

Chapter 476

Stepping through a [Portal] to the suite they were using as a base after his final interview, Matt arrived to find several of his co-conspirators lounging around the common area. Not that they weren't working, rather, they were busy communicating with one of the many concerned parties after his latest round of interviews.

They'd planned for three, but they'd gathered more steam than expected, and they were hoping to use that to break the unified wall arrayed before them. But they needed at least one of the aura businesses to reach out to them first. Or, that was what they wanted and were aiming for, and maybe somewhat arrogantly, was the outcome they had planned on. They'd known from minute one that their media blitz would have repercussions, but even Matt had a flood of messages from 'concerned parties'.

A Liz, the fourth one he felt in the suite, slipped in behind him and started massaging his head and shoulders.

"Why don't you sit down and let me put something together for you?"

Not needing to be told twice, Matt let himself be led to the row of barstools, where he slumped as Liz started mixing him a drink.

Once he mustered enough energy, he asked, "How are things on this side?"

"Right about where we expected, honestly."

Matt was surprised to hear that and looked up to see if Liz was messing with him, but she was serious, which took a small weight off his shoulders as it implied their plan was working.

The messages he'd been receiving had fallen into three broad categories: the lower Tiers who agreed with him but had little individual power, the uninvolved but powerful people who wanted to insert themselves, and the people who felt threatened and lashed out at him.

Matt tried to remind himself that they were the vocal minority, but the angry and negative messages had begun to wear on him well before the final interview.

Seeing the tall glass of liquor with hardly a splash of mixer, he tried not to smile but couldn't help it. Taking a sip, he tried his best to not react as the Tier 35 alcohol burned everything it touched, but he knew he failed as Liz grinned at him.

"You know, it's actually not bad. Very strong, but I liked the flavor." Taking another sip, he massaged his temple. "Have we reached any of our next steps' criteria?"

Liz nodded, but it was her smile that allowed him to relax even before she spoke. "With the general reaction to your press tour being right about where we expected, we are fielding a

ton of requests to meet with people. Once we go through them all, we will need to start rubbing shoulders.”

They’d come to the Capital not only because it was both the heart of the Empire, and any news would spread best through its web of influence, but also because people were already congregating in anticipation for the higher Tiers’ return from deep chaotic space. That didn’t magically mean everyone they wanted or needed to talk to was at the Capital, but it meant there were enough to get started.

He must have made a face because Liz shook her head as she stepped in two directions at once, splitting herself another time.

The Liz that went to the fridge called out over her shoulder. “You did the interviews, and now you need a break. We can handle the next bit without you, so don’t be so stubborn.”

Matt tried to protest but he was thoroughly outnumbered. She was also right in that he did need to remember that the other nobles were perfectly competent, and he didn’t need to burn himself out trying to keep his finger in every pot.

They had their plan, and he needed to follow it as much as everyone else.

As a quickly thrown together wrap was slid over to him, Matt took his food to one of the tables and watched the Empire, or more specifically the Capital, around them.

Already in one of the largest buildings, his view let him see wide swaths of the ecumenopolis, but he also knew most of the imagery was technically false. Without the illusionary formations that made the largest buildings transparent, most wouldn’t even be able to see the sky.

As he sipped and snacked, Matt deliberately tried not to think about anything too hard, just letting his gaze linger over the people who could and were flying and simply enjoying the patterns they painted.

When he’d finished both the food and the drink, he threw himself into his own messages, sorting everything out.

Splitting his mind three ways, he blitzed his way through them. Out of necessity, those who were nice got quick replies, while the other two categories got most of his attention.

No matter how much Matt wanted to disregard everyone who offered their help at ‘mediating’, he couldn’t. Not only would that toss out the treasure with the trash, but it would be rude to those who were making their offers in good faith.

Quickly sorting out anyone he felt was acting in *bad* faith, Matt spent quite a bit more time going through everyone else until he had a small list of people he felt might actually be useful.

At the same time, his other mind went through everyone who felt threatened by his interviews and looked for information that might change anything they'd already gathered.

As one of his minds became free, Matt inspected the nobles still going through their own work. Most were like him, sorting through messages, but he saw Sciath silently talking with someone through her [AI].

For all that he had problems with hereditary nobility and the choices they generally made, Sciath was one of the few he actually liked. Not only did she seem to genuinely care about the people who found their Domain's unsuitable post Tier 15, but she was one of the closest aligned to him in both stance and the reasoning behind her position.

As they got reliable leads, they started to split up as small groups or individuals went to try and wine and dine various figures.

Matt spent two weeks meeting with barons and viscounts, lower Tier CEOs, small guild leaders, and even small business owners who were in any way involved in the aura potion distribution chain. Most of them had little to add to the discussion, only wanting to complain at him, but some raised good points, which was why he'd sat through the bad ones.

As he listened to different people sharing similar idiotic ideas, Matt started daydreaming about how the Cabal might have orchestrated the entire aura bottleneck problem. Or maybe taken advantage of it. At least he wanted to believe that was the reason to explain why so many people seemed to have the same idiotic stream of logic.

"Ascender Titan, you must see how this new structure you propose will reduce our profit margins to a razor's edge. Lower Tier resources have always been a fierce market, we all understood that when we invested our paltry fortunes into the endeavor. But without the contracts to protect ourselves, we won't be able to compete anymore. Labor costs are rising across the board, even as prices are falling. The only aura potions that still have a good markup are the very ones under contract."

Matt resisted the urge to sigh or otherwise lash out. He'd already answered that question a thousand and one times in the recent weeks. He knew for a fact there were recordings of him answering it, but somehow it felt like everyone wanted him to explain personally.

He was going to go through his spiel when Liz smoothly interjected, "Mr. Zakaria, are you interested in the math or the emotions? I'm sure you've seen the math, even if current aura production quadrupled overnight, you still wouldn't have significant competition in your own market, let alone the Imperial one. There are simply too many Tier 4's who need the potions, and the lower Tiers are advancing every day. As for rising costs, come now, we both know costs are *dropping*, not rising."

The ZakariaCorp CEO opened his mouth to reply, but no sound came out before he looked pleadingly at Liz, "But what if you're wrong? Things are good right now, so why do we need to change anything?"

Matt had to admit the man was being honest, and Liz was almost as taken aback as he was, though she recovered faster. "Therein lies the rub, Mr. Zakaria. The public interest is at risk." When Mr. Zakaria looked like he wanted to interrupt, Liz's understanding smile turned sharp. "That is not up for dispute, Mr. Zakaria. You may delude yourself privately, but the numbers are clear; there is a problem, and it's growing worse, not better. You own two moons in the Varad system and produce roughly two-thirds of its aura; the remaining third comes from smaller groups who have converted their own private rifts into aura ones. Though they mainly rely on the free aura types Titan's Torch has published. Is that your concern? Your competition pivoting to the rarer variants? That's a risk we can admit. However, even you are limited by your existing contracts to... what, a dozen rifts of each type? Wouldn't you make more if you could not only make more copies of what you already have, but also have more and *rarer* aura types to sell? If you can explain to us exactly where your problem lies, we can do something, but if it's only feelings, I'm sorry to say we can't help."

Zakaria shook his head, denying the accusation, but there was no life behind the action. "Theoretically, yes, prices are lowering, but the change is so minuscule that the notion is practically untrue. It's hard enough to staff our rifts now, let alone expand or replace our existing rifts with new ones that might be harder to run. Even with the current programs to bring people in from the higher Tier worlds, there just aren't enough people who want to delve that often with the necessary restrictions and additional complications that come with harvesting aura. As for our competition pivoting? That wouldn't be ideal, but we could survive. It's just that with such massive changes, who can predict what will happen? If you are wrong, we could lose everything. I'm not saying we shouldn't change things that are problematic, Ascender Legion, but what reassurances can you give us that we won't be ruined by these changes? What about..."

Matt let his mind wander as Zakaria continued to complain. While his candor had been mildly interesting, what he wanted wasn't too different from what the other, less influential and smaller aura producers wanted. His initial instinct was to ignore their worries, but even he could admit there were real risks in what they were trying to do.

Based on their own duchy, their proposed changes would be a net positive for pretty much everyone involved, but the individuals still felt like they were at risk. If the only ones worried were the aura research institutions, Matt and the other nobles could gather enough money to cover any pitfalls that might occur during a transition to the new laws, but the concerned parties were far more numerous than that.

While he'd expected it, they hadn't only fielded concerns from the aura producers and researchers. Basically, anyone involved with aura in any way, shape, or form had some level of concern, and there was no pleasing them all.

Their very next stop was to a group of companies that directly made and/or designed the aura potions recipes. They weren't the largest groups in their fields, but were numerous enough to still be influential when gathered. Their concerns weren't the same as the aura producers, and Matt forced himself to keep an open mind and listen to what they were asking.

He wasn't so much looking for a specific idea, almost everything mentioned to them was a direct conflict to their goals, but rather for the commonalities in all of their complaints and suggestions. After leaving their last meeting, he and Liz walked to a subway that would take them home instead of magically returning, both needing the time away from the nagging.

Walking among the mortals, using their masks to blend in, he privately asked, "What do you think about a potential loan program? We'd need Royal intervention, given the scale, but low cost loans for anyone negatively impacted might help sway some of the fence sitters."

"Harder than you might be thinking if we need to ask the imperial government. If Manny was here maybe, but without him..."

Liz's words trailed off, and Matt winced but couldn't argue. While he'd returned to his regular mana stone production since he'd returned and solved his own problems, he wasn't able to solve the Empire's. Frederic and the other Royals were ecstatic, as his mana let them pad their numbers in emergencies, but he hadn't really made a dent, given the relative scales involved.

At Tier 30, Matt *only* made 1.3 billion mana every second, but even that was far from enough to fix the economic shortfall alone.

At Frederic's request, he'd even spent a decade of real time inside a cleared-out Tier 45 rift to abuse the time dilation and create more mana shortly after Tiering up. He hadn't like agreeing any more than Allie wanted to be at everyone's beck and call to teleport, but he'd still done his part as he'd needed the time to shore up his mana control.

However, that was why bringing up an Imperial-backed loan wasn't his smartest idea.

"I'm just too used to Manny being here to fix problems, but that's why we need to do this ourselves." Letting himself smile, he added, "You know, when I was growing up, I was always annoyed when older and higher Tier people treated me like a kid. But now that I'm both old and higher Tier, I miss being a kid who didn't have to worry about things. Responsibility sucks."

Liz didn't try to make him feel better, agreeing wholeheartedly. "Yeah, let's ditch it all. Get Allie to teleport us back to deep chaotic space and just leave it all behind."

"I've honestly thought about it. Sadly, there is no way I could do it. I'd get bored without life and civilization within a decade."

Liz thought about it for a moment before disagreeing, "I think you'd make it at least a century before that happens, but I think you'd go stir crazy very fast once it started."

Matt vehemently denied the assertion. "Not a chance. I'd run out of something in the first month, or not have brought it along in the first place. Hmm. Maybe that is the solution?"

Liz raised an eyebrow, silently asking him for clarification. "Stuffing everyone we don't like in deep chaotic space? I'm tempted to, but it wouldn't be nice to pollute nature like that. And

really, if we want to kill them all, it's easier to just stuff them into local rifts instead of making Allie travel."

Unable to resist, he smiled back at her. "As tempting as that is, no, sadly not the context I meant it in. I was more so thinking about how to increase demand faster than what we've already been doing. Aura potions production is far from satisfying the demands of our population. Combined with aura enchanting increasing the demand for raw aura, it should be rising, but we've heard several groups complain about not having enough people. So how can they not have enough people?"

Finding a breakdown of one of the companies by position and estimated Tier, he shared it with Liz so she knew what he was referencing. "Looking deeper, they aren't exactly wrong. As much as I wanted to blame them, I'm not sure it's fair. My initial thought was to try and get more young people from the capital worlds, which I do agree works, but I actually think that's the wrong maneuver. In fact, I think we should look into bringing in more average delvers. The ones who only want to delve once every two weeks. Why can't they help? I and most others have been ignoring them as a source of delvers because of the rapid pace aura farming has encouraged, but most isn't all."

As they reached their building, Matt opened a [Portal] from the lobby to the front of their suite, skipping the line at the elevators that their and the nobles' retainers had caused in the hotel they'd based their operations out of. With so many of them, it was easier and less offensive to rent a space rather than bring foreign dukes into their families' private homes.

As he was doing that, Liz took his idea and ran with it. "Stop treating the aura farming as if it's a race and needs to be done all in-house? Honestly, I like the idea. It would help, a lot maybe, but will they agree? Currently, the delvers are employees, but if we push for them to sell slots in the traditional way, they will balk unless we allow them to claim any of the aura the same as they do with their employees. But that would force them to drop the price of the slot, and as we've seen, they won't like the sound of that suggestion."

Ingrid looked up as they entered the suite, catching the tail end of their conversation. "We debated alternative aura gathering methods, but we concluded that selling aura rift slots was a dead end outside of highly populated systems. We concluded it was impractical as anything but a sub-reform. When we took into consideration the pushback such a request would generate, we dropped it altogether."

Matt was going to drop it, but floated the angle he had originally been aiming for. "Ahh but that's my point. I'm not suggesting we go that far, why don't we offer it as a way to... pad their worker numbers, so to speak. They sell the rift slot like any other, and in exchange, they get right of first refusal for aura pulled out of those rifts, set at the same number they pay their own employees at. If the delvers want to take the aura, they can pay the normal price, minus their own cut, but combined with the first refusal, it will even help drive prices lower if people have alternative sources to sell aura, should the producers try to fudge the payment numbers. So long as every slot is sold, all you really need is one squad as a replacement or backup in case someone's late to their delve. Am I missing a downside here?"

Ingrid looked between Liz and Matt before shrugging. "I think the idea could help, but I'm not sure it's enough on its own."

Liz opened her mouth to speak when they all got a message from Heracleonas, "Anyone not at the suite, return there. I was able to wrangle us a meeting with nine aura research CEOs. They said they were willing to talk, but wouldn't be more specific than that."

Matt wasn't quite as hopeful as the others were, but he joined them as everyone tapped into their sources, trying to gather any and all information before the meeting. They needed to be prepared and not fumble their chance at success by being underinformed.

The first and most obvious information was the corporations' size and their patented recipes. The nine who came to them weren't quite the bottom of the barrel, but they were on the smaller size when compared to the average entities, let alone the larger ones.

Seeing that many of the companies willing to meet were either operated by the lead researcher who developed the original patent, or someone adjacent to them like a family member, things started to make more sense.

As such, Matt wasn't too surprised when, after the obligatory pleasantries, Sopia, the wife of her company's lead researcher, cut right to the point, which he appreciated.

"Ascender Titan, we were hoping you could add some protections for us smaller aura research institutes in your proposal. After your recent... announcement, several of the larger factions have reached out, looking to pull us into conglomerates or other subordinate relationships. Now that it has begun, we are afraid that if your proposal doesn't go through, we'll inevitably be squeezed out as the largest companies' umbrellas grow larger through research or acquisition."

He, along with the other nobles, acted surprised, but it was an act. They'd long expected and hoped the larger companies would make such a move in response to their own announcement. By disturbing the equilibrium, they enabled their opposition to speed up their timeline.

Which had driven people to them in order to survive.

Exactly as they'd hoped.

Matt smiled politely as he said, "Once we push through the reform, I doubt there will be as much pressure for outward acquisition from the larger groups, which will give you some measure of relief. When I said we were trying to be as fair as possible while solving the Concept bottleneck, I meant it. To that end, do you have any reasonable changes to suggest?"

The various leaders looked surprised, and it took a few silent seconds for someone to work up the courage. But when the first representative spoke up without being reprimanded, the atmosphere lightened considerably. These people would hopefully be the crack they'd use to dismantle the alliance arrayed against them, and as such, they needed to wine and dine them properly, which meant not snapping at guests' bad suggestions.

Matt felt a lot of it was mindless chatter, but he enjoyed having a front row view as Liz slowly loosened them up, before starting to tease more important information out of the aura companies willing to talk without the wall of being political opponents.

After looking over their newest proposal to allow aura rifts to act like normal, purchasable rifts, every one of them had comments. Several of them were even good.

“Ascender Titan, I think this is a good proposal and will help. Though, I might suggest a few tweaks since you asked. Setting the rift prices automatically based on the local average is good in theory, but unnecessary. It will feel like an overreach, and anyone who doesn't put it there or below that line themselves isn't the target audience of such a measure. Removing that stipulation, or possibly altering it so it's a simple but high maximum based on the same criteria, might be something to consider.”

Matt's initial reaction was to disagree, but the more he considered it, the more he agreed with the underlying logic.

Seeing Liz's nod, he looked to the nobles.

Peter and Boutaje both had flat expressions that said they *didn't* share that sentiment, but they did indicate the proposal was within acceptable ranges.

Without a unanimous decision, Matt didn't want to overcommit. Some things were very hard to un-say, if it could be done at all. “I think you raised a very valid point and one that I agree with after some reflection. We'll look at it seriously. Anyone else?”

Seeing the first idea received so well, the others were more willing to speak up, but most of the ideas were bad. It wasn't until Phoebe Cooke, one of the purely business-oriented leaders, spoke up that Matt found himself reconsidering his earlier plans.

“Ascender Titan, in your original proposal you offered an extension of the current patent protections from ten thousand to fifteen thousand years. If it's not too presumptuous, might I suggest extending it further? Until, say, twenty thousand years. That keeps even yet unreleased patents within Emperor Emmanuel's reign, meaning he can oversee anyone who disagrees with giving up such long-standing patents, which is always a concern given the timeframes. With a precedent firmly established, any Tier 50 should have no issues reckoning any aura recipes that are discovered after the next few thousand years. Yes, it will double the length of the normal protections, but I believe that such a concession will sway many. Even the Talented aperology firms find themselves deep in debt or burning through capital to fuel their research. Allowing us to keep a hold of our profits for longer, and therefore ensure better theoretical returns, will soften the sting. It turns the patents into even longer-term investments, and what immortal doesn't like one of those?” Ending with a smile, Phoebe met his gaze before looking away after a moment.

Normally, the Empire didn't allow for such long-term patents, given how they could stifle an industry, but if there were no exclusivity clauses, that wouldn't be too much of an issue.

At least...

Seeing a potential issue, Matt countered, "I'm willing to discuss something of the sort, but it could only be for the profit, not the technology itself. That would have to end at the normal timeframe to allow derivatives aura to be developed outside your own factions, as originally intended within the patent system."

That caused a small murmur to pass through everyone, nobles included, but rather than partial pushback, he received universal acceptance of his addition, making things easy.

Matt was fairly sure at least two of the nobles had already gotten some of their people to start hashing out the exact wording they might want to use.

Phoebe looked thrilled. "I can only speak for myself, not any of the other groups such as the alchemists, but I find that makes the entire proposal far more palatable from a commercial aperology perspective."

Hearing that, Matt took a metaphorical step back, deliberately dropping a few levels of his formality, trying to capitalize on the positive atmosphere.

As he was approached by three of the more prickly leaders, Matt put on his best smile and played his part.

It took time, but he assured them there wouldn't be any last-minute changes or referendum. When returning to Liz's circle, he arrived just in time to hear her ask, "Sopio, you must know we did our own research after you made contact, and rumors are your husband figured out a new aura recipe. Any burning desire to brag a little?"

Sopio looked half as proud as the phoenix sitting on Liz's shoulder as she asked, "May I return the question by asking what exactly you heard?"

Liz played her part, letting Sopio have a stage to perform on for everyone around them. "Our people have heard quite a few rumors circling around the notion that you guys have developed a new rift recipe, and most speculate it's a new sub-category of water aura."

Sopio looked relieved and far more proud as she smiled and took a sip of her drink, making them and everyone else wait.

"Sorry, I had to calm my nerves. I'm a bit jumpy, but yes, we are proud to add a third distinct recipe for both the rift and potion. Water-force might not be the most sought-after specification, but we are confident in its base popularity. I submitted our patents soon after I arrived. We couldn't be more pleased."

Matt clapped quietly along with everyone else.

While most others were either jealous of her success or happy for her, he was more impressed with her husband, Sergei. It seemed like he'd been able to leverage his otherwise unhelpful aperology Talent into creating several subtypes. It was doubly impressive when he considered that she said recipe, not rift. While copying a rift was possible, it was currently only being done for the most valuable aura rifts, given the inherent requirements involved a

specialized higher Tier. More than a few Talented aperologists who thought they'd score easy victories discovering aura recipes had instead found out that while one-off rifts were within their Talent's power most of the time, translating that into something repeatable was far more difficult.

As the conversation drifted on to the next topic, Matt grabbed two drinks from a passing waiter and sauntered up to Liz, who stepped off to the side to snack. "Drink?"

Plucking one from his hand, she sighed, "Thanks, honey."

Leaning in closer, she whispered while shielding them from idle ears, "I think this went well. Very well. So well that we are going to have to do it a few dozen more times."

Matt grabbed the other half of what was on her plate before correcting her, "Realistically, it's probably more like a few hundred more times. We need at least thirty percent of the aura producers on our side to trigger the Petition, but more would always be better."

"At least you know. I was trying to ease you into it."

Snorting, Matt nearly choked on his drink, to his wife's amusement.

Flicking the liquid away, he winked at the phoenix who'd hopped onto his shoulder, but blocked his view of Liz.

"Back into the breach."

As Liz took his arm, her pointer finger happened to poke a rib. "Don't even try to pretend you wouldn't rather be in a fight."

Laughing, they rejoined the party and Matt focused on enjoying the parts of these engagements he enjoyed while trying to ignore the ones he didn't. If the current mood about their proposal continued, they'd be doing this or similar events as often as possible to gather the support they needed, but he was hopeful.

Seeing Dominus waylaid by three nobles all vying for the dragon's attention, Matt separated from Liz and stepped forward with an only slightly forced smile.

"Millerson, it's good to have a moment to talk informally. I was *very* impressed with your peoples work with the movement-burst aura variant while we were away. The popularity has held steady since day one. I never would have considered using more nitrogen in the formation to have such an interesting effect."

Given the opportunity to boast, Millerson turned to Matt and beamed, "Thank you Ascender Titan. I'll pass on your kind words, however it's far from a single adjustment in nitrogen to create the desired effect it's about the..."