

Chapter 336

Emmanuel permitted himself a small smirk as he studied a projection of the Harmony Accord's smoldering flagship. For the second time in as many hours, his faith in his Ascenders had been rewarded, and he was thrilled. He and the other Tier 50s had remained in their war summit hall as he'd projected what was likely the final battle of the war above their conference table. He'd phrased it as a convenience, but in truth, he was delighted that they wouldn't be able to study Matt in-person while he was fighting.

"Is there any need to continue this farce?"

Janet drummed her fingers on the table, then shook her head. There was a certain kind of quiet resignation in the action. "No, I think we've seen plenty. As President of the Everlasting Republic, I hereby extend an offer of armistice."

The crystal set into the table began to glow softly. Emmanuel and Allister gave their own offers of armistice, followed somewhat more reluctantly by Winter Hornet, and finally Virgil, holding an impressive amount of fury in reserve such that none of it made it to her face.

The AI powering the table began to whirl, and as the remaining Tier 50s provided their respective insights into the war, values began to accumulate. Nearly every battle in the war was analyzed, and the accomplishments of the soldiers were tallied and totaled.

The warscore for each involved Great Power, for each Tier bracket, quickly popped up, along with a long list of events which needed reviewing. After hundreds of thousands of years, *most* events had a fairly clear correlation to their score, but most were not all, and there were always accomplishments that needed direct discussion to properly weigh their merits.

Unsurprisingly, Aiden's most recent fight was at the top of the list. Specifically, how it impacted the final victory status of his Tier.

"Do you accept the loss in the Tier 35 bracket?" Janet asked.

Emmanuel dismissed the question with a snort. "Aiden may be seriously injured, but Maya and Yun Me are captured and seriously damaged themselves. That in *no* way constitutes a proper victory in the Tier 35 bracket."

"And yet the accomplishments of a single man were unable to turn the tides of war so utterly," Winter Hornet spoke. "Regardless of how remarkable, the simple truth remains that your forces were pushed back a nearly unprecedented amount. That The Drowner prevented the loss of your regional capital does not gainsay the simple fact that it was *threatened*. You do not possess the manpower required to recapture said territory. Besides the rewards due your Masters will be provided, yet that does not *obviate* your weakness."

Emmanuel looked at each in turn, very obviously letting his spiritual sense loosen and probe across the battlefield, seeing the wreckage of their once-grand armada. He said nothing,

merely allowing his actions to speak for themselves. He had a very particular balance to strike, and while a nominal loss in the Tier 35 bracket suited his purposes just fine, he would be doing his character a disservice if he didn't at least present the front for desiring an indisputed victory.

It took some time, but eventually Janet grit her teeth and conceded the point. "A draw in the Tier 35 bracket, then. Not that it matters. And that's the most you're getting."

Winter Hornet and Virgil grudgingly agreed, and Emmanuel turned back to the negotiations. "Acceptable."

"It still doesn't matter," Virgil pointed out. "You only managed a victory in the Tier 25 bracket, and even *that* is mostly by technicality. A narrow victory and a draw in two of the major brackets does not offset a loss in all the other brackets. They may be minor, but they add up. You *still* lose."

Emmanuel nodded, conceding that point. It was exactly where he wanted to be all things said. A victory here would look great on paper, but he needed time where he couldn't be attacked more than the win. A victory would limit how much the other Great Powers could demand from him, and he wanted the other leaders to ask for as long of a peace treaty as possible. He needed to play his cards carefully here, as he didn't want to appear eager for a prolonged peace. That would make the other leaders suspicious at a time he could ill afford it. Thus, he needed to make it appear like he would only accept the longer peace begrudgingly.

With things being so close to a white peace, where nothing of real significance would be exchanged, the other Great Powers would have to pay out the nose for any kind of restrictions to the Empire expansion. Which was something all six of the other Great Powers were greatly interested in. Considering he was perfectly content to halt their expansion anyway, in preparation for the upcoming true war that would no doubt be kicked off by Matt's mana generation, a slight loss was the best ending he could ask for to this war. It was another "concession" he would appear to make that was perfectly aligned with his plans for preparation.

That the war was so closely contested was only possible thanks to the efforts of his Ascenders, and that fact was well known by all the Great Power Leaders.

Ironically, the payouts for two of his three Ascenders would be larger than the war loss payouts he would owe to the Republic, Sects, and Federation.

It was all Emmanuel could do from rubbing his hands together and cackling like a lunatic at the thought.

There was an art to looking disappointed *naturally*, attempting to hide the emotion in a way that would nonetheless be visible to the canny- which everyone in this room was counted among- yet not look forced. He performed admirably by his own reckoning, and silently gave his weigh-in to the remaining disputed score events, concluding his part to play in the war. "Now, for convenience's sake, we may as well officially convene the peace summit?"

Virgil growled but nodded while Winter Hornet said, “I suppose there will be no more interesting fights, so we might as well. If we are calling the end of the war, I would have Yun Me returned to me now, that she may receive *proper* healing.”

Emmanuel nodded his assent, then reached out to the prisoner’s healing station, where Yun Me and Maya were currently being treated. Both were in plain white prisoner garments and laden with cultivation, mana, and domain suppressants, but it was a matter of simplicity for Emmanuel to retrieve them both- leaving a message as he did so as to not cause alarm- and deposit them each in turn within their respective Great Power’s healing stations.

The action received a nod of acknowledgement from both Janet and Winter Hornet, and hopefully demonstrated his willingness to cooperate. With the speeds they were operating at, they would likely be finished with the majority of their negotiations before the swap was noted by the respective healing stations, but such gestures were important nonetheless.

The other Tier 50s finished providing their respective weights on the disputed warscore events, and the AI provided the final tallies. Emmanuel nodded, content enough with the final tally even if it were *slightly* lower than he might have preferred.

Continuing in his formal tone, he said, “Then let the battles stop and the pieces settle where they may.”

He flicked between a dozen Talent sets and cast just as many spells, carrying the proclamation of peace across what few battlefields were still active. It was primarily meant as a demonstration of power, but he also foresaw the action saving quite a few lives, and that made it worthwhile unto itself.

He also foresaw that there would be three battlefields that ignored his orders, wanting to finish their grudges before the war was officially over. A quick projection and focusing of his will preempted that, freezing everyone long enough to get the message across that the fighting was *over*.

Looking back to the other Tier 50s, Emmanuel asked, “What are your demands?”

Virgil spoke before the other two could. “I want all the occupied land we control. I—”

Emmanuel didn’t let her finish. “No.”

“No? Are you refusing to negotiate, Emmanuel?” Virgil looked almost gleeful at the thought.

“I *am* negotiating, unlike you. A negotiation requires a good faith effort from all involved parties to come to a mutually satisfactory conclusion, something you show no evidence of partaking in. To begin with, *your* war score is insufficient to even claim that much land.” Letting his eyes harden Emmanuel let his distaste for her show. “And furthermore, I would sooner see those planets *burn* than fall under your control.”

That earned a snort of respect from Tobias, who sneered at Virgil's angry glare she sent his direction. There was an expected flare of anger from Janet, no doubt from his not-so-tacit admission he would be willing to allow the war to *escalate*, along with a minor expression of concern from JR and Aoife, but he could deal with that. Actually, there was at least a minor amount of concern coming from Allister as well, but it was fine.

Looking at Janet and Winter Hornet, Emmanuel continued. "With the war score being so close, let me state my position. I will not give up a single planet. That is my final line and all negotiation needs to start from there."

Janet smiled and responded, "That will be expensive in terms of war score, but I have no issues with such a demand."

With Winter Hornet's agreement, Virgil had no standing to continue down that line of argument.

Winter Hornet spoke with a gesture around him. "The main issue is and always has been the Empire's unbridled expansion. The Empire must agree to no outward expansion for the duration of the treaty. Standard rules apply about enveloping and other such underhanded methods. Is there any problem with such an arrangement?"

Emmanuel drew a breath, then let it out aimlessly. "The wellbeing of my people is my primary concern."

That seemed to take the tension out of all the ostensibly neutral third parties and the general atmosphere changed to a more cordial one.

Janet stared down Virgil, who looked like she wanted to interject, and when the other woman finally backed down Janet spoke. "Very well, then I ought to have plenty of war score to *insist* upon a full audit of the Path of Ascension, specifically in regards to investigating the suspicion that you are utilizing unscrupulous methods to create promising candidates for Gladiatorial status. This includes but isn't limited to staging planet wide rift breaks, dosing mortals with natural treasures, and myriad other dangerous methods."

That was a serious accusation and Emmanuel let himself frown. He'd hoped that Janet had moved on to other, more important things, but apparently she was still pushing for her audit. Technically, there was nothing illegal in doing those things to one's own citizens unless it was related to the Path.

Tobias wasn't wrong when he pointed out that the other Great Powers hadn't moved to free his people from the Federation predations until the Federation was about to get another Tier 46 planet, which would have tipped the scales of power. Those same scales of power were the reason the other powers had declared war on the Empire, and why Emmanuel was happy to restrict his growth for the next few thousand years.

None of them would easily allow another Great Power to become ascendent and threaten the others' sovereignty. They were all happy with their slow and steady growth with

each of them ruling over their own territories that gradually expanded as higher Tier worlds drifted through or near their network of worlds.

Mistreating one's citizens was not a reason for doing something as invasive as an audit, but when it came to the Path... Things became more complicated. Those treaties were some of the oldest and most well tested agreements. By using that angle, Janet might be able to get the others to agree.

Thankfully, Emmanuel wasn't caught off guard by such a request.

"Even with your score, an investigation on the scale you're proposing requires proper cause. What evidence do you present that I have violated any of the Duskblade Accords?"

"I have proof here that you, through your newest Tier 47 king, Frederic Macheteuil, have been conducting experiments to almost a dozen cut off worlds."

Emmanuel allowed himself to smile. Frederic's maneuvering to cover for Matt and Melinda's talents had worked even better than he'd supposed. "Those worlds are being utilized to test various social reforms in isolation, and since their exclusion, no candidates for the Path of Ascension have come from any of them."

With a wave of his hand, he conjured copies of the initial reports generated *by* said social reforms, further backed up by evidence that no Pathers had come from any of the planets in question, and entirely annihilating that particular angle of attack.

Janet glared at him. "You set that up."

"Of course I did," Emmanuel replied. "I gave personal approval to the project. Now, if you're speaking of making it look as though intentional maltreatment of civilians will result in stronger cultivators, that is *also* true. Consider it a lesson that when you seek out conspiracy, you will *always* find something odd. No matter the truth of the matter."

Considering he wasn't doing underhanded experiments on his people, Emmanuel wasn't worried about any other information coming up. He was sure there was some noble somewhere doing unethical experiments, but anything less than state approved interference would never be accepted by the others.

Janet looked like she had eaten a lemon, and interestingly enough, Virgil flinched slightly, and Aoife pursed her lips slightly. Frederic hadn't been wrong when he expected another of the Great Powers to take the bait. Winter Hornet inclined his head in interest, making Emmanuel suspect that he might have also attempted to copy their apparent methods.

Emmanuel shook his head at the Sect propensity to reach for any avenue of power, but nothing Frederic had faked buying was inherently dangerous.

From Virgil's expression, Emmanuel suspected she had been more enthusiastic in her application of the very expensive resources to a number of planets.

Janet worked her jaw, but ended up nodding. “Regardless of the true nature of the actions taken by King Macheteuil, I possess substantive concerns with the actions taken by your Duke Primal, Duchess Vetalin, and the evidence we’ve seen in the worlds overseen by —”

She was interrupted by Virgil, who gestured to Emmanuel while looking at the other Tier 50s. “Why do you even bother? He has an answer for everything. He has plans within plans. We are all just dancing to his tune. If you all fear being eclipsed like you say you do, I suggest we attack him here and now. You all were willing to attack the Federation for getting too strong, but you watch as the Empire plays its game? Janet, you harp about the Empire and its expansionist nature every other year. You bitch and moan about how evil the Empire is for what they do to their people, but you roll over at the first rebuttal. Are you all foolish enough to ignore what is right in front of you?”

Emmanuel wasn’t surprised at the words trying to incite a true war with him, but he was surprised to hear that argument come from Virgil. It sounded more like something Janet would peddle. If Janet had pushed that point, he would have been worried, as despite her hatred for the Empire, she was well regarded by their peers. While she was wrong, her conclusions made sense when taking into consideration her limited information and internal biases. It was even likely the other GP leaders held similar suspicions, if not so fervently as Janet.

But Virgil? No one liked the Federation. That they still existed spoke more to the fact that there were insufficient suitable factions to form *two* new Great Powers than anything else. Even what had become the Monster’s Collective wasn’t *entirely* suitable to all, but when the Tier 46 planet arrived in Federation space, action had been forced. Given Virgil’s endlessly inflammatory language, he would be unsurprised if the Federation failed to exist for more than a handful of generations past his own. But none of them could act, for any attempt to overthrow them would simply be an attempt to, whether intentionally or not, create a puppet state. And none of the other Great Powers would allow that much power consolidation.

It was almost amusing to watch Janet defend him, but Emmanuel knew when it was best to keep his mouth shut.

“There is plenty I detest about the Empire, yet I *am* willing to let the subtle abuses lie in favor of the blatant ones, *Virgil*. Be thankful that I can’t declare war on you here and now. Your actions taken with this very war have been sufficient to earn my enmity. You are a pale shadow of your father, and you are rotting away your people with your very presence.”

Virgil looked like she wanted to rebut Janet’s statement, but the pure hatred radiating off Tobias combined with the lack of support from the others forced her to close her mouth.

Turning her attention to Emmanuel, Janet continued what she was saying before. “And once again, regardless of your *intentional* misdirect, abuses persist within your subjects, and the simple existence of such a misdirect merely confirms that you have something to hide. Though I will concede that the evidence to root it out now is insufficient, I will not allow *your* blatant abuses to persist either. You kill billions in your meatgrinder, *that* is foul enough and will not be allowed to stand.”

Emmanuel gauged the reaction of the others and frowned as he saw acceptance and agreement in most of the other Tier 50s.

He hadn't wanted things to swing this way, but he had expected it.

This avenue of attack was measured and stood in stark contrast to Virgil's latest attack, making it seem all the more reasonable. It was so well timed, Emmanuel had to consider if the latest outburst had been a play to make Janet's suggestion seem more reasonable.

Ultimately, the other Tier 50s worried about the Empire's recent growth. But growth meant more than just their outward expansion and more planets, even though those metrics were a significant part of it. The Empire had been pushing social reforms to make things better for the low Tiers. This increased the birth rate, but that alone would have only put them on equal footing with the Republic. The Republic treated their mortals well, but kept them in low Tier worlds that, while posing little danger, had limited room for advancement.

Large populations meant nothing in terms of empire growth without the ability to convert a portion of those people into productive immortal cultivators.

That was where the initiatives to raise each and every planet to Tier 5 came in. It was ruinously expensive for the Empire's budget, requiring a significant amount of his personal funds and careful management of expenses and taxes for higher tier citizens. The theoretical payback period for such efforts was sometime in the fifty to ninety thousand year timeframe with their current tax policies, but that was a price Emmanuel's grandmother had been willing to pay for future prosperity. Now, the planets she had poured resources into so long ago were now paying dividends for Emmanuel and the current Empire.

A Tier 5 world itself wasn't valuable in the same way that a higher Tier world was. After all, no immortals could directly be raised from a Tier 5 world. But that wasn't where the benefits came from. The largest benefit of a Tier 5 world was the fact it was filled to the brim with Tier 1 and Tier 2 rifts. Those rifts might be quickly pushed through for a dedicated delver, but on higher Tier worlds, their absence became serious bottlenecks for anyone wishing to delve rather than advance through cultivating ambient essence.

Not that there was anything truly *wrong* with cultivating ambient essence, and there were plenty of immortals who achieved their status without ever setting foot within a rift. Especially those living on the higher-Tier worlds, where it was possible, albeit difficult, to reach Tier 15 entirely utilizing ambient essence.

Of course, such immortals contributed comparatively little to the greater Empire. Theories abounded for the *why*, yet the statistics didn't lie. The higher-Tier one was when they began to delve, the less likely they were to either excel, particularly in combat. And the Empire needed the excellent.

The average individual, of *any* Tier, consumed more than they produced. It was the few outstanding individuals who created the infrastructure the Empire needed, who fought and won

its wars, who tethered new planets to the growing web, and contributed the most in taxes, perpetuating the enormous machine which was Emmanuel's empire.

The Path had, therefore, been seen as a way to produce more of those exceptional individuals, take the existing infrastructure designed to get as many people to as high a Tier as they could manage with minimal oversight, and widen the scope. Instead of separating planets and pacifying the low-Tier worlds with low-Tier or unawakened individuals, letting them slowly Tier up on their own over hundreds of millennia, his grandmother had seen it as a way to produce far more of the Empire's true lifeblood, its people. Making better use of the planets they had, essentially, rather than always scrabbling for more.

That was why he wasn't worried about the restrictions on expansion and other such measures, as they didn't stymie the real engine of the Empire's growth.

His planets would still slowly reach Tier 5 and produce more fighters. These fighters would populate the lower immortal Tiers and eventually be incentivized to join the military in record numbers to continue moving upward. Even without Matt and his mana, the Empire would eventually grow to a point where their armies were larger than those of all the other Great Powers put together, should they not copy its methods.

It was just a matter of time and creating the opportunities for those ambitious mortals to be able to rise up.

That last bit was the rub with limiting the Path in any way. With his father's reforms, the Path had turned into something of a social service thanks to its existing infrastructure and being outside the local nobles' control. It even served as a light form of auditing, *ensuring* a literal path out of even the most mismanaged and abusive worlds.

He had expected this to come in the worst-case scenario, and he even had plans in place to mitigate it.

He was willing to give in this area for a small amount of time, but he would make them pay for it, and would do his best to minimize restrictions.

"Neither myself nor my forbearers have overstepped the Path treaties, and to say so is slander. If you wish to restrict me from having too many Ascenders, buy them out. Do not get upset because we have found something that works."

That might have been a little too blunt, but Emmanuel believed his best option was to play hard ball rather than seem like he was capitulating.

Aoife raised a finger as soon as he finished. Officially, the other Tier 50s were here as third parties, and shouldn't be interfering so directly now that the peace treaty was being argued, but Emmanuel didn't move to stop her from speaking.

"We will not fall for your trap, Emperor Emmanuel. Regardless of your claims that you are not influencing your Legends program, and the lack of proof to make a formal accusation, the existing trends speak of your strategy. Perhaps you are simply *accelerating* key talent for

now, keeping within the bounds of good discretion. Yet per your own admission, both of your most recent Ascenders received an early manager, which is not in *violation* of your bylaws, yet certainly *leans* upon it. Then, you utilize two concurrent groups of Ascenders, team them up with many other excellent soldiers, and we never truly test any of them individually. No doubt, you saw Ascenders Light and Shadow's capabilities as a tremendous fortune, letting one of your Ascenders present enough of a threat that we couldn't afford to challenge them again and again, reinforcing the illusion.

"You had hoped this would go unchallenged, and then each time you push just a little bit further, until you are overflowing with Ascenders. Perhaps some are weaker, perhaps some are stronger, but they would be legitimate in name only, and strong enough to present a threat and overwhelm us with sheer numbers. Though each time only bending the rules *slightly*, presenting your forces in the optimal situation to project a show of force. In this way, you seek to drain us dry, fueling your own ambitions with a veneer of legitimacy. It is clever, to be sure. But we will not dance to your tune."

Emmanuel quirked an eyebrow. Denying Aoife's projections would do nothing but make him look guilty, so he didn't even bother. "I hope that this isn't some lead-up to an attempt to shortchange my Ascenders of the due they've earned."

"Of course not. Excellence deserves its own reward. Simply be aware that you are not as subtle as you may think."

What went unsaid, of course, was the way in which each of the others would be scouring to find what the supposed 'secret trick' he'd stumbled upon was, that they could make their own Ascenders. They were each trying their own things, of course, but the Empire had clearly already found the 'secret,' as though there was any sort of secret inherent to letting people choose their own destiny and pursue it as hard as they saw fit.

It was as grotesque as it was fascinating, at times. The Federation had been tightening its grip all the tighter around those with promising Talents, as though no less than three of his Ascenders would have been overlooked on account of their first Awakening.

The Clans had been intentionally allowing additional rift breaks to happen on some of their worlds, hoping that it would encourage those with the spark and motivation needed to select themselves as heroes, ignoring those who would never have the good fortune to ever prove themselves.

The Republic... Emmanuel wasn't entirely certain *what* the Republic was doing. The Veil seemed directly counter to the idea of sourcing talent from the masses found on low-Tier worlds, yet he had no doubt they were doing *something*.

Last he'd heard, the Corporations had begun subsidizing transportation to lower-Tier worlds for the purposes of advancement, and the Monster Collective was loosely working towards some of the same reforms as the Guilds had initiated. But they were decentralized enough that progress was immensely slow going.

Meanwhile, the Sects had been subjecting unawakened peasants to grueling trials before letting the 'farmborn' awaken and join minor sects, with an additional formalized pathway to more prominent Sects. It was a flawed system in many ways, but it was *immensely* close to being incredibly effective, and probably far more 'efficient' than the Empire's own efforts, looking purely at it from a strength perspective.

Which of course they would.

If there was one thing the Sects knew, it was strength. The Empire had more people, the Republic had better logistics, the Corporations had better items, and the Sects took horrific losses whenever they lost with how many of their soldiers fought to the death. But they *still* were one of the strongest Great Powers, because 'forged in fire, beaten with steel' meant on a one-for-one basis, they beat comparable soldiers from nearly any other Great Power.

That only intensified at higher Tiers, where the internal contests for the Royal positions ensured that nearly all of their rulers were utterly *terrifying*, in one way or another. In the lead-ups to Winter Hornet's taking of the Tier 50 slot, he'd had to fight Tier 45 ancient monsters, two of whom had been older than Yun Me herself. Monsters who had been consolidating power for over a million years, crushed under his fist. That he won was more a testament to his strength rather than any condemnation of the ancients he'd beaten for each of them had been powerhouses.

From a personal viewpoint, Emmanuel would argue that his system of giving people freedom was inherently better, but in the view of a Great Power's leader who only cared about combat power, the Sects' method *worked*.

But, the Truth was simple: I Am Not A Tyrant. It was inherent to him, and a not-insignificant weight as to why he didn't want the Empire to become ascendant. *He* wasn't a tyrant, but that was no assurance that in five, ten generations after him, the Emperor of the day likewise wouldn't be. It was, gauging by history and his peers, far more likely. Setting the Empire up in that position was merely preparing for abuse, condemning untold trillions to a worse life that he could have otherwise improved.

Besides, competition drove innovation, drove *progress*. Without that drive, complacency set in. Any Great Power that stood ascendant would eventually go the way of the Glorious Everlasting Kingdom of Prosperity. Without that threat from all sides, none of the other Great Powers would even be considering to give their unawakened citizens anything akin to a better life via cultivation.

Living in harmony was the ultimate outcome, but such was not the nature of reality.

His vision for a better future was more thoughts than concrete plans because he didn't think the other Tier 50s would believe or trust him. But when Matt's mana eventually did come to light, his ideal outcome would be one where they all had Tier 50 worlds. Or, everyone but Virgil. He'd rather Ascend than give her one iota more of power.

The issue in that grand vision came from keeping the Empire and Matt independent. There was no point in setting oneself on fire to help keep others warm, and Emmanuel had no intention of letting the Empire be subjugated for their mana. That was why there would be a true war. The others would want to monopolize the mana like they thought he was going to, and any protestations otherwise would fall on deaf ears.

After all, most of them would love to see their Great Power the only remaining power, so obviously Emmanuel would feel the same way.

Emmanuel nodded slowly to Aoife, conceding the point. “Regardless of your view of my alleged plans, no degree of speculation will make me any more inclined to surrender my greatest weapon. If you desire to dismantle the tool which I have found that *works*, I hope you are prepared to pay for it.”

At the same time, he sent a message to Allister.

In order to get the enemy Tier 50s to ask for a longer peace treaty, he needed to appear on the back foot in negotiations. Having the Guilds request a separate peace agreement with the other side would reduce the Empire’s total warscore and worsen his bargaining position. The others would probably see it as a betrayal and the start of heavy friction between the Empire and Guilds’ alliance, which was a good thing. It would make the Empire seem even weaker and would play into the idea of slowing the Empire down.

Flexing his spiritual sense, Allister got everyone’s attention. “Before Emmanuel finishes, I would like to argue for my own separate peace treaty. The Guilds want a quantity of territory equivalent to our current occupation. *Our* warscore, unlike the Federation, *is* sufficient for such a proposal.” he shot Virgil a glare that almost started a fight right then and there.

Emmanuel didn’t interfere as Allister hashed out their own peace treaty, but he was happy the Guilds would profit from this war. They would be taking almost a hundred new planets, with six Tier 15 planets and two Tier 20s. For a war where they had initially lost territory and were a secondary target, it was a fantastic treaty.

Emmanuel pretended to huff about the betrayal, glaring in Alistair’s direction. He frowned as Janet turned to him. “In light of the Guilds’ independent agreement, you lose about twenty percent of your total warscore. While it is true that we possess insufficient pull to force a restructuring of your Path of Ascension, I believe we can certainly come to an agreement that the degree of bloodshed you inflict upon your people as a smokescreen for your secrets is horrific. You are to limit deaths of those upon the Path of Ascension to no more than five million per year, with scaling penalties per Pather that exceeds that amount. If your methods *truly* work, then surely you can make it work with a smaller pile of children’s bodies in your wake.”

Emmanuel frowned. That equated to roughly a four percent death rate, given current Path numbers, which had only been growing in recent decades. But when the Path tended to average a *forty* percent death rate, that was untenable, especially since he wanted to expand it still.

It also reeked of hypocrisy in that Janet judged him for Pathers deaths when she let uncountable billions die on veil worlds who could be healed with even minor magical healing. Really, it was an excuse to slow them down, similar to how everyone declared war on the Federation for the treatment of those with bloodlines, when in reality it was about the Tier 46 planet.

Still, none of that changed his rebuttal. “Five million is far too small. That’s lower than even typical standard delving death rates for low-Tiers. Seventy five million.”

“Seventy five million children per year,” Janet glowered. “And you call *Virgil* a monster. That’s steeper than even the Sects death rate.”

Winter Hornet snorted at the snipe at him. “The strong separating themselves from the chaff is best done by the edge of a blade. This is only natural. Though, there is nothing to be gained from adding further chaff to the harvest. Fifty million, perhaps. With your current size, that is comparable to your so-claimed *typical* death rates. Surely your selectors are capable of determining those who have truly no hope at advancing?”

Emmanuel withheld a frown. The people he was referring to were the ones who benefited most from the Path as a social program, from destitute worlds and with detrimental Talents. It was intended to serve as a comparatively harmless route off their homeworlds, but they were the ones who tended to push themselves further than they should, and held a commensurately higher death rate as a result. Eliminating them *would* reduce the overall deaths, yes, but delving was hazardous even at the best of times.

Janet shook her head. “Fifty million may be acceptable to *you*, but I hold myself to higher standards. Twenty-five million. There is no need to inflict so innumerably many short lives with naught but bloodshed. Plus a reduction in funding.”

Emmanuel pointed out the issue there. “I would never give you so much access as to enforce a funding limit. I didn’t lose the war that bad, even with the Guilds backing out at the last minute.”

Janet agreed with him after a moment of pondering the issue. “It’s true I can’t force it, but I will still insist on it.”

Virgil finally got herself under control enough to speak. “Resources. If Janet wishes to burn her warscore on trivialities, she is welcome to do so. For a start, I want two dozen vials of the Dragon blood you have been throwing around.”

That earned agreement from Winter Hornet. “I am also interested in that resource. I’ve heard of its potency and am... intrigued. My coordinators for the Dao Child program have expressed interest in what it might do.”

Emmanuel had expected such a request and easily agreed. “That can be arranged, though our source is *very* limited. The price associated is ten times what you seem to expect it to be.”

It took a while, but they eventually hashed out an agreement for the price of the now officially-named Primordial Dragon Blood. It was the only source of bloodline essence from a creature above Tier 3, and while it carried no other benefits, that sole one was impressive unto its own. During the negotiations, Aoife, Tobias, and JR each independently negotiated trade deals for it themselves now that a price had been established.

The discussion of trade goods had naturally slipped into what the *Empire* would be getting from the war. Yes, they would be keeping their planets, but the others had expressed a desire to buy out not one, but *two* Ascenders. That would prove... exciting.

“So. Who do you want to buy out?” he asked rhetorically.

Tobias grunted out a snort that might have been a laugh. “Light and Shadow, of course, as well as Waters. Both of them must be removed posthaste.”

Emmanuel had harbored a faint hope they may have *also* mentioned Matt, Liz, and Aster, but they had a fairly standard degree of impact, insofar as Ascenders went. It would have just been very amusing to have them pay for Matt’s rapid Tier ups when that only assisted the Empire. Still, it was better this way. The less they looked at Matthew, the better.

“Very well. Then let’s begin.”

The first stage was straightforward enough. Any Great Power interested in buying out an Ascender had to provide a guaranteed non-aggression and defense clause, wherein any attacks made against the Empire for the next seven hundred and fifty years would be made against effectively the entire Realm. Five hundred years was typical, to give the armies a bit of time to re-normalize in the wake of being so warped around a singular entity, and Emmanuel attempted to argue that they should receive a full thousand, to compensate for the fact they were buying out *two* Ascenders, but was countered by the fact that Light and Shadow hadn’t been present long enough to substantially warp the armies around their presence.

He didn’t mind too much, though. By that same precedent, he’d been able to argue that on account of them buying Zack and Allie out in the wake of their very first war, the Empire’s investment in them didn’t have enough time to pay out, and therefore they needed a fairly substantial degree of monetary compensation as restitution.

They’d agreed, of course. Coming from negotiations where he was very much on the *backfoot*, it was a breath of fresh air to have so much leverage. Because, unlike the war, where he couldn’t simply walk away from negotiations, the initiative for buying out an Ascender was *entirely* on the behalf of the others. They had to convince both him personally and the Ascenders they were aiming to remove from the wars that this offer, here and now, was a better deal for them than what they could get by just continuing as they were, and perhaps going on more *offensive* wars to gain spoils from conquest.

It was his job to serve as an advocate for both his Ascenders and his people, ensuring that neither of them were shortchanged, but instead rewarded *handsomely* for their efforts.

“Now. I hope that this doesn’t come a surprise to you all, because I hold most of your intelligences in high regard.” His slight earned him a few glares, but it was worth it. “But part of *this* compensation will need to be planets.”

“Planets haven’t been awarded as part of a directed buyout since The Raven Queen,” Aoife glared, “And you’re pushing for them now, instead of during the political considerations?”

“Well, because you’re forbidding Light and Shadow from getting any of their own, of course. Come now, three of you attack me the moment they finish the Path, then the moment they begin to snap back you surrender and say that you want to see them never fight again? They’re Tier 25, and Waters reached Tier 32 less than an hour ago. They’ve barely had time to capture a proper capital for themselves. You *know* Empire traditions regarding this sort of thing, are you trying to flaunt them?”

JR gave a cawing laugh at Emmanuel saying that Aiden was ‘only Tier 32,’ but the rest of his point was valid.

“Look, I’ll put it simply. If you want to prevent me from expanding, and are denying my Ascenders the ability to win a duchy via direct conquest, I *will* need to give them lands to rule. I don’t think any of us want to deal with two groups of nomadic Ascenders, looking for excitement *elsewhere?*”

Each Great Power handled their most excitable warriors differently, to prevent the more nomadic raiding of border worlds that could spark minor conflicts. The Empire had historically promoted any Ascenders to be the new head of their noble house, but when Agatha had opened the Path to non-nobles, she extended the rule such that they formed the head of a *new* noble house. His father had furthered that initiative by encouraging each Ascender to make a business and then spread it through the Empire. The old rule had been applied for and by noble families that wanted to expand their influence so it had long been set in precedence.

When the Path expansions came through and far more commoner born children became Ascenders, peak elites, and pinnacle fighters, the noble families had only been able to grit their teeth at the unintended impact of the old convention. Emmanuel’s father had seen the opportunity to both weaken the hereditary nobles and tie the interests of Ascenders closer to the Empire. Unlike the noble families that raised their children with the desire to own land and control things, the commoner Ascenders were a little too unattached for his father’s liking. Ascenders defecting wasn’t common, but it had happened once or twice, and having them become nobles and start a business tied their interests more firmly to the Empire. Though neither was required, and monetary rewards were possible for those with unstable personalities.

Emmanuel could most certainly find a duchy with a non hereditary noble family and buy them out for the kids, but why would he do that when he could get his enemies to pay for it?

JR was nodding, but Emmanuel decided to try and push it just a bit further, making eye contact with Janet, Virgil, and Winter Hornet. “And I want the majority of these planets to come from your powers. You were the ones who are pushing the entire Realm into this situation, I won’t let you escape the consequences of your actions so easily.”

He looked at Janet and let his contempt show. "And with your planets, we can see how best to cleanse the insanity you propagate."

Janet bristled, "You will destroy the peaceful lives of billions and call it mercy. Those people *chose* to leave the pursuit of cultivation in the hopes it would lead to a better life for them and their children."

"Their *ancestors* did."

"We all live in the wake of the choices made by our forebears. And yet you condemn us for creating a place where something *other* than Tier reigns supreme." Janet snapped right back at him.

"There are better ways to do that."

There was a long pause after his last comment where the spiritual fluctuations increased between the other Tier 50s and until Janet waved a hand. "I don't like it, but so be it."

"We can negotiate the precise planets which will be provided, as well as any potential transportation logistics later." Emmanuel deferred, "We can even involve Light and Shadow directly, if you're so inclined. But I will not allow them to be shortchanged on their rightful due."

JR tapped a claw on the table. "I suppose we have circled around the subject long enough. Legion, Titan, and Wraith. The peace treaties we are discussing will also affect *them*. If you desire the Empire to perform no expansion for a lengthy degree of time, how is the Empire supposed to recoup their expenses with *them*?"

Emmanuel hid his surprise. He'd intended Allister to be the one to bring up that particular point, and he shot the crow a grateful glance.

"We are *not* buying out a third Ascender, simply because they had the good fortune to come about when *another* disruption occurred," Janet glared.

"But JR is correct, it *does* affect them," Winter Hornet agreed. "And their strength is not something which ought to go unnoticed."

"A partial buyout, then?" Allister suggested.

"What, are you saying we only buy out half of a Slayer?" Virgil scoffed.

"No, don't mandate that they must leave war Tiers, just... say, allow them to Tier up as they are wont to do, and purchase an agreement from Emmanuel that he will not delay them at Tier 35. The odds of them remaining long enough to outlast the non-aggression treaty is *minimal*, especially given they have peers who will be outpacing them. There's little which drives Hero-types more than being outmatched, and in this way they'll almost certainly Tier *themselves* out of the war without needing to directly persuade them."

Emmanuel hesitated. That was an excellent outcome, all told. That would put the least spotlight on Matt possible, while letting him not have to explain why he wasn't holding an

Ascender at Tier 35 until he ran out of excuses. "I am amenable to this solution, but only for the appropriate price, of course."

"As is only right," JR agreed.

That was when it started getting *fun*. All of the Great Powers had their own particular treasures and specialities that they normally clung to with an iron fist. They tended to leak *eventually*, which had happened to the Empire's bottled concepts, but some things were truly irreplaceable. The spring on a Sect planet that produced liquid essence, the Republic's twilight-aspected moon, the star in the Corporations which had been harnessed to produce Sparks of Intelligence and Revelatory Mind-Gems, the Federation's Soul Furnace, and more besides. Not all of them were useful to the Ascenders- Revelatory Mind-Gems helped one build an Intent, which obviously wasn't needed for those who already possessed one, but there was always *someone* for whom they'd be immensely valuable for, and Emmanuel got as much of it as he could.

Then there were the natural treasures and skills.

Prismatic Feathers, capable of renewing the bloodline of a child to nearly full potency, so long as their parent possessed at least a *tenuous* one. They also somewhat increased the odds of a hybrid bloodline, but such things were secondary compared to the immense value they held to his bloodline-holding nobles. He'd negotiated to get two bushel's worth, and with over a hundred and seventy feathers soon to be in his possession, he had a very valuable resource on his hands for rewarding or purchasing goods from many of his internal noble factions. A shard of [Vigorous Thrusts of the Rooster] was shamelessly acquired for Leon, an Ember of Rekindled Stars for Mara, a Seed of the Primal World Tree for Tur'stal, and that was just the start.

Hidden realm access for his Ascenders, guaranteed assistance in tiering up growth items to Tier 45, Legacy access, a Tier 27 fire-aspected planet, custom collaborative work made by the Clans and Corporations, free access to Ancient Masters, the list kept growing.

There was still flex, of course. Without actual input from the Ascenders they were actually buying out, they couldn't entirely finalize the deal. For instance, if Aiden refused to speak to JR about what a Place, the new piece of an Authority was, then he obviously wouldn't be making two completely custom commissions- one for Aiden himself and one for Emmanuel, but the deals between the Powers were complete. Virgil had pushed quite hard for her own access to Aiden's information regarding his Authority, but he'd been somewhat noncommittal, and deferred it to when he could later speak to the man. It was *probably* worthwhile, as JR would likely sell the knowledge once he had it, but there was something concerning about the way she'd asked that put Emmanuel on edge.

That aside, he would also be responsible for providing enough if Allie, Zack, or Aiden wanted substantially more than the current proposal offered, but he wasn't especially worried about it.

All in all, the treaty was almost everything that Emmanuel could have hoped for.

The Empire officially lost the war and would give up some resources. They would also limit outward expansion to Tier 10 worlds or higher. This was effectively an outright ban on expanding considering how rare these planets were, but did put them more inline with the historical expansion rates. They would have to cap allowable deaths on the Path for the duration of the treaty, finalizing at twenty-seven million per year. Finally, they would have a period of seven thousand years of non aggression with the Republic, Sects, and Federation. In return, the Empire maintained its pre-war borders and any worlds occupied during the duration of the conflict would be immediately returned to Empire control. Then, of course, they'd be receiving a handsome reward of planets on top of that, plenty to keep some fresh Ascenders busy for quite some time.

It wasn't quite his hypothetical max of ten thousand years, but it was three thousand years longer than Emmanuel had realistically hoped for. He had fought *against* the length of the peace deal, saying the restrictions being tied to it were too overbearing, but that only made the others fight harder to extend it, which was exactly what he wanted.

Seven thousand years of guaranteed peace from normal wars with the most hostile of the other Great Powers was exactly what the Empire needed to not just recover, but strengthen itself for the upcoming true war.

The others found his insistence upon keeping all of his planets *odd*, yet they didn't contest it too harshly, not when it worked so firmly in their favor. He could understand their confusion, but they were his people, even if a number of them were simply vassal states or so far out they were mostly autonomous low Tier worlds. Better yet, their closest ally also got a decent amount of planets which would strengthen them once they were fully integrated.

As everyone was turning to leave, Tobias tossed a rolled up scroll at Virgil. Peeking, Emmanuel wasn't surprised to see a declaration of war from the Monster Collective to the Federation for past atrocities.

Seeing a war declaration passed out, Winter Hornet looked hopefully at the Clans and Corporation, but neither of them made their own declaration. Once they left, he turned to leave as well. Emmanuel did notice a look shared between Janet and Aofie, which he interpreted as the Republic either setting themselves up to ally with the Clans, or paying them not to attack in their moment of weakness.

Before the other Tier 50s fully left spiritual range, Emmanuel frowned and publicly asked Allister to stay, hoping the others would see it as him about to have a fight with the Guild Tier 50 for the 'betrayal' of separate peacing out of the war.

No, as soon as he asked Matt for his permission, it was time to read Allister into what was really coming, and *why*.