

Sorry about the sudden notice but I'm going to pause the Patreon for a month and take a bit of a longer break before we get into the upcoming arc. The story will continue but I acknowledge that I need a longer break and the best way to do so with the Pateron model is to pause payment for a month, so that's what I'm going to do.

I'll have more information about pausing at the end of chapter note but here is the link: <https://support.patreon.com/hc/en-us/articles/214013323-How-to-pause-billing-for-your-members>

TLDR: we'll pick back up on february 20th, sorry for the delay but I need to recharge my creativity.

Chapter 483

Once the first auction was officially underway, a dozen additional auctions kicked off as well, but there were few listings that really caught his interest during the first week. There were appealing items, yes, but not so much that he wanted to buy them at such inflated prices.

Still, his lack of interest didn't make things dull, far from it, but that was why he was in a private room with a smaller group, taking a break from the larger group in the central room.

Getting notified about an item, he was prepared to ignore it. But after seeing the item's tags, he interrupted his conversation with Sam about how aura potions affected the high Tier mortal cosmetic industry, to change the auction they were idly watching.

Vinnie backhanded Matt's leg, trying to grumble through a mouthful of food. Rather than arguing, he dutifully rewound the recording to watch the item's full introduction.

While they did that, he slapped the bid button a few times to ensure he didn't miss out as the price climbed higher and higher.

Seeing a very attractive woman walking down the stage to the equally attractive auctioneer, all of Matt's friends raised their eyebrows at his choice of item, but he immediately shook his head.

"I wasn't the one who wanted to see the auction start from the start."

Sam, seeing the title protested, "A noble-only auction? How is that fair?"

Matt only rolled his eyes, having checked the previously sold items. "Watch this item and tell me if you'd want to buy the stuff on offer here."

As they'd talked, the item was delivered to the auctioneer, who revealed it with a flourish.

Obviously made out of a Tier 13 essence stone, that was where the description fell apart. Rather than a small sphere, the item was a ribbon only a hair's width, frozen in a perfect mobius strip larger than most dinner plates.

After the auctioneer gave them a moment to appreciate the item, he pulled a normal Tier 13 essence stone out of his spatial ring and crushed it without saying a word, letting the Natural Treasures speak for itself.

And it did.

The essence released from the stone was instantly swept up by the item and pulled into a vortex through the mobius strip.

Kyle shrugged as the in-person crowd started murmuring. "Yeah, I don't get it."

Matt waited a moment for comedic effect and pointed at the auctioneer right as he started speaking. "Did I mention the range of this Natural Treasures is eighty miles from itself in all directions on worlds of its own Tier? Silly me. On lower Tier worlds, it scales until Tier 5 worlds, where it has a range of almost two hundred miles. That's the lowest the Empire is allowing this item to be used on. Everyone has thirty seconds to review the attached information. Bidding starts at a Tier 35 mana stone, which is also how the item's Tier is being treated for purposes of the sale, allowing anyone to bid without penalty."

"How does that equal anyone being able to bid? Shouldn't this be like every other auction item with Tier penalties?"

Matt sighed. "This being a ducal item? Nope. Therein lies my problem. Let's catch up to current. This might be a bit fast, as they are operating at Tier 25 speeds for this auction, but we can slow it down if we need to."

Sam, passing a plate of finger food, asked with her cheeks bulging, "Are you still bidding?"

"Of course I am."

Still mid-chew, she waved him to go ahead. "It's fine then. I wanna see you win! I'll boost for a bit."

Seeing the current bid, she started choking, as did all of his old friends.

Vinnie, clasping his throat squeaked out, "Why would anyone pay that much? It's only a Tier 13 Natural Treasure."

Matt rolled his eyes. "I haven't even started bidding seriously yet, and I bet a lot of others haven't either. Change your perspective. I'm not buying this item, my duchy is, because really it is a ducal level item. In fact..."

Seeing a comatose Phoenix Liz next to a platter of hors d'oeuvres, he poked her rounded stomach, waking her up as he continued his explanation. "According to the provided

information, this item will increase ambient essence levels in entire *cities*, allowing for those who cultivate ambient essence to progress something like seventy percent faster. Multiply that by self admittedly stringent regulations stating we can only use it for a year or so per city, and a decade per planet, so as to not disrupt the planet's natural essence cycles."

Vinnie continued to poke at the projection as if to change reality. "But how does that equal a Tier 40 mana stone? No, excuse me, a Tier 41 mana stone, silly me."

Phoenix Liz, having woken up, plopped onto the chair next to Matt and transformed into human Liz.

"I'll eat another plate of hors d'oeuvres if it doesn't sell for at least a Tier 43 price."

Sam rolled her eyes, poking Liz's now flat stomach. "I don't think we need to make a bet with you in order for you to do that. But *why*?"

Liz grinned right back, "Nope! In fact, I'm putting in a new order, who wants to join in."

As Matt threw a few interesting recommended items onto the list, he idly watched as the price of the Natural Treasure slowly crept to Tier 42, fearing it might blow past his initial estimation.

Seeing a small delay at 300 Tier 41 mana stones, Matt wasn't at all surprised when a much higher bid appeared, pushing the item to Tier 42 all at once, confirming his worst fears. Naturally, it was made by a hereditary ducal family, marking the first entrant of the real players, as well as those with revealed names.

Flicking the button to increment the bid, Matt let his own presence be felt for the first time since his initial few bids.

Unlike many of the auctions, this nobility-only auction didn't have hidden identities enforced, and social etiquette considered it *shameful* for any Marquess' or Duke's to hide themselves. Or so was the official story. In reality, most Duke's and Marquess' wanted to flaunt their identities, so it was more a matter of allowing the powerful to do as they wished while still offering protection for the lower Tier nobility.

That was also why the auction had started with the item being labeled as Tier 35. Anyone lower than a Duke wasn't the item's target audience.

As their food arrived, Kyle asked, "Yeah, but why does that mean the item is that valuable? I see its use, but it's *Tier 13*."

Liz sighed, nodding in agreement. "Some team got stupid-lucky there. What an ideal find. As to answer your question, you are simply underestimating the value we can generate internally using this Natural Treasure. If we wanted to, we could force our Barons, Viscounts, and Counts to do pretty much anything we wanted for the chance to have this item make it to their planets on a regular rotation."

Matt took over when Liz took another bite of her cranberry fig and goat cheese spread, using her distraction to butter his own slice of toast, having smelled it. "We have an undersized duchy and we have hundreds of worlds under Tier 15. That's the majority of our duchy in fact. Every single one of them would want to get access to this item. Following the current regulation means a decade of use, with at least a century before another, but during that decade even the moderately wealthy from every nearby planet will flood to that world to cultivate faster. That brings in both short and long term benefits, so long as the local ruler wasn't an idiot. Then multiply that by forever. It's a portable economic boon that can be moved around at-will. How wouldn't it be super valuable?"

As he took his bite, Liz raised an eyebrow, waiting for more questions.

Sam couldn't resist asking. "What's your highest price?"

Matt shrugged, wanting to keep up the mystery, but Liz gave a more reasonable answer.

"Below ten Tier 44 mana stones is about where I put it. Any more and I wouldn't feel it's a good deal."

Matt shook his head. "That's already higher than I have it, to be honest. My internal limit was one Tier 44."

Liz bobbed her head around as she considered before raising two fingers. "Let's meet somewhere in the middle?"

Not having an issue with that, he agreed, while the others looked on in shock.

When the door to their private room opened and Melinda and Mathew squeezed in, the others immediately started complaining about how much Matt and Liz were spending.

Mathew was unsympathetic to their plight. "How do you even have that much money? I understand the older duchies buying super valuable items like this, but how can *your* duchy afford it? You only have a sub-Tier 40 ducal capital."

Matt wagged his hand, even as Liz explained, "We still have a duchy's worth of planets under us, which adds up. Sure, it's a half-sized duchy, but Matt and I don't touch our portion of our official coffers. Additionally, you are underestimating the draw of a high Tier aspected planet and how many high Tiers that brings. We have something like four to five hundred Tier 40's living on Palustris and they all pay tax. Sure, it's not as much as a kingdom-level capital, but it puts us on the higher end of ducal capitals alone. So we can afford to buy one or two of these very expensive items, but even we can't compete if one of the long term ducal families gets a bug in their ass, unless we want to tap into our personal wealth. Then we can tango, but I don't think it's worth *that* much."

That seemed to catch all of them off guard, before Melinda rolled her eyes. "They mean their Ascender funds. Each movie must print you guys money."

Matt shook his head, "According to Allie, it's still poor compensation for having the terrible movies made about us. It—"

He was interrupted as Allie fell through nothing and into their room, pulling Aster through by her 'tail'. She managed the illusion and the switch masterfully as she and Allie fell on Sam and Kyle.

After finding their own spots in the now much more cramped room, Matt sighed. "I already called this item, you can't see it and start fighting me."

Neither of them were interested, but when Zack opened the door and tried to bring Susanne into the room, Matt had enough. Tapping into the room's AI, he dismissed the walls, returning their once private room to the main area, letting their couch reform around the central projector and merging them with the others who'd been watching a different auction.

"I hate all of you."

Getting a laugh, Matt started bartering with Zack to keep him out of the bidding, promising him complete access to the item if he wanted to study it. His capitulation didn't solve the other bidders, and soon the item ticked up to 390 Tier 43 mana stones, where everyone grew hesitant to bring it over the next threshold.

Seeing the auctioneer start to speak, Dominus represented the Maniakes duchy and raised the bid twice to 392.

As the countdown started creeping its way down from five, Matt raised the bid three times, hoping to scare off anyone lurking.

However, his bid had the opposite effect, and Silvia Dobrescu immediately pushed the bid to 1 Tier 44 mana stone.

Wanting to capitalize on the moment, Liz raised the bid once, doubling the price aggressively.

That finally caused a considerable pause, as for the first time, the timer ticked below two seconds.

One.

The moment before the auction would have concluded, someone else raised the bid and they bowed out. It was a valuable item, but not something either of them were willing to fight with the more established noble families for.

And they fought.

Enough so that Matt didn't feel any heartache when the Natural Treasure eventually went to the Wyatt family for 24 Tier 46 mana stones.

It was an enormous purchase, but one Matt was confident the crafting corvids that were the Wyatt's could take advantage of. Feeling some of his bias towards JR bleed over to his feathery cousins, Matt forced himself to send Peter a nice message congratulating him for the win.

Not that they lingered long. With an Empire's worth of items, the next auction began. Seeing it, Matt dismissed his station, joined the others, and watched one of the weapon auctions they'd been betting on.

While ostensibly for the breach and the items pulled out of it, craftsmen who hadn't been sitting on their hands wanted to limit their spending. As such, top of the line item auctions were almost more common than Natural Treasure ones, and would continue to be so for the first two weeks.

True mastercraft items made by renowned crafters or entire crafting teams would only be sold in the final days and they weren't quite there yet.

However, that was ideal for Matt's purpose. After several rounds of reassurances, he finally convinced his lower Tier friends they really could spend as much as they'd like on their own Tier items. He understood they didn't want to come off as leeches who only hung around him for his money, but there was only so much convincing he could do.

Thankfully, once Aster convinced Annie to bid and buy a pair of delving daggers that could teleport to each other, along with a host of other functions, the others started getting things that interested them.

While they were paying a premium, they were still getting excellent items from crafters who normally had waiting lists centuries long. Even if the items weren't truly tailor made, anything good enough to be sold at the Capital auctions was better than what they could normally access. At the same time, he understood they couldn't afford such things under normal circumstances, but that was why he was trying to give them money in the first place.

An unintended side effect of their purchasing so many items was it helped pass time quicker, as it gave the middle weeks far more meaning than they otherwise would have.

Not that it took too long for items and treasures they did want to start appearing. A large portion of the month flew by. Though, unlike most of his vacations where he was able to visit friends, he didn't dread the ending, knowing many of the people slipping in and out of their suite would go to the Corporations.

Thankfully, he found almost all of the items he needed sprinkled through the month. He paid close to thirty percent more than the base price on average, but he didn't care, only happy to find them at all. That was the advantage of scale. With enough people, someone was bound to have found at least one of most of anything.

Most wasn't all though, and there were two Natural Treasures he'd seen neither hide nor hair of. The first and most worrisome was a Tassal of Lament, which, according to JR's design document, would be one of the core items required to stabilize his mana gems.

Already the rarest type of Natural Treasure, its effect didn't lend itself to being sold at all. Able to stabilize the spirit even in the case of horrific spiritual damage, giving a second chance at life, Matt was hoping his mention in the Ascender chat would find him what he needed. No one in the Empire had even heard a rumor of the Natural Treasures appearing, but that meant little for the others.

At the same time, he was already looking into the alternatives. But sadly, he had none for the second item he hadn't found yet.

Rather than a specific item, JR had simply given him a criteria on mana throughput to meet.

The problem was that he hadn't seen anything better than a Gilbert Fiddle, which only reached eighty percent of his requirements. As much as he'd love to blame JR, the problem was entirely Matt's. Mana throughput wasn't too rare of a secondary effect in Natural Treasures, but with how much mana he made, the item either needed to be much higher Tier and have it as a secondary effect, or have it as a primary, core effect.

However, he'd found nothing in weeks of searching and was hoping to get a pleasant surprise in the final week. Thankfully, his luck wasn't everyone else's.

Liz made out excellently, getting three blood based Natural Treasures she wanted to try and alchemize into herself in as many days. The first, U-Rapture, was typically used by blood mages who wanted to add a degree of hallucinogenic to their spells, but that wasn't what she wanted with it.

At least not entirely.

Liz didn't just want to add the effect to her Ichor spells, she wanted to add it to *herself*. The same went for the Last Drop Blood Ginseng and the Violent Vitality that she managed to get her hands on.

Entering the final week, things started to pick up, with the true big ticket items getting released. Paradoxically, the outside venues also got more rambunctious, as most had no more money to spend, while their room calmed down as they prepared to get serious.

Not that it stopped *all* of the partying, as their friends turned each auction into a reason to celebrate or commiserate.

Only twenty minutes into the day's auctions, Matt took over the main room's projectors to the hoots and hollers. However, they died down when they saw the 'cannot bid', indicating it was one of their items as everyone grew interested.

Same as most, an attractive staff member brought the covered items out, letting the moment build as their steps echoed on the recordings.

The auctioneer did her part, launching into the introduction as the music started to rise. Being in the main hall, she had more than a few interested eyes, but she didn't rush, forcing everyone's attention to her.

Only when she had it did she speak, "Ladies and gentlemen, don't let the appearance of these *items* fool you. They are worth every mana stone we are asking for. We have three of these novelties now, and only a few more during our grand finale. If you haven't believed a single word I've said this month, believe *this*. Don't let this opportunity pass you by."

Having teased the audience enough, the auctioneer pulled back the covering, revealing two Tier 14 and one Tier 26 skill upgrade orbs laid out in a standing triangle.

Spiritual senses swept the items from everyone as people tried to figure out how something as ordinary as skill upgrade orbs made their way onto such an important stage, but feeling that only made Matt giddy, knowing what was coming.

Having expected that as well as Matt, the auctioneer spoke as the viewers finished scanning, explaining what they probably didn't believe. "As verified by both the auction house and Imperial government, these are *elemental* skill orbs. As their name might imply, these skill orbs function similarly to normal skill upgrade orbs, effectively raising the Tier of a skill, but these impart a specific elemental aspect to singular spells. With so few orbs, testing was limited, but it's confirmed that opposing elemental pairings work just as well as same mana pairings. Though, neither are believed to be the best use case of such items, so do consider the results carefully. More information is being made available now on the listing and everyone has one minute to review before the auction starts. As for the three presented here, let me introduce them. We have one Tier 26 Air elemental orb, one Tier 14 Metal upgrade orb, and finally, the crowning orb of this batch: one Tier 14 *Spectral* mana orb. As the first time these items have been seen, we have been permitted to start the auctions for all three as Tier 26 items. Good luck everyone."

For those who hadn't gone into chaotic space, they turned to Matt and the others and demanded to hear about the strange realm that produced them.

Their curiosity wasn't uncommon, which was why Titan's Torch had coordinated with the auction, revealing what information they'd learned about the elemental skill orbs.

So far, they hadn't been able to make a rift that produced them, but that was part of the reason why Matt was willing to sell the possibly unique orbs at an open auction. He wanted attention and a high price tag.

Having buried his hatchet with Mackenzie Harrington and her ilk, Matt wanted to remind not only them, but everyone else, that rifts could do far more than make aura. Aperology was a dreadfully underfunded branch of research, and he hoped stoking people's desires would see the field widen further. For all of their reproducibility issues, such as the Talented aperologist

being unwilling to travel, they had a better chance at forcing the creation of a rift that dropped elemental upgrade orbs than his guild.

That admission wasn't Matt giving up on the idea of his guild or other non-Talented cultivators discovering the true science behind aperology. Far from it. However, he acknowledged that while he'd done a lot, he hadn't *truly* changed the way people looked at rifts. Funding for most projects was both limited in amount and targeted in scope.

Privately, in his wildest aspirations, Matt envisioned a realm where every rift was bespoke. Where its creation was scientific, where its monsters were known, where its layout was expected, where the set rewards were exactly what a community needed because they chose them. It was far from realistic in the short term, but entirely possible in theory, so far as he understood the development of the various cultivation industries; the same way that in the beginning of the Realm's history, only Talented alchemists could make potions, whereas now anyone with some training could perform once miraculous acts as a commonplace routine. It might take a few trillion years after his ascension but he wanted to firmly plant those seeds.

Watching the traffic to the news stations, as well as seeing the wave of messages being blocked by his filters, Matt hoped he might have shaken up people's beliefs on aperology, but knew only time would prove him right or wrong. That was, in fact, why they were selling all but two of the elemental upgrade orbs, with them being kept around as scientific references.

It was also why they'd saved a few for the Minkalla auction. Matt felt a little bad about what they were going to do to Gideon and Eclavorn with the Plasma orb, but not so bad as to change their plans. The dragon deserved a twig on the tail for his reaction to Matt before the expedition.

He hadn't wanted to work with Mackenzie Harrington, but when she reached out a year after their initial aura reforms, reporting the first of her punishment rifts completed, he'd brought up the orbs and their potential. It was both a carrot to reward her for creating rifts whose physical layout perfectly suited the farming needs of the local community, instead of taking an easy way out, and a way to remind her that he wasn't done making aperology a household idea.

He still felt slimy working with her, but he'd demanded his own restrictions for any Talented aperologist who managed it, which he felt was a worthy price.

Not that his requirement was onerous. He only demanded they actually make the rifts and not deliberately create artificial scarcity. Not that he set the quotas high. He wasn't interested in forcing people to work against their will, but creating a hundred rifts over the same number of years was far from onerous when he *didn't* set price limits.

Matt was confident they only needed one success for widespread investment to come pouring in. Until then, everyone would be burning their personal funds at an atrocious rate, trying to make a rift that dropped elemental upgrade orbs.

Once the Tier 14 metal one started taking bids, the price immediately shot up to a Tier 35 mana stone, where it continued to climb without pause until it reached 122 Tier 37 mana stones.

Scanning the general crowd's reactions with his spiritual sense, Matt smiled. Everyone he observed in the open crowd was talking about the limited testing they'd shared. Many dreamed about rounding out one of their main spells with an extra element, or covering a weakness by circumventing their element's counter.

It was all theoretical, but the buzz was there.

When it finally sold to a Tier 40 fire cultivator for 316 Tier 39 mana stones, Matt joined everyone celebrating their luck.

"Aster, no!!!!" Cameron protested as Aster used her and several others of her late arriving friends tried to get a wave started, before it devolved into something closer to a mosh pit.

Even with the larger crew split, they were making a fortune on the first orb alone. And it wasn't even the best thing they had to sell.

Riding that high, they watched in anticipation as the Tier 26 air skill upgrade orb ended up selling for 173 Tier 43 mana stones. They'd expected a higher price thanks to a multitude of factors but they hadn't dared dream quite so large. However, even that new high was merely an appetizer to the spectral elemental upgrade orb.

Watching the auctioneer introduce the spectral orb, Matt wanted to give them a hug. "While I'm sure the interested parties are already aware, let me explain for everyone else. Spectral mana is an incredibly rare mana type with many explorations never finding any related Natural Treasures. Why you ask? Because of its *composition*. It's a Level 3 mana type, and as such, it's made out of Mist, Shadow, and Illusion mana, which means two thirds of its component mana types are already rare Level 2 mana types, and the Level 1 Shadow mana isn't exactly common."

Pausing, the auctioneer smiled, giving the crowd time to speculate and look up relevant information. "While this may not surprise many, that results in intangibility. While combatants have little need to explain why they might desire such an ability, it is more sought by *crafters*. While I wouldn't want to speak on secrets, the most common use of a spectral crafting skill would allow, say, a smith the ability to selectively forge the internals of an item with their main forging implement. Good luck everyone."

Similar to the other two orbs, the Tier 26 starting price was quickly forgotten about. It quickly rose to Tier 40, but things only started to slow down deep into Tier 42.

As the auctioneer said, Spectral mana was famous, even infamous, in crafting circles. Even limited to a single skill, it offered incredible versatility to any crafter's arsenal, which was why they'd make it the third orb sold, rather than the first. They needed news to spread and for

interested parties to start paying attention. Originally, the auction house planned for it to be in the final day's auction, but at their group's urging, the presenters ultimately chose to present it as the pinnacle elemental upgrade orb of the first batch, rather than the second best of the final day.

After running the simulations, they were even happy to do so after seeing how much higher it would drive the price of the Tier 26 *Firmament* upgrade orb. As tempted as he and everyone else had been to keep the stupidly rare upgrade orb for themselves, it was of too low Tier to be used on their core skills, and as such, they'd decided to sell it after getting the okay from Manny.

Seeing the price tick over into the Tier 45 mana stone range, Matt watched in trepidation with everyone else as the countdown slowly edged closer and closer to zero. Each new bid bought them five seconds of relief, at least five seconds relative to a Tier 25's perception. That same amount of time could be an eternity for the Tier 40s who were engaged in the bidding war, but one by one, anonymized ID's stopped appearing as the price ticked higher.

When it finally hit zero and the bidding officially ended, their entire room sagged in relief, before exploding in celebrations at the final price.

211 Tier 45 mana stones, which made the Tier 14 Spectral skill upgrade orb one of the items in the auction that had the largest difference between its Tier and its final selling price. If it had been a Tier 26 orb, Matt was fairly confident the price might have been even higher even if the relative difference was smaller. However he didn't dwell on such possibilities and was content with what they'd gotten so far.

Instead, he raised his glass to Allie's incoherent speech and fell back into a couch with Liz, enjoying the satisfaction of a successful expedition.

Sending a message to the rest of the crew to mark the celebration, they looked to see even Susanne being visibly moved by the final price. Matt knew how hard she worked to cover the resource gap inherent between Ascenders and everyone else, while also not relying on any of them. While well taken care of in the army, she wasn't as free as they were, and many of her merits were spent as fast as she got them.

Seeing her giggle repeatedly even got Zack to laugh, prompting exuberant comments from everyone else, which culminated in him finishing two drinks in rapid succession to even louder cheers.

Having incredibly flush pockets, they were a bit more aggressive in their following bidding. While none of them went crazy, all of them let things they didn't really need go when the prices got too high, they didn't hesitate to go all-in when they did need something. Given they were mainly buying for themselves, it wasn't too hard, as the items they were mainly interested in were in the Tier 30 to Tier 35 range. Thus preventing most Tier 40s from being able to snap them up.

They were watching the final moments of a displacement flower when Susanne changed the projection, but she only rewound the video to the item's description to several boo's.

"Only working for those with air or force aspected mana, this Natural Treasure creates a hyper fine edge on any weapon. Best used with skills like [Wind Cutter], [Wind Slash], [Wind Blade], [Hypersonic Edge] and so on, it's a must have fo—"

The man's voice was cut off as Susanne skipped ahead to the current bidding, to several more good natured protests.

She ended up getting the item, but the Tier 31 Natural Treasure ended up costing her 210 Tier 39 mana stones after she got in a bidding war with a Tier 35 who seemed to want it as badly as she did.

Thanks in large part to their recent elemental orb sale and her cut, Susanne was more than capable of holding out, despite the five Tier gap.

However as they entered the final day things truly started to heat up as the best items the Empire had wrestled out of the breach were unveiled.