

I really need to take more time off this break next year. I never get anything done during the break I say I will. I hope everyone had a good holiday season.

Anywho, 9k chapter. Enjoy.

Chapter 479

"Can I assume he's providing said mana against his will?"

JR nodded without hesitation. "Most definitely."

Hearing that caused the kernel of fear to blossom into a nugget of red hot rage as another bit of information suddenly made a lot more sense. The first time he'd gone to the Corporations without Manny's protection, Carissa had warned him about going to the capital system. At the time he'd discounted the warning as one to be wary of JR, but now...

Looking to Manny, who simply nodded, caused a slew of emotions to race through Matt. He wanted Manny to say something. To explain... anything.

Was JR threatening him? Was Manny?

Neither seemed likely, especially when Manny was the one to force the issue. That meant Manny wanted Matt to know, but either couldn't or wouldn't speak of the information in advance.

Unable to figure things out himself, Matt did the only thing he could do. Ask.

"*Why?*"

He wasn't entirely sure who he was asking, JR, Manny, or even Rosemarie, who still waited off to the side, but JR was the one to reply.

"*Why what?*" Fluttering back to his work bench, JR started going through drawers, but his indifference only made Matt angrier.

"Why do you have a *mana font*? One that I've never heard of before, which actually confirms that they aren't a willing participant. Who is Icliz the Mad?"

JR cocked his head as if he never considered the question before shrugging his wings. "You not knowing about Icliz is a failure on your history lessons. Just because it happened a million years ago and in another Great Power is no reason not to have heard of him, Chosen Titan. His life and 'death' are well documented, but let's not talk about that. You won't believe anything I say, but Icliz *the Mad* didn't earn that name overnight. So while his particular ending

along with a few of the details may have been altered and obscured, his rise and fall were all on him.”

Looking over to Manny for some guidance, Matt finally got what he wanted. A smidgen of the truth via a data packet. Left questioning everything thanks to the sudden information, Matt hoped for easy answers but found none.

Icliz the Mad wasn't someone JR had made up out of nowhere, nor had he been recalcitrant about using his Talent and Domain.

At least according to the information Manny had sent him, which seemed like *everything* and forced Matt to use his [AI] to help sort through it all in a reasonable timeframe. A lot of the information wasn't compiled reports, but rather first hand accounts from employers, early mercenary leaders, news stations, employees or anyone who interacted with the man during his life.

With only a few such records, Matt might have tried to cling to the hope that it was a cover up for his own reasons, but the overwhelming amount of dated media made it clear Icliz had been a man held back by his Tier and station and little else. Born only a few hundred years after the Ascendency of the Sun had been annihilated by the other Great Powers for their Tier 50 killing Ascender Daedalus, Icliz hadn't been given the best starting hand. But he'd still managed to become a cultivator though the exact method had been lost to time and rumors.

From there, he'd never stopped until he got himself 'killed'.

Checking the reported Talent and Domain, Matt still managed to be surprised by what he saw.

Tier 1 Talent: Produce an aura that doubles the mana generation of all creatures in its range.

Tier 3 Talent: Increased aura range. (See Appendix 2.2A for estimated ranged calculations)

Tier 25 Talent: Icliz gains mana generation equal to (estimated) 50% of all mana regenerated by creatures in his aura.

Concept: Boosts/(lowers) the morale of those affected by his aura.

Intent: Most details are unknown, besides allowing him to permanently take a portion of anyone's mana regeneration if Icliz killed them. (See Appendix 3.0A for full speculative breakdown of Icliz's Intent)

Aspect: Unknown(See Appendix 4.2A for theories).

It was a very powerful Talent combined with a vicious Domain, and Matt felt his stomach drop as he made assumptions about Icliz and his past. However, his worst fears were proven wrong, which made him all the more confused as emotions clashed without an outlet.

Matt almost felt dumb at the realization the grand creation, the Ascendancy Cage, was a hoax to hide Icliz. It was such an accepted fact that Minton's grand working before he left was what made their capital world unique he'd have never questioned it. They collected fees from everyone living in the system for maintenance of the giga structure.

It was all beginning to feel like a gigantic cover up. How many older immortals remembered these details? How many people looked back far enough in history to realize Icliz's Talent was a little too close to the Cage?

How censored had history become? A million years was a long time even for immortals. According to his general statistics about immortal life spans, less than a fraction of the population was estimated to be around. Most either ascended or eventually died but as Aunt Helen proved, that meant little.

How many of them kept quiet about the conspiracy?

Matt didn't know and while he intended to find out later, he appreciated Manny having so much first hand information ready for him given JR's comment about obscuraton.

Despite being born in one of the most turbulent eras, Icliz hadn't been captured and thrown into a box. In fact Icliz got his start selling his mana font service to various low Tier crafters who were willing to spend money in exchange for more mana.

Not believing an unaffiliated Tier 1 could openly sell his services in such an era, Matt checked one of the more detailed reports and found his answer. For all its problems, the early Corporations was founded by the survivors of the Ascendancy of the Sun. Legally speaking, everyone spared had been slaves. That was why they'd been relegated to orbit, and the origin of why the Great Power kept most of its population in space, even to this day.

Having been enslaved themselves, the remaining immortals had only been able to agree on a single law: complete bodily autonomy for everyone; mortal or immortal.

Icliz's Tier 1 Talent was good, but not so much as to tempt the few people who could have bent that inviolable law. The unique environment he found himself in protected him as much as it enabled him to become a monster.

Once he could afford a full set of armor, Icliz started joining combat teams as a mobile mana font and support going into rifts. Not fighting himself, Icliz delved ten hours a day minimum, bouncing from party to party, absorbing as much essence as he could before only charging a small fee for his services. When he wasn't in a rift, he sold his time and aura at higher Tier crafting services as his name slowly spread.

Icliz even personally advertised his Talent in those early years, as he slowly crawled his way out of the faceless trillions he'd been born to.

Seeing that, Matt's emotions roiled further, but it only added to his discomfort. Icliz seemed to have had everything Matt hadn't, yet his end...

Forcing himself to continue reading, Matt needed to *see*. See what went wrong and where. It may be too late to change anything, but as he began to accept the truth, he needed to know.

Like most in the era before Bottled Concepts, let alone aura potions, Icliz was forced to rely on his own efforts when it came to his Domain. Rather than wasting away, he proved his worth by spending only twenty years at the peak of Tier 4 before he broke through to Tier 5 and escaped his original low Tier star system.

Matt half expected Icliz to go on his rampage then, but he only traveled a few systems over to a Tier 9 world where he started selling his services, once more repeating the process.

However, the Tier 9 world wasn't the same as the lower Tier ones, and with immortals and their descendants being plentiful, Icliz's clientele shifted to the super wealthy and the true controllers of the disparate star systems.

Selling his services, Icliz slowly advanced one Tier at a time, moving on before any single group ever got too many ideas, while having an impeccable reputation as a well rounded support. Sure, Icliz wasn't throwing fireballs, but he was throwing up shields and debuffing the enemies while letting everyone fight harder.

Closing his eyes, Matt found it all too easy to insert himself into the reports he was reading, but forced himself to stop. Icliz *wasn't* a good person.

While his reputation at the time had been impeccable, two teams vanished with him being the only survivor. In retrospect, it was easy to dig up the conflicts the teams or their backers had with Icliz. But at the time, *only* losing two teams made him exceptional among freelancers who were known to run at the first sign of danger.

Even with his stellar reputation, Icliz still managed to shock everyone when, at 15, he decided to join one of the many former slave armies being used by local rulers as hired muscle. As precursors to the mercenary corps in the Corporation, the slave armies had been similarly lent out to other Great Powers, but the first Tier 50 in the wake of the Ascendancy hadn't wanted to pay for the armies and let them do as they willed. Thus leading to the eventual formation of the mercenary corps.

Icliz spent ten Tiers and twenty thousand years as a mercenary, with his reputation in a steady but slow decline as he moved to the less and less reputable units as his casualty rate increased. At the same time, his role changed from pure support to a more offensive position as he expanded his repertoire and skills.

From Tier 22 to Tier 25, when he retired from mercenary life, Icliz had a 'sudden change' where he killed any time he had any excuse, leading to the first use of his title 'the Mad'. Though, it didn't stick at the time. Most assumed the constant battles were wearing on him, but

able to see the whole timeline, it was obvious that Icliz's descent into depravity had started well before Tier 20.

Matt suspected he was only seeing Icliz reach a position where he could finally let loose, and when the reaction wasn't positive, he retracted his claws. Checking the consolidated reports he was far from the only one to come to that conclusion. Few people stumble into an Intent like that, and Matt had little doubt such a specific power as mana theft had been anything but accidental.

If that had been all, Matt wouldn't have had too many things to say. After all, while using a Domain to take a portion of someone's mana regeneration was rare, its effects usually weren't that big of a deal when the trigger requirement was their death. Few people would argue about someone using such an ability in battle. That would have been fine, but Icliz was greedy. He got impatient.

By the time he'd reached Tier 25, Icliz had been blacklisted from all but the most suicidal mercenary corps who were happy to have a quarter of their teams return from any given mission. Instead of following that trend and dying on a battlefield somewhere, Icliz used his Tier 25 Talent as an excuse to reinvent himself, citing most people's assumption that he needed time away from the battlefield.

After vanishing for a few decades, he returned with a much calmer but more calculating attitude as he began selling his mana to various groups once more. Except now, he was able to gain a portion of everyone's mana generation, and Icliz became a lot more valuable. Thanks to his time on the battlefields, he was that much harder to deal with quietly, which he used to his advantage while openly marketing his new Talent.

At Tier 30, Icliz seemed to hit a tipping point when he could spread his aura to an entire planet and its satellite stations. He started working with the slowly establishing but ultimately failed, central government that the Corporations' second Tier 50 created. Using its legendary corruption, he started requesting the right to perform any executions under their purview, and few saw any reason to deny him.

The worst part of it all for Matt was how many leaders welcomed Icliz with open arms. They openly bid against each other for the man to spend his time in this system, but soon enough, the small trickle of deaths was too slow. By the time he reached Tier 35, he'd started pushing local leaders to mandate the death penalty for lesser and lesser crimes.

The higher Icliz's Tier rose, the greater his appetite grew, as did his demands.

That was how he earned his name, until it was cemented with his final act.

As a Tier 46, Icliz launched a bid to become the Corporations' third Tier 50, answering the call to pick an heir. He ultimately failed, but that didn't undo his actions on the way to the Corporations' capital.

Confident he would be the next Tier 50, Icliz had annihilated all life from the dozen systems he traversed on his journey, looking for a last minute power up. He didn't even destroy that much, preferring to kill with his Domain rather than ruin the very expensive space stations, but he had no such compunctions when people fought back.

Matt wanted to vomit seeing the overwhelming first hand evidence of Icliz's cruelty, but he pressed on.

However, for the first time, the records seemed to end with only a few mentions of Icliz's death at the hands of who would eventually become the Corporations' third Tier 50. Even Matt knew of Milton Walker, the man who finally managed to stabilize the Corporations and reform it into a unified Great Power, rather than a collection of fractured states barely under control.

According to Manny's information, Milton claimed to have killed Icliz, but the other Tier 50's hadn't believed him and verified on their own, eventually learning of his ultimate fate of being captured and enslaved.

Matt hated what he'd read, and knew he'd need to verify everything himself when they left, but he had one final looming question that he couldn't comprehend.

Turning to Manny, Matt asked, "How did he not start a true war? That's what you and everyone else has said about my Talent. It's been over and over about a true war, but now I learn the Corporations have their *own* mana font. I don't get it."

However, instead of Manny answering, JR spoke as he fluttered into an open space, making a triangle between the three of them. "That is a good question, but one you'd have picked up on if you'd been paying better attention when your Talent was being described. Maybe a practical demonstration would be better. I had to shift the schedules aggressively for you, Chosen Titan, but the easiest way to lower Icliz's mana generation is to get people out of his area of influence. And for ease of access, that means rifts. Just so you are aware, I had to send nearly all of our higher Tier mana equalizers away to free up enough of Icliz's mana generation to run our little test, which is costing me *massively* in interruption fees. But I should have bought us a two minute window where you can go all-out. That show you promised, if you would be so kind."

Getting a nod from Manny, Matt didn't argue with the raven, who was waving a wing impatiently, and emptied out his mana pool. He'd already tried to share once before so there was no reason to hold back now. Standing glaring he produced mana. However, instead of making 1,342,177,280 mana every second, thanks to the doubling from Icliz's Talent, he made 2,684,354,560 which marked the first time his mana generation was affected upward marking a new moment he couldn't enjoy.

After a full minute, the raven breathed out a small sigh. "Fascinating, and more than enough proof to continue. Not even a single sign of spiritual strain. I'm thoroughly impressed by your mana generation, Chosen Titan, on an individual level. You must know that most Mana Positive Talents— a loose definition to be sure, but such Talents are hard to shove into boxes— have flaws. *Most* people who have a mana related Talent either don't generate that much extra

mana, or they are incredibly specific in how or when they generate it. Or are very limited in how they can spend it. But maybe we should let the Talent collector speak about this?”

Manny shot a glare at JR before he took up the thread of conversation with a sigh. “JR is correct; I’ve collected enough applicable Talents that I can confirm it. Like with most Talents, the average mana Talent doesn’t generate that much extra mana outside of an individual scale, and most don’t even push the needle on that metric either. However, there are always exceptions, with some Talents being better than others. Most cause spiritual strain, but that’s less of a side effect of the Talent and more a consequence of a spirit making so much mana. In fact, Icliz has one of the best mana font Talents because it isn’t simply converting other energy like food, essence, or other exotics into mana, like the majority of other mana Talents. Even then, Icliz is limited by two factors your’s isn’t.”

“Three.” JR pretended to cough the last words out, but Manny didn’t argue and instead corrected himself.

“*Three*. First of all, he doesn’t make that much mana himself, all things considered, especially minus his Domain. His Talent, as best as I understand without having access to it myself, lets him boost then copy people’s mana generation. That means he can’t make extra mana if he’s alone. Second, and the largest one by *far*, is spiritual strain. When he was conscious, Icliz had a plethora of ways to mitigate a lot of the resulting spiritual strain, but even then, he limited how much total mana he made a day. Now that he’s unconscious, they need to limit how much mana he actually makes, lest he either ‘wake up’ or die. Thirdly, Icliz is a monster and has ‘woken up’ twice. Both times, the first thing he does is use his connection to everyone’s mana pools to kill the lower Tiers and expand his personal mana pool. On the other hand, Matt, your Talent...”

Matt shook his head. “But my Talent *does* have a downside. I can’t even cultivate my mana core, and it was really hard at the early Tiers. How is that without downside? I— wait, I don’t even care about defending how hard I had it. Why not just kill Icliz and be done with it? He’s a monster, but by keeping him locked up, you aren’t much better.”

JR cocked his head as he inspected Matt. “First, I take umbrage with your assertion that your Talent has downsides. Come now, let’s not be silly. No mana cultivation? Who cares in comparison oceans of mana you can create. Also, you are projecting quite a lot into a man who doesn’t deserve *anyone’s* sympathy.”

“How many other people have been captured under the same justification?”

Instead of responding, JR shared a look with Manny.

Turning back to Matt, JR ignored his previous question. “What your Tier 50 failed to mention was the sheer amount of mana you can make, young Matthew. Icliz... Icliz is fine. Until *very* recently, I was even quite impressed by him, thoroughly enamored even. He still is one of the Corporations’ crown jewels, but here’s the thing,”

Leaning in, the raven whispered, "Icliz can *only* make a hundred or so quadrillion extra mana a day before he's tapped out. Sure, that's a lot of mana, but I can do math, Matthew. I can count! Quite high actually, if you ever feel so inclined as to want to test my numerical capabilities. What does trash like him matter when you can match Icliz's generation at Tier 39? By Tier 43, you'll have dwarfed Icliz by an order of magnitude, and things will only grow more out of control as you advance those final few steps."

Pacing towards him over open air, JR used his words like daggers, "Do you *now* understand why everyone is so certain you will cause a true war, Matthew? There is exceptional, and then there is *too* exceptional."

Looking between the floor where Manny earlier glanced at, Matt had no doubt of who the raven meant with each 'exceptional'.

Balling up his fist, Matt made his stance clear. "But you keep him chained up all the same hiding behind a false grand creation."

Instead of arguing, JR shrugged a wing. "More like constantly lobotomized to ensure he remains passive. Cheaper and easier than restraints that can actually hold him back. He's got upgraded [Regeneration] running, so we've reached a parody that works for us. As for the Ascendancy Cage, well now that's a secret you'd have to pay for."

Hearing that, the rage left Matt, only to be replaced with a frigid iciness as the raven toyed with him.

"Then kill him. I won't work with you if you have a mana slave. Call it what you want, but it's unacceptable. If he's as ruthless as you say, then just end him."

JR started shaking his head even before Matt finished. "I will not destroy one of my greatest assets for no good reason. Especially when you just told me I need to start preparing for a true war."

Matt didn't back down drawing his line in the sand. "Then I will not work with you."

JR seemed unbothered and waved a wing at him. "Settle down. I said I won't destroy something for no good reason. Like everything else in the Corporations, Icliz is for sale."

Finally having enough, Matt snapped back, "People aren't for sale! Just because you allow it doesn't make it acceptable."

The raven barked a laugh right back at Matt, unruffled by his anger. "I'll note there is a near zero rate of enslavement in the Corporations, whereas the Empire would need to quantify that metric with a percentage over the same time period and definition. Don't delude yourself, *everyone* sells themselves, we only draw the line at *permanent* ownership of other people. Everything else is up for sale. The Empire may dress it up in fancy words and gilded frames, but ultimately, the only thing that anyone in this realm truly owns is themselves. It's up to the individual to decide how to sell. Whether it be their time at a job or their bodies in a rift, it all amounts to the same thing. The only currency we have in this realm is ourselves, and Icliz

sealed his fate when he took any future choices away from so many other people. In the Corporations, we have simply removed a veneer of civility that you are used to, but do not fool yourself into thinking the math has changed. If you wish to change something, then become strong enough that I can't stop you, or pay the price I set and do it yourself."

Feeling his anger solidify into something hard Matt growled, "It's unacceptable!"

Breathing hard, Matt felt everyone's gaze on him, but he didn't care.

Making it worse, JR only smiled pleasantly at him. "There are *exactly* eight people in this Realm who dictate what is and isn't acceptable, Matthew, and you aren't one of them, so don't try that angle. Would you like to try a different one?"

Seeing he couldn't force the raven, Matt felt an overwhelming surge of helplessness and couldn't help but glaring at Manny.

"You knew I'd hate this."

Instead of arguing, Manny nodded right back. "I also know that you'd be angrier if I hadn't mentioned it, but I swore oaths about mentioning Icliz's existence on my own. When I said we'd all need to put our cards on the table, I wasn't lying. I did try to mention it before the armor talk but... Would you like some advice?"

Nodding, Matt sighed out a quiet, "What?"

"We can't change everything. Trying to overreach now might make reaching tomorrow impossible. I know it might feel hollow, but Icliz wasn't a good person taken advantage of. He's a monster who saw other people as resources, and while JR isn't willing to kill him, he isn't lying about being willing to sell him."

Matt felt sick, but logically, he knew that even if Manny fought JR to a standstill, allowing him to find wherever Icliz was being kept, he couldn't damage the Tier 46, let alone kill him. That didn't change the fact that he hated being a part of something so close to him.

Firming his resolve, Matt shook his head. "Then no deal."

That seemed to shock everyone in the room, including Manny, but Matt didn't let himself second guess. "I won't be a part of this. I don't want my armor made from slave mana. I refuse."

JR looked around in confusion, even checking under his wings, but eventually looked up to Matt. "You are strange, Chosen Titan, very strange."

Holding up a wing, he prevented Matt from interrupting. "However, I can agree to what I believe you might consider an acceptable alternative."

Not quite believing the bird, he asked, "What?"

"I won't use his mana on your item if you supply it yourself. And if you agree to another deal, I'll even start the process for phasing Icliz out of the mana supply. He can be completely decoupled in less than... lets say a century if you so desire. How does that sound?"

"Too good to be true."

JR grinned at Matt, his eyes sparkling in the same way they had when they were designing his armor.

"Never let anyone say you're stupid, Chosen Titan. However, the cost should be obvious. Replace him." A bolt of fear shot down Matt's spine, but before he could react, JR continued speaking. "Replace his mana output and what good would I have for him? Though, if I'm being honest, I would much rather try to amplify your Talent off his before you truly outpace him. Wouldn't that be the best of both worlds? If you can't really buy him until you'd pop him like a balloon, I can offer a loan if you'd consider keeping him around after?"

Matt worked his jaw, trying not to let the raven's final words get a rise out of him, before nodding. "I'll have no part in keeping someone against their will and harvesting their mana. I refuse to fight for my own continued freedom while taking part in abusing another's. Even if that person is a monster himself."

There was another long moment before JR proffered a wing.

"Then do we have a deal?"

Instead of reaching out, Matt asked, "What in particular are you referring to?"

"No need to be quite that suspicious. Your armor with no Icliz mana, you staying in the Corporations for a decade or two, the offer to buy Icliz, all for the price Emmanuel and I agreed upon already. He already gave me the downpayment, do you really want to back out now?"

Letting his breath out slowly, Matt glared at the bird. "See, the addition of that last requirement does not engender warm and fuzzy feelings after our recent conversation."

JR seemed genuinely confused, forcing Matt to spell it out. "You finish one sentence with 'replace our mana slave'. Then immediately add, 'spend a few decades here'. You have to see the conflict of interest. At least the conflict with *my* interests."

"Relax, Chosen Titan. Your Tier 50 is right there and we are in my lab but reality dictates the facts not our desires. For an armor of this level, I will need direct and constant access to you during the entire process. That means you have to remain in the same star system as me. I can't go to the Empire, which means you need to come here."

Unable to stop his mind from conjuring a thousand and one reasons why that would be an awful decision, Matt looked to Manny who nodded, confirming the bird's words.

Before Matt could come up with an appropriate response, JR asked, "Why don't we hit three humans with a single stone, hmm? We won't be able to hide your presence while making

your armor. You still need to spend a decade or two working with Cosmind to perfect your [AI] enhancement, but that can't happen at the same time as this, so that won't work. Hmmm... I know! Why don't we expand the scope and bring your friends. But then we need to have a reason for you all to be here."

Grinning, JR looked at Matt, but the gaze made his stomach sink to his feet once more. "Why don't we have you guys open businesses while you are here?"

Caught completely by surprise by the answer, Matt could only ask, "What?"

Sighing dramatically in a way that only a bird could, JR said, "Fine, let me spell it out. I need uninterrupted access to you for anywhere from a decade to two. I don't wish to announce that I am making armor for an enemy Chosen to the rest of the Great Powers. That means we need a reason to obscure the truth. And would you look at that, you yourself gave me one earlier, didn't you Matthew?"

"I did?"

Matt wasn't sure when he had given JR a reason, but he suddenly felt uneasy.

"Of course. Don't you remember arguing I should cut deeper into the various companies beneath me?"

Knowing it was futile and that the Tier 50 seemed to have planned everything from the start Matt tried to protest, "You asked me what I thought. I didn't suggest anything. I—"

He failed.

"Why don't you and your friends— bring as many as you like, I don't care— come and spend time in the Corporations. I'll even let you all start your own business, build them up as the economy recovers from what I'm about to do, and leave with the profits. I'll even allow you to keep operating the business once you leave, so long as they can continue to turn a profit without outside funds."

Feeling toyed with and played, Matt growled, "You wanted this outcome from the beginning. Why?"

JR's grin was wicked, but Matt found himself entangled by his own efforts. "Because you are now one of the most important people in the Realm, Chosen Titan. Maybe not yet, given your Tier, but in five more Tiers, that will change, and in ten... Well, that will be quite the sight. Also, I think you have a gross mischaracterization of my Great Power, and the best way to solve that is to let you experience the truth."

Gesturing down and unable to contain his anger in the sharp move, Matt tried not to growl once more. "And you think forcing me to spend time here will *improve* my opinion of the Corporations?"

JR paused at Matt's question before cocking his head in confusion. "Improve your opinion of my Great Power? Hmm, no not really. I simply want to ensure that your opinion is based in reality, rather than your preconceived notions."

Matt didn't fully believe the raven, not after being maneuvered into such a position from the beginning— before JR had even known about his Talent— but after designing his armor with the Tier 50, he didn't have an easy way to back out. He wanted that armor.

Wanting to press, Matt shot back, "What if I want to set up a charity instead of a business?"

The raven, who started staring at a projection of Matt's armor, turned back around. "Feel free. I won't stop you."

Before Matt could ask for clarification about the seeming backtrack, JR finished, "But while I'll allow you to fund your charity yourself while you are here, I will not allow you to fund it once you leave. So run a charity, but if you want to make a lasting difference, I demand your business be self-sustaining. I'd much prefer it if you just extract resources from our markets. Much less bothersome than charity."

Matt's initial reaction was once again to dismiss the words as a way to play a game with him and his desires, but he felt it was deeper than that.

However, the bird refused to give a more concrete answer.

Turning to Manny, Matt got a small shake of the head and a private message. "I have no easy answers, Matt. I said that from the beginning. We can only trust our guts. If you want to back out, I'll do my best."

"Is this really our best bet? To work with someone who is doing the exact thing I want to avoid? It feels like drinking poison to quench thirst."

Manny raised and dropped a single shoulder. "I don't know, Matt. I wish I did, but I don't. I do believe it's our best bet. None of the other Tier 50s are as willing to work with us as JR and the Corporations are. Then, there is the type of item you want; JR is the only one who can do it. Combined? I genuinely think this is our best bet. I also have no desire to defend the bird, but Icliz was a horrible person, the inverse of you and what you strive for. Bad things happen to good people, but sometimes they happen to bad ones too. This happens to be the latter, not that I agree with the initial decision."

After a moment of silence, Manny added out loud, "JR being willing to sell you Icliz is a concession. He wasn't lying when he said he'd rather put the two of you together. He'd risk empowering Icliz to triple your mana output. However, for all his issues, JR isn't one to renege an agreement. If we make a deal with him, then he'll keep it."

Taking a deep breath, Matt met JR's gaze. "How can I trust you won't put a back door into this armor, or into me. After all of this, I find it hard to trust you."

JR looked sullenly to Manny. "I have a Talent that can help, but I doubt you have too much to worry about. I'm no crafter, but an item on this level, while impressive, is still a Tier 30 item. That limits how much even a Tier 50 can do, so while he might try to slip something nefarious into the armor, it will be relatively obvious. Besides, as much as I hate to admit it, JR cares too much about his reputation to sabotage his own work."

He couldn't make the other Tier 50 budget and he was worried fully backing out of the deal would ruin the existing treaty.

After wrestling with himself he finally nodded as he reached out to take the proffered wing. "Then fine. I hate myself for it, but I accept." Pulling his hand back he turned to Manny. "Can we go before I vomit?"

Before they could leave, JR added one last thing making Matt freeze, but he chose not to react.

"Icliz's greatest failure was that he was too weak, Chosen Titan. His failure doomed him more so than his actions, because as a Tier 50, he would have been one of those eight. However, he didn't. And as such, he was subject to the whims of the victor. Good bye Chosen Titan. I look forward to seeing you again shortly. Do remember to buy the list I'll send you shortly. I charge large finder fee's."

Rosemarie waited until JR fluffed his feathers, indicating they were truly alone once more, before finally asking one of the many questions that had been bubbling up in her since being asked to put on a play for a Tier 30.

"Are you seriously considering joining the Empire in the inevitable true war that will spawn from that boy? Forty four trillion mana a second at Tier 45 is a lot, but is it worth the cost?"

JR shot her a cocky look as he strutted across the table. "I'll note that is just under four *quintillion* mana a day, but do you think that is the only reason I accepted? The mana?"

Having worked with JR for longer than most, she didn't hesitate to ask, "Is it not?"

Instead of answering her question, he pivoted, showing just how interested he was. "Any interest in selling that gem? I'll give you a Tier 47 item from the breach. Your choice."

Rosemarie snorted, not falling for the raven's distraction. The more valuable the gem, the less likely she'd sell it, but she had no idea why it was so valuable beyond its novelty factor.

"What's so special about it? I won't sell what I don't understand."

"Fine, fine be like that. But if you want to know, watch and find out for yourself. Take your time and be thorough. I would have missed it myself if I hadn't been giving it my full attention and got a little lucky with the timing."

Thoroughly confused, she moved over to the liquid mana stones, where she brought forth her entire cultivation base and inspected the crystal.

It was impressive, a combination of several techniques that each promised untold depths for those who dived in, but it wasn't so interesting that JR should have tossed out all of their carefully laid plans after seeing it. He'd originally intended to decline the Empire's offer until they could learn more about why they felt the need for a defensive pact applicable to a true war, not agree on the spot.

Neither observation caused Rosemarie to grow impatient, rather she calmed herself and prepared for a wait as she observed the liquid mana stone for... something.

Having time to study it, she came to appreciate the effort Chosen Titan had put into making the gem, the elegance was belied by the speed at which he'd created it. It truly was a work of art, with mana coiling and twisting in upon itself endlessly in its smokey depths. It was almost hypnotic in its undulations. However, no matter how pretty it was, Rosemarie didn't find what JR wanted her to see even after three full days, not that she gave up. He knew how much work she had, and if he felt that her time was best spent watching the mana stone then sh—

Rosemarie flinched.

She hated herself the moment it happened, but couldn't stop it. The all too pleased look in JR's gaze assured her that he'd seen and remembered her lapse in composure, but he didn't immediately comment on it as he looked over at where she stood.

"So you saw it then? Still think I made the wrong choice?"

Not quite able to believe what she'd just seen, Rosemarie spluttered, "That's impossible. Only a spirit can make mana, but that mana gem just increased the amount of mana that's in it. Sure, it was a minuscule fragment of a full unit of mana, but I watched it. *I saw it happen*. Did someone absorb mana from the outside? Is the containment not perfect? Did I see wrong? This is *impossible*."

JR squawked several times in triumph. "Mana gems that create their own mana. Now you tell me, was that a good deal?"

Hearing his reply, Rosemarie snorted, not quite believing the tricky bird. She'd seen him bluff his way through far larger risks and she didn't believe that he'd noticed this instantly, given his loss of composure midway through his own original investigation.

After all, it had taken days of observation for her to catch a fraction of a whole unit of mana being created, but she'd seen it. She was far too old to doubt her senses.

"How does it work?"

JR pecked the gem, causing it to wobble. "After three days of thinking, I *think* it's a three way confluence. First is his Domain, which adds both an endless and concentration effect to the mana in the gem. Normally, post creation, concentration should make the mana collapse in on

itself as it condenses down, but because of his subaspect, it isn't. It's the same phenomenon we see with the aura rifts made from his mana."

Whistling, JR strutted. "The gift that keeps on giving. See if we can foster a few endless Concept users of our own. Don't force anything, but let it be known we are interested. Anyway, the two interact in a positive manner, making the mana grow more concentrated as time goes on. However, the endless effect seems to be stronger than the concentration effect, meaning it's a positive upward cycle. You actually missed one other creation that I saw. It's incredibly subtle if you aren't looking for it, so don't feel too bad. So little mana is actually being created it would be hard to notice without a decade or fifty for it to accumulate to a noticeable point. The second and third things are related, however. It's the mana gems and Titan's Tier 25 Talent. I don't know how much of that is truly reliant on his Talent to make it possible, but I suspect it's quite a lot. However, the boy was correct in his supposition that these gems are perfect containers, which means the mana that is trying to be generated can't go anywhere. It has no more room. Except it *does*, because of the gem's liquid structure which is in motion. Somehow this comes together in *this*."

Rosemarie closed her eyes, catching the critical point in her boss' attempts at distracting her. "If you already knew this, then why not execute Icliz when Titan pushed? He's worth far less than infinite mana if this can be developed to such a point, which I doubt given the scale. Other Tier 50's have 'turned off the aura' before without too much repercussion. Even in a Tier 45 rift, the current speed of generation is far too slow at this observed rate. Besides, you nearly lost the deal over that, so I don't buy that you suspected any of this when you had us test him originally."

JR snorted at her, even as he started dismantling the designs of Titan's armor, not bothering to look back to her. "And overplay my hand? No, capitulation would have been more unusual and drawn attention. It's much better to pretend to be as ignorant as they are about the phenomena, and then pretend to notice the anomaly after we've worked together for a few years. That will build more trust, which can then be further cemented by eventually allowing him to kill Icliz himself. Even if they figure it out in the meantime, so long as I still bring it up first, we'll have gained good will from the attempt. Look at everything the child does, he's idealistic and emotional. Treating him honestly is both easier and smarter."

Rosemarie slowly nodded as she considered the various angles. She knew she'd never have agreed to join a true war on the weaker side, but didn't argue now that it had happened. Neither did she miss his deliberate avoidance of her final comment about his original pivot.

Thinking about it more, she began to come around. With not only an endless mana font the likes of which she'd never even considered possible, forty four trillion mana every second at Tier 45 was no joke. But the promise Titans liquid mana gems hinted at... Yeah even a bad true war would be worth it.

So long as they won.

Instincts roused, Rosemarie corrected the Tier 50. "I know what you normally mean when you say someone is idealistic and emotional, boss, and I don't think that is the smartest

play here. He's already a Chosen level threat hiding his abilities. You might want to measure three times before you choose to pull that lever."

Pausing in his edits, JR finally nodded. "Well reminded. While controllable now, he isn't actually under my wing or claw. Pity that. I'd have him willing to sell his mana within a century if he jumped ship permanently but little chance of that. The Empire's systems work a little too well, hmm."

Rosemarie's mind was still racing when JR waved a wing, dismissing her. "No need to sit around here any longer, go do what you have to do. Start tearing into the businesses. Young Matthew may have been kinder than we intended, but the forty percent left is still within our acceptable upper limits. I want fertile grounds ready and prepped for the return of the higher Tier explorers so we can really start to exploit aura enchanting. I already peaked at their treasures, and if we can get the timing right, we'll have a strong economy for rest of my tenure and beyond, if my successor doesn't fuck it up. Then get people to work on the wording for a defensive pact with the Empire following our earlier guidelines, and make sure we negotiate so a portion of all crystals handed over to us are Matt-made crystals. We need to ensure our share before anyone else realizes his value."

Not wanting to ask, but knowing she needed to with what was at risk, Rosemarie asked the question she'd been holding in since she'd realized how far Titan's Talent could go. "Are you confident about us winning the true war?"

Finally looking away from a projection of Titan's body and spirit, JR shivered, sending several feathers flying before replying, "Am I confident? No not particularly, but Emmanuel is. He's certain of victory with or without us."

"Could the Emperor be bluffing? He has a reputation."

JR immediately shook his head. "Unlikely. I'm not entirely sure why, but I do know I'd much rather chain our wagon to the Matthew horse now instead of in twenty thousand years after the Empire succeeds and emerges victorious. Can you not see how in retrospect, Emmanuel's moves in the most recent war make far more sense? He wasn't foolish in letting the Guilds take their occupied land, reducing his side's war score; he'd already won and wanted the longest treaty possible, and so needed to lower how well he'd done. Ha!"

Laughing with his piercing true laugh, JR cocked his head to the side as he thought out loud. "Emmanuel may have lost the war, but in turn, he got everyone else to pay him for Tiering out two of his three Ascender teams. HA! HA! No, he got the full sweep, considering part of the reasoning for allowing Titan, Legion and Wraith to go along with Light and Shadow delving other rifts was their own partial buyout. If he's been planning this for so long, why wouldn't I feather myself a perch when offered such a deal? In fact, I'd argue if I said no to this deal, I'd be in violation of the oaths I swore when I became a Tier 50. One of them was to best guide the Corporations in a long term sustainable way, and what is more long term than infinite mana?"

Tapping his foot, JR started bobbing his head in a repeated nod. "Ultimately, our greatest advantage is time and foreknowledge. After the economy settles down, start a few higher Tier

initiatives while keeping loyal elements from ascending. Agatha was a little too thorough when it came to purging the higher Tiers, so we'll need to pick up some of the slack when it comes to the highest Tiers battlefields, and we can start now. Start scaling up for higher Tier combat. Use the breach as an excuse if we have to say anything. We want to be better prepared for the next one thanks to a lackluster performance by our higher Tiers or some such nonsense. Spin it however you want, just ensure we are moving in the right direction without tipping our hand. Also, encourage more mercenary work and increase remuneration for outside contracts. Let's try to ensure the other Great Powers stay at war as much as possible in the coming years. I doubt the lower Tiers will matter much, but there is no reason not to hamper them as much as possible."

Dropping that subject for the time being, seeing how he'd already decided, Rosemarie decided to circle back around to the topic he'd tried to avoid. "So why did you originally decide to pivot and test the kid at all?"

Instead of blowing her off, JR hopped to stand right in front of her. "That decade's overtime I owe you written off, and I'll tell you everything."

"That's my third largest piece of leverage over you."

Instead of arguing, the raven smile widened. "That makes the deal all the more exciting."

Squinting at her boss, she narrowed her eyes and trusted her gut. "No deal. I'd rather not know."

Stomping his feet, he squawked several times in frustration. "I hate you. Fine, I'll spill. I sensed something was amiss, but when I saw the gem in Titan's chest, I knew this will be the item that gives me an inspiration, or something in its creation will lead to the same. I'd have paid for the opportunity, so I trusted my gut. I'd say it worked out, wouldn't you?"

"That's the fourth time you've said that."

"This time it's different."

"Third time."

"It's different this time."

"Second time."

Snorting, JR grew serious. "The gem. I can see you couldn't feel it, but I could when I originally scanned the duo on their entrance. It's..."

Looking off into space, Rosemarie watched as JR thought before speaking. "Not something that should exist. It's similar to a Tier 50 in a way, but where we are eternal it's temporary. I don't know how else to describe it, but the energy in the gem makes me want to flee. But it's purely from my connection to the realm as a Tier 50, the same way I can sense people who are high Tier. That reward... shouldn't exist for more than a moment. Except it's not

temporary right now, but we already discussed that, so let me move on. My point is that energy is very uncomfortable to be close to. After interacting with the energy, I believe I might be able to craft an item that will let me unleash my full power without being forced to ascend.”

Rosemarie wasn't entirely confident her boss wasn't bluffing for a second time, but she didn't call him on it. Instead she grabbed *her* mana gem off the table and slipped it into a pocket, even as she turned away without acknowledging his boasting.

“Oh, do go dip into a rift and let me know if the mana gem doesn't work in a time accelerated environment for some reason. Yes, yes, we will need to ensure some of our payment comes in these mana stones.”

Hopping back to his table, JR called out right as she was about to reach the door, “That is the lesson we will have to teach Titan while he visits us, even if he doesn't want to learn it. If he doesn't assign value to himself, someone else will, and he might find he doesn't like the price.”

Cackling, JR waved her away as he dived into redesigning Chosen Titan's armor. Rosemarie knew she'd get more out of talking with the wall now that he was fully absorbed with his work and didn't bother lingering.

Taking another peak at the blueprint, Rosemarie asked herself if it was all worth it. Remembering the endless stream of mana that had poured itself out of Chosen Titan without a single warble of his spirit, she quickly concluded that yes, it was.

Any price would be cheap when talking about the best mana font the Realm had ever seen.

As she walked away, she tried to push down the knowledge that their enemies would be reaching the same conclusions, lest it cause her composure to break in public. Once in front of JR had been more than enough.