help as he improves his time magic. I'd recommend doing it, but sell your expertise at a premium. While Zack was impressive and a right pain to fight, they really got bought out because of his partner, Allie."

Maya looked almost wistful for a moment before shaking her head. "She's a *hyper* long range teleporter, the best spatial manipulator in the Realm, and got bought out when she revealed the fact she has *no* inherent range limits. During their first and last war, she brought the final Gladiator team around the frontlines and slaughtered about half of the Tier 25 peak and pinnacle elites from the Federation, Sects, and us. Once you get to know her, she's great though. She complains about it endlessly, but she teleports any of us who wants it around. Though, given she just reached Tier 35 herself, we've only been able to use it a few times before the war kicked off. But it's *amazing*. I'd suggest finding a bakery you like and stocking up on snacks for payment. An earnest attempt at a new snack is the best way to that woman's Talent. Currently, she spends most of her time jumping between the first and second layers of Chaotic Space, pushing her limits and expanding her network. She keeps on the look out for Strange Realms and is willing to jump anyone within her strength to collect them. Be glad she's gone."

Esther felt a chill race down her spine at the implications, but nodded in unison with Lawrence when she'd accepted the news. She was quite grateful this 'Allie' had been bought out of the war Tiers. Esther had no desire to fight with the ever-present threat of a surprise ambush from a Gladiator-level combatant. Let alone the threat of two.

"As for the last ones. Well they are most interesting, as they are the most relevant. Let's start with Liz. A blood mage phoenix who transformed her blood mana into a Level 4 mana aspect she calls ichor. Blood of an Immortal rather than the blood of a mortal if that helps you

understand. It's powerful stuff, composed of lightning, fire, and blood. While she's the best ichor specialist by a wide margin, as she's the pioneer, all of the Great Powers have started testing replacing elites' blood with ichor for passive boosts. If they are like us, they've seen great effects, but no one has implemented the tech much with her still in the war Tiers. No need to make it even easier for her to kill elites than it already is with her control over normal blood. The Empire is actively using it, but keeping it to a few pinnacle teams so far."

Another data packet came with a recording of dozens of identical women casually carving their way through a swath of Tier 35s as if they weren't low and mid level elites. This Elizabeth only used three skills Esther could identify, and it was clear she didn't have an Aspect backing her up.

It was impressive, and ideas on how to counter what she saw sprung up like plant shoots in her mind.

Before she could continue to ponder, Maya spoke. "Annoying to fight thanks to her absorbing thousands of fire, lightning, blood, and ichor Natural Treasures that hit the market to reinforce her baseline into the dedicated melee fighter levels, while also matching a specialist mage in her ability to sling spells around. She's additionally quite the curse mage, loosely comparable to Brian, though she did lose *some* depth of that post-mana aspect and bloodline upgrade. / think she is holding back some of her capabilities in that regard, but that's pure speculation. Don't let her get a body part, and if she does, get out of her range. She's also quite the notable alchemist in her own right, with her own bloodline potions company even if it's a bit overshadowed by everything else she does most of the time. If I'm being honest, all of that pales in comparison to how irritating it is to play her in anything related to poker. Bah, even if you do manage to kill all of her bodies, it's not so easy to trigger a revival- which I will note has been empowered post-adjustment to her bloodline- since she keeps some blood in Matt at all times. Sooo, you need a way to deal with that, *and* him feeding her mana through that connection in conjunction with his Concept doing the same to Aster."

"To ignore him for a moment, let's talk about his bond and the third member of the team; a former arctic fox, Aster. Currently an aurora fox, but looking to create her own Level 5 space-ice mana aspect. She wants to change her Rank 1 bloodline instead of advancing to Rank 2 where it would all be easier. Also, where she wouldn't have such a large chance of uncontrollably ranking up and losing control, but what do I know about bloodlines? While that's a bit in the air, she has turned herself into an incredible support mage who is very good at dispels and area debuffs. Don't underestimate her buffs either, even if they are rarely the main show. The same goes for her illusions, she's no expert like *I am*, but she can hold her own. Like snow, once it starts to stick, the others will all pile up. Then she's got you slowed down until you're dead by one of the other two. Her spirit space has seen some massive improvements after she created a forum for people with them and got people sharing tricks. Oh, speaking of snow, pilfer her ice cream collection if you ever get the chance, it's worth it, even if she slips in a prank ice cream or two into the batch. The in-group waiting list is already over a century, so use your arrival to jump the line. The out of group one got capped at a thousand years, and is straining to keep that limit. She's got a great sweet tooth. Oh! Speaking of bloodlines reminded me. Both of

them are the beneficiaries of having access to the original primordial dragon blood that is currently the newest rage for those of us in the chat with bloodlines. You two should pester Janet for some the minute you get out of here. It's apparently *incredible*."

Esther had spent enough time playing that same role when Lawrence was otherwise occupied, she could see the depth of power on display. But what impressed her was the ice. The ice was everywhere and all consuming. Combined with the wind and snow, Esther was already planning her counters to the potential onslaught before she had to figure something out on the fly.

She was more than a little leery about such large scale workings after their most recent trip forward in time.

Before she was done analyzing, Maya continued with a sigh. "Matt, on the other hand is, if it's possible, even more annoying to fight."

The video almost looked similar to the one of Moe fighting. The large, clearly non dwarven man was swinging around a hollow sword that didn't *seem* all that notable. At least, it didn't at first glance. She held that belief until she saw him hit a planetary shield and go right through it, and deep enough into the planet she saw it shudder in protest.

Still, that wasn't too bad. They'd never struggled against the physical types.

"So, he's like Moe? A strong melee fighter? If Moe's is being the strongest and hitting everything, what's Matt's? His weight? That's... unusual but it doesn't seem all that difficult to handle."

Lawrence's question was met with a shake of the head. "Not even a little. He's just playing with a new toy there. Or rather two new toys. What you are looking at is one of the best mages in the Realm, second only to Zack in most metrics. Though their specialties are direct opposites. Matt's Domain gives him almost unlimited mana thanks to Minkalla making all three of their Concepts entirely free via their seventh floor Mind Over Matter. He's leveraged that in both the obvious ways, such as a nearly endless stream of spells, as well as a few obscure ones such as flash making talismans. He can even do talisman *arrays* if he has some uninterrupted time and needs something specific. Also, he's a pretty good gravity and telekinesis specialist for someone who is technically a generalist. JR, the Corporations' CEO, made that blue armor personally. After you see what it does in person and get jealous, you should argue to trade your war contributions for JR making you something. That raven fits every stereotype about Corpies and ravens together, so be mentally prepared. You probably can't swing something *that* good, given what he had to make the armor, but I'm sure Janet can pony up something nice from her own recent trip into deep chaotic space, or the vaults she pretends I don't know about. Back to Matt's fight though. He's a well balanced generalist blade mage and frustratingly difficult to pin down for long."

The second video showed the same man as a Tier 25. The unending waves of spells slamming into him and coming from him wasn't just impressive, it was downright scary when combined with the earlier showing of his body.

However, Maya's next words made her forget all about fighting. "Yeah, Matt's also the one we need to talk about the most. Without a doubt, he's changed the Realm more than any single person in recent history by a wide margin. Have you ever heard of skills any newly awakened Tier 1 can make? They technically came from a lower Realm ascender, Ra'thala, but Matt was the one to spread them. We call them Tier 0 spells, despite my many objections to the oxymoron. Anywho, he gave away the methods to create them and the underlying logic for free which let it spread so fast none of the Great Powers had any hope of containment or control over those initial skills. That, in turn, started a low Tier revolution across *all* of the Great Powers. From five skills to hundreds, it changed low Tier cultivation drastically."

Before Esther could do more than share a disbelieving glance with Lawrance, Maya continued speaking the unfathomable. "Oh, and Aura potions. You remember them, right? Extremely rare but invaluable for the wealthy who bought them up? He made it so they are everywhere thanks to a development in aperology. One that he *also* shared for free. It invalidated Bottled Concepts overnight and basically removed the remaining roadblock for mortals to reach Tier 15. Safe to say, Matt's changed a few things. Good guy overall, though a little touchy about rift breaks due to childhood trauma of losing his parents due to one. Also suspiciously secretive about his Talent. Lots of speculation there, but nothing concrete beyond the ability to crystalise mana. Don't press him too much on that too early though, or he'll lock down pretty hard, and that would be a *travesty*. He loves to cook and is pretty damn good at it, though no one will ever admit it to him because it keeps him bringing new dishes for us to try. Ask him to make something with lamb for when we meet. I've been *craving* lamb as of late. Umm... now I'm hungry. Oh! His house will shock you, but I won't spoil that early or the others will strangle me."

Esther could only sit in the hot tub numbly as she tried to digest the deluge of information she'd just been given.

When Maya offered her a glass of medicinal alcohol, she took it without her normal over thinking. Her brain was far too occupied with far more interesting mysteries.

One glance at Lawrence told her his mind was following her own. She was more than mildly interested in meeting these peers. Things seemed lively and they both needed that, even if she was a little wary about the changes that had occurred.

To do so they needed to leave the impromptu medical rift, but that was what the bath was supposed to do. Instead of asking all of the many questions that flitted through her head, she focused on massaging her spirit as the healers had taught her while she processed.

Things seemed far more lively than their time, and while that didn't make up for their loss, it at least gave them an interesting distraction as they got their feet under them. Because they would recover. Not even getting sent a hundred thousand years into the future was enough to stop Esther or Lawrence.

Nothing was.

They were Gladiators.