

Tech System 751

Chapter 751 Signing of the Ceasefire

"From forcing nation leaders to sign surrender agreements to now signing a ceasefire agreement with aliens on behalf of the empire—who would've thought all this would happen in less than a decade?" an alluring woman remarked as she disembarked from her ship. The ship's tractor beam engaged, gently guiding her toward the designated location for the signing.

She was a member of Nyx, one of the few who had been active even before the Unification War, and despite the ceasefire not yet being in effect, she showed no signs of nervousness. In fact, she seemed excited—not at the risk of an accidental firing ending her life, but because of what this ceasefire hinted at. The signing of this agreement suggested the possibility of a larger peace, and an end to the conflict. And what followed would be a battlefield of intelligence gathering, one of a scale previously never imagined. This prospect thrilled her far more than any conventional war ever could.

Although she had always enjoyed her work, it often felt lacking in true challenge. Even before the unification, they held technological supremacy, meaning very few secrets remained hidden from them. The cult, which once posed a threat by not relying on technology, had been a brief anomaly—one quickly dealt with.

But now, for the first time in years, it seemed like there was an actual game to be played. The newly opened frontier presented a real opportunity—an arena where Nyx operatives would truly be needed. The vast expanse of potential allies and enemies, each with their own secrets to uncover, promised the challenge she had longed for. Spying, once routine, would now become an art again.

While her mind worked in the background, focused on the approaching representative, they finally reached the point where the formal exchange was expected. However, just as they neared, she felt an odd sensation—an attempt to breach her mind.

"Let's not do that and focus on what we're here to do," she said calmly, realizing the Zelvora representative had tried to infiltrate her thoughts. The psychic shield in her headgear had blocked the attempt, causing the Zelvora to experience a slight backlash. Fortunately, it was minor, as his intent hadn't been malicious—at least, not overtly. He had been trying to create a mental network for easier communication.

"Please forgive me for the misunderstanding," the Zelvora said, his tone carrying remorse, as translated by the device. "I wanted to establish a mental link to make the process smoother, but I forgot to ask for permission. This situation is new for us."

"That's fine," she responded with a warm smile, projecting understanding. Yet behind that friendly facade, she didn't spend even a fraction of a second believing his explanation. She was certain the attempt had been a test, probing her defenses, with the safety net of plausible deniability.

"Can we move to the topic at hand? We're not bound by a ceasefire just yet, so if we're blown apart right now, no one's going to be punished for it. Let's finish this quickly to prevent that," she said, breaking the moment of silence with a pointed reminder of the precarious situation.

“Ah, yes, of course,” the Zelvora representative responded, slightly flustered. “I’ll once again explain the process of initiating a mana oath before we proceed to sign your means of contract, which requires no further instructions.”

Despite the explanation already being covered during the negotiation process, she allowed him to re-explain the steps for the mana oath without interrupting. Once he finished, they initiated the oath swiftly. The process was followed by the Zelvora representative carefully signing the runic contract—which the empire told them was a mana contract—after verifying that the terms had not been tampered with from the final agreed version. Everything was done with methodical precision, ensuring both sides adhered to the agreement down to the smallest detail.

The moment the Zelvora representative signed the runic contract, a surge of mana flooded into both him and everyone on the battlefield. Instantly, they gained knowledge of the contract’s terms, as these were imbued directly into the mana that now coursed through them. Those more attuned to the mental plane, especially the Zelvora who were also slightly sensitive to the soul aspect, felt something more profound—an imperceptible knot forming around a part of their soul.

This subtle but unmistakable sensation sent a clear message: this contract was as binding as their revered mana oaths, if not more so. The realization hit them all at once—the runic contract not only bound their mana but also tethered a portion of their very soul, making it an unbreakable agreement with consequences far beyond physical or magical means.

The battlefield had officially entered a ceasefire, set to last for one week. As the tension eased, many soldiers allowed themselves a momentary sigh of relief, finally able to rest after days of relentless combat.

"Our emperor instructed me to tell your side to present your offer as swiftly as possible," she said firmly, before the ship's tractor beam began pulling her back toward the vessel that had brought her.

There were no handshakes, no formal exchanges—only a lingering sense of the violence that had been halted moments ago. Now, there was only the fragile peace brokered by the ceasefire, hanging in the balance of what would come next.

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{Sir, they have sent their proposal,} Nova said, materializing a document that seemed endless—a hundred pages long with thousands of terms embedded within it.

Aron wasted no time, quickly scanning the first few lines. It didn’t take long for him to grasp that this so-called peace proposal was not quite a peace deal. Instead, it was a wager, a challenge that had to be met before any true peace agreement could be finalized.

The proposal was clear-cut: both sides would meet, and they could place anything on the line as a wager—resources, territory, information—so long as the other party accepted it.

Likewise, demands could be made as long as something equally valuable was offered in return. Once both sides agreed on what was to be wagered, they would then negotiate the rules of the engagement—how the stakes would be won or lost.

After finishing the lengthy document, Aron paused for a moment, reflecting on the potential benefits and pitfalls. The concept of negotiating via wagers intrigued him, but it was also fraught with uncertainty and risk. Finally, he broke his silence.

"I will be negotiating with them personally," Aron declared with conviction. "But first, have the others gather once they've finished reviewing the proposal. I need to determine if there are specific requests we should make, and the same goes for the AIs." He displayed no signs of hesitation, as the notion of retreating had never even entered his mind.

Chapter 752 Negotiating I

"We should ensure that, regardless of the outcome, we do not fully join the Astral Conclave and remain mutually beneficial allies. That way, we retain the freedom to communicate and trade with all civilizations without restrictions, which will allow us to expand as quickly as possible," Youssef reiterated, echoing his earlier stance from when the issue was confined to Xalthar's ship.

"Our sovereignty must be maintained, with a strict prohibition on enslaving our citizens as another non-negotiable," Jeremy added. As the Minister of the Interior, his primary concern was the protection of the empire's people, while Youssef's focus, as an external strategist, was ensuring the empire's position was safeguarded from the perspective of outside entities.

{Free trade agreement. On the surface, it might seem like they are the only ones benefiting from this, but it will mark the beginning of their loss of trade dominance in the Conclave to the empire,} Nova interjected, fully aware of Aron's long-term plans. A free trade agreement was the essential crack in the wall that would enable their strategy to unfold.

One after another, both the humans and AIs in the room began pitching in ideas, each voicing key points Aron should consider. He listened carefully, mentally filtering and prioritizing their suggestions, determining which were non-negotiable and which could be compromised based on the situation.

Meanwhile, news of the negotiations had been broadcasted to the public, with citizens being encouraged to submit their own suggestions. Any proposal deemed substantive by the AI would be forwarded to the emperor, adding another layer of input to the situation.

The meeting spanned several hours in VR time, during which Aron fully immersed himself in strategic discussions now that the ceasefire allowed him to log in. Though only half an hour had passed in the real world, he emerged from the session with a well-thought-out list of terms and conditions to be included in the contract.

His priorities were clear, and each suggestion had been meticulously weighed for its importance and potential impact on the empire's future dealings with the Astral Conclave and other civilizations.

"When are they ready for the start of the negotiations?" Aron asked the moment he logged out of VR.

{They're ready whenever we are. They're just waiting for us to finish reviewing the information,} Nova replied, showing him a display of a ship situated at the center of the two opposing fleets. This vessel would serve as the location for the negotiations and be open for observation by all, as only one representative from each side was allowed to be physically present. The other side didn't

choose this setup out of a love for transparency, but because the various powers within their coalition wanted to ensure their interests weren't trampled by their representative.

"We can't keep them waiting too long then, let's go," Aron said, eyeing the waiting ship with interest.

{On it,} Nova responded as the massive mana tanker Aron was aboard creaked silently. A small, sleek vessel detached from the main structure, smoothly navigating toward the center of the former battlefield where the negotiations would take place.

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"That won't do," Liasas, the selected representative for all the Conclave civilizations present, said the moment Aron brought up his first condition—remaining independent from the Astral Conclave.

"That's why it's called a negotiation," Aron replied calmly, unfazed by her immediate rejection. Without pausing, he continued reading through the rest of the conditions he wanted included in the agreement, moving at his own pace, showing no sign of backing down on the crucial points.

For the next half hour, Aron methodically listed the conditions he wanted included in the agreement, some of which seemed odd or excessive. Many humans watching the proceedings speculated that he might be intentionally overloading the terms, expecting several to be discarded during the negotiation process.

When he finally finished, having recited everything flawlessly from memory, he said calmly, "Now we can move to the actual negotiations," signaling the beginning of the serious bargaining phase.

"I'm pretty sure you know we can't just give you anything beneficial without earning something of equal value in return," Liasas said calmly, her tone measured. Yet, many wondered if her calm demeanor was a facade, hiding intentions beneath the surface, much like humans often did.

Aron didn't miss a beat. "I could say the same for your side," he replied with the same steady calmness. "But it seems you've forgotten this isn't a typical agreement—it's a wager. The winner takes the majority of the benefits, and the loser faces the more exploitative terms. As long as I win on our side, all my conditions will be accepted by yours, just as you'll get yours if you win."

His response made it clear: he wasn't willing to back down, nor was he going to let his conditions be dismissed so easily. He had laid out his terms with the intention of securing them through victory, not through compromise.

"Although that's true, the demands should at least be achievable and reasonable," Liasas responded. "Otherwise, we could have just demanded to turn your race into slaves if we win or forced you to hand over all your mana stones without compensation.

Aron remained unfazed. "That's true, but nothing in my list of demands is unachievable. And saying your side's demands aren't overreaching is an understatement of the millennium. You've got a clause that forces us to sell you mana stones at mining cost if you win, which is essentially the same as enslaving us, except we'd be managing ourselves."

He paused briefly before continuing, "If we want to avoid overreaching demands, then both sides need to step back, or we could structure the deal in a way where the benefits scale with the level of victory. A perfect win would give one side maximum advantages.

Alternatively, we can make it so each civilization negotiates with us individually, with only the winning civilization getting their demands fulfilled. If they lose, they meet our demands. We're open to either, or a mix of both, since some of our demands require the Conclave's full agreement. And those present here have enough votes to make that happen."

With this, Aron laid out his strategic reasoning, justifying his seemingly outlandish demands while offering a more balanced approach to negotiations.

Chapter 753 Negotiating II

'Something's not right,' Liasas said in her mind as Aron spoke about possibly altering the terms of the deal to make it either individualistic or a mixture of both.

'Why do you think so?' Xylor, the Zelvora fleet commander, asked, connected to her through the mental network, after sensing her concern.

'I'm sure some of their soldiers managed to breach a few of the top ten civilizations' ships and encountered some of our strong individuals that wiped out their forces. Yet the man in front of me doesn't seem the least bit concerned about what signing this agreement could mean. And from the speed at which he's negotiating, it's clear he's not just stalling—he genuinely wants to reach an agreement quickly. It's... strange,' Liasas responded, sharing her suspicion with the fleet commander.

She still didn't know the name or rank of the individual standing before her. He had introduced himself simply as the negotiator, offering no further details before launching into the empire's list of demands.

Zorvas, connected to the conversation through their mental link, pondered her observations. 'You think they believe they've found an opportunity here, rather than us trying to exploit them?' he asked.

'That's what it seems like,' Liasas replied thoughtfully. 'It's possible they have individuals they believe can handle opponents of our caliber, or at least those they've encountered so far. Keep in mind, they managed to capture Xalthar, who was at sage level. They might think our level of strength is only at or slightly above that threshold.'

Her suspicion deepened as she considered the implications. Were they truly underestimating the full power of the Astral Conclave, or did they believe that they had enough power to win?

'If that's what they're thinking, they're in for a rude awakening,' Zorvas said, trying to suppress a chuckle. To him, it felt as if the empire was like a group of children who had managed to win a fight against someone slightly older than them, and now believed they could challenge fully grown adults.

‘Probe them further. I need enough evidence to convince the others to raise the stakes if this turns out to be true,’ Xylor ordered, showing no interest in Zorvas's amusement. He was focused on the bigger picture—on ensuring that if the empire truly was underestimating the Astral Conclave and overestimating themselves, they could push for even greater concessions and rewards. The current deal was already heavily skewed in their favor, but Xylor had no intention of leaving potential gains on the table.

‘Yes, sir,’ Liasas replied, ready to dig deeper into the empire’s motivations. As she did, Aron finally finished his counter-argument, which came with an unexpected counter-proposal. His suggestion was to shift the negotiations from a group-based format to either individual or semi-individual talks. This would create multiple, smaller agreements, each with different levels of privileges and rewards at stake, depending on what the two sides could agree upon for the outcomes of each face-off.

Liasas glanced at Aron. ‘He’s trying to create a framework that allows them to hedge their bets,’ she thought. ‘But why? Are they trying to minimize risk, or do they believe they can win more by negotiating individually against all of us?’

“What do you mean by individual or semi-individual negotiations?” Liasas asked, both following her commander's orders and keeping the conversation moving forward.

Aron responded calmly, his tone steady, despite the complexity of what he was proposing.

"Individual negotiations would focus on specific deals that only certain civilizations can provide. For instance, if one civilization specializes in producing a particular resource or technology, we would negotiate directly with them for favorable terms on that specific commodity. A broad, group-wide wager would be counterproductive in such cases, where only one of you can provide a service or item we need.

However," he continued, "there are other demands—larger ones—that can only be fulfilled by a collective vote in the Conclave’s general assembly. For these, we would need the cooperation of all the members here. This is where semi-individual negotiations come in. The stakes in these cases would be shared because it’s the entire Conclave that would need to agree on certain concessions. Instead of dealing with the risk of losing multiple individual votes and ending up without enough support, we package it into a collective deal. So long as we win more than half of the total fights, we secure the necessary votes for those demands, regardless of whether individual civilizations won against us or not."

His tone remained measured, almost unnervingly calm, which made it difficult for the observers to gauge his intentions. To the imperial citizens watching, his composed demeanor seemed out of sync with the high-stakes nature of the discussion, creating an unsettling feeling.

‘Yes, they’re completely serious about this and truly believe they can win,’ Liasas reported back after Aron finished explaining his proposal. His confidence, combined with the structured approach he presented, gave her all the evidence Xylor needed to

take action. It was clear that the empire wasn't bluffing—they believed they could win and were playing for significant stakes.

'Understood,' Xylor responded, preparing to gather the other civilizations. 'Tell him we need to consult with the rest before making any decisions.' With that, he expanded the mental network, pulling in representatives from all the other civilizations to discuss whether to accept the shift in negotiation terms and how best to respond.

'Yes, sir,' Liasas acknowledged, then addressed Aron. "We'll need to pause the negotiations briefly to consult with everyone on our side before we give you a final response to your proposal."

Aron, completely unfazed, responded, "Take your time. The sooner we establish the basic rules of the agreement, the smoother the rest of this process will be." Without further words, Aron simply closed his eyes, signaling that he was content to wait while they deliberated. His calm demeanor and patience suggested he had prepared for such delays.

Mirroring his behavior, Liasas closed her eyes as well, focusing her attention on the mental network where the meeting was already in motion. As the representative for all the civilizations present, she needed to be there to understand their intentions, to be able to not only facilitate the conversation but also to shield the more hot-headed races from causing any incidents when the negotiations resumed.

Some of the civilizations, with their volatile tempers, might inadvertently breach the ceasefire if left to negotiate directly, bringing devastating consequences upon themselves. She acted as their buffer, ensuring the negotiations stayed within the bounds of diplomacy.

Chapter 754 Negotiating III

"I like them for their boldness and straightforwardness, and I'll respect them if they can back it up," a Xor'Vak representative remarked during the meeting, openly expressing his thoughts without restraint.

Whether it was a feeling of admiration or disgust, the Xor'Vak never hid their true feelings. This attitude stemmed from the immense power they possessed, allowing them to speak the truth without fear of consequences. As one of the strongest races in the Conclave, they saw no need for deception, earning them a reputation for being brutally honest.

When the rest of the room heard his words, "surprised" would have been an understatement. Earning the respect of a Xor'Vak was as difficult as turning mana into mist form. They only respected those they deemed their equals, making it nearly impossible for most members of the Conclave to even dream of such recognition.

Though he stated that respect would only come if they proved themselves, the very declaration was significant—it meant he was willing to give them the chance. This, in turn, implied that the Xor'Vak would cooperate with the process, setting aside their usual unpredictable disruptions. It would make the negotiations on the Xor'Vaks side smoother than anyone could have anticipated.

“Their suggestion is quite tempting, and it appears to have no negative consequences for us. It allows races unsure about sending a representative the option to abstain while those capable of sending a contestant have the opportunity to earn more—albeit with the risk of losing more if their contestant fails,” a high-ranking member of the Shadari civilization remarked, reigniting the conversation that had stalled after the Xor'Vak's bold declaration.

“That’s true. They've even considered our position, ensuring that other civilizations can't simply ride on our coattails when their subpar fighters inevitably lose,” a Valthorin added, disdain evident in his tone for the lower-level civilizations that seemed intent on doing just that.

They had been planning to advocate for a singular joint agreement, which would allow them to benefit regardless of their performance, but it seems like they have been caught and stopped before they could even start their campaign against it.

Ignoring the glares directed at him, he continued, “It’s quite a shame that it was them who proposed this, as it will be a regret their race carries for generations.” His excitement was palpable, as he anticipated the upcoming face-off.

This was a golden opportunity presented to them by the enemy—an occasion to redeem the honor they had tarnished when they momentarily faltered at the sight of black holes that actually scared them. They had no intention of playing it safe; they planned to send their strongest fighters, not only to secure victory but also to humiliate their adversaries, ensuring they would never again dare to lift their heads in their presence.

As the discussions progressed, representatives from various civilizations began chiming in, expressing their intentions—some gleefully gloating while others remained quiet, wary of attracting the ire of the top ten, who were not in the best of moods. Although they masked it well, the top ten were still simmering with anger, viewing the upcoming fight as an opportunity to vent their frustrations. They sought to justify their forced participation in negotiations with a civilization that held only a single star system, while they themselves controlled vastly more territory.

They were not Valthorins, but they still took pride in their positions, and that pride had been bruised by a backwater civilization they believed they could easily crush. Previously, their thoughts had been consumed with how to deal with other members of the Conclave who had come to this location, but now their focus had to be shifted to the unexpected challenge posed by this lesser civilization.

“With that, the basic agreement for those who are not sending representatives has been finalized and will be presented to the other side for their approval or renegotiation,” Xylor declared, signaling the conclusion of that discussion. The basic agreement was more of a foundation than a comprehensive deal; while it offered some benefits, it was hardly different from a negotiation between equals. It included provisions allowing them to purchase mana stones at seller's prices and ensured they couldn't be barred from buying them, along with other fundamental rights. This

setup was designed to ensure that those who sent fighters could gain additional privileges beyond the basic terms.

However, it wasn't just about benefits; the agreement also contained clauses mandating that they vote in favor of the empire if it emerged victorious, particularly when the empire's demands in the agreement required the Conclave's overall approval. Many viewed this as a mere formality, as for the empire to secure a win, it would first have to overcome the top ten civilizations' fighters, each formidable in their own right.

"So, how many of you will be sending fighters?" Xylor inquired a few moments later.

When the time came to make the decision, only twenty-three representatives raised their hands, indicating their willingness to risk sending a fighter in exchange for a more favorable deal if they won, and accepting the potential losses if they didn't.

The number of civilizations willing to send fighters was small, a result of either their strongest individuals being lost in the initial attack or the significant damage inflicted upon them by the relentless imperial breaching forces. The risk of further losses was deemed too great, leading many to not risk it at all.

"Those who are not sending fighters, please leave," Xylor instructed. After a brief pause, the representatives of the remaining civilizations exited, leaving only the representatives of the twenty-three civilizations behind.

"Please state your demands," Liasas requested. "I will relay them to their representative, who will either accept them and propose their own in return—marking the finalization of the deal—or deny some of them. In that case, I will serve as a direct link, delivering your intentions and responses during the negotiations between both sides until we reach a compromised agreement.

Keep in mind that the format of the fight has not been finalized yet. This means you might be limited to a single fighter, or there could be no restrictions at all, depending on the agreement that will be made jointly with the other side after they complete their individual agreements with each of you."

With that, she took over the proceedings, ready to listen to everything they had to say in order to later facilitate the negotiations with the negotiator from the opposing side.

Chapter 755 Negotiating IV

Aron could be seen reviewing the new basic agreement proposed by the Conclave with little to no change of expression. "We accept it," he said, once he finished going through it, not bothering to suggest any modifications.

"It's good that we can agree on something," Liasas said, her tone calm but unsurprised by Aron's acceptance. The basic agreement, after all, favored the empire more than the Conclave forces, who had little choice but to comply. Despite the Conclave's united front, its members remained highly individualistic, and the stronger civilizations needed a justification for risking the lives of their best fighters.

Their rationale was simple: the greater the risk, the greater the reward. As a result, the weaker civilizations, barely holding on after suffering significant losses, were left with a smaller share of benefits. With no leverage to challenge this, they were forced to accept whatever was handed to them, their situation evident as they clung to the last threads of benefits.

What truly surprised Liasas, however, was Aron's apparent authority to make decisions for the entire empire on his own, without consulting anyone. In contrast, she had to constantly relay information back to the mental network and wait for collective input before she could make even minor decisions on the agreements. It felt strange to her that a civilization as advanced as his would place so much power in the hands of the negotiator.

Even more puzzling was the fact that their empire seemed to lack any apparent mental abilities that would have made sense of the behavior shown by the negotiator. As far as she could tell, there were no signs of telepathy, shared consciousness, or any form of mental linkage—only minds that were well protected, at least to the limit of the basics they tested, which was done to only one individual and had failed.

"What we want in exchange for agreeing to this basic agreement if we win," Aron began, "is to remain outside the Conclave as independent allies, while also establishing a free trade agreement with no tariffs or blockades imposed against us." He presented the demand as part of the empire's terms for the basic agreement, which required all the civilizations present to vote in favor during the Conclave's general assembly for it to pass.

Aron understood that he couldn't ask for anything too excessive at this stage, especially since the other side had used their portion of the basic agreement to reduce the benefits for the weaker members.

So, he opted to keep things balanced, returning the favor in kind. His real focus was on the more significant individual agreements, where the true negotiations would happen. There, he could secure the substantial benefits he was after, without wasting time on trivial matters in the broader group discussions. For now, the simple demand of maintaining independence while securing a free trade deal was more than enough.

Aron's proposal was swiftly relayed to each civilization's leadership for approval, as the demands would require long-term commitment from their governments meaning the real leaders needed to agree to them and not the current representatives.

The discussion moved quickly, and as expected, the members agreed that, should the Terran Empire win the contest with the specified majority, the basic demands would be granted.

The leadership saw little risk in the proposal even if the impossible happened and they lost, thanks to the free trade agreement they could flood the empire with cheaper products than the empire itself could produce crushing the empire's economy before it could even grow and cause problems.

"Your demands have been agreed to by unanimous vote and will be fulfilled, should the conditions be met," Liasas stated, delivering the news with a hint of confusion. She couldn't understand why their demands were so modest when they could have pushed for far more, considering how much the other side desired access to mana stones.

In her mind, the Conclave would have accepted their demands even if they were more egregious, as they were confident their fighters wouldn't lose—even by a single match. The deal seemed safe for

them, and the more lenient terms only solidified their belief that they wouldn't have to honor any of the more extreme concessions.

Aron briefly smiled upon hearing her response before his face returned to its usual calm expression. He was fully aware that many on both sides—within the Conclave and the Terran Empire—were likely questioning his approach, thinking he had made a blunder by not demanding more from the negotiations.

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Nova, observing the reactions of the Terran citizens, noticed that many of them believed they were losing out on the agreement. With a soft chuckle, she remarked, {It seems you've all forgotten that we don't even have mana stones. If we lose, we have nothing to lose at all. We simply won't produce any mana stones, as the agreement only specifies the selling of mined mana stones. Anything beyond that isn't enforceable by the terms. We really should thank Xalthar for doing the hard work of lying for us, and them for believing that false information,} she said, shaking her head slightly.

After her brief comment, Nova fell silent again, resuming her observation of the negotiations while her various instances continued other tasks. She kept Aron company and remained the essential communication link between him and the Council, efficiently managing her roles without missing a beat.

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"Now, let's proceed to the individual agreements," she stated as she transmitted the information to the negotiator. "Everything they require from your side is included in that document. Take a look and decide what you want in return. If there's anything you wish to negotiate further, we can handle that as well."

Aron immediately delved into the details, reviewing the demands from the twenty-three civilizations that were preparing to send their fighters for the upcoming face-off.

Some of the civilizations' demands were quite reasonable, such as requests for permanent percentage discounts on mana stones. However, others were audacious; the top ten civilizations and a few others sought full access to the knowledge of how to produce black hole bombs, alongside the ability to purchase mana stones at production price. Additionally, they wanted a share of the profits generated from selling mana stones to other civilizations, insisting they would also determine who the empire could sell to and impose maximum quantities over specific periods.

They halted their demands at this point, fully aware that pushing for anything more would likely lead the empire to reject the agreement outright, potentially opting to continue the war or even destroy their star system if they sensed a significant threat. They believed their exaggerated requests would serve as a starting point for negotiations, allowing room for adjustments while still aiming to secure more favorable terms than they would typically receive.

"We will accept the Xor'Vak's demands if they agree to provide us with the body or bodies of their defeated fighters, their knowledge of their racial abilities, and a single ticket to challenge their leader at any time," he stated, pausing momentarily after listing his counter-demands, making no effort to negotiate from their side.

As he laid out his terms, Liasas froze, nearly experiencing a brain aneurysm from the shock. The overwhelming surprise coursed through the network, dissipating much of the potential impact she could have felt.

Chapter 756 Negotiating V

Aron paid no mind to Liasas's astonished expression. After a moment of silence, he seized the opportunity to further outline his expectations from the other civilizations.

“We will accept the Trinarians' demands if they agree to provide us with their knowledge of spatial manipulation, their latest wormhole technology, and the body or bodies and equipment of their defeated Trinarian fighters.

We will agree to the Valthorin's demands if they agree to share their expertise in crafting and forging honor blades, the process of initiating a soul imprint, access to something akin to the Pride Nexus, and the body or bodies and equipment of their defeated Valthorin fighters.

We will accept the Shadari's demands if they agree to grant us their knowledge of stealth, allow us to purchase their star system-specific minerals at a twenty percent markup from the mining price, and provide the body and equipment of their defeated Shadari fighter or fighters.

We will agree to the Galvinith's demands if they provide us with knowledge about the symbiosis process, bonding techniques, and the body and equipment of their defeated Galvinith fighter or fighters.

We will accept the Zelvora's demands if they grant us their understanding of mental abilities and the body or bodies and equipment of their defeated Zelvora fighters.

We will agree to the Erythians' demands if they provide us with their knowledge in bioengineering and the body or bodies and equipment of their defeated fighters.

We will accept the Symetra's demands if they agree to share their knowledge of Void energy, the crafting of weapons and living weapons, and the body or bodies and equipment of their defeated fighters.

We will agree to the Elara's demands if they provide us with their knowledge of magic and body enhancement, along with the body or bodies and equipment of their defeated fighters.

We will accept the Feryn demands if they share their expertise in magic engineering and the body or bodies and equipment of their defeated fighters.

We will agree to the Yrral Coalition's demands if they provide us with their knowledge of production technology, their war records, and the body or bodies and equipment of their defeated fighters.”

In the same systematic manner, Aron continued to enumerate his terms, each acceptance contingent upon the other side providing their specialized knowledge and the bodies of their fallen fighters.

When Aron finished listing his counter-demands from all twenty-three civilizations, an eerie silence fell over the assembly. Both those involved in the negotiations and the observers watching the proceedings were taken aback, left speechless by the audacity of the Terran Empire's negotiator.

He had directly targeted the most coveted technologies that had elevated these civilizations to their esteemed status within the Conclave, demanding access to knowledge that had been closely guarded and cultivated over countless generations.

However, as the initial shock wore off, many began to reassess the situation. While Aron's demands might seem brazen, they paled in comparison to the aggressive terms put forth by the other side. Moreover, his requests were narrowly focused on the specific abilities and technologies that the top civilizations wielded—often tied to their unique racial traits. For most of these civilizations, the knowledge would be nearly useless to the Empire, as they lacked the innate abilities to fully utilize it.

During the silence, Aron remained patient, allowing the weight of his demands to settle in.

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A few minutes ago.

A moment after Liasas conveyed their individual demands, the representative who had initially proposed those terms observed Aron with keen curiosity. They were eager to see how the Terran Empire's negotiator would respond. Would he dismiss their requests and attempt to renegotiate, or was he so blinded by confidence that he would accept their demands outright? Their minds raced with possibilities.

In addition to the content of his response, they were also keenly interested in his emotional reactions; these would reveal the level of assurance he held regarding the Empire's position. However, to their surprise, they were met with the same calm expression Aron had maintained throughout the negotiations.

“We will agree with the Xor’Vak’s demands...” The beginning of Aron’s sentence caught everyone off guard; not only was he quickly outlining his own demands, but he also implied that if their side's terms were accepted, the Empire would accept the individual demands from the Conclave forces without any negotiation. The shock in the room intensified when he articulated the specifics of those demands, leaving the representatives staring at the Xor’Vak’s envoy with pale expressions. To say their demands were overreaching would have been a colossal understatement.

“HA
HI!” The Xor’Vak representative erupted into laughter upon hearing the Empire’s demands, a sound filled with amusement.

‘Did he not understand the demands, or has he lost his mind out of anger?’ nearly everyone in the mental network wondered, their minds racing. They were certain that one particular clause in the Empire's terms—the ticket to challenge the Xor’Vak leader—would ignite fury in any Xor’Vak. If the impossible were to happen and the Empire were to win and had their demands enforced, they could use the ticket to challenge the leader for a fight. A victory in that battle would mean gaining control over the entire civilization, holding power until another challenger arose.

Given the audacity of that demand alone, many believed that the Empire was pushing for the impossible, a mere protest against the overly harsh terms proposed by the Conclave. This was a strategic move, they thought, designed to allow for negotiations where the Empire could later retract some of their demands, showcasing their willingness to compromise in exchange for a reduction in the severity of the Conclave's demands.

Recognizing the cleverness of the Empire's move, they all felt a sense of respect for the strategy employed. However, before they could fully explore this line of thought, the laughter from the Xor'Vak representative finally subsided. With a serious tone, he declared, "Sure, we agree to their demands. If they can defeat our challenger, then they would have earned that right anyway. However, if they prove disappointing, they will pay for speaking the leader's name."

His demeanor had shifted dramatically; the casual attitude he had previously displayed was replaced with a grave seriousness. The implications were clear: he had only accepted this after receiving permission from their leader, signaling that the Xor'Vaks were now fully aware of the stakes and prepared to back their words with conviction.

'They are fucked,' everyone thought in unison, their surprise at the Xor'Vak's response palpable.

Before they could fully process the implications of that declaration, Aron resumed listing his demands, moving on to the Valthorins and addressing one civilization after another. This time, a wave of unbelievability swept through the room as gasps escaped the lips of the representatives. The imperial negotiator seemed determined to catch everyone off guard again, provoking an endless cycle of shock. It felt as if he were deliberately pushing the boundaries to incite anger and turn potential allies into enemies.

If that was indeed Aron's intention, it appeared to be working; everyone who heard the demands from their civilization began to simmer with anger. They felt as though they were being looked down upon, their pride wounded by the audacity of the Terran Empire's negotiator.

Chapter 757 Negotiating VI

While surprise and anger roiled through the room, Aron remained oblivious, as none of it had been conveyed to him by Liasas. She found herself at a loss, uncertain how to proceed. The moment he presented his demands, the mental network had descended into chaos, leaving her grappling with the turmoil unfolding within it.

The scene within the mental network was a stark contrast to Aron's calm demeanor. Anger boiled over, with most participants venting their frustrations freely, no longer holding back. However, three groups remained conspicuously silent amid the uproar.

The Xor'Vaks were quiet, having already accepted the empire's audacious demands. The Valthorins, bound by their unyielding pride, refused to stoop to complaints, maintaining a dignified silence. Lastly, the Zelvora stayed composed, both due to their mental discipline and because, in the broader context of demands, what had been asked of them was relatively insignificant. Much of their racial abilities were public knowledge, limiting the risk of exploitation. If the empire's intention was to sell the gathered information, as many feared, the Zelvora knew they could easily safeguard against that by including restrictions in their agreement.

After what felt like an eternity to the silent civilizations, the rest gradually calmed down, their anger dissipating after venting their frustrations.

“Just like the Xor’Vak, we will be accepting their deal with one modification: the shared knowledge will remain exclusive to the Terran Empire, restricted solely to their use,” Xylor, the commander of the Zelvora fleet, announced. His composed tone carried the weight of a decision already made. He had contacted his leadership back home and received clearance to proceed as he deemed appropriate.

The Valthorins, unwilling to be outdone or risk appearing fearful by proposing changes to the deal, swiftly declared their acceptance. “We agree to the terms as well, with the addition of the same condition: all shared knowledge must remain strictly confidential and for the Terran Empire’s use only,” their representative stated with unwavering pride, ensuring their stance aligned with the others without appearing weak.

With the acceptance from the Valthorins and Zelvora, the number of civilizations agreeing to the audacious terms rose to three. The room once again plunged into silence, heavy with tension, as the remaining representatives continued their discussions with their leadership back in the Conclave.

After about an hour of silence in the mental network, the representative of the Yrall Coalition finally broke the tension. “We will accept their deal if they include their ship technology in the list of our demands, considering they are asking for something of similar magnitude from us.” It was the first instance where a representative did not fully agree to the Terran Empire’s demands, instead proposing a counter-condition to balance the scales.

The Symetra followed soon after, agreeing to the terms without even requesting secrecy. They had no reason to guard their knowledge, as accessing Void energy and mastering the forging techniques required a unique combination of racial abilities. These abilities, shaped by the distinct conditions of their star system, were nearly impossible to replicate elsewhere. To them, sharing their knowledge was equivalent to handing over a nuclear schematic written in an unknown language—useless to anyone without the necessary background or context.

One by one, the remaining civilizations began voicing their acceptance of the Terran Empire's proposals, though many attached conditions or suggested limitations on the knowledge they were to provide. This approach was especially common among the smaller civilizations, which were more cautious. Unlike the top ten, who exuded near-certainty in their victory, these smaller powers couldn’t afford the same level of confidence. Protecting their interests, no matter how unlikely it seemed that they might lose, was a priority for them.

By the end of the negotiations, only two civilizations remained silent: the Shadari and the Trinarians. As masters of stealth and spatial manipulation, respectively, their technologies remained some of the greatest mysteries in the Conclave. Their hesitation drew attention, as the knowledge they guarded was highly coveted, yet their silence hinted at deeper calculations regarding the risks involved. All eyes turned to them, waiting for the final verdict from the two enigmatic powers.

Although the Trinarians were confident in their fighters—nearly as fearsome in close combat as a Xor’Vak royal—they were still reluctant to risk their technology. Unlike other civilizations' unique abilities, which were often limited by racial traits, the Trinarians' spatial technology was different. It was one of the rare systems that could, theoretically, be utilized by anyone with the right resources.

The only reason the Trinarians had maintained a monopoly was their natural affinity for spatial manipulation and highly specialized mental architecture, skewed toward performing feats no other species could easily replicate.

However, the danger lay in the possibility of the knowledge falling into the hands of someone capable of replicating their abilities or, worse, developing artificial workarounds—something the Trinarians themselves excelled at, as seen in their wormhole technology. Although they had created simplified versions of the technology for other civilizations, distributed under strict mana-bound oaths. This would effectively strip them of the leverage they held over others, potentially birthing a rival force capable of threatening their position.

For the Trinarians, even entertaining the remote possibility of creating a competitor was unacceptable. Regardless of how unlikely defeat seemed, they had no intention of letting such knowledge leave their grasp.

As for the Shadari, they were among the most anxious members of the top ten civilizations, though they masked it well. Their concern might seem excessive, but while the other top members estimated the Terran Empire's chances of victory at 0.2 percent, the Shadari placed theirs at a precarious 1 percent—an alarmingly high risk given their renowned abilities.

The root of their anxiety stemmed from the Empire's remarkable advancements in stealth technology, which had successfully eluded even the Shadari's sensors—renowned for their unparalleled effectiveness. While the Empire's demonstrated stealth capabilities were primarily associated with large machines and not attributed to any individual within the breaching forces, a lingering concern persisted: the possibility that the Empire might harbor an individual with exceptional stealth abilities.

If such an individual were to be utilized strategically, it could jeopardize the Shadari's chances of victory. Moreover, the risk of the Empire gaining access to their own knowledge of stealth posed an even greater threat. Such knowledge, when combined with the Empire's existing technology, could very well topple the Shadari from their longstanding position as masters of stealth. This potential loss of their competitive edge weighed heavily on their minds, creating an atmosphere of unease that they struggled to conceal.

If members of the Conclave had overheard their concerns, they would have laughed them to death, viewing it as a giant fretting over the threat posed by an ant. The idea of such a powerful civilization being anxious about an insignificant competitor would seem absurd, as it appeared the giants were scrambling to find ways to avoid an unlikely downfall at the hands of a much smaller foe.

What held back these two civilizations, along with all others who had already accepted or proposed changes to the deal, from outright flipping the table was the prospect on the other side of the scale: mana stone and black hole bomb technologies. These advancements promised unimaginable riches and weapons of mass destruction, ensuring that if they won—a result almost certainly guaranteed—they would gain an overwhelming advantage that could make any civilization think twice before engaging them in battle.

Chapter 758 Negotiating VII

After about seven hours, Liasas finally opened her eyes and began speaking.

“The Xor’Vak have agreed to all of your demands. However, they added that if you fail to back up your arrogance, you will pay the price for daring to invoke their leader’s name without the strength to justify it,” she said as soon as she noticed Aron was already listening to her.

“We don’t have a problem with that. What about the others?” Aron responded without hesitation, his voice steady and decisive. A smile crept across his face—one he didn’t bother hiding—making his satisfaction unmistakably clear.

“As for the others, your demands can be agreed upon, but many require additional clauses and modifications,” Liasas repeated, pausing to gauge Aron’s reaction.

“Let’s hear what their modification demands are and see if we can accommodate them,” Aron responded calmly, his tone steady. He wasn’t rushing the discussion, knowing that every detail had to be considered before deciding.

“The Valthorins” Liasas began, “request that their knowledge must not be sold or revealed to any other civilization without their permission.”

She continued systematically, listing each group’s demands. Some wanted to offer outdated knowledge, reasoning that it would still hold value while safeguarding their most recent advances. Others demanded stricter conditions regarding how the knowledge could be used, limiting its scope to specific fields or forbidding certain applications entirely.

Aron remained silent, mentally noting every condition, assessing whether each demand was feasible or whether he would need to push back. His expression stayed calm, betraying none of the calculations going on behind his eyes.

Liasas worked her way through the list, starting with the simplest modifications and moving toward the more complicated requests, ensuring nothing was overlooked.

The top ten civilizations didn’t demand many modifications. The Shadari and Trinarians only requested permission to provide limited knowledge, while the rest merely insisted on a clause prohibiting the empire from selling or sharing their knowledge with others. The Xor’Vak were the only exception, agreeing to the terms without any modifications.

In contrast, the civilizations just below the top ten pushed for significant changes. Since many of their advancements weren’t safeguarded by unique racial abilities, some requested the empire to demand something else entirely, while others outright rejected the original demands.

However, none of the civilizations raised objections to the empire's demand to claim the bodies of fallen enemies if they won the fight.

"Those who wish to include a clause preventing us from selling or sharing their knowledge without permission will have that request honored," Aron began, his tone steady but unyielding. "However, that clause will be mutual—neither will they be allowed to sell or share our knowledge without our express consent."

He continued, his voice growing firmer. "As for those offering outdated knowledge, we will accept it—but only under the condition that the blackhole technology they receive will match the same

generation as the knowledge they provide. Additionally, they will forfeit all special privileges tied to the mana stones: no mining price deals, no profit sharing, and no authority to control who or how much we sell to. Fair is fair—if we are expected to offer the best of our technology upon defeat, they cannot expect us to settle for anything less than the best from them."

Aron's gaze sharpened as he addressed the final group. "For those who outright refuse our demands, we hereby revoke our acceptance of theirs. They must return to the negotiation table with new terms before we even consider another counteroffer. The scales must be balanced—or at least close—for any agreement to be reached. Otherwise, we will simply decline their terms until the ceasefire ends and the fighting resumes."

His voice carried a dangerous edge now, a deliberate weight meant to drive the message home. "If they're unwilling to risk what we ask, then they should consider the baseline agreement the others accepted. It seems their reluctance suggests they are unsure of their chances against us, which is understandable. Accepting the basic deal will reduce the number of competitors to those confident enough to stake something of true value—and those prepared to fight, not cling to half-measures."

Aron leaned back slightly, satisfaction gleaming in his eyes as he added with subtle contempt, "This way, those unwilling to risk their core knowledge can still benefit from the deal—if their side wins. And I'm certain the hundreds of billions across the Conclave and the Empire watching this right now will appreciate knowing exactly who stands ready to compete—and who does not."

Liasas, catching on to Aron's strategy, looked at him in disbelief. She hadn't expected him to resort to such a bold and calculated provocation, yet she couldn't help but admire how effective it was.

Without missing a beat, she turned her gaze toward his after receiving a response from the mental network, her expression calm but laced with subtle intrigue as she said "The civilizations that requested the clause preventing their knowledge from being sold or shared without their permission have agreed to your counterproposal," her voice measured.

"What about the rest?" Aron asked, his tone steady but expectant.

Liasas didn't respond immediately. Instead, she closed her eyes, signaling that she was listening intently to the incoming replies from the other factions. Only after gathering their responses would she be able to provide him with an answer.

After about thirty minutes of silence, Liasas finally opened her eyes. "Eight of the members have chosen to withdraw their demands and will be opting for the basic agreement," she said calmly. "The rest have agreed to your terms, including the mutual clause requiring permission to sell or share information with other civilizations."

Her tone remained as steady as ever, but there was a subtle hint of disappointment in her expression. It looked like she had hoped for a different outcome. It looked like the empire had gained the upper hand by leveraging the prestige and respect the civilizations needed to uphold in the eyes of their peers—a clever move that ensured they wouldn't compromise their soft power in the long run.

But Aron recognized that her expression was merely a façade. With those eight withdrawals, it had become impossible for the empire to secure a majority by defeating only the twelfth to twenty-third ranked competitors, even if they lost all their battles against the top ten. The count had now dwindled from twenty-three to fifteen, and the top ten civilizations effectively included eleven

members, with the Elara and Feryn tied for the tenth position. It was a smart move from the Conclave.

Not only that, but they had also promised the eight who withdrew from the normal agreement that they would buy the mana stones at mining price from the empire and sell them to the eight at the same price after they won. This was a significant incentive for their withdrawal, as it allowed them to reap the rewards of victory without having to fight at all.

As for the other four who chose not to withdraw, even in light of these conditions, they were equally confident in their chances of winning the fight. This meant they would also benefit from purchasing mana stones at mining price while simultaneously gaining access to the blackhole technology.

Aron just smiled and said “We accept. Let’s proceed to sign the agreements before discussing the format of the face-off and the conditions under which it will take place.”

Chapter 759 Negotiating VIII

The agreement was signed swiftly, as all protections and potential exploitations had already been settled before the main demands were presented. The swearing of the mana oath and the signing of the mana contract were completed within an hour of reaching the agreement. This quick resolution led them directly to the next phase: determining the format of the fight and defining what constituted a majority win.

“How are these fights conducted in the Conclave?” Aron inquired of Liasas.

“It typically involves two individuals battling to the death or until one side concedes defeat. While there are usually some restrictions on the weapons each side can use, there are no limitations on an individual's abilities. These fights are generally held on land, and I doubt you'll allow us to enter the star system for these confrontations?” she explained, noting that this format was primarily practiced by the Vlathorins and the Xor’Vak, though others occasionally engaged in similar fights, as permitted by Conclave rules, provided certain conditions were met.

“No, no one will be entering the star system until this situation is resolved,” he replied matter-of-factly before asking, “But is it truly necessary for these fights to occur on a planet?”

“What do you mean? The fights need to be face-to-face and are usually conducted on a planet. They could be held on a moon or a large space station with an atmosphere, but our sensors haven’t detected any such locations in the area,” Liasas responded, still trying to discern if he was hinting at something she wasn’t grasping. “Are there hidden locations here?”

“We could repurpose a hundred-kilometer-wide asteroid, cover it with a shield, install a gravity generator, and fill it with mana to create an atmosphere. That should suffice as a battleground where no one has an unfair advantage, right?” he proposed earnestly.

Liasas almost felt her eyes pop out upon hearing Aron's proposal. While the technical aspects of repurposing an asteroid were manageable—many members of the Conclave could achieve it at varying speeds—the idea of filling such a large space with mana was staggering. Doing so without any specific purpose was the equivalent of setting an enormous fortune on fire. It would require about a quarter of the mana needed to activate wormhole technology, meaning the endeavor could cripple an economy of a lower Conclave member.

“You do realize how prohibitively expensive it is to fill an area that size with enough mana for combat, right? Are you suggesting that you will be the ones providing the mana?” she asked, her tone edged with disbelief. She knew mana was abundant in this star system but seeing them act as if it was something normal was something she was yet to get used to.

“Yes, we will provide the mana,” the negotiator responded smoothly, “but in return, the gravity on the battlefield must be set to 1g. All other preparations will be done collaboratively to prevent tampering.”

“We can agree to that,” Liasas said immediately, eager to avoid delays that might shift the burden of providing mana onto their side.

“Now that we’ve settled the fighting ground, let’s move on to the fighters. Will each civilization send only one representative, or are multiple fighters allowed?” Aron asked, his tone steady.

“The more fighters each civilization sends, the more complicated the situation becomes,” Liasas explained. “It would also force your side to field additional participants, which would be unfair given the numerical advantage we have. Therefore, we suggest that each civilization sends only their strongest individual. However, your side will be allowed to bring more than one fighter up to the total number of ours to even the odds.”

“What exactly does ‘up to the total number of your contenders’ mean?” Aron asked, seeking clarification.

Liasas replied smoothly, “It means if you have a strong enough individual, they can fight in multiple matches, provided they are capable of continuing. Since our side will send only the strongest from each civilization, it’s only fair that your strongest fighter can compete more than once if needed. However, there will be no extended breaks between fights, so you’ll have to factor that in.” Her tone remained polite, but the subtle implication was clear: they doubted the empire had enough strong fighters, and this clause was more a dismissal than a favor.

Aron’s smile widened, reading between the lines. He knew this wasn’t a concession but a reflection of the Conclave’s arrogance—they believed the empire lacked sufficient strength to pose a threat.

“We accept and thank you for your consideration,” he replied smoothly, his tone gracious but inwardly pleased. Their assumptions only made his task easier.

"Then the majority will be determined by whichever side wins eight fights," Liasas declared confidently.

"We agree to that," Aron responded calmly, noting her satisfied smile as if victory was already secured.

"Now, let's move on to what will be allowed and what will be banned," Liasas continued, producing a detailed list of prohibited items. The negotiator took the document to review, knowing that anything permitted for one side would also be available to the other.

They began negotiating, clarifying specific items, and discussing whether certain weapons or tactics should remain on the list. However, it quickly became apparent that this process could take far too long. To expedite matters, both sides agreed to let their respective AIs handle the finer details, ensuring the rules were balanced and the fights would emphasize individual strength—regardless of how that strength was attained.

It took a few days to finalize the document outlining the banned and allowed items. Both sides also reached an agreement on who would act as the referee which was a critical role in the fight, and they were going to entrust that responsibility to an AI. The AI would monitor the arena, ensuring strict adherence to the rules and detecting any attempts to breach them. Its joint development would take place over the one month allocated for constructing the arena.

Once the terms were settled, both sides signed the agreement, marking the beginning of the final phase of the conflict.

The countdown to the decisive showdown had officially begun.

Chapter 760 The Construction

With the agreement signed, construction of the arena began, creating a surreal and contradictory scene. Civilizations that were still officially at war found themselves working side by side on a shared project, while other sections of their fleets stood idle, maintaining a tense standby posture in case one side gave in to the temptation to strike.

The mana oath and runic contract ensured compliance, but they were not preemptive barriers—they only enforced punishment after a violation occurred, not for the intent. Although the penalties for breaking the agreement were severe, the potential destruction that could be unleashed in the moments before those consequences took effect was something neither side could afford to ignore. As a result, both sides remained cautious, prepared for any sudden betrayal.

The selection of the asteroid was completed swiftly, and it was soon pulled from the remnants of its disrupted orbit—a casualty of the black hole bomb that had marked the war's violent beginning. The asteroid was maneuvered carefully and stationed at the midpoint between the two warring factions, becoming the neutral ground where everything would soon be decided.

Construction machines from both sides descended upon the asteroid, each faction contributing their most advanced capabilities to the effort. As the machines worked, the massive rock began to transform, and those watching the live broadcast could hardly believe what they were seeing. Bit by bit, the asteroid was reshaped into an enormous colosseum. Anyone familiar with history, whether

through ancient texts or modern cinema, would recognize the familiar architecture emerging from the rubble—a circular battleground designed for combat, but on a scale never before witnessed.

The arena's combat zone spanned over eighty kilometers in diameter, giving fighters an unprecedented amount of space. Reinforcements were being meticulously installed—layers of physical barriers, mana-infused shields, and gravitational stabilizers—to ensure the structure could withstand the devastating attacks that were sure to unfold. The colossal dimensions of the arena served not just to impress but to silence any potential complaints. No fighter could argue they were constrained or unable to unleash their full strength.

This wasn't just war—it was a spectacle. The fight needed to be an ultimate showcase of power, a stage where neither side could claim disadvantage. In war, being placed at a disadvantage was simply part of the game, but here, the rules demanded that all participants have the freedom to give everything they had without holding back. The message was clear: there would be no excuses, only victory or defeat.

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Aron had finally allowed himself a moment of rest, retreating into sleep—a luxury he hadn't indulged in for much of the war. Yet, even as his body rested, his mind remained active. Logged into VR, he was deep in conversation with Nova, who was currently presenting a product briefing in her usual efficient style.

{We've developed multiple methods to produce mana stones, with each process yielding stones of varying quality and mana density,} Nova explained during the presentation. She used the word we deliberately—after all, as the lead moderator of Lab City, which remained Aron's personal research hub, she held a stake in every breakthrough. This allowed her to claim partial credit for the development of the product alongside him.

“What's the difference between them?” Aron asked as he examined the images of the mana stones produced by different methods.

The stones varied in color and tone—some shared the same hue but differed in saturation, with some looking pale while others appeared deeper in color. Although the subtle variations hinted at differences in quality and value, Aron was still determining which were superior.

{Although directly compressing mana into a solid form gave us the purest version of mana stones, they would instantly dissipate without insulation—just like liquid mana when exposed to the open air,} Nova explained. {To maintain stability, we had to introduce bonding agents to hold the mana together in a solid state. Depending on the bonding method used, the amount of mana each stone retains varies, with paler-colored stones holding less mana.}

Aron paused, considering how to use this information effectively. “Since we're maintaining Xalthar's facade that these stones are mined, offering varying qualities makes sense. It allows us to position the purest stones as premium, driving up demand and creating competition among buyers—even though the production cost is roughly the same for all grades.” He smirked, already envisioning auctions where nations would fight over the highest-quality stones.

{Exactly,} Nova replied smoothly, having anticipated his strategy. {With different bonding techniques, we can produce any range of qualities you need.}

{So, which type are we sending to fill the colosseum?} Nova asked, shifting the focus back to the purpose of the presentation.

"The lowest quality ones," Aron answered decisively. "They'll serve as the most common product in the market, setting the baseline price for the other grades. It makes sense to introduce them early, and flooding the Colosseum with these will also subtly reinforce their value as 'standard.'"

{Getting to work,} Nova acknowledged without hesitation.

Almost immediately, several mana-capable atomic printers whirled to life, initiating the rapid production of the low-grade mana stones. With precision and efficiency, the machines began assembling the stones, ready to fulfill their purpose in both the arena and the market.

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In just under two weeks, the Colosseum neared completion when a massive cargo ship appeared in the area, arriving from the solar system. The ship was loaded with an enormous number of containers, and without delay, it maneuvered toward the arena easily going through the already up and active shield surrounding the area, before it began to release a torrential downpour of mana stones into the fighting ground.

Members of the Conclave, watching the spectacle unfold, could hardly contain their envy as they witnessed the empire casually dumping nearly an entire low-level civilization's economy worth of mana stones as if they were mere trash.

As the mana stones met the ground in the open atmosphere, they immediately began to evaporate, slowly but significantly increasing the ambient mana in the arena. What remained behind were heaps of ash, the remnants of the bonds that had held the mana within the stones.