

Chapter 469

Matt's form changed as he responded to the newest incursion from what they were calling the Sword Sect.

That was to differentiate them from the Flying Sect, which was one of the two aerial-based teams still in the running. There had been a third from the Clans, but they made the mistake of clashing with the Monster Collective Swarm team.

No one had known they'd done it, but however they managed to merge units together, it had been effective. Tree spiders were scary, but spider wasps were another breed of nightmare.

The Dwarves hadn't known what hit them, and they'd contested the Swarmers on their shared border over the remnant of the flying citadel's growth item gems.

They hadn't succeeded, but Liz led wings of her phoenix units deep into their territory and burnt down several of their farmed forests, drastically reducing their troop production, which had allowed them to take several of the more important radiant crystal mines needed for the top level research.

Liz herself was a terror.

In the three months they'd been inside the strange realm, she'd used the dual reality of the place to further her own mental training.

Last he checked, she was at forty two fully independent raiding wings. They took losses, but thanks to one of the unique upgrades Liz had unlocked along the way, she could revive her units so long as a few survived. Recovery took time, but with so many groups operating, she was a menace.

Though, not quite as much of a menace as Allie.

Matt wasn't sure if it was genius or idiocy that prompted her to have the idea, but it had paid off handsomely. Thanks to two of her normal upgrades, Allie had been able to create invisible sentries, giving them real-time coverage over large portions of the enemies' bases.

So long as her units didn't move, they were completely invisible, and their teleportation didn't break their camouflage thanks to her second upgrade.

It wasn't perfect, they were still physically there and could sometimes be detected through other means, but the information they revealed let them always arrive 'just in time', as he was doing now.

It was a careful dance to keep their enemies guessing, but it was exhilarating.

With everyone fighting through the medium of the strange realm, ingenuity, team work, tactics, and politics made the strange realm a treat Matt sorely needed.

Crushing two of the most common Sword Sect units, a glowing floating sword that tried to rush into the breach, Matt also commanded Stenson's ships to repair the wall.

As if time reversed itself, the wall and the turrets recovered in time to block the next wave of a dozen swords.

They weren't alone, but neither was Matt.

Two dozen of Gan Le's tanks marched forward, intermixed with as many of Susanne's units, and behind them were twice that in support units.

In the command room above, Matt selected and commanded the rest of their prepared units along the border to advance. While only numbering slightly over five hundred, the attack was a substantial investment when it came to the gear each unit was equipped with.

Most teams had chosen to go down similar paths, and the Sword Sect were no different, which meant the numbers in their clash were fairly even.

Matt kept his hero unit in the back, only moving in to support his units when he was about to lose several, as if he didn't care about such losses. To reinforce that feeling, he then commanded his back-up troops into the battle, firmly outnumbering his opponents.

They didn't give up the border region easily.

Their units amassed just out of range of the still-faltering frontline, preparing for a fighting retreat through their well-reinforced valley region. They had been skirmishing with the Sword Sect over this border for more than a month now, and both sides had known this day would come.

It had only been a matter of time, but the moment was now.

They would have to see whose preparations were better.

Smiling, Matt commanded his troops to advance fully.

Using part of his consciousness, he corrected formations, redirecting Susanne's soldiers into weaker flanks, baiting the enemy into overextending, and shifting his own troops out of their counter-maneuvers on the fly. He even made sure that Gan Le's units were tanking the ranged magics that half-heartedly peppered his units from afar.

He knew there was more to the attack but he didn't react, simply commanding his army to advance.

The field exploded as Matt's units reached the frontline, but he lost less than five percent of his vanguard units. Seeing that, he didn't change his tactics, instead watching for his opponent's response from their deeper position past the entire battlefield, from what Allie's scouts revealed.

It took a long time for the response to come, and he had some suspicions as to why. Thankfully the response came exactly how they expected it.

A large army of close to five thousand mixed units marched in response to Matt's incursion. Said attack was in response to the Sword Sect's original probing attack, but that's all it had been.

They hadn't expected this level of response, and Matt even feared they wouldn't respond, wasting his and Rah's effort, but they finally sent their army forward.

Commanding one of Rah's units to move in a pattern, Matt bypassed the strange realm's normal range communication limitations.

It was limited, but they'd already discussed and planned around every variation they could think of, and seeing a large army was their best case scenario.

Outnumbered four to one, they stood little chance of beating the army in the field, but Matt didn't intend to. Instead, he pretended to create his own skirmish line a few miles into their territory, acting as if he wanted to hold his position to wait for reinforcements. He knew they could see him but tried to order his units around as naturally as possible as the larger army marched ever closer.

Almost a mirror of what happened during his initial attack, the ground turned against the mobile force. However, instead of exploding, the ground collapsed as Rah commanded his sappers to complete their missions, causing the western flank of the Sword Sect to drop almost sixty feet.

The damage itself wasn't too bad and the attack didn't kill any of the Sword Sect's army, not that they'd expected it to. The world was so gamified, they'd made sure to test if fall damage worked the way they wanted and it was a good thing they had as falling couldn't but it could damage.

That was where the labyrinth came into play.

Commanding his army along the carefully intact paths, Matt used his ranged units to attack from above, while his melee units interfered with the Sword Sect's attempts to climb the walls.

When that proved a losing proposition, they tried attacking the walls, but that was an even harder challenge.

While the strange realm allowed underground alterations, that wasn't what Rah had done. That might have worked, but it never would have been as effective as what he did.

The original idea of the attack had come from a unique building they gained access to when they killed a giant golem boss: a labyrinth.

Scalable to nearly any size, they struggled to decide on how to apparently use such a large 'building' in anything but a defensive manner.

Rah had already considered using his units as sappers before that, but the lack of fall damage to units made the efforts not worth the time investment.

That was until he merged the two ideas.

Not limited to making the labyrinth on the surface, he chose to create it only a few dozen feet underground. The moment his units completed it, the ground above crumbled inside, along with everything standing on top.

As a proper building, the walls were now reinforced with crystals and far too strong for even fully upgraded units to reasonably damage.

Matt couldn't help but laugh at how well Rah's plan came together as his army quickly annihilated the enemy army.

Pushing deeper, he finally met up with Rah's hero unit on the far side where he had been hiding.

"That worked perfectly," he couldn't help but say the moment he could speak to Rah in the command room.

Rah was equally jubilant. "We can secure this entire region's flank with the labyrinth while we start moving the resources."

"Oh I wanted to ask, did you see why their response was so slow?"

When Rah said he didn't know, and nothing was visible in what Allie's troops revealed, they decided to push deeper into the Sword Sect territory.

Seeing nearly no resistance as they passed by mines and buildings, their confusion was finally solved when they saw the other army approaching the heart of the Sword Sect.

Sixty foot tall monsters, reminiscent of the bosses the Republic team had killed, Matt saw them tearing into the final remnant of the sect troops.

Seeing the core of the base, Matt and Rah led the attack, rushing to try and claim the growth item gems.

With only a week left in the strange realm, they weren't the only ones to go on the offensive, it seemed. And with both of them acting at the same time, the Sword Sect stood no chance.

While unintentional, Matt and Rah had no desire to share if they didn't have to. Unexpectedly or not, they weren't going to pass up the fortune. They did, however, inform the others to pivot as many units to their flank as possible via troop movement signals.

The battle's opponents shifted, but that also made them much scarier.

The Republic Monster team was a formidable one that they'd clashed heavily with in the battlefield the day before.

They hadn't lost, but they hadn't won either, and Matt was eager for a much more interesting round two as they fought over the corpse of the Sword Sect.

Heavily defended with both buildings and units, the Sects team did their best to hold on, but under a relentless full-scale assault from two other factions, they crumbled.

When the final Sects hero fell, the rest of their units stopped moving and their buildings and resources became ripe for plundering.

They clashed at the growth item gem pillar.

The Sword Sect had performed admirably up until their downfall, with nine gems already incorporated, but the fruits of their efforts became a battleground.

Knowing they needed to hold on in the crucial early moments, Matt moved his hero unit up with Rah as the two of them clashed with three of their opponents. At the same time, they commanded the attack, watching as reinforcements crossed their vast territories.

Falling into an acceptable stalemate, as neither side was able to claim control of the growth item pillar long enough to mine a resource from it, Matt scanned the rest of the map.

Liz was still skirmishing in the other groups' bases, but the others hadn't been idle.

Aster, Allie, and Susanne were holding off an attack from the Ranged Corporations group in their south.

They were aiming for the radiant crystal mine in the area, but the three of them managed to hold off their assault without too much effort.

Their south, at least, was far more industrialized, with proper supply trains to move resources and half-finished products deeper into the base from their ever-expanding sprawl.

It was almost amusing, but the crystals then came back in the form of newly arriving units who matched their attacker.

They'd named the Ranged Corporations group that because they preferred ranged combat, not because they could only attack from a distance. They were one of the stronger remaining competitors, with their own vast territory.

Their mammoth units were like walking tanks with the layers of armor piled on them, while their more offensive units rode on their backs or from hot air balloon-like drives they used to snipe from.

The Corporations' rifles were items, but they'd fully leaned into them and it paid off. They could field not only larger armies than most others, thanks to their cheaper base units, but their rifles were head and shoulders above the best portable mana cannons that their own group had access to after they ran out of ranged research upgrades.

Liz had originally run rampant in their area, but they'd set up scout towers to snipe any flying units that tried to cross the border with their range advantage. When she did succeed, her units were quickly hunted down. With her help, they'd recovered several weapons to study, but they learned little, having already advanced down their own individual paths so far they could no longer pivot to take advantage.

Destroying the weapons was easier and far more punishing, given the horrendous costs of fully upgraded weapons. The Flying Corporation, having not invested in their units themselves, had mass producible units still available from the lower strata infinite crystal resources. The weapons to arm them were far harder to pump out, and each one destroyed was a painful blow, so they'd long changed their focus when fighting them.

The battle was still active, but with Matt pulling most of the attention to the former Sword Sect, the trio's offensive had ground to a halt.

Gan Le arrived first and Matt sighed; the fight became much easier as the numbers finally evened out and he could change out of his defensive form. While almost indestructible at this point, the upgrade lacked a meaningful way to deal damage.

Gan Le, after his own series of upgrades to his base units, as well as his hero unit, had turned into more of a mana-crystal-steel turtle than a man. But his defensive reduction aura was vital to letting Matt form swap.

Flipping into his offensive stance, Matt's form slimmed down as it sped up. Using that sudden shift, he landed a deep cut on the enemy hero unit he was dueling, forcing them back and giving himself breathing room.

Gan Le's arrival wasn't enough to fully control the most important prize, but the tide started to turn. That was until the giant monsters arrived and threw their weight into the fight, evening things back out.

Slow to move, they were mere shadows of their former selves, but that was still head and shoulders above three of them.

Pulling back, they let the Republic secure the pillar momentarily.

When Liz and Allie arrived, they launched their own counter offensive and pushed them off the pillar, having only been able to mine a single gem off it in the meantime.

Matt personally mined the growth crystal with a unique pickaxe that had a thread of amber weaved through it. Said thread was so small, it didn't appropriately represent the effort that had gone into slaying the giant pterodactyl that had taken over a windswept valley, but the effect had been worth it.

Swapping into his harvesting form, Matt was left incredibly vulnerable as he concentrated on hitting the pillar in the precise strikes this strange realm preferred, rather than trying to power through it.

Counting in the control room, he cheered as he reached the magic number, three, and an extra growth item gem appeared out of nowhere.

Through exhaustive testing, they'd learned his passive could only work once per mined resource that was able to be reclaimed from enemies' bases, which prevented them from mining and then giving back someone's pillar of growth item gems over and over to farm infinitely. Exploits aside, the upsides were more than worth it for him to risk the mining himself.

He could have used one of his own units, but they were slower and he only had the one pickaxe that let him push his upgrade from an extra resource every fifth to every third.

They'd hoped to find a way to go lower to abuse their advantage, but Matt was personally content, given they already had the most growth item gems out of any remaining team by a long shot.

Still chipping away at the crystal, Liz and Rah worked together to protect Matt as he grabbed three more gems before backing away.

Leaving the final gem to the Republic team was a bit of politics all on its own, but the other side seemed to accept it and their advances stopped. Both sides settled down on their newly-created border, content to feast on the corpse of the Sword Sect and the resource nodes that were either undepletable or not fully tapped out.

That just meant more free resources for them.

Chances were they'd be fighting each other sooner than later, but that wasn't *now*. They were running out of time and crystals, which led to everyone saving up strength for a large final push, most likely at them, given they had the most to lose.

Their daily battleground was against the Flying Sect group, but they weren't keen on avenging their compatriots. Their attention was focused entirely on the singular growth item gem waiting to be harvested.

With a floating island as their base even in the battleground, they were more mobile and immediately aimed for the resource, but it required a full uninterrupted ten minutes to mine the ore, ensuring speed wasn't a determining factor.

The Flying Sect team started building ground-based fortifications as they floated above with flocks of harpies patrolling the sky.

Rah used his units to carve trenches through the ground, making it hard for the harpies to swoop down and use their now-glowing claws to attack, and usually kill, a unit.

From inside the fortifications, their own ranged units returned fire.

Zack's units cast protective spells as attacks rained down from above.

Dozens of unit types assisted the harpies as they struck devastation into anything they hit.

Matt pegged them at nearly half as strong as a hero unit, which was impressive. His own units had been upgraded quite a lot, chasing after more resource improvements. But even accounting for the normal variation of upgrade paths, the harpies were damn strong. It did imply they'd pumped *every* special resource into that singular unit, which might open the Flying Sect up to other weaknesses...

After sharing that thought with the others, they started looking for any noticeable weaknesses.

They were so interested in that, they actually stopped truly trying to take the growth item gem, only interrupting their competition to reset their progress when they had to.

With the initial blitz taken care of, they were able to settle in, with neither side willing to admit defeat.

With few other resources on the map, they quickly mined everything and started pulling from their reserves.

They'd won more than a few early fights by simply having deeper pockets than their opponents, but everyone entered with enough to fight for the entire hour, or risked being defeated in detail. They suspected the two teams they hadn't encountered or seen had been eliminated like that, but they couldn't be sure with their limited information.

When the harpies couldn't stop their advance, the Sects team pulled out one of their trump cards.

They dared to risk one of their hero units.

A nearly human-looking man leapt to the ground from their fortress, grappling with and destroying one of Gan Le's units in two hits. Shining with copper light, he quickly turned the tide in the Sects' favor and the timer ticked down to the final minute.

Even the harpies' attack tempo increased to the maximum, trying to slow their reinforcements down, regardless of the casualties. Aster and Zack sacrificed fifty of Magnus' units to merge two spells and cast a massive blizzard that covered the airspace above the trenches, giving their units a moment of respite. One of their earlier upgrades, they'd been saving that move for the final clashes.

That was when Allie moved.

She teleported next to the Sects hero unit, and using one hand, grabbed his wrist while her other drove a yellow crystalline dagger into his neck.

The moment the attack landed, she vanished once more, which let her avoid the active spells cast around the hero to trap their response.

The poison that flooded the area killed every unit within its range, but upon seeing that they backed off, letting the final few seconds go uncontested.

Confident with their victory, the Sects group didn't expect the massive ice golems that formed out of the still-lingering ice banks.

Envisioned to battle the Clans' giant robot units, the golems had no trouble tanking the harpies' attacks while rushing the mined gem.

The hero unit grabbed the gem and tucked it under an arm as he jumped into the air and grabbed onto a wisp of wind that tethered him to the platform and started reeling him in.

He nearly made it.

A golem clapped its hands together, trying to force him to jump away, where he'd have to start over.

However, to everyone's surprise, he didn't hold onto the growth item gem or try to save himself; instead he tossed it to a nearby harpy and sacrificed himself to the golem's attack. The hero unit's elimination ensured the enemy team got the growth item gem, but Matt and team didn't have any quick ways of taking down the battlefield flying fortress, so they backed off.

They had plans, but they were centered on the normal map's battlefield. They'd been planning for the final week's inward focus for the past month, and had no intentions of playing their hand now for a single growth item gem.

Even their attack on the Sword Sect was meant to strengthen their borders more than it had been to eliminate an enemy.

They'd been doing too well and knew the other groups would eventually turn on them, hoping to cannibalize their thirty eight growth item gems.

Most groups had gathered enough of the gems, but they were the only one with more than two or more stacks of the reward, and it was unlikely for anyone to expand outward any more. The overworld monsters at their current range were simply too strong to be wiped out without weakening oneself to the point any other group would be foolish not to attack.

The Clans team who suffered that fate had stopped everyone else from expanding after the second month, leading to everyone consolidating their gains and preparing for the final week.

And they were right.

With three days left, every other group still remaining in the strange realm attacked them in near unison.

They were ready.

Their first response was to drag the Flying Sect's fortress into a mountain range, where they tethered it with enormous crystalline chains that they hoped would take at least a day to break through. They tried a similar tactic on the Flying Corporation group, but they avoided the trap and forced them to meet them in aerial combat with Liz's units. Still, that was acceptable.

They could handle one flying enemy, not two.

Having retrieved all of her harassing units in advance, as well as having prepared well for this final showdown, their team finally abused their crystal advantage. In a golden flood, they dumped more units onto the battlefield than anyone could have expected.

Keeping rough track of their extra crystal production after the first week, they'd saved a large portion of their unexplainable units, not wanting to let anyone know about their *full* capabilities until the final moment.

From the mountain they had started calling the Roost after Rah hollowed part of it out in his testing, two thousand additional Liz units took to the sky. They mauled the fighter jets, accepting horrific losses and then pushed through the withering barrage of laser fire to reach the Corporations flying base.

Matt and Zack added their own assistance as their defensive cannons opened fire, large projectiles of mana rising then falling until they slammed into their shields with enough energy to crack a mountain.

When the flying ship started to sink, they backed off. Their main goal had been accomplished, and they didn't have to defeat these additional opponents to win, only survive until the timer reached zero. Following their plans, they strategically collapsed their defensive lines in a fighting retreat.

The first two fell faster than they would have liked, but as their perimeter constricted, their defenders' advantage started to shine and they stemmed the bleeding.

Amusingly enough, their one-on-one daily battles became periods of respite instead of times of worry.

As much as Matt wanted to throw everything at a singular opponent while they had the opportunity, their opponents knew that. As such, they didn't even attempt to venture out of their initial defenses, waiting until they could return to where they held the advantage.

So instead, they used their advantage to mine what little resources they could and relax, before returning to the meat grinder that was their final two days.

On the second day, they started losing people.

Stenson went down, protecting the retreat of the last surface supply train, not letting their enemies get their hands on it. Though a worthy sacrifice, the loss of high end combat power still hurt.

Limited to the command room, he fully dedicated himself to macro, which eased the burden off of the rest of them slightly. Katya and Arden quickly followed suit in semi-deliberate sacrifices to slow down the advance and buy them time.

They only needed one of them to survive, and there was no reported distinction in the rewards given, so no one hesitated when the time came.

Matt, Gan Le, Susanne, Rah, and Liz all did their best to hold the frontlines directly, but with so many other teams, they were outnumbered in every fight, and keeping their hero units alive was hard enough. To make up the difference, they hemorrhaged units, burning through stockpiles of crystal reserves while trying and failing to keep up with demand.

On the final day, Matt turned all of his remaining units from miners to fighters, pulling them out of the hidden underground resource nodes where they'd been for the last month and a half. That finally stopped the relentless push of the other teams, but also signaled their own end.

With no new additional resources, it was simply a question of who would have deeper pockets.

Liz went down first by a coordinated ambush from all but one member of the Monster Collective team, and still managed to take down two of their hero units before she fell, but her loss hurt. They nearly lost their second to last defensive line then and there, but they managed to hold on.

With five hours remaining, they were forced to retreat to their last line of defense, focused solely around protecting the growth item pillar. Rah and then Lura went down in rapid succession, spending their lives as best they could.

The other groups clearly expected them to blow up the fortifications, using their most disposable units to lead the way. But ultimately, they ignored the casualties required, desperate to reach the growth item gems.

Matt went down during that hectic assault, no longer having any units to replace his own death.

They held on, but it was close. Far closer than Matt would have liked, given that he could only watch on from the command room, but Gan Le and Zack kept the other teams off their pillar for the final twenty minutes, and that was all that mattered.

They might not have held on if it wasn't for the Federation team backstabbing the Monster Collective team and trying to take their less-defended pillar. They weren't the only ones to try and snipe a last minute steal, just the first to act on it.

With victory secured, the relief hit Matt, taking a weight off his shoulders that then morphed into a successful flutter on his stomach. After so much effort, Matt was relieved to finally see his reward.

His mental mantra repeated endlessly, hoping they had done the right things and gotten the growth item modification reward.

A single gem absolutely stuffed with exotic energies materialized in front of Matt, its shell a painfully thin barrier containing the energies that pulsed with a kaleidoscope of colors.

Even without touching it, he knew its power. It was intrinsically connected to him through his spirit already.

This energy was the raw and undiluted form of what made a growth item special, without anything to obscure it.

It was beautiful.

Stunning in a way Matt knew would mesmerize him for days if he let it.

Any item he brought in contact with the gem would be transformed into a growth item. And if the reports were correct, he'd get a degree of customization relative to how well they'd done.

Except, Matt didn't want to turn any of his existing items into a growth item.

He'd love to upgrade his sword, to add its neutronium ingot without sacrificing a spiritual empowerment Natural Treasure, but they didn't get that option.

Knowing he needed to make a decision, Matt let his hand move on autopilot, seeing everyone else had already claimed their reward, hoping an answer would come to him with the added pressure.

Except that didn't happen.

As Matt touched the crystal, all he felt was a profound sense of loss.

He'd been considering a new growth item to possibly help with his casting issues, some form of spell stabilizer. However all of his plans revolved around getting it custom made and only after rigorous testing. He also intended to make it from the best materials he could get after the breach's influx of Natural Treasures and rare resources, but now those possibilities rushed and half formed.

Matt considered what else he could turn into a growth item that might be useful long term, but none of them called to him and indecision tried to paralyze him.

His mind first landed on his underarmor, as it was similar to his other and had been considered as a base before being discarded, but something bespoke. If upgraded, it could give

him a layer of defense few would know about, but once more, he didn't have access to their ship or any of the rare Natural Treasures he'd want to use when making such an armor.

He considered just trying to create something on the spot, but he knew any result would be substandard for his expectations. He just didn't have the time for work he'd find acceptable.

Already, he could feel the dynamic equilibrium of the energies slowly move out of tune. And once they had, they would tear themselves apart. He had about thirty minutes before that happened, but it wasn't enough.

Matt considered using a mana concentration device but with his Intent... he didn't really...

Matt didn't let himself get distracted. Instead he cycled through ideas.

His power armor?

He could, once Allie was done, ruin everyone else's plans by getting Allie to teleport him to the Empire's armory where they stored non-used Ascender gear. He could grab the armor and qu—

Matt paused as he registered the daggers Allie was already turning into a growth item.

They weren't *like* her Tier 25 war daggers, they were them. She also hadn't seemed to hesitate in shoving them into the floating gem.

Matt knew she must have had the items on her, but given their limited storage options traveling through the sky bridges, he had no idea where she'd pulled them from.

Her private message answered his question. "Did you not take a single keepsake? Dumbass."

Matt almost shot back he wouldn't have smuggled any such item into the breach, but didn't waste his breath, instead letting his mind run.

Looking at the others, Matt saw them all already hard at work.

Zack looked ecstatic as he stared at his converted spell array ring, finally completing his dream of turning the buyout reward into a proper growth item.

Gan Le, however, managed to irritate Matt and he almost regretted bringing the man along as he had to watch the man turn his already formidable armor into a growth item.

Matt hadn't used the gem, so he wasn't sure exactly how much control they had over the final object, but he doubted the item would get worse for its enhancement.

Susanne didn't surprise Matt at all, with her turning one of her Concept sheathed weapons into a growth item. It wasn't the weapon he'd expected, she'd chosen a sword so thin

it looked like it was made out of tissue paper, but he knew it was also the sharpest weapon she had in her arsenal.

Rah, however, was creating a bracer made out of normal-looking marble that was flecked with purple and teal, signifying it as one of the Rare Tier 30 earth-based Natural Treasures they'd gotten. That made his final choice obvious, and Matt thought boosting his primary mana type was a solid choice, given his upgraded Tier 25 Talent already let him be more versatile than most.

Matt knew exactly where Aster had gotten the wide Sects-style sash she was turning into a growth item. He even knew its ability, and despite not being Gan Le's largest fan, he fully agreed with her turning it into a growth item.

Originally a small gift Gan Le gave Aster after joining them, the sash made the wearer colder and had been a thoughtful but overly grand gesture.

When Aster turned it into a growth item, Matt suspected it might become her strongest defensive layer to date. She hadn't shared with anyone except him through their bond, but she'd already noticed [Deathly Cold] was assisted by the sash, and they'd strategized about getting a similar but combat-focused version of the gift when they returned to settled space.

Now she got to skip that, as well as chose the path the upgrades took, and Matt felt a twinge of jealousy at the fact she had such a perfect item on hand when she needed it.

It wasn't a nice or good thought and Matt squished it before looking to his wife.

Like him, she wasn't working on turning an item into a growth item. Instead, she was still in her preparatory phase and he watched as she cannibalized her small portable alchemy cauldron, replacing its ordinary metals with her now-upgraded Blood Iron self-made ichor metals.

Matt was shocked at the audacity and wished his wife well but didn't bother her.

Replacing the metal without destroying the enchantments was nigh impossible, but Zack lent a hand, diverting some attention away from his new growth item to assist her, keeping them stable until the conversion was done.

Seeing that, Matt's largest wish was that he could take this prize home and use it later.

That, however, was flatly impossible. It was a shame the gem only resembled the mana storage devices he'd spent so much time studying, instead of having their energy preservation properties. He'd have been able to...

Matt looked at the gem blankly for a moment, his mind trying to process the idea he'd just had.

Not pausing to question the how or if it was possible at all, Matt connected with the mana in the reward gem knowing he needed to simply act. He was confident he could use the energy

even if this test failed but he didn't consider that possibility too deeply. He had no intentions of needing that backup.

He felt the energy try to enter him, but he was faster.

Acting on instinct, Matt injected his mana into the outer layer of the gem and tried to activate his Tier 25 Talent, wanting to turn the gem into something more permanent.

It didn't work.

Matt's Talent didn't really work on other people's mana and the strange realm's mana was no different. More than that, trying to change the reward gem's outer shell felt *wrong*.

It might be possible to force the change but that wouldn't do what he wanted.

That would be like coating a chicken's egg in a sealant, hoping to hatch the chick later. It might stop anything from escaping, but it wouldn't prevent the insides from rotting as the unique blend of strange realm reward energy started to decay.

Even if it worked, he'd have at best hours before it was rendered useless, rather than thirty or so minutes. Allie could probably get him back to the Empire without a hitch but she'd be wiped out and the best crafters would take longer than that to find on his own.

She'd also leave the rest of their team stranded in the breach, making that a *very* last resort. If Manny was still in the Empire, Matt would have had her take them to the Tier 50 in a heartbeat, knowing the Emperor would have a solution, but he had left before they had. As much as he loved them, Mara and Leon weren't crafters and wouldn't be much help either.

The people at his guild were his best bet. Maybe he could find some of the mana storage researchers and they could figure out a way to better preserve the energy together.

He'd almost fully accepted that end point when another thought came to him.

Why am I trying to copy the strange realm?

He'd already proven the strange realm storage devices weren't perfect. The things they contained slowly drained of energy and that would still ruin the reward.

Feeling that he needed to make a decision *now*, he decided to follow his gut.

He'd end up destroying a bad growth item anyway, and as such, he didn't hesitate once the decision was made.

Forcefully solidifying the outer shell on the gem, he then flooded it with his mana. It mingled with the preexisting energy contained inside the gem, but as said energy was already tuned to him, there was no rejection.

Matt hadn't considered that angle, but as it needed to be to make a growth item bonded to himself, it didn't inherently reject his mana; unfortunately, he also knew he couldn't do this for anyone else's reward.

With no time to waste, and left with only hunches and speculation, Matt pushed his Tier 25 Talent deeper into the gem.

He didn't want to fully solidify the crystal.

Something told him that allowing his mana to halt the energy entirely would instantly snuff it out, like trying to freeze fire.

Without magic, it was impossible to freeze energy, but Matt had magic.

He had his Talent.

The purest representation of his unique spirit.

There was and could only be one Matt.

He didn't need to copy the strange realm because he wasn't the strange realm. He neither knew how they worked nor how they created the things they did, but he didn't need to.

Matt only needed the energy to keep going and he already had the solution.

He'd had it since he advanced to Tier 5 under the watchful wings of Liz's closest brother Travis, his husband Keith, and Aunt Helen.

Matt was Endless.

Feeling like something was going to split deep inside his mind and spirit alike, he pushed his Talent even deeper into the gem. It was like trying to push rope into the thickest half-frozen mud imaginable, but he persisted, even as he felt as things started to unravel before him despite his best efforts.

It was in that visualization that he realized what he needed to do.

Once his mana, and therefore Talent, had fully infused the gem, he activated his Intent for the briefest of moments, darkening his mana to ink black and commanding it to solidify even as he drained most of the willpower he had recovered over the strange realm's duration.

The instant before it could fully solidify, he did something he'd never considered before. Matt forcefully stopped his Talent and shoved the nearly solid mana to get it moving. It was the tiniest of shoves, and he knew it was entirely wrong the moment he did it.

It was wrong, *wrong*, **wrong**, **wrong**.

The gem's entire structure started to fall apart as his efforts had disturbed the fragile equilibrium that had been present between the strange realm's energies and his Intent-empowered mana.

Matt forced himself not to panic, carefully following the energy patterns and trusting what his instincts told him the energy wanted to do.

Knowing how risky it was but doing it anyway, he spent most of his remaining willpower activating his Back to Basics floor reward, fully tapping himself out, knowing he'd be paying for the action later, but proceeding regardless. He'd suffered years' worth of survival in Minkalla relying on the Daedalus formation to give himself access to magic, but it was all worth it as a light seemed to go on inside his head.

It wasn't a new idea but rather his mind, his [AI], his mental training, and his previous accumulations from testing mana flows coming together in a slightly discordant symphony.

He burned through an ocean's worth of mana trying to process everything and come up with a solution.

Seeing what looked like the best answer, he followed the idea.

Almost immediately, he knew it was a failure, but he kept going as it wasn't *that* wrong.

Turning the pulling motion into a push, Matt shoved the mass of mana and energy, getting it moving in a much more complex way with half a dozen different layers all moving in different directions and with different patterns all while preventing his Talent from fully solidifying the mana and energy.

It wanted to lock everything down into a solid, stable mass, but with the energy's constant movement, it prevented his Talent from fully solidifying the mana and energy inside. It reminded him of water being frozen. If cold enough, even moving water could be solidified, but if the conditions were just right, even walls of ice could move like liquid.

He'd landed somewhere close; even if it wasn't perfect, it was good enough. While the inside of the gem was dense like honey, it was still very much a liquid, despite being entirely solid.

Taking a moment to observe the decay rate of the energy, Matt almost didn't believe it as he detected absolutely *zero* decay during his testing.

The energy was perfectly stable, and the small push he'd given the energy inside before the end continued to spin without any outside interference needed.

Matt's first reaction was to retest, as that wasn't how most energy containers worked, there was always some loss, but his following three tests all had the same result.

No energy in, no energy out, no energy change.

A seemingly perfect container.

Finally starting to believe, he couldn't resist a chuckle.

He'd done it.

He had no true idea how he'd done it, but he had. True understanding would come later, but that was all that mattered in the moment.

Creating a similar gem out of mana, he tried to pull off the same trick again.

He failed, but he already could tell what he'd done wrong.

He needed his Intent to concentrate his mana as part of the stabilization process, but he couldn't touch his Domain for the next hundred years or so if he wanted to avoid permanent damage, having fully emptied his willpower reserves.

Not wanting to give away what he'd done, Matt pretended to tuck the crystal away but instead simply slipped it in his chest, where it would be hidden inside his spirit from casual observation.

Its location made it easy for him to check on the gem to ensure nothing changed from the microsecond earlier.

He also intended to keep the gem there until... he didn't know when, but at the very least when they returned to the Empire. The moment something started to change, he was going to have Allie rush him back to his guild, but it appeared remarkably stable.

With even a few days lead time, so long as he had full access to his guild, and more importantly his researchers and craftsmen, Matt was confident he'd be able to make something impressive if the worst came true and the gem started to lose energy.

But it didn't.

In the four months they stayed on the crystal planet to 'observe', Allie was able to create a waypoint so they could come back at any time. It was, in fact, the only reason Matt was willing to leave the crystalline planet at all, given how much information he was learning by studying it.

However, the main reason they left was that a Federation team had taken charge of the planet and they kept shadowing Matt as he tried to study things. That successfully irritated him enough to be willing to leave. If the planet de-aspected, he was going to hold everyone responsible accountable and he'd be starting with them as the 'rulers' of said world.

They did, however, learn through the gossip chain that the Flying Corporation team was the only one to get the growth item modification reward out of their group of entrants. Hearing that, Matt tried to stir up some internal jealousy, but he couldn't find the effort to care, given what he'd managed with his own reward.

He still had the spirit strengthening Natural Treasure needed in exchange to get the neutronium ingot added to his sword.

With most planets and strange realms accounted for, everyone started to settle down, waiting for the end of the breach. Some delved, but most teams turned the last few weeks into a party. It was almost anticlimactic given the earlier fighting, but no one left standing in the planets around them seemed inclined to fight over the remaining scraps.

Everyone was content, though it wouldn't last.

After adding two more waypoints, they decided to return to the ruin that had injured Susanne to advance their cultivation while waiting for the final eruption as the bubble burst.

They were hardly alone.

Nearly everyone had bought the corporation's map, and as such, the ruin had turned into one of the breach's main attractions, as teams from all three breach points tested their luck inside.

Rah wanted to experience the explosion to the end, so they waited a few extra days instead of teleporting out.

As described, the contracting space compressed the worlds together until they started to repel each other.

It started subtly; the worlds grew closer, their sky bridges more firm, more real, the distances shorter. Then like a switch was flipped the entire bubble fell apart in a matter of moments.

It started from somewhere towards the third breach point but close enough Matt felt it through the sky bridge network.

In the compression the worlds found they had no more space to give. Their sky bridges were as short as they could go, the worlds would collide if they were pressed together any more. That forced other planets to shift, but they too had been running out of room, and in a chain reaction, all of the worlds brought in from the third layer of chaotic space vibrated as they locked each other in place while the energy bubble tried to shrink further.

With the worlds unable to get closer and the bubble continuing to shrink, something had to give.

All of that inward pressure suddenly vanished as the bubble popped and the planets that were too close together tried desperately to get the distance they craved.

Despite not being able to see it, Matt knew all of the remaining third layer energies were washing through the core of the breach. Any ship not capable of flying through the third layer caught out in the open and not inside a planet's protective reality would be lucky to survive.

After they felt the surge of energies start to slow, Allie teleported them back to where the rest of the ship and crew were waiting, finally ending their journey into the Rasdale tidal breach.