

Delver's Academy prided itself on being separate from politics. On being above the petty squabbles that might embroil the rest of the kingdom. And though that wasn't an expectation it could always meet – many of the students carried with them the prejudices and rivalries of their parents – the academy made it abundantly clear that the noble students *weren't* to act on those inclinations, at least not overtly.

Delver's Academy would keep its neutrality.

Sometimes, that was easier said than done – such as when a kingdom-spanning attempted coup left one of their students dead and multiple others in the infirmary.

But the academy was determined to maintain its reputation. It wasn't the first time students would find themselves incapacitated before the final test of the semester, and it wouldn't be the last. They held the test regardless, though they did break from tradition by forbidding observers in the form of potentially murderous noble parents.

The results, Cayden was told, had been surprising.

Despite being down a member – losing Em as the main damage-dealer of their team – Princess Valeria somehow managed to scrape out a win against their primary competitors, the team led by Ignar Blythe, a slitherkin and occasional training partner of Cayden's. Some of their victory could apparently be attributed to Cayden's team's absence; with Delphia and Cayden in the infirmary and Velic and Marvenal missing, they were the only team to forgo competing entirely. They were originally expected to be one of the princess' team's main competitors, with many of the other students allying themselves to one of the 'big three' noble teams for the deathmatch-style final test. But in the wake of the failed coup, many of those nobles who had previously sided with Velic attempted to show their loyalty to the royal family by aiding the princess, instead – which proved to be just enough for her team to overcome their deficit.

Cayden had already heard about all of this, of course. It was an interesting story, but it mattered little to him in comparison to his sister's freedom, losing his eyesight, and killing the duke, especially when he'd heard it while under the effects of [Immutable]. Even now it still hardly seemed important, except for one thing: the reward for the first place team.

With the princess' team coming out victorious in the final test, they managed to clench the overall first place spot among first-years at the academy, earning them the reward of four skill-stones.

Skill-stones were an extremely rare dungeon drop – rare enough that Cayden had never seen one in more than a hundred delves – that allowed someone to instantly learn one random skill. Even for nobles, they were prohibitively expensive and rare, giving them a chance for power than might otherwise be impossible.

Two of the rewarded skill-stones, for example, contained tier-two skills. Normally, tier-three skills like Cayden's [Resistance] or [Immutable] would be impossible for anyone with less than five general skill slots to acquire, and every race Cayden had heard of – minus gargoyle – had four general skill slots or less, making tier-three skills impossible for pretty much everyone else.

A lucky tier-two skill-stone, though, could bypass that restriction. No one had ever explicitly stated that as one of the benefits of skill-stones, as if not for his own experience he wouldn't even know tier-three skills existed, but it was easy enough to deduce.

The other two rewarded skill-stones were class-three tier-one skill-stones, which were potentially even more valuable than the tier-two skill-stones.

Beyond the 'tiers' of skills that measured how many constituent skills combined to make up the new skill, skills could also be divided into 'classes' based on how difficult they were to acquire.

Class-one skills were those skills that pretty much anyone could learn with a little bit of time and effort. Skills like [Walking], [Inspect], or [Bludgeoning Resistance] were all class one, and could generally be learned in a day or less.

Class-two skills were much more difficult to acquire, needing either specific resources or circumstances to earn. Skills like [Fireball] required the user to possess another skill like [Mana Manipulation] or a different fire-based skill, while skills like [Mind is a Temple] required a specific and not easily manufactured mindset. While class-two skills weren't uncommon, not everyone could learn any specific class-two skill.

And then there were class-three skills – skills that were considered practically impossible to learn naturally. They weren't necessarily rare, as many of them could be learned as racial or class skills. But as general skills? They were unheard of.

Supposedly any racial or class skill also existed as a general skill, just *significantly* harder to acquire. General skills were usually earned by doing the action that the skill performed – how would Cayden go about gaining a general version of his [Boost Passive] racial skill?

While interesting, Cayden hadn't considered the different classes of skills as particularly relevant to him when he'd first learned about it in his lessons a few months prior. What was the point of worrying about the rarity of skills when he had [Borrowed Power] and was able to steal any skill – general, class, or racial – that was performed on him?

As was depressingly common, Elise was forced to correct his misconception.

"You can borrow any skill performed on you, but that's still limited to only certain skills," she explained. "Even with [Conduit] increasing that number, there are some skills – mostly passive skills – that [Borrowed Power] can't steal. The high elven racial skill [Long Lived], for example.

And even if you *could* borrow that skill from a high elf, you wouldn't be able to level it, since it was originally a racial skill."

"Yeah, but still..." Cayden began, but then he frowned. "Wait. Are you saying it's possible to get [Long Lived] as a general skill?"

Elise chuckled. "Yep! That's what 'any skill also exists as a general skill' means. Though you'd have to be *extremely* lucky to find a skill-stone for [Long Lived]."

"But...when you level it, would it become more powerful? What would a level twenty [Long Lived] skill even look like?" Cayden rambled, not giving Elise any time to answer. "And you could combine it with other vitality skills?? That's *insane!*"

"Definitely. And while not every class-three general skill is quite as powerful, there are some with even more impressive potential synergies. Why else did you think the nobles were competing so heavily for the first-place ranking?"

"Oh...uh, misplaced pride? I suppose I should have given them more credit..." he mumbled, and Elise and Tiana laughed. "But what does this have to do with [Immutable]? Even if one of the skill-stones worked with my build, I missed my shot."

"So the princess won the four skill-stones, right?" Tiana jumped in after she managed to control her chuckles. "But they only have three team members to split them between. Marianne and Henrietta each claimed their choices, and one of the two other skill-stones is something called [Opened Mind]."

"You may remember it," Elise jumped in. "It's one of the racial skills of the psion race, and serves as the basis for their particular brand of powers."

"Psion..." Cayden mumbled, thinking back. It had been one of his race options when he'd turned twelve, but that had been close to four years earlier – he struggled to recall the details. "Wasn't there some major downsides to that race?" He remembered originally shortlisting the race as one of his potential favorites until Elise had warned him off.

"Yeah, and it comes from that skill," Elise responded. "I don't know the exact wording, but in exchange for access to a type of magic that isn't dependent on mana, they become weak-willed and very vulnerable to mental attacks."

"...and you think that might cancel out the negative effects from [Immutable]?"

"Potentially. I originally read about psions in a book, and according to it all the successful psions have to spend most of their teen years in seclusion, training up their mind stat and skills like [Meditation], [Mental Resistance], and [Focused Mind] before they're able to interact safely with

society. I'd imagine, though, that [Immutable] would be even better at canceling out [Opened Mind's] downsides, and hopefully [Opened Mind] would do the same for [Immutable]."

"That...would be amazing," Cayden begrudgingly admitted. Skills that came with downsides were typically known for being more powerful than their purely-positive counterparts. If he could have two skills whose downsides canceled each other out, gaining only the benefits of each...he frowned. "But how did you learn about the princess' skill-stone? Wouldn't that be something she wants to keep secret?"

"Ah, well that would be from me," Tiana said. "Princess Valeria doesn't think she'll end up personally using either of the two remaining skill-stones, so she's looking to trade them away. They're much too valuable to just sell, and apparently she considers the services of one of the last remaining fateweavers – now that the fateweaver compound has been shut down – to be worth one of them."

It took a moment for what Tiana said to fully click in Cayden's brain. But when it did, his response was instantaneous.

"No. Absolutely not. Not a chance," he stated, shaking his head so hard he felt a slight twinge from where the injury on his neck had been healed.

"Hear me out–"

"No! You JUST escaped from the fateweaver compound, and now you want to dive right back under the princess' thumb? Right back under the control of the nobles?! I won't let you do it!"

There was a short, tense pause.

"...you won't *let* me?" Tiana asked, her voice dangerously flat.

Cayden sighed. "You know that's not what I..."

"Oh, I'm sorry that I didn't consult you, sir. May I use the restroom later, sir? I'm feeling a little peckish...may I have a bite of food, please, sir?"

"C'mon, Tiana, don't be like that..."

"My brother who was until JUST NOW being mind-controlled by his own skill is worried that I don't consult him enough about MY choices. I'm thirteen years old! I can decide WHAT I WANT!"

Cayden didn't think Tiana pointing out her age was as good of an argument as she hoped, at least not to Cayden who was used to a world with *much* different ideas about the age of

adulthood. But before he could respond, he felt the couch shift beneath him before he heard the door to his dorm open and then slam shut.

There was a beat of silence.

"You could have reacted better," Elise rebuked him, and he stiffened before sighing.

"I guess, but...you agree with me, right? She's crazy for even considering putting herself back under the princess."

"I think she'd be crazy to dismiss an offer of employment from royalty out of hand. She'd be crazy to *accept* the offer out of hand as well. But discussing the offer with her brother? That seems entirely rational."

Cayden sighed, rubbing the heels of his palms against the bandages that encircled his empty eye sockets. "You already knew about this?"

"Yeah, since yesterday. She wanted my advice on the skills, on whether they'd fit any of our builds."

"...any of ours? Not just her own?"

"Any of our builds, yes."

"There's no way I could afford to buy a skill like that off of her," Cayden responded with a frown. "I'm already having to rely on Valeria to get my eyes healed..." Which was extremely frustrating in and of itself, but he'd looked up the prices of the two healers based out of the capital who could regrow eyes – there was no way he'd be able to afford their services without assistance or a LOT of extra delving. The freebie from the princess was only palatable due to how unequivocally she stated that it was payment for services rendered in defeating the duke, rather than a gift to tie them closer together. But still...it grated on him.

But Elise just laughed. "You two are definitely siblings."

"What do you mean?"

"So unwilling to be in someone else's debt, yet so willing to give freely," Elise said, and then paused. "Let me ask you this: hypothetically, if you happened to be imprisoned for a year and a half, and someone freed you without asking for anything in return, losing their eyes in the process...would you try to repay them in some way?"

"That's different," Cayden responded. "She's my sister – there are no debts between family."

“And if Tiana were the one to save you? You wouldn’t try to pay her back in some way? Try to help her advance her skills so that her injuries don’t happen again?”

Cayden knew what Elise was getting at. Reflexively, he wanted to deny it, to argue against the point she was making – but he wasn’t sure he could. Was he truly that much of a hypocrite, holding expectations of Tiana that he himself wouldn’t keep?

He grimaced.

“What are the odds Tiana’s accepting the princess’ offer right now just to spite me?” he asked with a sigh.

“Don’t be so hard on her. I’m sure it’s not more than fifty percent.”

“...will you help me go look for her?”

“Let’s hurry.”