

Chapter 472

Having dealt with their ship based obligations, Matt observed the planet burning beneath him. That was good, and seeing it himself finally removed the small nagging voice that had started whispering in his ear any moment that became too quiet, after seeing people fighting over the Crystal aspected world.

Allie didn't immediately teleport away as Matt expected she would. Instead, she flopped into Aster and went boneless. "I'm teleported out. We can take the planetary teleport to your place after the meeting. Then we can have a *meating*. I'm hoping that open roasted BBQ place didn't go out of business while we were gone. I also hope they still have that old sauce and didn't change it too much. I don't have the strength to find gooder food, Aster. I can't."

Aster laughed as she flew the two of them to their island. Allie had been invited but declined originally, so her joining last minute wasn't an issue.

Matt turned to Rah, the final person still with them after Zack and Susanne split off initially, but the older man shook his head. "I have some thoughts I'd like to jot down in my lab but then I'm also going on vacation. I intend to copy you guys and wander around the Empire for a few decades and settle down wherever I'm interested in for a year or two at a time. If we are in the same area, feel free to stop in for a bit."

"You *are* welcome to come to the meeting."

Rah shook his head firmly, not looking at where he knew the gem was hidden in Matt's chest. "I'm deeply interested, but I also don't think this will be solved any time soon. With that in mind, I'd prefer not to tempt myself with the possibilities before I take my break, then write my paper. You two really should join me on the break and not get distracted by work, even if it's desirable work. From what I understand, the lower Tier skill modification scene has been exploding and I intend to go experience it first hand. When I was young, I dreamt of places where people would freely share skill structures; I never imagined a place where they'd also teach the methods of how to do it safely. Don't miss out on the fruits of your labor."

Both Matt and Liz watched as Rah flew upward to Titan's Torch's moon where he had a permanent office. They'd love to immediately follow his advice but they couldn't. They needed to take over their duchies and give their respective seneschal's, Cato and Isabella, a well deserved break after running everything while they were gone.

Kees too, though to a hopefully lesser degree given the scale of operations. No matter the amount, Matt owed his vice guild leader a break as much as his seneschal.

Resisting the urge to run over and show said guild what he'd done, Matt was interrupted as a black cat stepped next to where Matt and Liz were still floating in space.

After inspecting them for a long moment she said, "I either expected you a few months ago or in a few more decades when the first waves came back."

The unasked 'did something go wrong?' warmed Matt's heart, even if the cat didn't express her feelings verbally.

Matt smiled back at her. "We'd love to tell you more about it in a more secure location."

Flying to their ducal island, which had the best security, they sent out staggered summons to everyone they would need to talk to in the coming days, preparing themselves to dive in.

They intended to take over for a decade to give their people a break before going on their own slightly longer one. Having progressed so much in the recent years they were in little rush to delve; they all needed to digest the new abilities and items they'd gotten on their trip into deep chaotic space.

Combined with Matt needing to fully regenerate his willpower before being able to safely use it again, he and Liz were already planning their own large break. He and Liz both needed it but they both also needed to give the people keeping their fiefdom running smoothly their own first.

By the time they arrived on their island only four people had arrived instead of the expected five, but Ciceron wasn't there. That meant a trip to the Capital eventually but that was already on their eventual itinerary, along with all of the kingdom-level capitals.

When they were safely inside the locked down secure room, Matt took a few minutes to say hello to everyone.

Cato was his seneschal and the day to day executor of Matt's ducal responsibility when he was absent, and often enough when he was available but busing doing something else. The snake bloodline man was well paid but his responsibilities were vast, even if shared with Isabella, Liz's seneschal.

A good seneschal was worth their weight in Natural Treasures and as such were as trusted as they were well vetted. As such Matt had no issue sharing the captured strange realm's reward's existence with them.

He'd probably be using them and the guild to help create the item he envisioned, but even if he didn't use the guild to do the crafting, both seneschals would be involved in the planning. Additionally, he had no secrets from Luna and was happy she'd taken the initiative to come along as he wanted her advice on how to proceed even more than the others.

She understood him better than most and her advice was rarely bad.

He also wanted to see her shock when she saw what he'd done.

Matt wasn't quite as close to Kees, but he wanted the older man's advice all the same when it came to his growth item, given how pivotal he saw his guild being.

Once they were all settled in, Matt cut the gem free and floated it in front of everyone as Liz cleaned his blood off, leaving it pristine and sparkling under the room's illumination.

Despite having checked on it minutely since he created it, he hadn't gotten a good look at the gem with his eyes and enjoyed the sight as much as everyone else.

It was stunning.

Slightly smaller than a typical fist, the gem was rounder than a mana stone or skill shard, but that only added to its charm. Matt's next thought was that he'd expected the gem to be darker thanks to the influence of his Intent concentrating his mana and therefore turning it black.

The result was 'dusky' rather than 'dark' and that made all the difference.

Inside, visible a dozen times over through the gem's facets, the strange realm's reward spun slowly in the same pattern he cobbled together. It was complicated and, while he understood the intertwining patterns abused the feature of mana that enabled the greater throughputs he'd been studying, *why* he'd needed several layers of different shapes and intensities to stabilize the energy was a mystery to him.

Or why the energy was stable at all.

He wanted to say that his Concept's Endless sub-aspect was fueling the energy but even after months of observation, he wasn't confident that was the case. He was sure it was at least a determining factor, but his instincts told him it had more to do with the second oddity he'd discovered.

His Tier 25 Talent confidently told him that the gem was a single solid mass of mana, despite the internals being fluid. He wasn't willing to force his Talent to condense on the liquid mana gem a second time, and thanks to having bottomed out on his willpower, he had to wait until he'd naturally recovered before he could activate his Intent to make a test gem.

He'd already proven that without his Intent's assistance he couldn't keep the internals of his mana liquid. Once more, he didn't necessarily think that was an intrinsic part of his Intent but a function of the hyper concentrated mana enabling a semi liquid but somehow still solid form of mana.

Matt was already starting to consider the possibilities the gem's creation had sparked to be just as, if more, important than the growth item he'd eventually make. He had plans to apply the liquid mana crystals to his sword instead of the static mana crystals he normally did, envisioning the higher throughput and stability the new method could offer him.

Dreams of finally having an outlet to use all of his mana drew him in like a trap, but he couldn't resist.

He'd still need a way to stabilize his *spirit*, but the gem was quite possibly containing the answer to that too.

Matt secretly preened at Allie's unconscious whistle.

Liz's reaction was only a second slower and she leaned forward, even as phoenix Liz split into three to get more viewing angles, as she squeezed his hand in a show of support.

Aster sent Matt a pulse of such raw adoration through their bond, he nearly blushed.

Cato, Isabella, and Kees just looked confused but Luna's reaction was everything Matt had envisioned.

The black cat had been sitting on her chair trying to look bored, but the moment Matt withdrew the gem she stood up as all of her hair stood on its end. She was so startled he was internally betting with himself if she'd start hissing or swiping at the gem but then realizing the danger of that thought he grew slightly worried.

Luna noticed and quickly got herself under control. In slow and steady movement's, she sat back down but her eyes and spiritual perception never left the crystal as if afraid Matt was going to drop it.

Her single word question came out strained despite its magical origin, "*Explain.*"

Having done his best to study what was going on while the gem had been lodged in his chest, Matt had managed to learn a few things and happily shared them with the others.

"This is the reward from a strange realm we visited near the end. It was a very interesting high Tier Crystal aspected planet and I have samples as well as recordings of everything. Beautiful place that has given me a lot of ideas I won't elaborate on right now. This reward however can let me convert a single item into a growth item."

Letting the moment hit everyone, Matt preened internally as Luna's pupils widened instantly as her study of the gem intensified.

Continuing he added, "I'm still not entirely sure what I did to capture the reward beyond the obvious. My best guess is that it's being empowered by my Concept's sub-aspect and kept from dispersing by my Intent's increased mana concentration, but I also think they are only secondary components to the technique that made the gem itself. So far I haven't noticed any energy loss or destabilization and given that it's been several months, I'm hopeful. Hopeful about a lot of things with the gem, really."

Kees looked flabbergasted as Matt looked at him for help but his guild's second in command shook his head, "Sorry Guild Leader, but Titan's Torch doesn't research Talent tech. I can send you our recommended affiliates list if you're interested."

Matt felt his jaw drop as everyone was caught off guard with his response. Unable to stop himself, he joined everyone else as they laughed at his reaction.

Growing more serious, Kees added, "Guild leader, this is a mix of a Talent and Domain applied to strange realm energies. It's as far outside our guild's expertise or mission statement

as it's possible to be. I'd go as far as saying we are woefully underqualified to perform any such analysis. The equipment alone needed to study something like this would blow our budget for the next century or three."

Matt was going to quip back when Luna flicked a tail as she climbed onto the table and got within an inch of the gem.

As she did so her body language slowly grew more somber. "I do hope you kept this achievement private."

It wasn't a question but Matt answered it anyway. "Only our friend group was told and only through touch [AI] channels. Some might have seen my exit, but we were never going to hide that we got the reward. I did however act as fast as I could to hide what I was doing but most would assume I made a crystalline growth item not that I captured the power."

Luna glared at him before looking at Liz and then Aster and Allie before she sighed. "You're an idiot but I can't blame you for this one. You are *vastly* underselling the importance of this, Matthew. I know I beat into you all that you aren't that special, but come now children, think a *little bit*. Using your guild is good, but you aren't most people. Once any of the Royals finds out about this they are going to drag Renaissance out of whatever hole she'd been working in and shove the two of you in a Tier 47 rift for a few thousand years until you have something *perfect*. Send me your ideas."

Matt's hopes were rising when Luna paused after seeing his proposal. When she shook her head she caused his rising excitement to freeze.

"Let me correct myself. In fact, let's make a bet since I know how much you all enjoy such games. If I'm wrong, I'll skin myself and make a scarf and give it to Mara for her birthday, if the Emperor doesn't at least *try* to get JR to make this item."

Knowing Luna, Matt felt his expectations rise even higher than he thought possible as he heard her make such a bet. If she was willing to take such a bet with no consequence for them she must be supremely confident Manny would try to get JR's help.

He more than most knew how good of a crafter the Corporations' Tier 50 was. He'd gotten *one* device from the bird, his Bifate Pair-Linker, and that had single handedly made his mana stone talismans possible and just a simple examination had triggered an inspiration in Erwin.

An item made by *him* turned into the growth item Matt was picturing?

He could only salivate at the idea.

Luna looked almost disappointed, "Matthew, think for a moment. With no time limit, there is *no* limit. You're thinking like everything except an Ascender. Powering you up outside of an active war is an Empire-wide top priority. Given what is coming, that's doubly true."

Matt was going to speak but Cato, Isabella and Kees nodded or otherwise agreed with Luna.

"I still want to study it."

Luna rolled her eyes as she sat down directly on the table. "No one is going to stop you once the crystal is *used*. Until then keep it well hidden. We'll be having a separate conversation about you tapping out on willpower but I'll assume you had a good reason to be pushed so hard. That said, it serves as an acceptable reason to delay making a choice in what item you want to convert but you need a plan and then we'll ha—" Looking at Allie, the cat corrected herself, "We'll use imperial intelligence channels to inform the throne and get Renaissance's schedule cleared in case I'm wrong."

Turning to the other three who'd already used the rewards, she tapped her claws on the table in a rhythmic pattern until coming to a decision.

"How much control did you have over the items you converted?"

Already having learned everything he could from the others, Matt knew the strange realms reward had been *fantastic*.

Most strange realms were inevitably compared to Minkalla, but few ever managed to top the all-devouring planet, but their reward might come close. Once the energy was pushed into their chosen item, the energy infused it and they'd been brought into a time accelerated mental space where they were able to tweak the growth item.

Each and every one of them had experienced something slightly different, but they'd universally had an incredible level of control over the item. If they'd wanted to waste the reward they could have turned the item's physical material into something rivaling a Natural Treasure but the more manufactured the item, the stricter the control.

Liz had done something that should have been nigh impossible and converted an alchemy cauldron made out of ichor iron still connected to herself into a growth item. As such the reward only allowed her to modify the cauldron in the context of it being an alchemy cauldron. However within that scope, she had substantial, if not total, control. Though every change consumed the rewards energy meaning someone indecisive could waste the entire reward if they changed their minds too many times.

Everyone in their group had managed to turn their chosen items into incredibly potent growth items, but Matt was particularly proud of what Liz and Aster had managed.

Liz turned her cauldron into a way to make herself stronger by refining her own blood, but even she didn't truly quite know what she'd managed to create. She technically knew the powers of her new cauldron but without thorough testing, she wasn't sure how close to her goal she'd gotten.

She set out to turn the cauldron into something of herself, that could be used to further modify herself. Thanks to replacing the original cauldron's materials with ichor metals made from her own blood, she'd done exactly that.

If her theory was correct she'd be able to use the cauldron and its new growth properties to refine and strengthen a portion of herself. Ideally she'd be able to then after merging with the enhanced blood have the effects propagate. Then she could restart the process with a higher starting point growing stronger with every cycle.

Like Matt with his gem, they both wanted to dive into their new toys, but they were both holding off. They'd long agreed they both needed some time to just be a couple when they got back and intended to follow through with their planned break.

Aster's chosen item showed another use case of the reward.

Where Liz had aimed to do something difficult, Aster aimed to do one existing thing incredibly well. From a nice but decorative cooling sash, the growth item was now so cold it could be considered a weapon in its own right.

Not that she put everything into the efficiency of the item, just as much reward energy had been spent on making the sash's repair functionality strong enough she wouldn't need to worry about anything short of total annihilation. Something that would be difficult because she'd used the item's Tier 25 effect to tie the sash's durability to how cold it was, ensuring it wasn't an obvious weakness.

Allie, on the other hand, hadn't bothered to edit her items directly all that much, given they'd been masterfully crafted originally. She simply took what was there and ensured the scaling parts of her daggers were exactly what she wanted them to be, armor piercing.

As far as Matt was concerned that was the best possible outcome when he used it and why he agreed with Luna's comment about time.

Taking one last look at the gem, Luna said, "Keep this under wraps. If you want to test your mana storage capabilities, Matt, wait until you can make a new sample. This is something we can't retract once it's announced and you don't want people to start thinking they deserve to study the real thing. That's how people get *ideas*. Once it's been used, the scans will suffice. A *lot* of scans."

First hand samples were good but following Luna's example to her conclusion, he could easily see people arguing him getting another growth item wasn't worth losing the sample.

From a purely logical perspective he could understand that viewpoint, but when it was his incredible chance on the line, Matt instinctively recoiled at any such notion. He didn't let that make him backpeddle his intention to share, but he did acknowledge that it was better to avoid any such situation altogether.

It was less ideal but like with his mana itself, Matt was happy to share, happy to help. He was, however, far less happy to *sacrifice* himself for the greater good. The 'greater good' was a bottomless pit that would take everything fed into it and still ask for more.

The discussion then pivoted into more general affairs.

The duchy and his guild were both fine.

They'd taken a few hits over the past two hundred years but so had everyone else.

With so many higher Tiers leaving to explore chaotic space they had taken a large portion of the most profligate higher Tiers with them. After all, the people who were both willing and able to enter the breach, were typically the best of their Tiers and the largest spenders.

While he'd expected it, the economy had taken a downward turn, coinciding with the onset of the breach as the best of every tier left, leaving the service industries without their patrons to cater to, causing widespread repercussions. There were protections in place to keep the market stable, but most of them relied on the businesses having been able to take the hit in the first place.

As per their orders, companies that fully floundered were either bought by them directly as ducal assets, or sold off to more competent people if it was believed that the business itself was profitable. Thankfully there were less than five of that first category across their entire duchy. Being so new they didn't have quite as many entrenched high Tier businesses resting on their laurels.

What they had was far worse, businesses that had still been trying to get on their feet after forming in, or moving to, their duchy. For those, Cato and Isabella had followed their economic downturn planning and helped the businesses limp along until their clientele started to return. Those loans weren't free but they were generously lax.

Turning to Cato, Matt asked, "What are our funds looking like?"

Cato didn't hesitate to give him the bad news, it was a good part of why Matt appreciated him so much. His affection didn't stop Cato's words from hitting him where it hurt though.

"We are well in the red and have been taking our own loans from the Imperial government. On both sets of accounts."

Checking the files Cato flicked at him, Matt winced.

They'd run out of his mana stashes over a decade ago and that was with the deliveries Allie made being used to refill his own coffers mid-way. Duchies were not cheap to get off the ground.

Reaching out and taking Cato's ring, Matt gave him what little mana he'd made since the Unsparring had teleported back to settled space now that Allie was teleporting relatively short distances.

Matt fully intended to help the Empire but they had Manny's reserves and the Tier 50 made a lot more mana than him. They could wait until he dug his own duchy out of the red.

"I'll handle that as my top priority."

The bad news didn't end there though.

The cabal, or what Cato suspected were agents of the cabal, had been using the economic downturn to try and infiltrate the duchy and guild alike.

Matt calmly noted everything down but now wasn't the time to move. Soon, but not immediately.

Instead, he let himself enjoy the afterglow of what *good* news there was.

The economic hardship which was affecting the higher Tier economy *wasn't* impacting the lower Tiers as it usually did.

In an unusual turn of events, despite being the economic heart of the Empire, the higher Tier economies' struggles had minimal impact on the mortal population. The lower Tier worlds across the board were improving, though some more than others.

Given the Empire's various controls that made little sense, but Matt was half right when he thought he knew the answer.

The Tier 0 skills combined with every growing availability of aura potions meant delving was up in a big, big way. That in turn drove people to the normally undesirable lower Tier worlds for rift access, which in turn drove those same local economies. Combined with higher Tier planets taking an economic hit, they were less attractive to those not already living on one.

In fact there were reports that for the first time since Agatha usurped the throne, and allowed free movement, higher Tier worlds weren't being treated as the end all be all destination for the ambitious.

Without the Path as an easy outlet for the restless youth of the Empire, there had been a brief moment where things were in the air as the economy on higher Tier worlds grew worse. Reportedly the Royals convened a meeting and implemented subsidies for young, low Tier delvers willing to leave higher Tier worlds, but Matt suspected Manny's planning from the near unified response and reporting.

Initially the program floundered without much of an identity beyond a bus ticket to the boonies that few people accepted or wanted, and it looked like it was going to be a failure. It wasn't until an enterprising Count meddled, that the program gained the direction it needed.

Aura potions for all their positives had a glaring downside.

The need to delve the rift on instance cooldown.

A world typically only had so many people willing to delve and the type of people who were willing, let alone capable of delving into the harder than average aura rifts, were rarer yet. However if the Empire had one thing, it was people. They simply weren't where they needed to be.

Rather than following the original guidelines, Count Ragonet redirected the few Tier 4 through 6 applicants to his aura farm and put everyone lower Tier on a newly purchased Tier 3 moon to act as a way to get them to a useful Tier.

Far from upset, the applicants loved unlimited delving and the program took off as aura planets slowly became delving destinations and low Tier economic hubs. The initial start-up capital was high but those who entered early were already seeing massive returns as other worlds struggled as the higher Tier economy slumped.

Matt's eye instead was caught on a line that said young cultivators had reportedly started treating aura planets as a gauntlet to pass before advancing forward.

At Tier 3 or 4 they should show up to an aura planet and sign up for three delves every two weeks. That was a delve every four and a half days, which was far more than most teams delved, which pushed many to their limits and some beyond. This led to an initial wave of deaths that eventually corrected itself, as the Empire came down on those rulers allowing the unprepared to throw their lives away as part of an officially sanctioned program.

Once appropriate tests were in place for those willing to enter aura farming worlds, deaths plummeted and the program's attractiveness rose, helping pull people from the crowded capital worlds.

At that speed it still took about a decade to reach Tier 6, but combined with the wages even a Tier 4 could earn, it was considered the easiest way for those without financial backing to afford an aura potion while profiting. Between delving that often and collecting aura, even after gear and healing expenses, most people came out of 'The Gauntlet' comparatively wealthy and a better fighter than their peers who delved the same rift time and time again.

The smart employers even started treating the aura potion as a signing bonus as a method to attract more people. The smartest used it to ensure the people they hired were competent enough to survive, or training them to that point. The dumber ones didn't and were dealt with, depending on the severity of their lapses.

It was a new path to wealth for those not lucky enough to be born to immortals that wasn't *too* dangerous.

While the original intent of the idea, to get lower Tiers to move and settle on low Tier planets, wasn't a true failure, the program pivoted as more and more barons dedicated a portion of their planets' rifts to aura potions. Few invested so much as to become an exporter of aura potions but the industry was a weed planted in fertile soil and impossible to stop as it spread as far as it could.

Matt savored every word as he read them.

The original program even worked, at least partly. People were people, and inevitably the young with newly found freedom found themselves pairing off and settling down close to where they were rather than where they came from. Not all, but those only became the success stories to drive the next generation out of the cities.

Overall the program was still small and not seeing anything close to the numbers the Royals were hoping for, but with the overall economic downturn the program acted as an important cornerstone keeping the lower Tier economies moving.

Knowing he'd helped ensure that, even if he'd never planned for such, Matt let himself enjoy the moment. It was proof that his desire to share the information about aura potions had been the correct one.

Checking the numbers, he saw aura potion usage was up across the board and with more customers than potion, the industry was thriving and near self-sustaining as young cultivators delved the same rifts that made their potions.

As an Ascender he could inspire people to improve themselves, but he couldn't do it for them any more than he could single handedly win a war. Seeing people take what he'd given them and run it with was *addictive*.

Which made the second bit of information all the more shocking.

Enchanting with aura.

Kees took over the conversation there. "The Corporations have been leading the pack with this new discovery but it's helping propagate aura rifts more than anything else, besides the aura potions. We've had a large uptick in groups reaching out for information about creating aura rifts. The same goes for people investing in totally new aura types, and how to make the rifts that create it." Kees looked exhausted as talked about the queries but he didn't elaborate, "If you look here, you can see there has been an additional six *thousand* percent spike in newly created aperology departments across every Great Power. It's one of the few higher Tier research fields not in a funding slump right now, except aura enchanting."

Matt was still perusing the information as Liz asked a question, "What do we know about this new enchanting method? Broad strokes please."

Kees smiled in reply, "We haven't been sitting on our arses if that is what you are asking, Titan's Torch has had nine new aura based enchantments released so far. Outside hidden faculties, we currently lead the field in *efficiency* based aura runes. By a large lead, in fact, but that's in part due to basically every other company aiming for the secondary effects such as faster plant growth. Our aim has been to reduce operating costs across the board and get them out there before anyone else patents them."

Matt started to frown but Kees indicated he was wrong. "So far the runes with special effects have all been the ones that were always rumored to have an effect. They are so old they

are in every Great Power's equivalent of the public domain. The Royals have already decreed that new variations can be patented but the originals can't be, and anything too close won't be accepted. That's where most people are aiming for, given that's where the real money is. The growth boosting light runes was only the start and everyone wants to recreate the market share they've captured."

Reading on, Matt wasn't entirely sure he believed everything he was seeing. It felt too fantastical. His plans of running their duchy as well as taking a break with Liz started to crumble before he stopped himself.

Liz smirked at him, having seen his interest.

Coughing slightly, he asked, "Two percent in growth speed seems incredible for only five percent more mana than a traditional light source. How are the other metrics such as longevity and repairability?"

Kees sighed, "That depends on who is designing the rune, Guild Leader. Look at the secondary corporations scrabbling for scraps of whatever market they are competing in. Most of their designs are either more expensive to run, not as efficient per unit of aura used, or have some other serious flaw. This new branch of enchanting is no different than any other, most designs simply aren't profitable or commercially viable. That said, yes there seem to be some flaws, aura control is hard and finicky. Some people simply don't have the knack for it and struggle to develop such control, while others have an easier time than average. Notably your instincts were correct about the repairability of aura enchantments. They are much harder, though not technically impossible to repair. It either takes expensive equipment or great skill to manage, so it might as well be for ordinary people. Titan's Torch has actually taken the lead with fourteen other research institutes and enchanting related entities, to form a dedicated team of people to try to simplify aura rune repairs and make such information public to avoid such expensive runes being treated as disposable."

Matt nodded along, showing he understood and was listening, even as he looked through thousands of files and reports, letting Kees continue.

"That said, the effect of aura runes are obviously worth it in most use cases, making them a more expensive replacement. Which is exactly why we as a guild have been aiming for cost reduction properties in creation, usage, and repair. While secondary effects seemingly depend on the particular rune itself, upkeep cost has been an easier target and other teams have already successfully taken what we've made and applied parts to the secondary effect runes. I doubted you'd care about that market share."

Matt didn't and said as much as he caught up.

"You handled it perfectly. Damn, I wish I could meet them. The two who figure this out, I mean. I'd love to pick their minds about the process."

Cato flicked his tongue at the comment before Kees could respond. "You and everyone else, my lord. The couple are two of the most sought after lower Tiers in the realm right now.

Currently they've been hired by the corporation that bought their invention and before you ask about poaching them, it's not going to happen. In the latest Twilight-Horizon patent, the one for the two percent version you are looking at, they were both in the tertiary assistance line; which is where they put the people who did the actuarial work, as the first two always belong to the lead researcher and the Corporation in question. Whether they are doing actual work is unknown, but no one can contact them while they are 'researching'."

Matt sighed, knowing his best chance to meet them was asking Max when she returned from the breach herself.

Until then, he wasn't going to think about it too often.

With a few other things to look at but nothing that needed the secure room, they exited, which was when Luna hit Matt with a surprise.

"Oh, you need to talk to Tim. I hired him as your retainer on your behalf after he came out of his fugue."

Matt closed his eyes as he listened to what one of his students had gone through, trying not to get angry.

Logically learning about how to turn a Concept's self preservation memory wipes into a method to keep a broken Concept from fully shattering was interesting, but not worth the price Tim had paid.

Trying to keep himself from interrupting Liz's briefing, Matt forced out, "We can talk about Tim in a moment once Liz is done getting updated. I am ser—"

Liz slapped the table as she shot to her feet, "No need to wait. We can talk *right now*."