

10k chapter. I'll see everyone on the 2nd.

Chapter 478

Emmanuel exited his final rift with a sense of anticipation he hadn't felt since he took the throne. They were done, and he could finally escape this prison.

With a wave, he obliterated the Tier 48 rift, officially ending his delving.

The only one who was already finished was Tobias, but Emmanuel had already come to expect that and didn't comment as he joined the turtle. Silent coexistence was an acceptable outcome, both personally and politically.

Twenty minutes later, Janet exited her rift and dissipated the final rift in the star system.

Not wanting to delay any longer, Emmanuel spoke the moment everyone was confident there were no rifts left.

"Is everyone ready to complete our deal?"

The moment he had verbal confirmation from each Tier 50, he swapped Talents and retriggered his earlier curse.

"Voluntarily taken, voluntarily activated, let no one say I forced anything up until this point."

Slamming his hands together, Emmanuel emptied his entire mana pool into the 'spell'. In return seven orbs of light appeared, hovering over the others with a steady glow as chains loosely formed around their wrists and ankles.

"As per our agreement, you may keep two items hidden but no more, no less, along with a single veto."

Emmanuel caught the moment where those who were truly hostile to him and the Empire contemplated turning on him instead of following through with their earlier agreement for his assistance. He also got to enjoy the moment they realized that was damn near impossible and he allowed himself to smirk, not bothering to hide it.

He hadn't been kidding when he explained that Elrick Ashwound's Talent was remarkably capable of binding *any* tier, as it effectively granted a temporary, additional Talent to any who agreed to receive it. Their own spirits were the enforcers, and it was a bit of a pity how restrictive the set was overall.

The Tier 50's didn't take it so well. They hadn't expected his little light show to have enough power to keep them locked into place until they fulfilled their agreement or they depleted

the mana spent to initiate it. The most dangerous moments were the first few, the ones before the Talent had been able to fully come into effect and assert its power, but Allister completed the ritual by dumping all of his rift rewards onto the ground around him.

With one active and willing participant, Emmanuel knew everyone else felt the restrictions snap into place. He also knew they would find it much more difficult than expected to renege on their agreements.

“Two items kept by myself. Here is everything else to take your five from. Take your time.” Allister smiled as everyone else looked above his head to the orb still shining brightly.

Not intending to go back on his word, Emmanuel found two of the lesser but still valuable Tier 49 rift rewards, along with three Tier 48 rewards and plucked them from the pile, trying very hard not to look at the handful of Tier 50 items tempting him. If Allister had gotten *seven*, the others were going to hate Emmanuel, because he wasn't allied to them and would be taking whatever took his fancy.

The moment he completed his half of the bargain, the light above Allister turned golden before fading away into a mote of light.

He hoped the others would give up, but Winter Hornet snorted and tried to fly away. His feet never left the ground, but reality itself started to stretch and bend as the Sect's Tier 50 put his considerable cultivation into trying to leave.

After his effort had no effect, Winter Hornet stopped his attempt to leave, having the audacity to grin at Emmanuel.

Allister snorted and made a show of walking around to pick up the rest of his rewards.

Seeing the restrictions weren't so easy to throw off, six more piles of loot appeared, but JR's light orb was the only one to change colors, causing the other five to look upward in confusion and dawning horror.

Not wanting to force their hands except as an absolute last resort, Emmanuel reminded them of the words he said when they agreed to his expansion plans. “I have no feedback from the Talent. It's entirely self referential once active, which is why everyone had to willingly agree. I have no more insight than any of you. The darker the orb, the more items you've kept hidden. Once the orbs are clear, I will pick and we can be on our way.”

Tobias growled, the sound deep enough to remind everyone the turtle's real body was larger than the planet they were standing on, but Emmanuel didn't back down for a moment.

“I will not be bound by some human. Release me or suffer the consequences, **now**.”

Bringing his own cultivation to bear, Emmanuel met the glare calmly. “You agreed. Now either break our agreement and let's start a true war, or bring out your items and let us cut to the chase.”

“I—”

Winter Hornet cut Tobias off with a laugh. “What if I prefer the true war?”

Seeing the growing hostility, Emmanuel glared at the remaining five one at a time. “Then let’s fight here and now.”

Instead of mollifying them or trying to back down, Emmanuel sneered. “Or, if we are going to break agreements, maybe I should just return home now and leave the five of you locked here. Let’s see how long it takes you to break free and fly back, and what I can do in that same amount of time.”

Virgil sneered right back at him, “If you think petty threats will let you get your way, then *do it.*”

Instead of getting angry, Emmanuel smiled at her, then let his gaze travel upward to the ink black orb above her head. “I keep my word, do you?”

Winter Hornet laughed and waved his hand, causing eighteen more items to appear on his pile of goods. Eleven were Tier 49, but seven of them were Tier 50, and Emmanuel felt his heart thump hard as the Tier 50 items joined the ones JR had displayed.

However, it wasn’t the items that Winter Hornet brought out that surprised Emmanuel, but rather the fact that the Sect elder’s orb had gone from dusky black to pure white.

Everyone looked shocked at Winter Hornet’s haul and he smiled as if he hadn’t almost torn the planet apart as he tried to leave a moment ago. “My word, kept. Anything else?”

Emmanuel didn’t let his shock show through, but he did probe the orb above Winter Hornet, wanting to ensure the other Tier 50 hadn’t used an illusion to trick him.

Deadlock broken by a third party, Janet sighed at Winter Hornet’s words but waved her hand, causing over forty more items to appear on her pile. Most were only Tier 48, but she’d gotten quite lucky herself, with fifteen Tier 49 items and four Tier 50.

Except, her orb didn’t go entirely white like Winter Hornet’s did. Looking up and realizing she couldn’t easily trick herself, she pulled out one more Tier 50 item, finally turning her orb white.

Instead of looking at the items like he wanted to do, Emmanuel looked to the final three Tier 50s with black orbs.

Aoife, Tobias, and Virgil didn’t exactly surprise him in their resistance as much as the others not kicking up that much of a fuss in the first place. With morality and momentum on his side, Emmanuel simply waited and let the pressure start to build.

With everyone’s eyes on them, Aoife sighed before she waved her own hand, turning her orb white. That left only Tobias and Virgil.

Emmanuel was considering how to break the deadlock when Tobias snorted at Virgil, "Very well. May none compare me to such a vile being as yourself." Turning back to him, the turtle continued, "We'll see what your word is truly worth in the coming days, Emmanuel. We'll see."

With a wave, a pile of rewards appeared around Tobias, but his orb only lightened instead of turning entirely white.

It was a dusky gray when Virgil dumped her rewards and growled out, "Make it quick, before my nausea overcomes me."

Instead of moving, he waited for both of their orbs to turn completely white, which took a few minutes as the two tried their best to keep an extra Tier 50 item or two hidden away.

When the last orb turned fully white, Emmanuel let himself feast.

Swapping his Talent to one of his appraisal sets, he scanned everyone's Tier 50 items, then worked his way down, looking for anything exceptional.

He found a lot. Too much. Five choices were far too few to get him everything he wanted, but more than enough to let him start dreaming. However, to his mild surprise, his initial appraisal told him that while rare, most of the Tier 50 weren't *that* high on his priority list.

If he wanted to hurt them, he'd go purely for value or deliberately take items useful for their own people, but he'd much rather take things he and his people needed. If he played his cards correctly, he could come out ahead and come off as magnanimous whilst taking a step back.

Looking over the items, Emmanuel repeated a mantra of self control and restraint, but it was hard seeing everything laid out before him. He was inevitably interested in what the other Tier 50s chose *not* to display, but he didn't let himself dwell on it for too long.

Instead, he looked at *his* rewards.

Emmanuel's initial impression was that the other Tier 50s had made out far better than they had any right too. Unless one of them had become stupid, they'd each kept their two reserve items, which meant two additional Tier 50 items per Tier 50, and even he could count that high without his fingers.

It meant each of the Tier 50's had gotten at least *seven* Tier 50 items. The very idea of so many peak realm items was mind boggling, given their normal rarity, but it had come at a cost. The planet around them wasn't dead, but it was conspicuously empty as they'd drained the pond to catch the fish.

There was *no* ambient mana left in the entire star system, as everyone had wanted several 'one last delve's'. In their desire to squeeze out every possible delve, they'd hunted down every scrap of ambient mana. The rewards were equally impressive, but unless they were willing to destroy their own capital worlds, it wasn't something they could recreate.

At least, not until Matt had a few more Tiers under his belt, but Emmanuel tried not to tease himself with the possibility of every delve session looking like this.

JR flapped his wings as if trying to ward off a predator as Emmanuel got close, but he could tell it was more an instinctive reaction to someone getting close to his collection of 'shinies' than true unwillingness to part with his treasures.

Hopping up the pile, JR asked, "Can I offer you a deal or two on crafted items so you don't take all of my Tier 50 items?"

The other Tier 50s looked over, hopeful Emmanuel would agree, but he shook his head. "I'm looking with Talents."

Hearing that, everyone stopped badgering him, which he found funny. They didn't trust him, but because of how they saw and viewed Talents, they just assumed he'd follow their advice and therefore be immune to persuasion. He wasn't that blind, but he wasn't going to be nice when picking either.

Appraisal Talents came in all shapes and forms, and he flipped through thousands, millions even as he considered the incalculable array of treasures before him. Vera Tai, Cornelis Drebbel, Wotan the Keen-Eyed, Dmitri Eleve, Aloy Iera, Hans Lippershey, Tui lala...

His first target, amusingly, was a Tier 49 acorn with blue and pink speckles splattered across its light brown shell. Having been able to see the seed's description, he knew Tur'stal would kill him if he passed up on taking the Calamity Tree home. It was a tree and living, which meant it could and would have to Tier up but he was confident any expenses incurred would be cheaper than finding another seed.

However, his choice seemed to shock the Tier 50s and it caused them to start reevaluating their unknown items. He wished them luck, energy patterns could only tell someone so much.

Emmanuel wouldn't have identified the reward himself, as he'd never seen the tree, even as a lower Tier variant, but he fell in love with the reward the moment he saw it. A long term investment, once the tree had Tiered up to at least Tier 47, the Capital's Tier, it would start to grow into the Realm itself. There, it could create a crack between Realms and allow a tiny amount of ascension energy to seep out and into the Capital.

The effect wouldn't be a millionth the magnitude of a true Ascension, but the tree would still be a boon for anyone who lived under its canopy. They could and might plant it elsewhere, but Emmanuel was already picturing the day where the hyper-massive tree was the Capital's most important landmark.

JR hopped onto a scythe handle that was sticking out of the ground and asked, "Any chance you want to share what the seed did? I'll pay for it?"

“Another Tier 49 item and I’ll tell you everything you want to know.” Emmanuel agreed without hesitating, but the raven just fluttered his wings in return, pretending not to have said anything in the first place.

Aiming for one of the Tier 50 items specifically, Emmanuel grabbed what looked like a snowglobe. Perfectly round and seemingly made of glass, the unnamed item's effect was as simple as it was powerful. It allowed someone to capture an entire star system inside without disturbing or harming anyone within the system.

One would still need to be able to move the weight of the world they captured, which limited its uses above Tier 35 unless Emmanuel himself was going to take action, but the ability to safely move not only planets but entire star systems was something he couldn’t pass up.

The other Tier 50 items, while useful, weren't exceptional enough for him to prioritize. They were either too specific in their use or finished items, such as the Tier 50 hammer Emmanuel was mildly interested in. However, despite its material and Tier being exceptional, the enchantments were mediocre, as expected out of ‘common’ rift drops.

Instead, he picked up a Tier 50 silvery gray potion that his Talent said would boost the mind cultivation of the drinker. At first glance, it wasn’t the most useful potion, but at their Tier items they could actually use were rare enough that the raven nearly vetoed his selection.

After taking a few other Tier 49 items he thought would be the most useful, JR didn’t hesitate and swept up his remaining loot before taking to the sky where he angrily circled them, showing the restrictions no longer bound him to their little island.

Not wanting to dawdle, Emmanuel quickly selected his next several items, going through Winter Hornet’s goods without finding anything truly exceptional that caught his eye. Instead, he prioritized grabbing Tier 49 and 50 raw resources. They were always useful and each could potentially be turned into treasured high Tier items, but he had high hopes for the bar of Tier 50 bronze infused with Armageddon mana. The Tier 49 petrified branch of mulberry tree was interesting as well, it had illusory leaves of Spectral mana condensing every three minutes, despite being dead.

Even if they lost a Tier in relative power after being processed and melded with other lower Tier items, each high Tier material was precious.

Too precious, as Winter Hornet was the first person to use one of his vetos. “I’ve changed my mind. I no longer wish to trade the Tier 50 geode. Pick something else.”

Emmanuel snorted as he tossed the overlooked *void* geode back to Winter Hornet, considering them even after the Sect Tier 50 helped when he flipped sides without a fight.

Sadly, his kindness was misplaced, as Winter Hornet’s action reminded the others of that ruling and they all started using it trying to deny him the items they saw as the most valuable.

Given that their grading metrics were vastly different, Emmanuel wasn’t too worried. Or, that was true until he saw a Tier 48 drinking gourd in Aoife’s loot. He’d originally dismissed its

effect of 'converts essence into an unknown liquid' as being bad, but having something repeatedly come back with an unknown piqued his interest, even as he went through his appraisal Talents.

If the Talents hadn't known what the item did at all, he'd have understood. They could tell it was converting essence, but the Talents didn't know what it ended up as, and once he realized the distinction, he couldn't help but dig deeper.

Popping the tied-on cork out of the mouth of the gourd, Emmanuel earned himself a glare from Aoife, but he was as disappointed as everyone else to find the gourd was empty. However, the moment he uncorked it, a wave of ambient essence was drawn into the gourd as the essence vacuum tried to fill itself. Not willing to drain essence from the planet below them, he quickly closed the cork, but everyone was a Tier 50 and noticed the drop of liquid now in the gourd.

Instead of becoming interested, the others saw that the item required high Tier essence to function and immediately wrote it off.

Everyone except JR, who swooped down and looked at the gourd. "Why not pour out that drop of liquid."

Looking at the gourd in his hands, Emmanuel shook his head. "I think I'd rather not."

However, Aoife disagreed, sensing his reluctance. "If you don't, I'll use my veto and keep it myself."

Considering how far to push people compared to what his Talent now told him the gourd did, Emmanuel decided that the truth was less interesting than their imaginations.

Popping the cork, but not allowing any essence to rush into the gourd, Emmanuel poured out a single milky white drop of liquid that seemed to hold stars in its depths.

Directing the drop of liquid to hover in front of Aoife, he allowed her to inspect the result and come to the same conclusion as he had.

"The gourd converts essence into a liquid that will strengthen people's baseline physical bodies. However, as you saw how much essence it took to make a single drop."

As everyone else's interest fully waned JR fluttered his wings. "Any cha—"

"Not for resale."

Taking one last look at the gourd, JR sighed. "Pity."

While the others thought it wasn't a great item, Emmanuel was already picturing the day he could make a Tier 48 rift, drain it of essence, fill it with mana, and fill up bathtubs of the liquid. He estimated it would take at least three full gourds to fully enhance a high-Tier's body, which would mean oceans of essence fed to the gourd, but so long as he replaced the expended essence with mana, the rift would convert everything without worry or significant depletion.

What others saw as an impossible condition, Emmanuel only saw as a matter of time and resources, and what did either matter when they could be directly converted into combat power?

Not wanting to give Aoife a chance to change her stance on the gourd, he quickly moved onto a Tier 50 item he knew she'd been eyeing and selected it, forcing her to use her veto on that.

In a concession, he took a Tier 49 talisman that boosted the user's durability. A Tier higher than it, it wouldn't be perfectly effective, but the talisman was rift made and packed with enough power he was confident in it being useful. Best of all, it was valuable, but not so much that Aoife kicked up a fuss about it or the gourd, even knowing he forced her hand.

Emmanuel was fairly confident that he had already gotten all of the best treasures available today, but for the sake of thoroughness, he picked through some of the less-interesting treasures with his Talent roulette. Information in all forms flashed briefly into his awareness, only to be shuffled away the next moment. But when he swapped in Iluia Leafboot's Tier 1 Talent, 'You always know the effects that would result from you consuming an item,' he instinctively swapped to a full set of emotional control Talents, fast enough that not even a flicker could register to *anyone* around him.

Then and only then, he swapped his Tier 1 Talent back, and verified what he'd seen.

The object before him, with a name that meant Heart's Emberseed in an old Clan language precursor dialect according to one of his Talents, didn't look very impressive as far as the Tier 50 items arrayed before him went. It looked like a twisting seed pod with a surface of tarnished silver, with a point made of a glowing golden gem. Deeper pulsing veins, invisible from the surface, extended throughout the entire structure making a complicated four dimensional weave even he struggled to follow.

It was also off to the side with items Virgil saw little value in, and he had nearly overlooked it because it looked almost... broken magically speaking.

The energy inside of it was unbalanced, spinning haphazardly and chaotically around nothing, like it was but one half—or one *third*—of something actually worthwhile. A few jagged spiritual edges and a far lower than normal amount of essence within it, completed the look. However there was no denying what he'd seen it could *do*.

He didn't want to believe it, but after he confirmed his findings with a few other Talents he had no choice.

He'd expected a lot on their trip, but this... *this*? No, he'd never even dreamed about such an item.

Emmanuel didn't even allow himself to directly *think* about what it was or what it could *do* until he'd secured it for himself. Knowing Virgil would be just as recalcitrant as the other Tier 50s, he waited until she vetoed one of his first five choices to circle back around to the seed.

When he *finally* picked up the Heart's Emberseed, he not only made certain to not react any more or less than he had for any of the other items, but had to resist looking at Aoife.

Despite finding an answer that people had been searching for since the Shattering, Emmanuel only had more questions as he pocketed the orb.

Their return trip was much faster than their exit trip, as they were no longer fighting the raging storm that was chaotic space. And with so many new high Tier items, none of them were in the mood to bicker or fight. Everyone wanted to return home, and as they passed their Tier 45s in the third layer of the breach, Emmanuel smiled at how his Ascenders and the Empire had done.

Not the best, that title probably went to the Collective, with them grabbing a Tier 39 True Sunflower, which Tobias was already gloating over. But far from the worst, which buoyed his mood considerably.

The moment they split up and their agreement ended, Emmanuel made his move and teleported back to his home rather than spend the ten minutes needed to fly. He *had* to run more tests on the Emberseed, and inform Carissa about the treasure he'd happened upon.

That was why he was more than a little surprised to see his wife in his throne room with his Ascenders and aura producers brokering a deal. He... hadn't expected that at all. He also hadn't expected Matt to clear things up, with Mackenzie Harrington of all people, after learning how she'd been part of the Cabal arrayed against them.

Seeing that a Tier 45 asset just became available for long term use, Emmanuel couldn't help but smile.

Appearing in the privacy bubble that Carissa had thrown up as she eagerly watched the show, Emmanuel officially returned home.

Leaning over her shoulder so their heads were in line, he quietly asked, "See anything interesting?"

By the time the two of them came up for air they didn't really need, it was time to wrap things up and Emmanuel had no patience to wait. He wanted to clear everyone out of his house so he could spend at least a little time with his wife, and of course celebrate their good fortune, before he inevitably had to get back to work.

Not that he was going to let a good opportunity pass him by. By inviting everyone involved to the palace, he could help obscure the real meetings he wanted to have with the people he wanted to give higher Tier items too.

His plans were ruined as Matt approached instead of leaving with everyone else.

Very politely, Emmanuel used the last of his patience and asked, "You wanted to talk to me?"

“You didn’t see it already?”

Emmanuel briefly considered strangling his Ascender, but restrained himself when Carissa looked interested in hearing him out. When miniature clones of his Royals appeared, he let himself worry. Those ‘clones’ weren’t supposed to reveal themselves unless it was *very* important, given the costs involved in their use.

His stomach started to sink to his feet and further as Matt started to bounce as he struggled to stand in place.

“Maybe we can go to your office? Your most heavily warded office?”

Seeing his Royals and his wife giddy with anticipation, Emmanuel’s mood grew steadily worse until they sat down.

The worry unable to be suppressed any longer, Emmanuel asked, “*What?*”

Then Matt did something he didn’t expect, he stabbed himself and pulled a gem out of his chest.

No longer hidden by the veils Matt kept up at all times, the same ones Emmanuel was normally too polite to pierce, every warning sense he possessed started screaming as he felt the gem.

Emmanuel didn’t know what his Ascender had been hiding, but the energies inside the gem were raw and unfettered in a way that set him on edge, as if someone was scratching metal just behind him. At the same time, it reminded him of a mortal trying to approach an active volcano. The very heat would prevent them from getting too close even before they actually touched the lava in most cases, and he similarly wanted to squirm away until he wasn’t quite so close.

Trying his very best not to let his panic show, Emmanuel squeaked out, “Is that what I think it is?”

Seeing Matt shrug, Emmanuel’s desire to throttle his Ascender nearly peaked, but the words he said prevented any conscious moment. “Are you thinking this is a strange realm reward that can turn any item into a growth item, captured and preserved for the last few hundred years? If so, good guess because, yes, that’s exactly what this is.”

Emmanuel just looked at the Tier 30 in front of him and wanted to ask *why*. He thought Matt liked him, but clearly that was wrong. He hadn’t even sat down yet, and somehow, his recently acquired rewards were already being given to a greedy raven. Still, the very fact that Matt had captured a strange realm reward, and in doing so creating a new technique to manipulate his mana, was worth any price.

Emmanuel wanted to tear out his hair, as he sure as shit hadn’t seen this coming, but that was why he never let himself become dependent on future sight. It wasn’t what you saw coming that was the problem. It was the things you never saw that hit the hardest.

And he hadn't seen this coming. Not at all.

Emmanuel was far from happy, but there was no way he was letting this opportunity pass them by. Which was why he was already contacting JR before Matt finished explaining his ideas. Instead, he played along until JR finally reached his own capital world and got his message.

Seeing the raven was receptive, Emmanuel stood, trying not to vomit.

There were a few ways he'd consider this upcoming meeting a success and a million and one that he'd consider a failure.

They'd just have to see what happened.

Looking at Matthew, Emmanuel could only trust in his Ascender and hope that was enough.

Matt froze momentarily as Emmanuel stood up, not expecting the Tier 50 to be quite so decisive. Rather than dawdling, he filled his mana pool, said goodbye to everyone else and once he received well wishes in return, nodded and the two of them vanished.

He'd half expected them to appear in front of JR himself, but they'd teleported to the Empire border and flew into Corporation control chaotic space. They'd only traveled for a moment when a translucent raven intercepted them before vanishing as quickly as it appeared.

"Good, he knows we are here. Time to speed up."

Matt had thought they'd moved fast before, but traveling with a Talented Tier 50 changed his perception on speed. What would have taken the Unsparing months at full acceleration to cover was crossed in a matter of minutes as they arrived at the Corporation capital system.

Instead of taking them into real space, Manny looked to Matt and asked one last time, "Are you sure?"

Matt didn't quite trust himself to speak and so only nodded once more, to which Emmanuel grinned. "I've got your back."

Hearing those words did make Matt feel better, but nearly a thousand years of worry and stress were hard to discard with a few words. However, he did trust Manny, and that was all he could do if he wanted his item.

And he *wanted*. Matt wanted so badly he could taste it.

Entering real space he felt a gentle but indomitable pressure guiding him away from the area they'd selected to enter. Seeing that the Emperor didn't resist, he didn't waste his efforts. Due to the redirect, he wasn't all that surprised when they appeared in the single most advanced laboratory he'd ever seen.

Filled with top of the line, if not fully bespoke equipment, the enclosed room was *massive*, but it still managed to feel cluttered despite being perfectly tidy due to how many objects there were.

Seeing everything made Matt's heart race.

This was *exactly* the person he needed to make his armor.

The raven in question only looked confused as Matt arrived, his head tilted fully sideways as he cawed. Matt wasn't sure if Manny hadn't warned JR who the item was being made for or if the bird was acting, but it caught him off guard.

"I hadn't expected you to accompany your Tier 50, Chosen Titan. That said, it's lovely to see you. How are Legion and Wraith? All well, I hope? Do anything fun while we were gone? I hear you killed some people and gave away free information. Naughty naughty."

Matt looked to Emmanuel for guidance but his Tier 50 only shook his head, indicating he'd keep himself out of the upcoming conversation until necessary.

Trusting that Manny knew what he was doing, Matt replied, knowing there wouldn't be secrets after this.

"They are doing fine. We just settled the aura potion issue before coming here, which I'm personally pretty proud of. We *didn't* have to kill anyone to get our way, so don't take that squabble with Remi seriously."

JR bobbed his head as he listened and paced around the table he was standing on. "Ah, how *interesting*. You mention politics, and here she is."

Contrary to Matt's expectations, the person arriving wasn't Max or someone else he knew from the Corporations, but someone he knew of but had never met.

JR's secretary and the executor of his will when he wasn't there, Rosemarie Roger.

The woman had been with JR since he'd been Tier 10, and by all accounts, there was a level of trust between them that surpassed what many combat groups shared. The raven knew that she would execute his exact desires, and she knew that he would crush anyone who disrespected her for her being a lower Tier.

He'd done it before. Though with her at Tier 46, there weren't many people who *could* snub her for her Tier at this point.

Turning, JR excused himself with a bob of the head. "Sorry, Rose just arrived, and given how recently we returned, I have to deal with this. One moment please."

Then, at the same Tier 30 speed, he turned to Rosemarie and asked, "What are the reports?"

Unbothered by the Tier they were speaking at or their presence, Rosemarie finally looked up as she replied, "The economy took a hit when we expected at the rate we expected it, but it rallied around the new aura enchantments and those that have found success in that new field. In general, nine out of ten higher Tier businesses have, on the other hand, taken serious hits due to their over extension..."

Listening to Rose give the raven a breakdown of the Corporation economy, Matt was thoroughly confused. They were obviously putting on a show for him. They could have had the whole conversation at Tier 45 speeds before he processed the first question, which meant they had to be doing it for his benefit.

The question was why?

After several minutes of updates on economic status and high Tier political maneuvers, including things Matt was *sure* he wasn't supposed to overhear, he understood.

Or he thought he did.

Matt couldn't be sure and Manny wasn't helpful, silently watching without doing or saying anything, so he trusted his gut and kept his mouth shut.

Or he tried too.

"Timothy's is holding out on repaying their loans, claiming economic hardship, but we know they've been siphoning a portion of their profits into secret accounts. He's already preparing for an early bankruptcy, as everyone assumed a reset was coming when you returned."

JR flapped his wings, turning his head so he had Matt fully in his sight, "If that's the case, then do a probe into his business. Launch it immediately and cut them down to... Hmm, I don't know, how about seventy percent of their current size? Let's trim some fat. Sell off and liquidate, starting from the business types away from their core products. Let's remind him—. In fact, crack open everyone's books. If we are going to reset now, then let's do it. Let's cut everyone else down to say, eighty percent of their current size. That feels about right."

Then, as if he'd only just seen Matt, JR asked, "But maybe we should do something different?"

When Matt sat there, silently watching the show instead of replying, JR hopped in place until he faced him fully and plopped down to wait. He groomed a few feathers as if to show how comfortable he was.

Seeing that neither JR or Rosemarie were going to speak, Matt shrugged, "I don't know what you are expecting of me? Do you want my opinion? I don't see why and I don't particularly care to give it."

Smiling, despite having an ordinary bird beak, JR stood back up and walked to the edge of the table closest to Matt.

"Ahh see, now that is my question, Chosen Titan. Why are *you* here? Emmanuel said he wanted to talk about the defensive pact we'd discussed on the way back to settled space, so imagine my surprise when he wants to meet immediately and brings you... *Alone*. Does that mean he intends to make you his heir? Seems possible, even if not likely, but that's very interesting isn't it? And if I'm right, why *wouldn't* I want to see your thoughts and reactions to the current political situation given your own involvement in its creation? What better way to see the true worth of a man than what he does with unlimited power? Don't you hate our capitalistic mindset, Chosen Titan? Want to tear it down? Dare you speak? Dare I act?"

Nodding as he said his last sentence JR managed to send a shiver down Matt's spine. Or that was until he realized the mistake raven had made. Instead of correcting him, Matt raised a single questioning eyebrow as he stared right back.

"Then why not cut them *all* down to seventy percent?"

JR didn't hesitate and ruffled his wings in a return shrug, "Done. Is that all?"

Matt looked to Rosemarie, who looked entirely unbothered as she blinked at him, patiently waiting for him to make up his mind.

She seemed to see nothing wrong with this whole situation, and suddenly Matt wanted to see how far JR would go.

He didn't *hate* the Corporation, though he did disagree with them on a lot of things, but he was negotiating with a potential ally, and so he wasn't willing to push too far.

"Why not sixty?"

The words slipped out before he fully realized what he'd said, but JR didn't hesitate, nodding vigorously. "You heard the man, Rosemarie. Only stop cutting when sixty percent of each of the companies' fat is left. Give them a good trimming."

Before she could reply, not that she looked like she was in a rush, Matt pushed once more. "Why not fifty? A full half of their excess? Isn't that the reason behind the economic resets? To give new companies space to grow, you cut into the most feeble and the old? I know I've read at least one grandiose passage in a history book about 'ensuring most companies specialize, but once they become too large and unwieldy... I also read you guys only tend to do one when the economy is already going to shit anyway, so why hold back now? Why not *really* cut them down?"

Matt expected some degree of hesitation or push back, but JR didn't even need to speak before Rosemarie echoed back, "Fifty percent then."

Pausing, she waited for Matt to change his mind once more, but instead he felt a chill go through him as he saw how far they were willing to go.

They could always be bluffing, but Matt wouldn't bet a counterfeit credit on that chance.

Narrowing his eyes, Matt spoke one final time, meeting JR's eyes. "Forty percent."

JR's smile lit up his eyes as he tempted, "Why not go even lower?"

Matt immediately refused, "No. Honestly, forty percent is probably too far. I just wanted to see what you'd say."

Tutting, JR joined Matt in shaking his head, "Afraid at forty percent? Wouldn't it be fun to see what happens if we go lower? What about twenty five? Twenty? Fifteen? Ten? I think any of those might be more fun."

Realizing he had no idea what was going on or what the test was anymore, Matt held firm rather than retreating. "No, I just don't think cutting a business to less than half will allow many to survive. Any lower and I don't think there will be any chance at all. Honestly, sixty percent seems far more reasonable, given what I know of the practice, but I said what I said. It just feels foolish to listen to an outs—"

JR interrupted him with a flutter of his wings as he crossed the table. "*Boring!* We'll do forty. We aren't targeting their core operations, so it will be a good test for the various leaders. Also, you forget that those who run their businesses well enough, by that I mean they aren't cheating the system in one way or another, won't be overly impacted by our probe. It also won't hit the ones who are cheating and doing it better than we can detect, but good for them.

"What you are forgetting, Chosen Titan, is that this isn't the Empire. I am not bound by tradition to politic and negotiate; my Great Power doesn't do well with the constant meddling that your people seem wont to do. Personally, I feel like I missed my calling, but I do love my shines, so I think it worked out in the end, even if I would *love* to play the Great Political Game all the time. It's so much more fun and interesting to maneuver people without the might of my cultivation, but that isn't how *we* operate best. Instead, the Corporation flourishes when the Tier 50 allows our baser instincts to bloom, but that can't go unchecked forever. Our history isn't as monotone as your words imply, but that's fine... for now. We'll do as you say, forty percent. Now, why are *you* here?"

Still reeling from the whiplash due to the topic change and the Tier 50 seemingly determining a Great Powers policy on the whims of a foreigner, Matt looked to Manny, who only nodded. It was slow and firm, with the barest hint of a smile that he could only assume was from JR's misunderstanding, but it reassured him enough that he continued.

"I need an item made."

Like a deflating balloon, JR's interest waned. "Sorry, I'm quite busy and won't be taking commissions for the foreseeable future. Can you not see all the interesting and unique toys here? Rosemarie can get you a form to fill out and I'll look at it when I feel like it. If there is nothing else, you may leave now."

Clacking his way back over to the closest edge of the table, he slapped the table once, making a mountain of Tier 48, 49, and Tier 50 items appear and causing a racket as they settled

into a pile. Items available, the bird started to sort his loot, making a production of each item, but Matt could see that JR really was losing interest.

Not wanting to be rude, but knowing he was going to be, Matt turned to Rosemarie, "Would it be too much to ask you to leave? Sorry, this is very private."

For the first time, Rosemarie reacted to something he said. One of her eyebrows reached for her hairline, but she didn't reply.

The question did seem to catch JR offguard and he shot the idea down. "She's involved with all of my projects and day to day running of the Corporations. In short, don't waste your breath. If you are that worried, go somewhere else."

Seeing Manny not say anything, implying he'd expected this, Matt didn't hesitate any longer and shoved his hand into his chest.

That caused Rosemarie's other eyebrow to join the first, but JR didn't react until he withdrew the gem.

Matt hardly saw the bird move as he jumped backwards in short hops until he was hiding behind the pile of loot thanks to the Tier 50 losing control over his perception.

Peeking out from behind the pile, JR blinked at the gem several times before he kicked the pile of high Tier rift rewards into a nearby storage container. "Never mind, my schedule just cleared itself. ***What is that?***"

His final words were spoken with a gravity that finally got Emmanuel to speak for the first time since they arrived.

"A perfectly preserved strange realm's reward that turns any item into a controllable growth item. We want you to make the item."

"I want to be there when the gem is used."

JR hadn't looked away from the gem, but Matt had no issue with that requirement.

"Fine."

"Done!" JR lost several feathers in his excitement as he started bobbing up and down in what Matt knew from Liz was uncontrollable joy.

"What about the price?"

JR turned his smile to Manny. "Don't think about the *price*. Focus on the *results*."

Matt tried to interject, but he was ignored as the raven spent a full twenty minutes inspecting the reward before he pried himself away. "Please tell me you want something more complex than a new sword or *power armor*."

Feeling slightly better at the obvious interest, Matt shot Rosemarie a pleading look, but instead of indifference, she reached out a hand. "I have no interest in your secrets, but if it makes you comfortable, I'll sign this contract."

Seeing that the contract was legally binding by both Great Powers and already signed by the other three people in the room, Matt created and tossed her a single mana stone.

Because he wanted to show off, he created one of his liquid mana stones, which caught both JR and Rosemarie's attention. More than he'd expected, as the other Tier 50 caught the gem and redirected it to float in front of himself. After inspecting it for ten full minutes, he shivered several times at higher Tier speeds, losing even more feathers in the process.

"Chosen Titan, you should have started here. You had my attention, but now you *truly* have my interest."

Trying not to panic Matt forced out, "I believe it would be better if I simply showed you first and explained after."

Nodding, JR didn't pull his gaze away from the gem, but waved a wing for Matt to continue. After getting a nod from Manny, who activated several spells to isolate them, Matt took a deep breath.

Letting it out, he opened his eyes as he flicked a finger to JR with his design document, not saying a word. Instead, he started releasing one mana a second, even as JR pulled his head back in confusion.

Seeing that he had their attention, he bumped the mana expulsion to ten mana, and then started doubling every second, following his progression through the Tiers and making the pattern clear.

He'd only reached Tier 7, 160 mana a second, when JR let out a small exhale as he strained to get closer without leaving his table top. It took until Tier 9 for Rosemarie to understand, and he saw her pupils shink into pinpricks as he moved to finish his cycle in a rapid burst until he reached Tier 30 and went all out.

However, as he reached Tier 25 and started to rapidly empty his mana pool, Manny held up a hand. "That's enough." Turning to the others, he continued, "The pattern continues, but for obvious reasons, we can't continue. There are *no* limits on the production, such as time or outside energy requirements or spiritual strain. His mana simply needs to be low."

JR shivered as he tried to settle his feathers, but had to repeat the process several times before he started to pace across his work bench.

Head snapping around at Emmanuel, the bird cursed, "And you let him onto the battlefield!? Are you stupid!? What if he'd died? How could you risk that!?"

Emmanuel didn't respond and instead looked down and to the side.

Matt didn't understand, but both JR and Rosemarie started nodding. "You need to tell him about Icliz. Now, before we go any further."

However, JR raised a feathered wing instead of responding. "I see the problem, but let us work out the armor first. My interest is piqued and I *won't* be denied."

Hearing the words he'd been waiting years for, Matt grinned as a projection of his design appeared before them all and JR took a few moments to look it over.

"Interesting choices, Chosen Titan, very interesting. I can see and like the direction. Use the armor to help stabilize your spirit as you cast larger and larger spells. Combined with your unique mana gems, it will be a potent combo for that alone, but I have some questions I hope you answer, because I believe that your own understanding or lack thereof is limiting your designs choices."

"I already told you my biggest secret, so I don't have reason to hide anything at this point."

JR fluttered his wings in pleasure. "Wonderful. So you intend to try to claim this as your Aspect's Anchor?"

Matt froze. He hadn't written that down anywhere, but JR had noticed immediately.

"Was it that obvious?"

JR chuckled good naturedly as he hopped across his desk. "I've seen it all and the design choices you are taking, makes that obvious. Permanent implantation and regrowth functions are normal enough, but prioritizing that over raw defense? That means you are banking on using it as an Anchor. That's a good idea, but we can do better."

"What could possibly be better than binding it to my Domain?"

JR didn't answer and instead asked another question as the armor focused on the chest cavity. "Next, are you trying to manifest and stabilize your skills in your chest in your liquid mana gems? Very clever, but really now, why are you using a Raptid arrangement? It's only the third most optimal array for what you are trying to do."

Matt opened his mouth but found no words to speak. That had been his farther stretch goal for his design if JR seemed confident, but the Tier 50 had seen right through it and didn't throw him out.

Continuing to deconstruct his armor design, JR added, "And the idea of integrating power armor and Guild cybernetics is fun and clever, but a doomed idea. Also, it's adorable that you noted that you have permission to use their blueprints, but I don't care about that. Everything you've got permissions for, I've either licensed personally or I have access to something that's even better. While these are good I have access to better and if we want something beyond that we'll need *actual* secrets from Allister himself. For something like this,

you don't just want the raw might of power armor, you want *finesse*. That means Federation cybernetics, or maybe Guild implants depending on our final choices."

JR was on a roll as the blueprint started to rapidly update. "So, no power armor. Not if you're going to want this to be your Anchor. Not if you want this to help you with all that mana! No, no. It needs to be something you can *always* use. If you *really* must, we can aim to give it a strength-boosting effect as a tertiary power. It'll already be strengthening your mana, in a way - you do have [Archmage's Presence], yes? Good, good. Oh, and you have that lovely cracked armor skill, do you perhaps wish to integrate it with the growth item? I believe you have been working with Cosmind for some skill merging of some kind, should we add a skill integration with this Anchor? Or at least allow for seamless integrating. That *could* be fun, yes yes.

"But this should be a part of you, a second skin. It needs to grow with you, be as indestructible as you are! We can even keep a strength enhancement effect if you want in addition to more better defences than you originally envisioned. *That* stuff isn't hard. It's the very easiest. As for something harder... You mentioned stabilizing your skills inside of mana stones, and what you mean by that will determine much. Elaborate."

Finally given the chance to speak, Matt answered the question at hand, not willing to backtrack. "I was looking into ways to improve mana flows and after my own developments, I had the idea of creating liquid mana gems in my chest and forcing my skill structures into reality. Using that as a base, I then hope to then bypass any spell structure stabilization issues that might crop up by sending billions of mana into a single spell."

Instead of shooting his idea down, JR paced back and forth for a few seconds slowly picking up steam until he was a dark blur.

"Odd. Strange. Unique. Interesting. *Brilliant*. I like the idea. Yes, it's clever, but it won't be easy either. We'd need a way for your mana to better manifest. Hmm? Hmmm. Yes, I think this will work. What do you think about your armor growing better over time as you feed it more mana, Chosen Titan?"

"That sounds amazing. How?"

"That is the eternal question isn't it? Normally, I'd never suggest something like this, but with the gem and reports on its uses, I believe it's possible. We start by no longer focusing only inward or outward. Instead the armor should simply be... Well, it will still be subdermal armor, but it should be much thinner than your original design without being worse in any category, except *maybe* your strength amplification. But I have a solution for that. Tada!"

Throwing a wing up, JR showcased an image of Matt as lines started to grow and expand like a fungal map. Rather than being upset or weirded out, he tried to figure out what JR was showing him.

Appearing next to him, looking at the projection from his viewpoint, JR explained, "Why make the item have all the effects we want when we can *grow* more powers? By growing a mana filament weave through your skin and muscles off the foundation of the armor you already

outlined, we can further empower your muscles and bones, if not more. We'll need to consider it carefully, but I can see us encasing your bones in an ultra thin layer of mana crystal that's still connected to the armor. It could improve your defense considerably, but we can do so much more beyond that. Sure, if you lost a limb you'd need to *regrow* these additional effects, but you'll be so strong afterward, it shouldn't matter."

Before Matt could interject, JR continued, "Still, I agree you need a robust regrow function, but I'd rather tie that into your [Regeneration] and abuse how much mana you can bring to bear. Speaking of your mana, making this work with other armors is *fine*, but I'd recommend we go universal. Connection conduits on both hands and on your back so you can directly connect with your sword and-or other implements such as over armors. We can use a better variation of the new [Item Link] skill instead of specifically tying to a single item in particular. How does this sound?"

After taking a few minutes to look over the designs, Matt shook his head, not quite believing. "I love the idea, but I don't think half of this is possible. What is that base material? Its hardness ratings and magical throughput indexes *can't* coexist in the same material. It's physically impossible. Can *anyone* actually make this?"

JR snorted at him. "Of course I can. Now, onto the *specifics*. We need to start with something durable as the core for the armor. I heard you have a neutronium ingot, do you still have it? I don't have any on hand."

Not bothering to try and speak, Matt summoned the ingot, but the raven reached out and snatched the bar, cutting a corner off with a quick swipe of a talon.

"This will do nicely. We can use this as a baseline material, and then I'll do something better than claiming the growth item as your Anchor." Pausing, he immediately added, "Not that you shouldn't aim to make it your Anchor. That will be the bow that ties this all together, but I have something more fundamental we can bind the item to."

Hearing the same claim for a second time, Matt finally got the opportunity to ask, "What can possibly be better than binding the item to my Domain via my anchor?"

JR snapped his head to Matt and smiled as if he'd been waiting for that question for eons. "*You*. I will make this armor *you*. The armor, Matthew Moore né Alexander. Of course, that would require you being alright with *giving* the armor your name. Or, more practically, you will need to give *me* your name, and I shall in turn imbue it into the armor. You would reclaim the name upon donning the armor, of course. But once you do... It wouldn't matter if you decided to break your Domain, to shatter your spirit, the armor would be perfectly fine so long as some part of you is 'not dead'."

Grinning, the raven posed as he drove his point home. "I can bind the item to your very person. Make it a core part of you, just like the flesh and bones you were born with. True, perfect integration. Think about it."

Becoming suspicious, Matt narrowed his eyes. “How? This sounds fantastical, and I know Aiden.”

JR smiled and gestured to the table next to him where a normal adjustable wrench appeared. “Adjustable wrench.”

Then as Matt was about to ask for clarification, he experienced a massive wave of vertigo as JR repeated himself. “Adjustable wrench.”

Except it wasn't his mind that experienced the vertigo, rather it was the world that warbled for a brief instant as JR did whatever he'd done.

Matt had no idea how he understood the words JR spoke, as he couldn't repeat the word and neither had his [AI] been able to record the information, but that all seemed immaterial as he saw what JR had done.

Above the adjustable wrench, floating in mid-air, a perfect replica of the wrench hung suspended, except it was illusionary.

Except it was also very, very real. More real than the other wrench.

Matt couldn't explain how, but when he reached out and took the slightly see-through wrench, he wasn't at all surprised when it felt like any other metal adjustable wrench he'd used. Flicking his thumb, the head adjusted open and closed smoothly, yet through it all he could see through the wrench.

Tapping it to the table Matt couldn't observe a difference between a normal item and whatever the raven had done.

A puffed up JR gestured to the other... wrench.

Matt's mind slipped and the world blurred as his mind tried to call the item on the table an adjustable wrench, except he couldn't as it no longer was that. It was static, still a wrench, but no longer adjustable in any way shape or form.

Picking it up, he knew even before he tried, the screw which should have rotated the slide was seized solid. Even throwing his own considerable strength at the effort, Matt could feel the metal would break before it shifted in the slightest fashion.

Matt looked up, startled to find JR was mere inches from his face, and he flinched backwards.

The bird looked at him with a piercing gaze, and spoke with the most deadly serious tone he'd ever heard from him, “Matthew Moore, I am JR. CEO of The Assembly of Corporations. I work wonders, fashion the fantastical, implement the impossible and I do it all on a daily basis. To forge reality itself is my trade, to gild the stars my passion. I have wrought horrors beyond your comprehension and assembled paradises beyond that. When I inform you of what I can do, *do not* make the mistake of believing it is in jest.”

Matt met black eyes unblinking. “So, are you going to take *me* out of ‘me’ or not?”

JR ruffled his feathers, having returned to a more comfortable distance faster than Matt could follow, and spoke in his more normal voice. “Obviously. That's what I said.”

Pointing the two wrenches at each other, Matt blanched, “But what will be left of me?”

JR shrugged. “Titan. Quill. Perhaps even Matthew Alexander. People are far more complex than any wrench, and while anyone shall be *diminished* by the loss of their name, you already possess alternate ones. You shall simply have to make do with them for the few months in which I shall require your name. It is not quite the first step, but it needs to be done at the start. Which does call my mind back to the fact, I shall require your aid in collecting certain items from the returning explorers. This shall be expensive, as many Natural Treasures shall be partially utilized in this construction, but you will find it worthy, yes yes. Oh, and I shall need you around for perhaps a decade or two as we make the armor. No delving at all, as the time I shall have to devote to this project shall be rather unpredictable, and you must be within the same real space as I when I do need your presence.”

“I can agree to the shape of this idea but...” Trailing off, Matt looked at Manny, bringing JR’s attention to him as well.

“I guess we do need to discuss our own dealings. I assume this is your bargaining chip for a defensive agreement? I see why you need it. The others won’t let you keep him. Not with your own power set. You're expecting a true war, then? What are your terms?”

Emmanuel flicked a packet, which Matt was surprised to also receive, as it outlined a defensive pact with the Empire in the event of a true war. The prices were also something Matt only could have imagined in a daydream or possibly a nightmare, depending on who was saying it.

Manny intended to Tier up everyone’s capital worlds to Tier 50 should they win, or at least survive, the true war to end the artificial bottleneck that existed in the Realm. It wasn’t only generous, but mind boggling in scale.

Neither of the other two seemed to believe it either, as all three blurred for over a minute before they returned to a level of proprioception that Matt could follow.

Manny was frowning, but both JR and Rosemarie were smiling from ear to ear.

Grimacing, the Emperor pulled out three Tier 50 resources and a Tier 48 gourd before tossing them over to the raven.

Squawking happily, JR smiled at Matt.

“So, do you agree?”

“Have you used this on someone else before? What happened?”

JR sent him a data packet and what Matt found... mildly reassured him.

“You have two main names you go by, so you *should* default to Titan unless you have a nickname I’ve never heard about. I won’t pretend it will be pleasant, but the pain will be worth it.”

Reminding himself that any temporary discomfort was worth it, Matt accepted. “Then I accept your redesign and general idea. I’d be dumb not to, it’s an all round improvement to my original. That is *if* you can do everything you proposed.”

JR waved his worries away. “You’ll get to see the entire process by virtue of the nature of this item needing your input.”

Rapidly turning, he cackled at Manny, “And the deal is struck! Our people can work out the smaller details, but I agree all-round.”

Turning to Matt, the raven let out several cawing sounds, “Want to know what price I got? Oh! Do you want to know *another* secret? I’ll tell you *that* for free.”

Having had enough high Tier shenanigans for one day, Matt declined, “Not particularly, but I don’t think that will matter.”

Far too happy, JR cawed, “It won’t! The price is fantastic. When Emmanuel Tiers up his Capital planet, the Corporation homeworld must reach the same Tier as the highest Tier settled world within a decade! That, and enough mana to fuel a hundred Tier 50 rift delves at full capacity with all of Emmanuel’s best Talents in effect. No more holding back on *my* rifts. Though that will only go into effect in the event we win.”

Losing most of his joviality, JR caught Matt’s eyes and held them. “Matthew, you must understand, I *just* got to delve high Tier rifts, and now here you come offering to make Tier 50 rifts that we can delve to our heart’s content. Why would I decline, even at great risk?”

Leaning in, the raven’s joy returned as he whispered, “As for the secret? Did you know the Corporations is officially for sale?”

Seeing Matt’s surprise, he continued, sending a contract with a wave of his wing, “I’m not joking. The current standing offer is a tad high, but I didn’t set it. I’m even willing to negotiate it down a bit. Emmanuel doesn’t seem like he’s willing to let you take over the Empire, so do you have any interest in buying the Corporations so you can play ruler before you Ascend? That Tier 50 Talent won’t upgrade itself if you don’t. Why not take a look?”

Seeing the price stated on the first line, Matt stopped looking. “This starts with a guarantee that every corporation citizen be raised to Tier 25, as well as have their wages guaranteed for three generations, along with the Tier 25 requirement. It also has to keep up with inflation and lifestyle creep and... This is absurd.”

JR barked a laugh at Matt’s response. “It’s a high price, but a very real one. Anything is for sale here Matthew ne Moore, even our loyalty. I—”

Emmanuel interrupted the bird saying a single word. “Below.”

Matt raised an eyebrow, but JR sighed. "Ever heard of Icliz the Mad?"

Not being in the Empire and in a sealed lab protected by two Tier 50s, he couldn't look it up and so shook his head, unable to speak. Thankfully, JR was willing to elaborate without forcing him to verbally ask.

Matt almost wished he had, as it might have delayed the answer if not for the knot of fear that wormed its way into his throat.

Hopping onto nothingness, JR got close enough that he was only a few inches from Matt before he smiled up at him and whispered, "He's the Corporations' mana font."