

Chapter 520

They spent three years and destroyed almost a hundred secondary targets before the Federation pinnacle elite trap snapped shut around them. They'd been allowed almost free reign in Federation space, and they knowingly dug deeper at every opportunity handed to them.

It was the role that only Ascenders could play. They could become a thorn impossible to ignore that came with an incredible price to even temporarily extract. As such, when the response was an array of small, three man scout ships blanketing the area they were operating in, they didn't flee back to Empire space seeing the trap appear.

They did the same thing they did every other time. They pushed the knife deeper and twisted. They pushed their ship to its Talent-backed limits, making the Federation's patience as costly as possible.

The first ship arrived after only four months. It wasn't a known vessel, which made it a clear response to them. All and all, it was an interesting approach. One he wanted to study in detail, but he knew they'd never let him capture such a valuable ship intact. While the ship did have massive dual engines, letting them raise their maximum speed beyond the norm for short bursts, that wasn't where the designers had focused their efforts.

They'd correctly realized they'd *never* catch up in raw speed. Instead, they'd gone the other way to cover distance fast: teleporting.

Matt paused as he realized the ships were most likely an attempt to replicate Allie, that had been repurposed to fight them. Once his Insight had the idea, it devoured it.

The ships were tiny for the troop transports that they were. It was only a tenth of their ship's size, with far more of its tonnage dedicated to its crew, which would make things cramped to the extreme. But all of that was to make teleporting the ship easier.

The first time they saw it, Matt had given the order to pursue. He'd been interested in testing just how well the Federation had done.

The three of them quickly learned the Federation had done an *excellent* job. The first time the ship teleported, it managed to completely escape their detection range. Even sweeping directed scans which extended their reach hadn't found them, and they'd completely lost track. They spent days fruitlessly searching before giving up, rather than let themselves be distracted as their enemies wanted.

It helped that they knew how to draw their opponents back out. It had only taken them hitting four more secondary targets to create enough pain that the Federation leadership ordered their new ship and its passengers to show themselves, hoping to distract them again.

It told the three of them that what they were doing was working.

They bit once more instead of ignoring the bait.

The second time they got close, they were better prepared. Two of the engineers had rigged up a ultra-long-range scanner and they managed to pick up the destination.

It only took his Insight a moment to run the numbers, but he was taken back until he recalculated them under a more accurate assumption.

The Federation had to have at least three teleporters onboard to manage a [Teleport] of that distance. They had to have at least that many, but the question was if they were burning one person out per jump or magically sharing the burden between them.

That jump told him a lot. So much so, that he wanted to see it again.

Matt looked to Liz and Aster as he warned them. "We need to confirm what the ships can do."

Neither argued, so he did something stupid and cast [Portal] in chaotic space.

It tore at his spirit to hold the aperture stable under the corrosion of chaotic space but he'd practiced for this exact moment.

So long as he kept below six [Portal]s a year, he could use the technique without issue.

He also knew himself and his willingness to push.

The first [Portal] let them cover three-quarters of the distance to the Federation ship, but there were two very important distinctions.

The [Teleport] had killed their momentum. He knew it had to be a design flaw of the ship, rather than the spell, and he added that to the slowly building spec sheet he was making of their enemies capabilities.

Matt's [Portal] had no such limitation and they quickly devoured the distance.

Unlike their first and second approaches, the ship didn't instantly teleport away. It only did so when they got within typical scanner ranges. More importantly, the second teleportation was fifteen percent smaller and well within their expanded sensor range.

One more [Portal] got them right behind the fleeing ship.

Instead of directly attacking and forcing the ship to teleport again, they scanned the Federation ship with every sensor their own vessel contained, as well as utilizing two crew member's Talents. As an expensive prototype the ship had excellent passive and active defences against such intrusions. Most of the resulting sensor data was annoyingly fuzzy and vague, but it let them understand the ideas if not the specific methods the Federation had used.

The good thing was that with each moment they were near the ship, the better their information became. His insight was able to start linking and cross-referencing the different sensor data making a more cohesive model.

However, before their scanners could saturate the ships defences, it vanished.

Instead of chasing with another [Portal], Matt processed what he'd learned.

Things were both as he'd anticipated, and also widely different. The Federation had at least a *quintet* of teleporters serving as the ship's rapid escape method, but they were also bolstered by the formation built into the ship. That and the absolutely massive mana reserves for both parties.

What little space existed in the rest of the ship had been given over to a single team. In their final moments, they even got a specific enough piece of information that they were able to identify the passengers, confirming the ship as a pinnacle elite vessel.

Gram 'Two hit' Lacshi, was an essence caster whose Talent allowed him to spend his cultivated essence without the usual permanent downsides besides having to recultivate. He was not someone they'd expected to be rerouted to stop them. At least not so quickly, and learning that made Matt's mind churn as he tried to cover every angle.

High Command had expected Gram to be sent to entangle On The Last Line, where he had a known slightly favorable match-up against their older peers. He'd survived three fights with them, even if he'd never come close to winning. That he'd been sent at them, and as the first responder, could mean many things, but he feared it indicated just how serious the Federation intended to pay them back for their annoyance.

Liz and Aster didn't like that news any more than him, but outwardly bemoaned the Federation ship that had seemingly taken a page out of his book. After a lot of data cleaning and testing, they'd realized part of their scanning issues were because the designers had quite literally filled the walls with mana stones. They hadn't even gone the economical route of using rechargeable stones, they'd opted for the more energy dense rift-made stones.

With five teleporters and a plethora of mana, his Insight estimated the ship could teleport anywhere from five to a maximum of fifteen times. The higher end only possible if the individual teleporters were willing to risk popping their spirits by using the formation amplifier a third time without the help of the others.

The riskiness of the design made him wonder where the Federation had gotten so many [Teleport] skill shards that they were willing to build what was clearly not a one-off vessel made for a specific team like theirs.

Rather than immediately push for another confrontation after learning about their enemy's capabilities, Liz redirected them back onto their original task by pointing out a truth.

"We still need to draw in more than a single pinnacle elite. You can't burn yourself out on this one target, Matt. You're still our escape route. A task which will be harder even if we

manage to kill one pinnacle early. That buys us more time at best and without [Portal], we can't easily keep up."

Liz's voice was firm and commanding as she reminded him of their actual goal.

"You're right. Let's make it painful to ignore us. It's the least we can do." Matt agreed.

The grin Aster flashed him brought out his own. They'd learned something, and that was never bad.

As they flew to the next location, the three of them started discussing and planning not only how to handle Gram, but even worse matchups of Federation elites. They simulated the situations both with his Insight and without it, searching for snags and burs that might trip them up.

They knew they'd never catch everything, but what they did anticipate would be easier to handle. Knowing Gram was there beforehand turned out to be good, because it let them theorize ways to take him out as quickly as possible. As an old pinnacle elite with such a strong Talent, the longer they fought him the more dangerous things would be, and their simulations only proved that. Part of what let Gram reach his status was that despite spending his cultivation for increased spell strength, he got stronger, not weaker, thanks to his Domain.

Not that they holed up in their ship. They hit seven more high value targets over the course of a year, like Tier 35 ship yards, supply depots, and crafting hubs. While doing so, they even got in contact with Ellen, who confirmed they'd started seeing teleporting ships deployed against them as the Federation ensured the two Ascender teams couldn't easily link up.

It was only possible because the Federation had dedicated a massive effort to deploy scout ships around them, but they managed to slip the leash more than once and strike at an unexpected place. Each time they did so, the net became denser. It was seven months before the second ship arrived, but only three more before the third ship joined the other two.

The three teleporting ships kept their distance from each other, and more importantly them, but everyone on the Empire ship knew it meant putting a firm countdown on the amount of time they had to run amok.

To force the Federation's hand, Liz gave the order everyone was waiting for. "Alright, let's go with exit plan 4. The earlier we can make them attack, the better."

To try and draw out that reaction they turned their ship's nose and started running for Empire controlled space.

It was a border almost a year away at their previously shown top speeds, but Matt's [Portal] could drastically change things.

He expected the fourth ship. He even expected the fifth one.

Matt didn't expect the *sixth* ship.

He, along with the others, feared the Federation had gone insane and had dedicated almost a quarter of their pinnacle elites to hunting them down. Thankfully, after a few months of effort, his Insight was able to crack some of the Federation communications encryption. He couldn't read the messages, but he was able to decrypt some of the identifiers on the data packets. Comparing them to known Federation protocols told them the final three ships were peak elites, not pinnacle.

They were some of the Federation's best peak elites, ones that were nearing the border of the pinnacle threshold, but they weren't quite over that hump. With Yvette and Halford to block a pinnacle team each meant the fight was still possible.

They would *only* have to contend with two pinnacle teams and at least two peak elites.

It would be a brutal fight, but one all three of them were determined to make a costly one and were willing to break out some of their trump cards to do so.

Their ship did its best with evasive maneuvers and even a clever [Portal] usage, but the sixth ship cut them off exactly as they'd known it eventually would.

Liz tapped her armrest before she looked at Matt. "Through them?"

Matt pushed his [Actual Insight] hard as he ran the calculations but its conclusion was the same as his initial one.

"They are most likely ready for that. In return they will probably target our ship, but destruction is unlikely after we showed how good our defences are. These teleporting vessels don't have the armaments to tangle with ours, bar their passengers who can break in, given a few uninterrupted seconds. We haven't been able to get info about the passenger of the fifth ship, but according to our latest intel drop, Raffi hasn't been spotted since he boarded a scout ship last year. That makes it a good bet he's in that one. If he gets close, something these ships make easy, he can halt our forward momentum with very little we can do to stop him beyond burning mana and breaking free of his grip. With that many pinnacle and peak elite teams waiting in the wings, we can't afford to slow down for even a second, let alone halt. Our best and most obvious bet is us making a break for and through an edge of the entrapment. That will improve our chances, but even if we succeed, we will likely still get chased down shortly after as the other teleporting ships converge."

Aster pointed out the problem with that idea before he could get to it. "They are probably going to collapse on us as soon as we go for it. No way they let us take one of them out early."

Liz nodded to the unspoken question. "I'm actually counting on it and hoping it means we can avoid direct ship-to-ship battle if they feel like they've caught us properly. Raffi can only hold our ship for so long. The moment that ends, we are gone. Unless we manage a clean win, getting bogged down here is pointless and stupid. They undoubtedly have further reinforcements nearby if we take serious wounds or worse yet, lose our ship."

Rather than argue with a good plan, Matt stood and walked to the forward hatch and stepped half outside, but not so far that he breached the shield.

The swirls of chaotic space raced around him, but his full concentration was where the ship's sensors said the nearest teleporting ship was. *He* couldn't feel it directly so far away through chaotic space, but his [AI] made overlaying the data streams second nature, to the point he could easily forget that it wasn't one of his senses highlighting the ship.

The other vessel didn't veer as it saw them aim for it, it accelerated, eager to engage them. As they'd expected, the time to play was over. They wanted vengeance and he was happy to give it to them.

Matt lifted and transformed his blade into a wider than normal glaive. It was a lattice structure like his sword form, but it didn't remain that way for long. It only took him a blink to make another liquid mana stone inside the longer weapon and carefully pointed it ahead, waiting for his moment.

The [Mana Beam] cut a blue-white canyon through the purplish corrosive energy, but much of its power was lost to the surrounding energies to do it. He didn't care and kept the spell steady as he carved a path through with sheer volume.

Through his connection to the ship's sensors, he saw their shield go opaque and made careful adjustments, ensuring their evasive maneuvers were useless. He wanted to force them to teleport if they wanted to avoid him and his favorite spell.

Instead, the pinnacle elite team revealed themselves, as they exited along with the ship's crew, who fled before their ship's shields failed. It was sooner than he expected and more data was tucked away for later review.

Their sensors identified the *peak* elite as Larc Vane, which made Matt frown even as he used [Cracked Dragonflame] to create a wall of mana that he crystalised with his Tier 25 Talent, creating a massive wall.

He didn't need it to block damage, he just wanted to halt their advance and buy enough time for [Portal] to get them out of the net.

It *almost* worked.

[Portal] got them behind the elite, but they immediately ran into a minefield. That slowed them down and was all the opportunity the other ships needed to teleport in, even with Aster using [Dispersing Squalls] to clear them a path. The merged [Cross Wind] and [Dispelling Wind] cleared most of them, but Matt still cast a wide area [Mana Beam] in a short burst to catch the stragglers.

That got them through the veritable wall of mines in record time, but the lost seconds still hurt them as the Federation ships raced ahead with reckless abandon, confident the remaining mines would ignore them.

A message from Liz made him open another [Portal], exhausting his sixth for the year. However, he opened it on a tangent to their previous direction. Instead of running to Empire space, they technically had a third option, though it was one they hadn't wanted to use. They *were* at war with the Collective, and could freely traverse their lands during the war. They were also closer to Collective space than Empire space.

Dipping into Collective territory probably wouldn't stop their Federation pursuers from following them— the rules weren't so strict as to allow anything that resembled a safe zone in the war's— but it might make the Federation elites think twice to show off what their ships could really do. And if they didn't push themselves, it would make their escape all the easier.

And there was always a theoretical risk the Collective might intervene. They never missed an opportunity to trip up their most hated foes, but that wouldn't mean they'd be directly helping the Empire and let them go if wounded and weak.

They never got the chance to find out.

He didn't know if it was expert planning from the Federation or sheer dumb luck, but their sensors picked up two massive troop transports moving to the frontlines about the same time they shifted their course to intercept them. He made a note that the response times were suspiciously fast, but such complaints would have to be brought up after they fought their way free.

Chances were the Federation had a new tech in their teleporting ships, but it was always possible they'd used civilian infrastructure to pass word so quickly. After all, no one would stop what was aimed at them. Not before it had an opportunity to kill them at least.

They pivoted to get away from the army, but the noose tightened that much further.

Liz and Aster joined him at the hatch less than a minute later.

"Yvette and Halford's teams are ready to engage. I told them to preserve their lives and reminded them we are only here until we wear Raffi out. However, that still leaves us with two pinnacles, and two, possibly three, peak elites but they might try and surprise us by sending five total pinnacles, leaving us with three to deal with." Liz must have seen his reaction as she added without missing a beat. "It *is* possible, even if unlikely, for the previous reasons. Two or three, this isn't going to be a clean fight. Time to pull out all the stops. We either win quickly or we flee the second we can. Raffi won't be able to snare us for at least a month after this and that's more than enough time to return to Empire space."

They continued to push for the Collective border, but they weren't able to fully escape the teleporting net. The final nail in the coffin wasn't any of their pursuing ships, but a regular Tier 35 ship that jumped out of real space and opened fire on their flank out of nowhere.

Taking the hit only slowed them minutely, but that was enough for the elite ships to teleport in with their cargo of people.

Matt made the cost fatal for the original ship, but it was too little too late. One of the teleporting ships got close and all of their forward momentum vanished as if they'd come to a halt.

It was almost a familiar feeling and he instantly hated it. He could do something similar with his Intent and had done so many times, but he found it far less entertaining when used against him.

Aster immediately moved to dispel the effect before the fighting started, but it was a Talent and that made it harder to counter compared to a Domain or skill. That didn't make it impossible. Raffi's Talent was strong but was still limited by his spiritual strength, though she'd need her full attention to make a dent in the amount of time they were locked down. While that might matter, it was a negligible amount compared to her usefulness in battle.

With the power of their engines at full burn, Matt calculated they'd break free in half of the Federation's expected time, but that was still *enough* time.

Rather than let their ship become the central fighting point, the three of them flew out into chaotic space to meet their opponents midway.

One of the ships opened fire, but Matt didn't even glance at the projectile as he picked apart the mass of energy. He was no Zack, but chaotic space cut both ways and it weakened their enemy as much as them.

He raised a finger and sent a burst of [Mana Beam] at the ship as a warning. It was only enough to pop their shields, but not enough to punch through even their light physical plating. He wanted to make it clear they weren't targeting the ships in a hope to protect their own.

It was unlikely that it would work, given how important their ship was to their antics, but that was why Liz had left three clones inside and Aster had left a golem. Anyone less than a pinnacle who tried a sneak attack on the 'undefended ship' would have their hands full.

Larc was one of the first to attack, throwing his boomerang on a path towards Aster, but he wasn't the only one.

Yvette and Halford's teams split off, taking two of the pinnacle teams with them, but that still left them to face two themselves. The first wasn't at all a surprise as Gram beelined for them, but the second was more interesting. Melodia, a pinnacle elite sound manipulator with a well earned reputation for her incredible destructive power and robust defences.

They made a good duo to try and take them on with the support of two peak elites. Each of the pinnacles were strong and had enough survival skills they were no doubt expected to survive this encounter, even if they weren't able to keep them contained.

They genuinely wanted to kill them. That wasn't so much surprising as it was revealing. All of the Great Powers wanted to kill them, as they did every Ascender, but it was telling that they'd committed two peak elite teams on the border of pinnacle in this attempt. They were

betting massively with elites that were strong, but had a clear path for further promotion to wound them and take them out of the battle in the most likely scenario.

That was risky this early into a war.

Together, that told him this attack was most likely happening in unison with the Federation's rally to push out the spike the Empire had driven into their border. It was even likely they'd sent an attack at On The Last Line to prevent them from trying to reinforce. Their peers weren't that close to them, but weirder things had happened recently and he expected the Federation had covered their bases.

In it all, Matt found the peak elites more interesting, as it told him quite a lot about the Federation leadership's mindset in planning the attack.

Janpur's Raiders, a team of four who were recruited early to fill in as replacements to the cadre's older members, but had elevated it beyond anyone's expectations. They, like all who joined the team over the years, specialized in net-based abilities. This generation had made a name for themselves, starting as mid-level elites thanks to their predecessor, but were at top of peak elite, ready to advance to the high mythical rank of pinnacle with one small boost in their combat power.

That was, if they hadn't crossed it already. That too was a possibility, given they hadn't been seen in active combat in this war.

All four members were pseudo-supports in their own right, which had caused many teams to underestimate what the group could do with a few restraints. They might not technically be a pinnacle elite, but if not, they were the next best thing the Federation had to offer, and he didn't dismiss that.

The other was Larc. An old and formidable peak elite with an unconventional weapon who could fight from long range with physical attacks, while having enough familiarity with melee combat, it was likely he could survive a brief encounter with one of them.

Combined, the line up ensured the upcoming fight would be anything but easy. Then again, that was what they'd signed up for when they chose this plan.

The earlier thrown boomerang landed at almost the same time as Gram and Melodia rushed forward at Liz and Aster in unison. The man blazed with energy and Matt moved to intercept, but was blocked by Janpur's Raiders as they attempted to copy Gan Le's tactic from the previous war.

Matt had no intention of making things that easy, though their interruption did let Gram go after Liz. As much as he wanted to tangle with one of the Federation's heaviest hitters, he needed to deal with Janpur's Raiders.

Doing so while fending off Larc, along with anyone else waiting in the wings, would be a much harder task, but one he had to manage.

Matt started by casting [Hail], creating a veritable wall of ice around Aster and Liz, helping his bond expand her spiritual space. They needed to work through both the spatial stabilizers and neutral mana destabilizers the teleporting ships deployed from what little storage they had magicked away.

He was only able to catch Liz starting to multiply before he was set upon by all four members of Janpur's Raiders and the majority of his focus narrowed as he hoped to rebuff this attempt quickly.

Brent moved in close and threw a magical web at him, but Matt sliced through it with his sword. It took both [Dispelling Edge], his own manual spell unravelling, and his Folded Reflection ability to drain the mana from the spell. It was quick and finicky work, but he managed it while also casting a rapid fire series of [Gravitic Bolt]s in return.

The first hit and shattered Brent's left arm's armor and pulverized the flesh underneath, but the rest were dispelled or dodged as the rest of the team arrived and sprung into action. They were coordinated in their moves and and half a dozen debuffs hit him all at once, trying to overwhelm his armor's defences even as they tried to use their Aspects to restrict his movements.

Matt shrugged most of them off without much problem, but a few stuck, both metaphorically and literally. Two parasitic curses that tried to drain his mana, he could ignore, and three self-reinforcing debuffs that were far more annoying.

He felt Aster dispel one of the three, but her attention shifted back to her fight before she could get the other two.

Matt appreciated her help but knew it was futile against this group. He started to purge them via his Millennium Willow Lifesap, but he suspected the fight would be over one way or another before it was able to dislodge the debuffs. Instead, he sent a message to Liz and Aster as the battle started to form.

They'd agreed to not hold back, and he hoped to maximize his first usage of this technique. However, that didn't mean they needed to wait until things went bad to pull it out. He might as well start with it, and they'd made several plans around that.

It did mean the three of them needed to play the opening sequence of the fight properly as they baited their own hidden hooks.

A teal blue net made out of a glue-like substance hit both his legs and clung to both himself and itself. It was meant to make every movement harder thanks to its resiliency and no doubt durable nature.

Matt ignored it. He moved through the restrictions, letting his raw strength prevent it from fouling him up. The net's own particular blend of stretchiness worked against it even as it tried to crawl upwards and encase him. With his normal weight and the strength it took him to move, the

net might as well not even have existed. Rather than stretch, his movements caused the net to tear like putty.

He even saw the small looks of surprise flicker across the faces of Janpur's Raiders as they finally started to believe what the most recent information about him had no doubt contained, but they hadn't quite trusted. He also knew any such advantage wouldn't last long and jumped on it.

He swapped his sword's form back to a glaive, where he used it to cast an amplified [Dragon's Breath] and [Dragonflame]. He let the fire and wind mix and merge chaotically as the former fed on the latter and grew to greater heights than it couldn't easily manage on its own.

Diamond, who'd been up next in the sequence to dart in, hadn't hesitated, trusting her armor and team to keep her safe as she threw out another physical net made out of bright orange chains. The links sank into the remaining glue net from earlier, even as it tried to burn through the outer layers of [Cracked Phantom Armor] with a strange variation of fire that had more in common with acid than most interpretations of flame.

The boosted flames melted the woman's armor during their brief contact, but she didn't linger long enough to suffer more than medium injuries that had already started healing. Still, she backed up a much more vulnerable target than she'd come in as, and they hadn't expected that. However her attack turned out, it let Everbright dart forward to replace her, ready to add their own brand of slowing debuff to the ever growing pile.

It was a cycle that the team had down pat, and one Matt knew he needed to put an end to immediately if he wanted any chance of a quick victory. Once the nets started to layer their power would stack, and even he wasn't entirely sure he could muscle through. He didn't have the leeway in this fight to hold back.

Matt turned his combined dragon attacks downward, even as he flooded [Cracked Phantom Armor] with fire mana to increase its resilience against his own blaze. That change helped in more ways than one, as it made it harder for the neutral mana destabilizer to affect his oldest spell.

While doing so, he felt Aster sneak a [Icicle] past Melodia and at some of the support elites that had deployed from Raffi's ship. Almost half of them vanished into her spirit space and the rest were forced to relocate as a tower was pulled into reality from a gust of wind and snow, expanding her reach that much wider.

The quartet wasn't so kind as to let him free himself and they launched water spells at his head, hoping to take advantage of the elemental advantage, but their spells failed to penetrate his multi-layered defence in any meaningful way.

A corner of his mind was helpful enough to inform him they'd only need about three more volleys of similar power to hit at the same time to manage it. That was a closer margin than he normally liked, but he didn't intend to give them the time to find that limit. Nor was he dumb enough to stop flooding his armor spell with more fire aspected mana to wash away such

damage. If a water mage pinnacle elite was there, they might have managed it in one hit, which would have been far more dangerous, but they needed more raw damage and he wasn't sitting still.

He had more than enough mana to go around.

When their attack failed, they changed tactics without hesitation.

Matt stepped forward as the boosted flames burned away the remnants of the goop and the chain was superheated beyond its already impressive temperature. He did so just in time to meet the final member of the raiders, Wren, with his sword.

He saw the flash of fear pass through the man's eyes as the blade and its accompanying [Titan's Wrath] was clearly aimed at his head. However, the Federation elite didn't even try to dodge. He used his entire focus on making sure his net landed, even at the cost of taking the blow.

Matt wasn't sure if the man was trusting the neutral mana destabilizers that had been deployed after the spatial locks, or some other contingency to stop the spell or blade, but Wren's upper half vanished under the blow. There were two reactive spells, a technological force redirect, and a localized spatial warp that was keyed into the locks and was strong enough to go off even under Matt's own more localized spatial lock. Both tried to save the man, but neither factor made a single difference to his sword or its trajectory.

However, there was no burst of essence. That signaled Wren had moved his brain from its normal hiding spot in his chest before the battle. Whatever the elite's preparation, the damage didn't stop the chains from wrapping around Matt like metal bandages.

They immediately absorbed and were strengthened by the few remains of the previous bindings that still clung to his armor. It took less than an instant for it to take on properties of the stickiness and incredible heat, making for what he knew would be an annoying combination once the chain had a chance to cocoon him. He knew that would take time, but they still constricted around him like a metal snake as they sought to restrain him through more physical means.

Matt was impressed as he *felt* the weight of the chains that snaked around him like a dozen perfectly coordinated constrictors. The bindings weren't made out of neutronium, but it was made out of one of the more common lesser imitations called Stellar Iron.

The bands of metal twisted and tangled in on themselves as they increasingly limited his movement. If that wasn't disruptive enough, the chains locked together whenever two links came into contact with each other for more than a few moments. It wasn't a magnetic linkage, but as if they were welded.

Despite knowing it wouldn't work he still tapped into [Metal Manipulation] to try and force the chains away, but being an Anchor growth item, its spirit was an extension of Wren's own, which made it nearly impossible to control via spell.

The quartet hadn't reached their rank by chance or luck, and it showed in how well they coordinated. They had a proven style that worked exceptionally well against most physically reliant fighters.

Wren hadn't had a truly perfect Minkalla run, but their chain had been boosted by three deep growth item floors, and he'd made the best out of his opportunity.

Matt was bent nearly over backwards as the chains sought to keep him from applying his formidable strength.

All the force and power in the world meant nothing if it couldn't be applied.

Matt resonated with that thought, but he didn't have the spare mental bandwidth to feel out a potential Phrase at the moment. Besides, that thought wasn't exactly a new idea that had just sprung into mind. He had no doubt that when he finished the fight, he'd be able to retrace the steps with this new insight and see if it was his answer.

Just as he started to gather his strength, he felt the wave of spells slam into him from all three intact members. They were trying to buy Wren time to put his body back together. Either way, such rapid healing would come at the expense of most of the Federation elite's healing cooldown. It was minor, but Matt's Insight picked up the signs that Wren already hit his limit in that first exchange.

As the wave struck him, he didn't bother focusing any extra shielding or defences. He was prepared to take the volley and intended to use their energy to help him break free of his bindings. He was less prepared for the boomerang that tried to sever his head in unison with the spells.

It was a good move that managed to surprise him, as he hadn't expected the pivot despite tracking the weapon. He only properly registered the projectile as it swept sideways at the absolute last moment. Larc had seemed intent to harass Aster with Melodia, but the Federation had their own plans and tactics.

The boomerang stuck halfway into his neck lodged firmly, but could not cut through his neutronium mana weave reinforced spine. Despite stopping, it still did its best, and the entrance of Larc's Aspect to the fight did a great job of distracting him, which let the net bring his hands to his ankles with a perfectly timed contraction.

Rather than growing angry, Matt flared the [Archmage's Presence] portion of his half merged skill, pushing the spell structure to its absolute limits. The spell screamed along with his spirit. The only thing that kept the skill from unraveling, despite the nine billion mana he forced through it, was a lifetime of training.

His spirit's ability to produce that much mana had little to do with his skills and capabilities of handling so much power. Luna had started the process of reforging himself all those many years ago, but he'd continued it after leaving her direct tutelage.

Inch by inch, Matt righted himself.

It only took a few moments, but he still had to endure another three volleys of coordinated spells from Janpur's Raiders as they kept up the pressure, futilely trying to wear his defences down through attrition. Even the boomerang still lodged in his neck tried to finish its job as he righted himself, but Larc quickly realized it was becoming harder to control his weapon and what that meant.

The elite made the correct call and gave up on his attack as he retracted the weapon from Matt's flesh by recalling it. His intervention in Matt's fight had already cost several of the support elites their lives without him to help keep Liz and Aster occupied.

Matt would have loved to keep the unconventional weapon locked down, even if he needed to keep it inside his neck and close to his head. However, he saw it was a lost cause and gave it up without any additional struggle.

He didn't have the concentration to spare.

Wren screamed something the moment his body finished recovering, which made Brent, Everbright, and Diamond change tactics from offense to debuffing, but they were far, far, too late.

Matt had already started moving. That meant he'd gathered momentum. The exact thing they'd tried so hard to stop.

Their Aspects flared as they tried to lock him down with their higher stage Domains. Aspects were infinitely harder to resist without one of his own, and pushed to their max, they threatened to overwhelm him.

He felt himself slow, his muscles tired, his mind fog over, all while an immense desire to give up sought to overwhelm him. The feelings weren't new, Janpur's Raiders had been trying to be discrete in their ramp up before they flared them to their maximum effect, but he'd noticed.

Not that he let the effects bother him. Everything in the Realm was secondary to his goal of standing up.

Matt felt the first chain snap as he reached a critical speed.

Wren tried to adjust and cover for the broken links, but Matt didn't give him that opportunity. He continued to apply pressure, using his own three part Domain to blunt the worst of their Aspect's effects. His Meld, despite being more of a half Domain stage, was the largest help as despite it being 'weaker' than his Intent, it was a full stage they didn't have.

He didn't activate it entirely and blank out everyone else's Domains, not yet, but just used it to strike at their Domains broadly and weaken them in a more general way. He'd worked hard learning how to selectively apply his Meld, and had seen great improvements. He did all of that even as his Intent and Concept were focused on defending himself.

His Meld was something none of them could match without taking their Aspects off the offense.

With a silent roar, Matt snapped himself upright, breaking free as the shattered links of metal turned liquid and tried to reform. He had no intention of letting things be that easy for the Federation. His opportunity was close, but only if he could be in position to take advantage of it.

He needed to be free and unfettered to make the shot.

With a hard pulse, he flared his Concept and a petty touch of [Telekinesis] to send a good portion of Wren's most precious weapon flying in a thousand and one directions.

If they were in real space, that wouldn't be such a devastating problem, but as small as the chunks were, chaotic space would eat them in a matter of minutes, if not seconds. He saw Wren trying to collect his Anchor's fragments as quickly as possible before more damage was done, but Matt ignored him. It would take time for the weapon to reform in his spirit, and that would mean he was effectively out of a fight at this level.

He faked a dodge left before darting upward. He felt the magical nets wrap around him once again, but rather than trying to fight through to continue moving, he focused on keeping his sword and that arm free. To ensure that, he sacrificed his left side and both legs without any hesitation while allowing himself to be brought to a halt.

Diamond and Brent moved to intercept, eager to capitalize on their success, but Everbright stayed exactly where Matt wanted him to. He was busy holding the nets wrapped around Matt's legs, braced against the fabric of reality and standing firm as Matt had known he would.

A Liz nearby went down as Melodia and Gram unexpectedly swapped opponents, but that only fueled the others as the burst of power rebounded back through her remaining bodies.

Matt blocked the following wave of attacks with [Bulwark], both to give the impression the fight was pushing him- it was- but to create more things to keep track of. He even went ahead and solidified the spell into a semi-permanent wall, but all of that only took a fraction of his attention as he tracked the greater battle.

His brief reposition kept him near the edge of the battlefield, exactly where he wanted to be. Where he needed to be if he wanted to capitalize on a mistake their enemies would never make again after he revealed what he could do with his Augment.

A part of him wondered how they would take the revelation that he could ignore those annoyances and if it would bring JR grief.

He was confident that neither Yvette nor Halford's teams actually understood why Aster had ordered them to separate, making their individual fights harder, but they hadn't questioned it.

While hard to see individually from any one battle, on a larger view it created an *opportunity*. One that he'd only get to reveal once. After this, they'd forever be on the look out for similar setups, and while it wouldn't be impossible to use a second time, it would be that much harder and rarely as effective.

Thanks to his battle instincts, backed up by the number crunching capabilities of his [Actual Insight], he knew Everbright, Gram, and Tristian, the core member of his pinnacle elite team, would have their brains lined up as each was busy with their respective opponents, himself, Liz and Yvette. It would only last for an instant but that was all he needed.

Matt did three things at the same time. The first two were things he'd done dozens of times, but the third he'd been saving for a moment like this.

He raised his sword and swapped it back to the glaive. He needed the extra stabilizers he'd put in his weapon's casting form if he really wanted to push his limits.

He activated his Intent, concentrating his mana. That darkened it from its light blue to a deep black, so deep that [Cracked Phantom Armor] drank in all available light, rendering him an anomaly in the purple miasma.

And finally, he *solidified* and cast [Mana Beam].

Where only he could feel, a fist sized liquid mana stone appeared in his chest nestled next to his heart. It was the second most protected place in his body, only coming up short when compared to his brain. The [Mana Beam] manifested along with a portion of his spirit in that sanctuary among the physicality that was reality.

It had taken him a dozen uses of the technique to put words to the strange feeling, but it almost felt as if he'd returned the skill to how it was before he'd absorbed it. It was something only possible thanks to JR and the work of art they'd made together.

Two things happened at the exact same time, before anyone had any time to react, though in reality, they were one.

The [Mana Beam] *appeared* and three cultivators died. It was only two fingers wide, but the deceptively thin bar of black mana didn't cut through chaotic space like a normal spell. Despite its size, its presence still blew back the corrosive waves of energy that were chaotic space like an explosion, shoving aside an ocean for miles around them.

Not that anyone but Matt appreciated that mere side effect at the moment.

They were more focused on the corpses of Everbright, Gram, and Tristian. None of them had been given any chance to react as he'd caught them at the perfect instant. Everbright had been still, Gram had been dodging Liz's 'suicidal charge', and Tristian had been so far away he hadn't been paying quite enough attention to Matt. All of which was made a thousand times easier thanks to the [Mana Beam] crossing the intervening distance silently, with few of the usual warnings that accompanied a lethally strong spell.

The spell didn't tear through reality, it just existed within it thanks to Matt's Intent.

The three bursts of essence were simultaneous as the [Mana Beam] cut through their head, hip, and thigh respectively. The spell had simply ignored their defences as if they weren't there.

With nearly ninety percent of Matt's Tier 35, forty-three billion mana a second being directed to it, the spell obliterated everything in its path. It cut a deep furrow into the vastness of chaotic space and continued strong well outside the battlefield.

Eventually, the range became too much and the mana lightened and unraveled under the caustic presence of chaotic space. However, before that the corrosive energy seemed to have no effect on the hyper-concentrated spell. The bar of black mana didn't waver, it didn't warble, it didn't even flicker. There was simply too much energy packed into the spell for something as weak as the calmest layer of chaotic space to affect it so soon after leaving him.

Boosting with his Intent was still limited to shorter range spells, but he was no longer a Tier 25 and chaotic space had already ensured it would be a close up battle.

Matt didn't drop the spell after the three kills. Instead, he moved his sword like a conductor's wand, going after the other Federation pinnacles, who scattered like bugs fleeing the sunlight. Despite their efforts, he bisected the already unarmored Diamond on his way to Melodia, but neither hits caused any bursts of essence, despite him trying to hit their brain.

Still, the damage was done, as two pinnacle elites and one peak fell. Worse yet, several more took serious injuries trying to escape from the ink-dark [Mana Beam]. The rest of the elites disengaged and scattered as they performed evasive maneuvers afraid of the bar of death finding their brains. Instead of continuing he dropped the spell and let the liquid mana stone fade away, returning the skill to his chest.

While there was no direct cost to forming a skill in his body beyond the additional spiritual strain, that was negligible compared to the mana throughput he was capable of when manifesting a skill. No, the true limiting factor was his willpower and his own self interest.

If Matt so chose, he could manifest a skill or two nearly indefinitely. The problem was the stark difference in spell expression was so obvious, doing so too often would give away far too many of his secrets. A spell like [Mana Beam] had well understood energy expressions, with any increase in mana used to cast it, increasing its size in known functions. His manifested skills very obviously didn't follow the normal trends.

They still scaled, but the effect was far more efficient in terms of spell stability. That meant that at a few billion mana a second, an outside observer would assume it to be in the tens of millions. Combined with his Intent's own obfuscation of his mana it would ensure that it was very hard to account for how much mana he was truly throwing around.

That was what let him keep the beam nice and compact, rather than its normal unwieldy sizes, at such mana throughputs. It was also what made the empowered attacks deceptively dangerous.

It was as close to a perfect solution to Matt's mana throughput concerns as he believed was possible without his own Talent stepping in. The problem was that he really didn't want his enemies getting a good look at his spells' manifested effects. It would give away far too much

about himself and his Talent. That was why he'd set a soft rule for himself to only manifest his skills in the most dire of circumstances, or when he used his Intent's concentration effect.

Using that existing boost as a cover let him hide a lot under the guise of his 'concentrated mana's effects'. People would still ask questions, but an existing short term boost getting stronger was perfectly in line with an Ascender's normal growth patterns. Random skills becoming infinitely more effective at his whim was far more concerning.

And with two dead pinnacle elites and a peak elite joining them, Matt was confident that he'd made a splash with his first public use of the ability.

He'd also reminded the Federation that if they wanted to lock him down, they needed to be able to take his close range blows. Without that ability, it was nearly impossible to keep him contained.

Not that Liz and Aster let the moment go to waste.

Aster flared her spirit space and got two more towers out. They opened fire on Melodia, who reacted by releasing several notes in carefully controlled waves to rupture Aster's casting implements before she started to break contact.

His bond had picked up the method of large scale spell amplifiers from one of her forum members and ran with it. As had most of the more combat oriented members of that group. With his and Zack's help, they'd taken it a step further than the original and ensured she got a sizable boost from casting through them, and every tower's loss represented five years of effort gone.

Aster retracted both in time, repositioning them out of harm's way, but that stopped her casting, lowering her damage.

The sound wave was equally as effective on the Liz, who used the death's distractions to rush in close. She was caught in the burst of sounds from Melodia defending herself against Aster's barrage, and the wall of sound managed to crack her feather armor. Worse yet, the magical vibrations managed to rupture any small pieces of Liz.

That prevented her from using droplets of herself as weapons and kept Melodia safe.

That limited Liz to fighting like a normal human, but didn't stop her by any means.

Just as Matt was moving to finish off Brent or Wren, who'd instinctively moved closer together after Everbright's death, Tali appeared behind the real Aster the moment before she drove a dagger into his bond's head.

Tali was a combat assassin and one of the Federation's best, as proven by her scoring a pinnacle elite kill during their last war with the Collective. He wasn't surprised to see she'd been assigned to their mission as a fire assassin, and hoped he got a chance to end her threat permanently, no matter how unlikely that was given her alpha strike fighting philosophy.

Matt felt the blow land in his spirit as if the blade had hit him.

Aster dropped [Winter Spirit] to reduce her vulnerability to fire as [Deathly Cold] triggered and she cast [Chill of the End]. They lowered the temperature around both herself and the assassin who tried to end her life, while preventing her from death as long as she stayed cold.

Liz reacted even before he could. She reached out and grabbed the waves of fire Tali had brought along with her blow.

He hadn't picked up any hint of Tali before her attack, so he hadn't been able to puzzle out how she'd hidden a small star's worth of fire, but its presence proved she'd clearly been prepared to strike at Aster from the outset. The entire Federation plan had probably revolved around this moment, and it was only thanks to Matt striking first that they had a chance to salvage the situation.

It was a powerful attack, and Matt felt Aster's mana pool drop precipitously as the two spells struggled to prevent the blow and its follow up elemental advantage from ending her life. Her mana hit sixty percent in the first strike, and started falling just as fast as the fire raged.

Liz's intervention slowed the fire's expansion but didn't stop it.

Matt, having never let go of [Hail], poured more mana into the spell, even as he cast [Create Ice] and used [Ice Manipulation] to condense the remaining material around Aster.

Tali had been well prepared for their responses and activated a series of talismans. A part of Matt couldn't help but be impressed at whoever designed the talisman formation, even as he rapidly scanned it for any flaws. However, it was a thing of beauty, with three core effects that activated in unison while managing to enhance the others. And it did all of that without being technically linked together, which prevented a single dispel or other such life saving countermeasure from taking all three effects out at once.

It was a work of art he fully intended to appreciate after the battle.

The talisman array blossomed into another miniature sun, pouring out an ocean's worth of flames. The second effect was what looked like a much more advanced application of what the aura escape talismans did when they transformed someone to relocate them, trying to burn through Aster's ice and cold through an unconventional angle. The third effect created a vacuum for flame that drew in every available ounce of energy in the surroundings, mainly from the first fire talisman Tali activated in hiding, and aimed all of that heat at the tip of the dagger in Aster's frozen head.

Matt used the scant few seconds he had to create half a dozen liquid mana stone talismans to create more ice, cold, and wind, using most of his spare mana regeneration. He did so even as he focused on [Create Ice], [Ice Manipulation], and [Fire Manipulation], throwing his efforts behind Liz's as they sought to push the fire back.

The raw mana he could throw around helped dramatically, buying them almost an entire extra heartbeat, but it wasn't enough to halt the implosion's progress.

Aster, not willing to sit there helplessly, cast [Floating Snow] to reposition, but Tali's Domain ensured the weapon's tip stayed firmly planted in her head and the brain residing there, despite the distance she created between them. When they didn't work, she flared her spirit space and sucked in every bit of energy that surrounded her. Mana, essence from Gram's earlier casting and later death, even the destructive miasma of chaotic space.

She pulled it all in, including the fire that threatened to melt her.

Even supplied as they were by talismans, her final move gave them the breathing room they needed to throw their Domains at Tali's. Matt even added his Meld to the mix, forgoing his own defences entirely.

The world turned black and white as he smothered every other Domain in existence. Or tried to.

He only succeeded on his enemies' Concepts and Intentions. He extinguished them without any notable resistance, but that was exactly what he faced against the Aspects. Without an Aspect of his own, his Meld wasn't able to fully suppress the Federations elites'. They were refuges of color in the inverted world of black and white he imposed.

That he couldn't fully repress the others didn't mean he didn't weaken their Aspects. Tali in particular lost enough connection that Aster was able to slip her predetermined hit and immediately absorb the rest of the now undirected fire into her spirit space.

Seeing her attack fail, Tali tried to escape. It was the right call, but a Liz had moved in close while Matt was magically occupied. She barreled into the assassin with no regard for her own bodily safety, driving a spear into the other woman's side a dozen spell-empowered times, slipping in curses and blood spells that made each strike far more dangerous than they appeared.

She managed to do so while also fighting Melodia with two of her other bodies as the Federation elites reengaged to follow up on Tali's strike.

At the same time, Matt felt the remaining two still functional members of Janpur's Raiders, Wren and Brent, launch another round of restraints at his back in an attempt to lock him down. Before it landed, he cast [Cracked Air Side], avoiding the first wave and creating distance with them as he recast the spell and arrived at the others' fight.

They were not Gan Le, and he broke contact without being drawn back in.

Melodia hit him with a wall of sound the instant he stopped moving, and Matt nearly lost his balance before he calibrated [Cracked Phantom Armor] and [Archmage's Presence] to stop her particular blend of resonance effects and Sound mana. While the armor aspected to block the latter, the former had been boosted to a level allowing the more dangerous effects to punch through even his armor.

It was insidious in both how strong it was and how quickly it had gotten through his normal defences. After the battle, he'd need to carefully carve the changes he was spiritually

mimicking into the skill's structure. But that was why he'd kept the skill half merged going into the war. This was, as Max had reminded him more than once, a once in a lifetime opportunity to grow it quickly.

He dropped his Meld a moment later as Liz fully occupied Tali's attention. She didn't mind the flames nearly as much as the still recovering Aster had.

Tali sought to flee, but Liz made it expensive as she took a too-slow foot. Rather than absorb and convert the blood, she kept the appendage and started using it as a curse focus. From the way the flesh burned and crackled under golden fire and lighting, he knew she was using Tali's healing cooldown to refine her physical body. If Liz was using the spell on herself, she'd be way more careful in both the method and distance she was willing to go, but using Tali's body as the medium, she was deliberately sloppy while pushing the spell to its utmost.

With her first strike a failure and no way to dodge Liz, Tali made an attempt to try and kill the Liz with another flame empowered strike.

Liz's upraised shield prevented the physical blow but the accompanying wave of fire washed over her. Instead of damaging her it was absorbed into her feather armor. The only visible effect was making her glow particularly golden for a moment.

Liz used the opportunity to send out a small barrage of spells of her own. Some were physical based projectiles like [Ichor Sickle] but others were more insidious like [Embolism]. Tali managed to burn away most of the wave of attacks but several still managed to slip through and take root.

Once again, they had regained the momentum after Tali nearly stole it from them with her sudden strike on Aster.

Matt deliberately overextended and took a blow to his left temple, but in return caught Melodia with the tip of his sword. Even that casual contact obliterated her lower body, with her hips disintegrating entirely. Her defense had been formidable, but there was too much mass moving far too quickly for her body to stop. Doubly so, given he'd made the sword as light as possible for most of the strike before reversing that to increase its gravity fifteen times its already robust base weight the instant before impact.

He and Liz used the opportunity to press her even as Tali finally broke contact with Liz and Aster, where she tried to create enough distance that she could return to invisibility. There, she could either retreat or attack once more, depending on how the battle played out. But he also trusted Liz to keep track of the woman now that she had such a large piece of her flesh and spirit.

Melodia let loose a rapid series of sound waves from the instrument strapped to her right arm.

Every movement produced sound, not that they could hear it as it was captured and controlled. Matt was annoyed on behalf of reality that, thanks to her Domain, it didn't matter that

there wasn't matter to transmit her attacks. Melodia's instrument created something more conceptual than simple vibrations in the air.

That was how the wall of sound hit Matt as if he was underwater. The change in medium was enough to send him reeling off course with a half snapped spine. [Regeneration] only took a moment to piece the few broken connections back together, and he was back in the fight.

Melodia wasn't so lucky, and lost an arm from the small [Barrage] of [Gravitic Bolt]s he hit her with as they passed by each other.

With two Lizzes and himself, she was already in a losing position, but Aster's return and attention forced her to use her aura escape tasliman just before the rest of Janpur's Raiders were able to join her battle and even things out.

Only an instant after the first retreat, the Liz casting curses on Tali's foot absorbed and converted the appendage. That signaled Tali had created enough distance to break the link she'd been casting through and her withdrawal from the fight as well.

The elite teams fighting Yvette and Halford's group had already retreated. Both sides were already returning to their ship and Matt was glad to see they didn't need to extricate their helpers.

The attempt had failed before Raffi had, and there was no reason to over extend and spend their lives after unexpectedly winning the fight.

Not that the rest of the elites had played nicely with each other. All of their pinnacle elite protectors were wounded, and Yvette had lost one of her frontline fighters in the exchange. Their losses were only so low because Halfords team's healer had cracked her spirit to keep both teams up, despite how badly they were outnumbered. While a single death wasn't a crippling loss to Yvette's team —secondary members of long standing teams were sometimes transferred or left— it was a cost he'd hoped to delay paying for as long as possible.

Even discounting how many of the high elites Aster had stored in her spirit space, the Federation's attempt had still cost them two pinnacle elite teams and had most likely crippled a team with pinnacle elite potential.

Sadly, given how badly Yvette and Halford groups were wounded, he knew it probably wouldn't be their only loss on the expedition. A lot of things had gone right for them to shift the battle's momentum before the losses had been able to start a domino effect.

A part of Matt wanted to go back to Empire space, but that wasn't their role to play after such a resounding win.

They were Ascenders, and after a failed ambush they needed to 'gloat' and push back into Federation space, forcing the enemies to redirect more at them.

Matt didn't want to do so, but he also knew this was the most palatable thing he could be doing in this war. And as much as he hated seeing people he knew fall, it was better than butchering the non-elites.

Anything was better than that.