

Remember we are not quite done with the break yet, our normal schedule will resume on the **22nd**. Ill see you all then.

If you still need some PoA fix you can always check out the pocket FM version:
<https://pocketfm.com/show/the-path-of-ascension/7afbcbff6b63be24c9560eec193f9d3f755ec5b>

See you all next week.

Chapter 502

Aurelius Cora let the flavors and scents of the venue run over his senses, wanting to savor them as the host asked him a question. He responded with something effusive, barely paying it any mind. He couldn't help it. It had been so, so long since he got the opportunity to savor one of his kills like this.

The slow play, the cat and mouse before a strike. He'd been waiting for so long, and *Ascender* Titan smelled better than any of his prey ever had. It wasn't even close. Like freshly made chocolate and just plucked raspberries. It was intoxicating, like nothing he'd ever encountered before.

Logically, he knew that his stalling for the perfect target, and therefore depriving himself, was what made his newest conquest smell so good. However, knowing and understanding were two different things, thus it was all he could do to stifle the excitement that threatened to bubble up.

It was *finally* time.

Aurelius had never truly believed in the legends of Ascenders, at least not since he had learned enough to understand. How could he? They were big fishes in a small pond, young upstarts competing with those who knew they couldn't manage *real* cultivation and so stayed and died in the war Tiers for fear of advancement. Not only that, they were *common*, with more than a single so-called invincible per immortal generation, where he was singular. *Unique*. Made even more so by the sword in his hand, and everyone knew that rarity bespoke power and value.

It was the truest trifecta in the Realm. Risk, rarity, and reward. He had all three in spades.

Aurelius wanted to reach down and gently caress his blade, but he wasn't so stupid as to give away the game this close to its conclusion. Not that he would even if he was alone and could, Ekleipo hated being touched anywhere but his hilt.

As the sword had once put it when they first found each other, "My blade is there to *cut*. Do not attempt to muddle its purpose, else I rectify any such attempts myself."

It had been one of the rare few times the sword, or any of its previous wielders, had taken the initiative to speak to him after their initial disaster of a meeting. Aurelius had needed to reach Tier 15 and truly prove his worth before he'd earned the right to casually converse with the blade, though by that time, they'd settled into their current comfortable silence. Looking back so many tens of thousands of years, he found the whole situation laughable. At the time he'd hated it and felt humiliated, but now he saw the tempering for what it was.

Ekleipo was *old*. The sword had seen countless wielders over hundreds of millions, if not billions, of years. After passing through so many hands, his standards were high, and no mere mortal could be worthy of its assistance before they'd forged themselves anew with its power.

As with most things, Ekleipo proved correct. Anyone who couldn't overcome such a minor hurdle with the strongest weapon in the Realm wasn't a worthy wielder. Such worthless people may as well die and set the blade free to find another. So many of Ekleipo's previous wielders had failed in their purpose to ascend out of the Realm as a Tier 50, but he would not. He would not be another voice pulled into the sword to fuel the next wielder.

No, he was more. He was better.

While it may have taken them some time for their partnership to blossom, he knew they were all the stronger for those early struggles; like a piece of iron tempered through repeated forgings.

Aurelius' attention was pulled back to the present as he heard Ascender Titan reference one of their more recent interviews, doing common labor like some kind of peasant. Instead of letting his displeasure show, he made a lighthearted joke without consciously registering what he was saying. It was a skill he had long mastered and put to use often.

None of this conversation mattered, and that knowledge gave him ultimate power.

An Ascender would die under his blade today, so what did a small chat matter? The series of events that would result in the young immortal's death had already been set in motion with no way to change them at this point.

Aurelius had been planning this Tier 36 kill since he'd reached Tier 35 and truly understood how large the gaps between Tiers became as one advanced past the war Tiers. Both in essence and in skill. It presented... opportunities.

He'd spent fifteen thousand years watching and waiting for the proper target. The one that could solidify his Tier 36 Trophy as the one that would take him to the next realm.

His patience had finally been rewarded only six thousand years ago, but that was the advantage of attacking an Ascender. They grew so fast. Like a weed. A bit more difficult to uproot, but with the proper leverage and timing, he was sure they'd come out of the ground like every other plant.

Though, it may have been more honest to admit that *this* Ascender was just right for him. A perfect fit.

They had to be from the Empire, obviously. He *sought* omnipotence, but he was certainly not there yet, and the combined wrath of all Great Powers for one who struck down upon an *Ascender* was something he had no hope of surviving. But that limit mattered so, so much less than he had ever dreamed.

Lila Worldwalker would have been a *delightful* target, but the opportunity had never arisen for him to slay that particular dragon. Duke Waters had seemed promising for some time, but by the time he had finished dawdling at Tier 31 - *far* too weak for his purposes - the man had created his *Authority*, and Aurelius was hardly an idiot who thought he could win that particular matchup even with a Tier advantage.

Ascender Light bore some potential, and for all that he was a poor match for Aurelius' preferences, he would have made for a sufficient target should others not exist. His companion Shadow would have been a delightful kill, but she was far too slippery and he couldn't be confident enough that he could keep her from escaping and alerting one of the Royals.

A missing or dead Ascender was one thing, and by the time they pinned it on him he could have already made it to one of his foreign refuges. But an *escaped* Ascender, certainly not.

Legion would have been a suitable target as well, and he might hunt her later, but while he and Ekleipo had slain phoenixes before, Legion was an unusual sort of phoenix and a multi-body clone user besides. It made for a fuzzy target. Wraith was merely support, and therefore not a particularly valuable target. Perhaps he would collect her in a few Tiers as well.

And Titan was far too perfect. A straightforward swordsman spellblade, with a speciality of overwhelming power, may as well have been the ultimate Trophy to propel him to ultimate power.

For Ekleipo the Final Blade, and he, Aurelius Cora, its chosen wielder for the past hundred thousand years, *loved* power.

And death meant power.

Not that just any death would do. The core of his and Ekleipo's connection was that of the Trophy, the marker of a hard-won fight. The mightier and rarer the target, the greater their Trophy. But a Trophy taken from a miserable fight was a miserable prize. The grander, longer, and greater the battle, the more that Trophy could live up to its full potential. And when limited to a single Trophy per Tier with no means of being rid of a poor one, it was vital that every claimed Trophy be worth its place.

It was a lesson he had taken some time to learn, in his early days as an oh-so-arrogant ninth son of an heir to a common count. But now that he was older, he was far wiser. He knew how to play with his food, coaxing out every ounce of effort and encouraging them to give the finest performance of their lives.

In some ways, it was almost a bit of a favor he paid to them, in exchange for their power.

The thought nearly made him smile, and he allowed it after checking the conversation he was a part of. The timing was a little late, but he didn't mind.

He'd suffered more than most people could comprehend to rectify those flaws after he'd learned his lesson. If he said so himself, he was quite pleased with the results. While a lot had been lost, he'd made up for it by honing the skills, abilities, and Trophies he did have to a razor's edge. It had allowed him to dominate in the arena, and it allowed him to drain the supposed best melee fighters the Empire had to offer.

Aurelius had originally intended to wait until their scheduled fight at Tier 36 to *accidentally* slay the Ascender, but plans had changed. After an interview twenty years ago when Titan had broken through to peak Tier 34, he and Ekleipo had realized giving the man time to prepare for a 'stunning' additional Tier-up to match them during the inevitable fight was a mistake.

After *a lot* of deliberation, Aurelius agreed to move their attack up. His lower Tier meant he would be less able to put on as good a showing as he might have wanted, but... well, in truth Aurelius mostly just felt impatient. A single Tier gap was good enough, and would give him plenty of control over the fight to ensure Titan put on a *truly* good showing.

So the moment he'd gotten word that Ascender Titan had advanced to Tier 35, he'd launched his plan.

In his early years, Aurelius had been forced to pick out targets all on his own, after he refused Ekleipo's initial pick, a neighboring baron's daughter. But he knew better than to disregard such advice now. With what had to be a preternatural ability to sense danger, every target Ekleipo picked out for him had pushed him exactly to his limits, but never beyond. Now, 35 Tiers later, his capabilities were beyond conventional comprehension.

Even an Ascender, those who were famous for being *invincible* in their Tier, would find it difficult to survive a battle at-Tier with him, let alone with a Tier disadvantage. Ultimately, that was the genius of striking early.

It wasn't until the interview was done that Ekleipo finally deigned to speak. Its voice was deep, but without any of the reverberation that normally accompanied such people. The voice always made him feel like the sword was whispering to him, despite that not even being remotely true.

"Do you feel the connection building? Do you feel his strength? The strength that will soon be yours? Use me to claim it!"

Aurelius didn't reply, nor did he rush. If he followed *all* of the blade's advice, he'd have long been caught and arrested. It didn't seem to fully comprehend the current Great Power political realities. It acted as if everywhere was the Sects, where laws were more like suggestions for the powerful.

He was just old enough to know the old Empire had been better in that regard, but he'd always been adaptable.

His next target, however... Ascender Titan? Aurelius knew Ekleipo was right. The Trophy claimed from the Tier 35 would propel him to magnificent heights, and at that point, anything was possible. Something about that thought seemed off, but Aurelius couldn't put his finger on it.

"He moves to the rift. We mustn't let it cycle or our opportunity will be wasted! Act now or return to mediocrity and *waiting*." After a pause, the blade's voice dripped with scorn. "Or do you so enjoy advancing like a plodding cattle?"

Aurelius wanted to snap back that he'd hated every second of his latest advancement, but he drove any such distracting thoughts out of his mind as he followed Ascender Titan to the Tier 35 rift. He couldn't be sure exactly *why* the Ascender bothered to delve local rifts after every interview he did, but today, Aurelius didn't mind. It was an easy opportunity to get the man truly alone, away from anyone who might want to save him.

Thanks to his earlier preparations, the rift in question was a newly advanced one that still needed to be explored. Most of the time local teams would have delved it only hours after its advancement, but Ascender Titan had reserved the first delve the moment he heard about it.

Exactly as Aurelius had intended.

He'd needed to pour out a considerable amount of his accumulated wealth to forcefully Tier up the rift, but it was a small price to pay to create a suitable location.

One of his Trophies was the shadow of an insignificant and spineless rogue who had denied Aurelius a proper fight and therefore Trophy, which was something he had only discovered *after* claiming it, but it still allowed him to traverse through darkness undetectably. He hid within the Tier 35 guard's shadow, completely unnoticed by the man while they drew closer to where the rift was secured.

As if someone had paved the way for him, a far door opened and someone peeked their head out of the opening, inadvertently changing the light patterns and giving him a covered path to the distortion.

Seeing the Realm assist him nearly brought a tear to his eye.

After all his planning, entering the rift was *seamless*.

Once inside, it only took him a moment to find Ascender Titan killing the local monsters with his fists like some kind of puglist.

They were large six-limbed armored ant eater monsters that seemed to have a propensity for crawling underground with an earth moving Talent. It might have been a skill, but he doubted it. Not that Aurelius cared about the differences and particularities. He had no fear of monsters a Tier lower than himself.

“It would be like a lion fearing a rabbit.”

The words almost seemed to echo in his ears from Ekleipo's depths where the old wielder sometimes offered wisdom and counseling. Each one was an echo from the distant past. He let each lesson he'd learned come back to him as he watched the Ascender work his way deeper into the rift, one monster at a time.

After his professional analysis, he had to say he was *almost* impressed. The man's moves were clean, but were so slow and uninspired to his eye. The inexperience of the youth, it seemed. He seemed to be fighting with personal buffs *only*, but was hardly taking advantage of any of them beyond letting them carry him to lethality. But even then, he was killing the monsters with his Domain more than not.

He watched as Titan alternated between his Concept and Intent, pulling and pushing the monsters as appropriate while landing his own return strikes. Focused as the Ascender was on the monsters and whatever challenge he'd set for himself, he left dozens of openings that would have seen his instant demise if Aurelius had wanted to make his move at that moment.

He refrained. They had all the time in the world now that they were inside the rift, and ideally, he wanted his target to get farther away from the entrance before he made his move.

So instead of cutting things short, Aurelius continued to watch, making sure the Ascender's patterns matched up to his research. That was why he'd been doing the stupid interviews with Titan over the last few thousand years of agony. Where they had played in the dirt and pretended like the mortals were anything more than another form of upright cattle.

Aurelius already knew what he'd say to Titan when the man lay crumpled beneath him, drained of his everything. His strongest victims tended to linger, and he always enjoyed the times when his kills were private. They allowed him to gloat a little.

Remembering the looks of despair, helplessness, anger, and resentment always managed to brighten his day, no matter how badly it was. He could hardly wait to see that look on Titan's face. He who had been told all their lives that he was impervious to such an end.

Hours turned into days as Aurelius watched Titan slowly work his way through the first portion of the rift. He normally would have waited to strike when his target had expended most of their mana, but he knew how foolish that would be with Ascender Titan.

Thanks to the man's penchant for working interviews, Aurelius actually had practice hiding from the mana giving Concept. A nearly botched kill at Tier 9 had taught him a lesson about underestimating how much knowledge and advanced warning a supposed 'support' capability could give someone. It was something he'd never forgotten, even if he'd only rarely been able to implement the things it taught him. Few people allowed him months of contact with their Domain so he could work to make himself unnoticeable under it.

Aurelius finally saw his opportunity when Titan had cleared the first continent sized landmass the rift had created. Cleaning the first area meant he would need to either clear the sea of lower Tier monsters, or fly to one of the neighboring continents.

Aurelius had spent enough time in arenas and other various single fights to understand how to properly kick off an ambush.

[Flash Step] created a nova of light at his former position as Aurelius stepped forward and crossed the intervening distance between himself and Titan with a single step. Before the Tier 35 could react, Aurelius was already bringing Ekleipo down to shatter his collar bone and possibly, if he was lucky, cleave through the Ascender. That wouldn't kill him, but it would slow down the following reactions as his body regrew.

Contrary to his expectations, Ekleipo... missed his target.

Or Aurelius initially thought so, as Ascender Titan cast his own movement spell, trying to accelerate. The Tier 35 was nearly successful, but the tip of Ekleipo's blade made contact, smoothly parting the clothing and skin of his upraised left arm as if neither existed. The wound was already healed by the time Ascender Titan turned back around, but his shirt now had a small stain of crimson, showcasing first blood.

Aurelius, having succeeded in the last moment, raised Ekleipo and looked at the matching smear of blood on its tip. He paused, wanting to let the moment linger for his audience.

He could feel it through Ekleipo. The link was established. With the blood forming the connection, Aurelius finally understood why Ekleipo had chosen the Ascender. Titan's blood hummed with power despite his appearance of being at rest. On the contrary, vitality and energy at levels even the best combatants could only have when fully boosted gave exposure to the lie that was Ascender Titan's *casual delving*.

It was *perfect*. Everything he'd been hoping for.

Aurelius smiled when he saw the confusion flit across Titan's face. He knew exactly how to make things worse for a target. "Fancy seeing you here, *Ascender* Titan. I'm sure you have a lot of questions, but they will become clear shortly. Sadly, you'll have to fill in the blanks yourself."

Emotions like fear, anger, loathing, and disgust weren't as effective at building conduits as a battle where blood ran like a river, but Aurelius had learned long ago he didn't need to choose one *or* the other. He could very much have both. Anything he did to build the connection between himself and his opponent strengthened it. The emotion, the drama, the spectacle... as desired in the arena as they were to Ekleipo's hunts, and was why he had always excelled at both. The end would only happen, *could* only happen, when Titan fell under his blade and the ritual concluded. When his power was constrained within Aurelius' Trophy.

That or Aurelius' own death, but he knew how unlikely that was. He was special. Unique.

Chosen by Ekleipo.

He struck the moment he saw Ascender Titan open his mouth. No doubt the man wanted to command Aurelius with rules and regulations that no longer applied inside this rift.

Ekleipo flashed out, striking like a snake with a lunge aimed to take out Titan's eyes. Aurelius didn't expect the blow to land, and he hoped to take one of them as his Trophy besides, and so when Ascender Titan dodged, he was already tracking the maneuver with his follow up.

Aurelius saw the moment Titan realized he wasn't going to be able to fully evade. His stance changed and he moved to try and deflect the attack upward with a forearm instead of being run through the heart.

Aurelius rotated Ekleipo to ensure the blade still cut, but a blue glow rose to block it. [Cracked Phantom Armor], if the reports were to be trusted, but Aurelius was *hardly* about to let the man use his favorite defensive skill.

So much of the war had been publicized, and even scrubbed as the broadcasts were by Empire sycophants, someone at Aurelius' level could learn a lot about his target from the snippets that made it through.

The black and orange Tier 38 talisman turned the world teal and hazy as it prevented the cast, dissolving Ascender Titan's most reliable source of defence like a sugar candy being dropped in water. It would block nearly all other neutral-aspected spells too, cutting off Titan's favorite [Mana Beam].

And so, his sword struck the forearm head-on, cutting a deep gouge into the limb. Or that was what Aurelius expected to happen. Instead, some immense force wrenched his strike away, Titan unleashing a desperate burst of strength, repelling Ekleipo like two magnets brought together.

Aurelius laughed as he cast [Mirror Strike] while pulling upon one of his few useful Trophies taken from a rift monster. It was a simple ability that amplified the power of each successive blow. It was also one of his more common moves to use in public fights, and Titan predictably retreated instead of taking the first blow on his unarmored body.

Trying to outlast the dispel was smart, but it wasn't smart enough because Ascender Titan simply wasn't fast enough.

Aurelius' next move was to use a spell only ever used during a kill. He called it [Repeat]. He'd never learned the actual name, as he'd gained it from his Tier 17 Trophy as an Innate skill, and the original user had never publicly spoken it. Not that the name mattered, the unique skill's ability was all that mattered. It had been worth nearly losing his life as it allowed to recast his last spell as many times as he liked without interacting with the original's cooldown.

A flurry of [Mirror Strike]s' illusionary blades appeared and pushed through the repulsion to slam into Titan, sending up a spray of blood as his skin was shredded. Instead of pushing his

advantage, Aurelius stepped away as he felt Titan throw out a wall of his repulsive force, right on cue.

The coastline and everything around where he'd been standing exploded as the wave of force obliterated everything in its path. By the time it hit him it had already dissipated into little more than a breeze, but Titan had managed to fully heal within that time.

"Hehehe. You might want to conserve your energy, Ascender Titan. If large attacks like that miss a few more times you might find yo—"

Aurelius was forced to interrupt his [Mirror Strike]-[Repeat] combination as Titan punched out with [Armageddon Arms] active. Instead of waiting around for the train sized pillar of fire and rock to barrel him down, he returned to his own previous location right next to Ascender Titan with [Stutter Step].

Ekleipo's eagerness was palpable as they tasted blood once more, and the connection grew. However, the blow was so smooth he feared he'd killed the Ascender too quickly, but Ekleipo's reaction clued him in faster than anything else.

Where they should have drank their fill by biting deep, they'd only been able to sip because of an inner armor. That forced him to reevaluate his approach, but not his plans. He'd fought plenty of people with internal armor and knew its weaknesses. For all its advantages, once an opponent knew about its existence, inner armor wasn't much better than any armor. In fact, its many downsides often made it *worse*.

That was doubly true for someone like him. Such tactics might help against normal weapons, but it would serve no purpose against Ekleipo now that he knew.

Aurelius transmitted his intentions to the blade as he shifted into using another Trophy, that of a shriveled hand. It was somewhat lacking compared to what it *could* have been with a better fight, which would have reverted Titan to a state before he donned the armor, as he'd learned the hard way while acquiring it, but it would be enough to let Ekleipo bypass it.

Aurelius' next attack was empowered by [Accelerated Motion], [Viper's Stab], and then [Mirror Strike]. The combined power coming from a peak Tier 36 was enough to penetrate even the best Tier 36 armors, let alone a paltry Tier 35.

Ekleipo sank into flesh, tasting the sweetness of Titan's blood before it came to a jarring and wholly unexpected halt once again.

Aurelius dashed backward, expecting a retaliatory strike, but there was no follow up to his attack. Not one to let the advantage pass him by, he slashed using Ekleipo to cast [Inferno's Gale]. He amplified the skill's armor penetration with a pendant Trophy from Tier 28, hoping it wouldn't end the fight too quickly, just give him better control over the spectacle.

The rift turned red then orange as almost a tenth of Aurelius' mana pool vanished into the strike. He stepped away to a nearby spot in the sky, using [Fleet Foot] to give him a

temporary boost of speed, wanting to dodge any last ditch efforts of Titan to take him down with them.

Aurelius took the opportunity his new vantage point gave him to gauge his latest attack while also refilling his mana pool from the prefilled mana stones he always brought into real battles.

Titan was facing Aurelius' previous position, away from his current one, but when he saw the blue Tier 35, his heart nearly skipped a beat in terror. For a moment, he feared his talisman had failed to prevent the armor from being recast. It should have lasted for ten real minutes, far more than any true Tier 36 fight would ever take, and it hadn't even yet been a single second.

Thankfully, further inspection dispelled most of his fear as he noticed the color of the blue was slightly different. *Wrong*. It wasn't the proper glow of a spell. Instead, it was more angular, hard and solid with texture akin to woven crystal. Some makeshift armor, apparently. Good. That he had felt compelled to do something so unorthodox meant he *did* feel threatened.

When the light gray eye coverings turned to where Aurelius stood, he felt a sudden spike of fear shoot down his back, but didn't let it control him as he met the gaze with Ekleipo in his hand. Mind tricks wouldn't work on him, not when this mere *child* barely more than a hundredth his age was already on the backfoot.

Making his choice, Aurelius reserved a portion of his mana pool with [Embodiment Colossus] enlarging his size by half. It, in turn, doubled his raw physical strength. He then used one of his earliest skills, [Willow in the Wind], to modulate his flexibility by adjusting the mana he spent on the channel spell, balancing his new strength nicely.

[Liquid Armor] was his next cast. The skill pulled from the vial of Trophy-enhanced depleted steel and covered him in a thin sheen, making one of the best anti-magic armors available. He layered it with [Force Armor], bolstering his physical defences alongside one of his suits of fully enchanted battle armor.

Ekleipo blurred as it chopped downward.

Titan realized his mistake too late as Ekleipo fell towards his own upraised Tier 30, mana stone filled, sword. Why the Ascender's growth sword was still Tier 30 wasn't important at the moment, but even if it had been at the proper Tier, it wouldn't have made a difference. Not even growth items could block a direct strike from Ekleipo.

The mountain chain behind the crater Titan stood in crumbled as the edges of the [Mirror Strike] copied [Flame Slash] overshot his target and obliterated the scenery. The sword in Titan's hand had melted, leaving only the hilt and about a foot of the blade in its place.

Aurelius expected Ekleipo to have sliced down into Titan's flesh, but once more, the blade had only cut along the subdermal armor, even as the Tier 30 sword regrew at a visible pace into a hollow, latticelike shape.

"You couldn't have waited even a little longer? I'm *literally* next in line."

Aurelius hardly heard the words as he tried to comprehend how or why Ekleipo hadn't cut through Titan. He didn't have time to ponder the conundrum as Titan tried to lock their blade hilts together, ignoring that most of his blade had only just regrown.

Instead of fighting, Aurelius followed the movement for an instant before suddenly reversing directions. He wanted to overpower the Tier 35 and disarm him in a single maneuver, opening him up to a follow up strike. Except, as he tried to change direction, he found he couldn't slow, let alone halt, their weapons' descent.

Just because he didn't feel a weight manipulation spell active didn't mean Titan wasn't using one. He wasn't stupid enough to trust that after how many people he'd tricked with similar tactics. Rather than fight the increased weight, he pulled both of their weapons, wanting to escape the clench by moving with it.

Ekleipo sliced through the ground as easily as it had cut through everything else, and once Aurelius got free, he brought him up and around, aiming for Titan's armpit. Though still short, this fight had been a spectacle equal to any in the arena, and if this Trophy turned out useless, there was always Legion or Wraith for the next one.

[Ripper's Condensed Edge] made the sword scream with their shared bloodlust, even as he intended to finish the fight right then and there in a single decisive strike.

He expected Ekleipo, the blade that had never failed to cut through his targets, to cleave through the armor's inevitable weak spot, but that wasn't what happened. Instead, it skittered against the blue weave, seemingly unable to find purchase with anything but a direct thrust.

For the first time, Aurelius felt a ripple of shock.

Titan brought his now empty fist up and down in a large and slow sweeping hammer blow while Ekleipo was out of place after the failed attack, unable to threaten life or limb. Moving to fists wasn't unexpected, and he was confident in defeating a disarmed Titan.

Aurelius started to side step, but he froze in place for the briefest instant as Titan's Intent unfurled. He was able to break the hold it had over him almost instantly, but his momentum had been interrupted, which allowed the fist to catch him.

It descended on his shoulder and torso, but he was prepared to take the hit and possibly receive some damage. He'd already cast one of his few Tier 44 skills before entering the rift, [Reflection of Injury].

He —

The blue clad fist blew through both [Liquid Armor] and [Force Armor] as if he hadn't cast either of them. Both spells were overloaded in an instant, his force armor shattering and his coveted Trophy-enhanced steel evaporated before his eyes, but it wasn't until the fist entered his body that he understood *why*.

The hand weighed as much as a typical *moon*.

There hadn't been a gravity manipulation spell. He'd b—

Aurelius identified the only material that could be that heavy even as his mana rang like a gong as it transferred the damage back at his attacker. His own body reformed from the damage, but he realized the rebounded energy had no effect on Titan and his crystalline armor.

At that moment, Aurelius acknowledged he had reached for more than he could handle. That Titan had secretly obtained such a major power boost since his war was unfortunate, and something he couldn't have properly prepared for, spoiling this attempt. However, that was okay. He'd simply move up his lying-low plan for the time being. He'd need to escape the Empire, but his hideaways were across the entire Realm and he could get to any of them easily enough. If the worst came to pass he might have to enter a rift for a few tens of thousands of years, but he'd be fine.

Aurelius didn't hesitate any longer and activated the Tier 37 wind aura escape talisman he'd taken the habit of keeping on his body at all times. He aimed himself towards the rift entrance, accepting that this attempt had failed. He'd always know a failure was possible, but now wasn't the time to wallow.

He mentally sighed in relief when he felt the talisman activate and turn his body ethereal as he merged with the very air itself, becoming just another intangible mote of dust. The new type of talisman's acceleration was a bit insane, and he'd covered the distance in only a moment where he could leave.

He'd ju—

Aurelius slammed into a barrier, shattering his thought process and scattering his follow-up plans as if he'd been holding them in his hands.

It only took him a moment to see what had blocked his path, but it took him far longer to understand where the mile in diameter formation surrounding the rift entrance had come from. The entire thing was made out of what looked like solidified mana stone, which also didn't compute in his hit-addled brain. It was as if that was the only object needed to create a formation, which was very much not true.

Aurelius pulled out, activated, and pressed a ward breaker to the barrier in a smooth and practiced motion. As the miniature pitchfork touched the barrier, it fizzled briefly as it dumped an entire Tier 35 mana stone's worth of mana into the formation, trying to overload the more delicate components.

Under normal circumstances, that was more than enough to at least destabilize most barriers. However, the one standing before Aurelius hadn't even wavered during the discharge.

He turned to Ekleipo even as he refilled his mana pool, emptying a large portion of his reserves. Running wouldn't do him any good if he ran out of mana mid way. That was always the highest priority in a fight, and something he knew better than most. He could only hope he was fast enough.

Titan stepped out from behind a tree, somehow not making a sound as he approached.

“I have a few questions for you.”

Aurelius stifled the panic that threatened to overtake him and cast [Entangle] alongside another wind escape talisman, aiming for the far exit.

He'd have to dodge the boss that defended it, but that would be easier than getting through that barrier with Titan wanting to 'ask questions' like a dog nipping at his heels.

The second talisman activated without a problem and took him nearly a tenth of the way across the rift in a single bound.

As he prepared to activate a second one, a Titan-sized oval appeared. A moment later, he nonchalantly stepped through.

“I—”

Aurelius tried to speak, but Titan's fist blurred forward, shattering his chest as the blow sent him flying into the nearby ocean. He only came to a stop when he was embedded into the stone floor of the ocean beneath the yards of sand and silt the rift had conjured.

His spiritual perception picked up the fluctuations Titan spoke through. “I wondered when you'd strike, but when you didn't at Tier 33 and then 34, I thought you never would. I gave you so many chances over the years, and this is the fight I get? I'm disappointed.”

Aurelius cast [Wave of Trepidation], sacrificing another tenth of his mana pool to the spell. The entire ocean swelled as it raced at the descending Tier 35.

Titan spoke even as the waves that should have pulled him into a dream under his influence did nothing more than part around him. “You know, at first I only thought you wanted to be a sycophant or something along those lines. That impression didn't make it past the third time you pushed to do an interview with me while I worked on the construction efforts, and I actually gave you some thought. Your faked enjoyment was probably something I could have picked up even *without* my Insight, but I really hadn't expected some kind of... *is* it a Talent stealer? Or is it more general than that? It *looks* more general than that. Or are they not full Talents? The cursed sword angle is at least intriguing, I'll grant you that. It being intelligent was even interesting, because none of the years you might have gone into Minkalla had The Hills Have Eyes at a deep enough floor for that level of intelligence. So yes, I have some questions.”

Aurelius wanted to ask how he could possibly know about Ekleipo, but his attempt to activate the third aura escape talisman failed. His attention went to his hand and the talisman in it, but he found the appendage severed by a blade of [Telekinesis] and falling to the now dry ocean floor. The water hadn't had enough time to resettle, which gave him an unobstructed view of its descent.

Except, his hand never hit the ground. Instead the talisman activated an instant too late, whisking it off to places unknown, but what shocked him was that he hadn't seen or felt the

blow. That unexplained oddity sent a shiver through him. Few people could use [Telekinesis] with such finesse that it lived up to its reputation of being spiritually and magically silent.

He dodged the [Concussive Force] Titan's fist let out, even as he regrew his hand. The whole time he was looking for an opportunity to use one of his many backups, but each one seemed countered by his approaching foe.

Titan's voice consumed the entirety of his spiritual perception. "I have to admit, I *really* regret making those thrice cursed enchantments. My big mouth bit me in the ass that time. I thought the slogan 'once activated they are basically impossible to stop' was 85% marketing but noooo, it's not. I don't think you can comprehend how much effort I've put into trying to find a way to block those stupid talismans, but alas. Like most people, I've found it's better to simply remove the hand trying to use them. It's a lot simpler than chasing talisman for talisman. It's too easy for the caster to use the control I built into them — thanks *me*— to shift their trajectory by a few degrees midway and end up way out of normal sensory range. Cheaper too."

A part of Aurelius, the portion that liked to toy with his opponents, wanted to ask who were the 'most people' that thought it was easier to slice a hand off someone using a talisman. His reputation as one of best arena fighters may have been a bit more show than truth these days, but he'd never heard of anyone being able to do that by accident, let alone on purpose. The activation period for the talisman was already as short as the crafter could make it. There wasn't *supposed* to be a timing gap.

Aurelius knew he needed to break contact if he had any hope to escape, so he killed himself.

The phoenix feather Trophy he'd had since Tier 22 brought him back to life, but doing so let him cast the normally phoenix-only skill mod for [Misplaced Ashes].

His body started to melt from the inside out as an unseen fire raged.

He saw Titan's head turn as he tried to identify Aurelius' destination rather than trying to prevent the transfer. For a lot of spells, it was possible to interrupt or foul the process, but [Misplaced Ashes] made it so that his actual *resurrection* was already happening somewhere far away, and what was left of him was a distraction.

His second and final Tier 44 skill was *egregiously* inconvenient to use, not least because it required he burn his resurrection without dying first, so he'd need to survive for at least a month without it. It made up for that deficiency via everything else it did. Though, once he got out of here, he would make certain to improve the skill's accuracy. Or perhaps push on and actually add the effect that brought the user *out* of a rift.

Aurelius stood up where the now burned out tree he'd replaced had been, ensuring he was alone and verifying the skill had refilled his mana fully. Then he got his bearings, his spiritual sense stretching through the area he'd appeared in until he'd found his direction. He was still much closer to the entrance of the rift but he still didn't have an answer to the formation.

Following that train of thought, he attached a dozen escape talismans before activating the first. He needed to reach the rift exit before Titan might be able to recreate the wall and truly trap him inside.

Aurelius felt a shiver run up his incorporeal spine. Cycling between earth and air escape talismans, he made it to the end of the rift as fast as he could conceive, a glimmer of hope still in his heart. It was extinguished the moment he arrived.

In horror, he watched the ten story tall boss anteater writhe against the wall of mana encircling the rift's exit. Most of its body was still underground, but that hadn't made its end any cleaner. Only its head had peaked out from its lair, but that oh so important appendage had a man sized hole burned through it, and the rest of the body was still trying to process that fact.

Titan walked out of a portal that had been silently opened, brushing his hands.

"Thought you might come here, but my mana stone was on you circling back around."

Aurelius opened his mouth to speak, but Titan raised a fist and punched. He didn't recognize the spell beyond it looking a whole lot like [Fist Blast], but that spell, along with all of Titan's other neutral mana spells, should have still been disabled.

Dodging the blow, he felt a spike of fear lance through him. A fear so deep and persuasive that his bowels threatened to empty themselves. He—

Aurelius caught the intrusion and forcefully dispelled Titan's emotional manipulation. He was about to make a comment about how embarrassing it was to see an Empire Ascender using a Sect Concept technique to try and distract his opponent, but Titan's second attack arrived before he could open his mouth. He was forced to deflect the fist shaped projectile of mana, but the blow shook both his body and resolve.

He was retreating, but not quite fast enough. Aurelius felt an unstoppable force hit his chest and destroy yet another set of armor.

Aurelius wanted to flee, but knew that was impossible, and so stood his ground.

[Circle of Flame] was meant to create distance, but it didn't as the spell obliterated what was left of the boss and its lair. Titan closed in, the fire only singeing his blue armored shell. The orange armor that remained in its place lasted two punches before it shattered, but that was enough time for Aurelius to get the rest of his defensive suite fully online.

A [Rapid Thrust], that had been upgraded by him and Ekleipo over tens of thousands of years, finally pierced the blue under-armor. That nearly brought a wave of hope to Aurelius, but the feedback he got from Ekleipo was hard to believe.

Under the impossibly hard armor, where a person's flesh was supposed to be, was more threads of mana; however, that wasn't the problem. No, disbelief came from the fact that there seemed to be neutronium woven into Titan's skin *and* bones. Both, as if one or the other hadn't been enough.

It was certifiably insane.

Who—

He never got to finish the thought as Titan brought his fist down, intending to shatter Ekleipo. Normally, he'd allow an opponent to do exactly that, but deep down he feared he already knew the result of such a clash. For the first time, he had to face the fear of being on the losing side of the equation.

Aurelius found that he didn't like it.

Lunging his body forward but withdrawing Ekleipo, Aurelius put Titan in a position where he needed to choose.

The fist aimed at his chest told Aurelius he'd won the bet.

[Twirl] wasn't normally considered a combat spell, but sudden redirection spells were far more dangerous than they appeared.

With Ekleipo already moving in the right direction, he aimed to cut between Titan's ribs, avoiding as much reinforced bone as he could. [Hypersonic Edge] was his spell of choice, and his relief was palpable as he felt the outer armor split under his blow.

Titan didn't even seem to notice the [Fire Mites] that crawled off the sword, but Aurelius didn't sit around to see how effective they were close up. [Flash Step] got him out of the way of the next fist, but he was forced to throw himself through the ground as an unexpected lance of mana nearly took his head off.

Contrary to his expectations, his spiritual perception caught the culprit. A fist sized sphere of mana that had appeared during their fight nestled in the landscape as if it was just another piece of the scenery. Now that he'd identified their strangeness, he noticed there were hundreds scattered throughout the valley near the boss like mines.

Turning, he prepared to take the hit a whispered past wielder warned him was coming. He got his elbows together to block the fist and had just enough time to recognize the oddity of there being no spell effect when the blow landed.

His elbows shattered only a moment after his spells and physical armor, but the damage didn't continue. Instead, Titan's palm retracted and dropped into a low guard stance as his offhand rose and landed a follow-up strike on his flank.

What was left of Aurelius' physical armor crumbled under the blow, but once more, the hand stopped after shattering his bones instead of carving deeper through his flesh or sending him backwards. The worst part was he had no illusion that he'd stopped the blow. The weight behind each attack gave them momentum that was hard to redirect or absorb.

Something he couldn't do. He knew that, and evidently so did Titan. If he'd struck any harder, Aurelius could have gone with the blow and tunneled through the mountain.

Now, he had to take the damage and then spend mana to heal.

He was being toyed with.

The moment the thought registered, Titan spoke, even as another flurry of blows were exchanged. “The flaws in your style make it simple to pick you apart after you lose your initial advantage. I—”

Titan ignored Ekleipo, but Aurelius wasn’t able to do the same to his fists, even if he managed to block out his words.

When the next blow landed, Aurelius used the opportunity to bring Ekleipo down to the ground, cutting Titan off. [Flame Barrage] was copied by [Mirror Strike] and the world turned orange and red as the mountain around them evaporated under the heat.

[Fire Body] turned his body into a fire elemental, letting him avoid taking additional damage and create distance with one spell. He couldn’t use an escape talisman in that form, but he also understood how futile that was with both exits locked off.

He needed to —

Titan’s fist was wreathed in a white hot fire that managed to hurt Aurelius though [Fire Body]’s innate resistance to the same element, but he was beyond shock even as he impacted the molten wall where [Flame Barrage]’s true destructive potential had ended. The impact was nothing compared to his roiling emotions as he tried to understand what was going on. Sure, [Fire Body] wasn’t perfect immunity like [Fire Spirit] but Tier 20 skills, especially upgraded ones, shouldn’t be so easy to circumvent.

He could count on a single hand how many fire mages had enough raw destructive power to manage that on *him*, Aurelius Cora.

As he landed, he felt the Sect emotional manipulation once more start to amplify his fear, but this attempt wasn’t subtle like the first. It was like one of Titan’s fists. Unstoppable.

However, that was part of the problem. At this point his rational mind, the one that knew panic wasn’t helpful, had no way to quell the rest of him and reassert control in the face of the naked truth.

If they couldn’t escape, *they* were going to die.

What Aurelius couldn’t comprehend was how a Domain less than ten thousand years old had so much weight behind it. A general Concept power deliberately cultivated later in life should have been weak and easily brushed off by someone of his age and experience. In practice, it took all three stages of his Domain, his Concept, Intent, and even the piece of his Aspect he had created to keep himself fighting on through the terror that threatened to overwhelm him.

He suffered through three more rounds of agonizing but not destructive blows before he got a chance to use [Flash Step] and create more distance.

Aurelius tried to escape deeper into the wide middle of the rift, where he could buy some time, but the valley blossomed into a lightshow of spell effects as the mines activated. He was a moment too late to dodge and the tail end of the explosions caught him within their grasp, shredding his legs and left side.

Gasping for breath he knew he didn't have to spare, he tried to cast another spell to create distance, but a voice accompanied the hand that locked onto his sword wrist like iron manacles. "And here I was hoping I wouldn't *end* the fight disappointed either."

Aurelius activated and then flared all of his non-reserve buffs, desperately trying to wrench his arm free. Instead of Titan's arm moving, he felt his own shoulder and elbow scream as they were what gave. Knowing anything else only meant death, he pulled harder, willing to tear his arm off if it meant his survival.

Either his arm would tear or Titan's other fist would land.

Aurelius felt his arm give and tear right before impact. He had already accelerated backwards, trying to create any amount of distance between himself and the attack. He almost succeeded and the distance he created saved his life.

The fist landed with enough power and momentum behind it that even only glancing his head, Aurelius nearly lost consciousness. He'd run into walls with less solidity. Recently in fact. Confusion threatened to overtake his mind, but Ekleipo's whispered words were soft comforts in his ears, giving him an anchor to clutch onto.

Or were they his own thoughts? He wasn't sure any more.

Years of battle instincts let him dodge the next two blows as his arm regrew and he used [Tether Pull] to bring his blade back to his hand. It was just in time too, as he—

Titan's [Phantom Armor] finally activated. There was no grand glow or lengthy lightshow as the armor crept over his body, it was simply not there one moment and entirely present the rest. But unlike what Aurelius had seen before, it didn't take the form of some basic suit of plate armor or as a thin blue layer that conformed to Titan's body.

Instead, Titan's armor looked utterly identical to a *true* suit of power armor, not some cheap skill construct. Blue and black crystals bulked out his limbs and torso, articulated joints flexing slightly as the Ascender moved. It gleamed through a combination of reflected environmental light, its own internal glow, and the refraction of a tiny black hole embedded within its chest.

A crystal detached from Titan's shoulder, floating up next to his head, and then activated. A horrifyingly thin bar of death descended to end his life like a simple ray of sunlight. Aurelius was only thankful his last line of defence blocked some of the blow. That also meant some of it had gotten through.

Aurelius coughed up a mouthful of blood and parts of his still healing lungs as his battered body tried to pull itself together after the latest hit. His mind frantically searched for any way for him to survive, but all he could concentrate on was how his ribs had shredded his lungs and the blood that had gotten caught in his throat felt like cement.

With the last vestiges of his strength he lashed out, trying to create an opening he could use to escape or turn the situation away.

[Viper's Edge] caused his blade's edge to glow with a menacing lime green light but Ascender Tian reached out and grasped the blade with his left hand. The blue hand didn't even suffer surface level damage as he tried to wrench Ekleipo free. The sword refused to move under that grip, flexing but remaining locked in place.

Aurelius had a million questions that all boiled down to one: How?

Ascender Titan spoke words that made no sense. "I'll have to decline. I've spent enough time with my blade that I see no reason to *downgrade*."

Accompanying Titan's words was the feeling of a hand tightening around Aurelius' head, but that made no sense. Ascender Titan's hands were around Ekleipo's blade, not him.

Aurelius met Titan's eyes, wanting just a moment so he could understand. He'd killed so many people that he'd always anticipated he could fall, but now that it was happening he only wanted to understand.

How had everything gone wrong?

Ascender Titan's fingers shifted and the pain around Aurelius' head amplified as he heard something that sounded like his skull cracking.

He—