

The Mech Touch

#Chapter 7131: Implacable Stance - Read The Mech Touch Chapter 7131: Implacable Stance

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The Astral Octagon had turned into a hive of activity.

Many different events caused the members of the Red Collective to become swamped with work.

From the return to the Cybernetic Empire to the emergence of the mutated voribugs, the new superorganization had to scramble in order to stay on top of the situation.

The Lower Council spent long hours debating on new legislation meant to form a unified response to the latest events.

This immediately resulted in a lot of arguing as the lower councilors all comprised people elected from different territories.

Those who hailed from Rubarthan space loudly screamed for the RC to put its full weight behind reinforcing the Rubarthan Pact.

Others were much more hesitant about squandering so much manpower and resources against an opponent that could overwhelm most defensive measures by relying on overwhelming numbers.

Then there were the headaches caused by the Cybernetic Empire.

When Ves navigated through the crystalline corridors and finally entered the office that he had not visited in person for quite a while, his chief of staff dutifully stood up and greeted him with great deference.

"Welcome back to the Office of the Chief Councilor, sir. We have long been waiting for your return."

Eliza Mo Ragadan did not behave much differently from last time they met in person, but Ves could immediately spot a lot of differences.

For one, Eliza carried herself with greater confidence.

The months she spent while standing in for Ves had increased her sense of importance, causing her to gain an invisible momentum that made it easier for others to take her seriously.

Her qi cultivation had also progressed considerably. The Minister series of qi cultivation methods rewarded its practitioners for properly doing their jobs in government institutions.

Her relatively high position also granted her access to the Red Collective's exclusive cultivation resources. These were newly developed elixirs and other reagents that had proven to be effective at accelerating progress... though usually at a hefty price.

The fast pace of progress meant that the most effective solutions also tended to be experimental.

Although the RC was not stupid enough to place completely untested products onto their internal exchange, there simply was not enough time and manpower to test everything to the strictest standards.

The collies eventually chose to put products that had passed the initial trials up for exchange. This allowed for members such as Eliza Mo Ragadan to make their own consideration whether to brave the risks in exchange for faster progress.

This was a rather dangerous but highly effective policy. Eliza was hardly the only qi cultivator that Ves had encountered in the halls of the Astral Octagon that had made rapid progress in their cultivation.

From what Ves could tell with his sharp senses, Eliza had already reached the later stage of the first major cultivation rank.

That was roughly equivalent to a Senior Mech Designer such as Ves!

He had worked earnestly as a mech designer for more than 15 years, yet Eliza was able to catch up in less than a year!

This was a testament to her talent, discipline, the quality of her modern qi cultivation method as well as the reagents she expended.

It was only a matter of time before the Red Collective produced a mass wave of qi cultivators of the second major cultivation rank.

This was an important divide as those who had become powerful enough to reach this stage usually became powerful enough to affect battlefields with their extraordinary capabilities.

That did not necessarily mean that they could beat up mechs by themselves, but they became a lot more useful than before.

Given that the headquarters of the RC was filled with people who had doped themselves on reagents, this was clearly a matter of great importance.

As Ves moved to his desk and sat on the seat that had remained empty for a long time, he briefly closed his eyes and tasted the air of tension and unease.

"So..." He said. "You know why I am here. I only have 5 days or so to take care of business before I need to depart."

His chief of staff's expression grew tight. "We will have to make the most out of your stay here. The good news is that many different collies wish to speak to you in person. I have taken the liberty of filtering out the vast majority of requests, taking your objectives into account. Your first appointment is already on the way. Now that you have become more engaged in our affairs, it is vital that you become aware of our growing problems. You urgently need to become apprised of certain pieces of classified intelligence that the Secret Department do not dare to spread too far."

Ves nodded in understanding. "The Secret Department has been expanding rapidly, right?"

"Secrets have become more and more important." She affirmed. "I am not ignorant of the fact that this goes against the founding principles of the Red Collective, but we have no choice. We are constantly locked in division as many different stakeholders already exert too much influence on our internal affairs. Their interference is causing our operations to turn into political battlefields."

Ves formed a wry smile. "That is one of the reasons why I have deliberately maintained my distance from all of those acrimonious disputes. It is better to be disregarded than to be forced to pick a side."

"Everyone else has noticed. Your refusal to take their sides has reduced the weight of your name. Nobody likes a fence sitter. Since you have not done anything for them, they will not go out of their way to help you. The advantage is that no one outright hates you. The other department heads and councilors at least respect your neutrality, even if it is mostly a result of your disinterest and strategic inaction."

"I am told that there are certain collies that want to leverage my neutrality, correct?"

"Yes, sir. You will probably receive a request from your next appointment or the one after that. This is a delicate situation that has been allowed to fester for too long. We need to find a resolution before a rift can occur."

They continued to speak for a while longer. Ves periodically kept in touch with Eliza over the galactic net, but this was a highly secure means of communication.

He was able to gain more sensitive information by possessing Argent, but even then he and the collies did not dare to assume it was impervious.

In fact, they were right to be paranoid. Just the Web Mistress alone should have easily been able to intercept messages if she felt inclined to do so. This only further emphasized the importance of holding meetings in person.

Their conversation finally paused when a visitor arrived.

The dark-robed figure kept his head hidden underneath his hood. He could have been mistaken for a cultist if he did not exude an atmosphere that made it easier for people to cast their attention elsewhere.

Curious.

While this trick worked for most people, it did not work for Ves and Eliza.

The latter had already grown familiar with the antics of the Secret Keepers while Ves was resistant towards these kinds of effects.

The new arrival made a shallow bow. "Secret Keeper Zariel-775. I shall be briefing you on a collection of urgent dossiers today."

Ves waved his arm. "Charmed. Please go ahead. I am eager to learn what is truly going on inside the Red Collective these days."

The robed figure did just that. "Let me start with the most immediate external problem. This is a subject that has caused a great amount of polarization within our ranks. The Red Collective has formally extended an invitation to the Cybernetic Empire to become a part of our cooperative effort."

Ves could already foresee how that went. "I take it the Cybers did not say yes."

The male secret keeper nodded underneath his hood. "The Cybernetic Empire has rebuffed our offers. We have made repeated concessions, allowing the Cybers to maintain a greater autonomy and control over their own cultivators so long as they take responsibility for the consequences. This is similar to the special arrangements that we have made to accommodate the Red Association and the Red Fleet. Unfortunately, the Cybernetic Empire has refused our well-meaning accommodations."

"Are the Cybers principally opposed to the Red Collective?"

"Not entirely." Zariel-775 replied. "After pushing the matter, the representatives of the Cybernetic Empire have expressed a desire to gain access to our services and gain representation in the Lower and Upper Councils. What is problematic is their refusal to allow our people and organization to gain a foothold in their empire. The latest terms they have made state that they want to establish their own branches of the RC that are staffed by their own personnel. They want to maintain separate databases and gain veto power over all of the rules and orders issued from the Astral Octagon."

Ves snorted. "You might as well call them freeloaders! The Cybers want to gain access to everything good within the RC, but they do not want to share any of their own good stuff. It is all about control for them. The Cybernetic Empire is a highly centralized polity by design. The Polymath has completely rejected the authority of the Red Association and the Red Fleet. Her policy towards the RC is not much different. Anything that threatens to compromise her absolute control over her own star empire is unacceptable."

Zariel-775 remained silent for a moment. Ves could somehow feel that the spy was staring harder.

"You have intersected with the Polymath numerous times. You have a good understanding of her... personality."

"I do not dare to make that claim." Ves quickly defended himself. "I am sure that your Secret Department has conducted a much more thorough analysis of her. Based on what little I know about the Polymath, she thinks she is the smartest individual in the Red Ocean, which means that only she knows how to best lead our race to victory. She cannot stand the thought of letting others wander into her well-laid plans and completely ruin her layout due to reasons that she finds idiotic. Now that she is finally able to lead her own little empire, she will never relinquish control to anyone."

"What you have described... largely falls in line with our analysis." The secret keeper spoke in his emotionless voice. "As hopeless as it may seem, do you have any suggestion that might persuade the Cybernetic Empress to reconsider her stance towards the Red Collective?"

"Yes, but you won't like the answer. The only viable solution that I can think of is to put her in charge of the Red Collective. As long as she is in charge, she will no longer have any objections."

"That is unacceptable. We are a collective. We are accountable to the very same people that we are responsible for. To answer to only a single individual goes against everything we stand for. Star Designer or not, she is only a single person."

Ves nodded in agreement. "That is what you and I think, but the Polymath is cut from a different cloth. This is an ideological dispute. The RC's governance model stands in opposition to the Cybernetic Empire's governance model. Whereas the RC tries its best

to be more accountable to the masses, the Cybernetic Empire is run by technocrats appointed by the smartest of them all. The former has adopted a bottom-up approach, while the latter is the epitome of a top-down approach."

When put in those terms, it was no surprise that the Cybernetic Empire did not get along with the Red Collective.

"So are you able to offer any reasonable alternative or suggestion that could persuade the Cybers and their sovereign to reconsider their stance towards the RC?"

Ves spent a few seconds of thought. He could not think of any way to apply enough pressure to the Polymath to persuade her into giving up on her principled stance.

"...No. I am sorry, secret keeper. I think that the Cybernetic Empire will never become a part of the Red Collective so long as the Polymath is in charge. We will just have to get used to this reality."

Chapter 7132: Forceful Revelation

There was nothing Ves could do about the Cybernetic Empire.

Sure, Ves had talked to the Polymath just recently, but that did not mean he had her ear.

She Cybernetic Empress had her own agenda, and she was extremely stubborn about pursuing it. Ves knew without a shadow of a doubt that she would never compromise her vision just to accommodate the Red Collective.

From the response given by Secret Keeper Zariel-775, it seemed the leaders of the RC knew this as well.

They only asked Ves in case he possessed a secret weapon that could persuade the Polymath to change her mind.

The collies were expecting too much from Ves. He was not a miracle worker. He was just a mech designer.

Since there were no gains to be made on this issue, Zariel-775 shifted to another topic.

"Your return to the Astral Octagon has taken place at a convenient time. As the first human phase lord, we believe you can be of assistance with addressing a growing problem within our ranks."

"You are talking about the Phase Lord Department." Ves made a guess.

"Correct. So far, your chief of staff has only given you a shallow explanation of what we are concerned about. This is deliberate as the matter is too sensitive to be discussed over remote channels. The main reason why this delicate situation has not led to any drastic incidents is because we have made strides to keep it under wraps. We cannot afford to spread unnecessary panic and doubt when we are still a young organization."

Ves began to frown. "How badly has the Phase Lord Department diverged from the rest of the Red Collective?"

"The members of this department have effectively gone rogue." The secret keeper said. "As far as we can tell, it started with the human phase lords. Every member of the Ur-Titan Phalanx and the Flesh Chopper Phalanx have changed after they have increased their phasewater concentration past a certain threshold. The soldiers suffered a similar phenomena that has afflicted you, but the consequences are much more dire for them. Not a single one has successfully managed to repel or wrestle back control over the hidden personality that has sprouted from their abnormally strong physiques. You are the only success case, which means your input is all the more valuable."

Ves frowned deeper. "I am afraid that you are expecting too much from me. I may be a human phase lord, but my case is probably a lot different from the others. The only reason why I managed to regain control over myself is because my fellow Larkinsons happened to be strong enough to force my alternate personality to give up control. I am not sure whether that will work with the Phase Lord Department since it is so much bigger."

"That is so." The secret keeper nodded under his hood. "All of our departments are spread over at least a dozen different physical locations in order to prevent a decapitation strike from causing us to lose all of our institutional knowledge and other gains. However, this has also made it difficult to keep all of the members of the Phase Lord Department under control. By the time we realised the nature of the problem, it was already too late."

This was a clever approach, but it was never meant to be used against humans.

Now, red humanity might have to contend against phase lords that were much more alike to them than expected, everyone understandably grew squeamish about confronting these possible renegades.

"How exactly did this work?" He said.

"Before we managed to discover their... sudden changes in mentality, the human phase lords and their subordinates have done well at blending in. If you do not know the truth, it is nearly impossible to discern that they are not themselves anymore. It is only when we learned what happened to you that we began to look at our existing human phase lords differently for drastic changes in personality. That was when we picked up the suspicious behavior."

"The Phase Lord Department has to know you have figured out their secret, right?"

"Yes, but that has not yet caused us to undergo a schism. We have undergone an unspoken accord more or less. So long as we pretend that all is well and that nothing is wrong, this landmine will not explode in front of our faces. Instead, we continue to put our weight on it, knowing that any shift could lead to a catastrophe that will devastate both of us. Months have passed since then as we sought a cure to the affliction that has overtaken all of our human phase lords, but we failed."

Ves narrowed his eyes when he heard that. "You allowed the problem to fester because you were hoping to find a perfect solution."

The secret keeper made a shallow nod. "The members of the Phase Lord Department that have become compromised over the last year used to be our brothers and sisters. Whether their condition is similar to yours or not, we owed it to them to do our best to recover their original condition."

"I take it that these attempts have failed."

"Yes. We have not exhausted all of our options, but our optimistic outlook has faded. We no longer believe that we can recover their original personalities as the nature of their transformations is different from your own. After many probes and examinations... we have learned that where you have resisted the temptation to sacrifice your humanity for power, our compromised members have embraced their god complex, with all of the consequences that came with this decision."

"How many?"

"As far as we know, all of the human phase lords have become compromised to the same degree." Zariel-775 brutally revealed. "They have all struck the devil's bargain. This has caused them to undergo extreme personality changes, but not one that has caused them to adopt completely different identities. This is why they were initially able to escape notice. They have retained enough of their original selves to camouflage their changes of heart."

Ves grimaced when he heard that. He had already guessed that not every member of the Phase Lord Department possessed his resolve, but it was still disappointing to hear that so many collies had fallen prey to this trap.

"I need to understand their new conditions. From what you have described, their personality changes are less extreme than in my case, but they are still unquestionably changed, right?"

The member of the Secret Department paused for a moment as if he needed a moment to compose his next words.

This was an extremely delicate situation. Any inaccuracies on his part could lead to serious consequences down the line.

"Our theory may be flawed, but we suspect that the compromised human phase lords are still themselves. The reason why their behavior has changed so much is because they have been swept by a revelation that they have inexplicably accepted. Their changes are similar to secularists that have been converted into a faith. They are so convinced that their new views are correct that they have completely denounced their old views. What makes this so concerning is that each of them have willingly embraced the new truth as they see it. None of them have held true to their old values."

Both Ves and Eliza Mo Ragadan looked discomfited by this description. It was pretty awful to hear how every human phase lord had fallen prey to this particular weakness.

"So let me get this straight. Since every human phase lord has failed to resist this temptation, they did not get taken over by a radical second personality. They instead changed their mindsets on their own initiative, thereby developing a god complex but not to the point of turning into a stupid dissident or anything, right?"

"You can say so, chief councilor. What is good about this is that the compromised human phase lords are not radical to the point of rebelling against the Red Collective and human civilization as a whole. We believe that despite developing a god complex as you describe it, they still maintain enough sentiment towards humans to stay aligned with our race."

"So you aren't afraid that they will defect to the Red Cabal due to developing a sense of brotherhood with alien phase leaders?" Ves asked with clear concern in his voice.

"Our analysis may be wrong, because we do not have evidence that this is the case. The human phase lords may have developed an inflated sense of self, but they still consider the alien phase whales and phase lords to be enemies on the same level. Our fallen members see themselves as gods of the human pantheon. The Red Cabal is a rival pantheon. Both are currently contesting for control over the Red Ocean. The compromised human phase lords will still side with the rest of us because we have more in common with them than their alien counterparts."

"I see." Ves said. "This... sounds more optimistic than I expected. I assumed the human phase lords already thought about defecting."

"We are monitoring their situation from a distance." The secret keeper said. "One of the reasons why we have avoided confrontation so far is due to the risk that pushing too hard may inadvertently cause us to drive them into the arms of the Red Cabal. As compromised as they may be and as tenuous as their humanity has become, we still have hope that they can still identify themselves as humans."

That was the big question.

Sev had developed a very strong superiority complex. He believed that phase lords existed on a completely different level than mortals. The gulf between the two was so great that they no longer strictly belonged to the same race anymore!

Ves felt disgusted by this attitude. The way his alternative personality regarded other humans was the same as if he was looking at ants.

Sev would probably feel nothing if he happened to squash a crowd of humans beneath his feet!

If the compromised human phase lords possessed the same mindset, then there was no way to negotiate with them. Their sense of separation from ordinary humans had grown too strong to rein in their arrogance.

However, so long as their opinions were not as extreme, there may be hope in obtaining their support.

Ves did not hope for anything more than that. It was probably impossible to shake them from their delusions.

"I understand now." He quietly said. "Given my unique identity and position, you want me to approach these human phase lords and persuade them to cooperate sincerely with the Red Collective, right? These guys don't respect 'mortals' such as you. They only respect their fellow 'gods' like myself. If they see a human phase lord like myself working with other humans without any issue, they may be persuaded to follow my example."

The secret keeper appeared pleased that he did not have to explain this much. "Yes. We have other plans to address this problem that do not require your personal intervention, but we estimate that their success rate is less than optimistic. You have a history of solving unusual problems. We call upon you to do so again."

Ves crossed his arms. "You are piling a lot of expectations on my shoulders. Aren't you afraid that I will botch my attempt? I am not a professional diplomat or whatever."

"We can coach you on how you should speak to them and how to respond to specific situations." Zariel-775 noted. "Other than that, we trust you to navigate your conversation with your fellow human phase lords as you see fit. We will be pleased as long as you can persuade them to open up and resume their cooperation with the rest of the Red Collective."

"You are asking for much. These guys... if my suspicions about them are correct, they will demand far more than cooperation. They will insist that we put them in charge."

Chapter 7133: Transit to Jotunheim

Ves agreed to intercede in this matter.

The Phase Lord Department should have been a powerful contributor to red humanity's defense. Its phalanxes were expensive and time-consuming to set up, but could put up a mean fight against alien phase lords once they deployed on the battlefield.

Unfortunately, many people seemed to have forgotten about human phase lords as their appearance on the battlefield petered out shortly after they appeared.

While they enjoyed a modestly positive track record in the initial months, the secret personality changes that overcame them when their body cultivation advanced past a certain threshold caused them to care much less about their military obligations.

They had retreated to their bases and remained isolated from the rest of red humanity!

The other members of the Red Collective initially did not find this strange. Human phase lords were a very new phenomenon, and who knew what problems or bugs these pioneering humans encountered.

Yet as the human phase lords continued to sequester themselves while the frontlines burned, everyone's patience was slowly running out. Even if these body cultivators encountered a troublesome issue or three, shouldn't they be able to solve them or tough it out already?

The frontlines continued to get pushed back! Without enough reinforcements, there was no way that red humanity could prop up the entire frontlines.

It was only when the incident related to Ves became known that the Red Collective fully accepted all of the gathered intelligence.

The Phase Lord Department had become compromised.

In the face of such a major problem, Ves expected the distraught collies to figure out a way to solve this delicate but vital problem themselves, but their best solution amounted to waiting for him to stop by and intercede for them in person.

Well, it made a certain amount of sense.

"It is well-known that you are not the most dutiful chief councilor." Eliza Mo Ragadan told Ves as they had all made themselves comfortable aboard the Tarrasque that was about to bring them to the outskirts of the Yernstall Central Star Node. "However, you are one of the individuals that is most strongly associated with the Red Collective. You are the founder and hold one of the highest legislative positions in our

superorganization. Requesting you to render aid is more expedient because we can still keep this internal."

So the collies were afraid of making a fool of themselves.

"So the alternative plans all involve asking for help from external parties, is that correct?"

Secret Keeper Zariel-775 naturally accompanied Ves as they all made their way to the distant planet that housed the headquarters of the Phase Lord Department.

While the human phase lords were set up across human-occupied space, their highest leader as well as a sizable number of giant troops had holed up at the headquarters located on the Yernstall XXVII, which had recently become known as Jotunheim for whatever reason.

Jotunheim was not the most distant planet from Yernstall's three stars, but it was pretty out there. It lacked the warmth and illumination enjoyed by the closer planets that were situated more comfortably in the inner system.

This isolation happened to work in favor of the Red Collective. It was much easier to hide any irregularities related to their internal cohesion if the human phase lords never showed up in more densely populated planets such as Yernstall IV and Yernstall V.

During the transit to Jotunheim, Ves made good use of his time by pumping his chief of staff and the accompanying secret keeper for more information.

"How many human phase lords does the Phase Lord Department command?"

"Assuming that they have not suffered any attrition on or off the battlefield, the department should number 361 in total." Eliza Mo Ragadan reported. "The Ur-Titan Phalanx is the first and most elite unit that numbers just 60 in total in order to guarantee their strength. The Flesh Chopper Phalanx is the second elite unit that also amounts to 60 human phase lords. Then there is the Faceless Giant Phalanx, which is the first standard unit that is comprised of human phase lords. They are able to field 240 weaker and less developed human phase lords, though they still have a small number of powerful champions to help them resist more powerful foes."

"That is 360 human phase lords, not 361." Ves pointed out this small discrepancy.

"That is because I have left out the department head and leader of the Phase Lord Department, sir. Do not be intimidated by the large number of the phase lords that the estranged collies have at their disposal. Many of them are weak and equipped with good but not stellar combat equipment. It is not economical to outfit them with excessively expensive combat gear that is sized for their enlarged physiques. That is an expense that we cannot afford."

That was the troublesome part about fielding human phase lords. Just like warships, these body cultivators relied on size and mass to become stronger, which meant that it became increasingly more expensive to outfit them with good gear.

It did not surprise him that the Phase Lord Department only raised 2 elite phalanxes before moving to raise a standard phalanx.

The latter may have a lot more phase lords to throw at enemies, but their gear was probably at least an order of magnitude cheaper.

That did not necessarily mean that they were weaker. Ves was fully willing to believe that several squads of the weakest human phase lords could make the life of any greater phase lord miserable.

This was especially the case if they were equipped with modern gear and demonstrated impeccable teamwork!

"I won't be meeting with the human phase lords at the heart of their home base, right?" Ves asked with a little concern as he thought about what might happen if the talks went sour. "I do not think I can overcome an ambush of dozens of human phase lords, even if the Bluejay Fleet is ready to assist. I won't be able to teleport away when I am in the presence of so many powerhouses that can disrupt the local space and block any displacement attempts."

"That will not happen." The secret keeper immediately responded. "We have already arranged a clandestine meeting aboard a civilian transport vessel. There, you will meet the head of the Human Phase Lord Department along with a small number of his cadre. While the department is staffed by a large number of normal humans, they are inconsequential to the problem at hand. The only people you truly need to convince are the ones who have surpassed the physical limits of the human race."

"So tell me about these leaders."

Zariel-775 waved his hand and activated a projection that displayed a strong male leader in human form.

"This is Department Head Scilo Karneon. He is only 66 years old, but he is one the most impressive pugilists in the Red Ocean. We chose to appoint him as a head because he was one of the strongest advocates in support for human phase lords. He is only an able administrator, but he is remarkably charismatic and understands how to keep unruly soldiers with too much strength and energy in their bodies under control."

Scilo Karneon did have the look of a muscular athlete and fighter as opposed to a bureaucrat or an intellectual. He probably shoved all of the paperwork and other tedious obligations to his overworked staff.

"I have a feeling that your explanation is not quite complete." Ves told the mysterious dark-robed spy. "Anyone who is able to persuade a bunch of powerful people to get appointed in this important position is not simple. What makes him dangerous?"

Good question." The secret keeper smiled under his hood. "The department head here used to be a competitive boxer. This means that he has grown up as a designer baby that is optimized for brutal fistfights. He has trained in boxing and other martial arts for practically his entire life. He has received many augmentations that barely fall in the scope of legality according to the galactic boxing governing bodies. All of this training and investment has paid off. He has won dozens of regional championships. His best career result is winning 19th place in a past prestigious galactic boxing tournament."

That was a big deal!

Perhaps winning 19th place did not sound impressive, but this was a tournament that gathered the best boxers from all of human space in the old galaxy!

This was back during the Age of Mechs where the conditions were much better at the time!

Ves looked at Scilo Karneon with much greater vigilance than before. This was a born fighter and a proven champion. Now that he presumably became a human phase lord, he would be able to translate his fighting skills perfectly with his new physique!

"Okay, I can see how a champion boxer like him can gain the respect of his supersized troops." He said. "What was his personality like before he... became compromised."

"The department head was enthusiastic." Eliza referred to the few times she spoke to the man in person in the past. "He was the characteristic athlete that had a passion for the sport and cared about being the best. When the Red War broke out, he felt useless because he would not be able to translate his excellent boxing skills on the battlefield. This was still back in the time when Carmine mechs had not yet been announced or released. He took inspiration from your accidental transformation into a human phase lord and initiated an effective influencing campaign. He single-handedly forced the nascent Red Collective to include the Phase Lord Department."

This guy most definitely deserved his place in the department. Ves admired a man like Scilo Karneon who was not the strongest and did not have a lot of wealth, but still managed to win enough people over to gain an outsized voice.

"While we believe that the department head's original personality has not completely been subsumed by his new personality traits, the new Scilo Karneon has become a much different leader." The secret keeper mentioned. "You can read the full details in the information package that I am about to transmit to you, but you can imagine that he has become much more arrogant and fixated on becoming a physical god."

Ves snorted. "If he is anything like Sev, then I don't need to know much more. What I need to know is how I should complete my objective. Do I need to pressure them into falling back in line, or do I need to coax them as if they are misbehaving children?"

"Both, councilor. On the one hand, you cannot afford to present yourself as a phase lord that is weaker than them. The new department has undergone many changes where the strong hold authority while the weak can only obey. You must not give them the impression that you belong in the latter category. At the same time, these human phase lords still retain a bond with red humanity. You cannot afford to scold them too hard and cause them to lose the remaining vestiges of their loyalty and duty to the human race."

That made Ves look pensive. How the hell was he supposed to juggle these two opposing concerns!

Push too hard, and he might drive the human phase lords into the arms of the Red Cabal.

Push too little, and he would be labeled as a weakling before the human phase lords kicked him back into orbit, literally perhaps!

"You guys may be expecting too much from me." He complained. "I may be a human phase lord, but I am a mech designer by profession. There is no way I can beat the former 15th best boxer in the Milky Way in a fistfight, and they will know it right away. If I try to overcompensate, then it is easy to insult the prickly human phase lords. Those guys do not sound like the type to let that rest."

"We understand your doubts, but we believe you have the best chance to convince the Phase Lord Department to return to sanity. Your status is exalted among them. The human phase lords still respect you for being the first. The examination of your true body has been vital in deciphering a systematic means to convert humans into phase lords. Each of them owes you for the power they have gained, whether they like it or not. That alone demands respect."

Chapter 7134: The Ascended Giants

The first meeting between Ves and the leaders of the Phase Lord Department took place in high orbit of Jotunheim.

Although the base of the rogue department was well-protected, it had powered down its active turrets and other weapon systems as part of a pre-negotiated settlement.

The Bluejay Fleet did likewise keeping its mechs in their carriers and the weapon systems of its warships in lockdown.

Many people could feel the tension in the air as those involved in this troublesome affair realized how easily both sides could come to blows.

Any provocation could lead to escalation.

If the human phase lords were not willing to back down out of paranoia or misplaced pride, then they may decide to launch an attack, thereby starting a chain of events that would lead to massive losses to both sides!

The Yernstall was supposed to be the safest and most secure star system after Bridgehead One.

Any incident where warships, planetary bases and human phase lords started to exchange blows would definitely be detected across the central star node.

Many more people would find out about the internal irregularities, turning it into a full-blown scandal that could not be contained.

The Red Collective would suffer a huge crisis of faith!

Every leader involved in this botched affair would suffer a huge hit in reputation!

This included Ves!

He therefore needed to be very careful and avoid setting off the compromised collies.

Yet he could not allow the Red Collective to suffer too big of a disadvantage either.

The RC had its bottom lines. It could not afford to tolerate outright betrayal.

If the human phase lords did not fall in line, then the Red Collective had little choice but to call in the big guns.

This likely entailed drastic measures such as requesting the intervention of a god pilot to sort out the recalcitrant human phase lords.

Of course, it went without saying that such a move came at an enormous expense. Just the fact that the RC had to divert a god pilot from a vital responsibility was enough to affect the war effort!

Nobody wanted the situation to deteriorate up to this point. Ves carried the hopes of many RC leaders. They wanted him to try and see if he could resolve the problem quietly and without drama.

Ves personally did not have that much hope of success. He was not a professional diplomat and still felt he was lacking too much context.

However, the RC promised rich rewards if he succeeded in convincing the human phase lords to submit themselves to authority.

More importantly, if he failed, he would still come away with a generous consolation prize.

The RC had plenty of good stuff that Ves desired, from exclusive hyper materials to forbidden knowledge.

What Ves found most crucial was structural knowledge on how to convert alien phasewater organs into human-compatible versions. This was a long-standing shortcoming of the Larkinson Biotech Institute.

The Phase Lord Department conducted a huge amount of research in this field. Though much of the research data was locked inside bases such as Jotunheim, the RC's other databases possessed a sizable quantity of early research reports, enough to satisfy Ves' appetite.

The thought of those databases caused Ves to turn towards another important figure.

"Meow?"

Lucky raised his head and looked questionably at Ves.

"Are you ready for another infiltration mission? This isn't like the last attempts. Jotunheim is secured with lots of modern human tech. You cannot afford to be sloppy. Retrieving vital intelligence from their data cores is important, but preventing the human phase lords from finding out that we are sneaking behind their backs is even more important. You can literally start an internal war if any phase lord, any human thrall or any electronic system has detected your traces."

The gem cat arrogantly lifted his head. "Meow!"

It was as if Lucky felt insulted that Ves would even question his infiltration capabilities!

"Hey! We got exposed while we were attempting to infiltrate the Protector of Karnak's underwater lair, remember?!"

"Meow meow meow!"

Lucky believed he would be able to remain completely undetected if he did not have to babysit Ferrum this time!

Whatever the case, the consequences of getting caught were much more severe this time. That was why Ves did not insist on employing his infiltration-oriented mechanical cat avatar.

Compared to an amateur like Ves, Lucky was much more experienced with infiltration!

Ves turned to Zariel-775. "Are you sure Lucky will be able to find anything particularly important or incriminating? Even if these human phase lords are not the sharpest tools in the workshop, they shouldn't be stupid enough to document their evil master plan."

"You would be surprised how negligent individuals can be." The mysterious spy responded. "Even the best can fall prey to complacency. It is still worthwhile to take the risk to send out your pet on an infiltration mission. The absence of proof also constitutes an important data point in itself. The results will at least provide more certainty to the Astral Octagon. Do not be too concerned about the possibility that your pet will get caught. We have discretely mobilized a troupe of formation masters and other cultivators that will provide various means of remote support. The human phase lord should not possess the means to detect these discrepancies."

"Are you sure about that?" Ves questioned. "They all have companion spirits, right?"

The secret keeper nodded. "That is true, but none of them excel in detection as far as I am concerned. Their companion spirits are mostly oriented towards enhancing and supporting their direct combat capabilities, which mostly comes in the form of elemental energy manipulation. They possess certain means of detection, but our experts have already taken this into account. What is much more important is that you do your best to attract their attention. We are certain that the self-styled polemarchos is broadcasting this meeting to the rest of his troops. He has no other choice given how much they look up to you as the trailblazer of their current path to power."

"Polemarchos?"

"When we found out that the human phase lords have become compromised, the department head has already taken the first step to distancing himself from our organization by adopting separate ranks for himself and his subordinates. Following the traditions of the alien phase lords, Scilo Karneon has cast off his 'mortal name' and prefers to be known as the Oscillating Fist, the Polemarchos of the Ascended Giants."

"...That is a drastic change." Ves remarked. "He is one step away from designating human phase lords as the giant race."

"We know. We believe that the polemarchos have deliberately assumed these new names to fulfill multiple goals. Among them is to use the threat of declaring the existence of the giant race to force us to accommodate his other requests. It is working. The Red Collective cannot afford to let this catastrophe come to pass."

The stakes were too high. Ves felt more pressured than ever.

He continually doubted himself.

He truly did not feel he was not the right person for the job, because the RC could not find anyone better, they defaulted Ves.

It seemed reckless and unnecessarily risky, but the collies had conducted a thorough analysis and concluded that letting an amateur like Ves make an attempt was better than all of the other alternatives.

As Ves continued to absorb more information, the Bluejay Fleet finally approached the orbit of Jotunheim.

Just as agreed, the Tarrasque along with a small amount of escort vessels continued onwards while the remainder of the Bluejay Fleet remained a bit further away.

In case either side launched an attack, the bulk of the mechs and warships would have to spend precious minutes getting closer before they could offer material assistance.

This was a gesture of goodwill on the part of Ves and the Red Collective.

Hopefully, the human phase lords would not make Ves regret his decision to proceed with the plan.

As the Tarrasque and her meager escorts approached the target orbit, Zariel-775 took Lucky away in order to prep the gem cat for his mission.

Ves knew that the Tarrasque was ready to launch a stealth shuttle that was currently parked in a blind spot on the exterior of her large hull.

This shuttle would hopefully approach the headquarters of the Phase Lord Department and drop Lucky off without setting off any perimeter alarms.

Ves silently wished his cat would stick to the mission and not get up to any unnecessary mischief.

Minutes continued to pass as the Tarrasque assumed a stable orbit. Ves along with his chief of staff and a fortified troop of Apocalypse Wardens boarded an armored shuttle that would take him to the commercial transport vessel parked in a nearby orbit.

The shabby venue was specifically chosen to prevent any ambushes and limit the damage if the human phase lords became too 'energetic' for whatever reason.

Ves glanced at his bodyguards. They came from the 2nd Apocalypse Warden Battalion of the Enforcement Department. They were well-trained and talented in qi cultivation. They received a regular supply of elixirs to accelerate their growth, but even if they had gained a certain level of combat effectiveness, he doubted that they could pose a serious threat against even a single phase lord.

The difference in scale was too great.

The only upside was that the Apocalypse Wardens were all trained in combining their strength to launch collective attacks. That should give them at least a decent chance of slowing down their opponents.

The armored shuttle flew over to the empty transport vessel without any incident.

As Ves and his entourage stepped inside, an attendant from the Phase Lord Department bowed and wordlessly led the party to the main cargo hold.

Ves knew that the human phase lords had all become indoctrinated by the heavenly authority of the Red Ocean, but that did not explain why the regular human staff of the Phase Lord Department still did their jobs like nothing had changed.

"Hello. Can I ask a question?"

The attendant turned his head and looked at Ves even as he continued to stride forward.

"You are not a phase lord. Why... have you chosen to remain in the service of your current superiors?"

"You would not understand." The man said while shaking his head.

"Try me." Ves challenged.

"My orders do not allow for that. My only responsibility is to lead you to the right destination."

Damn. Ves would have loved to gather first-hand insights from a member of the Phase Lord Department.

They eventually entered a large and hollow metal cavern.

While the transport was only middling in size, the vessel's cargo capacity was still impressive in absolute terms.

Instead of ferrying raw materials or finished goods back and forth, the transport had now become the improvised meeting place between two parties.

Ves and the others immediately caught sight of the delegation from the Phase Lord Department.

They would have to be blind to miss the presence of four human giants!

Each of them had adopted a uniform size that allowed them to match the height of 2 average mechs stacked on top of each other.

They all wore nanosuits instead of raiments, which Ves interpreted as a good sign.

Ves did not believe for a second that this was their maximum size limit.

The Oscillating Fist stood at the head of the small procession.

He exuded a great amount of strength.

His gigantic but handsome face belied a strong sense of conviction and personality. =

This was not a leader who gave up easily.

Ves briefly glanced at the other three phase lords. Each of them were the heads of the three active phalanxes. He recalled their names and their biographies, but seeing them in the flesh breathed life into their stories.

The human phase lords all formed a united front. They observed Ves with a mixture of caution and respect.

As Ves and his party stopped a respectful distance away from the four giants, a tense silence ensued.

Chapter 7135: I Identify As Giant

The two sides looked completely different from each other.

On one side of the empty cargo hold, four human phase lords stood tall and proud.

Each of them wore decorated nanosuits that had been programmed to take on the form of uniforms that showed off their superhuman physiques.

On the other side, Ves along with his chief of staff and his bodyguards practically looked like ants in front of the four monstrosities.

The confrontation did not look equal at all. Just one of the human phase lords could easily the human-sized figures with a single foot!

Ves did his best not to let the extreme size difference bother him. It was not much different from meeting people who were noticeably taller than him. Sure, the gap was much greater this time, but he already anticipated this in advance.

Seeing as the four human phase lords had yet to break the silence, Ves decided to do it himself by raising his hand to form a casual wave.

"Hi."

He deliberately assumed a more casual tone in his greeting in an attempt to disarm the tension in the cargo hold.

This usually worked, but not this time.

All four phase lords scowled or showed signs of displeasure.

"Shameful." Scilo Karneon said with contempt. "I never expected our progenitor to cling so much to his mortal human failings. We looked up to you, Larkinson. You have opened up a route that allows for people to undergo a physical transformation that turns them into gods. Why have you not embraced the divine physique that you have been blessed with? This is a gift from the universe! To spurn it is not only blasphemy, but also a denial of your true identity!"

Ugh. Ves could immediately tell that this was not going to be an easy conversation. The sentiment betrayed by the department head along with his decision to approach this meeting in his current stature showed that he had truly fallen for his delusions of godhood.

"Good day to you too." Ves calmly responded. "I greet you in this form because I identify myself as human. I am not doing this to insult you and your like-minded subordinates. My humanity is precious. Since I am a proud and upstanding member of human society, it is natural for me to retain my original height. It is rare for me to use my phase lord physique for anything. As a mech designer, I have less need to tap into the greater power of my true body. I believe we are both civilized people. My stature should not have any bearing on this conversation."

The polemarchos shook his head. **"You are propagating falsehoods. You deny the truth that is locked inside your transformed biology. From the moment we have ascended into godhood, we already sensed that we have assumed a new destiny. The revelations that we have received after we have grown has confirmed it. We are mere humans no longer. We are giants. We are myth turned to life. We are the children you have wrought. It is only right for you to present your divine form to us. Your refusal to do so is in poor taste."**

Ves absolutely could not go along with their demand. Not only would doing so validate their delusional claims about giants, but the bigger problem was that it would allow Sev to usurp control over his body!

The latter consequence was unacceptable and had to be prevented at all cost!

Who knew whether Sev's crazy delusions would encourage the compromised human phase lords to completely separate themselves from the human race?

"I regret that you think this way, but I still choose not to meet with you in the form of a phase lord. I come here as a representative of the humans who make up the Red

Collective and red humanity as a whole. I take on their form so that they will know that I am on their side. I may have made the opposite decision if I was interceding on your behalf, but that is not the case this time."

Although the human phase lords did not like it, they reluctantly dropped the matter, though their good mood after meeting with their 'progenitor' had faded.

The air grew more tense as a result. Although Scilo Karneon maintained a deliberate posture of control, his phalanx leaders looked a little more poised to go into action.

This subsequently riled up the Apocalypse Warden guards who were ready to take action themselves if necessary.

"Mr. Karneon, I would like to—"

"Stop." The leading phase lord raised his palm. **"We may have acquiesced to your denial of your own identity, but do not deprive us from our own identities. To call us by our former human names is to imply we are still vulnerable mortals. I have discarded my mortal human name because it no longer represents my ascended self. I have become the Oscillating Fist, the polemarchos that reigns over the Ascended Giants. We forgive you for deadnaming me due to your ignorance of our ways, but we will not tolerate your misstep again, even if you are our indirect creator."**

Ves wanted to palm his face at this artificial nonsense. What was wrong with holding two names? Why were these 'Ascended Giants' so sensitive about their names?

It was a rather bad sign that they held so much contempt towards the names that tied them to their human identities. They tried so hard to distance themselves from their mortal human origins that it was as if they were afraid of anything that suggested weakness!

Ves decided to no longer push them on this particular issue. The first time already sufficed as a test. There was no reason to provoke this bunch any further.

"Would you like to introduce your fellow officers to us?" Ves asked. "I have read their records, but I figure that they have made the same decision as you and taken on new names for themselves."

The Oscillating Fist smiled and placed his giant hand on the shoulder of one of the men standing behind. **"Indeed they did. This is my second-in-command. The Unshakeable King is the most indomitable Ascended Giant among us. He controls his fury the best among us. As the strategos of the Ur-Titan Phalanx, he leads the most exceptional force of Ascended Giants in this galaxy."**

Keirzan Hoslin, now going by the Unshakeable King, took a step forward and made a somewhat respectful salute towards Ves.

"It is an honor to meet with the progenitor of giants. It is regrettable to see that your human minders have denied you from embracing your true strength. We look forward to liberating you from your shackles."

That sounded ominous.

The Oscillating Fist proceeded to introduce his next commander.

"The Fiery Axe is one of the best weapon masters among the Ascended Giants. Do not let her disciplined facade fool you. She is a monster when she is fully unleashed. She is the undisputed strategos of the Flesh Chopper Phalanx."

The Phase Lord Department counted significantly more male than female phase lords.

Nonetheless, Fasia Meledor managed to stand out and become the head of the Flesh Chopper Phalanx.

The female human phase lord stepped forward and bumped her rigid fist across her chest. **"Progenitor."**

The woman formerly known as Fasia Meledor stepped back after completing her simple greeting. She had conveyed all she wanted from her look, gesture and words.

The Oscillating Fist proceeded to introduce the third commander.

"The Divine Harpoon is my choice to command the Faceless Giant Phalanx as its strategos. He is one the oldest among us and possesses the calm and experience to keep all of his men in check."

The man who used to be an infantry commander by the name of Haroudi Molain stepped forward with an impeccable posture and bumped his fist against his chest like the previous strategos.

"It is a pleasure to meet with you, progenitor. We regret to meet you under these circumstances. We would have been happy to welcome you to our base if you did not choose to repress your true self. There is no shame in admitting that you have become one of us. We are not enemies of red humanity."

But they could be, was the unspoken implication.

As the last commander stepped back, the Oscillating Fist proudly faced the human delegation.

"The four of us may be small in number, but we speak on behalf of all Ascended Giants, or at least we hoped that would be the case. We had hoped to conduct a fruitful and substantive talk with a fellow Ascended Giant, but your choice of stature and your open denial of your true identity is an insult to us, no matter whether you intended it or not. We know what you want from us. We refuse to follow your script. There will be no negotiating between us. Whatever you hoped to accomplish through dialogue is doomed."

What?

Just because Ves insisted on sticking to his human identity and stature, these Ascended Giants rejected the possibility of trying to talk their way out of an impending conflict?

Had these guys gone crazy?

No wait. That was a stupid question. There was no doubt that they had lost their sanity!

"Let me make sure I heard you correctly." Ves said. "Are you sure you want to stop any hope of figuring out a way to realize a peaceful end to the current disputes?"

"Not precisely." The Oscillating Fist responded. "We object to the method that you have chosen. You are under the mistaken impression that we wish to address our disagreements through dialogue. That is the human way. We have most past such flimsy means. We are Ascended Giants. We rule through might, not words. We are still willing to end our conflict in a manner which does not lead to widespread bloodshed. We would like to offer you a counterproposal."

Ves had a feeling that he might not like what he was about to hear next.

"Please explain."

The phase lord leader began to smirk and assume a more aggressive posture. **"Fight us. Challenge us. Conquer us. As long as you duel my commanders and win, I shall permit you to challenge me for leadership over the Ascended Giants. Win, and we shall acknowledge your leadership without any further disputes. Lose even once, and we will refuse to listen to you any further. We respect strength above all, so if you believe you have the guts, then prove your qualifications to lead us with your fists. Oh, before I forget to mention it, we only accept challenges from other Ascended Giants. Do not challenge us as a human. Do not fight us with a Carmine mech. The only way you can truly earn our submission is for you to prove beyond all reasonable doubt that you are the most superior Ascended Giant."**

"..."

For a moment, Ves could not believe what he just heard.

Instead of engaging in a tense and difficult dialogue where both sides would continue to verbally wrangle each other until they reluctantly formed an uncomfortable compromise, these Ascended Giants wanted to solve their disputes in a different way.

Through martial duels.

It was a delightfully simple yet incredibly primitive way to determine primacy!

Ves did not have any desire to enter an arena and brawl against any of these human phase lords!

He was a mech designer, not a prize fighter!

There was no way he could stand a chance against these professional and experienced warriors!

Besides, as soon as he unfolded his true body, Sev would return from the depths of his mind.

His alter ego was a disaster!

Who knew what Sev would do once he took over Ves' body. Perhaps he might side with the Ascended Giants and lead them into declaring full independence from the human race!

"No."

The Oscillating Fist and his fellow commanders looked down at Ves with contempt.

"We deny your rejection. Either fight us, or get lost. You have no other choice. On account of being our progenitor, we will permit you to return to your ship and deliberate your decision with your weak human friends. You have 24 standard hours to transmit your final response. If you do not satisfy us, then do not blame us for what we will do next."

Chapter 7136: Fighting Qualifications

Ves remained in a foul mood as he sat in the armored shuttle that brought him back to the Tarrasque.

The first meeting with the leaders of the Phase Lord Department unfolded completely outside anyone's expectation.

In hindsight, he realized that he may not have pushed hard enough. He let the human phase lords take the initiative, from agreeing to use their new monikers as opposed to their original human names to letting himself get completely stumped by the demand to duel their leaders.

Ves became overtaken by their verbal offensive that he could scarcely catch his breath and figure out a coherent response that did not amount to a complete capitulation.

The only positive outcome from his first meeting with the compromised human phase lords was that he did not set any of them off. He did not look forward to fighting his way out of that mess.

As Ves boarded the Tarrasque yet again, he first tried to find out whether Lucky had already completed his infiltration mission.

"Meow."

Ves let out a huge breath after seeing the dark metallic archemetal cat enjoying a rich treat.

Lucky leisurely dipped his head into a bowl. It was filled with a mixed collection of high-grade exotics and hypers courtesy of the Red Collective.

"Did my cat retrieve the data that you wanted?"

"We are still parsing through it." Secret Keeper Zariel-775 placidly said. "Much of the sensitive data is locked behind encryption. The staff of the Phase Lord Department have not lost any of their competence despite following their masters into madness. It takes a considerable amount of processing power and decryption ingenuity in order to quickly crack the contents. That said, we should be able to unlock the first truly valuable data dump before the end of the day."

Ves looked forward to what they might find from the data. He did not have too many expectations, though.

These human phase lords should be well aware that Yernstall was home to some of the best hackers of red humanity.

Perhaps only the Cybers were better at it due to their greater technological advancement, but the mechers and the fleeters were quite good in their own right.

Seeing that it would take a bit more time to learn about the gains of Lucky's successful infiltration mission, Ves turned his attention back to the main issue at hand.

He looked carefully at the secret keeper. Even now, the man still refused to remove his hood from his head. The way it cast a shadow over his face was so unnaturally effective

that not even a direct light could illuminate it. The entire robe was probably an artifact of sorts that was so good at obscuring that it didn't even register as special from Blinky's senses!

It didn't matter.

Though the secret keeper was so well-trained that he did not betray any clues, Ves had a sense that the absence of any reaction already constituted an answer in itself.

"You predicted this outcome, didn't you?" He made a guess. "You sought me out specifically because I am the only human phase lord that is not a part of their club. You sent me over to that transport vessel on short notice and inadequate preparation because you guys already foresaw that further coaching was redundant. From the start, you already deduced that the only way to truly get those human phase lords to back down was for me to present myself and provoke them into a series of duels, am I correct?"

He had developed this suspicion during the shuttle ride back to the flagship of the Bluejay Fleet.

Ves did not believe that the Secret Department of the Red Collective could miss this possibility.

The spies of the RC had monitored the human phase lords for a long time. They should have compiled entire libraries worth of behavioral models that could roughly tell them how they would respond to different stimuli.

An outcome like the one that just unfolded earlier should have fallen within the calculations of those behavioral models!

Even if the RC was not as obsessively data-driven as the Polymath, the collies were still modern humans who possessed good familiarity with advanced technology. Processing data was an essential part of any serious organization.

The secret keeper at least had the decency to be honest.

"We did anticipate this particular outcome." The collie admitted. "We did not believe the probability that this scenario would unfold was as high as 100 percent, however. We believed that there was only a 46 percent chance that the human phase lords would challenge you to a duel. This result should only happen if they genuinely respect you as their progenitor and if they judge that you are a worthy challenger."

Ves blinked. "Huh? Did I hear that right?"

"Do not think that the human phase lords are simple-minded brutes." Zariel-775 warned. "They may appear that way due to their proclivities, but they are still members of the

RC. None of our hires are simple, particularly those who have been appointed as department heads or military unit commanders. They have their own ways of judging your strength and combat readiness. In their eyes, they believe that you can test them. Perhaps winning is a distant prospect, but so long as the probability exists, it is still a worthwhile endeavor to invite you to duel with them. Just the bragging rights of having dueled against the very first human phase lord is enough to make them proud."

Was that what Ves had been reduced to? Did those 'Ascended Giants' see him as nothing more than a trophy to be won in the dueling arena?

"Why the hell do those phase lords think I can even last more than a couple of seconds against them?" Ves frowned. "Is it because they believe my phasewater concentration is higher than theirs? That should not be the case. My phasewater organ collection is not that impressive either. I have not done much to progress my phase lord cultivation, deliberately so I might add. Besides, even if my mass is twice as much as that of the Oscillating Fist, I bet you the 'polemarchos' will easily beat me black and blue in a matter of minutes. He was the 19th best boxer in the Milky Way once upon a time! Even if he fell off hard after all of those years, he is still ten times a better fighter than myself."

The collie spy did not let Ves get away with such a lopsided comparison.

"The gulf in fighting skills is indeed large, but not as excessive as you describe. From our studies of the few pieces of combat footage that we have of you, we believe that you are a natural fighter. Your Larkinson bloodline is strong. You are a highly competitive individual and you are accustomed to performing under pressure. Aside from that, your fighting techniques with a polearm are surprisingly decent. It is nothing to write home about, but if you combine your serviceable foundation with other advantages such as technology, systematic cultivation and intelligence gathering, we may be able to shape you up into a winner."

"...Are you serious?"

Ves may have swallowed an enlightenment fruit that had instilled him with skills on how to fight with a staff, but he mainly redeemed it because it taught him how to manipulate darkness energy!

From what he could gather from the skills he acquired from the enlightenment fruit, their origin came from a disciple who had spent all of his time performing the same drills in a dojo. Perhaps he occasionally sparred against others, but these were highly restrictive sparring sessions where both sides had to abide by a lot of rules.

Therefore, despite knowing how to fight with a staff, Ves did not actually gain a lot of actual combat experience out of the fruit!

"Come now, Professor Larkinson. You are a mech designer. You should know combat well enough that winning is a process of utilizing your advantages better than your

opponent. It is undeniable that you will lose in terms of pure fighting skills, but what if your equipment is more superior than theirs? What if your companion spirit is much more powerful than their own? What if we provide expert coaching to you so that you have a better idea of what to expect when confronting known quantities?"

Ves pressed his lips. "What you are saying is logical on the surface, but combat is way more than a game of sums. There are a lot of unquantifiable factors that can determine the outcome of a battle. Stuff like discipline, martial spirit, experience and many more are stuff that those professional soldiers have in abundance. As for me? I am a mech designer! The time I spent in actual combat is just a fraction of the time I spent on designing mechs!"

The secret keeper stared pointedly at him. The spy did not back off on his argument.

"Ves the mech designer is indeed not a good fighter. He has talent in abundance, but he has never developed it in any acceptable measure. Sev the first human phase lord on the other hand appears to be much more proficient at employing those fighting skills correctly. He is the version of yourself that has spent serious time in learning how to employ your skills and how to better fight against competent opponents. There are still many shortcomings to his combat approach, but he at least possesses a foundation that can give us a serious chance of winning a handful of duels."

"..."

Ves grew angry. Did these collies seriously think it was a good idea to rely on his evil alter ego?

Summoning Sev for anything sounded like pure madness!

His other personality was liable to defect to the 'Ascended Giants'!

"I... refuse." Ves squeezed between his gritted teeth. "Sev is a liability to myself and to others. He is a slave to the Red Ocean."

Zariel-775 slowly leaned forward. "Did you not visit the Astral Octagon in the hopes of finding a resolution to your problem? We can help you, Professor Larkinson. We have developed certain theories and derived potential solutions to your condition, though none of them are as absolute as you would like. Each of them demands that you face your other self and form a compromise that both of you can live with. It is not much, but even a partial answer is better than no answer. I strongly advise you to consider. If you can convert Sev from an adversary into an uneasy ally, then you can rely on him to fight your battles."

"..."

This was unacceptable. Ves could not bring himself to take this crazy proposal seriously.

The collies hoodwinked him. They sought this outcome from the start, so they manipulated him behind his back. It was only now that they came clean, but they had already pushed him into a corner by this time.

He scowled. He felt disgusted by all of the manipulation. The RC did not respect its founder and chief counselor as much as it should.

Perhaps it was his fault for neglecting his duties and letting Eliza Mo Ragadan perform the bulk of his obligations on his behalf. His lack of commitment had left him bereft of allies within the organization.

Regardless, that did not mean that Ves was about to accept this arrangement. It sounded stupid on the surface. The subsequent explanation did not make it any better.

Seeing as he was getting nowhere, Ves let out a discontented huff and turned around.

He wanted to go back to his design lab and spend his time on more worthwhile pursuits such as helping his wife finalize the design of the Riot Mark III.

Just thinking about tinkering with mechs lifted up his mood. He was a mech designer. He was not a fighter. Sev did not represent his true self. The mere idea of compromising with an uninvited intruder to his own body should never take root!

Chapter 7137: Degrees of Betrayal

Ves managed to recover his mood after assisting his wife.

The Riot Mark III Project was nearing its ultimate conclusion. The initial combination of high-grade superdimensional matter and archetech was anything but perfect or elegant, but Gloriana had already conducted enough experiments to verify that the new solutions worked.

The Resonance Smith did not shortchange her in this regard.

Though Ves did not possess enough of an understanding of archetech to help his wife redesign the more difficult aspects of the Riot Mark III, he was still able to help her design the easiest sections.

It helped that his understanding of superdimensional theory was better than her own. There were not many aspects that he liked about his phase lord cultivation, but he had to admit that it was an enormous boon to his handling of phasewater technology and superdimensional technology.

"The Riot Mark III will be a machine without peer once he has taken on this form." Gloriana crowed. "For all of its problems and complications, archetech is still a superior tech base in terms of performance, resilience and damage control. Combining these strengths with the exceptional resistance of armor-grade superdimensional matter will result in the most powerful first-class expert mech in both the old galaxy and the new frontier. I dare say that no other expert mech will be able to match the extravagance of our design for years. Only the Larkinson Clan can afford to pamper its expert pilots to this degree."

"It is still just an expert mech, though." Ves said in a more tempered mood. "According to Ketis' theory, once Venerable Rosa Orfan takes possession of this machine, her Earth score should shoot up so much that her breakthrough is practically guaranteed. Yet... nothing is absolute. If she fails to trigger her second apotheosis, then this project will become known as the biggest and most expensive blunder in the mech industry."

Ves and Gloriana were essentially gambling on Venerable Orfan's breakthrough. This was a dangerous and risky decision that may very well bite them back.

"Is that why you insist on applying your 'special treatment' onto our work?" Gloriana quietly asked. "Just look at our work. Do you think with a mech this powerful, Rosa Orfan will fail to live up to the Riot Mark III's potential? I question the necessity of amplifying its performance even further, especially through questionable and dubious means."

"You know that this has always been the plan." He responded coolly to her, making it clear that he did not accept refusal on this issue "The Riot Mark III is meant to become the epitome of chaos on the battlefield. In order to exemplify this trait, he has to be cruel to his enemies as well as his own pilot. The friction produced between the pilot and machine will become the fuel that allows the combination's performance to reach the next level. Out of all of the high-ranking mech pilots in our mech roster, Venerable Orfan is by far the most suitable candidate to receive this special treatment."

Ves did not want to wait any longer. He had access to Demoncasting for a long time, yet did not utilize it often enough to justify its selection.

That had to change.

In truth, Ves wanted to push for the creation of the very first D-mech because he continually questioned whether he had chosen the right upgrade track.

He could not possibly forget that he could have chosen Upgrade Track #3: Superdimensional Transformation during the latest System upgrade.

At the time, Ves had no special feelings about this 'superdimensional' business.

It was only after Ketis did her research and opened up a portal to the Blue Dimension on her first attempt that Ves along with everyone else in the Red Ocean became introduced to the wonders of superdimensional matter!

If he understood the enormous strategic value of superdimensional matter at that earlier junction, then he may not have chosen to invest in Upgrade Track #2: Demoncasting!

Alas, the timing was horrible. If he had waited a couple of months after upgrading the System, he may have made another decision.

That did not mean he was dissatisfied with the choice he ended up with. Although he did not spend too much time on it, Ves had already confirmed multiple times that Demoncasting could yield powerful upgrades without needing to introduce another scarce wonder material.

D-mechs had enormous potential. Ves just had to ensure that he was prepared and ready to perform the secret process onto the Riot Mark III.

As the pair continued to work, the conversation inevitably strayed to the conversation between Ves and the human phase lords.

Thankfully, Gloriana fully recognized and agreed that Ves had been right to turn away from the Red Collective's nonsense.

"Hmph. No matter whether it is the estranged Phase Lord Department or the supposedly prim and proper Astral Octagon, they are both staffed by ideologues and extremists. None of them are on your side. They all want something from you. If you ask me, you need to put more effort into standing up for yourself. You are the head of the Upper Council, Ves. You preside over a gathering that brings together almost all of the major human powers of the Red Ocean. That should convey a considerable amount of weight to your name."

Ves sighed. "You are probably right, but it is not that easy for me to assert myself among all of those big players. Perhaps it is not worthwhile for me to retain my seat in the Upper Council. There is no point in keeping the position if I can't throw my weight around. Sure, it is nice to receive regular intelligence reports, and I can procure a large variety of exclusive goods from the internal exchange, but I can already get much of this through external trades."

Although Ves would always feel proud for playing a pivotal role in bringing the Red Collective to life, it had already evolved into its own beast.

The superorganization had become unrecognizable to him. It had its own leaders, culture and interest groups.

Ves did not really feel like much of an insider. He was not cut out for politics. Perhaps it was best to repeat the same move he did in the Larkinson Clan and resign from his position.

After Ves and Gloriana finished their work for the day, both of them grew satisfied with how the mech design was shaping up. They had not encountered any troublesome complications that could cause the completion of the mech design project to be delayed.

"You can pass on the good news to Venerable Orfan." Ves told his wife. "If the remaining design sessions are just as smooth, then we should be able to begin the upgrade process very soon. Everything else is already in place."

Gloriana formed a tired grin. "I am already looking forward to it. I am confident that the Riot Mark III will turn into an excellent masterwork... at least before you apply your special treatment. What comes out after that is anyone's guess, but I am afraid the end result will be far from matching my ideals."

"We all have to make sacrifices, Gloriana."

"Do not remind me, Ves."

As Ves was about to retire for the night, he received a notification from Secret Keeper Zariel-775.

A part of the data stolen by Lucky had finally been decrypted. The intelligence gleaned from it was interesting enough that Ves needed to know about it as soon as possible.

Though Ves was not in the mood for more manipulation, he couldn't help himself. He did not think he could enjoy a proper break without satisfying his curiosity.

"This better be good." He muttered.

A short time later, Ves entered a secure chamber where the secret keeper was already present.

The other man handed over a secure data pad.

"What did you guys uncover?" Ves asked as he began to skim through the messages on the screen.

"The data cores that your mechanical cat managed to hack into are protected in different layers. The weakest cores are relatively lightly encrypted as they contain data that is deemed low priority. These cores are also used to exchange data that is frequently accessed and transmitted. Their speed and lack of latency makes them more convenient in usage. Over time, these speed cores automatically transfer their data to the more secure but also slower cores."

Ves roughly understood what was going on. "So you only managed to crack the data retrieved from the weakest and least important cores. From what I am reading, you have only managed to retrieve scattered exchanges of messages between the members of the Phase Lord Department."

"Correct. While you can expect them to exercise a certain degree of discretion, there is enough explicit mentioning of their agendas for us to understand what the leaders of the various units truly seek."

The messages that Ves perused contained snippets that contained varying degrees of incriminating statements.

Much of it sounded treasonous. They only differed by degree.

"I don't have time for this." Ves instructed. "There are too many exchanges. Give me a summary. Tell me what I should truly know."

Zariel did so. "There are 7 individuals who truly comprise the leadership body of the Phase Lord Department. These are the polemarchos, the three strategoi as well as the three champions of their respective phalanxes. You have not met the latter, but they stand to take over leadership if their superior is taken out of the equation."

"Okay?"

"Take the Facelss Giant Phalanx for example. Its commanding officer is Haroudi Molain, the Divine Harpoon. As an old hand and a former infantry commander, he is the most steadfast among their gathering. According to these internal messages, it is clear that he is still loyal to red humanity and a proponent for keeping the Phase Lord Department within the RC. He serves as an important counterweight to the others who have much stronger desires to go independent."

"I see."

"The Divine Harpoon needs to be pushed upwards as much as possible." Zariel 775 said. "He is on our side, pretty much. That is good news to us, but he is not without his own problems. His obstinacy has made him many enemies among the other 'Ascended Giants', chief among them his own champion. Jeess Vorkine, known as the Divine Arsenal, is a powerful potentate with D-grade genetic aptitude that is nonetheless able to control a hybrid between a mech and a raiment that is integrated with multiple weapon systems and other tech. While he has never explicitly made his intentions clear, his word exchanges imply that he intends to initiate a leadership challenge to the Divine Harpoon in the near future."

"Oh." Ves found this to be mildly interesting. "How likely will the Divine Arsenal succeed?"

The secret keeper lowered his head. "We do not know if we are being honest. We do not have a good understanding of their combat power. The Phase Lord Department has kept much of its activities behind closed doors. However, the Divine Arsenal would not make his attempt if he thought he was unlikely to succeed."

The underlying message was that the Red Collective needed to resolve its problems with the Phase Lord Department before this leadership challenge could happen.

If the Divine Arsenal won his duel against the Divine Harpoon, then a crucial restraining factor would disappear. The entire leadership of the Phase Lord Department may very well be in support of declaring independence and turning the Ascended Giants into a separate race!

"What are the other leaders like, then?"

"They are considerably more problematic. Fasia Meledor, now known as the Fiery Axe, is a strong advocate for independence, but she also despises the Red Cabal. There are voices that actually propose that applying to join the Red Cabal and adopting the alien ways is their best option. We can at least rely on the strategos of the Flesh Chopper Phalanx to restrain these voices among her subordinates."

Trying to turn the Ascended Giants into its own separate race was one thing. Ves thought it was stupid, but he did not have overly strong feelings about it. To him, it sounded similar to the dwarven initiative to turn their kind into a race of their own.

What Ves could not accept was outright defection to the Red Cabal!

This was a serious betrayal to red humanity and detrimental to all of the people they left behind!

The fact that this suggestion was a legitimate proposal within the Phase Lord Department showed that it had truly gone astray!

Chapter 7138: The Chameleon Giant

It did not surprise Ves that much that the Phase Lord Department contained a multitude of different opinions.

The Ascended Giants were just like humans or any other intelligent race for that matter. Individuals always possessed different opinions on everything. It would have been more remarkable if they completely agreed with each other on many issues.

However, the question of what the Ascended Giants were supposed to do in the future was not just any issue, but a defining subject that could lead them to glory... or ruination.

After becoming indoctrinated by the heavenly authority of the Red Ocean, their desire to stick with red humanity had weakened to a devastating degree.

That many of them openly flirted with defection and betrayal should have never been tolerated under normal circumstances!

However, once all of the Ascended Giants had 'accepted' their own divinity, they developed such wild egos that they had lost their affection for their original race.

This was a detestable change of mind. Ves thought worse of the human phase lords for failing to stick to their duty. How come a mech designer of all people managed to resist better than all of these professional soldiers?

"The most important unit under the command of the Phase Lord Department is Keirzan Hoslin." Secret Keeper Zariel-775 continued his explanation. "As the strategos of the Ur-Titan Phalanx, he is the most powerful among the commanders and is deeply trusted by the polemarchos. The Unshakeable King is also the Oscillating Fist's handpicked successor. This is deeply troubling for various reasons, chief among them is the Unshakeable King's abnormally strong god complex. Every message he sends reveals how much he has accepted the belief that he is a god."

Ves snorted and crossed his arms. "The Unshakeable King is just a lesser phase lord. That hardly puts him on the same level as the ancient phase whales, let alone a god pilot. He should at least reach the third major cultivation rank before he calls himself this way."

The secret keeper inclined his head. He agreed with this description.

"The human consensus towards organisms ascending to godhood is indeed as you described, but the native aliens that our race has fought against have a different perspective on the matter. They are unfamiliar with the concept of invisible gods that act through mysterious ways. To them, gods are real, physical and enormous. Most of the intelligent alien races of this dwarf galaxy commonly regard any organism as a god as soon as even a sliver of phasewater has begun to flow through their veins. Of course, we may also be dealing with mistranslations. Perhaps their definition of a god also happens to include saints."

That may be true, but the point still stood. The native aliens elevated phase lords to godhood way too easily.

Sure, any phase lord was powerful beyond their peers, but they were not completely invincible. They could still be taken down as long as the attacking party was willing to pay a significant price.

"So the leader of the Ur-Titan Phalanx has the strongest god complex of them all. What does he want to do, exactly?" Ves asked.

"He understands red humanity's sentiment towards godhood, and he knows that there is no future for his vision so long as the Phase Lord Department remains of our civilization. This is why he has been trying to persuade his fellow Ascended Giants that they need to join the only side that accepts the premise that phase lords are gods."

"The enemy." Ves flatly said. "The native aliens."

"Correct. The Unshakeable King is obsessed with the grandeur of godhood. He wants to be worshipped by trillions of mortals and he deeply wants to be treated as a god by his fellow phase leaders. Before his transformation into a powerful phase lord, he used to be an empathic commander, a soldier who understood his duty and a willing defender of common humans. After his transformation, he has lost all of those traits if his unfiltered messages are truly emblematic of his true views. He is a man who is willing to let 99 percent of red humans burn as long as he is able to join the Red Cabal and enjoy a protected status as an Ascended Giant as opposed to a human."

That... reminded Ves a lot of the personality changes that affected mech pilots once they crossed the extraordinary threshold.

Certain individuals hardly changed after they triggered their apotheosis. Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson was a good example of this instance.

Others went through such a radical shift that it was as if they had turned into completely different people! Venerable Jannzi Larkinson practically embodied this phenomenon in his mind.

Ves never really associated the two separate phenomena with each other, but it made sense if they were related.

Whatever the case, if these messages were authentic and if they were not part of an ingenious deception scheme, then the Unshakeable King has to be eliminated or removed from power.

The longer he remained in his position, the more time he could spend on persuading the polemarchos and the other Ascended Giants that it was a good idea to defect to the Red Cabal!

"How good is the Unspeakable King's relationship with the other Ascended Giants?" Ves asked.

"He has won the respect and admiration of his subordinates. Many Ur-Titans might not be as eager to defect to the Red Cabal as their strategos, but they are not violently opposed to the idea, which indicates that every Ascended Giant carries the seed of betrayal in their hearts. There is only a minority of Ur-Titans that have openly rejected their superior's vision. Their champion happens to be among this group. Friedrich Sefenka, otherwise known as the Grapple King, still remembers his duty to red

humanity, if only barely. He strongly rejects the decision to side with the native aliens. He may still advocate for separating the Ascended Giants from the rest of the human race in order to exist as a race of their own, that is much better than the alternative."

The Ur-Titans were the first human phase lords. They had been picked from the most elite and skilled candidates and received the most resources out of the three phalanxes.

All of this meant that the Ur-Titans and more specifically their strategos carried much greater weight than the other Ascended Giants!

The only human phase lord whose opinion carried even greater weight was the polymarchos himself.

"What of the Oscillating Fist himself?"

"The messages reveal little about his opinions, Professor Larkinson. He communicates mostly in person and through his staff. He rarely sends out messages over his department's internal network, and if he does, he mostly addresses neutral topics."

"Then what do the other Ascended Giants think about his viewpoints?"

"They all seemed to think that he is sympathetic towards their views." The secret keeper smirked. "The Divine Harpoon believes that he is successfully reminding the polemarchos of their original intention to serve red humanity. The Fiery Axe is convinced that her superior is in the process of turning the Ascended Giants into a separate race in the Red Ocean. The Unshakeable King has expressed optimism that his persuasion is slowly swaying the polemarchos towards defecting to the Red Cabal."

"...It sounds like the Oscillating Fist has yet to make up his mind." Ves slowly concluded. "He reminds me of myself whenever I am at a junction where I have to make an important decision that can change everything. Whether you have already made up your mind or not, it is still a good idea to let your subordinates contribute their views and participate in the discussion. That way, you make them feel as if their opinions matter and you can be sure that you have considered every angle."

"So what do you believe the polemarchos is inclined towards?"

Ves furrowed his brows. "I am not sure, to be honest. My meeting with him lasted too short for me to get a good read on him. However, if we think about what we know about him, he is an extremely competitive person. He used to be a champion boxer and all. His first career still defines him. From that perspective, what he probably wants is for the Ascended Giants to exist as a special class of people, and that may mean going independent. That does not necessarily mean he wants to join the Red Cabal, but if red humanity regards the Phase Lord Department as traitors that have to be eliminated whenever possible, then there is nowhere else to go for protection and shelter."

It was quite difficult to be in the Oscellating Fist's shoes. His transformation into a phase lord may have turned him into a raging egoist who believed that the Ascended Giants had distanced themselves from their human roots, but that did not mean he had lost any of his political ability.

Perhaps part of the reason why the Oscillating Fist became so well-liked as a leader was because he put a lot of work into finding acceptable compromises and getting as many people as possible to agree with his agenda. It was not because he possessed extraordinary charisma or anything.

While all of this sounded like an interesting puzzle, Ves suddenly recalled his determination to have nothing to do with this mess.

He put down the secure data pad. "If this is all you have retrieved from the weakest data cores, then I am not interested in exploring any further. This is stuff that your Secret Department is responsible for analyzing. There is not much reason to present it to me. I am not going to accept their challenge."

Zariel-775 stepped forward and made a gesture with his arms. "Do not be so hasty, professor. We have listened to your complaints and have resolved to be more open and transparent with you. Stay and listen to what we think. First, let me start by stating that you are in a position to make a great contribution to the Red Collective and our civilization as a whole. You have listened to what the Ascended Giants are considering. Instead of letting them go independent or defect to the Red Cabal where they will be asked to actively fight against their former race, you can keep them on our side, but only if you are accepted as their leader."

Ves curled his lips downwards. "That sounds nice, but the premise is that I win all of their bouts. It is already a pipedream to win a duel against one professional soldier-turned-phase lord. Having to do it 4 times in a row is crazy, especially if I don't have enough time to recover from my exertion in between!"

"We have yet to accept their counterproposal." Zariel-775 pointed out. "We have noted that the Ascended Giants are all eager to fight with their 'progenitor'. We can leverage that to negotiate a more equitable arrangement. We predict that the polemarchos and his three strategoi will agree to reasonable changes to the terms. For example, we can demand that the duels will not be to the death or submission, but rather first blood or a scoring system. This should preserve your health and stamina as you or rather Sev fights back-to-back duels."

"..."

"We can also demand that your alter ego can win the leadership challenge and take over the Phase Lord Department by winning 3 out of 4 duels. We may be able to negotiate that down to winning just 2 out of 4 duels depending on the circumstances."

"That actually sounds a lot more realistic, not that my chances of winning are great to begin with." Ves quietly remarked.

"Furthermore, we can demand terms such as restricting technologies and weapons systems that the Ascended Giants rely on, while permitting tech that you rely on the most. There is a lot of room for manipulation. The more we tilt the rules in your favor, the easier it is for you to win your duels."

Ves agreed that this could make a difference, but that was only relevant if he agreed to play along, which was definitely not the case.

"None of what you are saying is enough to change my mind."

"I know. This is why the department head of the Enforcement Department is currently on his way to the Tarrasque. He will make a personal appeal that you should listen to. Please withhold your judgement until then, professor."

Chapter 7139: The Patient Builder

Receiving a visit from the department head of the Enforcement Department was a big deal.

The Enforcement Department played the same role as its counterpart in the Red Association.

It was the military arm of the Red Collective.

Every department of the RC fielded its own troops, but the Enforcement Department was special because it organized all of the real military units and made important strategic decisions.

Its department head was a big deal.

The Red Collective was set up as a decentralized superorganization courtesy of Ves, so it explicitly lacked a single absolute leader or a small group of people who held all of the reins of power.

Even so, the department heads held much of the power of the RC by virtue of their executive authority.

Unlike the councilors who could only exercise their power indirectly by voting on different bills, the department heads could decide how to implement the acts that the two councils had passed.

Even if they had to abide by their directives, they had so much leeway on how to follow the new laws and directives that they could pursue their own agenda much more than other collies.

It was therefore extremely vital that the collies chose the right leader to take charge of the Enforcement Department.

Due to the heavily fractured power structure of the Red Collective, it was nearly impossible to get enough groups to agree on a single candidate.

It was far too easy to find flaws that would cause a candidate to become unviable in the eyes of different interest groups.

This was why a former high marshal of the Kromo Republic managed to score this top job.

Demetrius Sol Klavia was a 200 year old man who once served as a mech officer, a mech general until he finally presided over the armed forces of a first-rate colonial state.

During his long years of service, he never really managed to excel in anything flashy. He was not a brilliant mech commander like Casella Ingvar. He was not a leader who inspired worship like Ark Larkinson. He was not even known as a particularly brilliant strategist.

What he excelled at was the boring stuff. He was a numbers guy. He prioritized logistics above everything else. His favorite strategy was to build up infrastructure and spend lots of time training troops.

His goal was never to start a fair fight.

It was to build up military capabilities so much that by the time a conflict finally erupted, he had already won because his forces were so much better prepared for battle compared to the enemy!

It was not for nothing that Demetrius Sol Klavia earned the moniker of the Patient Builder, though he preferred not to make use of it himself.

Although a man known as the Patient Builder very clearly lacked energy, excitement and charisma, he did not lack vision.

He had a very clear understanding that the Red Collective was just a new superorganization. It took time and effort to build up all of the infrastructure and to raise military units that were ready to participate in total war.

An added complication was that raising armies of qi cultivators was not like raising armies composed of mechs.

Mechs usually started off at full strength as soon as they rolled off the production lines. A mech corps comprising 50,000 mechs had a predictable amount of combat power so long as its numbers stayed the same.

The same could not be said for cultivators. Gathering 50,000 of them, and they would start off severely underpowered and lacking in experience.

Give them a few years of preparation, and their cultivation advanced by varying degrees depending on the complexity of their cultivation methods, their average talent and their access to elixirs and other assisting tools.

In short, the RC's armed forces needed to spend as much time as possible on training and preparation in order to unleash greater strength on the frontlines as possible.

This was the general reason why the Patient Builder led the Enforcement Department. He had no hunger for glory and would steadfastly stick to his slow strategy in order to guarantee that the RC would be able to make a strong showing once it finally unleashed its full might on the battlefield.

While Ves had heard plenty of hearsay about Demetrius Sol Klavia over the months, he decided to ask the opinions of those who met the old department head in person.

"I know much about the head of the Enforcement Department, but it is not my place to share them with you." Zariel-775 plainly told Ves. "We are called secret keepers for good reason. We come across a large amount of classified and sensitive information. We can start wars, provoke conflicts, break friendships and shatter alliances if we freely shared what we know to the wrong ears. I will not explain the specifics to you, but I am restricted from divulging information that is not critical and will break the confidence of a protected individual."

That... sounded disappointing, but Ves should feel grateful for the integrity of the secret keepers. These guys were the real deal.

They likely knew a lot of secrets about Ves as well, and he would appreciate it that they did not carelessly leak them on the galactic net.

"Can you share with me information about the incoming department head that does not violate your vow of secrecy that I should know in order to ensure a more productive meeting?"

That was a difficult request. The collie spy had to pause for a dozen or so seconds before he opened his mouth again.

"The reason why he has dropped all of his appointments and has left the Astral Octagon to travel all the way out here is because he wants to convey the sincerity of the Red Collective. You do not have to question his honesty because this affair is of great

importance to us all. The intelligence gathered by Lucky has confirmed one of our greatest fears. It is one thing for the Phase Lord Department to fall victim to a collective delusion and declare independence so that they can live on as part of a new giant race. It is another thing for them to outright defect to the Red Cabal and serve the aliens as gods who have an absolute right to rule over mortals. If the latter scenario unfolds... it can potentially unmake the Red Collective."

The secret keeper may be a little dramatic with his words, but he was not wrong.

The worst case scenario could inflict so much damage to the RC's legitimacy that it may very well break up afterwards. Nobody could trust it to serve the best interest of red humanity when there was solid proof that it had far too little control over its own cultivators.

One of the main reasons why the Red Collective existed was to regulate cultivators and prevent them from doing any harm to human society!

For the enforcers of human order to actually degenerate into its own enemies was too absurd for people to accept!

Given the potentially catastrophic consequences, it sounded a lot more logical for one of the most powerful leaders of the Red Collective to drop by and appeal to Ves.

Ves did not want to disrespect such an important figure by refusing to meet with him. He originally intended to visit the Astral Octagon to build new relations and form friendships within the superorganization.

This was a great opportunity to form a connection with one of the key figures who held a lot of power and authority.

So long as the head of the Enforcement Department was on his side, Ves was sure his place in the Red Collective would remain secure!

Since the department head chose to travel to the Tarrasque under lighter-than-usual escorts and with fast vessels only, he arrived remarkably quickly.

Ves, Zariel-775 and Eliza Mo Ragadan met the department head in one of the small conference rooms of the flagship of the Bluejay Fleet.

The Farseer and several other collies of the Moloch Squadron requested to attend this meeting as well, but Ves rejected it because he did not want to turn this into a spectacle.

"Head."

Everyone rose from their seats as soon as the head of the Enforcement Department entered the compartment.

The man wore a predominantly silver uniform across his slender body. He maintained a stoic and dignified posture. He was not a man that people would recognize as a strong leader, but he possessed a quiet bearing that subtly indicated that he was anything but average.

"Chief councilor." The older gentleman greeted Ves by his position within the RC. "It is a pleasure to meet with you. I have come to address a crisis that is threatening to spill out of control."

"Is that truly the case?" Ves asked as he moved right past the small talk. "I mean, even if I don't lift a finger, you guys definitely have plenty of contingency plans in store. No matter how powerful these human phase lords may be, I don't think that any of them are greater phase lords, which limits their strength. You don't even need to call over a god pilot to subjugate them by force. A single superdimensional ace mech should be able to do the job. If you guys don't have access to one, I am sure our clan can loan one out to you guys for a price."

The Patient Builder did not appear appreciative of the offer. "We do have contingency plans, but so does the Phase Lord Department. They are humans as well. As much as they are trying to deny their origins, the 'Ascended Giants' are still similar to us in thought. They know that we may choose to respond to their actions with force, so they have preemptively dispersed the bulk of their Ascended Giants across many different locations. We have not been able to track their coordinates. If the compromised personnel are intelligent enough, then they will deliberately not record or remember the locations so that we can never retrieve it. If we move to conquer the headquarters of the Phase Lord Department, then the rebels will transmit a signal that will command all of these hidden human phase lords to flee and possibly join the Red Cabal."

It was impossible to catch all of these Ascended Giants. They were enormous and difficult to lose track of, but they could still do so by passing through lots of uninhabited star systems.

They had a much higher chance of getting rid of any tails if they crossed the border and entered alien space in advance!

Aside from that, they could still shrink their bodies to human scale, so that made them even harder to track if they truly wanted to hide. They could land on any planet and live in an underground base while waiting for a signal from headquarters.

Letting any of these human traitors go would inflict a huge blow to the Red Collective!

The more Ascended Giants joined the native aliens, the more severe the consequences. This was why it was in the chief enforcer's best interest to ensure that zero Ascended Giants defected to the Red Cabal.

The only way to do that was for Ves to win the leadership challenge and take over the Phase Lord Department.

"I am earnestly requesting you to fight for the good of all red humans." The Patient Builder sincerely requested. "You should have a rough understanding of what is at stake. Do not let all of the phasewater, resources and manpower we have spent on raising 361 phase lords go to waste, or worse, benefit our enemies. From the moment an Ascended Giant steps onto the battlefield to fight against red humans, the Red Cabal will receive so much recrimination from the public that we will lose much of our support and legitimacy."

"So what?" Ves skeptically pushed back. "It won't be pleasant, but becoming unpopular is hardly a deathknell to the RC. Why not lay low for a decade before you reintroduce yourselves to the public?"

"That will not work. We need heavy infusions of funding and resources to ramp up our operations. Many of our plans rely heavily on goodwill and strategic partnerships. All of that will become ruined if we lose our broad support, thereby leading to the diminishment or collapse of our great project. Systematic cultivation will no longer become regulated as well as before. Many more people will go on to abuse flawed cultivation methods and either kill themselves or turn mad in a similar manner as the Ascended Giants."

Chapter 7140: Loss Mitigation Strategy

Ves let out a sigh.

He was willing to be a little more respectful in front of the head of the Enforcement Department, but that did not mean he was about to change his mind.

"You are both asking for me to do something that I cannot fulfill. I am not a fighter. Neither is Sev for that matter, though he would protest heavily if you told that to his face. Whatever the case, what you are asking for simply can't be done. Let alone winning three out of four duels, I do not think I can squeeze out a single win. I don't know why you guys keep pushing me to undertake the leadership challenge."

"Because only you can prevent the Phase Lord Department from turning traitor." Demetrius Sol Klavia directly stated to Ves with a serious expression. "We have calculated all of the options. My Enforcement Department is responsible for taking action and coordinating our partners in the event we need to employ any of the violent options. None of the projections look good. We have only tracked the coordinates of roughly half of the human phase lords, and that is because they are mostly stationed at

known bases and starships. In order to stop them from running, we need to divert valuable ace mechs from the frontlines of many war theaters, thereby causing those regions of space to suffer increased losses, up to losing numerous strategically important locations."

It was easy to overlook how difficult it was to defeat a phase lord, even one of the lesser variety.

As long as an Ascended Giant did not allow an ace mech to get into close range, he or she could easily utilize his spatial abilities to warp away and leave a star system by relying on his own body alone.

Once a phase lord reached the deep dark interstellar space, it was virtually impossible to track this rogue element down. It would be like finding a needle in a very large haystack. The Red Three simply couldn't afford to divert so many precious resources just to capture a handful of treacherous human phase lords at most.

In fact, an Ascended Giant did not have to maintain a true body in order to get away.

Unlike Ves, these fellows had embraced the offer of the heavenly authority of the Red Ocean, which meant that they had sincerely embraced their identities as 'gods'.

Changing back to human form did not change anything because their personality would remain exactly the same!

It was much easier to sneak away when an Ascended Giant could shrink and become visually indistinguishable from a regular human!

Even Ves felt the onset of a headache when he thought about tracking all of them down.

Perhaps there were prophets and other unusual cultivators that could trace their locations through mystical means, but there were far too many Ascended Giants out in the wild.

Dozens of them would definitely slip through!

Once these traitors reached the Red Cabal and formed an accord of sorts, the blow to red humanity would be devastating!

The RC did not need to do much work to persuade Ves just how bad this scenario could be if the treachery went public.

Red humanity had always managed to stick to its bottom line of uniting against its alien adversaries.

Sure, the Cosmopolitan Movement very clearly did not play along, but they had been ostracized for such a long time that most people did not really treat them as humans anymore.

It would be much more serious for a significant chunk of humans to defect to the slave civilization that the more ardent Ascended Giants dreamt of founding!

Under the protection of the Red Cabal, traitors such as the Divine Arsenal and the Unshakeable King wanted to found a slave society where humans were reduced to worshipping laborers who toiled for their supposed gods!

"I understand the necessity of stopping the Phase Lord Department from continuing on its disastrous course. You do not need to convince me that action needs to be taken." Ves told the head of the Enforcement Department. "What I am disputing is why I should be the one to take action. Sure, I will concede that all of your other plans are hardly ideal, but they are much more realistic than letting me take action in person. I will just get beat up if I challenge one of those professional fighters-turned-phase lords."

The Patient Builder shook his head. "Do not put yourself down. You are more resourceful than you appear. Throughout your career, others have underestimated you time and time again. Whenever they sought to challenge you, they have often suffered setbacks because you have unveiled a hidden capability of three. You are more than a mech designer. You are the inheritor of the Five Scrolls Compact and a man who has received the favor of multiple Star Designers and god pilots. Do you know what our seers foretold when they cast their gaze at the future?"

"No..."

"They claim that you and your alter ego can present a worthy challenge to each of the leaders of the Phase Lord Department."

"...I don't believe you." Ves flatly said. "Everyone knows that prophecies are not absolute. How probable is it that I can beat all four of those guys?"

"Less than 10 percent." Demitrius Sol Klavia honestly admitted. "However, there is around 30 percent chance that you can at least defeat 2 out of 4 human phase lords, which is enough to make this gambit worthwhile. Total victory is not necessary. What matters is that you earn their respect. If you can defeat just 2 Ascended Giants, you will have proven yourself to be a sufficiently strong peer. Your voice can sway the opinions of the compromised leaders and bring back a measure of sanity in their minds. As long as you can keep them loyal to red humanity, that is already a qualified victory."

That actually sounded a bit more realistic. It did not sound as hard to squeeze out 2 victories, but then Ves recalled the enormous gap in fighting skills and combat literacy.

"What is in it for me?" He asked. "You are asking a lot from me. I do not like to get beat up, you know. Besides, not all duels tend to end when one side taps out. What if the fighting goes too far? What if one of those crazy giants wants to earn the honor of slaying their own progenitor? I would not put it past those fanatics to claim my head if given the chance."

The Patient Builder took a breath and faced Ves with as much sincerity as he could muster.

"You may claim the Phase Lord Department for yourself as long as you gain at least partial control over it. As long as you can conquer the hearts of the Ascended Giants and take over leadership, we shall officially confer the position of department head onto you. My fellow department heads and I have already pre-signed a secret order that will confer the position of acting department head onto you. The councils will convene with haste and confirm your appointment within a week. After that, the Phase Lord Department is effectively yours."

That was a massive concession!

It sounded too good to be true to Ves.

"Really?" He skeptically asked. "Are you willing to give total control over 361 Ascended Giants to a single mech designer?"

"We are." The Patient Builder said with a completely serious expression. "We will put it all in writing if you doubt our intentions. We shall implement new rules, some of which are secret, which will reduce the ability for others to intervene in your management of your new fief. You may do with your powerful new troops as you will. Keep them in training and seclusion. Add them to your Bluejay Fleet in order to turn it into a super-strong combined arms force. Dispatch the phalanxes to the Terran Alliance or the Rubarthan Pact. Have them focus on conducting deep raids into alien territories. Use them to form a wall of flesh in an attempt to slow down the mutated voribug invasion."

Ves blinked. "I can do anything I want with the Ascended Giants without anyone nagging me or ordering me to deploy them to specific warfronts?"

"Yes." Demetrius Sol Klavia confirmed. "Look at it from our perspective. Right now, the Phase Lord Department is on the verge of becoming lost and may even defect to the Red Cabal by the end of the year. Any other outcome is much more preferable than that. Our hubris and our lack of caution has led to this crisis. We are willing to accept our punishment. If the Phase Lord Department is destined to slip from our fingers, we at least want it to fall into friendly hands as opposed to enemy ones. Having you take effective ownership over the Ascended Giants is still a better outcome than the alternatives. This is how we view this crisis."

"...Are you serious?"

"I am being completely honest with you. That is why I have come to meet with you myself. Trust me. As long as you accept our arrangement and fight to a satisfying conclusion, you will no longer serve the RC in the capacity as a chief councilor. You will have to resign from your current post, but you will become so much more. As a department head, you will occupy one of the highest executive positions within the Collective. You shall gain real power because you control one of the more powerful military forces of our civilization. No one should ever take you lightly again."

"What stops you from going back on your word?"

"It was difficult for us to come to a consensus, but we have eventually agreed to put our complete trust in you, Ves. Time and time again, you have proven your loyalty and duty towards our race through deeds. We have not ignored your sacrifices. We believe you are the right person for the job, far more than letting you languish as an absent chief councilor. If that is not enough to convince you, then let me inform you of one more fact. I carry with me a virtual document that contains the secret guarantee of the Evolution Witch. If anyone inside or outside of the Red Collective has any problem with takeover of the Phase Lord Department, the god pilot will intervene to protect your rights."

The man finally gave Ves a clear and honest answer about what the RC was thinking.

The collies were mainly concerned about loss mitigation. It took a lot of courage to admit that they could never retake total control over the Phase Lord Department.

As long as they formed this idea, then letting Ves turn the Ascended Giants into his private army did not sound like a bad idea!

At least Ves was a human phase lord that still remained staunch loyal to red humanity!

The probability that he would turn traitor was nearly zero given that he possessed way too many connections to human society.

Even if he would have second thoughts later on, one of the god pilots who he was acquainted with would definitely take action and set him straight!

Ves had to admit that he felt incredibly greedy for a moment. Who didn't want to have an army of 360 or so human phase lords at his beck and call?

He believed in the chief enforcer's promise that the RC would avoid trying to meddle with his control over the Phase Lord Department.

If the man lied, Ves could always approach the Evolution Witch and have her sort out the dispute.

If there was one thing high-ranking mech pilots and especially god pilots especially hated, it was people who broke their promises!

However, Ves did not get blinded by the outrageous concept of turning the Phase Lord Department into his private army.

"I am interested... but that does not mean I agree right away." Ves finally said. "I am not going to participate in this wild scheme of yours if it is too unrealistic. I want to see a game plan from you. I will wait for you to negotiate terms with the Phase Lord Department and see if the duels can be structured in a way that gives me a decent chance of winning. I don't care what your discount prophets say about the future. I make my own judgments. I am giving you one chance."

"That is all we are asking from you." The head of the Enforcement Department said as he smiled for the first time since this meeting.